GIVING AND KEEPING ONE'S WORD

Commitments and reputations in French and European societies in the Early Modern Times (16th-18th centuries, including the colonies)

International Conference, Rennes (France), November 25-26, 2021.

Reputation was a central and fluctuating value of the early modern European societies. Subjected to the vicissitudes of rumours and even slander, it allowed people to commit themselves. As an "irresistible imperative", honour thus sealed their words by means of speech at the same time as it was brandished in order to obtain rewards and dignities (Drévillon and Venturino 2011). Honour was both an individual virtue to conquer (through bravery, masterpiece or commercial success) and a moral code specific to different orders and social groups. It therefore depended both on the identity of the person and on the information that circulated about him or her, i.e. his or her reputation. Reputation was also an exchange value: without it, it was impossible to access certain markets, goods, titles or functions. It allowed both to obtain and to distribute: a good reputation helped to acquire honours and rewards, prestigious functions, responsibilities, but it also made it possible to distribute privileges to one’s friends and clients. Reputation thus conferred credit on its possessor and allowed him/her to make commitments. In early modern times, this very notion of credit was highly polysemous and could be found in all the spheres of society (social, moral, economic, sexual), underlining a capacity for action within each of them (Crowston 2013). Credit thus defined a resource based on trust as well as a capacity to guarantee, borrow, or distribute money, favours, etc. In commercial circles, for example, the term referred to the form of reputation that guaranteed economic exchanges (Fontaine 2008).

The polysemy of these terms reflected a variety of situations, emphasizing that both credit and honor were at the cross-roads of the collective and the individual. This is why it is all the more important to question them through the positions and trajectories of individuals as well as of groups, and in the light of gendered affiliations. Thus, the credit of a merchant resulted from the reliability and profitability of his/her trade as perceived by the social sphere (Coquery 2011); the dignity of a lawyer resulted from his successful lawsuits; the reputation of a craftsman, from his/her work and his/her skills (Farr 1988); the honour of a soldier, from his bravery, his discipline (Guinier 2014) and the visibility of his military exploits. Credit and honour formed a hierarchical and organized system in which individuals evolved, measured themselves and built as much as they underwent the social relations that linked them with each other. This system served as a foundation as well as a driving force behind the trust placed in a person at a given moment.

However, historiographies are still examining these phenomena in distinct ways, depending on the fields in which reputation and commitment are inscribed: while credit remains the prerogative of a social and economic history of exchanges, honour is still largely associated with studies on the military and the nobility, which were nothing but a small part of early modern societies. Of course, the construction, modalities, and expression of reputations differed according to the social groups, gender, and the periods under consideration. Individuals also had to deal with numerous identities and multiple forms of reputation. Considering all the forms of reputation altogether will help us both to understand the logic at stake and to throw light on their relations with all the forms of commitments. It will also clarify the use of concepts and their evolution during the period. This is why this conference intends to promote dialogue between historiographies that are sometimes kept apart: history of honour and credit, of course, but more broadly cultural and literary history, economic history, social history and law history…
Moreover, these considerations based on observations of the early modern French society may be extended to other societies based on the privilege system (economic but also fiscal one), and structured by reputations. Privilege, conceived both as a right and as a dignity, was intimately linked to the question of honour, reputation and commitment. It was indeed at the heart of a person's identity as it was at the centre of social relations and of the economy of early modern societies (Garner 2016). Thus, this economic and social system extended beyond the borders of the kingdom of France and existed, with similarities and differences, in other European countries and in colonial societies. This is why proposals based on transnational or comparative approaches on the scale of Europe and its colonies will be welcomed, as reputations often presented comparable forms. In addition, the early modern period was globally marked by debates and the emergence of new economic theories that questioned the foundations of its value system. Multiple questions could be asked: was it the honor of a craftsman or the dignity of a trader that guaranteed the quality of his/her product or was it the interest he/her had in selling or producing quality products? And how did these questions that shook up the economic world affected other social and professional circles, for example during debates on the commercial and military nobility? Finally, as studies on the economics of singularities (Karpik 2007) or on the question of market reputations (Chauvin 2010) have shown it, the topic of this conference encourages transdisciplinary approaches. Contributions in sociology, law or economics will thus be warmly welcomed.

It is therefore these forms of reputation and their relationship to commitment that we would like to examine, since there seems to be a consubstantial link between these notions, a relationship that was however little questioned in historiography. Keeping one's commitments makes it possible to build and sustain one's reputation, and conversely reputations were used as forms of guarantee to ensure that the promise would be kept. This is because beyond legal contract the given word was a guarantee as much as it was a binding. The Dictionary of the Académie française, in its 1762 edition, thus reminds us that a commitment [un engagement] is "a promise, an attachment, an obligation which makes one no longer free to do what one wants". It was indeed the moral character of the commitment that tied up individuals, supported by an important value constitutive of the identity of the contracting party, namely his/her reputation (Le Roux and Wrede 2017). This reputation was not only personal, it could be transmitted or built up by the family or by the professional group to which one belonged. Thus, in French infantry regiments, if the officer contracted with a craftsman or a merchant for leather or grain supplies, the debt was collectively accountable and engaged the reputation of the entire regiment.

