Habent sua fata libelli

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Practitioners of early modern French history recognize Robert Descimon as one of the foremost scholars of his generation and the one who has offered perhaps the most profound insights into the nexus of social relations, politics, and power in France as it moved from the age of religious wars into the age of absolutism. Highly focused, heavily documented, and firmly grounded in archival research, Robert Descimon’s prolific scholarship can appear traditional at first glance. The appearance is deceptive. A look at his footnotes shows the thoughtful use he has made of sociological theory, anthropology, and a wide variety of historical approaches and methods. It is also readily apparent that if he patiently culls genealogical data and constructs collective biographies, or prosopographies, from extensive research in notarial records, it is not for their own sake but rather to use them as tools for the analysis of social relations in an era in which questions of lineage played a crucial part. The role of mid-level elites, and in particular of the Parisian notables who evolved into the nobility of the robe at the end of the sixteenth century, has formed one of the major objects of Descimon’s research throughout his professional career. His first book, *Qui étaient les Seize?* (1983), a study of the Catholic League that seized control of Paris from 1588 until 1594, revised historians’ understanding of this radical movement in significant ways. At the same time, it set out an important new argument about the transition within the Parisian elite from an identity rooted in local and communal values to
one aligned with the centralizing monarchy and its values and priorities. In the three decades since the publication of *Qui étaient les Seize?*, Robert Descimon has continued to delve deeply into the dynamics of these societal transformations, while also exploring their political ramifications and the power relationships they both fostered and maintained. Independently and in research undertaken in collaboration with students and friends, he has offered valuable new insights into the mentality of ancien régime elites and into the political foundations of the absolutist state of which they were a part.

Little of Robert Descimon’s prolific scholarship has been translated, and much of it has been published in journals and collections that are not readily available even to those who read French. His scholarly contributions are as a consequence less known and widely understood than they deserve to be. This book aims to repair that oversight by offering an appreciation and extension of Robert Descimon’s work to those already familiar with it and to those who are not. Some readers may recognize an allusion to Marc Bloch’s classic meditation on the practice of history in the subtitle’s use of the phrase “the historian’s craft.” The echo of Bloch’s *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien*, published in English as *The Historian’s Craft*, is indeed deliberate. The current work too is a meditation on the questions historians ask and the ways they go about answering them; and Robert Descimon is, as the chapter by Jonathan Dewald in particular shows, a true heir to Marc Bloch and to the *Annales* tradition that he helped to create. The essays, written by distinguished Anglophone historians of early modern France, explore Descimon’s many contributions to this field but also, in a more personal vein, reveal something of his influence on the authors’ own historical practice, as they examine intersections of politics, power, and social relations in a variety of early modern settings. The volume concludes with an essay by Robert Descimon reflecting on his scholarly trajectory and with a bibliography of his many and diverse works.

**The view from the archives**

Robert Descimon’s contributions to our understanding of the history of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France have been both substantive and methodological. His historical contributions will be of special inter-
est to scholars working in early modern French history, but his approach and methods have implications that extend well beyond the French case. His work weds social to political history without diminishing the role of events. For Descimon, social groups are not fixed categories determined by material circumstances that inexorably dictate their priorities and values, but rather more flexible, evolving milieux whose members, although sharing social markers, might respond differently to the impact of events and, as a consequence, prioritize different cultural values. Recognizing that openness or resistance to change cannot be reduced to—or deduced from—economic interests alone, Descimon pays close attention to the corporative ties that defined communities of interest according to their shared privileges, but without viewing them through either the Marxist lens of social class or the fixed hierarchies of a “society of orders.”

Rather than understanding society in terms of horizontal and vertical structures, he emphasizes the actions that strengthen bonds either horizontally (i.e., between individuals essentially equal in their social and economic position) or vertically (i.e., between those in an asymmetrical patron-client relationship). Exploring the actions through which these solidarities are formed has been a consistent aim of his scholarship, which frequently employs their demonstration at the micro level as evidence supporting interpretive claims at the macro level about the functioning of both urban institutions and the monarchical state.

In contrast to many of his peers, who regard archival research as a rite of passage happily abandoned once the first major book is done, Robert Descimon continues patiently to dig for the precious nuggets of information that only the archives can yield up. Notarial contracts are a favored source. Taking an anthropological approach to such mundane documents as marriage contracts, wills, and inventories after death, he uses them to construct collective biographies and through this means has offered important insights into the strategies people used to protect and improve their family’s social position from one generation to the next. Tracing webs of connection laterally, as well as vertically over several

1. For the concept of a “society of orders” see, for example, Mousnier, Institutions of France, 4–16, which views the description of French society set out by Charles Loyseau in his 1610 Traité des ordres as applicable with few changes until replaced by a class society at the end of the ancien régime.

2. See, for example, Descimon, “Bourgeoisie Seconde.” Readers should be cautioned, however, that errors of translation obscure Descimon’s argument at certain points in the article. To cite just one example, “purveyor-client relations” (p. 423) should read “patron-client relations.”
Chapter 1

Robert Descimon, the Annales Tradition, and the Social History of the Ruling Classes

Jonathan Dewald

A peculiarity runs through recent French historical writing: for the past generation, interest in the Old Regime’s ruling classes and creative research about them have centered in the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, institutional home of the journal *Annales*. Since the journal’s foundation in 1929, the Annales movement has been one of the world’s focal points for innovative thinking about social history, and standard accounts of it (especially in the Anglo-Saxon intellectual world) stress its concern with the history of ordinary people and its indifference to the privileged and powerful. In their overview of historical epistemology, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob describe the Annales movement as concerned with “broad demographic changes, . . . long-term processes such as population growth or contraction, price curves, harvest yields, tax receipts, and the like.” Annales history, they add, focuses on “ordinary people—peasants, workers, immigrants, for example,” who “had been left out of traditional historical accounts because they did

1. At its creation, the journal’s full title was *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*. Its subtitle has changed several times since, reflecting its editors’ changing sense of the field’s development, but the journal has maintained a strong sense of continuity in its core commitments. For an overview emphasizing those commitments, see Burguière, *L’École des Annales*. 
not make the political and military decisions for a whole society.” In a more specialized study, Traian Stoianovich writes that “Annales historians have been nourished in the tradition of Jules Michelet. . . . Overtly, at least, they aspire to a history of the people like Michelet’s. . . .”

Of course, the Annales movement was never so hostile to studying elites as such comments suggest. Both of the movement’s founders devoted some of their most important scholarship to the French nobility, Lucien Febvre in his thesis on the Franche-Comté, Marc Bloch in both French Rural History and Feudal Society. Only seven years after founding the journal, they called in it for extending this line of research to collective study of the European nobilities and introduced that project by explaining how important it was to them. “The Annales had scarcely come into existence when we began already to consider it”; only the pressure of other business had delayed its implementation.

Yet the standard accounts are not entirely misleading, for in the postwar years few Annales scholars followed Febvre and Bloch’s 1936 suggestions. Instead, the study of French elites became mainly the preserve of Sorbonne historians like Roland Mousnier, François Bluche, and Jean Meyer. When in the 1970s Robert Forster and Orest Ranum compiled their series of Selections from the Annales, they included volumes on peasants, outlaws, food and drink, and the like, but nothing on the ruling classes, the subjects of their own research. Their choice was appropriate, and not only because these topics represented what American readers at that time would find newest and most noteworthy in Annales scholarship. There simply were few examples of Annales scholarship on elites. Forster’s 1960 study of the nobility of Toulouse was the first significant study of the rural nobility published after 1945, in either France or the United States; when Jean Meyer followed six years later with his study of the Breton nobility, he began by noting that Bloch’s

4. Febvre, Philippe II et la Franche-Comté; Bloch, French Rural History; Bloch, Feudal Society.
5. Les Directeurs [Bloch and Febvre], “Enquêtes: Les noblesses.” Their call was followed by an extended questionnaire on the topic in the same issue, and by two substantive essays in the following issue, one on the Austrian and one on French nobility, the latter by Marc Bloch.
6. The specific titles include Biology of Man in History; Family and Society; Rural Society in France; Deviants and the Abandoned in French Society; Food and Drink in History; and Ritual, Religion, and the Sacred.
appeal had gone largely unheard, and that this “immense domain” remained “so little cultivated.”

