

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 14

Julian Bourg, Ed., *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*. Afterword by François Dosse. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004. vii + 426 pp. Bibliography, index, and about the contributors. \$90.00 U.S. ISBN 0-7391-0792-5.

Review by Melanie A. Bailey, Centenary College.

To understand French intellectual life after 1945, scholars must consider more than the several theorists whose work particularly affected American academics in the 1980s and 1990s. As the essays in *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* generally imply, the careers and ideas of other thinkers may lend greater insight into French institutional, political, social, and cultural currents over the past six decades. Even if they vary in quality and methodological rigor, each chapter does shed light on at least one participant in French intellectual life or one debate that affected French intellectuals. Most of the authors hesitate even to suggest more general points about the culture that accepted or rejected certain lines of thought, which limits their ability to establish connections between their own subject(s) and the other subjects addressed (or not addressed) in the volume. Since the essayists do not engage in a conversation with each other, the collection does not add up to more than the sum of its individual parts.

Editor Julian Bourg acknowledged several lacunae in this presentation of post-World War II French intellectual life. He commented that, “and this is not estimable, this volume generally elides matters of race and gender” (p. 13). He did not postulate a reason for this rather surprising absence of discussion about French efforts to evaluate and re-evaluate race, nationality, immigration, sex, gender, and maternity. Bourg does not mention how he selected essays for *After the Deluge*, except that he intended to feature the work of relatively young American and European scholars of French intellectual history or French studies. Remarkably—but perhaps a partial explanation for the absence of an essay on French women intellectuals—only one woman, Lucia Bonfreschi, may be found amongst the authors. Essays by Christophe Premat on Greek émigrés Cornelius Castoriadis, Kostas Axelos, and Kostas Papaioannou; by Stuart Elden on Axelos; and by Ethan Kleinberg on the Lithuanian-born Emmanuel Levinas do establish that immigrants played important roles in French intellectual life after 1945. The contributions by Ron Haas, on Guy Hocquenghem, and by David Berry, on Daniel Guérin, indicate how two intellectuals who also happened to be homosexual became involved in debates about sexuality and gay rights.

According to Bourg and François Dosse, who wrote his afterword about the importance of intellectual history, the collection includes examples of various methodologies that together indicate the contours of contemporary intellectual history. For example, Alan D. Schrift uses institutional history to ascertain whether a particularly French philosophy exists without ignoring individual biography and reception, though he does not address whether or how race and gender affected career patterns or scholarly concerns. Although he might pursue his analysis much further, Ethan Kleinberg follows a line of questioning familiar to those who interrogate the creation of identities when he critically considers the viability and popularity of the “Myth of Emmanuel Levinas.” Kleinberg argues that Levinas and those who have written about him have perpetuated the myth that he resurrected, in contemporary form, a tradition of Talmudic scholarship from Eastern Europe. Kleinberg does not state whether this myth has survived better in particular places or among certain groups of scholars more than others, but his style of textual analysis and his thesis indicate that intellectual and cultural history can meet in potentially fruitful ways. The scholars who published their work in *After the Deluge* display their awareness that

multiple influences interact in the process of intellectual formation. They accept the usefulness of textual evidence and investigate the ideas conveyed by those texts without much or any obvious deployment of theory. One slight exception to this might be Kleinberg's essay on Levinas, however.

As indicated in the introduction, most of the chapters present case studies. By contrast, Philippe Poirrier's "French Cultural Policy in Question, 1981-2003" does consider a broader question and suggests reasons why policy has changed relatively little despite changes in administration. His essay indicates aspects of the culture that encouraged or discouraged certain kinds of intellectual endeavor. With the exception of the chapters by Poirrier, Schrift, and William Galois, which provides a look at the divergence between economic reality and the economic analysis conducted by French Marxists before 1989, these essays focus on a particular intellectual, a small group of intellectuals, or the effects of a specific controversy on a career, as in Samuel Moyn's description of the way in which the debates about the distinctions between concentration and death camps, prompted by the publication of Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka* in 1966, informed Pierre Vidal-Naquet's work.

As a result, the scholars do not seem to be engaged in a conversation with each other and the chapters do not provide a smooth panorama of French intellectual culture. Although we might fill in some areas of the picture reasonably well, including, for example, Greek émigrés who left for France around 1945, we receive little guidance as to how we should locate some elements relative to others. A few more essays akin to those by Schrift or Poirrier, which attempted to postulate explanations and to derive general conclusions about aspects of French culture, would have enriched the volume.

As Bourq observes, the contributors tended to focus on leftist philosophers, with Raymond Aron as the most conservative thinker chosen as a subject. Beyond that limitation, the chapters do not deal with any "mainstream" Marxist thinkers. Scholars seem eager to present their subjects as heterodox without clearly defining the nature of French Marxist orthodoxy. Some important Marxists appear only briefly: Louis Althusser receives mention in a few places, especially in Alan Schrift's survey of educational institutions, but no essay evaluates the ideas or influence of this key French Marxist on various intellectuals from the generation of 1968. Michael Behrent, whose "Religion, Republicanism, and Depoliticization" treats Régis Debray and Marcel Gauchet, and Warren Breckmann, whose "The Post-Marx of the Letter" examines the collaboration of Ernst Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, both maintain that contemporary French intellectuals have reacted against the rigidities of the accepted Marxist philosophy and the tendency of French Marxist thinkers to downplay politics. Yet, none of the essays in this volume would enable a reader to appreciate the validity of that criticism or the real nature of the reaction. Since the contributors focus almost exclusively on an intellectual or two, they do not offer much in the way of comparisons or contrasts with other thinkers, whether Marxist or not.

