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Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France 1789-1996*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2000. 425pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 US (cl). ISBN: 00-19-820328-4.

Review by Edward Berenson, New York University.

"The life of man is short," wrote Ernest Renan in his famous essay, *What is a Nation?* "But the memory of men is eternal. It is in this memory that one really lives." Though Renan was not known for ardent republicanism, these lines encapsulated the views of two centuries of republican leaders in France, who sought to make memory the source of political legitimacy.

Over the past two decades, French historians have been almost as devoted to the cult of memory as the politicians and publicists who tried to manipulate it. This fascination with the history of memory has largely been a good thing, producing not only Pierre Nora's monumental *Les lieux de mémoire*, but a plethora of other important works.[1] Avner Ben-Amos's extraordinary new book, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France* is the latest—and one of the best—contributions to this rich field of research.

Nora's collection is so often cited and republished—a new single-volume English version will soon appear—that it has itself become a *lieu de mémoire*. Indeed, we can trace Ben-Amos's book back to the wonderful piece he wrote for Nora on the funeral of Victor Hugo, an article that announced many of the themes—if not the impressive scope—of *Funerals, Politics, and Memory*. [2] In many ways, Ben-Amos's book constitutes a necrohistory of modern France, an attempt to organize the story of post-1789 France around its official commemorations of the dead.

Ben-Amos gives no comparative statistics, but it is difficult to see how any other country could compete with the enormous number of state funerals that have regularly punctuated the history of modern France. Nations commonly memorialize dead heads of state, especially when they die in office, and they hold public funerals for distinguished military figures, particularly when they lose their lives in war. But how many have joined France in offering state funerals to writers, scientists, explorers, and musicians? During its seventy-year existence, the Third Republic gave eighty-two state funerals, commemorating nearly as many dead men (and they were always men) as they inaugurated prime ministers. The record years were 1923 and 1934, when France publicly mourned the deaths, each time, of five of its greats. During these two years alone, the Republic staged funerals for a quartet of politicians (Delcassé, Freycinet, Barthou, and Poincaré), two writers (Pierre Loti and Maurice Barrès), two colonizers (Pasquier and Lyautey), and two military leaders (Maunoury and Dubail).

Why such attention to the dead? Although Ben-Amos does not frame his material with one overall thesis, his underlying argument is that French political leaders used public funerals to give luster and legitimacy to a republican form of government born in revolution and opposition to the Catholic Church. Because the French Revolution had declared itself the enemy of organized Catholicism, France's various Republics could not root themselves in the emotions, sentiments, and traditions of

Christian thought and belief. French republicanism could not create, therefore, a civil religion like that of the United States with its union of Protestantism and the Republic. Nor, by definition, could the French Republic bask in the sacred glow of the monarchy, as the British did especially during Queen Victoria's lengthy reign.[3]

Ben-Amos says little about the "*Christ républicain*" of 1848, but he could have shown how the failure of the Second Republic discredited the effort to blend Christianity and republicanism so widespread at the mid-century. Thus, if the Republic was going to draw on the deep well of religiosity, it would have to develop a sacredness all its own, a religion of republicanism to replace the official Catholicism long the Republic's partner in holy war. As Paul Bert, Gambetta's agnostic Minister of Public Instruction, declared, "A people needs a religion! It needs lofty sentiments and a unique thought; it needs a common faith [which] it should find in itself...and in its willingness to die instead of living without freedom and honor" (p. 261).

What better way to fashion this new religion than through a cult of ancestors and the dead? A great many religions had long been based on ancestor worship, only their dead tended to live on in a parallel world of spirit. Such supernaturalism was out of the question for a modern "secular" Republic, so its deceased would have to live on in memory alone. For French republicans, the eternity of memory would stand in for the eternity of afterlife. And that indelible memory would lead, as Paul Bert put it, to "the eternal life of our Republic" (p. 266).

In elaborating this and related arguments, Ben-Amos displays an unusually wide range of interdisciplinary reading together with a sure command of two centuries of modern French history. His theoretical framework comes mostly from anthropology, relying on Arnold Van Gennep, Clifford Geertz, Sally Moore, and many other lesser known writers. Among historians, Ben-Amos has drawn most from Mona Ozouf, Maurice Agulhon, and of course Pierre Nora, and he has profited from the brilliant work of the French political scientist Olivier Ihl, whose *La fête républicaine* (1996) does for the living what Ben-Amos does for the dead.