Things are different today. Now, some of the best-known students of early modern popular mentalities and experiences are to be found at the Sorbonne—and some of the most important studies of elites come from the École, and more particularly, from Robert Descimon and his research colleagues, assembling bright and early Friday mornings in his seminar, in what is surely among the longest-running, liveliest academic conversations in the world. Even its specific topics connect Descimon’s scholarship to the great Sorbonne historians of the 1970s. Like Mousnier, he studies the venality of offices and the terminology of social stratification; like Bluche, the *parlementaires* of Paris and the processes of ennoblement; like Meyer, the “reformations” of the nobility undertaken by Louis XIV and Jean-Baptiste Colbert. And yet (I want to show here) Descimon’s aims, methods, and interpretive assumptions are fundamentally different from theirs. Despite its many complexities and nuances, their work ultimately expresses a vision of the Old Regime’s ruling classes as the crucial builders of French culture, flawed but genuine exemplars of the creative potential of societal inequality. In 1973, thus, Bluche described the high nobility of the eighteenth century as “the drivers of a civilisation,” who had “invented an art of living.”


8. I have in mind for instance the scholarship of Denis Crouzet, who has been especially concerned with understanding the varieties of religious experience of ordinary Parisians in the sixteenth century.

9. Robert Descimon of course is not the only Annales scholar drawn in these directions. Among recent appointments to the École, Katia Béguin and Antoine Lilti have written theses specifically on the nobility (Béguin, *Les Princes de Condé*; Lilti, *Le Monde des salons*); and Descimon’s own generation there includes the cultural historian Christian Jouhaud, whose work focuses on interactions between the seventeenth-century aristocracy and the culture around it. The example of Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret seems to me to reflect a different line of development, since his important study of the eighteenth-century nobility seems to have derived from an initial interest in the origins of the French Revolution (*French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*). It is also relevant to the shift in Annales pre-occupations that Robert Descimon himself recently served as co-director of the École’s Laboratoire de démographie et d’histoire sociale.


Chapter 2

Law and Social History in Early Modern France

Michael P. Breen

A quarter century ago, two articles appeared marking a significant and lasting shift in the ways historians study the relationship between law, state, and society in early modern France: David Parker’s “Sovereignty, Absolutism, and the Function of the Law in Seventeenth-Century France” and Sarah Hanley’s “Engendering the State: Family Formation and State-Building in Early Modern France.” When these two articles appeared in 1989, the former in Past and Present and the latter in French Historical Studies, historical interest in the law and its social and cultural effects had been concentrated largely on topics such as criminal justice and social repression, the development of legal institutions and professions, and the law’s role in the formation of the early modern French state.¹ There had also had been fine studies of judicial politics, such as

¹ Key studies of criminal justice and repression include Cameron, Crime and Repression; N. Castan, Justice et repression; Y. Castan, Honnêteté et relations sociales; Deyon, Temps des prisons; Farge, Délinquance et criminalité; Lebigre, Grands jours d’Auvergne; Plessix-Buisset, Criminel devant ses juges; Reinhardt, Justice in the Sarladais; Ruff, Crime, Justice and Public Order; Soman, Sorcellerie et justice criminelle. For studies of institutions and professions, see, among others, Berlanstein, Barristers of Toulouse; Bluche, Magistrats au Parlement; Dewald, Formation of a Provincial Nobility; Dewald, Pont-St.-Pierre; Gresset, Gens de justice; Guenée, Trihunaux et gens de justice; Hamscher, Parlement of Paris; Kagan, “Law Students and Legal Careers”; Mandrou, Magistrats et sorciers; Shennan, Parlement of Paris. On the law’s role in the growth of the early modern French state, see, for example Chaunu, “L’État de justice”; Church, Constitutional Thought; Franklin, Jean Bodin and the Rise of Absolutist Theory; Hamscher, Conseil Privé; Hamscher, Royal Financial Administration; Hanley, Lit-de-Justice; Kelley, Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship; Kelley, Beginning of Ideology; Richet, France moderne.
Sharon Kettering’s book on the parlement of Aix,² and pioneering works, such as Natalie Zemon Davis’s Fiction in the Archives, pointed to new ways historians might analyze legal sources. Nonetheless, works like Arlette Lebigre’s La Justice du roi, which emphasized institutional structures, formal procedures, and criminal justice, and which treated law as an emanation of royal authority, were more the norm.

Parker’s and Hanley’s articles pointed in another direction. Parker asked historians to set aside narratives of centralization, rationalization, and the imposition of royal authority in order to focus instead on the legal system’s “general social and political functions”—to study the dynamics of its day-to-day operations.³ The legal system’s “immediate function,” he wrote, “was to provide a mechanism for conducting and regulating the incessant struggles for power, status, and wealth among the great families, clientele, and corporations that dominated French society.”⁴ Considering the extent to which the French state was made up of “competing clans, rooted in rival patrimonial networks and antagonistic corporate institutions,” Parker argued, historians needed to stop taking Old Regime laws and legal processes at face value and instead examine “what vested interests might be at work within France’s highly complex legal structures.”⁵

Appearing nearly simultaneously, Hanley’s article did just that by focusing particular attention on issues such as marriage, reproduction, family structure, and gender relations, tracing an alliance between law, patriarchy, and state formation that she termed the “family-state compact.” For Hanley, the “vested interests” in France’s rapidly growing and increasingly complex legal apparatus were above all the new legal elite of venal magistrates and professional jurists who, starting in the mid-sixteenth century, employed litigation, jurisprudence, and statutory law to expand royal authority over marriage, reproduction, inheritance, and other family matters in order to consolidate their social networks and protect their sizeable investments in royal offices.⁶ Merging biological theories of male superiority with legal principles of masculine marital and political

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². Kettering, Judicial Politics; Moote, Revolt of the Judges; Hardy, Judicial Politics.
⁴. Ibid., 73.
⁵. Ibid., 68, 36.
authority, Hanley argued, French legal elites created a mutually reinforcing relationship between patriarchal authority within the family and royal authority within the state. That authority was eventually challenged by a “counterfeit culture” created by women (and some men) to maneuver within the confines of the family-state compact and to contest its legitimacy in the courts and before the public.7

The many works exploring the complex and multifaceted relationship between law, legal practice, and society in early modern France that followed in the wake of Parker’s and Hanley’s pathbreaking articles have provided historians with a vastly richer, more nuanced, and more compelling portrait of state formation, gender relations, economic relationships, and social life than earlier legal histories that focused primarily on the histories of legislation, institutions, and jurists. They have shown that law, as Etienne Le Roy has put it, is less about what texts say than about what actors do with them.8 Seen from this perspective, one can better appreciate how the state was built not only from above by monarchs and their agents, but also from below by ordinary men and women who turned to royal authorities to help resolve their disputes. We can better see how legal language and legal institutions provided both the terms and mechanisms through which understandings of family relationships, communal obligations, the proper social order, and the nature of political power were debated, contested, and negotiated at nearly all levels of society.

In spite of these benefits, however, the current tendency to focus on litigants’ agendas and strategies, and the ways in which they “consumed” justice and manipulated the law in pursuit of their own ends, can sometimes come perilously close to removing the law and those who administered it from the equation altogether. Or at the very least, it reduces them to little more than mere accessories. While one need not go as far as Niklas Luhmann, for whom law is a closed and self-determining system of words, signs, and concepts, historians still need to account for the fact that one of early modern law’s principal claims to authority, and one of the reasons courts of law prospered during this period, was law’s

7. In addition to “Engendering the State,” Hanley has developed and refined this argument in a series of subsequent articles. See her “Jurisprudence of the Arrêts”; “Family, the State, and the Law”; “Social Sites of Political Practice in France”; and “Monarchic State.”
Chapter 3

Local Officials and Torture in Seventeenth-Century Bordeaux

Sara Beam

Beginning in the 1980s, Robert Descimon’s work on the Paris League spurred historians to rethink local politics during the final decade of the French Wars of Religion. Clearly articulating the corporate and social interests that drove Leaguers to rebel, he demonstrated that Parisians active in urban politics had a rational interest in maintaining their municipal autonomy.1 His ongoing research on Parisian elites highlights the professional, social, and religious ties that shaped their lives and provides agency to these relatively unknown men who have traditionally been marginalized in triumphant narratives of the centralizing French state.2 Robert Descimon’s focus on local political dynamics has profoundly influenced French historians and renewed interest in the dialogic interaction between French cities and royal power. In particular, his insights into the complex interactions between municipal and royal institutions signal a

Local Officials and Torture in Seventeenth-Century Bordeaux

direction that might profitably be explored by historians of the law, who often downplay the political and social dynamics that shape legal practice.

French legal historians argue that changes to early modern criminal justice resulted from “top-down,” centrally led reform. Specifically, they claim that royal legislation enforced by the parlements mitigated the cruelty of the justice system, a transition exemplified by a decline in the use of torture during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; legal historians assume and sometimes explicitly assert that local judges needed to be disciplined into practicing a less violent form of justice. As we will see, this top-down analysis of judicial practice reflects the rhetoric of rulings issued by the parlement appeals courts. But by relying on parlement records to characterize local legal practice, much is lost, particularly when considering that municipal courts of first instance functioned both as courts of law and as key political institutions fighting, as Robert Descimon’s work has shown for Paris, to maintain municipal autonomy in the face of an evolving French state.

