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Stéphane Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. xii + 324 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S., £33.50 (cl); \$24.95 U.S., £14.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8014-4134-X (cl); ISBN 0-8014-8873-7 (pb).

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For some time now in the humanities, the term “local” has designated a space of resistance, whether to overweening forms of impersonal knowledge, as in the work of Michel Foucault, or to the patronizing certainties of the centralized state.[1] Stéphane Gerson’s *The Pride of Place* joins recent scholarship in French historical and cultural studies, from Caroline Ford’s work on Brittany to Shanny Peer’s study of regionalism at the 1937 Paris exposition,[2] that seeks to complicate this picture while continuing to stress the importance of the local as a dimension of historical experience. For Gerson, the compliance/resistance binary does not begin to capture the complexity of the local’s place in French culture and politics in the nineteenth century. Rather, he casts the local as a space, both discursive and actual, of negotiation, one of a number of sites where the state and professional elites wrestled with the terms of France’s ambivalent embrace of modernity.

The Pride of Place focuses on what Gerson calls, alternately and largely interchangeably, the “cult” or “field” of local memories in the half century from the installation of the July Monarchy to the consolidation of the Third Republic around 1880. He is concerned above all with “the cultural and political uses of local memories . . . their theatricality, urban visibility, pedagogical uses, and applications as commerce and ‘philosophical idea’” (p. 7). Mapped on a grid with territorial and historical coordinates, local memories, which ranged from topographical details to edifying stories to celebrations of earlier periods of supposedly greater local initiative, offered scope for an enormous range of projects and ambitions. For elites, local memories promised to bring together communities still fragmented and at least metaphorically dislocated by the trauma of the Revolution. For intellectuals, memories served as the basis for a new, scientifically documented history and geography of the nation. The state, finally, embraced both these objectives while seeking both to foster local initiative and to co-opt local elites to its own vision of a unified France. One of the signal strengths of the book lies in Gerson’s ability to convey the dynamic, interlocking relationship among these uses of the local.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural production, Gerson defines the field of local memories as, among other things, an “unstable configuration of aligned and adversarial actors, who manipulated local memories to legitimate their intellectual production, broaden their social networks, and obtain public recognition” (p. 60). Naturally, political affiliations also played a part in shaping the field. Conservatives tended to focus their memories on traditional spatial units, such as the province, whereas those of a more liberal bent used the Revolutionary divisions of commune and department; all groups shared a Romantic interest in the medieval past. Though conceived as a way of bringing communities, including the nation, together, unearthing the stories, preserving the monuments, and publishing the historical and geographical details that constituted the local remained firmly in the hands of elites. If members of the old aristocracy, high-ranking officials (notably prefects and subprefects), and clergymen participated in the learned societies that provided the organizational base for the cult of local memories, the majority of their members, who were overwhelmingly male, came from the professional and intellectual bourgeoisie. Only the historical pageants popular chiefly in northern France during the 1840s and 1850s drew a more diverse range of participants, but their rules and procedures, unlike those of the traditional religious festivals they imitated, largely eliminated any expression of class or even corporate solidarity.

The commercialism of such pageants serves to cast the local as a site not simply of resistance but of creative adaptation to modernity, as towns without a strong industrial base marketed their pasts in a bid for the tourist trade on new railway lines. At the medieval jousts held in Douai in 1849, for example, spectators could buy lithographs, souvenir programs, sheet music, and flags. But Gerson acknowledges that such events rarely turned a profit or lasted for more than a few years, so that other forces, notably state patronage, played a much more important role than the market in the development of the field. The state's interest in the activities of local elites acquired institutional expression with the creation of the *Comité des travaux historiques* in 1834, part of the bureau of the same name within the ministry of education, and of the *Commission des monuments historiques* in 1838. The scope of the state's interest was so extensive that Gerson refers to the creation of an "official cult of local memories" (p. 150 and *passim*). Acting through prefects and local correspondents, the *Comité* gathered information for national surveys of documents and monuments, awarded subventions to local histories and reference works, and sought to coordinate the activity of local learned societies. Fearful of interfering too much and thus stymieing local initiative, successive ministers nonetheless aimed to control and shape local activities within the confines of a centralized vision. The provinces were to provide discrete facts and concrete information, leaving analysis to those with the broader vision available only in Paris. Local projects that diverged from government norms, for example historical narratives or geographical dictionaries classified by former provinces, were routinely returned or refused state funding.

If state officials feared the potential of locally constructed narratives to subvert national unity, notably by advancing local claims to greater autonomy, locals themselves did not always agree either on the object of celebration, on its purpose, or even on its very appropriateness. One of the most fascinating sections of the book concerns alternative pageants organized in some cities on universalist rather than localist themes; one group in Valenciennes, for example, presented the society of the Peruvian Incas as a model of egalitarian concord and religious moderation.

