«Laissez faire à Georges» and «Let George do it»
A Case of Paremiological Polygenesis

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For my friend Julia Sevilla Muñoz

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Abstract

While polygenesis appears to be a rare phenomenon with proverbs, the French proverb «Laissez faire à Georges» from the end of the fifteenth century and the American proverb «Let George do it» from the last quarter of the nineteenth century do in fact have two different origins. This is shown by numerous references from French and Anglo-American proverb collections and dictionaries. Even though some paremiographers and lexicographers continue to insist on a monogenetic relationship between the two proverbs, the argument for two separate origins has steadily gained acceptance. The two «Georges» of the proverbs have no relationship to each other, and it would have made little sense for the old French idiom with its relationship to Georges d'Amboise to have been adopted by the Anglo-American world. Clearly the American proverb is based on another George, namely the generic name given to emancipated slaves who were employed as African American porters on the Pullman railroad cars during the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond. While the French proverb has long been out of use, the American proverb is still in use today.

Keywords
Paremiography. Lexicography. Semantics. French. English. Georges d'Amboise. Polygenesis.

Título: «"Laissez faire à Georges" y "Let George do it". Un caso de poligénesis paremiológica».

Resumen

Aunque la «poligénesis» parece ser un fenómeno raro en los refranes, el refrán francés «Laissez faire à Georges» de finales del siglo XV y el americano «Let George do it» del último cuarto del siglo XIX tienen, en efecto, dos orígenes diferentes. Lo demuestran las numerosas referencias que se encuentran en refraneros y diccionarios franceses y americanos. Aunque algunos paremiógrafos y lexicógrafos siguen defendiendo la existencia de una relación «monogenética» entre ambas unidades fraseológicas, la argumentación a favor de dos orígenes separados ha ido ganando gran aceptación. Los «George » de estos refranes no tienen relación entre ellos y, en efecto, hubiese tenido poco sentido que el antiguo refrán francés relacionado con Georges d'Amboise procediera del mundo angloamericano. Sin duda, el refrán americano está basado en otro George, a saber, el nombre genérico asignado a los esclavos liberados empleados como mozos afroamericanos en los vagones de tren de primera clase a partir de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. Mientras el refrán francés está en desuso desde hace mucho tiempo, el americano está todavía vigente.

Palabras clave
Paremiografía. Lexicografía. Semántica. Francés. Inglés. Georges d'Amboise. Poligénesis.

Titre : « "Laissez faire à Georges" et "Let George do it". Un cas de polygénèse parémiologique ».

Résumé

Bien que la « polygénèse » semble un phénomène rare dans les proverbes, le proverbe français « Laissez faire à Georges » de la fin du XV^{ème} siècle et l'américain « Let George do it » du dernier quart du XIX^{ème} siècle ont, en effet, deux origines différentes, comme le montre les nombreuses références qui se trouvent dans les proverbiers et les dictionnaires français et américains. Bien que certains parémiographes et lexicographes affirment toujours l'existence d'une relation « monogénétique » entre les deux unités phraséologiques, l'argumentation pour les deux origines séparées a une très bonne

Mots-clés
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acceptation. Les « Georges » de ces proverbes n'ont aucun rapport entre eux, car le Georges d'Amboise de l'ancien proverbe français n'a guère de chance de provenir du monde angloaméricain. De fait, le proverbe américain est sans doute basé sur un autre George, à savoir, le prénom générique donné aux esclaves libérés employés comme des porteurs afroaméricains dans les wagons de train de première classe à partir de la seconde moitié du XIX^{ème} siècle. Le proverbe américain est encore en usage, tandis que le proverbe français a tombé en désuétude depuis longtemps.

About twenty years ago I made the cursory remark that when one considers the origin of any given proverb, painstaking historical and comparative research must be undertaken, and at least in some cases, it given proverb, painstaking should be considered that «polygenesis is possible, that is, proverbs might at times have originated in separate locations at different times» (Mieder, 1993: 174). I also have told my students about this possibility, but I must admit that I have hitherto not investigated a proverb that can be shown not to be monogenetic. So let me present a short case study of a proverb that is identical in wording, albeit in French and English, and which has in fact two origins at quite different times. The older proverb in French is «Laissez faire à Georges» and the much younger English proverb is «Let George do it».