In addition to an essay about the French Marxists against whom younger political thinkers have reacted, several potential subjects suggest themselves as helping to provide a broader, richer survey of French intellectual life after 1945. For example, a historically-informed article about an intellectual such as Julia Kristeva might have expanded the breadth and depth of the volume's representation of post-1945 French intellectual life. Such an essay might have commented upon the immigration of eastern European intellectuals to France, such as Tzvetan Todorov, Milan Kundera, and many others; the significance of gender as a subject for analysis and debate, as well as in its role as a factor in reception and in career trajectory; the influence of psychoanalytical concepts and approaches in French philosophy, the extent to which intellectuals have attempted to influence public policy or attitudes. On this last point, Kristeva, along with other notable intellectuals, has involved herself in SOS Racisme; she also provided a biweekly radio commentary for France-Culture. Finally, there are the varying conceptions of French identity after the end of empire, the nature and influence of "French theory," and/or the use of fiction to convey philosophical ideas.[1] An essay on a writer/intellectual such as Tahar Ben Jalloun would permit a discussion of race, racism, and the status of Francophone North Africans (and other peoples from former French colonies) in the Hexagon.[2] The essays in *After the*

Deluge do not deal with any of those themes or questions.

Bourg proposes a purpose for *After the Deluge* in his introduction. He describes it as an attempt to reflect upon and “gaug[e] the shape of a historical period that has passed and for taking stock of its significance.” Whether or not French intellectuals have lost their “international renown,” Bourg contends that historians and other scholars may now propose “balanced explanation and judicious evaluation” of the ideas, influence, and careers of those associated with philosophy in the decades after 1945 (p. 2). The editor also foresees a contemporary, political purpose for this collection: to offer “lessons and examples” for “our own thoughtless era” (p. 15). The intellectuals characterized in the volume grappled with the conundrums of their time and place, such as the aftermath of World War II and Vichy, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and May 1968. Thus, they might prove worthy models for others. Yet, few of the essays probe the ways in which French intellectuals effected their political engagement after 1968. Guy Hocquenghem, as reported by Ron Haas in this book, criticized many of his fellow activists from 1968, such as Bernard Kouchner and André Glucksmann, for having betrayed their radical ideals by accepting positions in the Mitterand government. The absence of chapters about Kouchner, Glucksmann, Luc Ferry, or other intellectuals who have chosen to serve either President Mitterand or President Chirac makes it difficult to obtain a complete sense of how such people have attempted to influence policy.

The authors of the essays in *After the Deluge* generally realize effective presentations of their subjects’ ideas and career trajectories. For the most part, they prove less successful at rendering judicious evaluations, perhaps due to their reluctance to draw broader conclusions or hint at how their subjects suggest something about France after 1945. Although the contributors focus almost exclusively on philosophers and others who published non-fiction, scholars might also consider films, novels, art, music, and other vehicles for communicating ideas as important elements in French intellectual life after World War II. Cultural historians who study intellectuals and ideas would probably concern themselves with a diversity of media, reception among various groups of readers or viewers, and cultural or contextual reasons why particular ideas enjoyed success or suffer neglect.

The chapters of *After the Deluge* each shed some light on interesting and potentially important aspects of French intellectual life since World War II. For scholars interested in getting introductions to men such as Daniel Guérin, Raymond Aron, or Kostas Axelos, the essays dedicated to their work will prove helpful. The volume as a whole proves less satisfying than individual chapters, however, as the contributors largely do not present claims about how their knowledge would advance a deeper understanding of the realm of French political philosophy or any other broader context. Historians and other scholars may find ways to include such pieces as they assemble a less fragmentary picture of French intellectual culture over the past six decades.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Julian Bourg, “Introduction”

Alan D. Schrift, “Is There Such a Thing as ‘French Philosophy?’ or Why do We Read the French So Badly?”

William Gallois, “Against Capitalism? French Theory and the Economy after 1945”

Warren Breckman, "The Post-Marx of the Letter"

Christophe Premat, "A New Generation of Greek Intellectuals in Postwar France"

Stuart Elden, "Kostas Axelos and the World of the *Arguments* Circle"

David Berry, "*Un contradicteur permanent*: The Ideological and Political Itinerary of Daniel Guérin"

Ron Haas, "Guy Hocquenghem and the Cultural Revolution in France after May 1968"

Ethan Kleinberg, "The Myth of Emmanuel Levinas"

Lucia Bonfreschi, "Raymond Aron: Nationalism and Supranationalism in the Years Following the Second World War"

Michael Scott Christofferson, "French Intellectuals and the Repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956: The Politics of a Protest Reconsidered"

Samuel Moyn, "From *l'Univers Concentrationnaire* to the Jewish Genocide: Pierre Vidal-Naquet and the *Treblinka* Controversy"

Philippe Poirrier, "French Cultural Policy in Question, 1981-2003"

Michael Behrent, "Religion, Republicanism, and Depoliticization: Two Intellectual Itineraries—Régis Debray and Marcel Gauchet"

François Dosse, "Afterword: For Intellectual History"

NOTES

[1] The volume might likewise have benefited from a discussion of French women intellectuals such as Hélène Cixous, Christine Delphy, Blandine Kriegel, Michele Le Doeuff, or Michelle Perrot—amongst other possibilities.

[2] One might consider the reaction to Jelloun's *Hospitalité française* (1984), as well as his various novels, poetry, and autobiography.

Melanie A. Bailey Centenary College mbailey@centenary.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 14

ISSN 1553-9172