

# Writing History in the Third Republic



# Writing History in the Third Republic

By

Isabel Noronha-DiVanna

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To my parents, who encouraged me to question established facts

To Émile Perreau-Saussine, with whom I discussed many aspects  
of this book – he will be sorely missed



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Isabel DiVanna  
Wolfson College, Cambridge  
March 2010

## FOREWORD

*Writing History in the Third Republic* is an interesting study of the writing of history in France in the 1860-1914 period. Previous attention to the writings of historians during this time has been somewhat cursory. They have generally been classed together as belonging to what was called the 'École Méthodique', but this, as the author shows, was more a retrospective way of dismissing historians during this period by the *Annales* School than an informative description by their work and their preoccupations. Covering the work of Fustel de Coulanges, Charles Victor Langlois, Charles Seignobos, Gabriel Monod and Ernest Lavisse, *Writing History in the Third Republic* shows how the political and ideological pressures of the period shaped their work. They were in reaction to a previous generation (Michelet, Guizot etc.) whom they termed an 'École Romantique' and were greatly impressed by the rise of more exact and scholarly German approaches to historical research. At the same time however, after defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the relationship with Germany whether its scholarship or its politics was fraught with tension and difficulty. French historians themselves were divided whether to construct a 'patriotic approach' or to take over German methods and hope to beat the Germans at their own game. The politics of the Republic was also subject to periodic danger: in the 1880s the threat from Boulanger, in the 1900s the Dreyfus Affair. Intellectually these historians were also faced with the challenge of the development of sociology into an innovative and research-based discipline under the inspiration of Durkheim. This study shows how these conflicting pressures shaped both the public and private concerns of historians during the period and how these preoccupations to some extent accounted for their subsequent eclipse. This study makes a useful contribution to a hitherto neglected aspect of the intellectual history of the Third Republic.

—Gareth Stedman Jones  
1 March 2010



## PREFACE

This book is written to favour no particular views, and in composing it I have entertained no design of serving or attacking any party. I have not undertaken to see differently from others, but to look further, and while they are busied for the morrow only, I have turned my thoughts to the whole future.<sup>1</sup>

This book is about the personal philosophies of history developed by seven historians during the late Second Empire and Third Republic. Hippolyte Taine, Ernest Renan, Fustel de Coulanges, Gabriel Monod, Ernest Lavissee, Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos all displayed a concern with the question of what constitutes an historical work. They came up with a number of different ways to explain causation in history, the role of history, and the application of historical knowledge to society and to the human sciences. Their philosophies of history were based on different understandings of human nature and human agency. Sharing what modern historiography calls a ‘positivistic methodology’, these historians formed the intellectual vanguard of Parisian academia during the early years of the third French republic. Their work is testimony to the singular development of historical studies in the late Second Empire and early Third Republic. These historians became known in the history of historiography as members of an *école méthodique*.

The years between 1860 and 1914 constitute one of the most under-researched periods of the history of historiography. The age of French ‘positivistic’ historians, as they are commonly referred to, is both overlooked and misunderstood. These historians were seen, for the first time, as a coherent ‘group’ of scholars in the early 1900s when a group of Parisian sociologists became increasingly suspicious of the methodological solutions advocated by Monod, Langlois and Seignobos in particular.<sup>2</sup> In the 1910s criticism again made itself manifest, this time by the detractors of the new Sorbonne, the reformed school of letters and humanities in which historians like Monod, Lavissee and Seignobos had put so much

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<sup>1</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 12, translated by H. Reeve.

<sup>2</sup> As we will see, Henri Berr and the group of “historian outsiders” were part of the first debate that contributed to discredit the work of the *méthodiques*.

energy.<sup>3</sup> A last fatal blow to the method and philosophy of history expressed by these ‘positivistic’ historians finally came from the young *Annalistes* (particularly Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in the 1920s).<sup>4</sup> The name *école méthodique* did not appear in the early waves of criticism in the years between 1898 and 1914. Yet, it was clear that other groups of scholars (Henri Berr and the sociologists, for example, and the anti-Sorbonniens) saw their work as belonging to a common school of thought, and one which was invariably positivistic and overtly committed to method as a guarantee of truthfulness in historical analysis.

Given the repeated (and personal) attacks by Febvre and other *Annalistes* on the work of Seignobos (the last of these ‘positivistic’ historians to die, in 1942), later twentieth-century scholars did not focus much on the output of their predecessors. It was not until Pierre Nora wrote about it in 1962, that the work of Lavissee aroused interest again. Even then, Lavissee’s work was of interest only as a pedagogical instrument of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> In the 1970s, largely due to a re-assessment of the role of history by *Nouvelle histoire* historians (such as Carbonell) the work of Third Republic historians became itself an object of study.

