

H-France Review Vol. 17 (March 2017), No. 60

Philippe Poirrier, ed., *Les politiques de la culture en France*. Paris: La documentation Française, 2016. 888 pp. 11.90€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-11-010249-2.

Review by Jeremy Ahearne, University of Warwick, UK.

Philippe Poirrier's anthology must without doubt be the largest available single collection of texts on French cultural policy, and will be a key reference on the shelf of any French-reading cultural policy researcher. It is distinctive both in its historical span (1790 to the present day) and in the discursive mix of its contents (parliamentary speeches, legal statutes and regulations, administrative reports, and a few more polemical pieces). The editorial hand of Poirrier is generally discreet, but informative. The chronological succession of texts is divided into five periods, each with their own introduction, and some texts are preceded by concise paragraphs setting out their context and significance. Indeed, one's only real criticism of the editorial work in its own terms would be that there are not more of these paragraphs. We are on occasion presented with quite austere or technical texts (on matters such as architectural corporations in 1940, dispensations on performing arts spectacles in 1945, or social security for authors in 1975), and it is left to the reader to surmise what contemporary or subsequent significance led Poirrier to include these rather than other texts. The sometimes technical or administratively focused nature of texts also means that the collection is not best suited for use as a student textbook for an introductory course on cultural policy. For this, interested teachers might turn to Poirrier's companion anthology with the same publisher made up of more polemical pieces, *Quelle politique pour la culture? Florilège des débats (1955-2014)*.^[1] However, it represents an excellent supplementary resource for students and researchers alike.

Most readers are likely to dip in and out of the book to pursue particular themes through primary texts that would otherwise be difficult to assemble (on measures for the protection of heritage, on the shifting administrative shapes of the national ministries responsible for culture, on intellectual property, on the emergence of film and then audiovisual policies more generally, on shifting structures and rationales for arts education, etc.). Some readers, however, will want to read the texts sequentially, and they may find that the corresponding engagement with the volume's historical spread and disparate detail shifts their general understanding of state cultural policies in interesting ways. For this reader, this happened in three broad ways.

Firstly, the long reach back to 1790 did not so much represent an alternative 'starting point' for French cultural policy to, say, 1936 or 1959 (Poirrier notes that the book had to start somewhere, and could have reached back further in time).^[2] The extra historical depth gives us instead a view of diverse and relatively autonomous cultural policy "threads" working their way across different eras, with a certain cumulative logic of their own that can be inflected, accelerated or sometimes arrested by particular political regimes. Thus we see complex apparatuses emerging across decades and centuries for such *acquis* as the identification and safeguarding of national "heritage," for the assertion of artists' rights and then security, for the management of national archives, and for the support for films and cinemas in terms that went beyond industrial returns. Sometimes these diverse threads are gathered up concretely or virtually

in terms of an overarching cultural policy (during the Popular Front, the Malraux administration, the Sixth Plan). At other times, we are more aware of the fragmented or even contradictory nature of national cultural policies at any given time. Thus Jack Lang laments the existence in 1981 of two conflicting state cultural policies—that which he was trying to promote, and that incarnated by the nation's television channels at the time, over which he had no control. In more dispersed manner, texts speak of the cultural policy of a particular major institution such as the Louvre (p. 612), or of regional or municipal authorities (p. 632). Instead of a single national cultural policy, we see the nation as the site of multiply interconnected, but sometimes also separate cultural policy threads, each with differently dated historical filaments.