More generally, Gerson identifies two "designs" (p. 118) of what he calls the pedagogy of place: one ideological, a blueprint for social stasis under elite direction; the other civic, a way of integrating the alienated lower classes into the national polity by first fostering local identification. The two correspond to two models of attachment or identity: one "organic," the notion that individuals' language, culture, and place of origin indelibly shape their characters; the second "voluntarist," stressing the role of the will in determining identity. The Third Republic, with its emphasis on concrete, locally-based instruction, synthesized these designs in the notion of the *petite patrie*, in which "all local elements retained their particularity, but as contributions to a broader entity transcending them," the nation (p. 230). Thus the state and locals together found the solution to the problem that had bedeviled them both: how to "'individualize' the local without 'particularizing' it" (p. 186).

Yet for Gerson the Third Republic marks less a culmination than a rupture, as the forces of modernity--professionalization, the rise of a mass press and national political parties, the development of a national market--weakened the authority of the local elites who, along with state officials, are his principal actors. The book makes perhaps the strongest claims (at least in English) for the significance of the July Monarchy since the publication of David Pinkney's *Decisive Years in France* nearly twenty years ago.[3] In Gerson's view, local elites had an independent voice in the period's vigorous debates over local diversity and the relationship between the state and the nation, which accompanied the birth of a "new intellectual state" (p. 44). Ultimately, these developments led to a profound shift in the political valence of the "local" that, by 1880, made it available as the basis for a reconfigured nation. This is a persuasive argument, and Gerson backs it up with abundant evidence, wide learning, and a generally sophisticated approach to reading texts. It takes nothing away from the book's considerable achievement to note that its scope is somewhat narrower than its title suggests.

One can hardly fault *The Pride of Place* for lacking a comprehensiveness to which it does not aspire: the introduction straightforwardly sets out the book's emphasis on "elite representations and strategies of

production,” eschewing any attempt to assess the intimate settings in which individuals passed on memories and making no claim to provide “an exhaustive survey of historical localism” (pp. 15-16). Yet the “representations and strategies” discussed in the book are overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, literary; the reader learns little about activities central to the cult of local memories such as the creation of museums and local monuments, and almost nothing about historic preservation, another memorial innovation of the July Monarchy. If the vast and growing scholarly literature on memory has yielded any common insight, it has to do with the sensual dimension of memory, and notably its strong links to particular visual, aural, and palpable images, but one would be hard pressed to visualize memory in *The Pride of Place*.^[4] Nor does Gerson acknowledge that the reconfigured status of the local emerged not only from debates over the past but also from negotiations about issues impinging on the present, from infrastructure to art museums to urban renewal, in which both the state and localities had a stake. Gerson’s narrow focus would matter less if he at least offered a coherent alternative definition of memory as a discursive construct, but his repeated insistence on the “inherent indeterminacy” (p. 274) of the field of local memories leaves that construct both dry and nebulous, a telling absence near the heart of the book.

“Near” rather than “at,” because in an important sense neither memory nor even the local lies at the heart of this study. Significantly, fully half of the book’s eight chapters, including the three culminating ones, deal centrally with the state. In a sense the book makes its most substantial contribution to the study of what Foucault called governmentality, “the tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not.”^[5] Another way of putting this would be to say that, with its somewhat meandering structure, *The Pride of Place* often reads like an intellectual history of meetings: of local academies, inter-regional congresses, and, of course, ministerial committees. In his portrayal of a bumbling, contradictory, usually well-intentioned state, its reach almost always exceeding its grasp, Gerson waxes almost lyrical, achieving the sureness of touch and passion of true conviction. Those who have worked in other contexts on relations between the post-Revolutionary state and the provinces will find this picture familiar, and Gerson scrupulously relates it to “recent portrayals of an internally conflicted and ‘blurred’ French state” (p. 253). But in combination with his searching examination of mid-nineteenth-century liberalism, Gerson’s exploration of the continuities and limits of the state’s self-conception as intellectual arbiter offers a compelling and original set of insights into the very nature of the political in modern France. We have reason to be grateful that the bureaucratic domain—sometimes humdrum, usually scorned, but always important—has found such an erudite and sympathetic interpreter.^[6]

NOTES

[1] See especially Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in his *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980): 81-83.

[2] Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World’s Fair* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[3] David H. Pinkney, *Decisive Years in France, 1840-1847* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[4] The classic work on the relationship between memory and sensation is Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1993, orig. publ. 1896). See also Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of*

Memory (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993) and my *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), especially chapter 1.

[5] Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 103.

[6] Benjamin Kafka's fascinating dissertation in progress at Stanford University, "'The Imaginary State: Paperwork and Political Thought in France, 1789-1860,'" promises to make another important contribution to this field.

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