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Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the people. Political Culture in France, 1934-1939*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009. Xiii+300 pp. Bibliography and Index. £49.50. ISBN 978-0230202771.

Review by Kevin Passmore, Cardiff University.

Jessica Wardhaugh's excellent book is one of several recent works that explore the participation of left and right (largely, in fact, the extreme right) in a common political culture, which was nevertheless put to different uses.<sup>[1]</sup> In particular, Wardhaugh argues that both sides struggled with the problem of how to deal with the unpredictability of the crowd, the mass, at a time when economic, political and diplomatic problems had undermined confidence in democracy, and when foreign dictatorships seemed to have harnessed the mass more effectively to state power. The Radical-Socialists and moderate right largely distrusted mass action in the streets, while Socialists, Communists and the extreme Right saw in it possibilities for change. All these groups knew that control of the crowd was liable to escape them.

The bulk of the book details the successive ways in which competing groups represented the people or the crowd, and thereby tried to control it for their own purposes. Whereas the left emphasised the rationality and orderliness of the people, the right, Wardhaugh argues, had recourse to the categories of collective psychology, to the controlling concepts of Gustave Le Bon's 'crowd theory': the need for an elite to guide the potentially unstable mass, thus ensuring that the crowd's patriotic instincts predominated, and that demagogues (false elites) did not manipulate its passions and materialism. Surprisingly, given that to do so would have strengthened her argument, Wardhaugh neglects the fact that the left too used the assumptions of crowd psychology – as Marc Mayers has demonstrated.

The story begins with the riots of 6 February 1934. The right saw the crowd on the Place de la Concorde as an ordered emanation of the whole people and nation. It used the metaphor of the sea, and said little of individuals or particular groups within the crowd. If it mentioned communist demonstrators, they were said to lack the order of the nationalist crowd. As for the 12 February counter-demonstration, it too wanted for national roots. The left's depiction was equally compatible with collective psychology, in that it portrayed the 6 February crowd as fine folks who had been manipulated by far right demagogues and the 12 February demonstrators as the self-disciplined, true people of Paris.

In 1934-5, left and right began to borrow themes from each other. The right attempted to recruit workers and peasants, while depicting left-wing politicians as 'revolutionaries in smoking jackets' (the left retorted that the right was in the pay of the trusts). Meanwhile the left embraced nationalist themes, demonstrating for peace on 11 November. In the great Popular Front demonstration of 14 July 1935, both sides claimed to represent order and accused the other of fomenting disorder. While the left identified the nation with the Revolution, the Croix de Feu insisted that only the veterans could represent the nation, and celebrated the military parade in the morning. Central to Wardhaugh's argument is that both sides saw their own crowds as restoring order that was threatened by conspirators on the other side – muscovite revolutionaries or the 'Hiterlite' La Rocque. For the time being, incidents such as the royalist assault on Leon Blum ensured that the left was better placed to champion order.

The strikes of June 1936 changed that. Workers' willingness to take matters into their own hands undermined the Popular Front's claim to represent order. At first, there was a near consensus on left and right that the workers' demands were legitimate, but soon the right, and even the Radical-Socialists, began to see the Popular Front as incapable of controlling the crowd. Whereas the left stressed the orderliness of the strikes, their festive nature and the benefits of reform for the whole of society, the Right argued that they harmed the 'middle class.'

The next chapter, entitled "The Challenge from the Right", actually focuses on both right and left attempts to achieve national reconciliation. Wardhaugh seeks a middle way between accounts that exaggerate either the confrontational or the celebratory dimensions of 1936. She detects a partial agreement on social reform and a common desire for national reconciliation, undermined by conflict in the streets. On the one hand, the Croix de Feu, reformed as the Parti Social Français, advocated the unity of the people above classes, bound by a common 'mystique.' Again following the principles of collective psychology, it argued that the people needed the guidance of an elite, and liberation from the demagogues of the Comintern. To bring this people to life, the PSF attempted to stage mass meetings, which showcased La Rocque's powers as leader. Jacques Doriot's Parti populaire français added that that the repetition of simple propaganda themes would transform the 'collective psychology' of the people.

While the left, unlike the right, stressed the rationality of the people and saw France as part of an international community of ideas, it increasingly followed the right in seeing the nation as a community. The PCF endeavoured to reconcile rural and urban, metropolitan and colonial workers, and the unity of the provinces. Similarly, the right claimed that the Popular Front neglected the peasants, whom they identified with those who had died for the land in the trenches. The communist organisers of the 4 October 1936 demonstration at the Parc des Princes, appealed to the people and denounced foreign enemies in language very similar to that used in La Rocque's call for a counter-demonstration.

In perhaps the most interesting chapter, Wardhaugh explores the efforts of left and right to resolve the 'problem of the mass' in popular culture -- to 'create and control' the 'communion' of community that, fleetingly experienced in the strike or demonstration or mass meeting, seemed to suggest the possibility of creating a more durable consensus and community'. She argues that since the people proved difficult to control in the streets, activists turned to cinema and theatre. Left and right envisaged a theatre accessible to the people, dealing with their actual problems, while creating a sense of community, uniting different groups in an ideal community. From this perspective, Wardhaugh casts new light on such familiar products of Popular Front as Renoir's 'Marseillaise', and details Jean-Richard Bloch's evocation of medieval solidarity as an antidote to workers' enslavement to the machine. She shows that Catholics displayed a similar interest in medieval and provincial themes and, most originally, that Catholics combined them with the desire to create a community between actors and audience, inspired by the director, Jacques Copeau. These themes came together in the great Jociste rally at the Parc des Princes in July 1937, a display of music and movement that was meant to reconcile the worker with the machine.

