
Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics

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1 Rhetorics of dissent in Renaissance Humanism

Quoniam Dominus excelsus, terribilis:
rex magnus super omnem terram.
Subiecit populos nobis:
et gentes sub pedibus nostris.

[For the Lord is high, terrible;
a great king over all the earth.
He hath subdued the people under us;
and the nations under our feet]¹

After a celebratory spree in ancient Greece, particularly among the Sophists, the concept of human agency all but vanished in the Middle Ages. Life was said to be governed by laws that lie beyond human influence. The medieval world-view revolved around an undisputed theological core that left little room for privileges associated with subjecthood. Common people were reduced to spectators, impotent onlookers in a unfolding human drama. They were caught in an immense mesh of fate and sacrifice, spun by the hands of God and his quasi-divine earthly embodiments. Or so at least resonates a common image of the medieval period. Somewhat correct, but oversimplified. Black and white, with black prevailing most of the time. But there was, of course, much more to the Middle Ages than an omnipotent God. The theocentric vision was only the frame within which a whole range of complex and highly diverse dynamics took place. Even in the

¹ Psalm 46, 11th–12th century version, Gregorian Chant Gaudete, Sung by the Benedictine Nuns of St Cecilia's Abbey, Ryde, Isle of Wight (Farnham, Surrey: Herald AV Publications, 1992), p. 7.

pre-modern period strong ideas about popular sovereignty existed.² The transition from the medieval to the early modern period is equally complex. It is a long and gradual evolution that cannot be grasped satisfactorily by rehearsing a few key events deemed crucial by subsequent historical interpretations. Indeed, some argue that the respect for and interest in the individual, a key theme of modern thought, had its origin as far back as the second half of the twelfth century.³

Despite this blurring image one can identify a number of shifts that occurred in the transition from the medieval to the modern period. With the rise of Humanism during the Italian Renaissance, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the prevalent theocentric vision of the world came under increasing challenge. A good century later, the new humanist message gradually penetrated the remaining parts of Europe. It resurrected the notion of human agency and challenged God's monopoly to anchor all aspects of human existence. Humanism placed the subject at the centre of history and expressed a profound belief in people's dignity, in their own ability to solve problems.

The present chapter demonstrates how these emerging humanist ideas provided the foundations for a tradition of popular dissent that espouses a strong belief in human agency. Turn the clock back to 1552. We are in early modern France. Writing is Étienne de la Boétie, a young student who expresses profound disgust with all forms of governing that entail some people dominating others. He protests against divine authority, against royal absolutism and, maybe most importantly, against the deprivation of subjecthood:

Is this a happy life? Can this be called living?... What condition is more miserable than to live such that nothing is one's own, such that one derives from someone else one's entire well-being, one's freedom, one's body & one's life?⁴

La Boétie's work first lingered in obscurity. But the rhetorical reflections that followed his initial fury eventually influenced the emergence of a tradition of dissent that deals with radical resistance to authoritarianism.

² See Walter Ullmann, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 200–228.

³ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050–1200* (London: SPCK, 1972).

⁴ Étienne de la Boétie, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, ed. P. Bonnefon in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1967/1552), p. 49. 'Cela eft ce viure heureusement? cela f'appelle il viure?... Quelle condition eft plus miserabie que de viure ainfi, qu'on n'aie rien à foy, tenant d'autrui fon aife, fa liberté, fon corps & fa vie?'

In subsequent centuries, la Boétiean assumptions about power, domination and resistance will play a significant, albeit often unrecognised role in shaping practices of popular dissent. While Machiavelli's *The Prince* helped to define sovereignty, state power and the ensuing international order, la Boétie's *Anti-One* contributed to the emergence of forces that came to circumvent and undermine the spatial and political logic of this order. The present chapter takes the first step in retracing the ensuing tradition of dissent.

Because la Boétie, and early modern thought in general, provided the foundation for various transversal dissident dynamics that are operative today, my genealogical inquiry engages in a relatively extensive reading of the *Anti-One* and its relationship to ideas and political practices in sixteenth-century France. Placing la Boétie in the context of larger discursive trends entails searching for unpronounced assumptions that are entailed in his work, assumptions about society, power, the subject and, above all, human agency. But analyses of social dynamics, especially if they date as far back as the sixteenth century, can never be authentic representations of events. My reconstruction of the context within which la Boétie's work unfolded is inevitably coloured by my views of history, by the sources I have chosen to investigate, and by the motivations that lie behind my effort to come to terms with them. Hence, a reconstruction of historical dynamics must be sensitive to multiple voices from the past and compare various subsequent interpretations of them.

From heaven to earth: the new humanist vision

Étienne de la Boétie was born in 1530 in Sarlat, a small town in the south-west of France. He grew up in a well-placed aristocratic family.⁵ La Boétie wrote his main political text as a student at the University

⁵ The text that comes closest to a serious biography of la Boétie remains Paul Bonnefon's introduction to the 1892 edition of la Boétie's *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. xi-lxxxv. In researching the context of la Boétie's life I also drew upon Jacques Joseph Desplat, *La Boétie: le magistrat aux nombreux mystères* (Le Bugue: PLB Editeur, 1992); Jean-Michel Delacompté, *Et qu'un seul-soit l'ami: la Boétie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) and several introductions to French and English editions of la Boétie's writings, especially Simon Goyard-Fabre, 'Introduction', *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), pp. 17–127; Nadia Gontarbert, 'Présentation', *De la Servitude Volontaire ou Contr'un* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 12–45; and Murray N. Rothbard, 'The Political Thought of Étienne de la Boétie', *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, tr. H. Kurz (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975), pp. 9–35.