Within this rich theoretical and interdisciplinary frame, Ben-Amos narrates the history of French state funerals from the eighteenth to the late-twentieth centuries. Beginning his story with the Enlightenment, Ben-Amos shows how the notion of the Great Man shifted from those born to greatness (monarchs and aristocrats) to those who achieved it through important contributions to society (writers and *philosophes*).[4] This was a crucial development because it meant that greatness was now a career open to talent, rather than a pure attribute of high birth. By the late-eighteenth century, the state was in a position to anoint particular newly deceased individuals with greatness and convey certain messages with its choices.

The leaders of the French Revolution quickly understood the pedagogical possibilities of funeral celebrations, using them to instill the values of the Republic and build a sense of community around the dead. Public funerals thus served much the same purpose as the other revolutionary festivals so ably analyzed by Mona Ozouf.[5] Funerals, however, stood out as particularly effective events, since their focus on a single inspirational hero made their messages especially straightforward and easy to understand.

When Mirabeau died suddenly in April 1791, the Constituent Assembly hastily voted to bury him in the enormous new basilica Sainte-Geneviève, soon to be known as the Pantheon. Even before 1789, commentators had called this imposing edifice a Temple of the Nation; after 1791 it became a lay shrine to France's "Great Men." Revolutionary leaders wanted the Pantheon to remain a monument to the nation as a whole, but the controversy over its deconsecration and the burials there of Voltaire, Marat, and Rousseau turned it into a de facto temple of the Republic.

The Pantheon suffered some discredit as radicals exhumed certain individuals deemed buried there by mistake. But the Revolution's various funerary celebrations established patterns and precedents that later Republics would follow. Some were "festivals of inclusion" designed to create the bond of republican community, while others served as "festivals of exclusion" marking the boundaries between *le peuple* and their enemies. Inevitably, a great many public funerals exhibited qualities of both, since the effort to bring people together often called attention to those who did not belong.

Under Napoleon, state funerals were mostly limited to military figures, and the Pantheon gave way to the Invalides and the unfinished Arc de Triomphe as destinations for funeral processions and sites of burial. Ben-Amos echoes Ozouf in emphasizing the symbolic importance of the itineraries that funeral marchers followed. A stop in front of the Pantheon meant something completely different from one in front of the Invalides. The former was now an indelibly republican symbol, the latter a military and Napoleonic one. The neighborhoods through which processions passed had symbolic importance as well, as did the nature of the participants and observers of the parade.

The Restoration reserved state burials for members of the royal family, while the funerary highlight of the July Monarchy was the return of Napoleon's ashes in 1840. By associating himself with the Emperor, Louis-Philippe hoped to confer a measure of glory on his lackluster and increasingly unpopular government, but the celebration of Napoleon's memory became so ardent that it threatened instead to destabilize the regime. Ben-Amos's discussion of this event shows how funeral celebrations could slip out of control and even undermine their original purposes.

Between 1815 and the 1870s, a number of non-official public funerals expressed explicitly subversive meanings, as organizers and participants used the death of a prominent oppositional figure to demonstrate against the regime in place. One such subversive funeral took place in January 1870 when the socialist writer Victor Noir was killed in a dispute with the Emperor's cousin, Pierre-Napoleon Bonaparte. Shortly before the burial, Noir's editor, Henri Rochefort, declared, "I was weak enough to believe that a Bonaparte could be other than a murderer" (p. 97).

The situation became more ambiguous during the Moral Order of 1873-77, when the Republic was ruled by monarchists. In these years, republicans used funerals to express opposition to the government of MacMahon, but they did so with decorum and restraint in an effort to demonstrate their fitness to govern the country. Adolphe Thiers's death in September 1877 evoked the most important funerary celebration of this period. The crisis of *Seize Mai* had occurred just a few months earlier, and the funeral became a defining moment in an electoral campaign that would itself mark a turning point in French politics. It was somewhat paradoxical that the great Orléanist Thiers, the man who had opposed the Republic in 1848 and assaulted the Commune in 1871, now became a symbol of republican France. But given the delicate politics of the late 1870s, Thiers was made to incarnate the temperate Republic that Gambetta and his colleagues wanted to represent.

