

Guizot between history, memory and politics

CTHS 2024 Congress

By Laurent Theis

François Guizot, too, was an athlete in his own way. The fact that the little orphan from Nîmes reached the highest positions and honors and gained an international reputation is due to efforts and energy that also involved his body. For example, speaking for hours before the deputies and making his voice heard even in the upper galleries was a performance worthy of lyrical artists and required meticulous physical preparation. Writing with a quill, without ever faltering, thousands of letters and dispatches, and a hundred books, was also a performance. Finally, politics, to which he was passionately devoted, is also a form of competition; "I love politics because I love the struggle," he said. And he lived thus, through strict hygiene, until the eve of his 87th birthday, ending with a beautiful death as in ancient times. It was September 12, 1874, 150 years ago.

This commemoration can be an opportunity to revisit a debate that has been ongoing for decades, the ambiguous relationship between history and memory. Guizot can help us in this; first, because this debate truly took shape with the generation of historians to which he belongs. Secondly, because Guizot was simultaneously or successively a historian, an editor of memoirs, and a memorialist himself. In 1812, inaugurating the course of modern history at the Faculty of Letters at the age of 25, which established him as the most significant historian of his generation and even the following ones, he more than sketched the ways and means of a renewed knowledge and indeed a science in formation—he was particularly one of the promoters of the footnote. By creating in 1834 what would become fifty years later the CTHS, and defining its mission in documents that I imagine are mandatory reading for your assembly, he helped to lay down both practically and intellectually the terms of the question and began to provide answers. By publishing between 1858 and 1867 eight volumes of "*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de mon temps*," he directly involved himself in this dialogue between memory and history, which also, especially for him, involved politics.

Guizot begins his first lecture on December 11, 1812, with an anecdote: In 1615, imprisoned in the Tower of London, Sir Walter Raleigh, the former favorite of Elizabeth I, was writing the second part of his *History of the World* when he witnessed from his window a bloody quarrel in the prison courtyard; the next day, he received a friend who had been a witness and participant in the same incident who described a scene contrary to what he had seen with his own eyes. Raleigh, then thinking that the truth is impossible to establish, threw his manuscript into the fire. How can we make history with memory? the young professor asked. This question would accompany him throughout his life. Becoming an editor due to political circumstances that led to his dismissal as a high-ranking official in 1820 and then as a professor in 1822, Guizot undertook to publish *Memoirs* intended to provide sources and material to a wider audience; between 1823 and 1826, these were the 25 volumes of the *Collection of Memoirs Related to the English Revolution*, which he was writing the history of, and, between 1823 and 1830, the 30 volumes of the *Collection of Memoirs Related to the History of France*

from the Foundation of the French Monarchy to the 13th Century, whose translations my colleagues at the Sorbonne and I still used for our students fifty years ago. Many of you, I think, have consulted them and noticed the relevance of the notices Guizot placed at the head of each delivery, which sometimes anticipated the history of mentalities developed 150 years later; I am particularly thinking of the *Gesta Dagoberti* and the *History of the Church of Reims* by Flodoard. Guizot, at the time, had in mind his *History of the Origins of Representative Government*, and his 1829 course on the *History of Civilization in France*, which cemented his reputation.

His entrepreneurial approach, which mobilized a whole team including his wife Pauline de Meulan, continued when he took office in 1830, and especially during his long tenure as Minister of Public Instruction from October 1832 to April 1837. In 1833, under his patronage, the Société de l'Histoire de France was founded, to which I would like to associate its little sister, the Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français created in 1852, of which he was naturally the honorary president, and in 1834, under his authority, the creation of the CTHS; but this is your history, and I will not dwell on it, especially since Mrs. Simone Mazauric spoke on this subject at your congress in Reims in 2015. Let us simply note that history and memory, or rather Memoirs, began to move towards the same goal by various means: the publication programs of the two organizations, the approach that accompanies it, and the editors thus established testify to this: what do, for example, the scholar Jules Quicherat editing the trials of Joan of Arc and the popular novelist Eugène Suë editing the correspondence of Admiral de Sourdis have in common? Well, this: a constantly reiterated scientific requirement, even if its implementation sometimes leaves something to be desired; even today, some of these publications from another century remain unmatched.

At the time, they were timely. You all know how much, under the constitutional monarchy, the atmosphere was historical, for aesthetic reasons and intellectual and even social considerations. The question posed to the generation born between 1785 and 1805 was: what happened during this chaotic period, how to explain it, even who exactly are we, and where are we going? History was then the recourse. Among many others, let us quote Barante in 1828, future president of the Société de l'Histoire de France: "Our century is seized by historical fever." Chateaubriand in 1831: "Everything today takes the form of history." Naturally, the history of France was summoned first, alongside that of England, placed as a mirror to see more clearly. However, this history of France, a truly national history, did not exist, lamented Augustin Thierry in 1829, and Henri Martin followed suit in 1833. Guizot gave the necessary impetus to its development, starting by providing historians with the necessary material to satisfy the curiosity of an ever-growing audience.

