THE PROVERB'S ANNALS

Few popular slogans have had the history of Vox populi vox Dei. And few have been more ambiguous. For just who composed the populus, how it expressed its divine voice and how its reputation varied are problems which have never been thoroughly explored. The one detail of the proverb's history that is certain is its genesis in Judeo-Christian beliefs. It thus cannot be one of those proverbs whose origin is lost in the very distant, the prehistoric past.

Esteem for the People is a modern phenomenon, though its origin lies well back in occidental history. The vox populi was first thought to be authoritative in the election of kings and bishops; it later became an arbiter of taste. The development of what has been called folk-art, accompanied by an almost passionate love of it, is something that only a series of volumes could adequately expound. Yet a brief synopsis of this curious history may prove to be at least a stimulus to other and younger historians. It should be of some interest to Americans for, after all, our Constitution is in legend written by the People, who are held to be sovereign, and rights are expressly reserved for them in Article IX of the Bill of Rights.¹ Our national elections are believed to be conducted on the principle of universal suffrage, though this belief is not always grounded in practice. Our mass media of communication are directed by men who hold that they should give

¹ Professor Lily Ross Taylor in her Roman Voting Assemblies, chap. I, points out the similarities between the methods of electing officers in the Roman Republic and in our national conventions. That the Romans were also supposed to be sovereign as a people is recalled as late as the fourth century a.d. by Claudian in his De consulatu Stilichonis, Book III, ll. 106 ff., though by that time popular sovereignty had completely disappeared.
the People what the People want. And since the development of public opinion polls, we have found our rulers studying them, following them as guides, and thus probably modifying their future results. If the People are behind some measure, it is usually believed to be a good one; if they are against it, the measure is therefore bad. This is no doubt the most prudent belief to hold if one is a politician whose career depends upon popular support. But as in all such procedures, the beneficiaries attempt to influence those whose opinions they claim to follow. One sees the same sort of thing in families, where the children have to do what their parents tell them to do but have learned how to bribe the parents to urge them to do what they would have done without urging.

Behind all this is the shadowy notion that men have a faculty of knowing what is right and wrong without study or even reflection. Men do know what they want. And they are likely to identify the fulfillment of their desires with the good. The dispute about whether the realization of a wish makes it good or whether goodness is a standard in terms of which our wishes should be organized is one that has worried philosophers since the time of Plato, if not before. Fortunately we need not try to settle that issue in a purely historical study. But I should point out that the people who use the proverb with approval assume that in case of popular desires, desire creates goodness.² The People are assumed to have an infallible source of knowledge, knowledge that is self-substantiated, requiring no analysis or criticism. The proverb is in this respect related to one of the many forms of cultural primitivism, the form that maintains that nature is better than art, that instinct is better than learning, that feelings are wiser than reason, that the “heart” is sounder than the “mind.”

It is obvious from the very wording of the proverb that it

² And here I should no doubt explain that when I am speaking of people collectively, as the People, I spell the word with an initial capital. In the lower case, I refer to people distributively.
could not have been phrased, except in Hebrew, before the spread of Christianity. The term vox populi did occur in Latin, though naturally not identified with the vox Dei, in Lucan’s Pharsalia, which was written in the middle of the first century A.D. In the first book of that poem (ll. 270–75) we find the phrase in a passage running,

The Curia, mindful of the rebellion of the Gracchi, set aside the law and expelled the tribunes who had divided the city by their disagreements. The exiles seeking the help of their leader and the standards which were nearby, were assembled by Curio the bold, in a venal speech. He, the one-time voice of the People, dared to defend freedom and to mingle armed potentates with plebeians.

The idea that people in general, the human race, might have a voice was not entirely foreign to Roman thought. Stoicism was accustomed to the idea of a consensus gentium if not to a consensus Romanorum, and it was always true and always to be followed. Moreover, in the divisions of Roman society it was traditional to express the interests of the various social classes as if each had one peculiar to itself and antagonistic to those of the other social classes. But all this simply shows that the term vox populi in itself would not have been obscure or strange to readers of Latin. What Romans thought of popular opinion is another matter, and I shall leave it until my second essay.

Since the proverb has obvious affiliations with Hebraic and Christian thought, one looks for hints of it in the two Testaments.

3.
Expulit ancipiti discordes urbe tribunos
Victo jure minax jactatio curis Gracchis.
Hos jam mota ducis, vicinaque signa petentes
Audax venali comitatur Curio lingua:
Vox quondam populi, libertatemque tueri
Ausus, et armatos plebi mescere potentes.

Here the vox populi means an individual who is the mouthpiece of the people and it carries no eulogistic charge. Lucan had no great admiration for Curio. See the poetic apostrophe to him in Book IV, ll. 799 ff. I owe this reference to my colleague, Professor Henry Rowell. Populus, moreover, here means plebs.
Assuming that we know what we mean by “the People,” and confining ourselves exclusively for the time being to the New Testament, one is frustrated by the exegetical skill required to make the relevant texts consistent. For there are just as many passages that would lead one to believe that Christianity was to be the religion of the poor and oppressed if they are the People as there are others that seem to support the antithetical idea. Not only do the Three Kings (literally, Magi) come to adore the newborn Jesus, but also the Shepherds. The significance of the two Adorations is probably nothing more than the suggestion that both high and low, weak and powerful, join in acknowledging Him. It has sometimes been said that the Twelve Apostles were chosen from the working class and that therefore Christianity was to be a religion of the lowly. But as a matter of fact the occupations of only five of them are given in the canonical texts: four are fishermen and one a publican or tax collector. Comment has been made on the fact that God was incarnated as the son of a carpenter, but the carpenter in question was of a line of kings descending from David. In the Magnificat, the Lord is praised for putting down the mighty and exalting them of low degree, for filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52–53). But the first miracle was at a wedding feast and consisted of providing good wine for the guests (John 2:9). In the Beatitudes the meek are to inherit the earth, and the reviled and persecuted are called the salt of the earth. But Jesus also said that He had come not to send peace but a sword. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:20), men are told not to lay up treasures on earth but to lay them up in Heaven, to take no thought for their food or drink, nor for their clothing. They are, in fact, to take no thought for the morrow. But later (Matthew 25:1–12) the five foolish virgins “took their lamps and took no oil with them.” And when the Bridegroom came, they had to ask the five wise virgins for oil, with lamentable results. And what would one who believed in taking no thought for the morrow make of the parable of the
talents? And when the multitude was "very great" and had nothing to cat (Mark 8:1), Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes and fed four thousand people, though He had previously urged His disciples to take no thought for their food and drink.

It is easy enough to harmonize these apparently discordant passages by treating them as allegories showing the power of the Incarnate Lord. But the great majority who read and heard them were not trained in exegesis and they tended to emphasize either one side of the teachings or the other. Some interpreted the main lesson of Christianity as a program of communal life, as Saint Ambrose did, help for the poor, protection for the weak, which is almost precisely what the Lollards asked for. Some, on the other hand, justified the structure of power as manifested in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In Matthew 19:21 and 24 we read, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Yet when at the Passover the woman brought ointment and poured it on Jesus' head and the disciples were indignant at the waste of money which might have been given to the poor, Jesus said, "Why trouble ye the woman? For she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you, but me ye have not always." Hence when a man of wealth endowed an abbey or spent huge sums on the decoration of a church he could always cite this example rather than the former.

At the very time of the Peasants' Revolt in England, great sums were being expended on what must have seemed like luxury to the poor, and this in the name of piety. Churchmen like Saint Ambrose might preach communism, and Saint Bernard might rail against the lavish decoration of churches, but there were others, like Suger of Saint Denis, who saw no problem there. I am not attempting to say what the "real" meaning of these New Testament verses was or to harmonize texts that seem discordant. I am simply
trying to show why pious Christians could take one set of statements by themselves and see in them the kernel of a religion that was much more complicated than they seemed to realize. The Church as an organization never practised asceticism, though certain of the religious orders did to an extreme degree. But neither did she preach extravagance, though the Vatican has never been a hermit’s cell. How was an unsophisticated Christian to know which tendency was right? When the Lollards moved in the direction of simplicity and poverty they were persecuted not only by the state but by the Church herself.