Once genuine republicans took control in the late 1870s, the state funeral occupied a central place—along with secular schools, the army, iconography, and local festivals—in the regime's effort to instill a political culture of moderate republicanism.^[6] Beginning with the extravagant commemoration of Thiers, the years from 1877 to 1900 were especially thick with celebrations of the republican dead: Louis Blanc (1882), Gambetta (1883), Victor Hugo (1885), Jules Grévy (1891), Jules Ferry (1892), Louis Pasteur (1895), and many, many more. The highpoint was doubtless the funeral of Hugo, which Ben-Amos so beautifully evoked in *Les lieux de mémoire* and which somewhat disappointingly receives less attention here. The celebration of Hugo's life and death marked the triumph of the Opportunist Republic and allowed the regime to associate itself with one of the nineteenth century's greatest heroes.

Commemoration, of course, involves forgetting as much as memory, and Hugo's funeral ignored the arch royalism of his early life and downplayed his hero worship of Napoleon I. The republicans could

not, however, ignore Hugo's desire for a funeral devoid of Catholic content, and the most ardent secularists among them were thrilled to sponsor such a prominent non-religious rite. Church officials had already endured Gambetta's civil funeral in 1883, and they expressed horror over the secular imagery surrounding Hugo's death. Catholic opposition to this republican ceremony thus turned what the government had intended as a massive funeral of inclusion into an event that left a great many religious people out.

Funerals, Politics, and Memory is such a rich and thoughtful book that criticisms are almost beside the point. Ben-Amos's impressively wide reading makes his theoretical discussion especially pertinent, but the placement of that discussion in the middle of the book causes some repetition of material presented earlier in the volume. Rich as the material is, Ben-Amos need not have included so much of it. At nearly 400 pages of densely printed text, the book is longer and more detailed than it needs to be. This is especially true of the chapters on the Third Republic, when the huge number of funerals discussed begin to run together and repeat points already made.

There are only two substantive problems. The first concerns Ben-Amos's relative inattention to the process of selection for state funerals. Some figures are obvious choices: Gambetta, Ferry, Joffre, the various presidents who died in office. But it would be interesting to know more about why, for example, the Congo explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza received a state funeral, but not Jules Crevaux, who died in South America after exploring the Amazon, or Colonel Marchand, the explorer and military commander who confronted the British at Fashoda in 1898? And though it is fascinating that musicians and composers were eligible for state funerals, we do not learn why Gabriel Fauré received the honor, but not Claude Debussy or Maurice Ravel, both far more renowned at the end of their lives than Fauré.

The other substantive question turns on Ben-Amos's treatment of the press. Newspaper reports constitute his main source of information about the conduct of the various funerals and the debates surrounding them. He has read a broad range of journals representing different ideologies and levels of circulation, but, for the most part, he says little about journalism and the press as such. It would be interesting to know, for example, whether journalists' narrative strategies with respect to state funerals changed over time or according to the category of person being commemorated. And it would be even more useful to think about the press as the medium of memory par excellence. Journalism, after all, not only served as the main source of memory-making for those who did not witness the funerals in person, but it also reshaped, ex post facto, the mental images of those who were there.

I should emphasize, again, that these small concerns pale in comparison with the scale and accomplishment of this book. More than the history of state funerals, Ben-Amos's work is a chronicle of memory and forgetting, a powerful analysis of ritual and public spectacle, and an inquiry into the politics of religion and the religion of politics. It is a thorough, subtle, and original contribution to the history of modern France.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-92) ; Annette Becker, *La Guerre et la foi: De la mort à la mémoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994); Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) ; Pascal Ory, *Une nation pour mémoire: 1889, 1939, 1989, trois jubilés révolutionnaires* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1992); Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[2] "Les funérailles de Victor Hugo" in Nora, *Lieux*, vol. 1 La République.

[3] Olivier Ihl, *La fête républicaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), ch. 2.

[4] On the origins of the great man, see also David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[5] Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

[6] Mona Ozouf, *L'école, l'église, et la république 1871-1914* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1963) ; Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne au pouvoir: L'Imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989) ; James Leaning, *To Be a Citizen: The Political Culture of the Early Third Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

Edward Berenson
New York University
edward.berenson@nyu.edu

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