
H-France Forum, Volume 2, Issue 4 (Fall 2007), No. 2.

Christian Jouhaud, *Sauver le Grand-Siècle? Présence et transmission du passé*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007. 315 pp. 23.00 Euros (pb.). ISBN 9-78-20203-76266.

Review Essay by Orest Ranum, The John Hopkins University.

Christian Jouhaud's *Sauver le Grand-Siècle* is written as a variant on the sub-genre of history whose purpose is to breathe life into what is perceived by the author as an enfeebled concept or chronological period that is being neglected by both readers and writers. His work is a variant in the sense that writers plead in favor of a concept or period pretty much as they or it is usually taken to mean. But Jouhaud does not like the term "*Grand Siècle*," because it connotes an authoritarian, bellicose, and culturally warped reign (my terms) that at least since the late eighteenth century has been evoked to legitimate right-wing policies.

His task, therefore, is twofold: discern or open doors to a seventeenth century that is admirable for being more humane, disinclined to war, and endowed with a more pluralistic culture that is not centered on a royal court.

Implicit throughout the book is the presumption of today's increasing ignorance about the seventeenth century, which functions to sustain a quite emotional, almost sentimental attitude that fosters a search for authenticity in the past that is little known or forgotten. No non-French observer has much legitimacy to challenge this presumption, but it ought to be recognized for what it is, a powerful *aiguillon* toward anecdotes drawn from seventeenth-century sources, of the type later found in *romans de gare* and *histoires populaires*. I believe Jouhaud is right about the *grand public's* implicit choices for reading – almost always laden with human interest, *faits divers*, personal tragedy, and identification with victims.

The principal theoretical theme in Christian Jouhaud's books up to now has been the emphasis on writing and speaking as forms of action. In societies where analytical philosophy and rhetoric are frequently found in college courses, the point seems almost obvious; but such was certainly not the case for historians in France during the decades after World War II when functionalist social sciences held sway in the universities. Jouhaud returns to the point here (p. 87) but this book is centered on the question of how the past may be reconstituted in the present. Being able to answer a question about a play by Molière on the *Jeu de Mille Euros* is a form of pastness-in-the-present that cannot be disparaged; but this is not the type of past-presentness that satisfies. Jouhaud calls upon so many testimonies on this issue that all cannot be presented here, but to facilitate the reading of this review, I shall give the page number after introducing a testimonial or source for comment.

Such familiar thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Roncière, and Roland Barthes are brought together to testify, each in his own way and in somewhat obscure prose, that the past is (*sic*) and can be part of the present. The fact that history in French is often written in the present tense is almost stated (p. 17), but the ramifications from this epistemological setting are not explored to propose a presentist conceptual framework grounded in the French language as it is used to write history – a missed opportunity. This also results in a very weak and vague concept of history. History can be almost any writing about the past as brought into the present. Let me state a more formal definition: History is a sustained, analytical narrative grounded on archival and/or literary sources, evaluated and presented through the apparent or subsumed understanding of the most recent narratives and authoritative narratives on the same theme.

An exploration of the psychological dimensions of the problem of how the past can become or remain present is centered on individual (M. de Certeau), rather than collected (e.g. M. Halbwachs, Pierre Nora) approaches. The metaphor (and historical fact!) regarding Louis XIV's entrance into Marseille in 1660 through a breach in the walls rather than a city gate puts strong emphasis on intention, again individual, as something to be brought up to consciousness, a past unknown but that can be brought to the present. De Certeau's brilliant analytical sensibility yields a sense of history (p. 206) that is not only largely private, but also perhaps not communicable to others, despite its humanist foundations. Interesting as all this is, it has little bearing on the more collective and not-conscious (a term preferred by Philippe Ariès) past-present nexus that would have to be brought to bear in the creation of a different *Grand Siècle*. Still, there is some congruence between what de Certeau expounds and the thought of the art historian Pierre Charpentrat (p. 231) regarding the forgotten past which is remembered as forgotten, a past in the present that cannot be remembered, but its present forgotten-ness remains. This reviewer finds this reflection very thoughtful and true.

Until Voltaire, the notion of *siècle*, and of Louis XIV, had remained pretty much the way Charles Perrault had first stated it, that is, essentially in poetic and short-essay form to expound the comparison between the great ancients in letters, arts, and sciences, and the French moderns. The *Siècle de Louis XIV* was not entitled "History" by the author, who in the subtitle describes it as an "essay" (p. 46). The first written work that contained political, military, and cultural history, the concept of the *Siècle...*, as the Century, also strengthened when it followed ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and Medicean Florence as the fourth great age in what would eventually be characterized as Western Civilization. Jouhaud is right to point out the gossipy reference technique of the *philosophe*, an indication that, despite innovation, respect for the *ars historica* principles of privileging eyewitness sources still had some influence, although Voltaire is frequently ironic and tendentious when commenting on sources.