The question of popular authority and wisdom cannot be answered until one has decided just who are the People. They are not everybody; that much is clear. How they were distinguished from the non-People will have to be taken up by itself, for it involves normative as well as descriptive judgments. Before entering upon that problem, I propose to give the recorded background of the proverb as far as I have been able to trace it.

Alcuin: The First Appearance of the Proverb

The usual dictionaries of quotations attribute the proverb Vox populi vox Dei to Alcuin, though he himself says it was current in his time, the late eighth century. In any event, no one has found an earlier occurrence of it. We now give in translation the entire text in which it appears, in a letter to Charlemagne. It is dated, according to its latest editor, Dümmler, about 798.

1. A will is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the Testator is alive. For before death the general consensus confirmed it. And so one cannot violate at a later date what could not be condemned at an earlier.

2. Whoever is found to be displeasing to a testator and is also especially abusive is one unworthy to be mentioned in a will. For example: Chanaan was made a slave because he dishonored his father; Esau lost his place as elder because of his intemperance; Reuben and his younger brothers were subject to rebuke by their
father. And finally, "He who shall curse his father . . ." and so on.

3. It is natural that the blessings of fathers on their sons be passed along by inheritance. They, however, fight against nature who are disobedient or contumacious toward their parents. He therefore will be a proper heir who has kept the orders previously fixed by his parents.

4. It is one thing to grant something with undue indulgence, another to have been given one's rightful due. Nor can those things be taken back from what is due which it has been agreed were obtained from real merit. Indeed a diversity of merit demands a diversity of reward.

5. He who is nobly born and has been given his inheritance legitimately, has not been found in contempt either of the Old Law or the New, nor injurious to his father, nor harmful to the people, he should be very sure of inheriting with the Lord's compassion.

6. When the head is broken, it is obvious that every member languishes, since from the strength of the head comes the soundness of the whole body. Nor can the members glory in that false health which is found not to be in the head.

7. If the truth is sought here, it is not unknown; if the reason, it is not doubtful; if the authority, it is not uncertain. For the authority stands out clearly and the reason is obvious and the truth itself cannot be hidden.

8. All such matters seem grouped in a threefold division, a division of the willing and the unwilling and those who stand in between, so that they may be linked to those from whom they may benefit. Hence the willing should be properly aided; the unwilling strongly opposed; and the doubtful either rationally convinced or circumspectly neglected. And to all must it be shown that authority cannot be corrupted nor reason conquered nor truth in any way overcome.

9. The people in accordance with divine law are to be led, not followed. And when witnesses are needed, men of position are to be preferred. Nor are those to be listened to who are accustomed to say, "The voice of the people is the voice of God." For the clamor of the crowd [vulgi] is very close to madness.

10. There is a popular proverb: from hardness something survives, from softness, on the other hand, nothing remains. Nevertheless wisdom ought to wait upon constancy and constancy upon perfect wisdom, so that constancy may be wise and wisdom constant.

11. The preaching of peace should be carried on so that no false assertions can be induced under the name of piety. For just as the
breaking of the peace is the worst of things, so it is blasphemous to negate the truth. Finally, true unity and peaceful truth do much in unison.

12. And, I maintain, things of this sort must be drilled into the simple, because ignorance of the truth can force multitudes to stray. But contrariwise, the enemy is confounded when the truth is made clear, friends are unified, and in fact all will equally lack excuses [for their errors].

These things, I beg of you, look into worthily and diligently. The greatness of your faith renders my smallness impatient on your behalf, gives me daring beyond my powers, for only he loses faith who has never had it. May He in Whose hands are kings and the laws of kingdoms multiply your crowns, watch over and protect you.4

4.
2. Quicunque testatoris repperitur ingratus, insuper et contumeliosus existat, ipse sibi testis est, quia testamento dignus non est, ut verbi causa Chanaan patris in exhonoratio servum constituit. Esau propter intemperantiam primogenita perdidit; Ruben junioribus fratribus contumelia paterna postposuit. Ad postremum quoque: Qui maledixerit patri (Exod. 21:17; Lev. 20:9) et reliqua.
3. Benediciones patrum in filio hereditare genuinum est, contra leges autem naturae pugnare qui parentibus inobedientiam seu contumatiam param. Legitimus igitur heres erit, qui praefixis ordines erga parentes tenuerit.
5. Quod optime natus et hereditatem legitime consecutus neque legis antiquae seu novae in nobilitatis inventus, nec adversus patrem sautius neque contra populum vulneratus, magnam debeat hereditandi gerere Domino miserante fiduciam.
6. Fracto capite subjecta quaque linguere perspicuum est, cum de firmitate capita totius proveniat incolominitas corporis; nec possunt ca sanitate membra sedita gloriar, quam constat in capite non haber.
7. Hic si veritas quaeritur, non est incognita; si ratio, non est ambigua; si auctoritas, non est incerta. Quoniam et auctoritas supereminet et ratio patet et veritas ascondi non potest.
8. Tripartita distributione videntur ista omnia includi, consultantium scilicet ac nocentium et eorum, qui sic inter utrosque semper ambigui sunt, ut quos obtinere persperexerint, eis se continuo socient. Sunt ergo consulentes utiliter adjuvendi, resistentes autem viriliter obviandi; dubii vero vel rationabiliter adtrahaendi, vel circumspecte dissimulandi; cunctisque mon-
There are many problems woven into this letter, but it will not be disputed that (a) Alcuin tells us that our proverb is customarily cited by some people, that (b) he identifies the People with the uneducated mob, that (c) he has no confidence in their judgment. He clearly does not believe that the People’s voice is God’s voice and he says what Pope Stephen was to say seventy-five years or so later, namely that the People should be led, not followed. This is of some interest since the election of Hildebrand

strandum ne auctoritatem posse corrupti, nec rationem vincit, nec veritatem paenitit superari.

9. Populus juxta sanctorum divinas ducendus est, non sequendus; et ad testimonium personae magis eliguntur honeste. Nec audiendi qui solent dicere: Vox populi, vox Dei, cum tumultuositas vulgi semper insaniae proxima sit.


11. Sic exercenda est predicatio pacis, ne sub nomine pietatis inducatur assertio falsitatis. Nam sicut pacem rumpere pessimum est, ita veritatem negare blasphemum. Multum sibi demiique concimium verax unitas et pacifica veritas.

12. Haec et eiusmodi, reor, inculcanda simplicibus; eo quod ignorantia veritatis cogat errare quam plurimos. Porro veritate manifestata contrarii confundentur, amici solidabuntur, universi vero pariter excusatione carebunt.

Ista, supplico, dignanter ac diligentius inspice. Vestrae siquidem fidelitatis immensitas parvitatem meam reddit impatientem pro vobis, facit etiam supra vires audentem. Enimvero fidem non perdit, nisi qui numquam habuit. In cuius manu sunt reges et jura regnorum, ipse coronas vestras multiplicet, tueatur, obumbret.

