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Sarah Shurts, *Resentment and the Right: French Intellectual Identity Reimagined, 1898-2000*. Newark/Lanham: University of Delaware Press/Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. xii + 337 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-61149-634-5.

Review by Sean Kennedy, University of New Brunswick at Fredericton.

Presenting the history of French intellectuals in the modern era as a struggle between left and right is a long-established tradition, but in *Resentment and the Right* Sarah Shurts offers a fresh and compelling perspective. By identifying a recurring cycle of contestation over identity that ties in with long-standing debates over how to categorize the far right, the significance of the left-right dichotomy, and the character of French intellectual life, Shurts highlights the persistence of a distinctive pattern of extreme-right intellectual engagement. Ambitious in scope yet also featuring close analyses of prominent and less-prominent thinkers, her book is likely to spark further debate, and deserves considerable admiration.

Well aware that she is on highly contested ground, Shurts carefully delineates her definitions of the terms ‘extreme right’ and ‘intellectual.’ With respect to the former she notes a veritable “wild west of terminology” (p. 15), the legacy of a long debate over the significance of fascism in France and the difficulties inherent in categorizing a diverse, often fractious political tradition. As for intellectuals, definitions tend to focus either upon values or sociological characteristics. Faced with various interpretive possibilities Shurts seeks to, borrowing a phrase from historian John Sweets, “hold that pendulum,” avoiding interpretive extremes.[1] In dealing with the extreme right, she concedes the findings of scholars who stress its diversity, the porosity of the left-right dichotomy as suggested by “crossover” figures, and the patterns of sociability shared by left and right-wing intellectuals. But her central finding is that, notably at key crisis points, extreme right thinkers identified themselves as part of a distinctive intellectual tradition and did so in intense, resentful opposition to perceived left-wing hegemony, leading them to articulate their own, distinctive claim to intellectual status and validity.

Shurts explores this dynamic during six key junctures in French intellectual life, beginning with the Dreyfus Affair. Dreyfusard writers claimed that they embodied the values of reason, truth, and justice, buttressing their cause through organizational initiatives such as the creation of the Ligue des droits de l’homme. Despite fissures within the Dreyfusard camp and previous friendships that crossed ideological lines, the Affair deeply fractured French intellectual life, with the anti-Dreyfusards labeled “by default, both anti-French and anti-intellectual”(p. 45). Slower to engage publicly, the latter eventually responded by attempting to redefine what it meant to be an intellectual. Using the examples of Maurice Barrès and the lesser-known Ferdinand Brunetière, Shurts traces how extreme-right authors decried the moral pretensions and growing institutional domination of the intellectual world by the left. Against abstract rationalism and universalism they stressed the primacy of national rootedness and a devotion to realism. The anti-Dreyfusard conviction of being the true intellectuals was also expressed in the formation of the Ligue de la Patrie and distinctive professional and cultural networks. Relatively marginalized within the universities, anti-Dreyfusards gravitated towards literature and journalism, with periodicals such as Brunetières’s *Revue des Deux Mondes* becoming crucial sites of sociability and professional development.

The divisions were also evident in the different cafes, bookshops, and salons frequented by the two sides; the signing of rival petitions was another crucial way of drawing the battle lines.

Thus began, as Shurts puts it, “a cycle of behavior, a trope of repression, a set of values, and a new socio-professional community that would become essential to right-wing identity construction over the century” (p. 82). All of these elements were on display during the Nouvelle Sorbonne controversy of 1910-1914. Prompted by educational reforms that encouraged more focus on the sciences, greatly reduced opportunities for Catholic education, and integrated the elite *École normale supérieure* into the Sorbonne, the controversy featured new claims of left-wing intellectual hegemony and extreme-right calls to defend true French values. Shurts explores the controversy from the perspectives of Charles Maurras and Henri Massis to illustrate how different right-wing traditions could nevertheless participate in the same dynamic. Massis, a disciple of Barrès, kept his distance from the Action Française and its monarchist tenets during this period, yet both he and Maurras accused the left of betraying French culture to German-inspired education reforms, and for seeking to dominate young minds through the university system. In his 1913 work *Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui* Massis proclaimed that the new generation was inspired by the nationalist right; for its part the Action Française had notable success in attracting young intellectuals, belying its own claims of marginalization as it powerfully reinforced the trend towards socio-professional segregation through its network of journals, publishing house, and ancillary organizations such as the Institut d'action française.

The next key step Shurts identifies in the evolution of extreme-right intellectual engagement is the bitter polarization of the 1930s; here she focuses upon the cases of Abel Bonnard and Ramon Fernandez. While renewed left-wing intellectual mobilization took place primarily within the context of the Popular Front, counter-mobilization on the right expanded previous claims, now asserting the left not only dominated the universities but public discourse in general. Thus Bonnard protested that “there is only one party in France: that which encompasses the left and the extreme left” (p. 152). Fernandez had supported socialism and indeed anti-fascism in its early stages, but by 1935 was alienated by the growing influence of the Communists. Like Bonnard, he aligned with former Communist Jacques Doriot's new Parti Populaire Français (PPF) on the extreme right. Both of them strove to legitimize intellectuals of this stripe, echoing earlier ultra-nationalists in their outrage at the left's supposed lack of patriotism and realism, imbuing their own ideal thinker with the familiar quality of French rootedness but also newer, fascistic notions of organic nationalism. Shurts acknowledges persisting divisions within the extreme right, for instance with respect to Bonnard's call for Franco-German cooperation, but is struck by the extent to which diverse strands of ultra-nationalism shared common resentments and forged connections. While the efforts of the PPF to organize right-wing intellectuals could not match those of the Popular Front, manifestos in support of Fascist Italy's colonial expansion in Africa, and Franco's Nationalists in Spain, provided a sense of shared purpose. So did contributing to the strident and highly successful far-right press, with papers such as *Gringoire* selling in much higher numbers than did its rivals.

