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**Claire Andrieu, Marie-Claire Lavabre, and Danielle Tartakowsky**, *Politiques du passé : usages politiques du passé dans la France contemporaine*. Collection Le temps de l'histoire. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2006. 266 pp. Notes and index. 26€. ISBN 2-85399-630-1

**Université Paris I**. *Concurrence des passés: Usages politiques du passé dans la France contemporaine*. [Actes du colloque les usages politiques du passé dans la France contemporaine des années 1970 à nos jours, organisé par le centre d'histoire sociale du XXe siècle, Paris I, et l'équipe pouvoirs, savoirs, sociétés, Paris VIII]. Collection Le temps de l'histoire. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2006. 300pp. Notes and index. 26€. ISBN 2-85399-631-X.

Review by Seth Armus, Saint Joseph's College, New York.

No one will win a prize for observing that France is preoccupied with its national memory. Helped along, *malgré lui*, by outstanding historians, this fascination has, on a number of occasions in the past quarter century, come close to veering out of control. After the work of Henry Rousso and Pierre Nora, in particular, official manifestations of national memory in monuments, conferences and ceremonies, for example, have been, of necessity, self-conscious. For some academics, encouraged by the last century's linguistic turn, exposing the tension between "history" and "memory" has the added appeal of appearing transgressive. But if Nora's work tells us anything, it is that memory, even popular, regional, "organic" memory, is never an alternative to history, rather it is constructed from within it.[1]

What happens, then, when governments, regions, special interest groups, and the public at large get wholeheartedly, self-consciously, involved in the memory game? That question, more than any other, unites this diverse and divergent collection of essays gathered after a colloquium on "Political Uses of the Past in France, 1970 to present," which took place in Paris on September 25-26, 2003, and was sponsored cooperatively by the *Centre d'histoire social du XXème siècle* (Paris I), and the team at "Pouvoirs, Savoirs et Sociétés" (Paris VIII) with the further participation of CNRS-Université de Provence. The result is two volumes, the first "Politiques du passé" emphasizes the role of central government and individual actors, while the second "Concurrence des passés" aims to examine how new methods of exploring the past have led to competition between, among other things, memory and national identity. The papers themselves are largely split between micro-histories, usually from a local, provincial perspective, and macro-histories--a distinction that sometimes amounts to social historians and political/cultural historians. The two groups do not so much engage with each other's ideas as stare, awkwardly, across the divide.

As H-France readers know, it is more common on the Continent than in the United States or Britain for conferences of this sort to result in published proceedings. As with all such collections, one has to ask whether publishing these papers is useful. What apparently made for a lively day or two in September does not, necessarily, make for enthralling or enlightening reading. This, unfortunately, is largely the case with these two volumes, filled with thoughtful observations and, occasionally, very interesting analysis, but more often than not the sort of hastily or inconclusively argued papers (either over-general or over-specific) that characterize conferences of a certain type. A second question raised by collections like these is one of audience. Since there are likely to be very few readers with a passionate interest in the changing street names in Provence, François Mitterrand's view of history in his first *septennat*, and the politics of the use of history by Breton regionalists in May 1968, there has to be some sort of

compelling narrative thread or coherent theoretical unity. Despite the brave efforts made at summary and synchronization in the concluding comments by Axelle Brodiez and Sylvain Pattieu, the collection never quite achieves that sense of harmony.

This is not to say the contributions are not very good; many are, in fact, excellent. Of the over forty pieces in this collection, those in the last section on “concurrency et controverses” aimed specifically at historiography are probably the most useful. Isabelle Merle and Emmanuelle Sibeud write instructively about the struggle over France’s increasingly politicized colonial history, and, from a slightly different angle, Guy Pervillé shows how important the historians of the Algerian War have become for French public debate. At the other chronological extreme is an engaging essay by Christian Amalvi on the changing use of the Middle Ages in French history and the popular imaginary and, in particular, the surprisingly fluid uses of Jeanne d’Arc (attention Ségolène Royal!). There are other good pieces throughout both volumes—no one familiar with Annette Becker’s work will be surprised to find that hers is, also, among the best. In her exploration of the public memory of the First World War, Becker observes that memory is attractive to politicians because it is a good deal easier than history. Having to contend with neither the complexity nor the critical scrutiny that history has come to demand, it therefore gives politicians a chance to cheat, for they can bypass the rigor and appeal directly to the populace. What a pleasant response this is to Paul Ricoeur, quoted elsewhere in the collection, and his insistence that memory could avoid the pretensions of the historical profession and, thus, be liberating.

These two books specifically address the recent use of the past, so present-mindedness is to be expected as a function of the subject. However, even social scientists (who excel at predicting the past) would likely approach a subject like “Memory and the Internet” with trepidation. It is to the credit of some of these contributors that they bravely go forward and argue, with speculative flourish, about the impact of things that are still in process. But these sorts of essays, like the medium they address, are immediately out of date. Now, less than four years after they were written, they appear awkward and, more or less, irrelevant. But even less ambitious forays into the extreme present, such as Sylvie Guillaume on the use of history in the arguments of pro and anti European politicians, are risky. The author asks engaging questions, but her conclusions that both Jacobin Left and nationalist Right are attached to essentialist notions are pretty much self-evident.