In *Histoire et historiens*, published in 1976, Charles-Olivier Carbonell, himself an *Annales* revisionist, referred to Taine, Renan, Fustel, Monod, Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos (and a few others) as members of an *école méthodique*.<sup>6</sup> Carbonell’s argument was that the Third Republic saw the emergence of a new form of history-writing in France as a necessary result of the ascent of Protestant historians to positions of influence after the 1860s.<sup>7</sup> In Carbonell’s view, the Protestant, positivistic historians saw

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<sup>3</sup> Massis and De Tarde, writing under the name of Agathon, provided this second blow to the reputation of Third Republic historians.

<sup>4</sup> Bloch and Febvre, “A nos lecteurs” (1929), 1-2, called for interdisciplinary rather than specialized approaches. It is important to note, however, that Febvre was most complimentary about Lavissee for his role as a pedagogue and reformer of the university system (although he never commented on his work as an historian). See Febvre’s *De la Revue de synthèse aux Annales*, letter of November 1922 to Henri Berr, about the death of Lavissee, which Febvre describes as a “catastrophe” (141).

<sup>5</sup> Nora, “Ernest Lavissee: son rôle dans la formation du sentiment national,” 73-106.

<sup>6</sup> Carbonell, *Histoire et historiens*, ch IV. See also Amalvi’s “1975-2005: les ‘Trente Glorieuses’ des historiens?” and his *Une passion de l’histoire* for a commentary on the role of Carbonell himself in the history of historiography in France, leading to Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire*.

<sup>7</sup> Carbonell himself does not suggest a reason for the original ascent of Protestant historians, but it can be surmised that this was related to the creation of the *Revue historique* as a rival force to the *Historische Zeitschrift* (created in 1859) and to the *Revue des questions historiques*, whose editors were Catholic. The popularity of

history in a different way than Catholics. After the victory of the Third Republic against the forces of monarchy, Carbonell argued, the new history model became Protestant in essence.<sup>8</sup> Linking the coherence of the *école méthodique* to religious preference and political tendency, rather than to the use of any particular methodology, Carbonell made a persuasive point about the legitimacy of the use of the word ‘school’ when applied to the *méthodiques*. Carbonell’s point relates deeply to his concern for history-writing after the *Nouvelle histoire*. In a sense, he sought to show the ways in which this Protestant variety of history emerged alongside modern republicanism and nationalism in France.

In the United States, William Keylor wrote a book on the rise of an academic culture in late nineteenth-century France, not referring to these historians as *méthodiques*, but certainly labelling them as positivists solely in the ‘fact-oriented’ sense of the word.<sup>9</sup> Keylor’s argument sought to show the divergent ideas about history that emerged as a result of the new German ideas and methods in human sciences. The use of German ideas became, as Keylor saw it, a complex problem after the Franco-Prussian War (thus explaining the return to positivism of Monod, Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos) and World War I (when the criticism of the former school of historians by new entrants in the 1920s became apparent). In this sense, Keylor shows history as particularly reactive to—and in effect dominated by—political issues. Keylor attempted to reconcile the views of the positivistic historians and those of the *Annalistes*. He argued that despite their boldness and misplaced confidence in methodology as something which guarantees the factual accuracy of historical findings, historians in the period between 1870 and 1914 actually established the basis for historical work which has been used ever since, and as such they deserve praise.

While Carbonell’s argument seems particularly one-sided in my view, Keylor’s argument is not sufficiently persuasive or powerful. Surely historians in the 1870s, having discovered sources and their appropriate use can be said to have influenced later generations of historians. But the inner workings of the authors of the so-called *école méthodique* are never analysed by either Carbonell or Keylor. Likewise, Coornaert, also writing in 1977, referred to Third Republican historians as ‘positivists’, in a book

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the *Revue historique* seems to be related to the new methodology which it put forward, namely one which was scientific and not religiously partisan.

<sup>8</sup> See Carbonell’s *Histoire et historiens*, 450, for an account of the victory of the small group of Protestant and republican historians of the *école méthodique* against the royalist *école catholique*.