of Orléans. It is a relatively short polemical treatise, officially entitled *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*. I will refer to its widely used and more adequate alternative title *Contr'un*, or *Anti-One*.⁶

La Boétie addresses his main theme without hesitation. The *Anti-One*'s opening lines reveal the author's profound abhorrence of all forms of governing that are based on some people ruling over others:

[I]t must be said that the domination of several could not be good for the power of one alone, as soon as he acquires the title of master, is harsh & unreasonable . . . it is extremely unfortunate to be subjected to one master, whose kindness one can never be assured of, since it is always in his power to be cruel whenever he desires; & as for having several masters, the more one has, the more extremely unfortunate it is.⁷

What precisely is the object of la Boétie's rage? We are, as mentioned, in the south-west of France, in the middle of a century that is characterised by rapid change, radical turmoil, and bloody civil wars. All power is claimed by the King, but he does not have the ability to enforce it. The regional gentry is seeking to profit from the power vacuum, the Catholic Church desperately attempts to hold on to at least some of its fading strength, peasants rebel and religious strife is soon to bring the entire country to a standstill.

As he was writing, la Boétie may have had the rebellion of Guyenne in mind, which dominated politics in the region at the time.⁸ In 1548, when la Boétie was eighteen years old, thousands of repressed peasants of the Guyenne region opposed the *gabelle*, a salt tax, and started to rebel. In August the insurgents entered Bordeaux. Meeting up with sympathetic commoners, they soon took control of the city. Its authorities first entered into a dialogue with the protesting population and

⁶ For a non-specialist in medieval French language, the subtleties of this sixteenth-century text are not easy to decipher. Besides using specialised dictionaries, I contrasted the original text (or what comes closest to it, the so-called manuscript of de Mesmes), with various versions transcribed into modern French. I also compared my translations with the ones by Harry Kurz in la Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience*.

⁷ La Boétie, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, pp. 1-2. 'Il falloit dire que la domination de plufieurs ne pouuoit eftre bonne, puisque la puissance dvn feul, deflors qu'il prend ce tltre de maiftre, eft dure & defraifonnable . . . c'eft vn extreme malheur d'eftre subiect à vn maiftre, duquel on ne fe peut iamais affeurer qu'il foit bon, puisque'il eft toufours en fa puissance d'eftre mauuais quand il voudra; & d'avoir plufieurs maiftres, c'eft, autant qu'on en a, autant de fois eftre extremement malheureux.'

⁸ See Jules Jolly, *Histoire du Mouvement Intellectuel au XVIe Siècle*, vol. I. (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1969), pp. 35-6.

actually revoked the *gabelle*, but this conciliatory approach was soon replaced by an extremely brutal crackdown. Local authorities called upon Henri II, the King of France, whose army then crushed the rebellion and established an extended reign of terror. The leaders of the uprising were executed in various tortuous ways – decapitated, burned, broken, impaled or torn apart by horses – as part of a carefully orchestrated public display of vengeance and intimidation that lasted for weeks.

If la Boétie indeed wrote about the 1548 uprising, the first of a series of big peasant revolts in France, then he did it without direct reference to the events. But even in its abstraction the message of the *Anti-One* was clear. Its description of servitude, violence and suffering under a tyrant reflected the frustrations of a whole generation of commoners and captured the spirit of popular protest that soon was to take hold of France.⁹

With or without the repressive regime of King Henri II in mind, la Boétie's essay was a devastating critique of existing practices of governance. Its condemnation of one man rule fundamentally opposed the prevailing absolutist theory of monarchy, which rested on the idea of a *princeps*, a ruler who has a divine mission and to whom unlimited obedience is due. Consider Charles de Grassaille's influential *Regalium Franciae*, published in 1538. It portrays the King of France as 'imperator in suo regno', as 'quidem corporalis Deus': a prince of divine appointment, a ruler whose power extends to virtually all domains except the law of his own succession. He reigns as an earthly embodiment of God, entirely independent of popular consent.¹⁰

La Boétie attacked the very core of these doctrinal foundations of royal absolutism by linking power and consent:

The one who controls you so much has only two eyes, has only two hands, has only one body & has nothing more than what the large and infinite number of men in your villages have. All he has is the means that you give him to destroy you. From where does he get all these eyes to spy upon you, if you do not give them to him? How can he have so many hands to hit you with if he does not take them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get

⁹ Henry Heller, *Iron and Blood: Civil Wars in Sixteenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), p. 40.

¹⁰ J.W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1941/1928), pp. 283–4, xiii–xxii.

them if not from among you? How can he have any power over you except through you?¹¹

La Boétie's contention that any form of rule is dependent upon popular consent is both radical and subversive in the context of sixteenth-century France. A clear concept of human agency is implied in these lines, for la Boétie dares to speak of subjects and, even more courageously, of subjects who act independently of a divine will. Justifying this radical stance purely on secular grounds, particularly on the power of reason, logic and a natural right to freedom, he argues that sovereignty belongs to the people, and not to the King or to God. Before discussing the consequences of these claims in more detail it is necessary to place the *Anti-One* again in the context of larger discursive struggles that were waged at the time.