Specifically, this essay seeks to apply Robert Descimon’s approach, characterized by an awareness of the dialogic interaction between social and political history as well as a careful analysis of local institutional dynamics, to an analysis of the evolving practice of judicial torture in the provincial city of Bordeaux. The city council of Bordeaux, known as the jurade, was a municipal court of law that practiced torture with remarkable restraint, moderation that flies in the face of assumptions regarding the need to discipline local judges. The jurade’s reasoned judicial practice, I will argue, reflected a broader political strategy to maintain its authority over local policing and criminal justice during a period of civil war and of royal centralization.

Legal historians of early modern France generally agree that the practice of judicial torture was profoundly shaped by royal regulatory pressure between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. Torture had emerged as an essential component of European criminal procedure by the thirteenth century, justified by the need, according to the medieval “law of proofs,” for a full confession of guilt before a capital sentence could be imposed. The practice of torture, based on Roman and canon


4. Carbas, “Origines de la torture judiciaire,” 381–419. In principle, a confession of guilt was not
law, accelerated during the late medieval period, as criminal courts across Western Europe shifted to the inquisitorial method and issued more sentences involving corporal punishment. Yet almost from its introduction, efforts were made to regulate its practice in the interests of producing truth and of avoiding abuse.\(^5\) In France, these efforts took the form of royal edicts, most notably in 1498 and 1670, which sought to limit and regularize its practice. These laws prohibited an individual from being tortured more than once and required that a defendant confirm any confession of guilt after the conclusion of the torture session in the hopes of avoiding false confessions made under the pressure of extreme pain.\(^6\)

French legislation also established that individuals sentenced by local courts of first instance had the right to appeal to royal courts for redress. Defendants could appeal interlocutory sentences mandating torture, known in French legislation as “la question,” as well as final sentences involving corporal punishment.\(^7\) As early as the fourteenth century, the Parlement of Paris modified some criminal sentences issued by lower courts to make them more lenient and reproached lower courts for misuse of torture.\(^8\) By the sixteenth century, the period that is generally accepted to be the high-water mark for the use of interrogatory torture in Western Europe, the Parlement of Paris regularly overturned interlocutory sentences issued by lower courts authorizing torture and instead released those defendants from prison.\(^9\) During the same period, the Parlement of Bordeaux also rejected some lower-court sentences authorizing torture and mitigated punishments for a variety of crimes.\(^10\)

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6. Isambert et al., Recueil général, 11:366 (1498): “Nous défendons à tous nos baillifs, senechaux et juges ou leurs lieutenants, qu’ils ne procèdent à réitére de nouveau ladite question ou torture audit prisonnier sans nouveaux indices”; 18:413 (1670): “mais s’il a été délié et entièrement ôté de la question, il ne pourra plus y être remis. . . . Quelque nouvelle preuve qui survienne, l’accusé ne pourra être appliqué deux fois à la question pour un même fait.”


9. Schnapper, “Justice criminelle,” 252–84; AN, X2a 147, fol. 236v, 2 July 1585; AN, X2a 144, fol. 132r, 1 March 1584.

10. Schnapper, “Répression pénale,” 65; ADG, 1 B 422, fol. 85, 15 November 1577; ADG, 1 B 422, fol. 28, 7 November 1577.
Chapter 4

Urban Elites and Politics in Sixteenth-Century Dijon

Mack P. Holt

I first became aware of Robert Descimon in 1985, when I read his debate with Élie Barnavi on the nature of the League in Paris published in *Annales* in 1982, and then Descimon's own book published the following year: *Qui étaient les Seize? Mythes et réalités de la Ligue parisienne.* I bought this book in Paris in the summer of 1985, and I have been constantly reading and re-reading it ever since, continually mesmerized by the two things that stood out immediately from my first reading: Descimon's convincing revision of the history of the League in Paris—*les Seize*—and his revision of the way historians write political history. Descimon's convincing revision of the narrative of the Catholic League is now well known, and we do not need to go over it again here. Suffice it to say that after the publication of *Qui étaient les Seize?* it was no longer possible to write off the Paris League as a bunch of radical opportunists who were on the wrong side of history for not supporting the inevitable victory of Henri IV and the *politiques*, as so many previous historians had done. That Robert Descimon's work also inspired a new methodology for doing political history, however, is less well known to those outside early modern French history, and it is this subject that I want to address here.

What initially intrigued me most about Descimon’s book on the League was that he seemed to be writing a political history of the League in Paris, but he was using a variety of sources I had naively believed to be primarily useful for social historians rather than political historians, above all, notarial records. His later work on the *échevinage* of Paris in the sixteenth century and the *noblesse de robe* in Paris from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries only confirmed this. So, when I began my research on the religious wars in Burgundy, I started by reading the deliberations of the Hôtel de Ville, which seemed a natural place to start to learn about local politics. But inspired by Descimon’s model, I eventually turned to the notarial records, the *état civil* of baptisms and marriages, the tax rolls, and even the criminal records of the city of Dijon, sources I had been aware of, but again primarily through the work of social historians. Thus I hesitate to make any broad generalizations about Robert Descimon’s contribution to the discipline of history, but it is clear that Descimon’s work has influenced me and a host of other scholars in a variety of ways.

First, he has demonstrated that we need a wider definition of what politics is in the ancien régime. If we take a broader definition of politics—the negotiation for power by all those who claimed to have a stake in it—it becomes clear from Descimon’s work that you cannot really understand urban politics at all unless you are also a cultural and social historian. Second, this has pushed me beyond a study of just the elites, as negotiations for power necessarily involved a much wider share of the urban community, an insight that has led to my search for interactions and relations between urban elites and vignerons in Burgundy. As all Descimon’s work has demonstrated, social relations and politics are symbiotic. Indeed, as seems to be the case so often in this period, social relations—not ideology, religion, or class—are often the key to understanding how the ancien régime worked in practice. Finally, Descimon’s work has forced me to try to understand politics as a process of negotiation rather than just an analysis of the outcomes of these negotiations. His thoughts on absolutism—and along with those of his co-author Fanny Cosandey—have been especially useful in this regard. So, what I propose to do for the rest of this essay is look at some examples of the kinds of sources—actual

documents in the archives—that I once naively thought were of very little use for writing about politics.

Let’s begin with notarial records. Until Descimon published his marvelous prosopography of the 225 members of the Paris Sixteen as part of his first book, I had never imagined that notarial records—wills, marriage contracts, sales of property, loans, and the like—could be so useful for understanding local politics. Social historians had been using notarial records for decades, but it had never occurred to me that they could be useful for studying political history. This was obviously a personal lacuna, as had I been paying attention, I would have noticed that many other scholars, including Denis Richet, one of Descimon’s mentors, had been using notarial archives to write political history for some time. Nor was *Qui étaient les Seize?* the very first work to point out that politics and social relations were symbiotic. Today, using notarial records to help us better understand early modern French politics is very well established, but for me in the early 1980s, Descimon’s book was a revelation. It became very clear that relations between the elites of Dijon and the city’s vignerons were well represented in the notarial records of the period. For example, how did vignerons stay afloat in times of shortage, and how could they possibly finance the purchase of additional parcels of vines or the improvement of their holdings? The short answer is that they did so like vignerons still do today: they borrowed against their potential for future earnings. Without a system of credit and debt, the wine industry in the sixteenth century would never have been able to meet expanding market demands caused by demographic growth and increased demand from afar for Burgundy’s best wines. There were a variety of different kinds of credit, or loans, available to sixteenth-century vignerons living in Dijon, primarily because the city had a critical mass of wealthy elites from merchants to royal officers and judicial officials connected with the royal courts. These affluent individuals often had spare cash to invest in the wine industry and they were anxious to do so, especially because of one

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4. See the *thèse secondaire* of Denis Richet, written in 1964 but published posthumously in 1991, “Une Famille de robe: Les Séguier avant le Chancelier.”

5. See, for example, the wonderful article of Ranum, “Courtesy, Absolutism, and the Rise of the French State.”

Chapter 5

The Notary as Rural Power Broker

Maître Coujard and Pierre Collenot, Syndic of Alligny

James B. Collins

What have we learned from Robert Descimon? His lifetime of painstaking research into the lives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Parisians has reminded us that they lived, just as we do, in the micro: their lives consisted of innumerable small acts, woven into the fabric of their lives. These threads combined to make the larger tapestry of their time. Historians can see that larger pattern and the individual figures embedded within it, but have too rarely stopped to examine the remarkable juxtaposition of threads local and forain. We must also seek out those who drew the small details in the larger cartoons. In a village like Alligny-en-Morvan, a team of “artists” created the picture of their society and then worked with others patiently to stitch together their little corner of the tapestry of France. Their brush held ink, not paint; control of the written word meant control of the village. Their lives show us that writing was more than a cultural attainment. Rather, it was the essence of governmentality: royal, provincial, and seigneurial.¹

¹. See Foucault, Security, Territory, Population, on Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Recent research suggests that the relationship among these levels of government was less adversarial than
Robert Descimon’s work has enabled historians to understand how ten thousand individual decisions, taken for particular reasons, collectively make sense. That is true not simply of obvious mass decisions, like emigration, but of individual choices of beverage, or music, or movies. In early modern France, as in the twenty-first-century United States, the cultural milieu of the family, formal education, and professional formation all circumscribe choices and action. These combined individual decisions become a sort of maelstrom from which few can escape. Recreating the lives of Parisians through their marriages, their purchases or sales of property, including offices and rentes, and their innumerable transactions, Descimon has taken what had been incomprehensible and made it, at long last, intelligible.