<sup>9</sup> Keylor, *Academy and community*, 10.

that focused on modern history-writing in France, thus again merely creating an oversimplified understanding of the group of people who apparently did history in a similar way.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Pim den Boer, a Dutch scholar in the US university context, wrote in 1998 what became the third major study of the professionalization of historians in France from 1818 to 1920, with half of the book focusing on the Third Republic. Boer confirmed the use of the labels *méthodiques* and positivists when referring to the historians here examined, showing how history became a science in the period between 1818 and 1920 as a result of the fundamental dissociation of study of individual action as opposed to study of facts.<sup>11</sup> Boer claimed that while many professional historians subscribed to the sober language, clear facts model of Langlois and Seignobos's *Introduction aux études historiques*, there was still room in academia for the older, Fustelian version of historical analysis that was rhetorical and based on sources and a clearly defined methodology.<sup>12</sup> What Boer did, in effect, was to show that within the 'positivistic' school there were internal distinctions and, like Carbonell, he distinguished the older version of the *méthodiques* offered by Taine and Fustel from that of the professional historians (Monod, Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos). This, to me, does not seem like a profitable approach either, for reasons I will demonstrate below.

Since the publication of these major sources on history-writing in the Third Republic, historians such as Bourd  and Martin have used the term *m thodique* somewhat liberally to describe the work of historians of positivistic tendencies writing during the Third Republic,<sup>13</sup> as did Prost when referring to professional historians whose 'scientific' philosophies of history were embedded in Claude Bernard's positivism.<sup>14</sup> And so the label persists.

In general, manuals of the history of historiography, or of the theory of history and philosophy of history pay little attention to the theoretical and methodological reflections of the generation of historians situated between Romantic historiography and *Annales*. Less attention still is given to these historians in volumes about the philosophy of history. The matter of a 'positivistic' philosophy of history has come to be seen so far as an old fashioned and discredited way of writing history. As a result, few scholars devote any attention to the epistemological or methodological problems of using the term positivism itself as a political as well as moral philosophy,

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<sup>10</sup> Coornaert, *Destins de Clio en France depuis 1800*, 47-65.

<sup>11</sup> Boer, *History as a profession*, 280-297.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 296-303.

<sup>13</sup> Bourd , "L' cole m thodique," 181-214.

<sup>14</sup> Prost, *Douze le ons sur l'histoire*, 71.



or to the implications, in terms of intellectual affiliation, of positivist historians (the *méthodiques*) for political movements in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France.

## Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The main argument I am forwarding here departs from previous work on the subject, especially those books by Carbonell, Keylor and Boer. There are three main systemic ways in which this book differs from previous scholarly work on the *méthodiques*. Firstly, I offer a more comprehensive use of sources for Fustel de Coulanges, Monod, Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos. Historians such as Carbonell, Boer and Keylor have not shed much light on the philosophy of history of the *méthodiques*. By focusing strictly on each author's allegedly most important texts, Carbonell and Keylor, for example, neglected much of the debate between historians of the period regarding method and approach. Likewise, Boer's approach, a result of over a decade's worth of research, includes romantic historians like Michelet, Thierry and others, socialist historians of the Third Republic, as well as Francophone historians (like Henri Pirenne) in the analysis. Boer's book offers less in terms of an analysis of the so-called *méthodiques* due to the breadth of his approach and varied sources he used.

A second difference between my approach and that of Carbonell and Boer is their focus on religion and the assimilation of religious choice or upbringing to political choice and philosophy of history. This is the central part of my argument. The main problem with this assimilation, as it has been put forward by previous scholars, is that the *méthodiques* are not a straightforward group of historians as far as religion is concerned. For decades, scholars have persisted in the approach based on 'exceptions that confirm the rule' when looking at the work of Third Republic historians, thus arguing that the Catholicism of a member, or the monarchical preference of another goes on to confirm a point about successful Third Republic history-writing being mainly Protestant and republican.<sup>15</sup> This seems to me a rather odd way to go about studying and doing intellectual history. Surely, if a rule has exceptions, the best and most profitable way to examine it is by re-examining the rule. In the case of the *méthodiques*, historiography has ruled it to be the product of Protestant, republican historians in institutions of higher education in Paris. It is this rule of

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<sup>15</sup> What I mean by "successful" is institutional, in light of the fact that the discipline was becoming professionalized at that time.

aligning religious, political and historical thought that I seek to re-examine based on two assumptions: firstly, that religion informs history writing; secondly, that politics informs historical thought.

Let me move on to the first assumption. Here I argue that in the work of the *méthodiques* religious preference did not have any bearing on the historical works produced by scholars such as Fustel, Monod, Lavis, Langlois and Seignobos. A similar point applies to philologists and literary critics of the time, as I have tangentially argued elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Carbonell attributed too much importance to the personal religion of historians of the period, largely in order to vindicate his own belief that there was no creative, innovative, important historical production other than that of Protestant historians. We need not do the same, and in not doing so, new avenues for understanding the work of late nineteenth-century historians emerge.