My interest in this proverb-pair came about when I read the following short remark by the linguist H.L. Mencken in his celebrated early study on *The American Language* (1921):

> It [«Let George do it»] originated in France, as «laissez faire à Georges», during the fifteenth century, and at the start had satirical reference to the multiform activities of Cardinal Georges d'Amboise, prime minister to Louis XII. (Mencken, 1921: 364)

About ten years later in 1931, Archer Taylor, the renowned American folklorist and paremiologist and obviously a reader of Mencken's classic work, considers this connection of the two proverbs a possibility and adds some important information to it:

> *Let George do it*, which is perhaps a vaudeville phrase, is now less frequently heard than formerly and is perhaps on its way to extinction. [in note 2 Taylor adds:] Possibly we can see a connection with *Laissez faire à George* [sic]*, il est homme d'âge*, a historical proverb. We are told that Louis XII expressed his confidence in his minister, George d'Amboise, in these words. The traditional explanation in America is based on «George» as a name used in addressing Pullman porters. (Taylor, 1931: 9)
> [*nota bene*: the spelling of *à*, *Georges*, and *âge* varies in both my French and English sources and will be cited as given throughout]

Taylor's careful and speculative wording makes it abundantly clear that he was not entirely convinced that there actually is a connection between the two «George» proverbs, although the possibility cannot be denied. Separate origins of such minimalistic texts as proverbs can occur, after all, as Alan Dundes has pointed out: «If one is engaged in citing cognates of a particular proverb, one should be careful to distinguish actual cognates, that is, versions and variants of the proverb in question, assumed to be historically/genetically related to that proverb, from mere structural parallels which may well have arisen independently, that is, through polygenesis» (2000: 298). In fact, the issue of monogenesis vs. polygenesis has been discussed in folklore circles since the Brothers Grimm, and it remains a perplexing scholarly problem to this day (Chesnutt, 2002).

The origin of the French proverb, reduced from the longer quotation «Laissez faire à Georges, il est homme d'âge» is well established. In fact, Louis-Pierre Anquetil in his fourteen volume *Histoire de France depuis les Gaulois jusqu'à la fin de la monarchie* (1805) cites its

start in the year of 1498, when Cardinal Georges d'Amboise (1460-1510) became the minister of state under King Louis XII, who had been impressed with his administrative abilities:

> 1498 [in the margin]. Il (Louis XII] avoit une telle confiance en lui que, dans les circonstances embarrassantes, sa solution ordinaire aux difficultés qu'on lui présentoit, étoit, *laissez faire à Georges*, et il se tranquillisoit sur l'événement. Cette sécurité a été souvent funeste. (Anquetil, 1805: V, 375-376)

The long version of the proverb appears for the first time in Fleury de Bellingen's early collection *L'Etymologie ou Explication des Proverbes Francois* (1656):

> Le Roy se confioit entierement en sa [Georges d'Amboise] sagesse pour la conduite des affaires de son Royaume, disoit ordinairement en prenant resolution de bien servir le Roy & l'Estat dans les occasions, qui se presentoient, & [l]es choses dont il s'agissoit: *Laissez faire à George, il est homme d'age*. Donnant à entendre par là qu'il se comporteroit prudemment, sagement, & avec toute la consideration, & circonspection necessaire en ce qui concernoit le service de sa Majesté, la gloire de sa coronne, & le bien de ses Peuples; car c'est là agir en homme d'age; comme au contraire proceder inconsiderement, hastivement, & sans meure deliberation, c'est agir temerairement & en jeune estourdi. (1656: 37)

Antoine Oudin also registers the proverb in 1656 with a short explanatory comment, as one would expect it from a dictionary entry: «Laissez faire à George, il est homme d'aage, ne [d]outez point, ne vous mettez point au peine, nous viendrons bien à bout de nos desseins». (Oudin 1656: 194)

The proverb clearly has the meaning of not having any doubts or worries, because everything will work out if that George [d'Amboise] is in charge. It is interesting to note here that the minister is actually not mentioned, showing that the proverb has taken on a meaning of its own. In references from proverb collections of later times, the editors have found it necessary to give a more precise historical explanation:

> 1690 and again 1771: *George*. – est un nom propre qui est venu en usage en ce proverbe, Laissez faire à *George*, c'est un homme d'âge. Il s'est fait du temps du Cardinal *George* d'Amboise Ministre d'Estat: quand on parloit des affaires publiques, on disoit, Laissez faire à *George*, il est homme d'âge, pour dire, qu'il s'en falloit rapporter à sa bonne conduitte & à sa grande intelligence. (Furetière, 1690: R[3]; almost identical also in Furetière et al. 1771: IV, 483)

