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Le fil de l'esprit. Augustin Girard, un parcours entre recherche et action, Paris, Collection du Comité d'histoire du ministère de la Culture, 2011. 334 pp. Bibliography, index, and illustrations. 18€. (pb). ISBN: 978-2-11-128143-1.

Review by Jean-Louis Fabiani, École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Paris) and Central European University (Budapest).

This book is much more than a *Festschrift*, a commemorative collection of essays devoted to one of the most interesting high-level civil servants of the Fifth Republic, Augustin Girard. It is an original and fresh contribution to the history of cultural policy in France. Beautifully edited with enlightening illustrations by the Comité d'histoire du ministère de la Culture, le *Fil de l'Esprit* mingles research essays by historians, sociologists and various administrators on the one hand and texts by Girard on the other. The best contributors to the field are present (Guy Saez, Vincent Dubois, Pierre-Michel Menger and Philippe Poirrier, among many others) as well as former ministers of culture or top-level political advisors (Jacques Toubon, Catherine Tasca and Jacques Rigaud). Foreign observers shed original light from abroad on the functioning of French administration. An included CD-rom constitutes a useful addition to the book: Girard is thus strikingly present through various recorded documents.

Augustin Girard, born in 1926, belonged to a Catholic family deeply interested in social issues. His parents met as they were militants in the Catholic and social movement, le *Sillon*, led by Marc Sangnier. They were also interested in the development of education through cultural participation, an orientation called in France *éducation populaire* that associated unionists, teachers and leftist activists in diverse voluntary associations, particularly strong in the times of the Popular Front. In this political and spiritual environment, it comes as no surprise to learn that Girard's family was very active in the *Résistance* movement. They were arrested and deported; one of his sisters was sentenced to death and executed. Girard himself explained that his distrust in the traditional French political elites came from their attitudes during the German occupation.

Girard's stay in the United States, where he came after the Second World War as a Resistance grantee (*boursier de la résistance*), added a new dimension to his commitment. He graduated in English and became *agrégé de l'Université* in that discipline, the highest degree in the traditional French *lycée* system. However, he decided not to teach in the state educational service, but in a private high school based on innovative methods, the Collège Stanislas in Paris. There he was "picked up," as he said in an interview published in the book, by a member of André Malraux's staff to become a member of the cultural committee of the Plan, an institution created by de Gaulle in 1946 and directed in the first years by Jean Monnet (p. 23). The Plan was designed to unify knowledge and action and was devoted to shaping the future of France.

Malraux was appointed by de Gaulle in 1959 as Minister of Culture. The function did not exist before and had to be totally invented. The famous writer was looking for new characters who did not belong to old institutions, such as the Académies, and he relied on them to imagine new forms of action. Most of them did not come from the Ecole nationale d'administration, an elite school created in the aftermath of the war and that was soon to become almost monopolistic in higher bureaucracy. They had less linear

itineraries, as they often came from the colonial administration or the educational system. This was a great time of renewal in French public life and Girard took an active part in it. He brought in his international experience, as well as his inherited interest for popular education and “active methods,” a set of tools developed by the educational movement involving the participation of pupils and, more broadly, of citizens.

In 1962, Jacques Delors, who was to have a brilliant career when the socialists came to power in 1961, appointed Girard as the director of the tiny Service des études et de la recherche, which remained very small and peopled by mavericks, at least compared to the typical elitist style of recruitment of civil servants in France. Girard spent all the rest of his professional career in this position, quite marginal but in the meantime in touch with the best social scientists of the new generation (Pierre Bourdieu, Raymonde Moulin, Jean-Claude Passeron, and Erhard Friedberg were the first among many others and followers) and developed, with other members of his Service, a set of very innovative tools designed to analyze how the French people related to cultural goods in a time of rapid change. Girard was himself a sort of hybrid and, although he did not engage into research, he helped his collaborators bridge the gap between bureaucracy and the social sciences, a difficult task considering the overwhelming importance of the hyper-critical intellectual in France. A good example of those hybrids is Olivier Donnât, who directed three of the national surveys, *Pratiques culturelles des Français*, that made Girard's service famous, and fiercely contested.

Girard's longevity in his position is quite uncommon in France, where high-level administrators go frequently from one job to another. He served thirteen ministers and survived the arrival of the Left in 1981, a not-so-common fate. This is partly due to the modest dimension of his office and also to the fact that survey research had no strong political flavor. As a matter of fact, Girard's work was more important than it looks at first sight in shaping what we now take for granted as cultural policy. No example existed before. Malraux, who dreamt of a higher political reward from de Gaulle, had to rely on fresh ideas and Girard was a natural provider. His Catholic *resistant* background gave him quite a few hints about what culture could do in a modern democracy: helping the integration of people into a new national community, reducing inequalities and reconstructing the territory.

As Guy Saez aptly reminds us in his chapter, cultural development (*développement culturel*) was Girard's greatest commitment. It would be certainly absurd to de-contextualize the notion and sever it from its ideological and ethical environment. The idea was borrowed from a sociologist of the postwar period, Joffre Dumazedier, soon to be superseded in public life by younger contenders like Pierre Bourdieu, but decisive in linking the social movement of popular education with sociological thought. Within the administrative system, cultural development was a brand new category. It belonged to what was called in France a “missionary administration” (*une administration de mission*) and demanded a full commitment of the actors. Talking about mission implied that the concept was located at the crossroad of bureaucratic action and social activism: this combination was to orient the whole of Girard's administrative behavior and intellectual activities.