It is a noticeable oddity of this collection that the section examining “new approaches” is probably less innovative than the more modest first volume. Perhaps I am allowing my prejudices to cloud my judgment, but I doubt I am the alone in finding, among the local histories, a surprisingly conventional use of theory. I am not wishing for a plague of impenetrable jargon, but there is something naïve about the type of theory used here, most of which seems to be the product of an earlier generation’s wide-eyed engagement with sociology, that seems insufficient to the task. In contrast, some of the political/cultural historians engage in unassuming, but nevertheless useful, exercises in their analysis. My favorite is Jean-François Tanguy on Jacques Chirac, who exposes the word ticks and evaluates the odd linguistic patterns evident whenever the French President discusses history. [2]

Ultimately, these essays share, as subtext, a mostly unspoken concern with the role of the historian in the age of memory. For some, even asking that question smacks of special pleading. Marc Bergère, for example, wonders whether the historian is even needed to mediate between popular memory and history, in this case World War Two. Even as they are embracing local history, some left-wing historians wonder if the collapse of interest in the nation is not correlated to diminishing interest in class-conflict. Claire Andrieu’s essays also worry about how memory has “generalized the status of victim,” (vol. 1, p. 45) thus depoliticizing it, and Hervé Glevarec, echoing the work of Christian Faure, quietly contrasts today’s interest in “the peasant past” with that of Vichy. (vol. 2, p. 35) The whole issue is concluded nicely by the last essay, a kind of institutional historiography of *Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent* and the manner in which historians have dealt with the demands of the present. (vol. 2, p. 271) The fundamental distinction between a history that accepts political engagement and one that demands

neutrality is, of course, an old one. But discussed in this context, as a debate of sorts between François Bédarida and Henry Rousso, it takes on surprising freshness.

In the above-mentioned post-face which serves as a conclusion, there is an ambitious attempt at synopsis and connection. Tying in, whenever possible, questions from other panelists, this addition gives a fair sense of what was on the mind of the conference attendees. They argue, convincingly, that the French state had traditionally opted for uncontroversial, general commemorations, thus the attractiveness of “memory.” But the growth of specific memories, be they regional, Jewish, or colonial, for example, has splintered and decentralized the process. (vol. 2, p. 285) Similarly, these newly politicized pasts have become essential to regional identity, and have had the odd result of promoting cultural history over other approaches that may have seemed traditionally better suited to this subject. In addition, the growth of new technologies, the pressures of popular memory, political instrumentalization, and social utility have challenged the historian’s role and even the nature of the historical profession. While there are significant areas of disagreement, as in whether politicians manufacture or merely reflect historical myths and the question if the world of memory even needs professional historians, these historians are noticing what has been happening, and are, at least, concerned.

How precisely, then, are historians implicated in this? Since the state itself prefers memory that has lost its controversial edge, some argue that it wishes to use historians only as priests, whose role is to bless civic memory. As useful as historians may be, that utility does not extend to the messier elements of the past, such as the Algerian War. These must be commemorated without reviving arguments or even exposing contesting interpretations—if there is one thing the state dislikes it is arbitrating between antagonistic memories. (vol. 2, p. 284) The high profile granted to historians comes at a price.

As always, there is a tension here between elitism and vulgarization. Like their counterparts in the United States, French historians are partially the victims of their own success. As much as many of us may criticize *The History Channel*, to take an obvious example, there is also a certain pride in the fact that our students actually watch it, as opposed to, say, *The Philosophy Channel*, *The Sociology Channel*, or *The Agricultural and Applied Economics Channel*. New technologies, or, rather, massive revolutions in technology, have certainly changed something about the way history, memory, politics, the profession, and the public interact. At the very minimum, access to historical sources has become vastly easier, faster and more democratized. No historian can afford to be uninterested in these questions even if, as this collection more often than not demonstrates, it really is, as has been said about another sort of French revolution, “too soon to tell.”

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## NOTES

[1] I refer especially to Rousso's earlier work, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991. The manner in which *Les Lieux de Memoire* was condensed for translation gives a slightly inaccurate sense of the project's whole. Briefly, a larger percentage articles in *Realms of Memory* deal with state power than in the French original. On this subject, and for a general discussion of the issue of memory, it would be hard to improve on Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French: National Memory,” *The American Historical Review* 106/3 (June 2001): 906-922  
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/106.3/ah000906.html>

[2] It is certainly the case, as Tanguy points out, that Chirac's linguistic tricks are not all so subtle--he likes, for example, to contrast Gaullist “belief” with Socialist “ideology.” It is my sense that the speeches of President Chirac will provide future historians with much to examine. Everything from his diction to his unconventional use of elision might be (and for all I know are already being) fruitfully explored.

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