

Robert Descimon, Qui étaient les Seize? Mythes et réalités de la Ligue parisienne (1585-1594). Paris: Mémoires des Sociétés historiques et archéologiques de Paris et de L'Ile-de-France, vol. 34. 1983. 302 pp.

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To book-buyers in 1983, Robert Descimon's thesis presented itself in the innocent disguise of regional antiquarianism. It appeared in a publication series sponsored by the local history societies of Paris and the Ile de France, and the nineteenth-century sketch on its cover seemed deliberately to recall the placid scholarship of earlier times; the book even came with its pages uncut, preserving another nineteenth-century tradition. Its title promised close analysis of a narrow question over a narrow span of time: who were the activists of the Paris League, the extreme Catholic movement that dominated the city between 1585 and 1594? Descimon's detailed answer took the form of a 130-page (in a book of only 302 pages) "prosopographical dictionary," heavily documented capsule biographies of 225 individuals. He placed this listing in the center of the book, rather than at the end as a conventional appendix, further proclaiming his harmlessly antiquarian intentions.

Of course, the disguises soon fall away, and the reader is quickly disabused. The erudition stands literally "au coeur du présent travail," in the author's words (95), but in fact it serves as the starting point for meditations about fundamental issues of French history, extending from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the present. For Qui

étaient les Seize? is an attempt to define the transition from medieval to modern France, locating the moment, naming the actors, tallying the costs—and above all seeking to untangle the meanings. For Descimon, the League was the critical point in this process, and he asks what the actors in it thought they were doing, and what social forces made them behave as they did. Hence a book that, for all its nineteenth-century trappings, speaks to and for its late-twentieth-century moment of publication. Echoes of 1968 hang over a book that explores a radical movement that failed; so also do echoes from 1970s debates within the historical profession about how to construct a social history that would also take politics and mentalities into account. It is not surprising that Qui étaient les Seize? has provided the loose framework for a long series of related studies that have emerged over the twenty-five years since its composition. Descimon himself has produced some of these, but many others have come from students and colleagues participating in his seminar (one of the liveliest in Paris) at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

From the seventeenth century on, the Leaguers have stood at the center of one of the great narratives of French history. Catholic fanatics who would not tolerate religious dissidence within their country, so runs the story, they eventually yielded to the good sense and military courage of the first Bourbon king, Henry IV. Against their fanaticism, he and his supporters offered religious tolerance, good government, and national unity, creating a state that stood above the particularisms of its citizens. Only such a state could aspire to European greatness. Henry died before fulfilling that aspiration, but his son and grandson realized it; despite revolutions and new political systems, the ideals of military grandeur and national inclusiveness remained central to French national life in the

nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. Unreasoning Catholic zeal explained part of the Leaguers' resistance to this project, but so also did their social backgrounds. Drawn chiefly from the lower orders, lacking political experience and education, the Leaguers were easily manipulated by charismatic leaders from the high aristocracy, themselves cynically using rebellion as a path to power and offices. Variations on this social interpretation persisted through the mid-twentieth century. The great Sorbonne historian Roland Mousnier, for instance, repeated the view that the Leaguers were drawn from the lower levels of the legal profession, men whose career prospects were blighted by the development of venal office-holding. Whether from the very bottom of society or from this middle class of under-employed lawyers, League fanaticism expressed resentment, misunderstanding, and blindness.

At its simplest level, Qui étaient les Seize? explodes these national myths. Carefully quantified, the book's capsule biographies—the product of years spent in Parisian notarial and judicial archives—conclusively demonstrate that the movement drew its members from the solid Parisian bourgeoisie, men with wealth, standing, education, and connections; many of them held high royal offices, and most of them were important figures in the city militia, the primary focus of municipal life. After the fact, such men often claimed merely to have flirted with the movement, or to have played only a modest role in it. In the new order of things that Henry IV established, both winners and losers had an interest in propagating this falsehood. The former activists sought to secure their political futures; the king wanted national unity, and he wanted to demonstrate that only deluded outsiders could seriously oppose the new state.

