

POLITICS AND 'POLITIQUES' IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

During the French Wars of Religion, the nature and identity of politics was the subject of passionate debate and controversy. The word *politique*, in both sixteenth-century and contemporary French, refers to the theory and practice of politics – *la politique* – and the statesman or politician – *le politique* – who theorised and practised this art. The term became invested with significance and danger in early modern France. Its mobilisation in dialogues, treatises, debates, and polemics of the French Wars of Religion was a crucial feature of sixteenth-century experiences of the political. Emma Claussen investigates questions of language and power over the course of a tumultuous century, when politics, emerging as a discipline in its own right, seemed to offer a solution to civil discord but could be fatally dangerous in the wrong hands. By placing this important term in the context of early modern political, doctrinal, and intellectual debates, Emma Claussen demonstrates how politics can be understood in relation to the wider linguistic and conceptual struggles of the age, and in turn influenced them.

EMMA CLAUSSEN is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in French at the University of Cambridge.

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POLITICS AND 'POLITIQUES'
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY
FRANCE

A Conceptual History

EMMA CLAUSSEN

University of Cambridge



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For Bissie, Brian, and Jennifer

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Preface

This book asks how people understood the concept of politics in sixteenth-century France, and how those who practised it were characterised. Both concept and practitioners were referred to by the same word, *politique*. I trace written uses of this word as a means of studying shifts in the meaning of the concept and the figure. As much as this is a conceptual history, therefore, it is a textual and a literary one. Part of the book's argument is that sixteenth-century literary ideas and processes influenced developments in political thought and practice. It also argues that the word *politique* and the idea of politics hold a specific place in the literature of the period. The book is about the representation of politics and political actors in writing, the writing of politics, and writing *as* politics. It treats a diverse corpus, including polemical pamphlets, high political thought, and works strongly associated with the literary canon such as Montaigne's *Essais* and the *Satyre ménippée*.

This period of European history has been described as foundational for modern politics. I consider the case of France, mostly during the civil wars known as the Wars of Religion. France is at once typical and unusual within the sixteenth-century history of politics and *politiques*. It experienced the renewal in the study of politics and political theory, and the political turbulence, that characterised Europe during the Renaissance and the Reformation. However, in French (as compared to English, for example) there is an especially strong overlap between noun and adjective, and between abstract 'politics' and the somewhat more concrete figure of the political actor, partly because they are all expressed by the same word, *politique*. It is not always easy to identify which part of speech is being employed. There is a complex connection between the idealised or demonised *politique* figure and abstract notions of politics. Moreover, the masculine substantive *politique* attracted controversy during the French

Wars of Religion. The term came to describe a loose party of those who favoured peace and negotiation over violence and intransigence, and who therefore made the pragmatic choice to support Henri de Navarre in the later stages of the conflict and to sponsor his second tactical conversion to Catholicism. So-called *politiques* were castigated in polemic for their willingness to compromise religious uniformity (and authenticity) for civic peace. The question of the nature and identity of real *politiques* is somewhat vexed; in this book the *politique* figure is as much a construct as [he] is an identifiable historical actor, if not more so.

The issue of the *Politique* party and the particularity of the *politique* persona represent a unique case in the broader history of political language and ideas in the sixteenth century. This is not an argument for French exceptionalism, but rather for specificity within the larger context. Post-Reformation religiously inflected civil conflict was widespread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not only in France but also in Germany, the Netherlands, and England. France was intimately connected with the affairs of its neighbours, and foreign powers intervened in the French conflict; many of the writers discussed in this book look abroad, to Spain, Germany, England, or further afield, as sources both of inspiration and of threat. France was also connected to territories beyond Europe, especially the Ottoman Empire and the Americas. Indeed, the category of 'France' itself is very much a permeable one in the sixteenth century.