At the time Voltaire was writing, how well-known was Eugene de Savoy's lack of interest in women? (p. 51) There may be wit here, or a wink at "those who know" at the expense of those who do not. The cue about the battle is an anecdote, as the ancients, especially Tacitus, characterized the term. An anecdote is a minor incident with major consequences. It may merely be personal animosity or affection, or a door left unlocked on the Day of the Dupes. S. Uomini's *Cultures historiques dans la France du XVII^e siècle* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998) includes an account of Varillas's disgrace from the world of the *érudits* for having invented anecdotes. Varillas simply wished to liven up his narrative. A parody of such an anecdote would be: had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, Rome would not have declined (France-Inter, June 4, 2007). Jouhaud does not discuss the meaning of "anecdote," but readers will notice that his presentation of excerpts from Marie Du Bois's *Mémoires*, the word is used to characterize emotion-filled incidents, not unlike the *faits divers* of a newspaper. Had Jouhaud remained true to the ancient meaning and selected his anecdotes for their great import, the book might have yielded a more complex and original *Grand-Siècle*. The word "*étrange*" appears frequently throughout the book, a device used to stimulate attention and suggest that there is an unknowable, perhaps bizarre or even scary past that awaits being brought into the present.

When Jouhaud attempts to go beyond quoting and commenting in philosophical language, the results are at best thin. An example is his remark about the lack of utility for some facts that Voltaire provides about the Fronde. Deemed useless because they are not in the present: the tautology is apparent. How can facts not be useful or present if Jouhaud is writing about them? Is it not the historian who makes facts useful and present? This suggestion that facts can be effective on their own raises other questions that cannot be framed in the language of utility.

After noting that Pascal is so much more than a writer, Jouhaud comments upon him as a writer and does not quote his thoughts about the relationship between past and present. Certainly not a typical seventeenth-century individual, Pascal nonetheless belongs to that century and very much to the present as well. He is nearly the only presence about whom

Jouhaud has no strong reservations. Jouhaud recognizes the force of the Jansenist presence but considers it as closed in upon itself. When he comes to the memories of the Camisard atrocities that are still very present, as Philippe Joutard has shown, Jouhaud notes that there is a relation between that presence and the charitable welcoming of the persecuted; but again, as with Jansenism, the Camisard historical presence lacks a more extensive, or perhaps more diffusible, past in the present.

These two examples of a strong presence of a past in the present, but lacking something, might have prompted Jouhaud to reflect upon the alternate values of a culture constituted of numberless strong presences, each with its own living past yet all living together, versus a mass culture; but he does not. To this reviewer, a disciple of Montesquieu, the phantasmagoric impulses toward extending and deepening the national culture since the Jacobins have certainly enriched the overall historical experience of the nation, but none has been sufficiently strong to destroy a pluralistic society grounded on various pasts such as the Jansenist, Provençal, Socialist, etc. A conglomerate can be a very curious and solid rock.

Jouhaud's evocation of Paul Bénichou's *Morales du Grand Siècle* (Paris, 1948) and his *Le Sacre de l'Ecrivain, 1750-1830* (Paris, 1973) might have prompted deeper engagement with such remarkable insights as the relationship between ideas and intentionality as refracted in the past-present equation; but it does not. The medieval heroic idea of the Cid as brought to life by Corneille is a brilliant illustration of what Jouhaud seems to be searching. And Bénichou believed, yes believed, that this heroic idea could be made present again in the 1930s, and that it would weaken the weight of the "*machine sociale*." Great pedagogue that he was, Bénichou lets the reader infer that the past, not philosophy, is about all we have to reinvent present moral action.

If Voltaire pioneered the inclusion of the arts and letters into the French historical narrative, Alphonse Feillet brought famine, the peasantry, and working conditions into the same narrative. After his *La Misère pendant la Fronde*, which appeared in 1862, no general history of France of any seriousness could be published without some attention to the basic conditions of life for the overwhelming majority of the population. From Jouhaud's perspective, if I understand it, *Germinal* – not Feillet's remarkable book – would have the necessary purchase on the present as bearer of the past. The only equivalent from the seventeenth century might be Callot's *Misères de la Guerre*, Michel Serre's great painting of the plague of 1720 in Marseille, or the Le Nains' peasants – perceived as poor although historians know they were fairly well-off.

Is Bremond fair to Rancé's actual devotional message when he attributes to him the rejection of Tradition? One of the difficulties in the essay approach, as developed in Jouhaud's book, is that it results in the restatement of conclusions that are often (not always!) more nuanced than in their original authorial frame. Bremond's authority is enormous, yet A.J. Krailsheimer found it necessary to spend several years of research on Rancé, not merely because of Bremond's views, surely, but as a result of the complexity of Rancé's place in Western cultural spirituality. The rejection of Tradition is so often a starting place in the reform of the Church, but not an end point.

