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**<https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/people/nh408/index.htm>**

**‘Historicisms and counter-historicisms in the seventeenth century’**

**Monday 12 November, 5pm: Old Combination Room, Trinity College**

#### **The Author**

I took my BA in Classics and English (2008), MSt (2009) and DPhil in English (2012) at the University of Oxford, before taking up a Title A Research Fellowship here at Trinity this year. My doctoral thesis, ‘The *ars critica* in early modern England’, was a study of late humanist philology in the British Isles, mainly covering the years 1610-1660. I am about to begin preparing it for publication as a monograph. I am also preparing shorter articles and book chapters on the scholarly context of the King James Bible; the correspondence between Paolo Sarpi and Isaac Casaubon; and seventeenth-century translations of Lucretius.

#### **The Paper**

My paper returns to one of the preoccupations of my doctoral research, and incorporates the work I have done so far on my next project (on criticism in the early Enlightenment). What role did humanist philology play in the development of historical method, and in the progress of the broader phenomenon of ‘historicism’? The meaning of ‘historicism’ can vary. At its fullest, it denotes an understanding of things and events in the past as having meaning in relation to the culture surrounding them. This form of historicism excludes other interpretations: whether providentialist, normative, essentializing in any other way, or simply anachronistic.

It is generally accepted that humanists made significant steps towards such a historical understanding of the past. There are differences of emphasis, however: some historians have identified the late seventeenth century as a period in which scholars with a background in humanism historicized, relativized, and secularized the past as never before. Two key figures in this account are Richard Simon and Jean Le Clerc, who will be considered here. Other historians, conversely, have stressed slow and incremental historicization, beginning in the fifteenth century if not before, with no radical, ‘Enlightened’ break occurring around 1680.

This paper uses a sustained comparison of Simon and Le Clerc with earlier humanists to argue for the latter perspective, but with three caveats. First of all, there was no such thing as a monolithic ‘historicism’. If we calibrate our concepts of historicism and historical method according to the languages used by early modern writers, we soon find that there were multiple historicisms at work during the period, often overlapping but rarely coterminous. Secondly, such historicisms were confessionally inflected: Catholics and Protestants alike invested heavily in methods that might be regarded as historical, but these methods were often quite different from each other. Thirdly, historicism was not the principal goal of humanist scholars. The ‘criticism’ they practiced was as much literary as historical, especially compared with some of their earlier seventeenth-century predecessors.

## Recommended Reading

- Bravo, Benedetto, 'Critique in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Rise of the Notion of Historical Criticism,' in *History of Scholarship: A Selection of Papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship Held Annually at the Warburg Institute*, edited by C. R. Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Malcolm, Noel, 'Hobbes, Ezra, and the Bible: the History of a Subversive Idea,' in *Aspects of Hobbes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.
- Momigliano, Arnaldo, 'Ancient History and the Antiquarian.' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13.3/4 (1950), 285-315.
- Quantin, Jean-Louis, 'Reason and Reasonableness in French Ecclesiastical Scholarship,' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 74.3 (2011), 401-436.
- Schiffman, Zachary Sayre, 'Renaissance Historicism Reconsidered,' *History and Theory* 24.2 (1985), 170-82.