European writers of the period also drew on the shared heritage of antiquity, and in this France, again, was no exception. The French language of politics comes from Ancient Greece in its very vocabulary, as does the word 'politics' in many other modern vernaculars. In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt wrote that 'the Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence – that is, at the bottom of the sea – for as long as we use the word *politics*'.¹ The reason we use the word politics in the way that we do, in both French and English, is in part a sixteenth-century story, the result of early modern attention to classical thought. Today, it may be that sixteenth-century texts have joined their classical predecessors beneath the sea. The sea as symbolic of political existence – and of the historical depth of the present – is part of Arendt's image, in her essay on Walter Benjamin, of the thinker as a pearl diver who finds the 'rich and strange' detritus of history on the seabed. The

¹ Hannah Arendt, 'Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. by Harry Zorn (London: Random House, 1999), pp. 7–61 (pp. 53–55).

story of politics and *politiques* in sixteenth-century France is not exactly a string of pearls, but it is both rich and strange, and Arendt's suggestion of the word for politics itself as a potential pearl does in some ways express the spirit of this study.

I attempt to connect the French words for politics and political actors with discernible political reality – to trace the impact of language on events, and vice versa, as well as arguing that the changing use of the word *was* a literary-historical event, both material and immaterial, like Arendt's pearls. But the connection between the written and the real is hardly straightforward. The history of politics and *politiques* involves doubt, propaganda, fiction, and all kinds of wishful thinking; it involves political writing marked by desire – desire for freedom, or for uniformity, or for control, and so on. It is marked, too, by thwarted desire for an impossible conformity between words and deeds. Another particular feature of uses of *politique* in sixteenth-century France is self-consciousness concerning the gap between the name and the thing. In the later decades of the century, writers refer frequently to the so-called *politiques* (the Huguenot writer Simon Goulart, for example, mentions 'les politiques qu'on appelle'). The implication is that calling someone *politique* doesn't necessarily make them so; it just gives them the name. Modern historians also often refer to 'so-called' *politiques*, emphasising the act of naming, the speech act. Speech acts, or acts of language, are foregrounded both in the period and in criticism; thus, they are a central focus of analysis in this book.

This is not a study of *all* political language, nor of all instances of the word *politique*. For reasons elaborated in Chapter 1, it focuses on printed text, and especially on political treatises and polemical writing (there being considerable overlap between the two). These were new kinds of text, facilitated by the advent of printing; in particular, the polemical pamphlets printed during the troubles of the League (c. 1584–94; especially after 1588) had a critical impact. I consider the kinds of politics imagined, and created, in a new print world that was not entirely institutionalised, even if, for instance, a new translation of Aristotle, dedicated to the Queen Mother, was associated with the newly founded *Collège royal*, and radical Catholic pamphlets with the Sorbonne. This is not, then, directly a book about diplomacy, courtly intrigue, particular factions, peace negotiations, regional *parlements*, or *états généraux* – although these were crucial forms and spaces of political action in the period, familiar to all the figures discussed in the book, many of whom were active in some or all of these arenas. It is, rather, about political imagination expressed in text and especially in the use of a particular keyword, *politique*.

Part I addresses the '*politique* problem', which I treat as a problem of language and of definition. Chapter 1 introduces the historiographical and theoretical frames of the study. I outline the methods I have employed to analyse politics and *politiques*, and consider the relationship between the two. I discuss word-historical and keywords approaches and their use in intellectual history, and demonstrate that within the established overlapping fields of *Begriffsgeschichte*, history of ideas, and word histories, this book takes a specifically literary-critical approach to politics and *politiques*.

I show in Chapter 1 that politics was increasingly prominent and important in the period, that the term *politique* could not easily be defined; at the same time, the people known as *politiques* were themselves hard to identify or to associate with particular ideas. This gave politics and *politiques* considerable possibilities for certain writers and interest groups, but it also made them dangerous. These controversies have also made parsing uses of the term *politique* a historiographical problem: what was the *Politique* party, did it exist, when did it exist, with which ideologies was it associated, and what, if anything, was a typical *politique* attitude? Is this a useful historical category or a misleading one? I suggest that this confusion is indicative of the *politique* problem, that is, of the particular power of *politique* in sixteenth-century discourse, and of the emergence of politics as a distinct object of knowledge.