In a recent collective project, Épreuves de noblesse, Descimon and his collaborators establish the foundation of the next generation of research on the nobility by redefining the early modern French nobility through their social practice. Parisian robe families carried out “plural, open, and evolving” practices to define themselves and to preserve social, economic, cultural, and political capital. Nobility in this sense was a category manipulated by many actors, including the monarchy. If Louis XIV’s legislation made the nobility a more clearly defined legal category, within the order, the cultural divide—measured through social practice—widened. Genealogies and family histories followed what Élie Haddad rightly calls a “logic of illustration,” having a specifically political and patrilineal purpose. Moreover, the monarchy did the same thing. The royal heraldry arbiter Charles d’Hozier found the self-authored family genealogy of President Bragelongne of the Parlement of Brittany to be so outrageous that “no right-thinking man could fail to be indignant at its ridiculous vanity.” D’Hozier, in the copy held by the king’s cabinet of titles, crossed

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2. Bourdieu, *Distinction*. A recent study in England divided people into seven “classes” based on their tastes; Jones, “Great British Class Survey finds seven social classes in UK.”

3. Descimon and Haddad, *Épreuves de noblesse*.

4. Descimon and Haddad, *Épreuves de noblesse*, 298–302. See the chapters on the Spifame family by Robert Descimon, Élodie Milles, and Pavel Ouvarov, and on the Hurault de l’Hospital family by Patrice Alex. See also Haddad, *Fondation et ruine d’une "maison."*

5. Haddad, *Fondation et ruine d’une "maison,“* 35. Louis XIV specifically defined Salic line as applying only to descendants of Saint Louis (Louis IX); he thereby abrogated the legitimate succession rights of the Courtenay family, which descended in the male line from Louis VI.
out the term *maison* (house) in the title and wrote “the plain bourgeoisie must content itself with the word *family*.”

Far from Paris, we find the same Descimonian web of social relations, power, and local politics, and that same creation of a social category, implemented by mechanisms familiar to the robes nobles in Paris. We see a privileged world of exchange: marriages within a specific group, often by siblings to the siblings or first cousins of one’s spouse; exchanges of property, sold not on an open market but only to a select few; intricate patterns of sociability, with families cemented by godparenting and witnessing of key transactions; socioeconomic webs woven by constant loaning and borrowing of money; and an intimate connection of social ties and political power. As in the Spifame case, we see the ebb and flow of family fortunes; when one branch of the family falters, another one might profit from the collapse. Much as in Paris, cultural factors defined ins and outs. In a rural parish like Alligny-en-Morvan, the key cultural indicator was literacy. Female literacy in particular marked out the families at the top of the hierarchy of rural commoners.

**The tyranny of the written word: Tax fraud at Alligny**

This story begins with the tax fraud case of Chrestian Bouillet, master of accounts in the Chambre des comptes of Dijon, who visited the parish of Alligny on 1 October 1675, as part of his tour of the bailiwick of Autun on behalf of the Estates of Burgundy. Roughly once a decade, the Estates sent out commissioners to investigate the fairness of the tax distribution. Alligny’s fourteen hamlets and *bourg* had 220 taxable hearths in 1675. Bouillet’s visit to this isolated parish offers an outsider’s look at the real world of rural early modern France, in which a literate elite spun a web to ensure control of a parish or even an entire region. The web often spiraled

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7. ADCO, C 4752. Aside from the *bourg* (village center, around the church) and the hamlets of La Ruère and Ferrières, Alligny was a serf (*mainmortable*) village. Many serfs in Alligny lived in a community of goods to escape escheat to the seigneur, who inherited any serf’s property if the heirs did not live in the same house as the deceased. The tax rolls usually listed only one person, sometimes with the notice “and consorts.” An independent adult was a taxable hearth (*feu*), even if only renting a room as a day laborer. In 1675, the tax roll had fewer women (10 percent) than was usual at Alligny (14–15 percent).
Chapter 6

Reading Municipal Lists, Interpreting Civic Practice from the Insights of Robert Descimon to Seventeenth-Century Bourges

Hilary J. Bernstein

In his 1994 article “Les Scrutateurs des élections échevinales à Paris,” Robert Descimon makes a short but methodologically revealing remark. After analyzing the changing social composition and precedence of the four vote examiners for municipal elections in Paris from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, he comments that “Hidden within lists seemingly without significance, two divergent models of designation reveal the strategies that contributed to the invention of the traditions of the corps de ville (city government). Thus is fashioned the spirit of an institution.” Although the names of Parisian vote examiners might at first seem to provide little important information, placing each of these men by profession and seniority within the corps de ville actually reveals an important change within Parisian municipal government. Whereas during the Wars of Religion it was common to select the most socially prominent individuals repeatedly to serve as vote examiners, by the reign

1. Descimon, “Les Scrutateurs des élections échevinales à Paris,” 207. All translations from the French are the author’s.
of Louis XIII each *quartenier* (captain of the quarter) and member of the *conseil de ville* (city council) could expect to be chosen in turn, and experience as the fourth vote examiner frequently preceded election as an *échevin* (alderman). Such practices testified to a changing role for these individuals. Whereas in the sixteenth century, members of the municipal government chose vote examiners of high status in order to protect the *bureau de ville* (city government) from any possible attacks on its privileges and authority, by the seventeenth century, these measures no longer seemed necessary. Now that the Crown had come to see the corps de ville as an unenthusiastic but reliable support in maintaining order within the city, the first vote examiner took on the role of representing the *hôtel de ville’s* (city hall) new clientelistic relationship with the monarchy. With less of an external political burden placed on the other positions, they could now be used to reward seniority within the bureau de ville or to signal the body’s choice of future échevins.

This image of lists of names and the question of what they might reveal about civic practice will strike any scholar of urban institutions as particularly vital. The concern immediately arises: What lists does one examine or compile and to what purpose? In my research on the political practice and civic culture of Poitiers from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the reign of Henri IV, I was particularly interested in learning not only who held office in the corps de ville but also which members were most assiduous about attending council deliberations. Part of the way that I added substance to the lists of names I encountered was to pay attention to who attended meetings regularly, who repeatedly brought up issues needing to be addressed, who expressed themselves persuasively, and who agreed to take on the numerous burdens of urban administration, such as enforcing police measures, examining the fortifications, overseeing poor relief, and many more.² I also kept in mind that the content of such lists can reveal much about contemporary social and political assumptions: whether they include simple names only, honorific titles, seigneuries, or offices and professions says much about how social qualities were seen to relate to municipal office, just as the choice of organization by social characteristics or by institutional seniority constitutes an implicit comment on

² Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community.*
the importance of the corporate body in relation to the identities of the individual members.

From his earliest work on Paris, especially his *Qui étaient les Seize?*, Robert Descimon has addressed these seemingly opaque lists of names and what they can reveal about the shifting layers of prescriptive acts, customary practices, social choices, and political attitudes that together informed municipal government. A glance at the long series of intricately related articles that he has dedicated to Parisian civic institutions and society over the last thirty-odd years suggests an approach that has evolved in roughly three stages. First, his early writings reflect the conviction that political events and attitudes, such as adherence to the Catholic League, can be elucidated through a sophisticated sociological analysis that pays attention not only to levels of wealth and profession, but also to degrees of honor within urban society, family ties, and adherence to municipal traditions. Second, his work turned from an analysis originating in political events to one more explicitly focused on urban structures. Here, Descimon’s work demonstrates that in order to understand how municipal government functioned and to what purpose, it is essential to examine the social composition of its many constituent bodies, paying attention to the ways that political practice, social organization, and ideological assumptions all interrelated and focusing on the points of conflict as well as agreement. Third, and perhaps as a natural consequence of his previous approaches, his latest work on the urban milieu is predicated on the realization that, just as it is important to uncover the social relationships embedded in municipal practice, so it is crucial to understand how urban office holding fit within the strategies of alliance and advancement of the Parisian families involved. Here, Descimon shifts the focus from institutional procedures and their underlying social assumptions to the aspirations of a broad range of Parisian lineages as reflected in their marriage alliances, choice of profession, and self-representations in notary contracts. While a good number of urban historians have sought to

Chapter 7

Qui étaient les députés?

