
H-France Review Vol. 10 (September 2010), No. 125

Bruno Dumons, *Les "saints de la République". Les décorés de la Légion d'Honneur (1870-1940)*. Paris: La Boutique de l'Histoire, 2009, 507 pp. 34€ (cl). ISBN 978-2-910828-48-6.

Reviewed by Sudhir Hazareesingh, Balliol College, University of Oxford.

Bruno Dumons's *Les "saints de la République"* is a stimulating addition to the historiography of the Third Republic, and in particular to its social and territorial history. It focuses on the recipients of the Legion of Honour under the Third Republic in two French departments, the Saône-et-Loire (in Burgundy) and the Var (in the south-east). Drawing on 380 individual candidate dossiers from the archives of these two departments, supplemented by a thorough perusal of the French regional press and monographs on local history, Dumons meticulously reconstructs the administrative process governing the awards, highlighting the dynamics between local and national elites, and the republican regime's use of the decoration to promote a distinct set of moral and political values. The Legion of Honour is thus analyzed both from a sociological perspective, as an institution with embedded norms and values, and as an effective 'technique of government', deployed by republican elites to further social cohesion. The conceptual framework of the book is drawn from the sociology of religion: in presenting the recipients of the Legion of Honour as 'saints', Dumons explicitly equates the awards of republican civil honors with a form of religious canonization. Republicanism is thus also viewed here as a purposive moral doctrine, a 'secular religion' which informed collective attitudes and ways of life in France under the Third Republic.

After a brief Introduction, which highlights the creation of the Legion by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, and the retention of the decoration by all nineteenth-century French regimes, the book is divided into four parts. The first two are shorter and more general in character, drawing out the historical and cultural features of the two departments (notably their republican and socialist leanings under the Third Republic), the pivotal role played by prefects in the nomination process, and the key sociological traits of the *légionnaires*. The recipients of the award were mostly male, with only fourteen women honorands in these two departments between 1870 and 1940 (the first-ever woman recipient of Legion of Honour was Angélique Duchemin, decorated by Louis Napoleon in 1851). Experience was a key criterion: the *légionnaires* were generally aged in their fifties and sixties, and were also overwhelmingly local: typically born and educated in their respective department, they were known and highly esteemed figures in their local communities.

This 'large visibility' was a necessary condition of their civic exemplarity, and the third part of the book delves deeper into the occupational characteristics of these local heroes. Among the groups which were most privileged were professional elites (from the spheres of agriculture and industry, as well as liberal professions). Especially in the early years of the Third Republic, a durable affiliation to the republican cause was also a necessary condition for being considered for the award. From the hundreds of cases cited in the book, let us take the example of Jean-Pierre Cauvet, a republican doctor from the small village of Cogolin (Var), who received the Legion of Honour in 1891. Cauvet had been an ardent republican since 1848, and a resolute opponent of the Second Empire and the conservative 'Moral Order' regime of the 1870s. Cauvet was also the mayor of his village, and in this respect too he was typical of the *légionnaires* of the Third Republic. Mindful of the key role of mayors as agents of republican

legitimacy and democratic authority (mayors were directly elected after the 1884 municipal reform introduced by Jules Ferry), the regime showered them with *Légions d'Honneur*. They were rewarded for their longevity of tenure, for their promotion of the Republic in rural communes, for their efficiency as local administrators, for their protection of their communities from natural hazards (notably, in the Var, forest fires), and above all for their contributions to the modernization of their communes—through the edification of civic and educational buildings, the extension of road networks, and the development of major sanitation programmes.

The final part of *Les "saints de la République"* analyzes the award process in greater detail, both in terms of the normative criteria for success and the bureaucratic management of the procedure by administrative and political elites, both locally and nationally. Dumons makes excellent use of the archival material here, sifting through the dossiers to uncover the complex process which began with a local proposal and ended (sometimes many years later) with a decree of nomination in Paris, after the successful sponsorship of the candidate by one of the government Ministries. Among the notable features were the increasingly systematic approach adopted by prefects in proposing candidates; the growing use of résumés by applicants (some of whom produced detailed and at times over-zealous accounts of their contributions to the collective good); and the important role played by local parliamentarians and senators, whose endorsement of candidates was often decisive.

Dumons sheds fascinating light on the reasons why an application might fail: these included predictable factors such as insufficient distinction and lack of political support, but also an excessive penchant for women or alcohol, a perceived absence of commitment to the republican cause, and even an excess of religious zeal among family members (having a devout Catholic wife was especially unhelpful in the early decades of the Third Republic—an interesting example of how the private sphere impinged upon the public). All of this, in Dumons's view, confirmed that these awards were ultimately the manifestation of a robust conception of the good life. The key values which were promoted by the Third Republic through the exemplary lives of the *légionnaires* were devotion to the public good, competence, public esteem, and republican commitment; in one form or another, these virtues were symbolized by all the honorands. Alongside these virtues was a subsidiary set of qualities, which often also featured in the lives of the *légionnaires*: moral exemplarity, generosity, love of the *petite patrie*, and individual success.

Les "saints de la République" is an outstanding piece of archival research, and a worthy addition to the distinguished series from the "Boutique de l'Histoire" collection which has given us such excellent works as Rémi Dalisson's *Les Trois Couleurs*, Marianne et l'Empereur, Frédéric Monier's *Politique des plaintes*, and Natalie Petiteau's *Lendemain d'Empire*. Although these monographs are all very different from each other in terms of their subject matter, they share (with Dumons) a broad methodological approach: a heavy reliance on source material drawn from provincial archives; a suspicion of 'grand theorizing', and an attempt to construct the argument from the ground up; a focus on ordinary lives rather than major political and intellectual elites; a willingness to deduce moral and ideological norms from political practices; and a use of territorial history to illuminate more general themes in French political and administrative history. This sort of enterprise is of course not without its potential pitfalls, and Dumons wrestles engagingly with some of these throughout the book. While perfectly defensible, his choice of two strongly 'republican' departments as case studies loads the dice in substantive terms; it might have been useful, for the sake of balance, to mix in some material from a Catholic or conservative department—not least to investigate whether the dynamics of 'the fabrication of republican heroism' proved different in more hostile territorial environments.