The second assumption is that politics and historical output were somehow interrelated. Another idea that I put forward, one to which I hinted above, is that we must reject the notion that political tendencies act as a guide for history-writing. Keylor, for example, showed himself overly concerned with the lack of political involvement of historians as Monod, Lavis, Langlois and Seignobos, not perceiving that their ‘silence’ was sign of a very clear political attitude on their part, but one which did not find immediate explanation in the type of history that they sought to create. Along the same lines, Carbonell sought to show the republican framework of the writings of the *méthodiques* as an element that was present even if not constantly advertised by the authors themselves. I argue that republicanism was not consistently advertised because it was not always present, and certainly not present in a unified, capital-letter type of form. The bottom line is that the Third Republic was a period of intense change in French politics and society. As a result, modern scholars have sought to show how history-writing influenced, and was influenced by, this new political environment. The political nature of late nineteenth-century French works is almost universally accepted.<sup>17</sup>

What I have attempted here is not a re-examination of the role of history in the Third Republic. It is obvious that history had a role in

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<sup>16</sup> DiVanna, *Reconstructing the Middle Ages*, 15-18.

<sup>17</sup> The sources are far too numerous to be mentioned here, but include, for example, recent work such as Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, eds., *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, class, religion and gender in national histories*. Whilst questioning the legitimacy of master-national-narratives, none of the authors of the volume’s chapters actually question the association of political life and the writing of history in the nineteenth century.

promoting unity and patriotism and in establishing the Third Republic by demonstrating a series of continuities between the new (republican) France and the France of the past. How this was done is a more problematic question. This is why approaches by Carbonell, Keylor and Boer, seeking an all-encompassing explication for how Third Republic historians wrote history, need to be revisited in order to find the nuances of nineteenth-century historians' ideas. I have also not attempted to explain the historical output of late nineteenth-century historians as entirely motivated by the context. I am sure that the context influenced in many ways the writing of history, and I can suggest that the advent of the Third Republic (1870), the centenary of the French Revolution (1889), the Dreyfus Affair (1898 and onwards) and the separation between Church and State (1905) were certainly crucial. But instead of examining the writings of scholars as motivated by particular (political) contexts, I would rather look at the internal coherence of historians' work, the ways through which each historian understood history, to make a point not for the necessary influence of the context, but rather for the inner consistency of each historian's approach.

If political disappointment (or enthusiasm) may have motivated the writing of some works, these historians still had to be true to their own views about how history was made, which led them to write history the way they did. Likewise, they were institutionally committed, as they occupied positions in French (notably Parisian) academia. The multifaceted intellectual life that they led cannot be summarized in simplified explanations of their work as religiously, politically, philosophically or methodologically aligned. Their effort to cope with the difficult problems of French history—philosophical, political or moral—while remaining consistent to their held views is what makes their work interesting and worthy of further assessment. This book's contribution to a field currently dominated by political history is a new dialogue between theory, philosophy of history and the intellectual history of the Third Republic.

I examine here the work of individual historians of this period whose philosophies of history were clearly not the same. I departed from this premise in 2004, when I started writing this book as a doctoral dissertation in Cambridge. It was not until 2008 that I happened to review a book by Mark Blum, where he argued that each person has, from an early age, a view of past events that is coherent with individual mental structures.<sup>18</sup> While on a much smaller scale than Blum's massively inspirational work,

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<sup>18</sup> See Blum, *Continuity, Quantum, Continuum, and Dialectic: The Foundational Logics of Western Historical Thinking*.

what I seek to do here is to re-evaluate all our currently held views on intellectual history as influenced by context using the *méthodiques* as a case-study which can be extrapolated, at least in theory. I intend to show that having lived at the same historical time, shared some religious views and political tendencies, the historians described as *méthodiques* did not write history in unison. In fact, some of their views, as we will see, are incompatible, mainly at a level of philosophy of history. The only influence that can account for this is not to be found in religion, or political tendency, or the shared context in which these historians lived. Rather, the different stances towards philosophy of history to be found in the works of the *méthodiques* are a clear product of individual proclivities towards the subject. While it may seem self-evident that different individuals will write history differently, this is a departure from our currently held views about Third Republican historians and the political motivation of their work.