Chapter 2 is an overview of sixteenth-century literary-political writing, and of the semantic field that produced the *politique* problem, which was influenced by Renaissance humanist thought, the situation of the French monarchy in the run-up to the civil wars, and the Reformation. The semantic field was also shaped by developments in the use of and attitudes to the French language. Just as modern linguistic theories refer to semantic fields, so too sixteenth-century French writers used field, garden, and plant metaphors to describe the flourishing of the vernacular. An early example is Geoffroy Tory's *Champ fleury* ('Field of Flowers', 1519). Not all fields were flowered, however. Later writers complained of overgrown gardens and dangerous offshoots: and one such offshoot was the partisan use of *politique* in the late stage of the civil wars. Chapter 2 charts the development of the *politique* 'plant' (or 'weed') in the garden of French letters, in texts by authors as varied as Rabelais, Etienne Pasquier, Guillaume Budé, Loys Le Caron, Michel de L'Hospital, Montaigne, and François de la Noue. Their writings span the century and are generically diverse, with dialogue the most prominent form. Most of these authors were lawyers or connected to the rising literary-legal elite known as the *noblesse de robe*. Many rework the figure of the adviser to a prince, imbuing that adviser

with *politique* skills that characterise an emerging class of experts in and agents of power. They comment on the difficult nature of politics and suggest what good political action could look like. Politics in the sixteenth century has often been understood as being defined by what it was *not*: that is, that it was not religion, or theology, and that under pressure from Reformation conflict it became increasingly incompatible with religious rules. By contrast, I suggest in this chapter that fractured connections between theological and political discourses are only part of the story of how politics came to represent such a problem, and such an opportunity, in the sixteenth century.

Chapter 2 has a wide range of examples. Its purpose is to offer a broad context for the more sustained close reading carried out in the rest of the book, serving as a pre-history within the word history. Guillaume Budé's image of a usefully 'mixed man' who combines political acumen with other kinds of learning for the benefit of both ruler and ruled is not especially prominent in his own text; later writers during the civil wars are, by contrast, obsessed with and haunted by the boundaries of the 'mixed' *politique*'s flexibility. Chapters 3–6, organised chronologically, represent the core narrative of the book, in which the problematic flexibility of the *politique* is a central problem to be resolved, mitigated, or condemned. Part II (Chapters 3 and 4) treats works published *c.* 1568–78; Part III (Chapters 5 and 6) covers *c.* 1588–95. Each period experienced a structuring crisis: in the first case, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacres of 1572; in the second, Henri de Navarre's final struggle for France and for Paris following the assassinations of the Guise brothers and of Henri III in 1588–89. The texts analysed in these four chapters are different to those that feature in Chapter 2 in that *politique* is an important keyword in all of them; each group of texts made an especially significant intervention in the history of the term *politique*.

Chapter 3 is a comparison of Jean Bodin's *Six livres de la République* (1576) with the paratexts of Loys Le Roy's translation of Aristotle's *Politics* (1568). If, as Arendt wrote, the Greek *polis* is at the bottom of our collective 'sea', by translating the *Politics* and updating Aristotelian precepts with his extensive commentary, Le Roy's work is a diving mission, a work of salvage and transformation. Among the theorists of antiquity, Aristotle held an especially important place in early modern political thinking, both as inspiration and as something to work against. His dictum that 'man is a political animal' informs the period sensitivity to the idea that politics not only exists in the world but is also incarnated by, and is to greater or lesser extents inherent to, the human subject. As such,

debates about what behaviour characterises a *politique* person were always a matter of political theory as well as of polemic. Bodin's *République*, one of the most significant interventions in French political theory under the *Ancien régime*, attempts to reimagine the purpose and practice of politics, enacted by a wise *politique* figure who could stand alongside the great *politiques* of antiquity. It is also a kind of salvage of the principles of classical thought, written in French to serve an immediate political purpose and later translated into Latin to make it more accessible to a wider European audience. The word *politique* appears frequently in these texts as title or as generic marker, and both authors work to amplify the significance of politics within the disciplines. Thus the abstract term experiences a moment of positive construction in these works, embodied in the masculine substantive, *le politique*, who is the agent of a particularly powerful kind of knowledge (of politics, *la politique*).