Text from Epistolae Karolini Aevi, Vol. IV, ed. E. Dümmler, no. 132. In his note on vox populi (p. 199), Dümmler says, “Originem huius proverbi, nescio.” This may be evidence that the proverb was not much earlier than the ninth century. Yet the consent of the people, pro forma, was, as we shall see, demanded even in the election of popes. G. G. Coulton in Medieval Panorama (p. 28) quotes Stephen VI, Pope from 886 to 889, saying of papal elections, “The election pertaineth to the priests, and the consent of the faithful populace must be obtained; for the people must be taught, not followed.” This would seem to suggest that the consent in question was not freely given. Coulton also points out, after Esmein, that consent was shown by “clamours, by acclamations or by hooting.” But such consent could obviously be given only by that part of the people present. He refers to Esmein’s L’Unanimité et la majorité, in Mélanges H. Fitting, Vol. 1. On shouting as suffrage, see Lily Ross Taylor’s work cited in n. 1, pp. 2 and 85–86.
in the eleventh century was based almost entirely on popular acclaim and thus created a scandal. Moreover, it is not known what was the occasion of Alcuin’s letter. It obviously concerns a will, but it is far from clear whether Alcuin was advising the Emperor about his, Charlemagne’s, will or about carrying out the provisions of someone else’s will. The letter was presumably written, if Dümmler is right, about two years before Charlemagne was crowned as Emperor. According to Kleinclausz, Charlemagne named his successors in 806, but Alcuin died in 804. It is, to be sure, possible that Charlemagne had talked the matter over with him before 806, but it would have to have been before 800, since Alcuin was stricken with paralysis in that year. Charlemagne’s will was made about 811, which date makes it even more unlikely that the letter concerns it. And in any event, what would the voice of the People have had to say about this? The consent of the People was held to be necessary, as I have said, in the ceremony of electing a bishop and sometimes in the election of a ruler. The matter in hand may even have been Charlemagne’s distribution of crowns to his sons from the various lands he had conquered. But all this is speculation.

Sometimes popular consent was thought desirable when appointments to less exalted offices were made. Einhard, recording Charles’s accession to the office of maior domo, feels it important to add, “which honor was not usually given by the People to any but to those who were pre-eminent by nobility or birth or wealth” (qui honor non aliis a populo clari consueverat quam his qui et claritate generis et opum amplitudine ceteris eminebant). Again, in speaking of the accession of Charles and Carloman, he says that the Franks “solemnly and in general convention” (solemniter generali conventu) elected them and when, after the death of Carloman, the brother of Charles, Charles was chosen king, it was by

6. Ibid., p. 347.
“the consent of all the Franks” (consensu omnium Francorum). Just how general or how entire this consent was cannot be discovered now, and it is probable that the phrases are both simply ceremonious. They indicate how the tradition of popular consent was upheld and nothing more. For even when a usurper took the throne for himself, he used the same type of formula. Thus in the Francorum regum capitularia we find that the election of Boso (October 15, 879) occurred with the “consent of God, by the suffrage of the saints . . . with one mind and like vote and with entire consent” (nutu Dei, per suffragia sanctorum . . . communi animo, parique voto, et uno consensu); but surely no one would take such phrases any more seriously than one would take the style of “King of France” which was attributed to England’s kings until the twentieth century. But what must be taken seriously is the felt necessity of including them. For the inertia of custom explains not only the continuance of a verbal tradition but also its acquisition of sanctity.

The Election of Kings and Bishops

The consent of the People to the election of bishops has an even older history than has been suggested so far. The Catholic Encyclopedia in the article “Bishop” maintains that up to the sixth century “the clergy and the people elected the bishop on condition that the election should be approved by the neighboring bishops,” an account that may be considered to be the authoritative doctrine of the Church. But Hastings’ Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, in the article on “Laity,” traces popular election of bishops back to Acts 6:3–5. In that passage there is an account of a dispute between the Greeks and the Hebrews concerning the alleged neglect of widows. Then (verse 2), the Apostles called

8. Ibid., col. 29.
10. See PL, CXXXVIII, col. 787 ff.
“the multitude of disciples” together and said to them (verse 3), “Look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom ye may appoint over this business.” After choosing them, they “set them” before the Apostles (verse 6) and when the Apostles had prayed, “they laid their hands upon them.”

In the Old Testament there is authority for the popular election of civil as well as religious chiefs. The main source for the popular election of a king is obviously that of Saul. In I Samuel 8:7 we find that the people came to Samuel and asked for a king. Samuel prayed for guidance and the Lord said to him, “Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee” (Audi vocem populi in omnibus quae locuntur tibi). Samuel points out the miseries they will undergo if they are given a king, but (8:19) “Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us” (Noluit autem populus audire vocem Samuelis sed dixerunt: ne-quamquam rex enim erit super nos). The end of the incident in the biblical account runs (8:22): “And the Lord said to Samuel, Hearken unto their voice, and make them a king” (Dixit autem Dominus ad Samuelem: Audi vocem eorum, et constitue super eos regem).

11. This runs in the Vulgate: “Considerate ergo frates, viros ex vobis boni testimonii septem, plenos Spiritu Sancto, et sapientia, quos constituamus super hoc opus. Ilos statuerunt ante conspectum apostolorum et orantes im-posuerunt eis manus.” In the Didache, 15, which seems to date from the second century, the people are bidden to elect for themselves bishops and deacons and the seven are called deacons in the rubric. In the fourth century, Athanasius insisted on popular elections; see his Apologia contra Arianum, 6. The multitude must have been what today would be called the congregation.

12. If I quote the Vulgate, it is because it was this version of the Bible that most medieval readers knew.

13. The phrase vox populi also occurs in Isaiah 61:6: Vox populi de civitate, vox de templo, vox Domini reddentis retributionem inimicis suis. This brings the two voices together, but Saint Jerome may have mistranslated the Hebrew or the Septuagint. For in the Authorized Version the people are not men-
The Vulgate then does not identify the voice of the People with that of God, though God does order His priest to listen to it. The People, moreover, are wrong in wanting a king, so the divine purpose may have been to make them pay for their foolishness. In any event, Samuel is told by God to grant their wish and he does so. And the Books of Kings are ample verification of Samuel’s prophecy of the evils that accompany monarchy. Moreover, the historical books of the Old Testament establish a theory of history that became standard in Christian circles: the theory, later to be identified with the name of Saint Augustine, that historical good and evil are determined by the People’s choices. The first recorded choice of the People was a mistake, and they continued to make mistakes. But the history of the proverb shows that this was to be completely forgotten.

Returning now to the election of bishops, the consent of the People was certainly required; but whether the requirement was scrupulously met and how it was met are questions to which we have no firm answers. Formal, that is, ceremonial, acclamation seems to have sufficed. In the Libelli de Lice, for instance, there is a passage from Cardinal Humertus’ Adversus Simoniacos which somewhat clarifies the matter: “Whoever is consecrated as a bishop must first, according to the decretals of the saints, be elected by the clergy, then sought for by the people, and finally consecrated by the bishops of his province in accordance with the judgment of the metropolitan.”

The consent of the People is given, it
will be observed, after the election, not before, and it is reasonable to assume that once a man's fellow bishops had chosen him, the consent of the People would follow automatically. Yet it was sometimes held to be the best evidence of a bishop's legitimacy. Optatus, for instance, defending Caecilianus against the charge of causing the Donatist schism, points out that he was elected suffragio totius populi (PL, XI, col. 919); and in the Decretals of Burchardus of Worms, Book I, chap. 12, we read that, “no one is to be ordained bishop, unless the clergy and parishioners are assembled and are unanimous” (Nullus est ordinandus episcopus, nisi convocatis clericis et parochianis, et in unum consentientibus). But as early as the Council of Carthage (A.D. 254) we find it noted (PL, III, col. 1025) concerning the Bishops Basil and Martial who were accused of lapsing into idolatry, that it has been established by divine authority that with the people present before the eyes of all a priest be chosen and proved worthy and suitable by open judgment and testimony, just as in Numbers God gives this advice to Moses, “Tell Aaron etc.” God orders that a priest be elected before the whole synagogue, that is, He teaches and shows that there ought to be no ordination to the priesthood save in the presence of the public conscience, so that with the people present evil deeds may be detected and merits witnessed, and that there be a just and legitimate ordination which shall have been justified by the suffrage and judgment of all.15