This may seem like a minor point. However, it is a very important discovery as it relates not only to history-writing in a larger sense, but also to the fact that the work of the *méthodiques* was written to help promote the Third Republic, since history was understood to enhance patriotism. The fact that historians within this so-called school did not agree with each other, and often even blatantly contradicted each other, is only a problem for modern historians, who happen to be seeking philosophical and methodological coherence. Historians will not find either sort of coherence when approaching the work of the *méthodique* as a school. This is why the books written by Carbonell, Boer and Keylor are less helpful in understanding the work of the *méthodiques* than in helping to understand history-writing in the Third Republic as a collective, institutional effort. Carbonell, Boer and Keylor did successfully paint an overall picture of the role of history—and how history was written—in the Third Republic. What I am doing here is show the individual colours that were used to create this picture. The value of this analysis, I believe, is to demonstrate that not only is history-writing not to be seen as motivated by the political context (or rather, that historical imagination responds to more than simply the political circumstances under which one lives), but also that this type of approach endangers the great diversity of views about history in any artificially-described time period. For example: Boer provided an analysis of Lavissee as an educator, without once citing sources such as Lavissee's manuals for primary and secondary education (which went through over one hundred reprints between 1884 and 1922). Surely, Lavissee's role as an historian cannot be depicted without considering the works which he was commissioned to write. Boer, likewise, did not use Monod and Langlois's

works on medieval literature to show the authors' idea of history or the importance of their projects and proposals for the higher education reform which took place in the 1890s. Some historians whose affiliations are harder to trace have focused on the ways through which social history developed since the nineteenth century,<sup>19</sup> while others have looked at the developments of French history in general since 1800,<sup>20</sup> but all of them, invariably, perused the work of nineteenth-century historians using the *Annales* bias. This bias suggested that the positivistic historians all produced similar work that was methodologically-focused, overly-concerned with matters of origins of French institutions, and lacking in their definition of what constitutes a source for the historian.

Historiographical treatment of late nineteenth-century historians is thus unsatisfactory, and often historians have thrown out the baby with the bath water by dismissing the work of the so-called *méthodiques* as either positivistic—and therefore naïve and negligible—or as failed positivism applied to human sciences—and therefore erroneous, vague and confused. None of the works by modern scholars like Carbonell, Keylor or Boer actually uses Comte's books, and this engenders suspicion as to their own understanding of what positivism is in academic terms (and what it is not). In this book, I investigate the intellectual pursuits of the Third Republic's most famous historians by looking for the points of comparison between their writings and the uniqueness of their own works, approaches and methodologies. These are, of course, to be found in the questions they each asked their sources, which in turn account for the various answers they found. The theoretical development of their views will be approached in each sub-chapter, as I will pay attention to chronology to attempt to explain disparities which may otherwise appear as paradoxes or ambiguities. What I will do, similarly to what Blum argued in a general sense about the philosophy of history, is argue that by the time each scholar became professionalized and produced books or articles left for us to analyse, their understanding of history had already been formed. What is interesting in approaching the *école méthodique* this way is the fact that although one can easily find affiliations between the thinkers, the way they read each other's work, and work relating to methodology and philosophy of history led them to depict ideas in different ways. What I hope will become clearer is the internal consistency of historians concerning the philosophy of history as they understood it, and the smaller role played by

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<sup>19</sup> Allegra and Torre, *La nascita della storia sociale in Francia. Dalla Comune alle "Annales,"* and Dewald, *Lost worlds. The emergence of French social history, 1815-1970.*

<sup>20</sup> Coornaert, *Destins de Clio en France depuis 1800.*

the specific political context when ‘guiding’ history-writing in the Third Republic. I certainly accept that context did help guide views on history as it enabled (or even forced, depending on the case) historians to ask new questions—or ask them differently—when looking at the past. Trying to provide the view of a harmonious France—in the past, present and future—what the *méthodiques* did was use history to create, from a variety of perspectives, the notion of unity when religion and politics failed to do so. This is why their works leave religious and political issues behind, because in no other way could their program for history be legitimate in Third Republic France.

A common problem of intellectual history is the difficulty of proving one’s claims, especially when it comes to intellectual affiliation and exchanges of ideas.<sup>21</sup> This book unfortunately is no exception to this methodological conundrum. All the claims made here which are based on intellectual affiliation between thinkers will be suggested (rather than affirmed with certainty) based on available source material. The majority of sources used here are printed; first editions were consulted whenever possible and further editions were also examined. A list of archival sources can be found in the references, these being mainly private letters and private papers found in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale and Archives nationales), as well as lecture manuscripts (Collège de France, Sorbonne) and other personal papers. To my knowledge, many of the papers of Ernest Lavisse (part of the collection *Nouvelles acquisitions françaises* at the BN in Paris) have not yet been used in other scholarly works on Lavisse and other Third Republic scholars. Due to the sheer length of some original citations, which in order to be helpful at all for the reader would have to be used in full, extending over one or two pages in some cases, I have chosen to paraphrase much of what was said in writing, offering the relevant quotations in footnotes. A snapshot view of some of the considerations put forward by the *méthodiques* seemed helpful at certain points, so I have attempted to offer a number of full, translated citations for the benefit of the readers.