In the two following chapters, Wardhaugh shows that the crisis of June 1936 provoked both left and right to shift their emphasis away from the crowd in the street to the people's need for order and guidance. Evocation of 'order' ceased to be the exclusive domain of the right, as Blum's speeches stressed the people's loyalty to the government. In the aftermath of the Clichy riot, both socialists and the right depicted the people as a crowd, and attributed violence to agitators, while the latter saw proof that the Popular Front had lost control over the masses. The moderate conservative, Laurent Bonnevay, commented that 'collective psychology has its laws'. Left and right disputed ownership of national symbols such as Jeanne d'Arc.

The short-lived second Blum government of March to April 1938 stressed the primacy of the national over sectional interests and thus anticipated the executive rule of the succeeding Daladier administration. The new *Président du Conseil* depicted himself as a strong leader who understood the national interest, but whose popular origins ensured that he would never betray democratic ideals. Meanwhile, the people was increasingly identified with the 'middle-class', and in official ceremonies -- the visit of the British sovereigns, the demonstration of 11 November 1938 and in July 1939 the commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution-- the people was reduced to the role of spectator. Daladier, Wardhaugh concludes, invented a 'political religion.'

Wardhaugh is not the first to highlight the Popular front's difficulties in disciplining its own supporters, and its recourse to national themes.[2] The originality of the book lies rather in its examination of the common categories deployed by left and right, those of collective psychology. On this score, I found the book broadly convincing, but I have one reservation.

Historians of collective psychology do not always avoid buying into their object of study. The currently fashionable 'political religions theory' has not avoided this danger, for it both sees collective psychology as an important element of the intellectual matrix from which political religions (such as fascism) emerged, and assumes that people really can be manipulated by the repetition of simple themes in mass meetings. Wardhaugh too is a little ambiguous on this score. She argues that there was a "crisis of representation" in the 1930s, created by economic, political and international problems, coupled with a sense of alienation stemming from the rationalisation of industry (pp. 10-29). She relates this in turn to a deep "aspiration" for unity, which the individualist republic did not meet (pp. 53-5), and argues that the frequency with which "cultural representations" evoked community suggests "a deeper, more fundamental concern to address the spiritual relationship between the individual and the collective" (p. 182). We are close to the stock-in-trade of a certain social theory, in which change causes disorientation (or anomie) and the craving for new solidarities, a sociology transmitted from *Le Bon* into a certain reading of Durkheim, and even into contemporary cultural history, via Michel Foucault's implicit distinction between the elemental, spontaneous mass and the discourses that strive to discipline it. It leaves little room for the analysis of specific strategies of ordinary people, rational in their own terms, and may reduce elite policies to the desire for control.

Wardhaugh hesitates between insistence, on the one hand, that similar assumptions were put to different uses and that in practice the crowd proved difficult to control, and on the other hand that similarities operated at a deeper level. Since full exploration of the different uses to which common ideas were put is beyond the scope of the book, Wardhaugh sometimes seems to exaggerate (or reify) the meeting points between left and right. Only by remaining at a high level of abstraction can she maintain, for example, that there was a consensus on the need for social reform in June 1936. True, both left and right sought to incorporate the workers into the people and nation through social reform. Yet consensus existed only from the perspective of collective psychology, and explains little on its own. Thus, the forty-hour week and wheat office provoked opposition from the right from the beginning, and in the following years there were extremely complex struggles around them, involving workers themselves, unions, business, the courts and the government. The assumptions of collective psychology were certainly important in these struggles, as different groups struggled to define both the elite and the mass. Again, the reception and re-appropriation of activists discourses is beyond the scope of the book, but it would be interesting to know, for instance how workers' and women's groups on left and right responded to the implicit feminisation of the crowd, and to ask how they constituted themselves as elites through their own appropriation of collective psychology. There were doubtless many connections between mass and elite discourses.

Wardhaugh's view that the Daladier government created a 'political religion' is also a little ambiguous. It is unclear whether she means that the ritual celebrations of the period actually did reduce the masses to the role of 'spectators', or that the regime simply attempted to do that. That she holds the first view

is suggested by occasional references to the possibility of stage management through ritual of the mass meeting (pp. 56-9), and by her playing down of the left's mobilisation in 1938. Moreover, Wardhaugh suggests in her conclusion that only personal antipathy to Blum and la Rocque prevented realisation of a cross-political community. Certainly the strikes of 30 November failed, but that should not detract from the massive CGT rallies and of the preceding weeks, some of the largest of the period, and the strong showing of the Leagues in the parades of 11 November. Wardhaugh might well agree that post-November quiescence owed more to repression than to stage management or consensus.

Whatever the case, it would be churlish to insist further upon my reservations. Most of the arguments in the book do not actually depend on claims about the aspiration for lost wholeness. Rather, the book explains persuasively the different ways in which politicians and journalists of left and right conceptualised the crowd. Jessica Wardhaugh's contention that there was a shift from the angry crowd of 1934, through the organised demonstrations of 1935 to the stage managed displays of 1938-9 is convincing, and represents a significant renewal of scholarship on the 1930s in France.

## NOTES

[1] Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); Mark Meyers, "Feminizing fascist men: crowd psychology, gender, and sexuality in French antifascism, 1929-1945," *French Historical Studies* 29, no. 1 (2006): 109-142.

[2] Michael Seidman, *Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona During the Popular Fronts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Kevin Passmore  
Cardiff University  
Passmore@cardiff.ac.uk

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