> 1821: *George*, (*laissez faire à*) *il est homme d'âge*.
> On a tort de dire que ce proverbe a été fait pour le cardinal George d'Amboise, ministre d'état sous Louis XII. A la vérité ce prince lui est redevable du glorieux titre de *Père du peuple*. Le cardinal d'Amboise retrancha le dixième de tous les impôts, et les réduisit aux deux tiers. Sa prudence dans dispensation des derniers publics était si grande, que jamais il ne rétablit ce qu'il avait supprimé; mais comment trouver un homme d'âge dans George d'Amboise qui ne vécut que cinquante ans? (La Mesangère, 1821: 207)

> 1826: *George*: *laissez faire à George, il est homme d'âge*. Ce proverbe est du temps du cardinal George d'Amboise, ministre d'état de Louis XII. Comme ce ministre était extrêmement habile, on disait en parlant des affaires publiques: *laissez faire à George, il est homme d'âge*, pour dire qu'il s'en fallait rapporter à sa bonne conduite et à sa grande intelligence. (Caillot, 1826: 333)

> 1842: *Laissez faire à George, il est homme d'âge*.
> Le cardinal Georges d'Amboise, ministre du roi Louis XII, avoit une grande autorité sur l'esprit de son maître. Lorsque l'on estoit embarassé sur quelques affaires importantes, ce cardinal avoit coutume de dire, parlant de luy-mesme: *laissez faire Georges, il est homme d'aage*; comme s'il eust voulu dire qu'il avoit assez d'expérience pour s'en tirer, parce que l'expérience est le fruit de l'aage. (Le Roux de Lincy, 1842=1996: 471)

> 1842: *George. – Laissez faire à George, il est homme d'âge*.
> On croit que ce proverbe est un mot que répétait souvent Louis XII, pour exprimer sa confiance dans l'habileté du cardinal George d'Amboise son ministre; non que ce ministre fût réellement un homme d'âge, puisqu'il mourut à cinquante ans, mais parce qu'il déployait dans l'administration des affaires publiques une expérience comparable à celle des plus sages vieillards. *Être homme d'âge* signifiait alors, être homme d'expérience. (Quitard, 1842=1968: 423)

Basically all of the explanations of the proverb say the same, namely that Georges d'Amboise was indeed a very experienced administrator and that the reference to his age does not refer to longevity (he died at the age of fifty) but rather to his skills based on much experience. Of much interest and importance is the fact that French lexicographers and paremiographers stopped registering the proverb by the middle of the nineteenth century. I know of but one exception, namely Claude Duneton's massive *Le Bouquet des expressions imagées* (1990) that registers it as an historical proverb from the seventeenth century but says nothing about its survival in the modern age:

> XVII^{e} 1640 *laissez faire à Georges, c'est un homme d'âge* – proverbe fait du temps du cardinal « George » d'Amboise, ministre d'Etat: quand on parlait des affaires publiques, on disait: « laissez faire à George, c'est un homme d'âge » : il s'en fallait rapporter à sa bonne conduite et à sa grande intelligence. (Duneton, 1990: 228)

Besides this one reference, the proverb is absent in the modern French proverb collections as well as mono- and bilingual (French and English) dictionaries. It also cannot be found in written or oral communication any longer, and it would appear that it never gained much currency in earlier times either ─ certainly nothing in comparison to the English «Let George do it» once it begins to appear at the end of the nineteenth century. This leads me to the informed conclusion that the French proverb had fallen out of use by the middle of the nineteenth century and most likely even earlier, with the paremiographers merely registering it as an historically interesting proverb but not as one in actual use any longer. I have also not found any sign of it in Quebecois or Louisiana French proverb collections or dictionaries (see Boudreaux 1970, DesRuisseaux 1991, Proteau 1982), and so I doubt very much that it was brought to North America by immigrants. I am also quite convinced that the French proverb did not make it to Great Britain. My major reasons for arguing against a loan translation into English are: 1. the French proverb had currency primarily in its long version of «Laissez faire à Georges, c'est un homme d'âge» with its specific reference to the experienced Georges d'Amboise and as such would have made little sense to someone outside of France; 2. the meaning of the French proverb is somewhat different from the English «Let George do it», with the French text suggesting that one should or could hand over a difficult task to a more experienced person and the English text usually referring to a situation where someone unwilling to take on a task is pushing it off to another person; and 3. the English proverb appears only around 1900 when the French proverb is long out of currency. There is then a definite historical, linguistic (long and short texts), and semantic difference that supports the argument for polygenesis.