As at all times, but more so than at some times, his scientific enterprise and that of his friends responded to a political project, what we would today call ideological and cultural: to anchor the parliamentary monarchy, and more generally the representative system, in the national past, to confirm its legitimacy, and to inscribe it in the general movement of civilization. Thus, the study of history supported what Guizot called "free government," or "the government of minds," of which he was the promoter and agent, in opposition under the Restoration, and in government under the July Monarchy.

As we know, events did not consecrate the constitutional monarchy as the unsurpassable horizon of the government of French society, as if history proved reason wrong. Guizot suffered politically and even personally from this, but his robust temperament forbade him from resigning himself to this defeat. This is why, less than ten years after his fall, he decided to write his *Memoirs*, to intellectually correct this kind of aberrant distortion inflicted by facts; he anticipated his disciple Albert Sorel's remark in 1903: "There is no lost battle that cannot be won back on paper." Few personalities in the 19th century consumed as much paper as Guizot between 1805 and 1874. Here, more than four thousand pages came from his pen, which, according to Sainte-Beuve, never faltered. To give his *Memoirs* their full weight, he insisted, unlike Chateaubriand and despite Tocqueville's objections, on publishing them during his lifetime, to publicly account for his political ideas and practices, which remained his deep convictions. But, as Camille Jullian observed, Guizot the statesman never ceased to be a historian. This may be one of the causes of his unpopularity. Thus, in the very title of his work, *Memoirs* is associated with history. The history of his time would be scientifically established by future historians, as he himself had done in the six volumes of his *History of the English Revolution*, but he already outlined its main lines and indicated its general meaning, while providing firsthand material.

Indeed, the memorialist of 1858 implemented the ways and means defined by the professor of 1812. Starting with the second volume, entering his properly ministerial period, he excludes the already very rare personal elements, which the reader of *Memoirs* seeks above all in this type of literature, and increasingly resorts to documents, largely cited in the text or included in appendices of growing importance. For, he explains, in all circumstances, I quote, "historical documents serve as development and proof, either to assertions or to the judgment of history." Gathering enormous documentation because, he tells his collaborator Charles Lenormant, "I do not want to say anything that is not perfectly accurate," and to his protégé Camille Rousset, "I have the mania of knowing more than I will use,"—a mania that one would like to see more often today—he operates on events in which he was directly involved as he did in his strictly historical works. As if these dozens of original end-of-volume documents were not enough, Guizot published, along with his *Memoirs* and to complement them, a *Parliamentary History of France* in five volumes, reproducing his speeches from 1819 to 1848; he placed at the head one of his best texts, entitled "*Three Generations: 1789, 1814, 1848*," thus implementing this notion of generation that has since shown its relevance in historical and political explanation. Thus, through a sort of chiasmus, while the *History of the English Revolution*, of primarily scientific conception and realization, could incidentally bring, I quote, "some vivid insights into our own Revolution and our current situation," the *Memoirs*, a narrative by definition personal and subjective, took the form of a quasi-magisterial, even academic demonstration, including in its material presentation. If history remained the pursuit of politics by other means, politics, for Guizot, was elevated to the dignity of history; at least he endeavored to believe it and to make others believe it. "I am sure that these *Memoirs*," he writes to his daughter Henriette de Witt in 1859, "while giving a true picture of my time and the part I took in it, will not be without influence on the present." In fact, even before their completion, the liberal Empire opened the way to the return of the Orleanists; a little later, the Republic of the Dukes described by Daniel Halévy was established—Albert de Broglie, Gaston d'Audiffret-Pasquier, Louis Decazes—who had been nourished by Guizot.

More deeply, Guizot's explicit ambition, which sometimes suffocated his contemporaries, was to follow in the footsteps of Thucydides, Tacitus, and Machiavelli, also the great English Chancellor Clarendon, one of his greatest admirations, perhaps because, as the principal minister of Charles II, he incurred disgrace under political faction pressure. This dual historical and political function, when assumed and expressed at the highest intellectual and literary level, meets the definition of State Memoirs, a rare commodity. R. Rémond thus recognized that the "*Memoirs to Serve the History of My Time*" stood, I quote, "as the meeting point between the direct experience of the politician and the meditation of the historian." In his reflection on State Memoirs, P. Nora drew a parallel between François Guizot and Charles de Gaulle, "the two greatest memorialists of the democratic state," who sought through their Memoirs "to achieve their historical salvation."

What the General manifestly succeeded in doing, did the former Prime Minister achieve it? I suggest you verify it in an upcoming abridged edition of Guizot's Memoirs, which I had the honor of establishing, presenting, and annotating. Forgive me for ending on a commercial note, but the opportunity was too good. And now, finally, I will be silent.