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<sup>21</sup> Very little has been written about the actual problems of intellectual history as far as intellectual exchanges occur. One good framework for considerations about his exchanges occur appears in the introduction to Espagne and Werner’s *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l’espace franco-allemand*.

## INTRODUCING THE *ÉCOLE MÉTHODIQUE*

The premise of my revisionist analysis of the *école méthodique* is outlined in the Preface above; now, I would like to suggest that it may well be relevant to question the soundness of this very label as applied to historians in the Third Republic. Is there a unifying element that allows us to call them a ‘school’?

Late nineteenth-century historians do not appear as attractive as, say, Michelet or Tocqueville. They are drier, less witty, certainly less lively in their description of what history is, why one should study it and what the essential components are for studying it (facts, documents, analytical categories). Having affirmed and reaffirmed their own importance throughout the Third Republic and, especially, after the Dreyfus Affair, when human scientists felt that they could contribute to society in more ways than simply by teaching, historians in the late nineteenth century talked about facts, documents, sequences of events and causality and, in doing so, they believed they were contributing to the creation of a sense of citizenship in the new, republican France. Deterministic and racist, the works of Taine and Renan bring more distress than enlightenment for modern historians examining Second Empire politics and history. Belligent and focused on issues which are no longer seem of any importance, such as the origins of France and its institutions, the works of Monod and Fustel de Coulanges are largely forgotten in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Prescriptive, dogmatic and inflexible, the works of pedagogues such as Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos seem dated today in terms of style, content, and theory.

The *école méthodique* as an historical construct was born, therefore, to denote a group of historians whose work was dated, whose methodology was flawed and whose concern with history (meaning that it was the only way to foster a sense of nationhood) became highly problematic in light of developments in international politics. If anti-Germanism had led French scholars to accept positivism as a national alternative to German methods in human sciences, this stance was undermined when the association between positivism and republicanism itself proved problematic. In terms of historiography, positivism became an embarrassing topic since French historians themselves, from the *Annales* to the *Nouvelle histoire*, decided

to wage a war against factual history and political history alike.<sup>1</sup> If certain historians in the period have been the focus of a number of recent studies, it has been mainly as philosophy of knowledge (in the case of Taine) and religious history (in the case of Renan) that their works have been approached.

‘Tedious’: this is how a colleague of Sudhir Hazareesingh described Émile Littré’s work (and the work of those of a similar positivistic persuasion).<sup>2</sup> So too did Robert Tombs once congratulate me for undertaking the careful reading of a group of very ‘boring’ historians. In spite of these views, a close reading of mid- to late nineteenth-century historians does not reveal tedious works that are overly concerned with the subjugation of politics to history and of history to methodological issues which, *Annalistes* would argue later, deprived history of its nature.<sup>3</sup> Rather, one finds a struggle to expound, in rational terms, the complexities of modern France. How each author attempted to explain these complexities, and which era each chose to focus upon to do so is what makes this study interesting, for the answers found are surprisingly varied.

The main argument of this book is that in the absence of religious or political consensus, history in the years between 1860 and 1914 was seen as able and even required to provide an agreed basis of national identity based on a late nineteenth-century view of nationhood. However, this depended upon the belief that history as a narrative of past were believed to be true, and that historians possessed procedures or, more ambitiously, rigorous scientific methods to distinguish truth from falsity. Here I offer an examination of the ways in which Taine, Renan, Fustel de Coulanges, Monod, Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos claimed their work (or historical work in general) was close to fulfilling these requirements.

In addition, here I do not use 1870 as the breakthrough date in terms of history of historiography, as historians like Carbonell, Boer and Keylor did. In terms of historical studies, I see 1870 not as a break, but as part of a continuing trend of the scientificization of historical studies which was underway in the 1850s and 1860s. The extent of the politicization of the scientific goal of historical studies will also be discussed, since each historian here analyzed responded differently to the rebirth of the French republic.

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<sup>1</sup> A good survey of this attitude is offered in Nora’s article “Le retour de l’événement,” 210-27.

<sup>2</sup> Hazareesingh, *Intellectual founders of the Republic*, xi. His colleague remained unnamed.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Febvre, *De la Revue de synthèse aux Annales. Lettres à Henri Berr*, and, for further reference, Prost, “Seignobos revisité,” 100-17.