15. "Quod et ipsum videmus de divina auctoritate descendere ut sacerdos plebe praesente sub omnium oculis deligatur et dignus atque idoneus publico judicio ac testimonio comprobetur, sicut in Numeris Dominus Moysi praecepta dicens, Apprende Aaron etc. (Num. 20:25, 26). Coram omni synagogo jubet Deus constitui sacerdotum, id est, instruit et ostendit ordinationes sacerdotaes non nisi sub populi assistentis conscientiae fieri oportere, ut plebe praesente vel detegantur malorum crimina vel bonorum merita.
Here, for once, we have a purpose given, the revelation, if fitting, of any crimes and misdemeanors that a candidate for the episcopal chair may have been guilty of. After this passage the text refers to Acts 6:2, which we have already quoted, to show that this applies to all ranks from bishops to deacons. Why the clergy would not have known of a candidate's evil deeds and merits without consulting the People is not discussed. By the time of Charlemagne's *Capitularis*, the phrase per electionem cleri et populi was a commonplace.\textsuperscript{16}

In the election of Gregory VII, as I have suggested, it was the voice of the People rather than the voice of the clergy that assured him the papal throne.\textsuperscript{17} In his own words he writes, after relating the news of his predecessor's death to Desiderius, Abbot of Monte Cassino, April 23, 1073, “Suddenly, while our lord the pope was being carried to his burial in the church of Our Saviour a great tumult and shouting of the people arose, and they rushed upon me like madmen, so that I might say with the prophet, ‘I am come into deep waters where the floods overflow me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is dried.’ ” And three days later, writing to Wibert of Ravenna, he adds that the populace left him “neither time nor opportunity to speak or take counsel, and dragged me by force to the place of apostolic rule, to which I am far from being equal. . . .” Whether the crowd was acclaiming him as pope or as ruler of Rome is not clear. But then it was probably not clear to the crowd either. It is well known what a stormy career he had, once in the seat of power, and there was indeed question about the legitimacy of his election. But we have a letter from Wido, Bishop of Ferrara, on the matter which leaves no doubt

praedicentur, et sit ordinatio justa et legitima quae omnium suffragio et judicio fuerit examinata.”

The reasoning is paralleled in the marriage ceremony in the words, “If any man can show just cause. . . .”

16. See *PL*, XCVII, col. 521; Part I, sect. 1, par. 78.

17. I take my quotations from Ephraim Emerton, *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII.*
that popular acclamation gave him a legal right to the Papal See and was in accordance with tradition. The letter runs:

There are some who cast slanderous doubts on the coming into power of Hildebrand and who speak of his election as a crime. But when the case is carefully investigated, the charge seems utterly false and made shamelessly rather than prudently. For, as I have learned and authenticated from the testimony of very pious men of excellent reputation, when Alexander of blessed memory was dead but not yet buried, the clergy and the people, the whole senate in unison, by a single vote of all, by a complete consensus, by the greatest desire, violently dragged him [Hildebrand] along and tore him into a thousand pieces. He was elected by the clergy, demanded by the people, confirmed by the suffrage of all the bishops and priests. Hence we might indeed say of him what Cyprian said of Cornelius, that he was made a bishop by God, by the judgment of Christ, by the testimony of almost all the clergy—or, as I might say more truly, of absolutely all—by the vote of the people who were then present, by the congregation of aged priests and honorable men, though it had happened to no one before him, when the place of Alexander and the See of Peter fell vacant. This rule of ordaining bishops has been ratified in the canons, decided by the fathers, and approved as settled by the elders.¹⁸

Gregory himself merely emphasized the popular clamor and one would imagine from his letter that no regular election had taken place. It is true, as Wido puts it, that, if all occurred as he

¹⁸ Sunt qui Ildebrandi calumpnientur ingressum, quique eius criminentur introitum. Sed re diligenter inspекта, falsum videbitur omnе, quod profertur, et quod impudenter magis quam prudentеr opponunt. Nam, ut a viris religiosissimis didici et fama fere nte recognovi, beatae memoriae Alexandro defuncto nec dum humato, clero et populo, omni senatu pariter collecto, uno omnium voto, pari consensu, summo desiderio violenter attrectus et in mille partes discerptus a clcro eligitur, a populo expetitur, episcoporum et sacerdotum omnium suffragio confirmanur. Ut enim de eo dicamus, quod de Cornelio Ciprianus assersruit, factus est episcopus de Deo, Christi eius judicium, de clericorum pene omnium—et ut verius dicam, omnino omnium—testimonio, de plebis, quae tunc affuit, suffragio, de sacerdotum antiquorum et bonorum virorum collegio, cum nemo ante se factus esset, cum Alexandri locus et sedes Petri vacantur. Haec regula ordinandorum episcoporum a canonibus statuitur; a patribus decernitur, a veteribus praefixa probatur.”

Wido Episcopus Ferrariensis de Schismate Hildebrandi, Libelli de Lite MGH, Book I, chap. 1, p. 534.
relates it, tradition was simply continued. But, as all readers of medieval history know, there was widespread doubt about what actually had happened. In the case of secular rulers, there was also argument about the role the populus was to play. The question seems to have been hotly debated from at least the eleventh century on. One of the firmest believers in popular power was Manegold of Lauterbach who insisted that the People not only had the right to elect a king but also the right to depose one. To depose is obviously different from to elect, but if the People have both powers, they are to all intents and purposes omnicompetent. The following quotation illustrates Manegold's point of view.\(^9\)

"King" is not the name of a kind but of an office. Therefore the royal rank and power, just as it arises above all worldly powers, so he who is instituted to wield it must not be the wickedest or vilest, but one who, as he surpasses all others in situation and rank, must surpass them in wisdom, justice, and mercy. For he who must assume the care of all must shine above all others by the greater grace of his virtues, must strive to wield the power which has been handed over to him with the greatest balance of equity. For the people do not raise him over themselves that he may freely exercise tyrannical power over them, but that he may protect them from the tyranny and evil of others. But when he who is elected to restrain the wicked and defend the upright begins to nurture depravity in himself, to grind down the good, to exercise cruel tyranny upon his subjects which he ought to have rejected, is it not clear that he must deservedly fall from the rank granted to him, that the

9. Manegoldi ad Gebehardum Liber, Libelli de Lite, MGH, esp. sect. XXX, p. 365, ll. 5-31. The best account of his theory of sovereignty that I know is G. P. W. A. Hoch's Manegold von Lauterbach und die Lehre von der Volksouveränität unter Heinrich IV. For his idea of the People's Voice, see Libelli de Lite as cited. The tradition of the popular election of kings uses the words "the People" in a very restricted sense. In what is now England, the Witan are said to have had the power of election; in France, Louis the Stammerer (877-79) was elected by the nobles and the bishops; in the German states, the emperor was elected by only seven electors: the three Rhenish archbishops (Mainz, Cologne, Trier), the Palatine of the Rhine, the Duke of Saxony, the Margrave of Brandenburg, and the King of Bohemia. In the Visigothic kingdom of Spain, as in Poland, the king was elected by nobles. For a brief but authoritative account of the election of kings in France, see Maurice Duverger, Les Constitutions de la France, pp. 11 ff.
people may be liberated from his domination and their subjection to him, since the pact for the sake of which he was constituted has already been broken by him?

