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Richard D.E. Burton, *Blood in the City: Violence and Revelation in Paris, 1789-1945*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. xv+395 pp. Map, figures, notes, chronology, and index. \$36.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3868-3.

Review by Bertrand Taithe, University of Manchester.

Richard D.E. Burton's book on a literary fueled reading of French political violence since the French Revolution will raise more questions than it can answer, and while deeply evocative and disturbing, it does not amount to a cogent reading of the history of violence in Paris. What it does deliver, however, is an insight in the culture of violence and on its mirroring in literature. In many respects this is a particular reading of French history through the prism of Huysmans and Bataille.

The book is organised in a relatively complex manner befitting the complex subject matter and the diverse interpretative lines taken by the author. The chapters outline a geography of violence focussing on sites and periods, uniting space and historical narrativity: the Bastille, place de la Concorde, Bonapartist Paris, place de l'Hôtel de Ville, la rue du Bac, the père Lachaise, Notre-Dame, church prowling, the Sacré-Coeur/Eiffel Tower binary opposition, rue des Rosiers, and the Vel'd'Hiv or even, to leave Paris for its suburbs, Drancy. This association of spaces and stories, memory, commemoration, and literary palimpsest invokes the *Lieux de Mémoire* collection as a justifying authority and often a source. This partial use of *Lieux de Mémoire* illustrates, for me, the potential dangers of this over-flexible concept, something I have already commented on. [1]

What Nora and his associates endeavoured to illustrate, among other things, was the power of a historiographical revolution in the perception of space and time. Burton's book is not historiographical in any meaningful sense and while it endeavours to string together a selection (but by no means an exhaustive list) of violent episodes it seldom reflects on the historiographical debates attached to any of them in particular. The historians Burton utilises are seldom contextualised in the way he contextualises or sets his literary sources. Within each chapter this spatial analysis tends to collapse and to be replaced by a discursive narration through which space and time are conflated. Space is not all that meaningful to Burton. Neither is historiography. For a book based primarily on secondary sources and relying often on a handful of books to provide the evidence of a particular incident, there is very little awareness of the narrative purpose of such or such history. Both these avenues are dead ends.

It is not really the methodology that provides coherence to the book (in fact, I will return to some methodological issues later) it is the obsessive recurrence of a simple thematic: that of ingestive sacrifice. Burton makes a series of parallels between violence and sacrifice, sacrifice and communion, communion and redemption. Political violence, when read through this prism is sacrificial and wishes to be redemptive. This recurrence of a trope of redemption and ingestive sacrifice (when the victim is figuratively eaten) fits with some Catholic rhetoric and with much 'Sado-Catholic' literature. Throughout the book this argument recurs like a mantra. It does not build up in the sense that it is precisely the argument of the book that it is a recurrence, a pattern, rather than an evolution. Historians will find this repetitive interpretative framework irksome but it is worth considering on its own merit,

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and the book is not without some interesting insights and presents not only a wealth of narrative evidence to sustain its assertions but also a courageous engagement with both literature and history.

One of the most engaging features of the book is the way in which it recasts religion as a central interpretative agent of nineteenth-century French history. That the Catholic religion that inspires much of this book should be portrayed in such a black and sinister way is not to surprise the reader. Burton is more attracted to the violent red and black contrasts of hell and damnation theology than the subtler but equally mystical tones of the 'pastorale of love' developed throughout the nineteenth century. Many of the Catholic authors who feed his text with juicy extracts were seeking esoteric knowledge and obsessive evocations of suffering in their religion. This leads to a reading of excess using excess to excess (some pages are barely readable so engrossed are they in the voluptuous description of human suffering). It can also lead to theological misreading: the 'Christian's obligation to suffer along with his redeemer' (p.313) is seriously debatable in theological terms but then Burton does not use theologians much but rather literary tropes and carefully chosen excerpts steeped deeply in nightmarish religiosity. By pushing his argument too far, Burton is not always credible. Neither is it entirely credible to talk of a 'same basic scenario' (p. 344) making an eternal return in the French polity.

Another line of argument, which will seem more familiar to anyone interested in French history, refers to the need in French politics to aim for homogenous universalism tending to abstract concepts and singling out the 'other' for persecution, and, according to Burton, ingestive sacrificing. The revolutionary cults or the counter-revolutionary missionary Christianity rivalling with each other in this respect produced a spiral of violence and counter-violence, conspiracy theories and counter-conspiracy theories, victims and villains, martyrs and scapegoats, which ensured the perennial survival of this system of violence. In order to make this opposition clearer Burton had to skip over periods of popular Christian religion (such as the abbot Châtel's *Église Française*) and over any notion of historical contingency. Never are the processes leading to violence really explored nor are other interpretations of violence (for instance the discourses on class, crime, dirt, race, and gender are only used when they fit in the overriding theory). In this conflict between Christian and Revolutionary traditions, the ultimate breaking point was the successful repression of the Commune by the forces of clericalism. It re-established, according to Burton, a religious mode of representation of violence as sacrifice before shifting the historical burden away from the "people" and onto the Jews. In the book, the first chapter and the conclusion, representing nearly a third of the volume, reiterate these points and attempt to reinforce the argument.

The chapters on the French Revolution reiterate some well-known narratives, such as the fall of the Bastille and the murders that followed it, the execution of the monarchs, and the September massacres. It follows in the steps of a psychoanalytic reading of the events (using Lynn Hunt, for instance), but it neglects major studies of the nature of some of these massacres, such as Bluche's work on the September events.[2] This is a point that is not worth repeating: this book often lacks a depth of historical knowledge matching its willingness to engage theoretically with the issues. Another issue deserving perhaps more attention is the issue of transubstantiation and the role it played or might have played in ingestive sacrificial practices. The second chapter explicitly plays on the posthumous secular canonisation of the martyr king Louis XVI and to the rituals that accompanied it (with the construction of a penitentiary chapel later destroyed by the Communards). In a somewhat disorienting manner Burton then moves from the Revolution to a discussion of the work of Bataille. The location, place de la Concorde, serves here as the link between two related themes. As mentioned earlier, it is a conceit that does not help the book be more coherent.