Historians between 1860 and 1914 (and in fact their colleagues in other areas of the humanities, such as literary studies, philology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology amongst others) worked in a gap where political ideology, religious choice and the opportunities for social mobility were changing so fast, that all they really had in common was a heightened concern with methodology and an aversion to German influence. But despite the hostility of some historians to Germany, the methodology used in historical studies was remarkably Germanic, as was the structure of the Sorbonne, where Coulanges, Monod, Lavissee and Langlois taught. Despite the generalized antipathy to Protestant Germany, Protestant historians in positions of power founded a new historiography in the years between 1860 and 1914. Despite their obvious nationalism and commitment to France, Fustel, Lavissee, Langlois and their colleagues claimed that unbiased historiography was the only way to make the past useful to France. These factors contributed a scenario that can seem eminently contradictory and suggestive of the subordinate nature of historical thought to powerful religious or political tendencies. Here I show that this was not the case.

Benedetto Croce once said that 'all history is contemporary history'.<sup>4</sup> It is inevitable that it should be so. Historians in the period between 1860 and 1914 sought to assert their independence from Germanic influence by emphasising the French element in their work; in doing so, they were of course producing history that responded to current states of affairs. They described their approach as methodical (rather than positivistic, a term which only a few scholars, such as Gaston Paris, Paul Meyer, Langlois and Seignobos, used) and asserted that this was a distinctively French method of studying history, and one which revealed scientific truth. Likewise, a specific concern with sources, with facts as the basis for all true knowledge, and with truth as the main objective of historical studies, created a group of historians whose works resembled each other, and which Carbonell and his followers called the *école méthodique*.

Is there then any value to the term *école méthodique* as Carbonell employed it? And if so, should it be dated 1870-1914, as previously suggested by Carbonell, Keylor and Boer? My aim is to answer these two questions. The main text is divided into three Parts: Part I handles the intellectual and historical context; Part II tackles the investigation of the works of those who are seen as part of the *école méthodique*, and Part III examines the decline of the so-called school. As this book focuses on a

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<sup>4</sup> "Ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea." Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 4

narrowly defined area of intellectual history, the philosophy of history, I make no claim to originality of the context-based historical findings. Having relied heavily on historians' work to understand and depict the context, I have tried, as much as possible, to be frugal in the descriptions of historical events that are examined more extensively and with more competence by others. What I offer, in terms of a wider implication of the topic, is a reassessment of the claim put forward decades ago by Felix Gilbert that the history of historiography in nineteenth-century France originated from political issues.<sup>5</sup> Without seeking to contradict the importance of political history—and of politics to history—I aim to show that the way in which historians wrote about the past had reasons beyond a commitment to the political order. Third Republic historians created the milestone approach to history, asserting that certain dates and events should be seen as particularly groundbreaking and promoting massive change in the political order of France. This type of political-history approach, that Henri Berr, François Simiand and the *Annalistes* called '*histoire historisante*' or '*événementielle*', has been criticized, and yet when it comes to examining nineteenth-century history of historiography, it is still guiding the analyses of modern scholars. In a sense, here I wish to discredit the *histoire événementielle* once more, by showing the flaws of the approach in examining the work of the *méthodiques*.

For my purposes, then, rather than proceed to the political history of France during the Third Republic, it is preferable to see the path of republicanism in Parisian academic centres (in particular history schools) not so much as an ideology defended by professional historians, but rather as the backdrop for a certain set of methodological and theoretical considerations. These were wide-ranging, including questions on human nature, the possibility of systematic (positive) solutions, the explanations for human agency, the value of tradition, and hierarchy and leadership versus collective wisdom and memory. All of these were influenced by—and at the same time further inspired—the political and religious tendencies of each historian in question. But the usefulness of aligning politics and religion to the philosophy of history ends here. As we will see, moving the argument further, is that it is not possible to say that because he was a Protestant, Gabriel Monod was also republican, positivistic and inclined to focus on method and theory; if one inverts the sentence it does not make it true either. Lavissee was a Protestant, but his affinities were far from republican. Fustel de Coulanges, a monarchist, defended the thesis of the *école romaniste* which was later associated with both the Bonapartist and

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, "The professionalization of history in the nineteenth century," 239.

republican traditions, but not with monarchism. The stereotypes formed about republicanism, Protestantism and positivists or *méthodiques* simply do not survive an examination of the so-called *méthodiques* themselves.

Unlike Carbonell and Boer, I include Taine and Renan amongst the *méthodiques* rather than amongst the precursors of this so-called school. I do not see them as separate from the *méthodiques* in a methodological sense, and the fact that their political inclinations were not pro-republic (and in Taine's case, were definitely anti-republican) does not, I argue, have primary bearing on their understanding of how history occurred and how it should be done. I examine the works of Fustel de Coulanges, Monod and Lavissee as representing the heyday of the *école méthodique*, again, going against the mainstream analysis which places Fustel with Renan and Taine as the precursors of the *méthodiques*. The careers of all historians examined here overlap, and yet the division between chapters makes comparisons between them quite difficult to outline. So while the chapters on Taine, Renan and Fustel will be more descriptive of their work, I will point to the elements of their methodology and/or understanding of history which were borrowed by the younger historians (Monod, Lavissee, Langlois and Seignobos).