And yet, it is not to be denied that numerous Anglo-American lexicographers and paremiographers cling to the idea that monogenesis is at play. They argue that the English proverb was translated from the French original, with W. Gurney Benham taking the lead in 1926, most likely taking his cue from H.L. Mencken's claim five years earlier in his widely disseminated *The American Language*. Note by the way that Benham refers to the English text as an American proverb, thereby leaving out the possibility that the French proverb came to North American via Great Britain:

> *Let George do it*. – American saying, specially current during the war, 1914-1918. It means «Let the other fellow do it», and comes from the French.
> Laissez faire à George, il est l'homme d'âge. – Leave it to George, he is the man of years. – (Old Fr. saying, said to have been traced to the time of Louis XII (1498-1515.) (Benham, 1926: 800b)

What follows is a florilegium of similar references with their insistence on a French-English connection. This does not necessarily devalue such entries that often do include additional information of much use to the development of the English language proverb. Some of the following chronologically arranged paragraphs prove to be a bit repetitive, pointing to the lamentable fact that dictionary makers not only copy a lot from each other but also ignore new findings or neglect to do additional research. This is something that is changing with such modern quotation sleuths as Nigel Rees from Great Britain and Fred R. Shapiro from the United States who make heavy use of the internet to verify and often correct dates of first occurrences of quotations and proverbs alike. The first item also brings the significant variant «Leave it to George» into play:

> 1936: «*Let George do it*», or «*Leave it to George*» is another way of expressing buckpassing [«To pass the buck»]. A translation of *Laissez faire à Georges* (Georges d'Amboise, prime minister to Louis XII, c. 1500), the saying was revived in England in reference to [David] Lloyd George. (Holt 1936: 47)

> 1948: *Let George do it, he is the man of years*. (Laissez faire à George, il est l'homme d'âge.)
> Louis XII of France, referring satirically to his prime minister, Cardinal Georges d'Amboise. (c. 1500). Translated into modern slang as meaning «Let the other fellow do it». [And quoting Archer Taylor from 1931, see above:] The traditional explanation in America is based on «George» as a name used in addressing Pullman porters. (Stevenson 1948: 946)

> 1949: *Let George do it, he is the man of the time*.
> Louis XII of France (1462-1515)
> [note 2:] *Laissez faire à Georges, il est homme d'âge*. – Referring to his prime minister, Cardinal Georges d'Amboise.
> George McManus, American cartoonist, in his comic series, *Let George Do It*, popularized the saying in the early 1900s. (Bartlett 1949: 1218)

> 1968: *Let George do it*. [Louis XII of France (1462-1515)].
> George = Georges d'Amboise (1460-1510), Cardinal, First Minister of State and Lieutenant-General of the Army, one of those incredible Renaissance figures who seemed able to do everything and to do it well.
> Louis admired the Cardinal and trusted him, and he was well and faithfully served. But perfection is always slightly annoying and Louis's «Let George do it» was satirically intended. In its original form, it was: «Let George do it; he's the man of the Age». (Evans 1968: 268)

> 1977: *let George do it*! – roughly. Let someone else do it! A journalistic catch phrase dating from c. 1910 and applied to the enlistment of an unnamed expert or authority and the putting of the writer's own words into his mouth, and probably, as HLM[encken] pointed out in 1922 [i.e. 1921], deriving from the synonymous Fr. *laissez faire à Georges*, which goes back a long way, had an historical source, but 'later became common slang, was translated into English, had a revival during the early days of David Lloyd George's career, was adopted into American without any comprehension of either its first or its latest significance, and enjoyed the brief popularity of a year'. W[entworth] & F[lexner] pinpoint it to c. 1920 and note that it was popular during WW2, when it 'implied a lack of responsibility in helping the war effort': clearly the phrase was general enough during all the intervening US years. Moreover, as Professor John T. Fain wrote to me, on 25 April 1969, it 'can still be heard' in the US. In Britain, it had, by 1950, become very obsolete – and by 1970, I'd say, obsolete. (Partridge 1977: 135)

1994: *Let George do it*: Let someone – anyone – take the responsibility.
Coined at the French court as a derisory remark aimed at Louis XII who was given to passing the buck to Cardinal George, George d'Amboise (1460-1510). The original French '*Laissez faire à George*' became popular throughout France and eventually crossed the channel, reaching peak popularity at the beginning of this century. (Donald 1994: 205)