Descimon's biographies unmask these claims, showing how completely they misrepresent what was a deep and intense moment of political engagement.

The Leaguers' sociology thus suggests a movement that arose from reflection and commitment, rather than from exclusion and bitterness. Sorting out their intentions requires more speculation than defining their social standing, and alongside his social history Descimon offers a pioneering effort to produce a history of political mentalities, a task that has absorbed an increasing share of historians' attention in recent years. In a densely woven, nuanced argument, he argues that the Leaguers fought to defend a certain conception of the city and its ruling class. To them, a properly functioning city enjoyed a large degree of autonomy from the state and a significant degree of equality within its own walls. Despite real social differences, bourgeois shared "une sociabilité très dense et chaleureuse" (89) and an intense participation in civic politics, resting on at least the ideal of consensus.

The late medieval vision of the commune, surviving into the late sixteenth century, was thus both a social and a political fact. Against it Henry IV's supporters proposed the national state as the proper frame of reference, and they too combined political and societal visions. The city and its elites were to become subordinate elements within the larger national entity, and within it social relations were to be reconfigured on courtly and aristocratic lines. The nuanced gradations characteristic of the military aristocracy would replace the rough equality of the commune's bourgeoisie. Those who counted in the new order would be those who connected themselves most directly to the state, holding its offices and accepting its definitions of social standing. These were tempting possibilities for a portion of the Paris bourgeoisie, those who took to labeling

themselves "nobles hommes" and to buying offices in the parlements and other royal institutions. Such men could support the king in creating his national social order; the contemporary term for them, politiques, indicated their fundamental loyalty. But those who cared about the communal and egalitarian order of earlier times fought hard to preserve it, often at real sacrifice to themselves.

What then of religion in this nearly-final phase of the French Wars of Religion? Descimon takes sixteenth-century religion seriously, dismissing the suggestions of earlier scholarship that it be seen as a mask for secular interests, but his position also differs from those recent historians who have emphasized the Leaguers' millenarian vision of Christianity, their assumption that Christ would soon return to earth. Such emphasis suggests the Leaguers' immense distance from our own values and concerns. Denis Crouzet, for instance, has spoken of "the gap that hopelessly separates [us] from those distant systems of the imaginary" that prevailed in sixteenth-century religious thought.¹ Robert Descimon offers a more complex view, arguing that Leaguer Christianity should be understood as interlocking with Leaguer civic consciousness, as a Christianity of local saints and sacred places. The movement's aim, he has recently written, "was to reconstruct... the community's unity within a traditional church structure, with its confraternities, its local saints, its rites of association, its communal confessions."² This religion too fell victim to the new royal order, which had no more use for religious localism than for political. The papacy happily assisted in the process of repression and reconfiguration. It too was suspicious of localism and hostile to late medieval Christians'

¹ Denis Crouzet, La nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy: un rêve perdu de la Renaissance (Paris, Fayard, 1994), 12-13.

² Robert Descimon and José Javier Ruiz Ibáñez, Les ligueurs de l'exil: le refuge catholique français après 1594 (Seysell, Champ Vallon, 2005), 47.

drive to shape their own religion. Alongside a nationalized social order, Church and State set in place a royal religion.

Ultimately, Qui étaient les Seize? offers a reflection on the intricacies of historical otherness. In their zeal and their readiness for violence, the Leaguers are remote from us, and like most contemporary historians Descimon finds himself closer in temperament to their tolerant, humanistically-educated enemies. Yet his Leaguers are no mere anthropological specimens, to be studied as a reminder that the past is a foreign country. They fought for values—of community, self-determination, equality-- that we continue to cherish, the more so in that they seem so threatened in the contemporary world. Despite their profound differences from us and despite their defeat, the Leaguers offer us ethical and political models; at a few points, indeed, Descimon suggests that these values in fact reemerged in the bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century — "or, if one prefers, the dream of an overall reform of France for the benefit of its urban citizens (citadins)" (15). In comments like these, this historian of the Leaguers' lives and ideals drops his disguises as an érudit, and reveals himself to us as a moraliste.