

The Circulation of Contempt

In 1576 the Swiss theologian Josias Simler published a book entitled: [De Republica helvetiorum libri duo](#) which, according to his own statement, was meant to "rembarrer les calomnies des ennuieux" (p.5), namely to contradict those who unjustly (in Simler's opinion) criticized the Swiss. Accordingly, his 500 page work tried to explain the history as well as the political operation of the numerous and multifaceted little States located in the South of the Holy Empire.

His undertaking is extremely interesting for at least three reasons. First, from a conceptual point of view, it referred both to the concept of Republic and to the Swiss territory. However, the *republica* it evoked had very little to do with the current notion of Republic, as opposed to monarchy. Actually, the word encompassed all kinds of governments and designated any sovereign State. Second, from an argumentative perspective, Simler's ambition was not only counter false accusations against the Swiss political system but, more to the point, to challenge the moral superiority such criticism bestowed upon themselves by those who formulated it. In other words, he intended to deal with contempt for what we currently call republicanism.

Finally, from a temporal point of view, one may believe that Simler's words were specifically addressed to Jean Bodin who, the same year, had published his well-known *De la République*, in which he openly despised the political systems of the various Swiss cantons. Paradoxically, this simultaneity made it impossible for Simler to directly reply to his French counterpart. This makes the situation all the more interesting, for it implies that there was recurrent criticism of the Swiss political systems. Moreover, it indicates that the Swiss themselves didn't face this contempt with indifference or humble silence but were eager to confront it.

Of course, this phenomenon hasn't gone unnoticed. However, it is more often than not apprehended in a strictly national perspective. It thus allows French historians to show the development of French political theory and Swiss scholars to track down the construction of their homeland's "grand narrative". True, the German/Swiss historian Thomas Maissen confronted both the Swiss and French modern opinions on Republicanism. His research, however, was primarily focused on the concept of Sovereignty, as he tried to determine when and why the Swiss cantons ceased to be considered as belonging to the Holy Empire.

Our purpose here is somewhat different. We intend to highlight not only the "republican" content of this contempt but also its specific *modus operandi* due to its indisputable moral component. Why did this contempt develop, how was it expressed and answered, and what were its consequences? Moreover, what does it tell us about the values of those who generated it and how did it influence them? These are some of the questions we intend to explore by retracing French anti-republican criticism and its Swiss replies, and by finally deciphering the uses and abuses of political contempt from the mid 16th Century until the 17th Century, as famous political theories were taking shape.

I. France or the importance of context

In this framework, *De la République* is considered to be one of the most important books written during this period. Although Simler had the opportunity to read it shortly before his death and despite several topical and conceptual similarities, he didn't have the time to take Bodin's book into

consideration when writing his own *De republica helvetiorum*. This asynchrony shows, if anything, that Bodin wasn't the first French scholar to write about the functioning of the Swiss Cantons.

Early modern testimonies show that there was some kind of curiosity about the Swiss. Most of these writings stemmed from ambassadors or official observers who tried to understand and to explain the specificities of the Swiss to the French authorities. It is true that the ties between the kingdom of France and the "Swiss League" were growing tighter since they had signed, in 1516, a peace treaty that granted the Cantons French money and the king of France Swiss mercenaries. In this framework, the request for further information about these new allies seems only natural. These works are mostly manuscripts. Although they might have disseminated some common knowledge on the Cantons, it seems plausible that printed works were more able to do so and, consequently, to possibly trigger some replies from the Swiss themselves.

One of the first books available in French which evokes the Swiss cantons is by the German Lutheran scholar Johannes Sleidanus (1506-1556), whose opus on the state of religion under the reign of Charles V was translated into French and published in 1555. Interestingly enough, his book already refers to three capital concepts that will be used later on by his French counterparts in order to describe the political functioning of the Swiss Cantons. First, he depicted them as a true Republic, namely "administrés comme une république entre eux" (p. 37 b). Although he didn't define the word Republic, he specified that its formation stemmed from the expulsion, in the early 14th Century of the tyrants that had ruled the Swiss' territory. In Sleidanus' opinion, the Swiss had been able to get along peacefully until religion and especially Zwinglianism had made them rebellious and prone to (civil) war.