It is also slightly regrettable that Dumons avoided looking at military dossiers, choosing to concentrate exclusively on civilian recipients of the Legion. Another tightrope which has to be treaded when drawing almost exclusively from one type of source material (in this case, administrative reports) is over-interpretation. For the most part, Dumons keeps his balance, and makes scrupulous use of his material. On occasion, however, the nuances of some of the issues under discussion are lost. One

instance is when the book cites awards of the Legion of Honour to Second Empire republicans who had struggled against Bonapartism (notably in the Var, a department which fiercely resisted Louis Napoleon's 1851 coup). The implication is that 'resistance' was regarded as a form of civic heroism by the Third Republic. However, an examination of a wider range of sources (national and local memorials, the 1881 legislation on compensation of victims of the 1851 coup d'état) would suggest that the reality was more complex, and in particular that the new republican regime did not wish to celebrate the actions of those who had been involved in acts of violent resistance, or who had been members of republican secret societies. Longevity of affiliation to the republican cause was thus not a virtue in itself, and some forms of heroism were regarded as less worthy than others.

This raises a wider issue: how did the model of civic heroism constructed by the Third Republic interact with pre-existing norms of social exemplarity? Dumons stresses repeatedly that the bestowing of public recognition on meritorious individuals through the Legion of Honour was tantamount to religious consecration— the suggestion being that the Republic's civil religion was able to create a secular sense of the sacred. This is a strong thesis, and Dumons offers some compelling arguments to support it: not only were the *légionnaires* celebrated as exemplary citizens during their lifetimes, but many—such as the good doctor Cauvet from the village of Cogolin who has been mentioned earlier—also had their decorations inscribed on their tombstones: what more fitting symbol of the hallowed nature of the decoration?

As against this, a sceptic might argue that a real sense of sacredness requires a dose of mystique which the Legion of Honour ceased to possess once it was appropriated by the bureaucratic agents of the French State, and became (at least in part) an object of clientelist interplay among elites. And indeed this systematic exposure of the Legion to the murky world of Parisian politics occasionally dragged the award into controversy— the most egregious example being the 1887 scandal of the sale of public honours by the parliamentarian Daniel Wilson, the son-in-law of President Jules Grévy. The affair—one of the biggest scandals in the history of the regime before 1914—led to Grévy's resignation, and unleashed a torrent of criticism about the abuse of honours' system which damaged the reputation of the Legion of Honour, at least in the short run. The parliamentary commission of enquiry which was set up in the wake of the scandal received more than a thousand letters of complaint from all over France, and there was negative coverage in the national and local press for several months. So: sacredness, yes, but also profanation.

Yet these dissonances should not obscure the main picture. One of the major scholarly contributions of Dumons's book is to illustrate, through a wholly new type of source, the robustness of the Third Republic's civic culture, especially at local level. The creative interplay between the national and local spheres under the Third Republic, which has been a focus of increasing scholarly attention in recent years (notably in Jean-François Chanet's *L'école républicaine et les petites patries*), is here explored from stimulating perspectives, both as a normative ideal type, and as a practical way of life. *Les "saints de la République"* also reinforces our understanding of the social power of Third Republic. The regime's strength lay in its capacity to appeal to key strata in French society, especially among the bourgeoisie, and this is very well reflected in the roll call of honorands: all sectors of the middle class, from schoolteachers, journalists and doctors to small businessmen and bankers, were well represented. And once its hold on national power was secure, the regime was also able to broaden its social base, as is borne out in the shifting patterns of awards over time.

The best evidence of this inclusivity came in the aftermath of the Great War, when new categories of *légionnaires* emerged, such as priests, Catholic landowners and industrial barons— even those who came from Bonapartist families such as Eugène Schneider, who owned the iron and steel works at Le Creusot in the Saône-et-Loire. In the 1930s, there were a handful of foreigners elevated to the Legion of Honour; among them Lord Henry Ashcombe, resident of Valescure in the Var, an active philanthropist who was

also the proud owner of a local golf club. What better symbol of the Republic's sweeping ideological inclusivity than the elevation of this Old Etonian to France's most prestigious national decoration?

The other signal achievement of Dumons's book lies in its contribution to our understanding of one of the key components of French republican ideology: the concept of 'merit'. This notion has been the focus of much interesting scholarly work in recent years, most notably with Olivier Ihl's remarkable essay *Le Mérite et la République*. Dumons shares Ihl's contention that merit was used by the Republic as an effective technique of government. His statistics also demonstrate that not all groups were able to avail themselves of the opportunities opened up by the new regime-- those left on the sidelines included women, as has already been noted, but also citizens of working-class origin, who did not frequently figure among the decorated. But many other citizens from humble backgrounds did, and the focus of *Les "saints de la République"* on the exemplary character of these ordinary lives ultimately reminds us that, at its zenith as an ideological force, republicanism was driven by ideals of public service and collective good which were widely embraced. In these gloomy days when France's public sphere is mired in cynicism and scandal, Dumons's book provides a refreshing reminder that the Republic's *Sittlichkeit* has known better times.

Sudhir Hazareesingh
Balliol College, University of Oxford
sudhir.hazareesingh@politics.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for non-profit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172