

H-France Review Vol. 11 (February 2011), No. 34

Thomas Bouchet, *Noms d'oiseaux: L'insulte en politique de la Restauration à nos jours*. Paris: Éditions Stock, 2010. 303 pp. Bibliography and index. 19,50 € (paper). ISBN 978-2-234-06313-6.

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For some time now, the analysis of political language has figured prominently in scholarly efforts to understand modern French political history. Viewing power as a discursive construct, such scholars as Keith Michael Baker, Lynn Hunt, and William H. Sewell, Jr. have not only provided path-breaking accounts of the French Revolution, but transformed the very project of studying the Revolutionary era.^[1] In the fields of modern French labor, gender and social history, too, the “linguistic turn” has made an important mark.^[2] Furthermore, linguistic analyses have been driving a good bit of recent historical research into public opinion in France, especially during wartime.^[3]

Thomas Bouchet’s recent book makes an interesting addition to this literature. Rather than investigate discourses surrounding specific issues or scrutinize specific types of texts, he pursues here the history of a particular verbal device, the insult, as deployed within the context of French parliamentary life. In part, this study aims to shed light on the art of the insult and its evolution. Bouchet examines the terms of the attacks, both the specific language they employ and their types of targets (e.g., another politician’s physical appearance, intelligence, religious affiliation, or race). He explores the motives behind politicians’ use of insults and their short- and long-term consequences. But, ultimately, this detail work endeavors to advance our understanding of the basic structures and rhythms of French political life, at least as practiced by its deputies and senators within their halls of power.

Noms d'oiseaux is built around a set of twelve case studies that, collectively, enable Bouchet to survey French parliamentary practice from the Bourbon Restoration to the present. Some of the examples Bouchet explicates are well-known, most notably Victor Hugo’s characterization of Louis Napoleon as “Napoléon le Petit” just months before the 1851 Brumaire coup (chapter five). Another familiar example, and the book’s only instance of the insult in print, is Honoré Daumier’s bold caricature, “Le ventre législatif,” through which Bouchet analyzes parliamentary culture during the July Monarchy (chapter three). Of course the participants in the verbal (and physical) duels over the Panama Canal Scandal scrutinized in chapter seven, Georges Clemenceau and Paul Déroulède, are also famous, even if the words they exchanged are not.

Overall, however, Bouchet’s examples and their originators are rather obscure. They include the effort of the Second Republic’s finance minister, Michel Goudchaux, to taunt the democrats in the Chamber by calling them “montagnards” (chapter four), as well as the inflammatory remarks of one Xavier Vallat, who in 1936 scandalized the Chamber by bemoaning that the head of the government, Léon Blum, was a Jew (chapter ten). Bouchet shows how, after 1870, republicans sought to discredit monarchists by calling them “ruraux” (chapter six), and how, in 1922 communist Deputies like Paul Vaillant-Couturier challenged the revanchist foreign policies of President Poincaré by naming him “Poincaré-la-Guerre” (chapter nine). Bouchet’s choices for the postwar and contemporary period, too, tend to involve peripheral players: communist deputies in 1947, whose verbal assaults so exceeded the bounds of acceptability that they were banned from the Chamber, the last of France’s deputies to be so disciplined (chapter eleven); opponents to the legalization of abortion laws in 1974, who brazenly compared the

bill's supporters to Nazis (chapter twelve); and deputies on the political Right who posed pointed questions about President Mitterrand's activities during the Second World War (chapter thirteen).

For each of these cases, Bouchet follows a common analytical strategy. He starts by presenting the insult itself, framing it, as necessary, with the briefest of historical *mises en scène*. Next comes a discussion of the insult's consequences, for instance, Deputy Manuel's expulsion from the Chamber in 1823 for having dared to praise the Revolution and attack the memory of the "roi martyr" (Louis XVI) in the same breath (chapter two). Thereafter follows a more sustained effort to set the insult in its historical-political context and, thereby, elucidate the power valences associated with it. Each case study then concludes with remarks about the insult's legacy, such as the staying power of Hugo's "Napoléon le Petit" or the ongoing ability of comments on such touchy subjects as the Revolution, anti-clericalism, or Vichy to touch off inflammatory rhetoric.

This approach, however, has two main weaknesses. First, it fails to provide a truly unifying element for the various pieces assembled here. Furthermore, by the fifth or sixth case, the tack goes stale, sapping the discussion of its vigor. Second, and more importantly, it impedes the reader's ability to discern a clear argument from amongst the mountain of information. Not only does Bouchet offer up each case as a self-contained episode, but he avoids relating any part of his discussion to issues and debates in the relevant scholarly literature (even though he does provide a select bibliography of titles that he has consulted in preparing the book). In fact, only in the conclusion does he make any concerted attempt to tie the many threads together. Many of these findings are indeed fascinating, and would have merited more systematic attention throughout the volume. For instance, Bouchet identifies a significant shift in the tone and quality of parliamentary insults as France shifts from limited to universal suffrage. With the arrival of mass democracy and the election of deputies from new social backgrounds, he argues, insults became less witty and refined, increasingly taking on a commonness that also marked the popular press.

Similarly, in conjunction with the emergence of organized political parties at the turn of the century, Bouchet observes that the art of the parliamentary insult operated more at the level of the group than the individual. He claims, too, that the insult's declining importance after 1945, in particular, reflects a fundamental change in the place of parliament and parliamentary debate in French political life. On the one hand, mounting professionalization, coupled with the shift of power from parliament to president under the Fifth Republic, undermined the significance of debate and, concomitantly, its linguistic virtuosity. On the other hand, Bouchet suggests, contemporary media outlets have provided sites other than the Chamber for engaging in verbal combat, while also quickly pushing yesterday's news, especially that concerning parliamentary activity, into oblivion.

In many respects, *Noms d'oiseaux* is a noteworthy achievement. Bouchet's intimate familiarity with the voluminous record of French parliamentary debate is manifest throughout the volume. His prose is lucid and engaging, and many of the individual case studies are fascinating. But at the end of the day it is hard to avoid the impression that this is a study whose primary audience is the lay reader with interests in political history. This does not mean that specialists in French history and political life won't find it useful or informative. But they will not find in it a history of the insult that sheds much specific light on the scholarly debates that Bouchet's book would have done well also to address.

NOTES

[1] See especially, Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); and

William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France. The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[2] To name just a few representative works: Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993); William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988);

[3] Cf. Valerie Holman and Debra Kelly, eds., *France at War in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); and Dominique Rossignol, *Histoire de la propagande en France de 1940 à 1944: L'utopie Pétain* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).

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ISSN 1553-9172