Bodin's analysis is altogether very similar and different. Twenty years after Sleidanus, he equally used the word republic in order to qualify the cantons. Unlike his predecessor however, he envisioned each canton as a republic *per se* – albeit detached from the Holy Empire. This double point of view contributed to stress how divided, seditious and rebellious the Swiss were. According to Bodin, the Swiss didn't free themselves from tyranny. Quite the contrary, their popular political systems tended to anarchy, which was another form of tyranny. Bodin obviously neglected the religious argumentation and focused on political factors. His criticism obviously –though differently -- influenced the French authors who undertook to describe the Cantons after him.

At the turn of the 17th Century, Sully's advisor, Antoine de Laval (1550-1631) directly addressed Bodin's claims concerning the Swiss Republics. In his opinion, the thirteen Cantons were so tightly linked that they truly constituted a single Republic. More importantly perhaps, he skipped the problem of rebellion, let alone anarchy, and reintroduced the topic of liberty, by highly praising the numerous battles the Swiss had fought and won in order to preserve it. Conversely, a few years later, Pierre de Lancre, counselor to the king, denied the Swiss any ability to govern, let alone to manage a republic (p. 452). And if they enjoyed some kind of domestic liberty, it was a servile one! It is difficult to state whether this apparent contradiction was meant to evoke tyranny. In any case, he concluded: "Donc le Suisse [est] beaucoup inférieur aux autres nations" (p. 453).

Above all their differences, these various texts show some common conceptual and argumentative threads. First, they use the word Republic in order to describe the Swiss cantons – be it as a whole or individually – but without referring to a specific form of government. On the contrary, Bodin claimed that the aristocratic and democratic systems that prevailed in the various cantons were incompatible. Moreover, all authors agreed that the cantons were characterized by liberty, which

might -- or might not -- stem from division, rebellion and anarchy. The latter, most scholars believed, lead to tyranny that was generally viewed as the worse of all possible evils.

Secondly and maybe more importantly, these books and their criticism were deeply anchored in and decisively oriented by historical circumstances. The first criticisms were formulated as the Swiss had already experienced their first wars of religion and shortly before the rest of Europe was experiencing their own ones. Thus, it is no surprise that the Swiss seemed unable to refrain from divisions: they personified a problem that everybody preferred to understand as being typically Swiss and, more to the point, that Sleidanus preferred to consider as being typical of Zwinglianism. We can read here a recurring fear or a dead certainty: religious divisions inevitably lead to political divisions and in the end to territorial fragmentation, something that the Empire and Switzerland were going through at the time. As a matter of fact, Bodin – who knew Switzerland well for having sojourned at Geneva for a time - wrote his *De la République* precisely at a time when France was ravaged by terrible wars of religion and a weakening of royal authority after the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day, fueled by fierce political rivalries and bloody struggles for power. In this context, criticizing the Swiss political systems was a way of (not) speaking about the atrocities Bodin had witnessed in France - the Massacre and, conversely, highlighting what he considered as the best possible government.

A contrario, Antoine de Laval's rather positive opinion of the Swiss cantons was published in the more or less pacified in the context of the Edict of Nantes that organized confessional coexistence in France during which it was obvious that the Swiss wars of religion had been far less bloody and long-lasting than the French ones. Finally, the openly contemptuous evaluation of Pierre de Lancre may be read as a reaction to his own experience. In 1609, he was put in charge of bringing order and hence of witch-hunting near Bordeaux, thus developing a deep hatred for the "populace". However, his judgment may also be interpreted as a way of praising his king and the French monarchy.