After the stunning defeat of 1940 intellectuals of the extreme right had unprecedented access to official power, but Shurts clearly demonstrates that the patterns of previous decades were not easily shaken off. Diverse in outlook as the Resistance was, its intellectual adherents came together in underground networks to identify themselves as the authentic voices of French ideas, values, and now – in the context of occupation and fascist domination – patriotism. Denounced as traitorous, the extreme right continued to depict itself as unfairly stigmatized and marginalized, despite its institutional access and in some cases German support. Shurts dissects the wartime writings of another intellectual duo to demonstrate how familiar perceptions and arguments were redeployed in this vastly different political context. Thus, despite the fact that many left-wing intellectuals had been removed from prominent positions, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle insisted that this could only be a starting point, asserting that “the dominance of the republican ideals, the communist influence, and the left-wing intellectual milieu was so complete before 1940 that nothing short of a complete revolution in thought, not just personnel, could unseat it” (p. 198). Though distinct from Drieu in his fervent Catholicism and reluctance to criticize Pétain, Alphonse

de Châteaubriant concurred in stressing the persisting hold of left-wing ideas and the stigma that right-wing collaborationists still faced, seeking to counter this through his journalism and presidency of Groupe Collaboration. Over the course of the occupation both men advanced harsh critiques of intellectual resistance, juxtaposing it with endorsements of collaboration as a realist policy. Drieu's post-Liberation attestation, written shortly before his suicide, succinctly captures the collaborationist extreme right's quest to certify its intellectual bona fides and validate its stance: "I believe that I acted as an intellectual and a man, a Frenchman and a European should have acted" (p. 201).

The final two chapters of *Resentment and the Right* are broader in scope and less in-depth than the first four, but still make a strong case that the patterns identified by Shurts remained potent after 1945. Given the political climate of the Liberation and the postwar purge the extreme right was undeniably marginalized after the war, while the broadly though not uniformly left-wing values of the Resistance dominated, not only in the universities but increasingly in cultural institutions and the press. Though far-right journals such as *Rivarol* and *Défense de l'Occident* emerged in the early 1950s, it was debate over the Algerian War that, more than anything, facilitated the revival of extreme nationalism, with petitions in support of retaining imperial control helping to galvanize a sense of shared purpose. Shurts traces developments over two decades with reference to the writings of Maurice Bardèche and Jacques Laurent. Bardèche, brother-in-law of the infamous collaborationist writer Robert Brasillach, seethed at his relegation to pariah status and strove to restore legitimacy to the ideas of the extreme right. Jacques Laurent was less tainted by association with the Occupation but also promoted the far-right cause by contesting the vision of intellectual engagement advanced by Jean-Paul Sartre. He also became a strong supporter of *Algérie française*, a decision that he claimed led to his ostracism by the "intellectual terrorists" of the left (p. 252). In their respective ways Bardèche and Laurent situated themselves as voices of frankness and realism facing down the left-wing pieties of their era, protesting the betrayal of France's civilizing mission overseas and the silencing of legitimate nationalist intellectual perspectives. As in the past, they sustained their worldview through networks centered upon journals as well as particular neighborhoods and cafes.

As recently noted by Sudhir Hazareesingh in his book *How the French Think*, by the late twentieth century opinion polls suggested that the French public was growing more skeptical about the differences between left and right, yet the assertion of such divisions clearly persisted in political debate.[2] In her closing chapter Shurts provides some indication of how this came to be by considering how Alain de Benoist and the Nouvelle Droite fit into a broader pattern of resentment-driven mobilization. She acknowledges Benoist's own claims of seeking to transcend established left-right divisions, and the divergence of far-right adherents over issues such as religion. Nevertheless, opposition to, and a desire to displace, what is seen as left-wing hegemony continues to be a powerful motivating and unifying force for the contemporary intellectual extreme right. Echoing previous denunciations, Benoist asserts that left-wing thought "no longer forms a doctrine among others, it forms the very framework on which all constituted thought is inscribed" (p. 287). This conviction is at the heart of his decades-long efforts to establish the intellectual legitimacy, and enhance the potency, of the far right. Nouvelle Droite arguments in favour of "the right to difference" and critiques of globalization are interventions in contemporary politics that also continue a tradition of right-wing attacks on leftist universalism and egalitarianism. The creation of the Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE) in 1968, accompanied by like-minded publishing houses, journals, and associations, represents a sophisticated and durable iteration of the far-right tradition of establishing a self-segregated counter-society for intellectuals.

This book is an impressive achievement. Shurts engages carefully with a dauntingly wide range of scholarly sources and debates. Her efforts to strike a middle ground in most cases will no doubt elicit some dissent, and there are occasional diversions and some instances of repetition. But the overall impression is of careful reflection and judicious evaluation, and the use of a uniform structure for all but the final chapter further clarifies the analysis. Shurts's strategy of pairing famous and less prominent far-right intellectuals works well, and in the process of elaborating her thesis she offers a wealth of

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information on various individuals, networks, associations, and journals. This is a work that all scholars of contemporary France should find instructive and though-provoking. Indeed, Shurts's model of modern far-right intellectual engagement seems likely to apply beyond French borders. At a time when far-right claims of marginalization and persecution are pervasive, her book provides valuable insights into the motivations, strategies, and conduct of key exemplars of this vituperative tradition.

## NOTES

[1] John F. Sweets, "Hold that Pendulum! Redefining Fascism, Collaborationism and Resistance in France," *French Historical Studies* 15:4 (1988), pp. 731-758.

[2] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), pp. 158-161.

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