Reputation affected the means of contracting, promising or swearing and, therefore, the ability to act. This was particularly clear in trials, where judges took into account the reputation of the plaintiffs in both the complaint and the deliberations. In this way, the dynamic aspect of the relationship between commitment and reputation needs to be taken into consideration, and the importance of time in building such a relationship to be emphasized. Thus, reputation was used in the economic field to reduce uncertainties of information, for example by guaranteeing a lender that the debt he/she held would most likely be repaid, in view of the reputation of his/her debtor (Hoffman, Postel-Vinay, and Rosenthal 2001).

Eventually, in order to understand what built and kept these forms of reputational commitments, in short what drove individuals to keep their word, it seems crucial to explore the many possible sanctions faced by those who breached their word. To whom a craftsman or a merchant who had supplied a regiment could turn to when we know that armies and their officers were very often short of cash? What uses and roles should be given to public denunciations of a bad payer? How did corporations and communities of sworn trades intervene when one of their members damaged the reputation of the whole group? These questions aim to examine the role of the state and of ordinary jurisdictions, but also that of the corporations and orders through exceptional jurisdictions, notably merchant jurisdictions. What possibilities were offered to individuals to re-enter into commitments after an episode that had damaged their reputation? What were the
extent and consequences of having a bad reputation in a community, in a group, in a city? Finally, who were those who, willingly or unwillingly, breached their word, going against the power of reputation in early modern societies?

This two-day conference aims to discuss these questions and will bring together researchers in a cross-disciplinary perspective. The conference organizers welcome papers addressing the following topics:

**Axis 1: Building and maintaining a reputation**
- Inherited reputations, shaped reputations: analyzing reputations in the light of individual or collective trajectories, identities and commitments
- Supported reputations, bolstered reputations: privileges and dignities in the service of good reputation
- Asserted reputations, destroyed reputations: reputations at the heart of the flow of information, intelligence networks and rumours

**Axis 2: Reputation as an exchange value**
- Can one monetize one's good reputation? Credit, commitment and guarantees
- Places and forms of commitment: oralcy, literacy and publicizing the commitment
- Does a good reputation win in court? Reputation as an issue in the judicial process for witnesses, accused, complainants, etc.

**Axis 3: Social sanctions and regulations on reputation**
- Making a third party keep their promise: conciliation procedures, persuasion procedures
- Law, justice and evidence: status of the commitment of reputation before the courts and lawyers
- Sanctioning a broken commitment: judicial and social responses (shame, violence, etc.)

**Practical details**

Proposals for papers (2,500 characters), accompanied by a brief presentation of the work carried out and the institutional links, should be sent before May 3, 2021 by e-mail to colloqueengagementsreputations@gmail.com. Particular attention will be paid to proposals from young researchers and to the parity of speakers. Papers may be submitted in French or English.

After examination of the proposals by the scientific committee, the selected papers will be announced at the beginning of July 2021. A financial contribution to travel costs can be arranged. Please mention it when submitting.

**Scientific committee**
- Romain Benoit-Lévy (PhD student, Rennes 2 University, Tempora)
- Marine Carcanague (PhD student, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, IHMC)
- Simon Castanié (PhD student, Sorbonne-University, CRM; EHESS, CRH-LaDéHiS)
- Simona Cerutti (professor, EHESS, CRH-LaDéHiS)
- Aurélie Chatenet-Calyste (associate professor, Rennes 2 University, Tempora)
- Anne Conchon (professor, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, IDHES)
- Clare H. Crowston (professor, University of Illinois, États-Unis d'Amérique)
• Hervé Drévillon (professor, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, IHMC and Institute for War and Peace studies)
• Philippe Hamon (professor, Rennes 2 University, Tempora)

Indicative bibliography


DERMINEUR, Elise M., 2018, Women and credit in Pre-Industrial Europe, Turnhout, Brepols


GERVAIS, Pierre, 2012, L’empire du crédit. Profit et pouvoir économique à l’Age du commerce, XVIIIe-XIXe s, Manuscrit inédit en vue de l’obtention d’une HDR, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

GUINIER, Arnaud, 2014, L’honneur du soldat. Éthique martiale et discipline guerrière dans la France des Lumières, Ceyzérieu, Champ Vallon (coll. « La Chose publique »).