Nor could anyone justly and reasonably accuse them of perfidy, since they have in no way broken faith with him first. If we may take an example from less noble matters, if anyone for an appropriate wage turns over his swine to someone to be fed and this man does not feed them but steals them, slaughters or loses them, would he not know, after retaining the promised wage for himself, that he should discharge him with reproaches from feeding his swine? If, I say, this is observed in low things, as in the case of the swineherd who does not feed his swine but loses them, so much the more rightly with just and defensible reason must he who tries not to rule over man but to lead them astray, be deprived of all power and rank which he has over men as the condition of men differs from that of swine. . . . It is one thing to reign, another to tyrannize over one's kingdom. 20

The target of this passage is undoubtedly Henry IV, the emperor who tried to depose Gregory VII and was in turn excommunicated by the pope and did penance at Canossa. Manegold's

20. "Quod rex non sit nomen naturae, sed vocabulum officii. Regalis ergo dignitas et potestia sicut omnes mundanas excellit potestates, sic ad eam ministramad non flagitiosissimus quique vel turpissimus est constituendus, sed qui sicut loco et dignitate, ita nichilominus ceteros sapientia, iusticia súper pictate. Necesse est ergo, qui omnium curam gerere, omnes debet gubernare, maiore gratia virtutum super ceteros debeat splendere, traditam sibi potesta­tem summum equitatis libramine studeat administrare. Neque enim populus ideo cum super se exaltat, ut liberam in se exercendae tyrannidis facultatem concedat, sed ut a tyrannide ceterorum et improbitate defendat. Atqui, cum ille, qui pro coercentis pravis, probis defendendis eligitur, pravitatem in se fovere, bonus contrdere, tyrannidem, quam debuit propulsare, in subjectos cepit ipse cruelissime exercere, nonne clarum est, merito illum a concessa dignitate cadere, populum ab eius dominio et subiectione liberum existere, cum pactum, pro quo constitutus est, constet illum prius irrupisse? Nec illos quisquam poterit iustce ac rationabiliter perdiae argüere, cum nichilominus constet illum fidem prius deseruisse. Ut enim de rebus vilioribus exemplum trahamus, si quis alicui digna mercede porcos suos pascendos committeret ipsumque postmodo eos non pascere, sed furari, maestare et perdere cognosceret, nonne, promissa mercede etiam sibi retena, a porcis pascendis cum contumelia illum amoveret? Si, inquam, hoc in vilibus rebus custoditur, ut nec porcarius quidem habeatur, qui porcos non pascere, sed studet disperdere, tantò dignius iustae et probabilissime omnis, qui non homines regere, sed in errorem mittere conatur, omni potentia et dignitate, quam in homines accipit, privat, quarto condito hominem a natura distat porcorum. . . . Alius est regnare, alius in regno tyrannidem exercere."
letter asserts the right of the People both to elect and to depose a king and to do this on the premise of a primordial compact. It is, moreover, significant that the assertion is made by a prelate, though whoever else could have done it in the eleventh century might be questioned. Yet Alcuin had been a prelate too, and he was far from being enthusiastic about the rights of the populus. But by Manegold’s time the biblical tradition seems to have had greater currency, as in the famous expression *populus maior principe.*

I will conclude this section with the use of the proverb in the election of a bishop. There is a story dating from the first half of the tenth century that it was used to persuade a reluctant candidate for the archbishopric of Canterbury to accept his election. The candidate was Odo. According to his biography in the DNB by the Rev. William Hunt, Odo, a pagan, was adopted by one of Alfred’s nobles—Aethelheicm or Athelm—who had him baptized. On the death of Wulfheim (942), Archbishop of Canterbury from 923, Odo was offered the post by King Eadmund. He declined on the ground that it ought to be filled by one who was a monk. This difficulty was overcome by having him given the cowl at the monastery of Fleury, whereupon he accepted the archbishopric. The story of his accession is told by William of Malmesbury in his *De gestis pontificorum Anglorum.*

"Since the approval of all the bishops was given to the royal will, at last the most reverent overcame the rigor of his assertion and fell in with the common opinion, recognizing that proverb: *Vox populi vox Dei.*"

In this case the People were the bishops and it looks as if their voice had been the *vox regis* rather than their own. But whatever the facts, the proverb was seen to be of force and appro-

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21. “The People are greater than the sovereign.” For references to this principle, which was far from being applied, see Otto Gierke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*, p. 151, n. 164.
22. *PL*, CLXXIX, col. 1451 B.
23. “Sed cum regiae voluntati episcoporum omnium assensus accederet, tandem vix reverendissimus propositi sui rigore edomito, in communem per-rexit sententiam, recognitans illud proverbium: vox populi vox Dei.”
priate. It was, moreover, kept in currency, for William of Malmesbury’s book was written two hundred years after the event in 1125.

The Deposition of Edward II: The People as the Magnates

We now skip two centuries and come to the deposition of Edward II where the proverb was used in a political context. In the Parliament of 1327 the following charges were brought against the king, most of them unfortunately justified, none of them of immediate importance to the rank and file.

1. He was unfit to govern.
2. He had refused to listen to his wise counselors.
3. He had neglected the public business.
4. He had brought about the loss of Scotland, Gascony, and Ireland.
5. He had destroyed the Church.
6. He had badly mistreated the great laymen.
7. He had broken his coronation oath.
8. He had brought the realm to the brink of ruin.  

Parliament found these charges proven, and, in the words of James Mackinnon, “The Archbishop of Canterbury sanctified the transaction by a sermon on the theme, Vox populi vox Dei.”  

The archbishop in question was Walter Reynolds, and the sermon was delivered at the coronation of the new king. Why he chose this proverb for his text I have not discovered, nor have I found the sermon itself. Since I have not read Reynolds’ own words, I have no way of knowing precisely how his sermon fitted his text, but judging from the account of the abdication in Murimuth, no sanctification of the act was demanded. Murimuth’s account reads:

A certain number of persons (a group of bishops, earls, abbots) were sent to the king at Kenilworth, and they said to him and

urged him diligently to renounce his royal rank and crown, and permit his eldest son to reign in his place; otherwise they themselves would renounce their homage to him and elect another king in his stead. When he heard this, with weeping and outcries he replied that he was very pained that he should have deserved such treatment from the people of his realm, but in view of his inability to do otherwise, he said that he was pleased that his son was so acceptable to his whole people that he would succeed him and reign in his place.21

There are one or two details about this event that are worth emphasizing. In the group of persons who waited upon the king there were no commoners from the laity, and thus the words "totus populus" must be taken with a grain of salt.27 In the second place, before the abdication the Londoners rebelled, but apparently in favor of the king, not against him. In the third place, the charges were drawn up by Bishop Stratford, not by a lay commoner; and as for the People, a political theorist could possibly

26.

"Certus numerus personarum mitterentur ad regem apud Kenilworth, et sibi dicerent et eum requiverent diligentem quod renunciaret dignitati regiae et coronae, et quod permetteret filium suum primogenitum regnare pro eo; alioquin ipsi redderent sibi homagia sua et alium eligerent sibi regem. Quibus auditis, ipse cum fletu et ejulatu respondit quod ipse multum doluit de eo quod sic demeruit erga populum sui regni; sed ex eo quo aliter esse non potuit, dixerit quod placuit sibi quod filius suus fuit toti populo sic acceptus quod ipse sibi succederet, regnaturus pro eo."

Adam Murimuth, Continuatio Chronicarum, sub A.D. 1327, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson, p. 51.

27. But accounts differ. In Walsingham’s Historia Anglicana, ed. H. T. Riley (Vol. I, p. 186), the deputation included, “tres milites ac etiam de Londoniis et alis civitatis et magnis villis, et praepiscip de Portubus, de qualibet certus numerus personarum,” etc. In the proclamation of Edward III on mounting the throne, we read that the crown was given him by his father “spontanea voluntate” and brought about “communi consilio et assensu Praetorium, et Comitum, et Baronum, et aliorum magnatum, necnon communitationum, totius regni” (1187). The discrepancy can probably be explained by noting that Murimuth dates from the first half of the fourteenth century and was a contemporary of the events he was chronicling, whereas Malmesbury died in the fifteenth century and knew his history only at second hand. What interests me is his desire to add representatives of the Commons and the cities to his list.
maintain that they were present in the person of their parliamen-
tary representatives. Yet in what sense of the word could a parlia-
ment of that day be called popular? In spite of all this, it is
notable that the action against the king had to be presented as an
act of the People as a whole, and that Reynolds emphasized this
in choosing the text for his sermon.