An Unknown Group of Protestant Leaders on the Eve of the First War of Religion

Philip J. Benedict

Robert Descimon’s *Qui étaient les Seize?* provided an extraordinarily rich and detailed social analysis of one of the most important groups of lay militants from the era of the French Wars of Religion, the cadres of the urban wing of the Paris League of the period from 1585 to 1594. In homage to that work, I would like to offer here a similar study of a comparable, if much smaller, group of lay militants associated with the other “revolutionary party” of the era, the Protestant party, or, as Catholic historians of the time often called it, “la ligue des Huguenots.” Specifically, my subject is a key group of spokesmen for and leaders of the cause from the period immediately preceding the outbreak of the religious wars: the deputies sent by the provincial synods of the Reformed churches to represent their interests at court. A few other figures who spoke for the cause at assemblies in these years and went on to assume leadership roles at the local or provincial level during the following decades will also be discussed.

This article is a translation and reworking of Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, “Les Députés des Églises réformées à la cour en 1561–1562,” *Revue historique* 315 (2013): 289–332. Thanks are due to the *Revue historique* for permission to reproduce material first published there and to Nicolas Fornerod for his abundant assistance.
These deputies have been almost entirely overlooked by historians, yet in the year of extraordinary growth and critical decisions for the French Reformed cause that ran from the spring of 1561 to the spring of 1562, they were among the party’s chief agents and decision-makers. They were called into being by a decision of the second national synod of the Reformed churches, held in Poitiers in March 1561, that ordered each synodal province to “send a person to reside at court to solicit on behalf of the church, which persons will deliberate jointly so that their requests and other actions concerning religion will be in agreement.”1 Within two months, at least four provinces had named their “solliciteurs.” By August the churches had twenty representatives at court who accompanied Theodore Beza and the other Reformed ministers to Poissy when they addressed the Catholic prelates assembled there.2 The tasks these men carried out were diverse. Collectively, they submitted requests to the king and Queen Mother in the name of the churches, negotiated the terms for the doctrinal discussions at Poissy, named the ministers who spoke there, organized petition campaigns via circular letters, and offered guidance on how to respond to the important royal edicts of July 1561 and January 1562. Individually, they acted to defend the interests of the churches of their region, demanding justice for the victims of Catholic violence and seeking to discredit reports that their own side might have been responsible for disorder. Since these deputies collaborated closely with both leading Protestant grandees and the most eminent ministers close to the court, their exact role in shaping the strategies pursued by the Protestant cause cannot be isolated. At the very least, they were central agents in implementing these strategies. They probably also played an important role in determining them.

The presence of these deputies at court was announced to the world on the title page of two editions of Beza’s harangue at Poissy, a

1. All quotations from the acts of the national synods in this essay are based on the transcription made by Bernard Roussel of the most faithful copy of the early synodal decisions, British Library, Ms. Rawlinson D 638(2). The article in question here is numbered 55. I am deeply grateful to Bernard Roussel for sharing this information with me in advance of the publication of his new edition of the acts of the national synods.

2. As shown by the title page of two editions of La Harangue faîte par Monsieur Théodor de Besse, Ministre de la parole de Dieu, accompagné d’autres onze Ministres et de vingt Deputés des Eglises reformées du Royaume de France . . . en l’abbaye des Nonnains de Poissy (underlining mine), cited in Gardy, Bibliographie . . . de Théodore de Bèze, 90–91.
speech that Protestant printers hastened to publish to show the world that their ministers were being received at court as equals of the Catholic bishops. Thereafter, the delegates quickly dropped from view. The Tortorel and Perrissin etching that would enduringly shape the visual memory of Poissy omits them. Passing references pop up in works from the *Histoire ecclésiastique des Eglises Réformées au Royaume de France* (1580) through Lucien Romier’s *Catholiques et huguenots à la cour de Charles IX* (1924), but only in 1956, with Robert M. Kingdon’s *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France 1555–1563*, would a historian correctly observe the moment of their creation and devote as much as a full paragraph to them. Even Kingdon, while speculating that “much of the rising influence of the Protestant party at the Court in the period including and following the Colloquy of Poissy might conceivably be traced to these deputies,” could find out little about what they did and had to say that their activities were “mysterious.” Then they were forgotten again. A recently published article by Olivier Christin acutely observes how the constitution of deputations bearing requests and remonstrances enabled the Protestant party to establish itself as a recognized interlocutor of the Crown amid the assemblage of corporative bodies that was the French monarchy, but it displays no awareness of who the deputies were and how they were appointed, even while mentioning them several times.

In the course of editing the earliest provincial synods and other documents of the French Reformed churches from the years 1557 to 1561, Nicolas Fornerod and I were able to dispel much of the mystery surrounding these men and discover the names of twenty-two of them. Even without Descimon’s uncanny skill for locating documents about chosen individuals in the briny deeps of France’s notarial archives, we were able to identify and reconstruct essential biographical details for between sixteen and nineteen of them. After briefly sketching the institutional history of the Reformed deputies, this article will spell out the results of this research and offer a collective portrait of the group.


Chapter 8

Civic Engagement and Public Assistance in Sixteenth-Century Paris

Barbara B. Diefendorf

As other essays in this volume show well, Robert Descimon has contributed in a singular fashion to our understanding of the symbiotic ties between social and political history. He has made us acutely aware of the role that events and their contingencies play in the evolution of social relations and institutions. This essay proposes to apply these lessons to the problem of poor relief in early modern Paris by examining the impact of the social and political crises born of the Wars of Religion on the municipally organized and funded system of public assistance current at that time. Recent scholarship (including some of my own) has focused on the “revolutionary role” played by new institutions founded in response to the seventeenth century’s Catholic revival, in particular the charitable confraternities founded in the 1620s and 1630s to aid the sick poor in their homes and the ambitious project of the Hôpital général realized twenty-five years later to enclose the poor in a workhouse.¹ Sixteenth-century initiatives, which introduced a mandatory poor tax to supplement the voluntary giving of alms, if mentioned at all, tend to be glossed over

¹. Depauw, Spiritualité et pauvreté, 149, for the phrase “revolution in charity.” Other recent works stressing seventeenth-century developments in Paris include McHugh, Hospital Politics; Dinan, Women and Poor Relief; and Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity. All translations are the author’s.
briefly as decaying products of a civic humanism that failed to meet the new century’s growing needs. A break is commonly postulated between the municipally funded poor relief systems of the sixteenth century and the greater reliance on private benevolence that predominated a century later, and yet the reasons for this break remain inadequately understood. Historians have speculated that “the economic and demographic consequences of the French civil wars and religious struggles in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries may well have contributed to this,” but they have not sought to determine just what that contribution was.2

This essay attempts to repair the oversight. Focusing on the neglected period of the religious wars, it qualifies the argument for a break, or discontinuity, between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century assistance programs by showing that many of the practices usually assumed to be seventeenth-century innovations—including efforts to moralize the poor and train them for employment, but also the notion of enclosing them in workhouses—have important sixteenth-century precedents.3 The charitable initiatives inspired by the Catholic revival were less “revolutionary” in character than has generally been recognized. If the sixteenth century’s response to urban poverty failed, it was not because of a lack of imagination or effort but rather because the poor tax on which it relied could not meet the unanticipated demand placed on it when war, famine, and plague combined to strain social services beyond the breaking point in the 1590s. This failure was social and political in character, and not just economic. It prompted a hardening of attitudes toward the poor but also offers evidence of a rupture in communal values as Parisian elites withdrew support from communally organized poor relief and turned instead to the sort of private patronage previously associated with the aristocracy. If elites made the Catholic Reformation’s charitable initiatives possible, they also made them necessary by abandoning inherited traditions of civic engagement to align themselves with the aristocratic culture they

2. Jütte, Poverty and Deviance, 119.

3. The idea that the seventeenth century began “the great confinement” has been taken up by most historians of poor relief since Michel Foucault first popularized the notion in his Histoire de la Folie, whether they associate it primarily with the growth of the absolutist state or the religious revival of the Catholic Reformation. See, for example, Gutton, La Société et les pauvres, 289–349; Imbert, Le Droit hospitalier, esp. 35–37; and Depauw, Spiritualité et pauvreté, 229–52. McHugh, Hospital Politics, 83–109, disputes the role of the state and credits elites with efforts to enclose the poor. These works mention earlier attempts at confinement but quickly discount them as failures, stressing the novelty of the Hôpital Général.
Civic Engagement and Public Assistance in Sixteenth-Century Paris

witnessed at court. Changing attitudes toward poor relief give evidence of a rupture in communal values that clearly recalls the break that Descimon has postulated as a by-product of the seizure of power in Paris by a revolutionary Holy League in 1588.4 Studying public assistance thus offers a good opportunity to test his thesis that the crisis of the League provoked broader changes in civic values and allegiances.

