

REVIEW ARTICLE

Core and Periphery

Review essay by Jay Winter, Pembroke College, Cambridge University, for H-France, August 1998.

Michael Adcock, Emily Chester, and Jeremy Whiteman (eds.), *Revolution, Society and the Politics of Memory: the Proceedings of the Tenth George Rude Seminar in French History and Civilisation, Melbourne, 1996*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1996. 325 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, and notes. A\$24.95. ISBN 0 7325 1260 3.

Pierre Nora (ed.), "Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past", vol. II, *Traditions*. Trans. by Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xii + 591 pp. Illustrations, notes, and indexes. \$37.50 US. ISBN 0 231 10634 3.

These two volumes offer an interesting guide to some international trends in French historical writing. The collection of essays ably edited by graduate students at the University of Melbourne shows a robust range of approaches and interpretation of facets of French social and cultural history since the Revolution. The second volume of Pierre Nora's magisterial seven-volume multi-authored panorama of *Les Lieux de memoire* reflects many of the same positive features of the Antipodean collection. Indeed, Nora's inspiration is there too, the shadow of an *eminence grise* bringing out the best in scholars of many different fields. Together, these books describe a world of scholarly interest in French political and cultural identity, and mark out a terrain which can and should be cultivated for many years.

And yet the picture of French historical scholarship is not as rosy as, at first glance, it may appear. This is no longer the best of all possible worlds for French historians, and the central reason is demographic. While France and the French-speaking population have grown significantly since the Second World War, other foreign-language groups have grown faster still. In many university departments in the United States, Spanish studies have grown vigorously, and sometimes at the expense of French. In the social sciences, papers delivered in French at international meetings are increasingly rare, and for a good reason: nobody, it appears, is listening. The hegemonic position of English is annoying to many who, with Salman Rushdie, believe that a culture is disclosed by its untranslatable words, and that French history is best analyzed in French. Some French scholars shy away from international meetings for this reason,

and because the rhetorical pyrotechnics which give their presentations such flair cannot be replicated in English, or at least not in the English they command.

The answer appears to be a bilingual historical project, with room for both core and periphery in it. French history has to bring its English-speaking friends into an alliance in order to survive in the academic marketplace. This is as true in Europe as it is in North America and beyond. The place of French as a language for European history in an age of European integration is unsure. Such supra-national accounts of European history will certainly not be in German: English is their *lingua franca* now.

In addition, French scholarship has benefited directly for decades from the tangential perspective of those living outside the Hexagon. What Elie Halevy was able to do for British history in the 1930s, Theodore Zeldin, Richard Cobb, Robert Darnton, and George Rude, the inspiration for the Melbourne essays, have done for French history since the 1960s. The force of French historical scholarship in English-speaking countries is such that the strengthening of the guild of historians working in both French and English on the history of France is the only way forward.

For this reason, the appearance of the second volume in English of Nora's extraordinary collection of essays originally published between 1984 and 1992 in French is to be welcomed warmly. A third such volume is planned to appear in this series, sumptuously published by Columbia University Press. And for those who had hoped to find some particular essay in the original seven-volume French publication, and have failed to do so in these volumes, there is further good news. The University of Chicago Press is bringing out four more volumes, thereby making available to the English-reading public the entirety of this feast of learning.

The project, while of unique importance in current historiography, is not without problems. I drew attention to some of its controversial aspects in my earlier review of volume one of *Realms of Memory* for *H-France Review of Books*. The introduction by Pierre Nora to this second volume insists that "we live in an age of rupture. Our aim is to pinpoint that rupture, identify the paths that have led up to it, and specify its historical roots" (p. xii). I still find it difficult to understand the nature of that "rupture", not at all related to post-modernism, and I am still puzzled as to how Nora links this "rupture" to the discovery of *les lieux de memoire* in the 1970s and 1980s. Surely there were many sources of the flowering of the study of the symbolic history of French political and cultural life: the work of Maurice Agulhon is one of them. But when surveying *Realms of Memory*, doubts are eclipsed by admiration. These wonderful essays must be read in an ecumenical manner. The project has a dominant form, and Pierre Nora is certainly its *chef d'orchestre*, but within it, there are many different voices.

Volume two is organized on a three-part basis: "models"--land, cathedral, court; books--Lavissee, Proust, Vidal de la Blache, and *La Tour de France par deux enfants*; and "singularities", or individual and uniquely French sites of memory. Different readers will have different favourites in this collection. I am drawn to the revised edition of Jean Starobinski's splendid essay on French eloquence, which in itself, is evidence of the subject it addresses. But to my mind, the most powerful essay in the volume is Antoine Prost's study of *les monuments aux morts*. Prost has the extraordinary ability to write in two registers: a Cartesian register in the first half of the essay, where he surveys with care and precision the different kinds of memorials, and a Flaubertian register, full of poignancy and power in describing the rhetoric and symbolic forms of commemorative ceremonies. This essay is the finest single account of the thousands of *lieux de memoire* that mark, indeed define, public space in virtually every town in the country. Reading this essay makes it apparent why fascism failed in inter-war France. These sites of memory were pillars supporting the republic, not in Paris, not among literary circles, but in every corner of *la France profonde*, where small shopkeepers and farmers met their comrades in arms year after year to celebrate not martial virtues, but republican ones.

The power of this essay easily overcomes a poorly- translated title. This is a study of "war memorials", and not "monuments to the dead". The mistake is substantial, and shows how dangerous it is for a translator to offer a literal rendering of a title which contradicts its meaning. Unlike German war memorials, French ones did not perpetuate a cult of the dead; they did not further "the sacrificial cult of the fatherland", as Nora states in the introduction (p. x.). They had another aim entirely: they were places where veterans could teach the younger generation that war was an abomination and that they, the young, must never face the horrors of war that their fathers had endured. History had it otherwise, but the aim of the *anciens combattants*, gathering there on each 11 November, was clear. Fascists worshipped the dead; the Republican cult of Great War veterans, celebrated in thousands of villages and by thousands of obscure people--was very, very different.

Prost has the gift to bring to us the mood and the faces of the people who came to these sites of memory. He has captured "the face in the crowd", so central to the work of the late George Rude. Born in Norway, educated in Britain, and the teacher of generations of scholars in Australia and Canada, Rude embodied the international guild of French historical scholars. His influence on the writing of French social and cultural history is palpable, as the essays in the University of Melbourne illustrate. In Robert Tombs's elegant essay on "who fought for the commune", in Andre Burguiere's essay on family cultures and political cultures, in P. M. Jones's essay on "The Republic in the Village Revisited", in Patrick Fridenson's reflections on the French economic miracle of 1945-75, *les trente glorieuses*, we can savour the fruits

both of Rude's approach to history, as well as those of others moving in different directions. No sectarianism here; social and political history are cheek by jowl with cultural and economic history, just as they should be. And the work of French scholars sits side by side with that of their colleagues from many other countries. Without the core, no periphery; but without the periphery, the core risks atrophy, or an inwardness which it may no longer be in a position to afford.

Jay Winter
Pembroke College, Cambridge
jw28@hermes.cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 1997-2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. Maintained by H-France.