John Gower: The People as Abused

Internal conditions during the reign of Edward III were
stormy, and in 1381 Wat Tyler’s rebellion broke out when Richard
III, then fourteen years old, was king. Gower, who had great sym-
pathy with the peasants, used the proverb in his Mirour de l’Omme,
and we begin now to see how it is largely converted to the popular
cause. The passage in which we are interested runs,

Ly sage ce nous vait disant,
Selone que peuple vait parlant
L’estat de l’omne s’aparra:
Escript ausi j’en truis lisant,
Au vois commune est acordant
La vois de dicu; et pour cela
Caton son fils amonesta,
Q’il ne soy mesmes locra
Ne blamer; car sache tant
Ou bons ou mals quelqu’il serra
Le fait au fin se moustrera;
N’est qui le peut celer avant.28

It was not much after the appearance of this poem that Piers
Plowman was written; and from another quarter appeared John Wyclif
(ca. 1320–84). Wyclif turned out to be an innovator in both
theology (see his Trilogos) and politics. He was a supporter of
“popular consent.” In fact, one of the errors for which his teach-

passage quoted is from lines 12721 ff., pp. 147–48. For a historical account
of the rebellion, see Walsingham’s Chronicon Angliae, Rolls Series, 1874, and,
of course, Froissart.
ing was condemned in 1418 by Martin V in the two bulls *Inter cunctas* and *In eminentis* is the following: "The people can by their own decision correct delinquent masters."  

This was no worse than many an ecclesiastic had preached—witness our passage from Manegold, which could be supplemented by other passages from Marsilio of Padua—but when combined with Wyclif's views on the real presence, on poverty, and on the "Two Swords," it was anathema. Consequently, he came to be associated in the minds of readers with the rebels. But the proverb was apparently frequently heard at the time, for another of Chaucer's contemporaries, Hoccleve (1365–ca. 1450), wrote in his *Regement of Princes* (1411–12),

> Thus, my good lord, wynneth your peoples voice,  
for peoples vois is goddes voys, men seyne.\(^{30}\)

Who the men in question were and on what occasions they said it is not told, but the very fact that it is not told shows that the words could be referred to as current. It must have been a well-known slogan. Books called *De regimene principum* were far from rare and they all contained the usual commonplaces. That this was one such is of some interest. Actually, Hoccleve himself was a bit sceptical of the divine origin of popular opinion. In stanzas 422 and following he tells the story of a king who made strict but wise laws. The people would not obey them. To induce obedience the king announced that they had been decreed by Apollo, to whose shrine he then went for consultation. He managed to persuade his subjects to obey the laws in his absence, but he died in Greece. His orders were that his body be thrown into the sea lest, if he were taken home for burial, the people would think that his death freed them from their oath of obedience. He thus prolonged his

\(^{29}\) "Populares possunt ad suum arbitrium dominos deliquentes corrigere."  

Most conveniently to be found in H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, no. 527.

absence indefinitely, and the laws continued in force. Hoccleve saw in law a basis for royal security. As he says in stanza 397,

\.\.\. lawe is bothe lokke and key
Of suerle; whil lawe is kep in londe,
A prince in his estate may sikir stonde.

None of this supports the doctrine of popular supremacy. In fact, our previous quotation from Hoccleve could be interpreted simply as advice of a Machiavellian sort: to win the support of the people, let them believe that their voice is the voice of God.

Commynes: The People as the King’s Subjects

It is not only in England that one finds the proverb used. The Mémoires of Philippe de Commynes dates from the last quarter of the fifteenth century. In the third book, fourth chapter, of this work, Commynes tells of the defeat of Alfonso of Aragon by the French in 1495 and of his flight from Naples back to Spain. The defeat apparently was easily carried out and Commynes here quotes Pope Alexander VI as saying,

Les Francoys v sont alks ,1`ccqucs des csperons de boys et de la craye en la main des fourriers pour marcher leurs logis, sans aultre payne.

This ignominious defeat, says the chronicler, is divine punishment and sets an example to all other kings and princes.

Par quoy conclud cc propos, disant, après l’avoir ouv dire a plusieurs bons hommes de religion et de saicte vie et à maintes aultre sorte de gens (qui est la voix de Dieu que la voix du peuple), que Nostre Seigneur les vouloit pugnir visiblement, et que chascon le congneut et par elix donner exemple a tous roys et princes de bien vivre et selon ses commendemens. . . .

Such an attitude may be merely an attempt to bolster one’s ideas with common sense, and, as we have seen, no philosophic premises are invoked to justify the proverb, nor are inferences drawn from it.

George Gascoigne: The People as the Populace

Commyne’s attitude is different from that of the Renaissance writers. As we approach that period the wind changes. In a man like Gascoigne one expects and gets no general ideas, and he is sceptical about the truth of the proverb. That he feels the need of introducing it is historically interesting, however, for if it were not being repeated generally, there would be no point here in mentioning it. In his Dulce bellum inexpertis included in his Posies (1572), after stanzas of introduction dealing with what poets, painters, and astronomers have to say about war, he comes down to the common people:

Well then, let see what saveth the common voice,  
These olde saycle sawes, of warre what can they say?  
Who list to harken to their whispring noise,  
May heare them talke and tattle day by day,  
That Princes pryde is cause of warre alway:  
Plentie brings pryde, pryde plea, plea pine, pine peace,  
Peace plentie, and so (say they) they never cease.

And though it have bene thought as true as steele,  
Which people prate, and preach above the rest,  
Yet could I never any reason feel,  
To think Vox populi vox Dei est,  
As for my skill, I compt him but a beast,  
Which frusteth truth to dwell in common speeche,  
Where ever Lourden will become a leech.  

These verses were written during the reign of Elizabeth I and at the height of her popularity. With a sovereign as brilliant and as “personal” as Elizabeth it was natural that a swashbuckling poet should not assume the stance of a Hoccleve. The period was one in which autocrats were in the ascendancy and for the next two centuries the proverb was to be treated lightly. In Pierre de Sainet-Julien, for instance, we find it quoted, but hardly gospel.

Pierre de Sainct-Julien: The People as the Poor

Le Roy qui aura annobly, et affranchi tel richereau de tout subside, ne veut pourtant que les quottes qu’il souloit payer soient raisées des rooles, comme l’équité le requeroit: ains le Prince veut tousjours avoir ses sommes entieres, et ses receptes plustost que foibles, sans se soucier qui les paye. Par ce moyen il est force que le reste des pauvres habitants, desquels le richerau a acquis quasi tous les heritages, supportent ce que le n’agueres Roupturier, et devenu Noble, vouloit payer. Cela advenant, et tenu pour maxime le proverb vulgaire,

Qui est aymé de Populus,
Il est aymé de Dominus.

Aussi qu’il est dit: que la voix du peuple est la voix de Dieu: ie laisse à juger a ceyx qui le scavent, les belles bendictions, que le peuple donne à l’invention et aux executeurs.33

These words were published in the year of Henry III’s murder, and though his successor was designated by him as his heir, it was almost ten years before he would abjure his Protestantism and consolidate his power. That Sainct-Julien should introduce the notion of the people’s voice into his account of paradoxical situations is not surprising. Not only was the king an adventurer and opportunist in the eyes of many, but the land was full of nouveaux- riches whose former taxes were now being paid by the People. And since the People’s voice is God’s voice, all is as it should be. On the other hand, Sainct-Julien did write a pamphlet to prove that the kingship of France was elective and not hereditary, and in his Mélanges he had insisted that even legitimate succession had to be confirmed by the decision of the Twelve Peers and approved by the Three Estates.34 This is one of the few opinions of those who speak of “the People” that takes the term literally. For the Twelve Peers plus the Three Estates includes everyone but the women, the children, and the king himself.