Bodin and Le Roy write about politics as Catholics; in Chapter 4, I analyse Huguenot political writings. Huguenot writers reinforce and appropriate positive, powerful uses of the word *politique* circulating in erudite discourse to argue for an alternative vision of how society should operate, and what politics should be. The key sources in this chapter are the anonymous *Le reveille-matin des françois* (1574) and extracts from Simon Goulart's *Mémoires de l'estat de France sous Charles neufesme* (1576–78). The *Reveille-matin* was one of the best-known and widely read polemical texts of the war period. It is a pair of dialogues between exiled French citizens, among whom we find a character called Le Politique. The characters analyse recent history and develop a political mission, imaging new 'political laws' for France and ultimately arguing for rebellion against tyrants who suppress the Reformed faith. The main excerpt from Goulart's *Mémoires* analysed is a philosophical dialogue entitled 'Le Politique'. The dialogue is prefaced by a briefer exchange between an uncle and nephew seeking consolation in the wake of atrocities; this exemplifies the spirit of the works in question, which combine energetic desire for change with melancholy at the present situation. An enormous range of references and textual appropriations are embedded in these writings. Alongside classical exempla, contemporary authors such as Ronsard appear, and plagiarised anonymous versions and extracts of Etienne de la Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire* are pivotal. Another important contemporary reference in both Chapters 3 and 4 is Machiavelli, whom Bodin names in the preface to the *République* as having been sorely mistaken, and whose nefarious image was forged in Protestant writings in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacres – but I argue that the association between

'Machiavel' and *politique* is not the straightforward transfer of moral iniquity that one might expect.

Bodin's *République*, Le Roy's translation, and Huguenot resistance texts all have an established place in the history of political thought – more than analysing their political programmes, though, I am interested in how they define politics and *politiques*, and in the qualities of the texts. These are also important aspects of the politics of these texts. What is clear is that, as well as paying attention to this abstract question of what politics is and the practical question of what it ought to do, they raise the issue of *who* ought to be doing it. These texts imagine visions of a *politique* person or character who might fulfil abstract principles.

In Chapter 5 this previously powerful and often positive, if sometimes ambiguous, *politique* character turns bad. This occurs in the febrile period that saw the expulsion of Henri III from the capital, the assassination of the Guise brothers who led the Catholic League opposing the monarchy, and the retaliatory murder of the king. The aftermath of these events was crucial in the history of the term *politique*. Previously the noun *politique* was an object of knowledge, and a knowing subject; from *c.* 1588 the *politique* person becomes an object to be known and reviled, while retaining some of the qualities of the knowing *politique* subject. Catholic polemicists writing in support of the League seized on the figure of the *politique* as a quasi-fictional enemy who sought compromise, a manifestation of everything they hated and feared about contemporary politics. The pamphlets they wrote attacking *politiques* advertise their attempts to define and otherwise pin down these usefully shadowy figures, and in so doing demonstrate just how difficult they were to define.