2001: *Let George Do It*.
If you want to push an unpleasant task upon somebody else, you might say, «Let George do it». The first to use this expression was no less than a king – Louis XII of France.
Louis XII's prime minister was Georges d'Amboise. He was both prime minister and the king's closest confidant, which gave him as much power as the king himself. Louis would not make a move unless it was approved of or urged by d'Amboise. Whenever the king was asked to do something, his reply was stock: «*Laissez faire à Georges*», which roughly translates to «Let George do it».
So frequently did Louis use this phrase that the court attendants picked it up. Jokingly, at first, they would say «*Laissez faire à Georges*» whenever they wanted to shirk their duties. Through the courtiers, «*Laissez faire à Georges*» circulated throughout France. When it crossed the English Channel, it was translated into its English equivalent, «Let George do it». (Korach and Mordock, 2001: 91)

The various references show how lexicographers and paremiographers cling to the idea that the French proverb «Laissez faire à Georges» must be the legitimate antecedent to the English proverb «Let George do it». To a certain degree these explanations follow or copy each other, but there is some new information mentioned, to wit the comic strip «Let George do it» (1909/1912) by George McManus, the association of the proverb with the British statesman and prime minister David Lloyd George, and the association of the proverb with the African American Pullman train porters. But it must be observed that none of the informative paragraphs just cited explain how a French proverb that had long dropped out of use ─ if in fact it ever was very popular in France at all ─ crossed the English Channel at about the turn of the 20th century as a loan translation? It would have had no associative meaning to English speakers, i.e., why George and how about this George being a man of age (experience)? The French proverb had long become obsolete, and it appears that it is Anglo-American lexicography and paremiography that is keeping the questionable connection alive. How «dead» the French proverb is can well be seen from a bilingual *Dictionary of French and American Slang* (1965), whose editors know the English proverb but have no idea of the old French version: «George ─ to let George do it. ─ laisser à un autre le soin d'accomplir une tâche ou une corvée» (Leitner and Landen, 1965: 60). All of this strengthens me in my conjecture that the English proverb had its own origin, and that it was coined in the United States from where it crossed the ocean to become current in England as well.

With this prevalence of associating the English proverb with a French origin, one is surprised that some truly major dictionaries and proverb collections make no mention of this assumed French-English connection! After all, lexicographers and paremiographers do build on earlier reference works, and they must for the most part have been aware of this stubborn claim. Could one not have expected a statement to the effect that the supposed French source of the English proverb «Let George do it» is no longer tangible?! By not stating explicitly that they reject any French claim, I have no definite idea whether these colleagues agree with my decision of a separate origin of the English proverb. In any case, by only consulting the following publications, the serious scholar would remain utterly uninformed of an important part of the whole story, as it were. Of course, the major dictionaries and collections listed below ─ among them the print editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* ─ include invaluable contextualized references for the English proverb «Let George do it» from the 20th century starting with the year 1910. I shall refrain from listing that information:

1951: *Let George do it*, let someone (or something) else do the work or take the responsibility. *Colloq.* or *slang*. (Mathews, 1951: 690)

1970: Colloq. phr. *let George do it*: let someone else do the work or take the responsibility. orig. *U.S*. (Burchfield, 1972: I, 1218; identical in Simpson and Weiner, 1989: VI, 464)

1975: *George do it, let* – Let someone else do it. Said in avoiding responsibility. Common c1920 and during W.W. II when the term implied a lack of responsibility in helping the war effort. (Wentworth and Flexner, 1975: 212)

1980: *let George do it* Let someone else do the work or assume the responsibility; pass the buck. This American colloquial expression dates from the turn of the [19th/20th] century. (Urdang and LaRoche, 1980: 202)

1989: Let *George* do it
[no explanation, just several historical references] (Whiting, 1989: 250-251)

1993: *Let George do it* Find someone else do it; I won't. (Wilkinson, 1993: 279)

1994: *let George do it* let someone else do the task. (Lighter, 1994: I, 879)

1995: *let George do it!* meaning, 'let someone else do it, or take the responsibility', this catchphrase was in use by 1910 and is probably of American origin. (Rees, 1995: 121)

1997: *let George do it* let someone else do the work or take the responsibility. (Knowles, 1997: 353)

2006: *Let George do it*. Anon. referring to the universal nickname of Pullman attendants, who attended to the passengers' every wish; probably from the name of the founder of the company, George Mortimer Pullman. (Dow, 2006: 168)

2012: *let George do it!* on the railways, used as a humorous attempt to delegate an unpleasant task *US*. Pullman porters, low men on the food chain for railway workers, were known as George. (Dalzell and Victor, 2012: 1201)