Francis Bacon: The People as the Multitude

The proverb was also used in the political underground during this period, for in 1620 Naunton wrote to Buckingham that he was trying to find the author of a political pamphlet called Vox Populi, or News from Spain. This seems to have been an attack on the foreign policies of both England and the United Provinces. Bacon himself had no very high opinion of the common people. In his essay on "Seditions and Troubles," he says, "Common people are of slow motion if they be not excited by the greater sort; and the greater sort are of small strength except the multitude be apt and ready to move of themselves." In short, the two classes are interdependent. Yet in his "Expostulations to the Lord Chief Justice Coke," he writes,

Supposing this to be the time of your affliction, that which I have propounded to myself is, by taking this seasonable advantage, like a true friend, though far unworthy to be counted so, to shew you your true shape in a glass; and that not in a false one to flatter you, nor yet in one made by the reflection of your own words and actions; from whose light proceeds the voice of the people, which is not unfitly called the voice of God.

Is Bacon maintaining here that the Lord Chief Justice is the intermediary between the People and God and that therefore what he announces is ipso facto both the voice of the people and that of God? It would be more prudent not to adventure into mind-reading here, nor to try to reconcile what he says about the People in his essay on "Seditions" with what he wrote to Lord Coke. His theory of the Four Idols would suffice to show that he had no confidence in innate wisdom of any kind. The whole purpose of the Novum Organum was to correct the common errors of mankind.

Montaigne: The Passionate Multitude

Much the same might be said of Montaigne. Montaigne’s scepticism was more extensive than Bacon’s, and if he had any systematic ideology it was the kind of nominalism that stopped at the confrontation of individual people and events. To put experience into words is bound to land the nominalist in paradox, for words, when descriptive, are by their very nature logical reals. The paradox was ignored by Montaigne, if he was aware of it, and he seldom hesitated to generalize when it served his purpose. Thus in his essay on the discipline of the will, in which he follows his usual practice of referring his observations to himself, he is willing to generalize about the facility of demagoguery.

I have seen wonders in my day in the indiscreet and prodigious facility of people, suffering their hopes and beliefs, to be led and governed as it has pleased and best fitted their leaders: above a hundred discontents, one in the neck of another: and beyond their fantasies and dreams. I wonder no more at those, whom the apish toys of Apollonius and Mahomet have seduced and blinded: Their sense and understanding is wholly smothered in their passion. Their discretion has no other choice but what pleases them and furthers their cause. Which I had especially observed in the beginning of our distempered factions and factious troubles. The other which is grown since, by imitation surmounts the same. Whereby I observe, that it is an inseparable quality of popular errors.37

The instances to which he is referring in this passage are the Protestant revolt and the Ligue. He condemns both as stifling reason in passion. But such movements succeed because the People are willing to be manipulated by their leaders. This is said as a simple observation, and nowhere have I found in Montaigne the sort of bitter and sarcastic description of the multitude which his disciple, Pierre Charron, published. Charron’s La Sagesse was first printed in 1601, only six years after the first edition of the Essays. In it he castigates the common people with an acerbity that even Alcuin left unexpressed.

The populace is but a wild beast. Whatsoever it thinks is but vanity, what it says is false and erroneous, what it reproves is good, what it admires is bad, what it praises is dishonorable, what it does and undertakes is but folly, non tam bene cum rebus humanis geritur, ut meliora pluribus placeant: argumentum pessimae turba est. The mob is the mother of ignorance, injustice, inconstancy, idolizing vanity, which to wish to please is impossible. Its motto is Vox populi vox Dei, but it would be better to say, Vox populi vox stultorum. But the beginning of wisdom is to keep clear of them and not to let oneself be carried off by popular opinions. 38

If a source is needed for this passage, it will probably be found in Montaigne's essay on Fame. Here the essayist is specifically referring to popular judgments of human accomplishments, of great men and their characters.

We are often driven to empanel and select a jury of twelve men out of a whole country to determine of an acre of land. And the judgment of our inclinations and actions (the weightiest and hardest matter that is) we refer it to the idle breath of the vain voice of the commone sort and base rascality, which is the mother of ignorance, of injustice, and inconstancy. Is it reason to make the life of a wise man depend on the judgment of fools? . . . “Is there anything more foolish than to think that all together they are oughts, whom every single one you would set at noughts?” Whosoever aims to please them has never done. It is a But that has neither form nor holdfast. . . . “Nothing is so incomprehensible to be just weighed as the minds of the multitude.” Demetrius said merrily of the common people’s voice, that he made no more reckoning of that which issued from out his mouth above, than of that which came

38.

“Le vulgaire est une beste sauvage, tout ce qu'il pense n'est que vanité, tout ce qu'il dit est faux et erroné, ce qu'il reprouve est bon, ce qu'il approuve est mauvais, ce qu'il loue est infâme, ce qu'il fait et entreprend n'est que folie, non tam bene cum rebus humanis geritur, ut meliora pluribus placeant: argumentum pessima turba est, la turbæ popullæ est mère d’ignorance, injustice, inconstance, idolatre de vanité, à laquelle vouloir plaie ce n’est jamais fait: c’est son mot, vox populi, vox Dei, mais il faut dire vox populi, vox stultorum. Or le commencement de sagesse est se garder net, et ne se laisser emporter aux opinions populaire.”

De la Sagesse, “dernière édition” (Paris, 1630), Book I, chap. 52, p. 13. The English in the body of my text is my own translation. The Latin quotation might be translated, “Human affairs are not so well arranged that the better pleases the greater number; the very evil mob is the proof.”
from a homely place below, and says moreover, “Thus I esteem it, if of itself it be not dishonest, yet can it not but be dishonest, when it is applauded by the many.” No art, no mildness of spirit might direct our steps to follow so straggling and disordered a guide. In this breathy confusion of brutes, and frothy chaos of reports and of vulgar opinions, which still push us on, no good course can be established. Let us not propose so fleeting and so wavering an end unto ourselves. Let us constantly follow reason. And let the vulgar approbation follow us that way, if it please. And as it depends all on fortune, we have no law to hope for it, rather by any other way than by that.39

Clearly Charron did little more than transmit his master’s opinion in more violent language. Montaigne does not repeat the whole proverb that concerns us, but his reference to the voix du peuple in the scatological terms of Demetrius shows that he had the phrase in mind. But by this time humanistic learning had changed the ideas of scholars about the wisdom of the multitude. When one remembers that cardinals in Italy looked down on printed books and insisted on having their reading matter in manuscript, that one of the apologies for emblems was their unintelligibility to the crowd, that the parables in the New Testament were discussed as dealing with matters too sacred for the masses to learn, one can see that there would be little sympathy with ordinary opinion.40 But as we approach the seventeenth and eighteenth

39. Florio’s translation, spelling modernized, Book II, Essay 16. The quotations are from Aelian, Variae Historiae, II, chap. 1; Cicero’s Tusculans, V, 36; and Cicero’s De finibus, II, 15. I saw no good reason to include the Latin since translations of the quotations were in the text.

40. See my introduction to The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo (Bollingen Series XXIII) for information on the value of arcane knowledge. For a possible source of Montaigne’s opinion of la tourbe, and a source which is fairly typical of the Humanists, see Guicciardini’s Ricordi, no. 140: Chi disse un popolo, disse veramente un animale pazzo, pieno di mille errori, di mille confusione, senza diletto, senza stabilità (“To speak of a people is to speak in truth of a foolish beast, full of a thousand errors, of a thousand confusions, without pleasures or firmness.”) The Ricordi is now available in English as Maxims and Reflections of a Renaissance Statesman, trans. Mario Domandi. Cf., in that edition, series B, no. 5, p. 100; no. 123, p. 125; and no. 156, p. 134. See also my second essay below.
centuries we find that popular claims for recognition in both political and religious areas are being met with hostility from the literati, though, as everyone knows, the hostility was futile.