Some elements of la Boétie's writings reflect the ideas and assumptions of the humanist movement that started to take hold of France at the time. Humanism was anticipated by several medieval poets – Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch among them – and it reached its heyday in fifteenth-century Italy. In its broadest meaning, Humanism refers to an ‘interest in Latin and Greek literature which sets a high value on the lessons to be drawn from it’.¹² It is the gaze back to the classical period, the attempt to revive a long past culture, that gave the corresponding period, the Renaissance, its name. The revival of classical culture took on a specific form. Some commentators emphasise that the rereading of Hellenistic philosophy via Cicero, which was the most popular approach at the time, amounted to a revival of scepticism – the belief that ‘man’ is caught in a web of illusory perceptions, unable to gain secure knowledge of the physical world.¹³ Hence, instead of searching for a Platonic truth, humanists were usually more concerned with rhetoric, with practising the art of convincing others by drawing on the power of persuasion. It is in the passion for rhetoric

¹¹ La Boétie, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, pp. 12–13. ‘Celui qui vous maiftrife tant n'a que deus yeulx, n'a que deus mains, n'a qu'un corps, & n'a autre chofe que ce qu'a le moindre homme du grand & infini nombre de vos villes, finon que l'avantage que vous luy faites pour vous deftruire. D'où a il pris tant d'yeulx, dont il vous efpie, fi vous ne les luy baillies? comment a il tant de mains pour vous fraper, f'il ne les prend de vous? Les pieds dont il foule vos cites, d'où les a il, f'ils ne font des voffres? Comment a il aucun pouuoir fur vous, que par vous?’

¹² George Holmes, ‘Humanism in Italy’, in A. Goodman and A. MacKay (eds.), *The Impact of Humanism on Western Europe* (London: Longman, 1990), p. 118.

¹³ Richard Tuck, ‘Humanism and Political Thought’, in Goodman and MacKay (eds.) *The Impact of Humanism*, pp. 43–4.

that they grounded their basic intellectual identity.¹⁴ But the society at the time did not lend itself easily to such endeavours. Humanists first needed to carve out institutional and political spaces that allowed them to engage in rhetorical interactions. Universities provided these spaces. It is through them that Humanism gradually moved north and penetrated France towards the end of the fifteenth century.

When la Boétie commenced his studies, in the late 1540s, Humanism had already spread throughout most of Western Europe. The University of Orléans, one of the most prestigious universities in France, enjoyed an unusually wide range of intellectual freedom. Students read classical philosophy and waged debates about it. Criticism was encouraged. Within the confines of university life, a general atmosphere of free inquiry and discussion prevailed. Not surprisingly, la Boétie's *Anti-One*, composed during his student days in Orléans, bore the mark of this humanist environment. His opening argument, the condemnation of all tyranny, is presented as a critical dialogue with Ulysses, as narrated in Homer's Iliad. He continues to draw upon Greek philosophy, ruminates about the politics of Brutus or Nero, and illustrates his points by reference to ancient history and mythology. His style is abstract, theoretical, polemical. This is why many portray la Boétie's work as a typical Renaissance exercise in classical rhetoric.¹⁵

There was, of course, more to Renaissance Humanism than rhetoric, a spirit of free inquiry, and an interest in classical literature. Rhetoric was only the means to a much more ambitious political end: Humanism was a revolt against a long tradition of grounding truth and authority in religion. It fundamentally restructured the relationship among the individual, the church and the emerging state. The focus of attention moved from heaven to earth, from the truth prescribed by the holy scripts to the power of reason and persuasion, from the church's doctrinal morality to a loosening of norms and a secularisation of values.

La Boétie's *Anti-One* was deeply embedded in this humanist attempt to create a vision for the future, a vision that rested upon human dignity, to be fought for with rhetorical means. At the centre

¹⁴ Jerrold E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

¹⁵ C.A. Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi*, vol. XI (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1858/1856), p. 144; Paul Bonnefon, *Montaigne et ses Amis*, vol. I, (Paris: Armand Colin: 1898), p. 150; Pierre Mesnard, *L'Essor de la Philosophie Politique au XVI^e Siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1951/1935), p. 405.

of this tradition was Renaissance ‘man’, penetrating nature’s secrets, venturing out into the sea to discover new worlds, producing stunning works of art that celebrate the human body. An unprecedented sense of optimism arose. People, unchained from the confines of God’s will, became masters of their own destiny. Nothing seemed out of their reach. There was no hesitation. The subject was born and took responsibility. With it appeared an unlimited faith in human agency and in the ability to solve the world’s problems.¹⁶ Paradoxically, like so much in the Renaissance, this process of secularisation was accompanied by a new glorification of the church, a last resurrection before this institution faced the Reformation and embarked upon a journey that led towards what Nietzsche later called nihilism, or the death of God.