These testimonies first and foremost prove that the contempt for the Swiss systems had little to do with Swiss realities. The Swiss example more often than not served as a true counter-model that primarily reflected the realities and preoccupations of those who wrote about it. Obviously, the Swiss case was easier to use than, for instance, Venice. Unlike the prestigious Italian cities, the Swiss cantons were unimportant and obscure, sparing the scholars embarrassing explanations, while allowing them to ask key questions about the link between religion and the State, between pluralism and unity, between sovereignty and consensus and especially between the republic and plots. Indeed, within the Kingdom, there heated discussions about the etymology of the word *Huguenot*, that designated the protestants: if some Catholic controversialists played on words and linked the term with *guenon* (she-monkey) or evoked a certain King *Hugon* that was popular in the region around Tours, it was clearly the relationship with Switzerland and *Eidgenossen*, the conspirators, that contemporaries chose to remember. The protestant rebels that took up arms against their legitimate king, were thus the spiritual sons of the Swiss conspirators, namely those rebels who had organized themselves as equals on the basis of mutual oaths, thus hijacking from its true function what should have been a sacrament of authority and an instrument of power: the oath. At the very moment where royal power and the Catholic Church chose to ask of their subjects to swear increasingly precise and constraining professions of faith and oaths of obedience, making the oath a means of strengthening the ties of subjection, conspiracies of equals take on sinister overtones that brings them close to plots. The term *eyguenot*, found as early as 1520 in the French-speaking regions of Switzerland and borrowed from Swiss German, quickly becomes a pejorative term that Catholics

used to designate the Reformed (the confederates being thought to be favorable to the Protestant Reformation); it spreads from that point onwards through the idioms of French-speaking Switzerland as well as in the bordering regions of France.

It is of course impossible to evaluate the efficiency of such a discourse. Suffice it to say that this contempt was embedded in an autocratic trend. This doesn't mean, however, that the Swiss themselves were indifferent and didn't care to answer – quite the contrary.

II. Switzerland or the art of replying

Since the contempt for the Swiss cantons was not novel, the reactions it triggered weren't novel either. If Simler's *Republica* was arguably the most prominent Swiss "counter-criticism", it was by no means the first in this field. Actually, some of these reactions may be tracked down in the 15th Century, as several scholars tried to confront the criticism the (mainly Austrian) supporters of the Habsburg dynasty leveled at them. Most of them did it by using, or more precisely, by truly inventing and constructing a historical narrative. The invention of Swiss history had several purposes. It created a sense of unity, above and despite the cantonal borders. It also carried various values that were presented as typically Swiss – the most important of which was the aspiration for liberty, whatever this might have been.

Arguably, the wars of religion as well as the subsequent political divisions made it difficult to maintain these claims, which became accordingly rather scarce. As Simler undertook to write his own account of Swiss history, he interestingly decided to complete it with a more political/theoretical part, meant to explain the specificity of the "Swiss League". In this framework, he not only exposed the classical Aristotelian taxonomy but also indicated the dangers that threatened each form of Republic. Moreover, he warned his readers in the form of concepts and counter-concepts: "Il y a trois sortes de Republicques, à savoir la Monarchie, l'Aristocratie & la Democratie lesquelles ont pour ombres vicieuses la Tyrannie, l'Oligarchie & l'Anarchie" (340). Simler acknowledged that there were various Swiss governments: aristocratic, democratic or mixed. Nonetheless, he forcefully insisted on the existence of *one* Swiss Republic, in which sovereignty resided with the people and which was axiologically speaking lead by liberty. More importantly, it wasn't a Monarchy and, thus, couldn't deteriorate into what Simler feared most, namely tyranny.

Simler's book was reedited at least four times between 1577 and 1639. This success had circumstantial causes. It first echoed the Swiss fear of breaking apart due to religious divisions and, later, their growing awareness of forming a country, triggered by their common neutrality during the Thirty Years' War. However, this achievement also had intrinsic reasons, as Simler's text efficiently interweaved two kinds of argumentation. On the one hand, it elaborated on the historical justification that the Swiss scholars had invented and used since the end of the Middle Ages. In order to counter the Habsburgs' claims that presented the Swiss as factious people disobeying their prince and God, they argued that the Habsburg failed their mission, so that the Swiss were obliged to rebel, in order to re-establish the social and political order God wanted. In other words, they completely inversed their adversaries' argumentation. From their perspective, they were the righteous and virtuous. They were the defenders of true, God-driven liberty. Conversely, the Habsburgs were the rebellious. Moreover they didn't rebel against men but they stood against God. This kind of argumentation made the Swiss the Instrument of God and thus the new Chosen People.