Sir Thomas Browne: The Multitude Again

A generation after the publication of the first edition of *La Sagesse*, Sir Thomas Browne expressed in suaver language an opinion of the People similar to Charron's. His *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* came out in 1646, six years after Parliament was dissolved, four years after the outbreak of Civil War, one year after the beheading of Laud, and three years before that of Charles I. It is as a whole a catalogue of "vulgar errors," and hence demonstrates to those willing to be convinced that the voice of the People sometimes tells lies. After listing various errors of the mob, Browne writes,

> It much accuseth the impatience of Peter, who could not endure the staves of the multitude, and is the greatest example of lenity in our Saviour, when he desired of God forgiveness unto those, who having one day brought him into the City in triumph, did presently after, act all dishonour upon him, and nothing could be heard but Crucifige, in their Courts. Certainly he that considereth these things in God's peculiar people, will easily discern how little truth is in the ways of the Multitude; and though sometimes they are flattered with that Aphorism, will hardly believe, the voice of the people to be the voice of God.41

La Fontaine: The Vulgus

La Fontaine was as dubious of the validity of the people's opinion as his contemporary in England was. In his fable on Democritus and the people of Abdera (Book VIII, 26) he admitted his prejudice—easily done in view of the social climate of the Court and the Academy.

Que j'ai toujours hai les penseurs du vulgaire?
Qu'il me semble profane, injuste et téméraire,
Mettant de faux milieux entre la chose et lui,
Et mesurant par soi ce qu'il voit en autrui?

Le maître d'Epicure en fit l'apprentissage.
Son pays le crut fou: petits esprits? mais quoi?
Aucun n'est prophète chez soi.

La Fontaine has the Abderites send for Hippocrates to cure Democritus of his supposed insanity. But the philosopher is immersed in his books. His examiners begin to reason about metaphysics and then,

Ils tombèrent sur la morale
Il n'est pas besoin que j'étale
Tout ce que l'un et l'autre dit.
Le récit précédent suffit
Pour montrer que le peuple est jugé récusable.
En quel sens est donc véritable
Ce que j'ai lu dans certain lieu
Que sa voix est la voix de Dieu?

This scepticism is in keeping with the prevalent mode of satire during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, satire infused with a bitterness that had seldom been felt since the days of Juvenal. It was directed not toward one social class but toward types of human beings, as in Molière or La Bruyère, or toward humanity in general, as in Swift. The pretentiousness of certain men, their avarice, false ambition, brutality, mendacity, in short their weakness of virtue and strength of vice, these became the targets of the social critic, as they had always been. To quote passages from all the satirists would be impossible and enough has been said to sketch lightly the history of the proverb.

La Bruyère: The People as Underdog

The work of a moralist like La Bruyère was to emphasize types of people rather than humanity itself, whereas La Rochefoucault did the very opposite. In fact, La Bruyère was willing to admit
that he spent his life in observing men and his mind in untangling their vices and silliness. Speaking of himself in the third person, he says,

S’il donne quelque cour a ses pensées, c’est moins par une vanité d’auteur, que pour mettre une vérité qu’il a trouvée dans tout le jour nécessaire pour faire l’impression qui doit servir à son dessein.\footnote{Essay on “Ouvrages de l’Esprit” in Les Caractères ou Mœurs de ce Siècle, chap. I, “Les Caractères de la Bruyère,” p. 21.}

His work was supposed to be that of scientific observation, but instead of first setting up classes of character, as Theophrastus did, he examined individuals and used them as materials for classification. It is therefore possible to identify each of the men he is criticizing, though he gives them a Greek or Latin name. To see the human race as a collection of individuals, none of whom is completely like any other, was something that may be said, without more exaggeration than is customary, to have begun with Montaigne, when he announced that he was writing a self-portrait. Strictly speaking, this ought to have led a man to say nothing about the People as possessing a voice common to them all and like the voice of anyone in particular. But La Bruyère did not go that far. On the contrary, one finds him generalizing about men and women, about courtiers, about wits and men of wealth, but his usual tendency is the drive toward individuality. There is a good deal in La Bruyère about the influence of property on character, and there is the well-known contrast between the fate of a rich man and that of a poor man.\footnote{Essay on the “Biens de Fortune,” conclusion. One of the most striking of such passages occurs in “Les Grands,” pp. 256–57, where he compares “les deux conditions des hommes les plus opposées,” the rich and the poor whom he calls here “le peuple.” He ends this discussion by saying that if he had to choose between being “un grand” or “un homme du peuple,” “je ne balance pas, je veux être peuple.”} But why there is this gap between great wealth and extreme poverty he never seeks.

By the end of the eighteenth century the medieval principle populus maior principe had been pretty well justified in action. In
both the United States and France the People had seemed to win out, and when one looks backward one wonders why this was not evident to the Bonapartes, the Metternichs, the Wellingtons, and their successors in authority. There were dissident voices well into the twentieth century, and there will probably always be some who cannot reconcile themselves to facts. In the United States, Alexander Hamilton’s famous speech in the Federal Convention on June 18, 1787, is often cited as a case in point. “The voice of the People,” he is reported to have proclaimed, “has been said to be the voice of God; and, however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true to fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right.”

But on the whole few of the writers have ever attempted to justify the innate wisdom of the People. During the nineteenth century, however, one man at least made a suggestion which is allied to the doctrines of the consensus gentium, the lumen naturale, and the Scottish common-sense philosophy. This man was Archbishop Trench.

Archbishop Trench: Consensus Gentium

The voice of the People, says the Archbishop, is not “every outcry.” On the contrary, “the proverb rests on the assumption that the foundations of man’s being are laid in the truth; from which it will follow, that no conviction which is really a conviction of the universal humanity, but rests on a true ground; no faith,

44. See The Records of the Federal Convention, ed. Max Farrand, Vol. I, p. 299. It is worth noting that this is preceded by the words, “All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people.” As far as human nature in general was concerned, the Constitution embodied a definite conception of what it was believed to be. See A. O. Lovejoy, Reflections on Human Nature, Lecture II, “The Theory of Human Nature in the American Constitution and the Method of Counterpoise,” pp. 37–66.
which is indeed the faith of all mankind, but has a reality corresponding to it; for, as Jeremy Taylor has said, ‘It is not a vain noise, when many nations join their voices in the attestation or detestation of an action’; and Hooker, ‘The general and perpetual voice of men is as the sentence of God Himself. For that which all men have at all times learned, nature herself must needs have taught; and God being the author of nature, her voice is but his instrument.’” Unfortunately the Archbishop had not heard the voice of the Opposition and his notion of universality seems to have been limited to the universe of his associates. By means of terming all who disagree about those opinions which he calls universal by the invidious name of exceptions or “not truly human,” he proves his point. Thus such ideas as taboos against incest, and the existence of a “First Cause, Creator and Upholder of all things,” are indeed universal. But in the opening lecture of his book he quotes a quatrain from James Rowell (ca. 1594–1666) which turns all proverbs into the voice of God. The verses run,

The people’s voice the voice of God we call;
And what are proverbs but the people’s voice?
Coined first, and current made by common choice?
Then sure they must have weight and truth withal.

This is perhaps as good a conclusion to the chronicles of our proverb as any. We have done no more than brush in lightly the fortunes of a maxim over the centuries. Its origin is unknown; but its use to justify political and ecclesiastical policies make it appear to be a bit of very ancient wisdom. There are some strange features of its use, of which one is the failure of anyone to raise the question of just who the People were whose voice was that of God. For no one that I have come across has applied it to all human beings regardless of age, sex, wealth, lineage. The next

essay will try to clarify the problem of who the People were and what their reputation was.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{46} Since writing this collection of essays I have come upon an article called “Vox Populi Vox Dei,” by S. A. Gallacher, in \textit{Philological Quarterly}, Vol. XXIV (January, 1945). This article traces the origin of the proverb, as far as possible, and includes some references which I have not used. It should be read both as an excellent supplement to my essay and for its own intrinsic interest. I owe the reference to my colleague, Dr. John Baldwin.