Poirrier notes in his introduction that the choice of texts has been guided by the analysis of the "political will" (*volonté politique*) they express (p. 6), and this gives us our second overall perspective. The notion of a political will implies the existence of a resistant "other" against which it is directed. The book opens and closes with two radically destructive figures of such an other. The first is the "vandalism" associated with the Revolution, when the unprecedentedly purposeful destruction of a historically accumulated cultural landscape hitherto taken for granted gave birth to the modern notion of a "heritage" that needed equally purposeful protection (the subject of some nine of the first twelve documents). The second is the violence of the Bataclan terrorists set against the values of freedom of thought and expression. In contrast to such figures of abrupt destruction, there is also the insidious work of entropy, the irksome tendency of the universe to return to disorder, as Pierre Sansot once put it.^[3] Much of the detail of the administrative and legal texts included is designed to counter the dispersion or dilapidation, symbolic or physical, of the artistic works of the past and the skills required for the artistic works of the future. We can see in the multiple documents from 1790 onwards, the gathering, sifting, cataloguing and protection of these works. It is also visible in the thread of texts on the training and working conditions of curators, architects, musicians, authors, theatre directors, and others. Finally, the "political will" expressed across this corpus exerts itself, not just in the sometimes belated endeavour to adapt to or promote dynamics in civil society ('modernization'), but also in the attempts to counter such dynamics. If the intrinsic tendency of cultural capital, as with economic capital, is to accrue to those who already possess it, then the leitmotifs of democratization, decentralization and de-concentration which run through the two-hundred-year corpus express successive aspirations to counter these. Of course, the very fact that they are such recurrent and often rhetorically opportune leitmotifs demonstrates both the potency of the underlying "capitalising" dynamics (a Hydra's head) and the limited purchase on these available to public cultural policies.

Thirdly, one can follow across the collection the interweaving of justifications of cultural policy as an action which a nation undertakes *pour soi* (for its own population) and as a manifestation which is conceived *pour autrui* (that is, for beholding by other nations). As regards the first, it is clear that the texts recurrently express the will to protect and enhance the nation's culture for its own sake, as it were, to distribute its opportunities more justly and to support it in its economic existence. However, far from being added on to this as an afterthought, the question of France's perceived cultural existence outside the nation figures persistently as an intrinsic motivation and shaping force for policies. We see this in the 1790s in Romme and Grégoire's declamations on vandalism or the French language, in 1881 in Gambetta's justification for a dedicated Ministry for the Arts, or in the report of the communist deputy Joanny Berlioz during the Popular Front, and of course in the classic speeches of Malraux, associated with the Gaullist projection of national *grandeur*.

Such concern with projection is not necessarily vainglorious—the Gaullist politics of symbolic grandeur was famously part of a quite hard-headed approach to international relations. Moreover, some of the later international assertions of national identity through cultural policy are concerned with the very conditions under which small- or medium-sized nations can deploy an autonomous cultural policy in a globalized world order. We can read in this light the seam of texts that run through Jack Lang's famous 1982 speech in Mexico against cultural "imperialism" to Catherine Trautmann's linkage of the "cultural exception" with the "cultural diversity" agenda in 1999, or Pierre Lescure's conception of a "cultural

exception mark II" in 2013. As Poirrier notes, the stakes in this latter debate are crucial, as they concern the very "conditions for the sustainability of an immense scaffolding of support measures--both regulatory and financial--for production, distribution, screening and cultural action in audiovisual domains" (p. 631). The considerable merit of this voluminous collection is that it gives the reader a comprehensive sense of the immense, but potentially fragile, historically constituted scaffolding that constitutes French national cultural policy as a whole today.

NOTES

[1] Philippe Poirrier, *Quelle politique pour la culture? Florilège des débats (1955-2014)*, Paris: La documentation Française, 2014.

[2] The creation of Malraux's Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1959 in the early months of the Fifth Republic is often seen as representing the start of explicitly institutionalised national French cultural policy. The policies of the Popular Front government of 1936 are also sometimes proposed as marking a significant threshold in the purposeful intervention of republican governments in matters of art and culture.

[3] Pierre Sansot, *Les Gens de peu*, 2nd edition (Paris: PUF, 1992), p. 50.

Jeremy Ahearne
University of Warwick
J.Ahearne@warwick.ac.uk

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172