2012: Let *George* do it.
[no explanation, but we included it in a list of proverbs that we judged as being older than the year 1900] (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro, 2012: 288)

All of these references imply or state directly that the proverb «Let George do it» is of English or more likely of American origin. This is also true for my friend Nigel Rees, the ingenious phraseological sleuth from London. In one of his more recent comprehensive volumes on phrase origins, he does come in on an American origin of the phrase, even though he mentions the French-origin argument once again:

2006: *let George do it!* Meaning 'let someone else do it, or take the responsibility', this catchphrase was in use by the 1900s and is probably of American origin. It appears on a screen title in *Gertie the Dinosaur*, one of the first movie cartoons (US 1909). A bet is placed in an archaeological museum that a dinosaur cannot be made to move. When it does so, a celebratory dinner is held. The question then is, who will pay? 'Let George do it' is the reply. It seems unlikely that this was the origin of the phrase ─ merely one of the uses that popularized it. Indeed, H.L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1922 [i.e. 1921]), traces it back to the French *laissez faire à Georges*. The phrase received a new lease of life with the invention of the autopilot in the Second World War. Inevitably, the autopilot was dubbed 'George'. (Rees, 2006: 407)

And this almost definitely American origin is now being upheld by the up-to-date electronic version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* as accessed on November 29, 2012:

> N. Amer. colloq. *let George do it*: let someone else do the work or take the responsibility.
> [Origin unknown.
> It has frequently been suggested (e.g. by H.L. Mencken *Amer. Lang.* (1921) xi.) that the phrase is after French *laissez faire à Georges*, said to have been used by King Louis XII (1462-1515, king from 1498) with reference to his prime minister Cardinal Georges d'Amboise (1460-1510), to whom he entrusted much of the day-to-day running of the country. However, this French phrase is apparently not attested before 1805 (in L.-P. Anquetil *Hist. de France* V. 376, which may have been the first source to attribute its use to King Louis XII), although a variant *laisser faire à George, c'est un homme d'âge* is found earlier (1690; apparently last recorded in *Dict. de Trevoux* (1771)). Regardless of the origin of the French phrase, it is very uncertain whether there is any link with the English phrase, since the French phrase (in any form) appears to have been very rare by the date of the first attestation of the English phrase.] (www.oed.com)

This incredibly valuable explanatory discussion precedes the earliest reference dated 1909 found by the staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary* thus far. I can say with a bit of scholarly delight that I cannot only push this date back by seven years to 1902, and I have already shown earlier that the registration of the French proverb begins at least in 1656 (thirty-four years earlier than 1690) and was recorded at least until 1842 (seventy-one years later than what the OED has found). But never mind this expansion of dates! The key issue is that the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* agree with me that the proverb «Let George do it» is most likely and perhaps definitely of American origin and is not related historically to the French proverb. This does indeed strengthen my claim that all of this is a case of polygenesis.

It is my belief that it is appropriate for a scholar to stick out his proverbial neck on certain occasions. This is one of those cases, for I am convinced that the proverb «Let George do it» must have been current before 1900. Sure enough, the earliest printed reference thus far that my friend Charles C. Doyle found stems from 1902, but that basically presupposes that the proverb was in oral use before then. This up-to-now earliest reference makes it clear that the proverb must have been known, for otherwise the occurrence of the name «George» would be senseless:

> I believe about the most aggravating person to come in contact with is the one who, when asked to do a certain kind of work, to which he is not used, will say, «Well, I've never done that before, hadn't you better let George do it!». About this time you want to get out your lecture on self-reliance and confidence and deliver it to that man in such a way that he will not only do the work, but later, in thinking it over, will really feel proud of the fact that he can do something new. (Superintendent, 1902: 15-16)

In fact, Doyle also drew my attention to the fact that the variant «Leave it to George» with the same meaning of pushing a job off to someone else was current in the latter part of the 19th century, referring me to a short article about the early Quaker George Fox published anonymously by the «London Society» on September 26, 1886, in the *New York Times*:

> Although he [George Fox] was so highly esteemed that when difficult matters arose at the general meetings of the [Quaker] society they were usually shelved with the remark they «would leave it to George», individual members who thought he erred did not scruple to tell him so to his face. (London Society, 1886: 11)

Yes, Mr. Fox does in fact have «George» as his first name, but I agree with Doyle's comment to me in a letter of November 27, 2012, that included this important reference: «I believe 'Leave it to George' is an authentic variant. In the 1886 article attached, the subject is

the early Quaker George Fox -- but what's interesting is the enclosure of the phrase 'would leave it to George' in quotation marks, as if the writer is playfully adapting the proverb to the account of the historical figure». In any case, the lexicographer Alfred Holt, it will be recalled, also felt that «Let George do it» and «Leave it to George» are two sides of the same proverbial coin (Holt, 1936: 47).