Another conceit that does not entirely work in this narrative is the amalgamation of the fate of the Bonapartes, dying in exile among strangers. The chapter devoted to them is very short and fails to demonstrate convincingly that the dynasts had achieved anything like Louis XVI's status (at least for Napoleon III, his heir, or even *l'Aiglon*). To hint that their hybrid legend (scapegoat, saviour, martyr)

could be reclaimed by Pétain or de Gaulle is not implausible; it is simply a vulgar repetition of René Rémond's work.[3] One then wonders why is this chapter necessary? It is here that the obsessive nature of this work can become disturbing. One suspects that the author could not refrain from a desire to offer a universal explanation that would account not only for Capet and Dreyfus but also Napoleon and the mass murderer Troppman.

Conversely, there are some curious omissions. In the following chapter, mentioning the failed insurrection of 22 January 1871 without really exploring all the hatred and anger it gave rise to is puzzling. The event led to the massacre of some leading Communards, to a situation of full blown civil war, kept latent for a few weeks until 18 March, and it also opposed Parisians and Catholic Bretons whose command of French and understanding of political culture made them perfect enemies. Another omission is even more odd because it would contribute quite literally to the book's argument (even though the events did not take place in Paris, but then neither did the death of chevalier de la Barre nor many other incidents related in this book). I am referring here to Alain Corbin's study of the "cannibals" of Haute-faye, who ritually slaughtered a nobleman before roasting him like a pig.[4] This concurs powerfully with the scene from Emile Zola's *Germinal* studied in the concluding section of the book, where women desecrate the corpse of the greengrocer and castrate him posthumously.

The evocation of Rue du Bac's Marian apparitions in the following chapter also fails to develop a real comparative perspective with Lourdes, and one is surprised that Ruth Harris' work, which would have been so useful here, does not appear.[5] So many omissions seem negligent in a book such as this one.

The chapter focused on the Père Lachaise derives much of its narrative from Robert Tombs' work and neglects some of the more important addition to the historiography.[6] It manages still to be evocative and provocative while lacking any new evidence of real substance. The following two chapters do not obviously follow from this one (and this is the structural weakness of a *lieux de mémoire* rambling through the various sites), but they are crucial in this book. They refer to the conversion of Claudel and Huysmans after periods of agnosticism and interest in the occult. Both refer to the churches of Paris and to a process of conversion allied to a refusal of reason symptomatic of decadent art at the end of the nineteenth century. This reinvention of Christianity is particularly redolent with the themes of suffering, expanded blood, pain, and lust, which can be transmuted into pure gratuitous violence or the celebration of death. All these themes remind us of the work of Mario Praz or more recent works such as that of Elizabeth Bronfen.[7] The following section on the visual confrontation between the Eiffel Tower and Sacré-Coeur is only to be expected but does not use David Harvey's work or any cultural or historical geography.[8] It does enable a chronological leap forward to the First World War which is skipped over in spite of or perhaps because of the problems that the *Union Sacré* would have presented to the theme of the book. The following section, based largely on Annette Muller's autobiography, then develops the theme of violence by looking at the atrocities of the 1940s committed by French police and also at the genuine acts of kindness of absolute strangers. None of this amounts to a serious investigation of the themes of the Holocaust. The section on the epuration is better focused and makes parallels with the post-1870 moral crisis (a parallel found at the time). There is an obvious case to be made in considering the show trials of both Laval and Pétain.

The final section or conclusion is a mammoth eighty odd page essay within the book, which develops the theme of exclusion and ritualised violence against scapegoats through the case study of Dreyfus. This is not surprising, and the stance taken is dramatic and flies in the face of some of the most recent developments in the historiography. This section seems to be almost the synopsis of the book itself, without the geographical conceit that constrained so many of the chapters. It is also the section in which the ideas reign more freely, and this occasionally leads to a revelling in the rhetoric of pain.

In its best passages this book reminded me of Peter Gay's work and particularly his *Cultivation of Hatred* volume which develops similar themes using psychoanalysis as a tool of historical exploration.[9] The

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great difference is that Peter Gay is more of a historian than Burton, and his grasp of a huge diversity of sources is more assured. I have not found this book entirely successful. It is neither seamless nor does it make sense of Parisian or French (the two seem to be confused) violence, except in the most allegorical manner, but I have found it stimulating and interesting.

## NOTES

[1] Bertrand Taithe, "Monuments aux Morts? Reading Nora's *Realms of Memory* and Samuel's *Theatres of Memory*," *History of the Human Sciences* 12:2 (1999): 123-139.

[2] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1992); and Frédéric Bluche, *Septembre 1792, logiques d'un massacre* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1986).

[3] René Rémond, *Les Droites en France* (Paris: Aubier, 1982).

[4] Alain Corbin, *The Village of Cannibals: Rage and Murder in France, 1870*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[5] Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (Harmondsworth: Allan Lane, 1999).

[6] Robert Tombs, *The War Against Paris, 1871* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[7] Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Demininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); and Mario Praz, *La Carne, la Morte e il Diavolo Nella Letteratura Romantica* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1966).

[8] David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1995).

[9] Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred* (New York and London: HarperCollins, 1993).

Bertrand Taithe  
University of Manchester  
Bertrand.taithe@man.ac.uk

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