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A War of Signs

By Alexandre Goderniaux

From 1562 to 1598, as the Wars of Religion deprived France of its reference points, strategies for mastering, disguising, and eliminating religious signs became necessary for survival. External markers of identity provide crucial insight into what civil wars do to a society.

Reviewed: Jérémie Foa, *Survivre. Une histoire des guerres de Religion* (Survive: A History of the Wars of Religion), Paris, Seuil, 2024, 352 p., 23 €.

Three years after writing a "microhistory of the Saint-Bartholomew's Day Massacre" (*Tous ceux qui tombent*, La Découverte), which was praised by critics and widely read, Jérémie Foa, in a new book, examines practices that are crucial to understanding conflicts which are being substantially reconsidered. His latest book forms a counterpoint to existing scholarship, notably Denis Crouzet's attempts to explain violence in terms of confessional belief systems.[1] Foa also proposes a social history of the political, accessed not primarily through the nobility and court (like the work of Nicolas Le Roux[2]), but "from below."

[1] Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu. La violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525 – vers 1610)*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1990; Denis Crouzet, *La nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy. Un rêve perdu de la Renaissance*, Paris, Fayard, 1994.

[2] Nicolas Le Roux, *La faveur du roi. Mignons et courtisans au temps des derniers Valois (vers 1547 – vers 1589)*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2001; Nicolas Le Roux, *Portraits d'un royaume. Henri III, la noblesse et la Ligue*, Paris, Passés Composés, 2020.

Foa's new book constructs a complex framework to shed light on social interactions during the Wars of Religion. In times of civil conflict, identities become fluid. Consequently, they can only be recognized by external markers. Moreover, since death potentially awaits at each street corner, the ability to display, hide, and make signs becomes essential. Moreover, the capacity to hide or disguise one's identity intensifies doubts about the general level of honesty in society and increases social fragmentation.

An ingenious toolkit

Though he regularly quotes Montaigne ("the best guide to the civil war's murky pathways," p. 74), Foa draws primarily on memoirs and newspapers and, secondarily, on correspondence and controversial or polemical publications. He uses these documents in his preferred manner: through long excerpts, he plunges readers into the inner thoughts of those who experienced civil unrest. These scenes, which reveal much about sixteenth-century society, are presented with great liveliness. They detail the ways that violence was expressed or avoided. Foa describes, for instance, a Catholic who threw straw and blankets onto Protestants to help them escape their murderers.

The book is also notable for its critique of its own sources. According to Foa, "this literature documents the possible more than the truthful" (p. 158). Consequently, it "matters little" if a "scene is commonplace," if a dialogue is "too beautiful to be true" (p. 41), or if, in a particular pamphlet, "there is no point in following a polemicist's accusations all the way" (p. 121). A source's partiality is not an obstacle, but a springboard: it reveals the feelings and resentments through which people perceive civil unrest.

Foa's microhistorical approach, moreover, relies on the tools of interactionist sociology, notably the work of Erving Goffman. Foa uses *stasis*, a term the ancient Greeks employed to refer to a crisis in the polis, to focus the reader's attention on the specificities of civil war. His book is a detailed account of the anatomy of a society affected by civil conflict.

Finally, Foa's taut writing is driven by a challenging epistemological goal: to bring to life as much as possible the meaning of situations as they unfolded. While the

density of the book's paragraphs resembles that of the Wars of Religion, its skill in the art of reiteration matches the withering inner doubt of actors exhausted by lack of rest.

A universe of signs

Foa shows how civil war gives rise to a specific regime of identity, a concept that he defines, drawing on Georg Simmel, as the product of strategies of construction and avoidance. During the Wars of Religion, ever-present doubt about who people and things really were led to the "loss of the right to indifference" and the "corresponding obligation to make everything explicit" (p. 12). Since no one was able to fully understand others, France became a "universe of signs" (Umberto Eco, quoted p. 149). A context of extreme politicization made it a vital necessity to manage the expression of one's own identity and penetrate the identity of others, resulting in a fear of secrets and the abolition of boundaries between private and public spaces. Consequently, in direct contrast to Jacob Burckhardt's emancipated and flourishing Renaissance individual, the men and women of this era of civil unrest constantly had to manage their self-fashioning to avoid the deadly traps they faced in their daily lives.

Foa has thus clarified his thinking since *Tous ceux qui tombent*, which maintained that the massacres of the Wars of Religion occurred because the murderers were often the neighbors of their victims and were familiar with their identities and habits. Consequently, in these "Picrocholine wars" (p. 39), survival depended on mastering a "learned semiotics" (p. 31). While identifying the monarchy's initiatives to assign markers of identity in the private realm to promote cohabitation, *Survivre* also provides, in counterpoint, stimulating insights into the role of civil conflicts in the construction of modernity.

The book pays particular attention to several categories of signs. It shows how devotional and daily practices (ranging from professional activity to eating) and regional accents transmit considerable information. Furthermore, examining the dialogue and sounds of civil war allows Foa to reconstruct a world of questions and answers, interpellations, and rallying cries. Moreover, the book devotes considerable attention to objects: banners, clothes, food, letters, and books allowed one to affirm one's membership in a faction or reveal one's identity inadvertently. Objects provide clues into the civil war's day-to-day character: while proof of all kinds could be found

in the homes of suspects, strategies such as letter bombs and attacks with powder and poison were also widespread.