Part III examines the methodological crisis of the *méthodiques*. I look at the criticism put forward against Langlois and Seignobos (primarily) and to the whole school of positivist historians (ultimately), by three groups: Berr and the sociologists, then by the critiques of the New Sorbonne, and finally by the *Annalistes*. I end my analysis in 1914, so my considerations about the *Annales* and how they received, understood and, in some cases, misunderstood the work of their direct predecessors is done here using work that is chronologically relevant only.

It may come as a surprise that Third Republican historians did not overemphasise their religious or political preferences; they were not political theorists, or politicians themselves, and thus they got away with a certain amount of ambiguity and overlap. They were not ideologically flexible; they were simply ideologically distinct as individuals, and they tried not to let their ideological entrenchment influence their work. What I seek to show is that the coherence of the group was, if anywhere, in the use of a methodology and in certain common considerations about philosophical issues concerning the study of history. In particular, because the period between 1860 and 1914 is the age of positivism in the human sciences, causal relationships and historians' explanations for historical phenomena will be emphasized in the text, as will historians' considerations about human agency. The main issues which preoccupied the historians I am concerned with were the laws behind, and/or the direct

causes of, historical actions (Taine, Monod and Seignobos), human agency (Renan, Lavissee and Langlois), and the origins of France (Fustel, Monod and Langlois). They responded to these issues differently, and it was not political choice or religion that led them to make one or another problem of history their special mission, or to concoct a specific answer to the problem. The inner workings of historians' minds remain a mystery, and the main contribution I make here is to separate the examination of history of historiography from what has become, by necessity, an investigation of political history and political thought. In doing so, I hope to give to Cesar what is Cesar's and keep to intellectual history that which is its own, namely, the history of history-writing.

# PART I

## THE HISTORICAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF THE *MÉTHODIQUES*: FROM EMPIRE TO REPUBLIC

If it is indeed an exaggeration to claim, as we so boldly have done, that history did not exist before [the nineteenth century], one cannot fail to attribute to this period the feat of having brought considerable progress to the science of history.<sup>1</sup>

Echoing several men older and wiser than himself, Gabriel Monod announced, in 1876, that the nineteenth century is the century of history.<sup>2</sup> At the time, Monod was not as famous as he would later become. The editor of the *Revue historique* gained importance in the late nineteenth century as did history as a discipline. Whereas during the eighteenth century history, Monod claimed, had been the field of antiquarians and, later on, an instrument which provided Enlightenment philosophers with a sketch of the universal progress of mankind, in the nineteenth century its value changed.<sup>3</sup> History became the best way to explain the past and project a future based on the greatness of France; history appealed to the memory of all citizens; it was a science with a proper methodology and capable of showing patterns, pointing out directions and predicting possible future events.

In order to embark upon an investigation of what history was for the authors analysed here, and to suggest the idea that they can be seen as forming part of what was later called the *école méthodique*, a few preliminary steps are necessary. Although I will not be looking at the views of history of the *méthodiques* as an extension of their political

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<sup>1</sup> “Si c’est une exagération énorme de prétendre, comme on l’a osé, que l’histoire n’existait pas avant lui [the nineteenth century], on ne saurait lui contester la gloire d’avoir fait faire à la science historique des progrès considérables.” Boutie, “L’histoire à notre époque: ses progrès et ses faux systèmes,” 195.

<sup>2</sup> “Notre siècle est le siècle de l’histoire.” Monod, “Du progrès des études historiques en France depuis le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-11.

ideologies, I am happy to depart from the premise that the institutionalized study of history had a political role to fill. Therefore, I will first examine how the educational system was structured in the mid to late nineteenth century. This is necessary to understand the educational changes that occurred during the period between 1852 and 1869, with Napoleon III, and also those after 1870, with the establishment of the Third Republic. In turn, this reveals the involvement of the historians here examined in educational projects and reform. Secondly, it is essential to outline the elements of a new philosophy of history (generally characterized as positivistic) which pitted itself against an older idea of history (generally characterized as romantic or unscientific). The purpose of Part I is to contextualize the issue of education in relation to the emergence of history as an academic discipline, and to outline the pedagogical and didactical intent of educational reforms that were widespread in primary, secondary and higher education alike. These reforms were influenced, as we shall see, by an understanding of positivism not unlike that shared by some of the *méthodiques*.