The rhetorical origins of popular dissent

The particular way in which la Boétie sought to confront the problem of freedom and human agency made the *Anti-One* a much-disputed essay in the centuries to come. His idea of freedom entails that no government can survive without the support of the population. He argues that there is not even a need to fight a tyrant, for ‘he’ is defeated as soon as the population refuses to consent to its enslavement.¹⁷ Numerous passages in the *Anti-One* deal with this possibility of withdrawing consent. They later became the conceptual foundations of an entire literature on popular dissent. Here are its Renaissance roots, expressed in la Boétie’s rhetorical Humanism:

If one concedes nothing to them [the tyrants], if one refuses to obey them, then without fighting, without striking, they become naked & defeated & are no more, just as when the root is deprived of water and nourishment, the branch withers and dies.¹⁸

Be resolved to serve no more & you will be free. I do not want you

¹⁶ This new individualism and the trust in moral autonomy was, to simplify things, the essence of Jacob Burckhardt’s influential *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Berlin: Knauer, 1928). For one of the recently proliferating revisionist accounts of the period see Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

¹⁷ La Boétie, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11. ‘[F]i on ne leur baille rien [les tirans], fi on ne leur obeit point, fans combattre, fans frapper, ils demeurent nuds & defaits & ne font plus rien, finon que comme la racine, n’aians plus d’humeur ou aliment, la branche deuient feche & morte.’

to hurt or unsettle the tyrant, but simply that you serve him no more, & you will see how he collapses under his own weight and breaks into pieces, just like a large Colossus whose base has been snatched away.¹⁹

By linking any form of government to popular consent and ruminating about the possibilities that could arise when this consent is withdrawn, la Boétie advances a fundamental proposition about the nature of power. Contrary to the prevalent view of the time, he does not perceive power as something stable and restraining, a privilege that some have and others do not. Power emerges from popular consent and it is relational, a constantly changing force field located in the interactive dynamics between ruler and ruled. Perhaps most importantly, power is enabling, it provides common people with the chance to create opportunities for social change.

La Boétie was, of course, not the only early modern voice that opposed domination. Already in the early Italian Renaissance, various authors, such as Marsiglio of Padua and Bartolus of Saxoferrato, had openly condemned tyranny and advocated government by the people. But most of these and subsequent writers did not question the foundations of existing regimes. Instead, they were concerned with the proper functioning of the machinery of government. Out of this concern emerged a long-lasting humanist tradition of giving advice to princes, kings and magistrates. Humanists from Niccolò Machiavelli to Justus Lipsius counselled their rulers on how to be virtuous, how to govern best, or how to retain a position of power in adverse circumstances.

La Boétie's clearly went further than these concerns with proper government, political stability and the functioning of power politics. The *Anti-One* was more radical not because of its claim that any form of rule is or should be dependent upon popular consent. This relational perspective on power was implied in most of the advice given to the princes of Renaissance Italy and France. Where the *Anti-One* differed sharply from the advice-book tradition was in its claim that popular consent can be withdrawn at any time and that this act disempowers even the most ruthless dictator. It was this identification with

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 14. 'Soies refolus de not feruir plus, & vous voilà libres. Je ne veux pas que vous le pouffies ou l'esbranflies, mais feulement ne le foufenes plus, & vous le verres, comme vn grand coloffe à qui on a defrobé la bafe, de fon pois mefme fondre en bas & fe rompre.'

the people and their claim to sovereignty that made the *Anti-One* stand apart from more immediate contemporary concerns with the machinery of the newly emerging modern state.

The *Anti-One*'s radicalism is best exemplified in its opposition to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which was published in Rome two decades before la Boétie's student days in Orléans. It is likely that la Boétie knew *The Prince* since it was available in France at that time and constituted normal reading material for students. Parallels between la Boétie and Machiavelli are clearly visible, albeit not at first sight. Both situate power in the relationship between ruler and ruled, an idea that was alien to the preceding medieval period. Pierre Mesnard, in his classical study of Renaissance political theory, detects this common humanist trait but also draws attention to the above-mentioned important difference:

For la Boétie as well as for Machiavelli, authority can only emerge through acceptance by the subjects: except that one teaches the prince how to enforce their acquiescence while the other reveals to the people the power entailed in refusing it. In other words, the remedy of the *Anti-One*, whose political effectiveness we know today, is passive resistance, civil disobedience, the refusal to collaborate with an order one disapproves of.²⁰

Mesnard's summary makes clear that Machiavelli, at least in his best-known passages, was primarily operating within a framework of realist power politics. Viewing the world as a place where the struggle for power and the survival of the fittest determines the outcome of events, he advised the prince to abandon all precepts of morality if he is to retain his rule. La Boétie, of course, positioned himself at the other side of the social spectrum. His focus on withdrawing popular consent suggests that the *Anti-One* was written for the people and their quest for freedom, rather than for the prince and his attempts to cement authoritarian rule.

La Boétie's work represents the radical element of the emerging humanist movement. He dares to speak of a subject, places 'man' at the centre of attention, and displays an unbounded optimism in 'his' ability to exert human agency and change the course of history. But the *Anti-One* has other faces too, faces that cannot be classified easily, faces that do not fit neatly into preconceived intellectual spaces, at

²⁰ Mesnard, *L'Essor de la Philosophie Politique au XVIe Siècle*, p. 400.

least not the ones that existed in Renaissance France. These are the aspects of the *Anti-One* that most subsequent interpretations neglect. They are the pluralities of a text, the faces that grimace, mock, provoke; the ones that contradict, disturb and rebel. A short elucidation of them is necessary at this point.