Public assistance before the Wars of Religion

In the first half of the sixteenth century, aid to society’s less favored members was still conceived primarily in religious terms as Christian love, or charité. The practice of assisting the poor had nevertheless acquired important civic dimensions. The ecclesiastical institutions that had traditionally taken a leading role in running hospitals and providing alms were widely perceived to be failing in their responsibilities. At the request of the king and Parlement, city officials appointed a board of lay governors to administer Paris’s ancient charity hospital, the Hôtel Dieu, in 1505.5 Other hospitals were similarly placed under lay direction in the decades that followed.6 The municipality’s biggest involvement with the poor, however, lay with the Grand Bureau des Pauvres, erected in 1544 to provide assistance to poor people in their homes—what historians often call “outdoor relief.”7

Conceiving of the Christian community as an organic whole, “one bread and one body in Christ,” early modern Parisians had traditionally collected and distributed alms through their parishes.8 The understanding people had of the Christian community, though broad in conception, was thus localized in practice. Resources were scarce, and church wardens directed their alms to longtime local residents impoverished by age, illness,

4. Descimon, Qui étaient les Seize; and Descimon, “L’Échevinage parisien sous Henri IV,” among other of his articles.
6. Félibien and Lobineau, Histoire de la ville de Paris, Preuves, 1:614 (establishment of the Enfants-Dieu in 1536), and 2:703 (Lettres patentes of 4 September 1542).
7. Davis, “Poor Relief, Humanism, and Heresy,” on the somewhat earlier creation of the Aumône-Générale in Lyon, remains invaluable for comparative purposes. On municipally organized charities more broadly, see Jütte, Poverty and Deviance, 100–125.
8. Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross, 29–38.
Chapter 9

Unfinished Business

An Edition of the “Manuscript History of the League”

Mark Greengrass, with Marco Penzi and Mark Critchlow

Other chapters in this volume have explored Robert Descimon’s distinctive contribution to the writing of early modern French history. His determination to engage single-mindedly in the exploration of the unwieldy and unyielding records of the notarial archives in Paris has been an inspiration to others, including that small school of historians specializing in early modern France from across the Channel in the British Isles. It is that resource which, when interpreted with his scrupulous erudition, has enabled him to capture, through his extraordinary attention to detail, the actuality of people’s lives. Through it he has been able to reconstruct their notions of family, lineage, and locality, and to present the social habits and institutional context that structured their fortunes and aspirations. All this has been inspired by his desire to interpret afresh the traditional, triumphalist political narratives of the hexagon in this period: the suffocating story of the reimposition of Bourbon authority, the sacralisation of the French monarchy, and the emergence of the absolutist state. Robert Descimon’s career-long engagement in the history of the Catholic League embodies his attempt to find an alternative way of understanding the latter, which an older historiography interpreted as a watershed, a foundational moment for ancien régime France.
Another important and enduring feature of his work has been his generous willingness to share his findings with others and to collaborate with all those who want to explore these alternative pathways, whether they involve the Parisian notarial archives or not. This chapter is an example of such collaboration, around a project that is ongoing. It involves the study and publication of the unique history of the Catholic League, composed in the 1620s by someone who was closely involved in its affairs. Described as this “remarkable text” by Robert Descimon in 1983, it became an invaluable framework of reference for his prosopographical study of ligueurs. American pioneers (Ascoli, Salmon, and Benedict) had previously signaled its significance. It has subsequently been mined for its invaluable detail on (for instance) printing during the League and the state of mind of Henri III’s assassin, Jacques Clément. However, the document has never been published in its entirety. That state of affairs is symptomatic of a wider problem confronting any historian of early modern France. The source–texts on which one is often obliged to depend are only available in nineteenth-century publications that bear no relation to what would be regarded as scholarly editions by today’s standards. Their reliability is generally difficult, if not impossible, to assess. The issue was highlighted by Robert Descimon in his edition of four speeches of the famous reforming sixteenth-century chancellor of France Michel de l’Hospital. Such texts might be expected, in the ordinary course of events, to be readily available. In reality, however, three of them are known through what was, until recently, the standard edition of de l’Hospital’s works, published in 1824 to 1825 by Pierre Duféy. Hasty, lacking in critical acumen, and reflecting the political issues of his day, Duféy did not acknowledge the sources for the texts that he published. Sometimes (as in the case of the speech presented before the Parlement on 7 September 1560) what he chose to put into the mouth (or pen) of the chancellor

2. Descimon, Qui étaient les Seize?, 99, 214.
3. Salmon noted that the inaccessibility of this source had contributed to historians’ limited understanding of the Seize (“Paris Sixteen,” 542–43). Ascoli, in his unpublished 1971 University of California dissertation (“Sixteen”), drew on it extensively. Benedict acclaimed it as “one of the best sources available on the League in the provinces”; Rouen, 179.
4. Pallier, Recherches, 74; 77, 89; Chevallier, Les Régicides, 49 (and appendix).
5. Descimon, Discours. See also now Petris, La Plume.
borders on fiction, so far removed is it from what appears in the official record.\footnote{Descimon, *Discours*, 46; Duféy, *Œuvres*, 1:347–66.} In the case of the famous speech before the Estates General of Orléans, two contemporary published pamphlets as well as a manuscript version give variant readings to the text published by Duféy (based on a source that the editor did not identify) and assign a different date from which he gives it.\footnote{Descimon, *Discours*, 70; Duféy, *Œuvres*, 1:375–411.} For the speech pronounced by the chancellor before the Parlement of Rouen on 17 August 1563 at the moment of the declaration of Charles IX’s majority, Duféy seems to have preferred a version published almost a century after the event to other, earlier (and probably more reliable) accounts.\footnote{Descimon, *Discours*, 98.} Duféy completely overlooked the fourth discourse, presented to the Assembly of Notables at Moulins in January 1566, even though it had been published at the time as a contemporary pamphlet. Descimon’s edition underlines the more general point about the degree to which modern scholarship on early modern French history is so often dependent upon texts whose reliability and completeness is open to question.

Duféy published on the eve of the establishment of the École des chartes (1829), the institution whose mission was to establish an order in the thousands of libraries and archival deposits nationalized by the revolutionary French state between 1789 and 1793. What order that should be depended, of course, on the political flavor of the moment in the nineteenth century, and it was subject to continuing renegotiation and reconstruction even as the principal national archival classifications progressively emerged.\footnote{Moore, *Restoring Order*.} In a similar fashion, although standards for the editing of texts gradually emerged from the discipline and practice of the École des chartes, decisions about what to edit were left in the hands of committed individuals—some, but by no means all, trained Chartistes—local academies (*sociétés savantes*) and the committees of a small group of national bodies. Among the most important of the latter for the early modern period was the Société de l’histoire de France (SHF), founded in 1833 on the initiative of François Guizot. Its explicit objective was the publication of the national documentary record of prerevolutionary
Chapter 10

Gallicans Not Magistrates

The Dupuy Cabinet in the Age of Richelieu

Robert A. Schneider

Jacques-Auguste de Thou was a man of many facets. Although remembered primarily as a historian—he is the author of History of His Times, probably the most important work of French history of the period—he was also an accomplished Latin poet, a distinguished magistrate of the Parlement of Paris, the keeper of the royal library, a diplomat, and a prominent spokesman for the politique position during the Wars of Religion. And if he happened to read Desseins de professions nobles et publiques, published in 1605, he would have learned that its author, Antoine de Laval, a royal official and Gallican savant who wrote on a wide range of topics, considered him an exemplar of the virtuous use of leisure.1

This last aspect is more meaningful than it might seem. An interest in “otium” was in fact a time-honored theme among moralists, from Seneca to Montaigne and beyond—how to turn leisure into an edifying and useful experience, and especially how to avoid sloth and boredom while enjoying a privilege that was, after all, the birthright of noblemen. One chapter of Laval’s sprawling book Du loisir et comme on le peut employer honnêtement (On leisure and how it can be used virtuously), addressed this question, not by revisiting the views of ancient writers on the subject, such as Cicero and Seneca, or Christian moralists, as is usually the way in