And now comes the sixty-four thousand dollar question, to put it proverbially: Who is this George of the English proverb if not Georges d'Amboise of the much earlier French text? The answer has actually already been alluded to by a number of the lexicographical and paremiographical references cited above. The «George» of the American proverb is the generic name that was given to emancipated slaves who were hired by the railroad entrepreneur George Pullman after the Civil War as cheap porters in his famous Pullman sleeping cars. There is plenty of documentation to this stereotypical and degrading name calling, and it took courageous and powerful labor leaders like Phillip Randolph, the African American founder of «The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters», to overcome this infuriating and un-called for custom:

> At one time traveling salesmen considered it the acme of wit to call Pullman porters «George», presumably after the paternal founder himself. No one knows precisely when or why Pullman decided that porters must be men of the Negro race; but, for close to a century all porters in the United States have been Negroes. The first was probably a well-trained ex-slave, hired about 1867. Nameless in history, he filled his positions so capably that he established an exclusive field of employment for thousands of other black men, who gained education, mobility, and social status by working for the railroad. (Reinhardt, 1970: 298)

True, African American porters were able to carve out a livelihood for themselves and their families, but they were clearly exploited by demanding travel schedules and low pay, resulting in the eventual formation of the «Brotherhood» union. But travelers clearly depended on the services of the porters, and one wonders why they would have been so condescending as to de-individualize the porters into anonymous Georges! After all, the porters performed a multitude of services to assure a pleasant trip for the Pullman passengers, performing their tasks to such perfection that «In the Pullman Parlor Car of the 1880s, the saying was: 'Let George do it'» (Reinhardt, 1970: 304). This statement appears as the caption of a picture of the exquisite interior of one of these Pullman cars, but alas, up till now I have not been able to locate any references of the proverb in the impressive literature dealing with the Pullman porters that actually quote the proverb from the last quarter of the 19th century! Most of the extant literature deals only with the name «George». In fact, Jervis Anderson entitles an entire chapter «George» in his book *A. Philipp Randolph. A Biographical Portrait* (1972), indicating how insulting this generalized naming was to the porters:

> «Then, too», a porter from Jacksonville recalls, «there was this thing of 'George.' No matter who you were, or how old, most everybody wanted to call you 'George.' It meant that you were just George Pullman's boy, same as in slave days when if the owner was called Jones the slave was called Jones. It got so you were scared to go into the office to pick up your check, for fear some little sixteen-year-old office boy would yell out 'George'.» (Anderson, 1972: 163)

Jack Santino, in his richly documented book *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle. Stories of Black Pullman Porters* (1989), cites numerous interviews with former black porters that illustrate how the generic name «George» rendered them anonymous and subservient to the white passengers. He summarizes his findings in a powerful statement:

> The epithet «George», by which they [the porters] were known generally, did much to create and maintain the stereotypes. The term was associated with the days of slavery, because it identified porters as the property of George Pullman, with all the associated ramifications of inferiority and

> childlike dependency. As such, A. Philip Randolph insisted there be porters' name cards in each Pullman car, and he recognized that this symbolic change altering the term of address was as important as the more tangible improvements that increased pay and lessened hours. «George» is in many ways the sum total of the stereotype, and porters tried their best to ignore it. (Santino, 1989: 125-126)

This change took effect on October 19, 1926, when the Pullman Company officially «announced that thereafter all Pullman cars would have the active porter's name displayed in a prominent place so that the passengers would know how to address him when he was needed. The company instructed porters that they were to answer only to their own names, and that Pullman would take no disciplinary actions against them for refusing to respond to 'George'» (Harris, 1977: 83-84).