La Boétie tried to open up possibilities to resist tyranny. But he was equally if not more concerned with explaining the puzzling lack of such resistance. Why is it that so many people serve a tyrant who, if the premises of the *Anti-One* are correct, they need not fear at all? A perplexed la Boétie exclaims:

If two, if three, if four do not defend themselves against one, this is strange but nevertheless conceivable; . . . but a thousand, but a million, but a thousand cities, if they do not defend themselves against one, then this is not cowardice, for cowardice does not sink to such a low point. . . . What monstrous vice is this then that does not even deserve to be called cowardice?²¹

The vice has a name: voluntary servitude. La Boétie explains its existence in two ways, one deals with the force of customs, the other with a system of positive and negative privileges. Both of them entail, in essence, clear limits to human agency. The first is linked to a tyrant's ability to deprive his subjects of their memory of freedom:

It is this, that men born under the yoke & thereafter nourished & brought up in servitude are content, without searching any further, to live like they are used to, & not being aware at all of any other situation or right than the one they know, they accept as natural the condition into which they were born.²²

La Boétie's argument that the emergence of a quest for freedom requires a prior experience of it departs quite radically from his earlier polemics about a natural right to freedom. Facing the political reality of the time, he now admits that nature has less power over us than customs do. No matter how benevolent nature wanted us to be, our

²¹ La Boétie, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*, pp. 5–6. ‘Si deux, si trois, si quatre ne se défendent d’vn, cela est étrange, mais toutesfois possible. . . mais mille, mais vn million, mais mille villes, si elles ne se défendent d’vn, cela n’est pas couardise, elle ne va point jusques là. . . Doncques quel monstre de vice est ceci qui ne mérite pas encore le titre de couardise. . .?’

²² Ibid., p. 22. ‘C’est cela, que les hommes naissants fous le ioug, & puis nourris & éfleus dans le feruage, fans regarder plus auant, se contentent de viure comme ils font nes, & ne penfans point auoir autre bien ni autre droit que ce qu’ils ont trouué, ils prennent pour leur naturel l’eftat de leur naissance.’

environment shapes us to the point that, against our own disposition, we learn ‘how to swallow, & not find bitter at all, the venom of servitude’.²³ When Cyrus took the Lydian city of Sardis, La Boétie illustrates, its citizens rebelled against the occupation. But instead of simply repressing the uprising, which would have entailed the problematic and continuous employment of an expensive army, Cyrus opted for a much more subtle and powerful form of domination: he established brothels, taverns, public games and then encouraged the people to go and enjoy them. This kind of garrison proved to be so effective that Cyrus henceforth could subjugate the Lydians without the least use of force.²⁴

La Boétie mentions a second reason for the existence of voluntary servitude. It revolves around pyramidically structured systems of threats and privileges. Indeed, this is the secret of domination, he claims. The key to such a system lies in a tyrant’s ability to corrupt his people, particularly those who strive for power and wealth. La Boétie explains how each ruler is dependent on his closest advisers, half a dozen men, at most. They are accomplices in ‘his’ cruelties and share the profits of ‘his’ plundering sprees. In this way, the system replicates itself endlessly, because:

Those six have six hundred who profit under them & they proceed with these six hundred as they do with the tyrant. These six hundred have six thousand under them, they promote them in rank and give them the provinces to govern or the finances to manage, so that they too become entangled in avarice and cruelty... Devastating are the consequences of all this, & whoever is willing to follow this trace will realise that not six thousand, but hundred thousand, even millions are tied to the tyrant by this one cord.²⁵

Implied in these lines is the suggestion that a ruler can only maintain ‘his’ position if a large number of people profit from the existing system and thus have an interest in maintaining the status quo. The tyrant, who lacks independent foundational sources of power, is able

²³ Ibid, p. 23.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 35–6.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 45–6. ‘Ces fix ont fix cent qui proufifent fous eus, & font de leurs fix cent ce que les fix font au tiran. Ces fix cent en tiennent fous eus fix mille, qu’ils ont efleué en eftat, aufquels ils font donner ou le gouuernement des prouvinces, ou le maniemant des deniers, afin qu’ils tiennent la main à leur auarice & cruaute... Grande eft la fuite qui vient apres cela, & qui voudra f’amufer à deuider ce filet, il verra que, non pas les fix mille, mais les cent mille, mais les millions, par cefte corde, fe tiennent au tiran...’

to subjugate the people only through them. ‘He’ is protected by those who could easily end the charade if they had the courage to resist.

Despite its multiple faces, the *Anti-One* never loses sight of its radical humanist message. Even while elaborating on subtle systems of exclusion, la Boétie’s main interest is not in analysing domination as such, but in demonstrating how it can be overcome. In perfect humanist rhetoric, he reasserts his faith in agency, practises the art of persuasion, tries to incite people to overcome voluntary servitude. He constantly reminds the reader that systems of domination are fragile and dependent upon popular consent. As long as there are thinking subjects a tyrant’s position is in danger. And there will always be thinking minds, people who cannot be fooled easily, who sense the weight of the yoke, people who open their eyes and reclaim their natural right to freedom.²⁶ Renaissance ‘man’ looms around the corner, able to see it all, equipped with the vision, the will, and the strength to change the world. Will ‘he’ succeed?

Protestantism and the problem of free will

What was the immediate impact of la Boétie’s writings? How were they received? How did they shape practices of dissent and perceptions of human agency?

It is important to distinguish between la Boétie as an author and the *Anti-One* as a text. After its composition, a text takes off in multiple directions and becomes an object of appropriation over which the author inevitably loses control. In Michel Foucault’s words, ‘writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits’.²⁷ One must then locate and explore the spaces that are left by the author’s disappearance. A text is read in many different ways, it becomes a political tool that continuously changes shape and content. A reader of a text is thus, as Roland Barthes emphasises, an active producer, rather than simply a passive consumer.²⁸ Readers constantly reinvent texts, view them in the light of particular experiences, note some passages and neglect others. Reading becomes appropriation. Appropriation becomes politics. Politics shapes our lives.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author’, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, tr. J.V. Harari, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 102.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), pp. 9–23.