Many historians sooner or later are tempted to transmit their sources directly to the reader with only somewhat modernized spelling and punctuation to make them more accessible. This has become characteristic of Le Roy-Ladurie's works since *Montaillou*. Here Jouhaud does fundamentally the same, using excerpts from the *Mémoires* of Marie Du Bois, a long-serving *gentilhomme de la chambre* under both Louis XIII and Louis XIV, and an ambitiously pious neighbor in the small communities of Montoire-sur-Loir and Couture (Loir-et-Cher). Jouhaud quotes Du Bois at length to permit readers a direct experience of the past being brought into the present. The passages are all very interesting, and they enhance the reader's understanding of court culture, royal personalities, father-son relations, and social ambitions, in synthesis with Tridentine pious (not charitable) work in the villages where Du Bois was one of the *coqs*. In effect, his pious activities are repudiated by his neighbors.

Du Bois brings Molière's Orgon to mind almost immediately, though he does not seem obsessed by sex. His constant overt allusions to devotional writings, saints' days and lives, infused with his personal life, may well have made Du Bois insufferable to live around – so much so, perhaps, that Louis XIV laughed at him (p. 184) when Du Bois announced his retirement. Cruel as the Sun King's laughter was, and about this there can be no doubt, Du Bois may have laid on his pious discourse so heavily that, in a post-*Tartuffe* climate, laughter could be the only response on the part of the most polite of all kings.

The excerpts from Du Bois could prompt pages and pages of questions and analysis from this reviewer; but Jouhaud's own enthusiasm for this text is sufficient to confirm its success in bringing the past into the present for a historian of seventeenth-century France. But what about the reader who has very little seventeenth-century past in his present? Strong emotional responses there would certainly be to the almost *Erkronig* narrative (also, the *Bicycle Thieves*) about a father and his young son riding in the cold; and to Bossuet's complete moral failure to intervene to stop Montausier from rapping the Dauphin's knuckles. But what else? I fear that Jouhaud's project would yield no more of a revised *Grand-Siècle* than a new film of *The Three Musketeers*. This result would be much less successful than what Third-Republic *lycéens* learned. A chapter on the techniques used by historians and novelists from Voltaire to Goubert to bring the seventeenth-century past into the present might have advanced Jouhaud's purpose more than the excerpts from Du Bois.

Not a single woman is considered for Jouhaud's past-into-present pantheon, neither as author nor as actor. Is the Grande Mademoiselle too obvious? Her escapades during the Fronde and her affair with Lauzun give her strong credentials for the *concours* of Romantic authentic anecdotes. Or perhaps Liselotte von der Pfalz, an engaging, highly intelligent and perceptive observer of the *Grand Siècle*!

Nor is there anyone truly artful at gaining power and wielding it for its own sake or for some higher purpose. The political is such an important part of the self (Aristotle) that any project for bringing a past more into the present ought to include it. Strong candidates who both wrote and acted would be Sully, Turenne, and Vauban. Not Retz. Madame de Chevreuse? Not enough of her correspondence has survived to make her an interesting political survivor without help from fiction. Every fifty years or so, the triangulation of the ethical, of extraordinary political intelligence, and of the past, yields a great synthesis (Chéruel, Meinecke, W.F. Church, Bénichou).

Jouhaud has accomplished what he proposed to do. He has presented a congeries of critical comments and sources which would yield a new *Grand-Siècle*. He has kept in mind the pursuit of the popular reader by an emphasis on human interest and emotion. This book about what another book might be about is nonetheless quite personal and inward-looking; it will not, in this reviewer's opinion, influence other historians' writings about the *Grand Siècle*. Were Jouhaud to write it himself, the results would be path-breaking. He is a formidable close reader, a technique abandoned by French historians when they began to frame their findings in the discourses of social science. As reader-critic, he has broken down walls in French historiography, and nothing could be more welcome. The more *Grand-Siècles* the better.

Four pedantic points follow, so unimportant that they ought not to clutter my comment:

Du Bois seems to say (p. 63) that Châteauneuf was relieved of the seals in 1648. Moréri says that this occurred on February 25, 1633. He became *garde des sceaux* again on March 2, 1650, and was again relieved of the seals on April 3, 1651. Du Bois's apparent confusion of one disgrace with another suggests that he was writing from memory, possibly months or years after the fact. The king's lesser householders may not have been all that familiar with the high politics of the royal council.

Richelieu's so-called *Mémoires* are the *épaves* of a history of the reign of Louis XIII, not of Richelieu's ministry (p. 244).

As I recall, there was a bust of Louis XIII over the *porte d'honneur* at Richelieu's new château at Richelieu (p. 294)? And there was a great room designated as the *chambre du roi*?

Finally, as I read about the *je* (p. 93) as it might be said by a king, the use of the first person plural – *nous* – immediately came to mind. To my knowledge, no historian has studied precisely when the royal *nous* was used. I recall Louis XIII writing to Richelieu about the accommodation between his infant son and himself. He says: "Je lui ai donné des babioles...."

Orest Ranum
The Johns Hopkins University
Orestranum@cs.com