1. On Laval, see Faure, Antoine de Laval; and Fumaroli, L’Âge de l’éloquence, 273–79, 466–69.
these sorts of texts, but by vaunting the example of a handful of contemporaries. Along with de Thou, Laval cites two other distinguished magistrates, Nicolas Rapin and Guy du Faur de Pibrac, who were also poets, and Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, a diplomat in service to the Hapsburgs, known too as a man of letters. Indeed, Laval emphasizes the literary activities of his exemplars, for it is their commitment and contributions to “letters”—whether French or Latin—that distinguishes them from those other noblemen whose proclivities ran to gambling, hunting, “games,” and the like, activities Laval scorned as unworthy of emulation. De Thou, like the others, stands out as a model of the learned gentleman who, while usually devoted to “serious matters,” also dedicated himself to Latin poetry, thus “ornamenting” his distinguished career as a prominent magistrate with the avocation of an exemplary “beaux esprits.” Laval confesses that de Thou’s achievement in the realm of letters was so daunting that it convinced him to abandon his own paltry literary efforts. His goal here, however, is not self-referential, but rather to define members of the magistracy, the so-called Fourth Estate, as opposed to the traditional nobility, by its appreciation of otium as a useful and edifying experience and as a counterpoint to the professional commitments that otherwise claim their time.2

This aspect of de Thou can serve as a point of departure for this essay, which will, in part, explore the historian as exemplary of new trends among the cultivated French elite in the seventeenth century. The real inspiration, however, comes from Robert Descimon’s article “Jacques de Thou (1553–1617): Une rupture intellectuelle, politique, et sociale,” which appeared in the journal Revue de l’histoire des religions in 2009. Along with other essays, this article serves to deepen an inquiry that has been central to his remarkable career: the genealogy, fortunes, contours, and commitments of the Parisian “bourgeoisie” and the emergence, in part from its midst and in the crucible of the religious conflict of the sixteenth century, of the Fourth Estate and ultimately of the noblesse de robe. His prodigious work on this particular subject—which has enormous implications for understanding the nature of an ancien régime society—has been as path-breaking as it has been inventive, distinguishing him as one of Europe’s leading historians of his generation. This is indeed one of the reasons for

this book—his friendship and our gratitude for his boundless generosity, both personal and intellectual, over the years, being another.

In this article, Descimon argues that the great Gallican historian constructed—or perhaps reconstructed—a new persona or identity in the course of his career. This development can be seen as a series of “ruptures.” First was a rupture with familial and career traditions that had joined his forebears’ fortunes with the Parisian oligarchy whose power base was the Hôtel de Ville. The second was a break with the savant judicial “science” that had achieved such prestige in the sixteenth century. The final one was realized by way of a critique of dogmatic theology, and all its confessionalist implications, in favor of a Gallicanism that invested its providentialism not in a global vision of all of Christianity but rather in the more “local,” divinely ordained destiny of France and its king.

What did these ruptures lead to or create? Descimon provides several suggestions as an answer. Socially, de Thou’s break with his family’s Parisian roots paved the way for his participation in the creation of a new high nobility—a true nobility of the robe, with its own values and sense of place in the nation’s hierarchy. His intellectual break with the legal traditions of his professional forebears meant identification with the emerging Republic of Letters, the European-wide fraternity of savants. “He was incontestably a precursor,” writes Descimon, “inscribed in an intellectual configuration he himself helped to create, that of a republic of letters, which presupposed a distancing from the humanist movement of the sixteenth century.” Finally, there were cultural implications to de Thou’s “refashioning.” Here, Descimon alludes to his colleague Christian Jouhaud’s influential book, Les pouvoirs de la littérature, casting, it would seem, de Thou among those gens de lettres who created the literary field that Jouhaud, Alain Viala, and their students have been so fruitfully excavating these last years.

I would like to follow up on Descimon’s interpretation of de Thou’s development by looking less at the great historian himself than at his
Chapter 11

Intellectual Trajectories and Relationships of a French Historian

Robert Descimon

Curriculum vitae: Robert Descimon

Born in Paris (20th arrondissement), 21 March 1946.
Preparatory classes for admission to the grandes écoles at
Agrégé in history, 1970.
Progression through the ranks as research scholar, Centre
Directeur d’études, École des hautes études en sciences so-
Retirement, 2014.
As a discipline, our profession presents difficulties and traps. The biggest danger is a hidden Manichaeism. It seems that historians have difficulty clearing their minds of all laudatory or pejorative associations with the past, all references, even unconscious, to a system of values or to normative concepts of good and evil.

Denis Richet

These days in France autobiographical writing has become almost an academic genre, since one of the required parts of the file presented for the Habilitation required to direct research (a diploma introduced in France on the German model in 1984) is a mémoire de synthèse in which the candidate retraces the evolution of his research interests. Some years earlier, Pierre Nora launched a fashion for writing one’s “ego-history” by inviting a number of leading historians to tell their life story. These are not the models for this text, which aims simply to retrace some stages of an intellectual trajectory, as well as to offer a collective portrait of those who accompanied me on this journey. It aims, then, primarily to describe the webs of intellectual connection in which my personality as a historian took shape and not to offer reflections on historical methods or the status of the discipline, past or present. These biographical comments are thus descriptive and do not aim to apprehend a broader conception of history on my part; in any case, there isn’t one. While I think my way of doing history is close to that of my American colleagues, I nonetheless remain attached to the critical tradition associated with Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and other French sociologists.

My interest in history was precocious. From the time I first began secondary school at the age of eleven, in 1957, I thought that becoming

1. This text cites in notes works characteristic of the French historians whose memory or presence is evoked, except for the most well known of them, such as C. E. Labrousse, Pierre Goubert, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. See Nora, ed., Essais d’ego-histoire. Denis Richet, who will play an important role here, wrote a text in 1978, when he was fifty, published under the title “Pourquoi j’aime l’histoire?” as an afterword to the book of essays De la Réforme à la Révolution. This work, published posthumously, was masterminded by André Berelowitch and Yann Fauchois. André Berelowitch put together Richet’s complete bibliography (including newspaper articles published under pseudonyms in La Pensée and the Nouvel Observateur). The above quotation is taken from “Pourquoi j’aime l’histoire?”

2. At the risk of falling into the trap pointed out by Bourdieu, “L’Illusion biographique.”

3. I largely share the view expressed by Dewald in Lost Worlds, on the development and limits of social history in France.
a history teacher would be all I could dream of. Having always benefitted from excellent teaching, I saw this youthful vocation grow stronger with time. Thanks to the advice of a big brother twelve years my senior (Henri Descimon, a biologist and ecologist who had a career as a university professor), I succeeded in gaining entry to the École normale supérieure of the rue d’Ulm in September 1967. The tutor there who coordinated my preparation for the *agrégation* (the competitive examination on which employment as a high school teacher is based) was Denis Woronoff. I was on my way to achieving my goal.

My vocation as a historian of early modern Europe came later. In 1967, I was primarily interested in the history of ancient Greece, and especially that of the Diadochi and Epigones, Alexander’s successors and the founders of Hellenistic kingdoms. But although the Sorbonne offered remarkable teaching in Roman history, the same could not be said for Greek. I wonder today why I didn’t turn instead to Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, but I missed that opportunity.

Woronoff made us read the latest *grandes thèses*, among them those of Pierre Goubert, Pierre de Saint-Jacob, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. There was a lot there to give one ideas. Then the events of 1968 intervened. Like most of my generation, I took part. I became eager to work on the origins of capitalism and turned to Pierre Vilar, Ernest Labrousse’s successor in the chair of social and economic history at the Sorbonne. He was a warmhearted scholar whose teaching awakened a critical spirit. He advised me, in keeping with my desires, to take on the subject of the great merchant dyers of the faubourg Saint-Marcel in the sixteenth century—the Gobelins, Canayes, and Lepaultres—who were in their time entrepreneurs as close as might be found to the industrial capitalists of the modern era’s beginnings. A year later I defended my master’s thesis, “The Gobelins and Canayes: Dye Work Entrepreneurs in Sixteenth-Century Paris.” To guide me as I worked on this subject, Vilar, who was a specialist in the history of Catalonia and the Iberian world, sent me to consult with Denis Richet. Richet then became my mentor, a beloved master until his premature death on 14 September 1989. A remarkable human being, Richet combined a strong mastery of theory with great scholarly precision. He had an

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1982


1983

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1986


1987


1988


1989


1990


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1992

Some French terms have close English false cognates: for example, the chief priest/minister of a French parish is a *curé*, for which the English term is “vicar,” and the assistant priest in France is the *vicaire*, or “curate” in English. This glossary aims to clarify definitions of institutions, offices, and other terms for which there is often no direct English equivalent.

*avocat:* an attorney or barrister who pleaded cases in courts.

*avocat du roi:* an official who served as the king’s attorney.

*bailli:* a presiding judicial official. In royal courts of primary jurisdiction, called *bailiages* (bailiwicks), the *bailli* was a nobleman drawn from the most powerful local families. He was the chief military officer of the district and sometimes adjudicated disputes between nobles. The seigneurial *bailli* was the chief judge of a seigneur.

*bans de vendange:* the specific dates on which grape harvesting could begin each year, set by local magistrates in conjunction with the local vignerons. Harvesting the grapes was banned before the set date, and violators were regularly fined.