Viewing the *Anti-One* as an object of appropriation is necessary to understand how its intellectual legacy has influenced the emergence of a tradition of popular dissent that later came to operate in the grey zones between domestic and international politics. Not long after its composition in the 1550s, the *Anti-One* and its author parted company. La Boétie turned into a conservative diplomat concerned with law and order while his text became part of a long crusade to promote the humanist concept of free will. The remaining sections of this chapter join the *Anti-One*'s journey in its initial phase, the second half of the sixteenth century.

We are in a period that is dominated by one key phenomenon, the Reformation. Like Humanism, the Reformation is a complex set of ideas and events, susceptible to many different interpretations. At its most uncontested site, the Reformation was a movement that questioned the Pope's monopoly over the interpretation of the Bible. It tried to liberate Christianity from corrupt practices that the Roman Catholic Church had superimposed on it. It was a return to what was claimed to be the only authentic source of knowledge, the Bible. The Reformation was a second Renaissance, directed not at reviving classical Greek philosophy, but at reasserting the original faith, at halting the decay of Christianity. The Reformation's protagonist was the Augustinian monk Martin Luther, preaching and writing in the Saxon city of Wittenberg. Luther's famous posting of ninety five theses to the door of his church, on the eve of All Saints in 1517, marked the beginning of a turbulent period that undermined most of the Catholic Church's spiritual, jurisdictional and political power.

But the Reformation was more than just a fight against the corruption of the Catholic Church. At its core, the Reformation was, as one commentator puts it, 'a life-or-death attack on Humanism'.²⁹ From this perspective, the main battle was waged in 1524/5 between Luther and Erasmus, a Christian humanist writing in Basel. The focus of attack was not the Papacy, but Renaissance 'man', the secularisation of life, the faith in reason and free will, the very concept of human agency. Luther opposed Erasmus by arguing that true freedom cannot be reached by asserting human independence. Our own actions cannot lead to freedom or salvation because we are corrupt, helpless and entirely dependent upon God's grace. Luther's concern reflects a key

²⁹ John Carroll, *Humanism: The Wreck of Western Culture* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 47.

dilemma that permeated Renaissance thought. Ever since Pico della Mirandola's celebration of the dignity of 'man', a double-edged message haunted the rising humanist movement. It was double-edged, 'for to be uniquely privileged man was also uniquely burdened'.³⁰ There was no longer an omnipotent God that could take over the responsibility for humanity's fate. Renaissance 'man' had put 'himself' into a state of suspense, having taken over command, but not yet assumed responsibility for it. Luther recognised this dilemma. Free will, for him, was an illusion that robbed us of all foundations for life. 'Man' was left with nothing to stand on, no fixed world-view, no certainty; only despair and sin. True freedom, he hailed, can only arise from faith, from obedience to God's will.

The tensions surrounding this dispute over religion and free will started to take hold of France at about the time when la Boétie ruminated about withdrawing consent at the University of Orléans. Protestant reformers, the Huguenots, were trying to practise their subversive form of Christianity. The Catholic Church and its secular representative, the deified French monarch, increasingly saw their authority undermined and started to adopt more hostile positions. France was about to turn into a battle ground between adherents of the Catholic status quo and its Huguenot opponent.

La Boétie finished his studies and was admitted to the Parliament of Bordeaux in 1554. By then religious strife had already come to dominate political issues. Six years later, in the midst of various controversies triggered by the persecution of Protestants, la Boétie was entrusted with a delicate diplomatic mission. He was asked to mediate between his own parliament in Bordeaux and the court of King Charles IX, who had just succeeded his father Henry II. Catherine de Médici, who had taken over the regency for her ten year old son Charles IX, initiated a politics of appeasement and gave la Boétie the task of returning to his Parliament, known for an inflexible Catholic stance, to explain this new, more tolerant approach towards the Huguenots. De Médici's first attempt at appeasement failed. Violent confrontations between Catholics and Protestants increased and in 1562 she signed the *Edit de Janvier*, which was intended to protect the Huguenots from persecution.

A long report, a *Mémoire*, that la Boétie wrote about this edict

³⁰ John Hale, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 208.

reveals how much his opinions changed in comparison to the *Anti-One*, composed a decade earlier in his student days. La Boétie's rhetoric is gone, and so is the quest for freedom beyond the confines of the newly emerging state. His language is no longer one of anger, of defiance; it is the language of order, of discipline and of diplomatic manoeuvring. La Boétie defends the King and sanctions the use of force to restore peace and order. While the *Anti-One* aimed at unchaining the people, the *Mémoire* provided instructions about how to further enslave them.³¹ La Boétie the student angrily and passionately condemned the forces of Henry II that crushed the revolt against the *Gabelle*, whereas la Boétie the diplomat defended and revered these very same instruments of repression. But la Boétie could not control the fate of his earlier, radical text. The *Anti-One* was about to embark on a different route than its author. It was to leave its assigned place and turn into an unpredictable instrument of rebellion.