Identify, hide, and disguise

The use of external markers to assign identities to individuals and determine their fate exposed the men and women who lived during the Wars of Religion to a constant risk: that they would be trapped by forms of knowledge that had been designed both to detect and interpret signs and to conceal and counterfeit them. Civil conflicts create a universe of camouflage and imposture. Heightened suspicion makes the ability to blend into a crowd essential to survival.

If what matters is staying calm during an escape or keeping quiet while hiding, external markers such as speech, clothing, and daily objects become just as important as people. The recurrence and similarities of *modus operandi* in various strategies demonstrate that the civil war gave rise to new competencies. While disguising oneself as a peasant made it possible to enter a town hiding weapons beneath cabbages, sacks of flour, or broom, a royalist governor managed to escape disguised as a servant. Several years later, he was imitated by the Count of Nemours, who did not simply wear his valet's whig and clothes but also, to ensure that he was not interrupted during his flight, carried a terrine, and pretended it was a full chamber pot.

In this instance, too, Foa's analysis shows the snowballing dynamic at play. Suspicion generates skill at feigning innocence, which in turn gives rise to strategies for identifying reality effects. As the social fabric grows increasingly frayed, it becomes crucial to know how to gather, interpret, and communicate information. In turn, new tactics were explored to deceive the most experienced adversary. To avoid being identified by the guards of a city they were trying to infiltrate, foreign conspirators would hire refugees who know the regional customs and accent.

A game of scales

To explain the many disruptions resulting from civil unrest, the book proposes a history of anonymous people and hidden corners. These are not just details: it is

precisely in such spaces that one finds the anxieties, doubts, and reversals of the Wars of Religion. The reconstruction of daily life "at the grassroots" (p. 11) gives visibility to people forgotten by history and guides readers to the valleys where signs hide and the ridges where they disguise themselves.

To explain the unrest, Foa tries to situate it. He shows, first, that in a world that has lost its reference points, leaving and entering towns becomes a constant challenge, as countless groups were constantly patrolling and spying on them. Because horizontal movement was constantly supervised, motion became increasingly vertical. In cellars and basements, one finds revealing gaps that suggest when massacres occurred. Considerable effort went into scrutinizing these new forms of sociality: identifying how hiding places operated meant grasping places and practices that, by definition, left little trace.

As it reconstructs the distinctive forms of knowledge used in civil war, Foa shows, moreover, how each faction sought control over space. Even as enemies were designated through chalk markings, closets and graffiti rendered their presence in towns tangible. Searches did not seek to apprehend individuals or objects so much as they proved a group's power over a territory.

Finally, studying the fracturing of space makes it possible to gauge the fragmentation of society: such initiatives reterritorialized urban space into a mosaic of confessional camps. To halt this, the monarchy pursued an "anti-sensitive politics" (*une politique de l'insensible*, p. 143) that ought to purge public space of distinctive signs and replace the proliferation of factions with royal unity. Royal edicts prohibited prayers, songs, sales, and the consumption of certain foods.

In this time of civil unrest, the main way in which language intersected with identity was in the concern with identifying oneself and one's enemies. This "semantic insecurity" (p. 212) grew in complexity in relation to local particularisms and the course of events, which at times made it appealing to exploit the power of taxonomy, at others to avoid it. Furthermore, unprecedented forms of reification, animalization, and demonization made massacres a real possibility, though they were often euphemized by other linguistic practices. Based on these conclusions, Foa rightly connects the Malherbe reforms with Henry IV's pacification policies: after the Wars of Religion, language was deprived of its political stature due to its role in the civil war.

A new research field

Survivre inaugurates a new research field, which seeks to trace identity strategies and their textualization in letters, *libelles*, reports, and literary and iconographic documents. It also makes possible the study of discourse about these practices, their denunciation or valorization, efforts to curb or expand them, and their representation in a wide range of creative endeavors.

Moreover, by calling attention to phenomena that can be observed throughout the second half of the French sixteenth century, Foa shows that they can be studied in chronological sequences based on specific political and confessional characteristics. Signs and the mastery of signs allows one to better understand how facts are formed and reconfigured over the course of conflicts. Furthermore, considering the early decades of the seventeenth century would make it possible to pinpoint the formation of pockets of resistance that developed in reaction to the un-marking of social and the de-politicization of language.

Finally, the practices that *Survivre* brings to light helps us rethink how antagonisms function in civil strife. Clarifying the motive of the perpetrators of massacres by identifying the connection between signs and violence could provide new answers to a never-ending problem: why people get involved in conflicts that are both civil and religious. This approach would ensure that focusing on the "exteriority of belief" would not simply result in a "long history of deconfessionalization and detachment from religion" (p. 268-269), but could lead, to the contrary, to a reevaluation of the role of religious belief, networks of solidarity, political interests, and economic factors in the decision to take up arms.[3] The tension between transparency and secrecy could help to clarify the tension between politics and religion and ideas and personal or partisan interests. As a result, our understanding of the Wars of Religion would be considerably enhanced.

[3] For an examination of the deconfessionalization thesis as it relates to the end of the Wars of Religion, see Fabrice Micallef, "L'autonomisation de la raison politique. Bilans, enjeux et perspectives historiographiques," in David Do Paço, Mathilde Monge et Laurent Tatarenko, eds., *Des religions dans la ville. Ressorts et stratégies de coexistence dans l'Europe des XVI^e^-XVIII^e^ siècles*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010, p. 213-218; Adrien Aracil, "La part du religieux dans l'histoire politique du XVII^e^ siècle. Retour sur des exemples de conversions politiques," *Chrétiens et Sociétés XVI^e^-XXI^e^ siècles*, forthcoming.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, September 26, 2024. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, May 22, 2025.