On the other hand, Simler was probably aware that the Reformation had reduced the plausibility and hence the power of this discourse, as both Swiss Protestants and Catholics claimed to be the only

Chosen People. In any case, he coupled the classical historical justification with a political argumentation that better suited both his audience and the criticism stemming from the French side. In his discourse, he astutely juggled with some of the most efficient concepts of the time. His presentation of the Swiss political system aimed at clearly distinguishing between popular government and anarchy, liberty and rebellion. More to the point, his institutional account intended to prove that if the Swiss Republic was fundamentally popular, it was by no way anarchic; and if it was driven by true aspirations for freedom, it wasn't rebellious. This posture led to some crucial differences with Bodin and notably explains Simler's insistence on the Cantons constituting one single republic (as opposed to thirteen) that did belong to the Holy Empire. However, Simler's objectives also resulted in the finding of common ground. His hatred and fear of rebellion was thus fuelled by the widespread belief that revolt and hence division would encourage foreign invasion, foreign domination and consequently tyranny.

Obviously, the Swiss addressed most of their despisers' criticisms and truly took them into account. However hurt, challenged or spurred they felt, they often used this opportunity not only to justify but also to reinvent themselves. This simple statement presupposes at least two different and crucial steps. First, as several medievalists have already shown it, since the Swiss were despised as a whole, they developed an increasing awareness of forming a whole. Now, during the 16th Century, this reactive self-awareness was by no way obvious, as the Swiss cantons were religiously as well as politically dissimilar, if not radically opposed. In this polarized framework, contempt wasn't enough to bring the Cantons together, although it could offer an opportunity to picture what could lead to this result. So, just as the contempt for the Swiss was a way of expressing fears, concern and hopes that had only little to do with the cantons, the books supposed to deal with it actually presented an ideal picture of the "Swiss republic", that went well beyond the criticism that arguably spurred it. So, if the French contempt somewhat influenced the Swiss political thinking, it was merely in an indirect way. However, if there was no true dialogue, there was a kind of circulation, three features of which we would like to present in guise of conclusive hypotheses.

Conclusion

From a postural/argumentative point of view, this case study shows that the reception of contempt, which specialists of emotions haven't really studied so far, unsurprisingly varies according to the status and situation of the addressee. When the Swiss felt strong, they tended to replicate by reversing the contempt along the same axiological axis. Conversely, when they felt somewhat weak, as they did during the 16th Century, they tried to enter their contempters' hierarchy of values by displaying the same archenemy. So, what they tried to show wasn't their superiority but their equality with those who despised them.

This mechanism had important conceptual consequences. If the Swiss, and especially Simler, feared tyranny above all, they didn't consider it a possible decay of democracy but of monarchy. Now, there was fortunately no monarchy in the Swiss republic that was only composed of democracies and aristocracies. In his wish to prove the unity of the Swiss cantons, Simler established an equivalence between both these political systems and the Republic. There is no doubt that Simler's conceptual invention stemmed from his wish to prove that the Swiss belonged to the axiological codes of his time. His attempt shows, if anything, that the circulation of contempt reflects how widespread some dominant values were. At the same time, one may ask whether his conceptual blend didn't

contribute to the formation of the current concept of Republic, as opposed to monarchy – albeit in a very positive and not at all despicable way.

This double transformation, modifying the concept's meaning and connotation, admittedly occurred about 200 years later. Considering that the French revolutionaries not only viewed the Swiss as a Republic, but even as a kind of political role-model, it seems that contempt doesn't circulate only in space and between concepts but also through time.

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