Rage, rebellion and the voice of the sceptic

After la Boétie's death at the age of thirty-two (most likely of the plague), his intellectual legacy, including the radical *Anti-One*, was entrusted to his close friend, the famous essayist Michel de Montaigne.³² Without Montaigne's protection and leverage, the *Anti-One* might have remained an unknown and obscure Renaissance text. La Boétie never saw his rhetorical treatise published. It only circulated as a manuscript among a small group of personal friends. In August 1570, seven years after la Boétie's death, Montaigne travelled to Paris to arrange the publication of some of his friend's writings, particularly poems and translations of classical Latin texts. But he decided against publishing la Boétie's more political *Anti-One*. Montaigne defended his editorial choice by arguing that this piece of writing was simply 'too delicate and subtle to be abandoned to the rough and dense climate of such a mischievous season'.³³

The early 1570s were indeed a 'mischievous season', and this even by the standards of a century that was dominated by insecurity, civil

³¹ Étienne de La Boétie, *Mémoire touchant l'Edit de Janvier 1562* (Paris: Editions Bossard, 1922), pp. 103–180.

³² On the relationship between la Boétie and Montaigne see Bonnefon, *Montaigne et ses Amis*, vol. I, pp. 210–224 and Gérald Allard, *La Boétie et Montaigne sur les liens humains* (Québec: Le Griffon d'Argile, 1994).

³³ Montaigne, 'Advertissement av Lectevr', in la Boétie, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 62.

wars, revolts and brutal repression. The tension between the entrenched, defensive Catholicism and the new, dissident Protestantism was at its peak. Reacting to a number of intricate domestic and foreign policy issues, King Charles IX was persuaded that the Huguenots were trying to overthrow him. On Saint Bartholomew's Day 1572 he ordered the execution of Protestant leaders. Events escalated dramatically when the Parisian militia precipitated a large and systematic massacre of Protestants, a slaughter that lasted for six days in Paris and even longer in some provincial towns. An estimated 16,000 Protestants were slain.³⁴

The Saint Bartholomew massacre, publicly celebrated by Pope Gregory XIII, was an important turning point in terms of both political struggles and the history of ideas.³⁵ The civil war in France intensified again. Catherine de Médici, who had previously argued strongly for a politics of religious compromise, sanctioned the killing of Protestant leaders and adapted a much more combative stance. Huguenot activists too abandoned tolerance and moved towards an uncompromising defiance of all Royal authority. This constituted a dramatic shift away from earlier Protestant positions that advocated a strict doctrine of non-resistance to tyranny. The old position claimed that since God instituted princes, political authority was unquestionable and obedience to it was due as an act of religious faith. Calvin summarised this position perfectly when claiming that 'there can be no tyranny which in some respect is not a defence to conserve the society of men'.³⁶ But Luther had already abandoned this doctrine of non-resistance and argued that it is moral and lawful to oppose forcibly a ruler who turns tyrant.³⁷ Even Calvin eventually abandoned his conservative position and adapted what could be called a Hobbesian position that claimed a ruler must only be obeyed as long as he has the power to impose this obedience.³⁸ The Saint Bartholomew massacre clearly fuelled this

³⁴ See J.H.M. Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Ernest Benn, 1975), pp. 183–195.

³⁵ Benedict Anderson, for example, argues that the selective forgetting and mythical representation of the Saint Bartholomew massacre played an important role in the creation of French national identity: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991/1983), pp. 199–201.

³⁶ Calvin cited in Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York: Athenaeum, 1968/1965), p. 37.

³⁷ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 16–9, 74.

³⁸ Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*, p. 38.

more subversive and radical strand of Protestantism, which eventually turned it into a revolutionary political ideology. Pamphlets advocating radical forms of resistance started to emerge all over France: François Hotman's *Franco-Gallia* (1573), Théodore de Bèze's *De iure magistratuum in subditos* (1574) and Du Plessis-Mornay's *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* (1579).

The Reformation, initially a conservative religious reaction, now began to look like a radical political movement. While trying to reassert Christian faith, it undermined the only theological authority and thus contributed to a further secularisation of Europe, to the eventual death of God. The most paradoxical aspect of this evolution was that Luther's doctrines, which were primarily aimed at undermining the humanist concepts of free will, turned out to be Humanism's most important catalyst. The Reformation became the ultimate affirmation of rebellious individualism. Liberated from the dogmatism of the Catholic Church, 'man' now stood alone in front of God. Out of these theoretical foundations emerged an unprecedented revolutionary movement that transformed the entire continent. The concept of human agency was no longer simply a rhetorical position. It was by now a radical political practice.³⁹

La Boétie's political writings made their public début in the context of this emerging Huguenot radicalism. The *Anti-One* was first published in 1574, in French and in a Latin translation. Both were anonymous and ruthlessly mutilated versions of the original text. The pirated extracts were published as part of a militant Protestant pamphlet, the *Réveille-Matin des François*. It contained a detailed account of the Saint Bartholomew massacre and, directed personally against the King and his Regent, Catherine de Médici, called for the 'revolt of the many against the tyranny of one-man rule'.⁴⁰ The actual text of the *Anti-One* was reduced to a dozen pages that included all rhetorical condemnations of tyranny, but none of the more subtle discussions on systems of domination and the engineering of consent. Two years later, the *Anti-One* was printed again in a similarly combative collection of essays, *Les Mémoirs de l'Estat de France sous Charles Neufiesme*, edited by Simon Goulart, a Protestant pastor from Geneva.

³⁹ See Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints*, pp. 1–21 and in Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), pp. 237–43.

⁴⁰ *Réveille-Matin des François*, with comments by P. Bonnefon in la Boétie, *Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 402–7.