The African American labor leader and civil rights champion A. Philip Randolph deserves most of the credit for having freed the large number of black porters from their modern enslavement. He brought an end to «the time when all Pullman porters were indiscriminately called 'George', [and] he brought them the respect of the traveling public and confidence in themselves. The value of the union, in Randolph's opinion, lay in its demonstration that blacks indeed possessed a 'spirit of self-help, self-initiative, and self-reliance'» (Pfeffer, 1990: 31). It took decades to bring this change about, and with all the «George» name-calling that went on it should not be surprising that the proverb «Let George do it» sprung up in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Clearly Patricia and Fredrick McKissack must agree with this conjecture, since they employed the proverb as a chapter heading in their book *A Long Hard Journey. The Story of the Pullman Porter* (1989). The time was ripe for it, and I am thoroughly convinced that the proverb «Let George do it» was current in the United States before 1900 and that it came from the questionable treatment that the black Pullman porters received from their white passengers. It is almost inconceivable to me that I have not been able to find it before that date in the many printed and online accounts that I have checked, but, as the proverb states, «Hope springs eternal!»

But be that as it may, the American proverb «Let George do it», despite its inauspicious beginnings on the Pullman trains, soon became a generally accepted proverb without being directed in a racially malevolent way against black porters. In other words, the name «George» lost its unfortunate association with George Pullman and his African American porters and took on the meaning of any male person at all. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century it was well known in the United States, and it also spread to Great Britain where it became popularized around 1916/7 in connection with the well-liked prime mister David Lloyd George, whom people trusted to do big things. The proverb appeared in novels, plays, poems (1935 by Ogden Nash), newspapers, magazines, advertisements, cartoons (1909 by George McManus), radio programs, songs (1909 by Ray Zirkel) and popular films with the title «Let George Do It» (1938 and 1940). The proverb became so popular in the United States, that the linguist Josephine Burnham registered the neologism «let-George-do-it-itis» (1927: 245) referring to the proverb's excessive employment. In its actual contextualized use, the meaning of the proverb is rather ambivalent. On the one hand its wisdom is considered to be ill-advised, and then again other references show that it can be interpreted positively in certain contexts. As is true for most proverbs, their meaning depends on their contextualized use, with this polysituativity resulting in polyfunctionality and polysemanticity (Mieder, 2004: 9).

The famed linguist and phraseologist Eric Partridge claimed, as one of my earlier lexicographical references shows, that the English proverb has ─ somewhat like its French equivalent many years earlier ─ become obsolete today. When I have undertaken my own field research among friends, colleagues, and students, I have often received the answer that they have never heard of «Let George do it». But there is one thing that I have learned over the years

when asking native speakers whether they are aware of a certain proverb. They are often surprisingly quick in responding negatively, but upon further probing, it frequently becomes clear that they simply find it difficult to recall proverbs without contexts. In any case, when one checks in Google for «Let George do it» or «Leave it to George» millions of modern hits occur, and the proverb is surely not extinct in the modern age. Fortunately its racial beginnings are gone and forgotten, something that becomes wonderfully clear from the popular African American heavyweight boxer George Foreman's delightful children's book *Let George Do It!* (2005). He certainly would not have given his book this title, if he saw any lingering anti-black stereotype in it, and nor would the prestigious Simon & Schuster have published it for children! It is well known that George Foreman (Big George!) named all of his five sons «George» and in the humorously illustrated book Foreman offers some funny insights into his family, where the proverb «Let George do it» exhibits a universal applicability. This book remains quite popular to this day, and it surely did its part in keeping the proverb alive.

Be that as it may, the fact that the United States had George Washington, George Herbert Walker Bush, and George Walker Bush as presidents with the first name «George», also has helped to keep the proverb current. And when one finds newspaper headlines like «Let George Washington do it» today, it is obvious that it links the complete name of the first president with the idea of the government being located in Washington, D.C. In other words, it becomes a somewhat satirical slogan for letting the government take care of things.

I have collected literally hundreds of references of the American proverb «Let George do it» from various types of sources from the 20th century and today. There is no space here to include them, but let me state categorically that all of those occurrences make it perfectly clear that this American proverb has by no means gone underground or died out. While it might be less frequently heard or read in Great Britain, it is solidly established in the American media and mind and to be sure without any connection to the earlier French proverb that has long disappeared and never went beyond France in any case. Its racially motivated beginning during the last quarter of the 19th century is absent from its use and meaning today, but it should not be forgotten that the proverb originated as an insensitive slogan for getting black Pullman porters to be at the beck and call of their white passengers. By now the proverb is indeed an innocuous statement that can stand next to «Pass the buck» in expressing the unfortunately only too human tendency of avoiding action or passing responsibility to others. But that is the nature of proverbs in general ─ they reflect human nature and are used when a ready-made metaphor can hit the proverbial nail on the head better than lengthy prose could. So even if the American proverb «Let George do it» with its independent origin is perhaps less known today (my students claim not to use it), it remains well suited as a concise traditional piece of wisdom to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of modernity.

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