Moreover, thanks to the survival of Pierre de L'Estoile's collection of broadsheets and other printed ephemera, we know that this moment produced one of the only remaining images of a *politique* character: the half-woman, half-fish monster with a gorgon's hair that you see on the cover of this book. This extraordinary image and the accompanying verse that condemns the mixed, indecisive, and yet somehow seductive *politique* figure is at once the inheritor and a distortion of the 'mixed man' Guillaume Budé wrote about decades previously; the existence of this image and other pamphlets condemning 'mixed' politics make the figure briefly described by Budé so striking in hindsight. Indeed, the *politiques* of these pamphlets were central in making *politique* a keyword of the war period and of its historiography.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, deals with two longer works that respond to the pro-League pamphlets of 1588–92 and to the political crises of

1593: the *Dialogue d'entre le Mabeustre et le Manant* and the *Satyre ménippée*. In 1593, the future king Henri IV was encamped outside Paris, while inside the city, after several years of rule by zealous Catholics, an unofficial meeting of the Estates General was held as an attempt to elect an alternative monarch. This meeting ended in failure, Henri embraced Catholicism, and several months later he was finally able to enter the capital. The *Dialogue d'entre le Mabeustre et le Manant* was written by a diehard Catholic, and stages a fractious meeting between a supporter of the Catholic League (Le Manant) and a foot soldier of Henri IV (Le Mabeustre). Over the course of their long disagreement they recount the recent political history of Paris in considerable depth, with the Manant consistently blaming 'your friends, who they call *Politiques*' for the ruin of the city. Modern criticism and histories of the period typically refer to the *Politique* party in inverted commas, or to the 'so-called *Politiques*', as I mentioned above; Chapter 6 in particular shows that this highlighting of the speech act began before the end of the wars. The Manant's emphasis on naming, quoted above, is a case in point. This self-consciousness is reproduced in the more famous *Satyre ménippée*, a rambunctious satirical fictionalisation of the disastrous Estates General of 1593. In this closing chapter, I argue that the *Dialogue* and the *Satyre* engage in and block attempts at redescribing the meaning of *politique* as a means of inviting a final reckoning as the wars concluded, and as a way of attempting to shape the historical narrative already being constructed about the word *politique* and what, or who, it referred to.

This is a book about politics and *politiques* in the sixteenth century, and the narrative ends in the 1590s. This makes sense in that there was a particular *politique* problem in the run-up to, and during, the Wars of Religion, reaching a high point around the crisis of 1588–89. This said, ending with the end of a century may give a false impression of closure. In the seventeenth century, politics and *politiques* were still a problem, but differently so. In the Conclusion, I consider ways in which seventeenth-century France and England inherited the *politique* problem, and how modern and indeed contemporary politics might still be shaped by early modern political writing, for instance in the differentiation between feminine and masculine substantives in French, and the association between performance and politics deepened by the creation of a performer, the *politique*, who incarnates political action for better or for worse. My emphasis on performance and fictionality does not mean that there were no political moderates in early modern France, nor that these moderates shouldn't be referred to as *politiques*. But I aim to show that the people and

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principles identified as *politique* during the Wars of Religion went far beyond a particular group of literary-legal associates or moderate Catholics. The politics and *politiques* of sixteenth-century France indicate both the turmoil and the promise of political writing in the period. None of them are the singular, true, or real *politiques*: they all represent textual interventions in the complex dynamic that was (and perhaps still is) politics.

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This book is dedicated with love to Bissie and to my Dad's parents, my first and best teachers: Brian and Jennifer Claussen.

Note on the Text

I refer to all titles using the MHRA system. Direct short references to one text are usually indicated in parentheses within the text; all others are placed in footnotes. Dates placed after the titles of books in the main text refer to their first publication in printed form. I have used modern English translations of early modern French to preserve consistency, since early modern English translations are available for only some of the primary sources. I have used the same spelling conventions as the editions used, except that when quoting early modern texts I distinguish between 'i' and 'j' and 'u' and 'v', and resolve abbreviations. Any suggested emendation (of spelling or punctuation, place or date of publication, name of author, etc.) is placed in square brackets. In general I italicise *politique* in my text, and capitalise the noun when it refers to the supposed (largely fictional) *Politique* faction or party. When the term refers to a named character in a dialogue, I capitalise but don't italicise. Practice in primary material, with respect to both spelling and capitalisation of *politique*, is entirely inconsistent, and I preserve these inconsistencies when quoting.