*bourg:* village center, around the parish church.

*bourgeois mandés:* delegates sent by a city’s districts to participate in municipal elections or advise on city affairs.

*bourgeoisie seconde:* the second-tier non-noble elite, a group that historians of the concept view as having felt their path to social mobility was blocked by more socially prominent elites with better access to political influence and power.

*brigues:* illicit electoral contests.

*bureau de ville:* city government, in Paris and certain other cities.

*cabier de doléances:* list of grievances drawn up for and by representative assemblies.

*cens, censive:* a *cens* was a contract giving someone perpetual use of a parcel of land; the specific parcel spelled out in the contract was the *censive*. This was like a perpetual rental of land, as the purchaser agreed to pay an annual sum of money or a portion of the crop harvested each year in return for the use of the land.

*Châtelet:* The fortress-like building that housed the officers of the *prévôté* of Paris; by extension, the officers of the *prévôté*. 
commissaire: an administrative officer, or commissioner; this could be a long-term professional position, for example at the Châtelet of Paris, or a temporary appointment.

conseil de ville: city council.

conseiller: a judge in a royal court or a counselor in a municipal government, depending on context.

corps de ville: members of city government.

crimes énormes: serious crimes such as treason, infanticide, assassination, grand theft, or arson that warranted the death penalty if the defendant was convicted.

dévot: a devout Catholic displaying the interiorized faith characteristic of the Catholic Reformation, but also a term often associated with the politico-religious faction most active in opposing Protestantism in the era after the Edict of Nantes.

dizainiers: officers of the neighborhood or subdistrict known in Paris as a dizaine.

droit annuel: an annual fee paid by royal officeholders that gave them a hereditary property right to their offices. Introduced in 1604, the droit annuel increased the value of these offices in ways that made venality very hard to end.

échevin: alderman, or city official who policed and administered justice and order in a city.

échevinage: council of aldermen.

élection: local financial district, so-called after their chief official, the élu. Elected by local estates in the early fourteenth century, élus became royal officials in 1373. Roughly two-thirds of France had élections; that region was called the pays d’élection. The other third (including, for example, Burgundy) had provincial estates and so were pays d’États.

élu: the chief official in an élection; but also, depending on context, an elected representative. In Burgundy, for example, the seven members of the commission that acted for the Estates of Burgundy when they were not in session were called “élus” and included one cleric, one noble, one person from the Third Estate, the mayor of Dijon, two masters from the Chambre des comptes, and a representative of the king.

état civil: The collective name given to the records of births, marriages, and deaths kept by parish churches in the ancien régime.

feu: literally “hearth,” but also a term used to designate a taxable adult living independently and listed on the parish tax roll.

Fronde: an uprising against the French Crown that began in Paris in 1648 and, expanding both geographically and in terms of social makeup and demands of the rebels, evolved into a civil war that lasted until 1652.

gabelle: salt tax.

gens du roi: royal attorneys and solicitors.

gens mécaniques: craftsmen working with their hands.

Grand Bureau des Pauvres: the municipally run agency created in Paris in 1544 to provide assistance to poor people in their homes.

greffier: chief clerk, who kept a register of transactions [greffe] in his jurisdiction. A seigneurial greffier held an office, often leased for a given period.

guet: civic guard, usually responsible to and under control of the municipal government.
hôpital général: workhouse founded in the seventeenth century to enclose the poor.

hôtel de ville: city hall.

hôtel-dieu: a charity hospital, usually created by private donors and run by clerics in the later Middle Ages. Some hôtels-dieu were taken over by municipal agencies in the sixteenth century.

jurade: name of the Bordeaux city council.

jurat: a member of the Bordeaux city council.

laboureur: ploughman. In Alligny, a full plough team was four oxen [laboureur à quatre boeufs], and most peasants described as “laboureur” had only two oxen [laboureur à deux boeufs]. This smaller plough team could not do the heavy spring ploughing.

letters of remission: letters issued by the royal chancellery court pardoning an individual for a specific crime, later to be registered at the local criminal court with authority over the trial.

lieutenant de justice (or lieutenant-général): a royal officeholder appointed to initiate and conduct local criminal proceedings. Some cities, including Paris, separated these functions between a lieutenant criminel and a lieutenant civil charged with civil proceedings.

ligueur: a supporter of the radical Catholic faction, or Holy League, that held power in Paris and a number of other French cities between 1588 and the mid-1590s.

mainmorte: a form of serfdom in which the serf (mainmortable) owned his or her land but could pass it only to heirs living with him or her at the time of the serf’s death; if the serf had no such heir, the land reverted to the lord. To avoid this escheat, serfs often lived in a community of goods (communs en biens) with multiple households sharing the same roof.

maître des requêtes: master of requests; a key legal advisor to a king or great aristocrat.

métayer: sharecropper, but in contrast to the usual meaning of that term in American English, it connoted a peasant with a plough team, leasing a large farm, and so a relatively rich, rather than a poor farmer.

noblesse de robe: the collective term for men who acquired a form of nobility through the purchase of venal offices—usually royal offices—such as judgeships in the parlements. These offices did not give the holder a noble title or landed estate but were tied directly to the function of the office.

octroi: An excise duty on an agricultural product such as wine brought into a city from outside. The amount was set by the Crown and remained relatively stable and predictable, though it was often lowered in times of dearth. The octroi on wine, for example, was rarely raised in the ancien régime, largely because of the public outcry by both the producers and consumers.

parlements: royal appeals courts that by the sixteenth century had jurisdiction over all the major provinces of France; these courts also registered royal edicts to give them the force of law and undertook considerable responsibility for maintaining public order at the local level.

paulette: a term commonly used for the droit annuel, the tax collected annually on royal office to allow the holder to transmit it to his heirs or dispose of it in other ways. The term is derived from the name of the financier, Charles Paulet, who initially proposed it.
politique: a pejorative epithet applied to those who placed loyalty to the Crown and the royal succession above religious and confessional differences; later extended with less pejorative intent to encompass more broadly those Catholic royalists who supported the king against the Holy League.

pratien: a clerk who prepared cases for seigneurial courts, witnessed documents for a notary, and assisted legal professionals in other ways.

prévôt des marchands: the highest municipal officer, equivalent to a mayor, in Paris.

procureur: solicitor; more broadly, a representative empowered to act in certain situations. Village communities often had a procureur d’office as their agent, for example; he was not always a legal professional and could even be illiterate.

prud’hommes: goodmen, or men brought in to advise in certain situations.

quartenier: captain of a city district known as a quartier, or quarter.

question préalable: torture applied after the defendant was convicted and sentenced to death in order to obtain information about accomplices.

question préparatoire: torture applied after a defendant was charged to obtain a confession of guilt.

receveur: treasurer, or official charged with receiving and accounting for funds.

rente: A type of loan in which an investor would lend a sum of money to a borrower in return for an annual interest payment—usually one sixteenth of the principal—that the borrower and his heirs were required to pay in perpetuity on the same date each year until the entire principal sum could be repaid in one cash payment.

répartiteur: the agency charged with distributing funds in a particular district under Paris’s Grand Bureau des Pauvres.

Sainte Union: the Holy League, a radical faction that rose up against the French Crown in 1585 to demand stronger measures against the Protestants, a new war to end heresy in France, and the exclusion of Henri de Bourbon, king of Navarre, from the line of succession to the French throne.

sécretaire du roi: a venal office connected to the royal chancellery; in practice a sinecure purchased for the noble status it conveyed, a status that became hereditary after twenty years of service.

Seize/Sixteen: prominent members of Paris’s Sainte Union, or Holy League. The group took its name from the sixteen quartiers, or districts, into which Paris was divided.

sénéchaussée: a district of government—the equivalent in the south of France of a bailliage—and the mid-level royal court that adjudicated affairs at this district level.

Six Corps des marchands: the six most powerful merchants’ guilds in Paris.

syndic: appointed representative of a corporate or ecclesiastical body.

taille: the chief royal direct tax; when used in the plural, the term meant all direct taxes taken together. Clerics and nobles were exempt from the taille, but many regions and cities also acquired exemptions. Burgundy, for example, did not pay the original taille, voted in 1439 by an assembly not including Burgundian deputies, but paid direct taxes voted by the Estates of Burgundy, as well as the taillon, a tax created by Henri II to pay soldiers. The term “tailables” referred to all those subject to these direct taxes and usually carried a pejorative connotation.
venal offices: offices sold by the Crown to raise revenue and staff administrative posts, notably judicial posts; a phenomenon that expanded on a large scale during the sixteenth century.

vibailli: co-chief of the judicial unit known as the bailliage.

vigneron: those who tended the vines, harvested the grapes, and made the wine from the grapes after the harvest each year.
Contributors

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