This publication, reprinted twice in Holland, not only condemned one man rule and feudal hierarchy, but also provided a much more sweeping criticism of contemporary society in general.⁴¹

By the mid 1570s the *Anti-One* was relatively widely known and associated with radical Huguenot positions. However, this originally complex rhetorical text was by now reduced to an anonymous political pamphlet, a battle cry for radical political action. The concept of human agency, which had emerged only recently in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, became helplessly entangled in the religious strife of the Reformation.

Montaigne was clearly upset by this myopic usage of la Boétie's work. He initially intended to give the *Anti-One* a prominent place in his own *Essais*, but given its entanglement in political battles this was not to happen. When the first edition of the *Essais* appeared, in 1580, Montaigne again refused to publish la Boétie's controversial text.⁴² To protect the *Anti-One* from being misused as a tool for radical political action, Montaigne downplayed its importance. He claimed that la Boétie wrote this essay 'in his infancy, by way of exercise, as a common subject that had already been treated in a thousand books'.⁴³ It is likely that Montaigne's position was informed by more than a conservative hostility to change. His work embodies the sceptical element of Renaissance Humanism. For him, the world is a place of diversities and idiosyncrasies, of unique events that cannot be assessed through a Platonic search for truth. There have never been two opinions alike, he claims, not any more than two hairs or two grains are alike. 'Their most universal quality is diversity'.⁴⁴ Knowledge of the world can never be absolute. People are deceived by appearances and hence cannot judge things objectively. Montaigne's philosophical scepticism questions people's abilities to reach a consensus about what is good for them.

⁴¹ Heller, *Iron and Blood*, p. 75–6.

⁴² See Montaigne, *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), book I, chapter 28, pp. 231–2.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 219, 231–2. For further comments on Montaigne's strategy to trivialise the *Anti-One* see Bonnefon, *Montaigne et ses Amis*, vol. I, pp. 143–5; Mesnard, *L'Essor de la Philosophie Politique au XVIe Siècle*, pp. 390–1.

⁴⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, book II, chapter XXXVII, p. 881. Chapter XII (pp. 481–683), which is entitled 'Apology of Raymond Sebond', contains Montaigne's most explicit engagement with scepticism. See also Max Horkheimer, 'Montaigne und die Funktion der Skepsis', *Kritische Theorie*, vol. II (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1968/1938), pp. 201–59; and Paul de Man, 'Montaigne and Transcendence', in *Critical Writings, 1953–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

The dispute between Montaigne and radical Huguenots over the interpretation of the *Anti-One* set the framework for many subsequent debates about human agency. Huguenots employed la Boétie's message as a battle cry to support their rebellious individualism. Montaigne, by contrast, drew attention to the authoritarian aspects of the Huguenot revolution. His view implies that dogmatic political actions, even if they seek more freedom, are likely to create new forms of oppression. Hindsight clearly vindicated Montaigne. But in the late sixteenth century his critical voice drowned in the roaring of myopic political battles.

Summary

This chapter constituted the first step of an inquiry into the emergence and constitution of popular dissent. It has observed how rhetorical ideas about dissent have come to shape Renaissance perceptions of human agency. Such an investigation is of direct relevance to an understanding of contemporary transversal dissent, for the assumptions about power and agency that were formed in the early modern period continue to influence political dynamics today.

In a sixteenth-century world where the subject and the very notion of human agency barely existed, Étienne de la Boétie's *Anti-One* was a radical text. The prevailing sense of authority at the time consisted of 'a right to demand obedience as a duty to God'.⁴⁵ La Boétie broke radically with this deeply entrenched discourse. He condemned unequivocally all forms of governing that entail some people dominating others. The *Anti-One* claimed that people hold the key to social change, that any form of government, no matter how despotic, is dependent upon popular consent. Because people can withdraw this consent, they can precipitate the downfall of even the most tyrannical ruler.

La Boétie's rhetorical position was part of an emerging humanist challenge that symbolised the transition from the medieval to the modern period. Humanism defied the prevalence of God and placed humanity at the centre of attention. With it re-emerged the long lost notion of human agency, the idea that people are their own masters, equipped with the ability to change both the world and themselves.

The *Anti-One*'s subversive message entered the public realm in the

⁴⁵ Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. xiv–xv.

context of the civil war between rebellious Huguenots and defensive Catholic authorities. But la Boétie's text was immediately appropriated. It was bent, cut, mutilated. Virtually all of its rhetorical complexities vanished. Left were only the passionate condemnations of tyranny, which were then used to promote popular uprisings against the King of France. The *Anti-One* had turned into a political weapon for radical Huguenots, an instrument of resistance and revolution, an object of contempt and abhorrence. By the end of the sixteenth century, the *Anti-One* was reduced to a mere political pamphlet that did little more than inflate and dogmatise the concept of human agency.

The public appropriation of the *Anti-One* symbolises how dissent and human agency were constituted at the time. The Reformation, which challenged the newly emerging humanist concept of free will, paradoxically provided it with unprecedented momentum. Luther passionately believed that freedom can only arise out of obedience to God's will. If humanity is deprived of this foundation, it will inevitably plunge into a moral and spiritual abyss. But by trying to purify Christian doctrines, the Protestant reformers undermined the only theological authority, the Papacy. The Reformation became an expression of rebellious individualism that eventually led to a secularisation of Europe. Humanism emerged victorious. So victorious that it was to transform the entire Western world in the centuries to come. But one of Humanism's key components, the rhetorical concept of human agency, had become impoverished to a narrow and dogmatic political tool, a dangerously repressive affirmation of the newly gained independence from God and 'his' earthly embodiments.