The idea is undoubtedly cohesive, as Guy Saez argues, but it is also a very complex one, as Philippe Urfalino showed in his important book, *L'Invention de la politique culturelle*.^[1] In it, he points out the contradictions inherent in the mixing of administration and mission. What do we develop when we “do” cultural development? Is it only a way of easing access to legitimate cultural goods, as a process of cultural democratization? Or is it a way of changing the relationship of the citizens to culture and policy by bringing about a full cultural democracy? The notion envelops real political dilemmas. Its success was real under rightist, as well as under leftist governments, since we can witness it with the Mission du développement culturel, created by the rightist minister Jean-Philippe Lecat, and with the Direction du développement culturel, initiated by the leftist Jack Lang, showing a continuity rarely recognized by the latter, who instead used to say that, under François Mitterrand's presidency, culture had passed from shade to light (“de l'ombre à la lumière”).

Although the idea has suffered since the 1990s from a growing disenchantment vis-à-vis the promises of democracy, it had a great importance from the 1960s onwards and helped link the policymakers with the professionals of cultural worlds and the militants. The analysis of Cultural Forums based on passionate debates, particularly in Avignon and Bourges, clearly shows to what extent the notion of cultural development contributed to the shaping of a common culture, making possible a cultural policy *à la Française* that was to be one of the most original aspects of the Fifth Republic, not in terms of budget, but with respect to the construction of a new public sphere.[2] This goal was supported by the availability of original research findings on cultural behaviors that were published long before other and more central administrations, such as Education, were equipped with reliable data-providing services. Girard's commitment triggered a lot of innovative research in the sociology of culture. One could not understand Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* nor Pierre-Michel Menger's *Travail Créateur* without referring to the methodological and epistemological debates raised by the surveys developed by Girard and his colleagues.[3]

At this point, it is necessary to say something about the very productive development of cultural statistics that Girard allowed. The first national survey took place in 1973, near the end of the very prosperous decades that made France an affluent society and the most recent one was released in 2009. It allows a longitudinal perspective on cultural consumption as well as a view on lifestyle and symbolic changes in the country. At the beginning, the survey *Pratiques culturelles des Français* was a "pure product" of the French planning system, as Olivier Donnât reminds us in the book: measuring inequalities in a rapidly changing France (p. 97). As opposed to the still dominant view of culture limited to its high-brow side, the first survey included many elements pertaining to what is now called popular culture and leisure. But the main comments instantly focused on the restricted access to legitimate culture that was not to change quickly over time in spite of the political action of the Ministry of Culture. In the 1990s, it even became a way of dismissing cultural policy as inefficient or even counter-productive, as it induced middle-class practitioners to intensify their cultural activities, while the working class and the peasants did not change their attitude toward legitimate culture.[4]

Augustin Girard had sometimes mixed feelings about the uses of the survey that he had inspired. He was happy that the era of *de gustibus non disputandum est* was behind us and that a more objective approach to the issue of social taste was now available. But he was more reluctant when he considered the rather reductive statistical approach and the quick comments they triggered. Michel de Certeau's work enriched the critical debate on cultural statistics and Girard advocated complementing the national survey with qualitative research that would shed new light on cultural behavior as lived by individuals and small groups. The public debate generated by the survey has been fierce, but it has had many happy returns: new ways of studying the audience and the users, often inspired, overtly or not, by Certeau's *Invention du Quotidien*, a work commissioned by Girard's service and a thorough rethinking of the notion of cultural legitimacy.[5]

Augustin Girard's role has thus been twofold: helping a new sector of public intervention define itself and establish technical tools and conceptual categories of action; giving a niche, original and fecund, to the French sociology of culture. This was made possible by Girard's own itinerary and quite marginal position in the system. His generous personality helped the development of unlikely encounters and productive misunderstandings. This explains why some nostalgic overtones can be perceived throughout the book. Girard was the best example of the *grand commis de l'Etat*, inspired by a high sense of his mission and open to unconventional approaches. Emotion is present everywhere in the book, particularly in Pierre-Michel Menger's sensible contribution: evoking Girard's boldness and inventive attitude, he allows us to hear again his "humorous and affectionate laugh" (p. 191).

This is not the most important point. What makes this book worth reading? It is a rare occasion to understand the functioning of French public administration in a domain that is small as far as budget

matters, but central as far as ideology is concerned. This volume is undoubtedly one of the best of the already very rich series published by the Comité d'histoire du ministère de la Culture.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Maryvonne de Saint Pulgent, "Avant-propos"

Chapitre 1 – Augustin Girard, un parcours, une pensée

Vincent Dubois et Didier Georgakakis, "Sciences sociales et politiques culturelles. Entretien avec [...] Augustin Girard" [in: *Politix*, 1993 – extraits]

Vincent Dubois, "Augustin Girard, un intermédiaire entre recherche et administration"

Sylvie Pflieger, "Augustin Girard (1926-2009) : les études au service de la décision politique" [in: *Hermès*, 2010]

Chapitre 2 – Développement culturel

Augustin Girard, "Développement culturel et politique culturelle" [in: *Éducation et Culture*, 1968]

Guy Saez, "Augustin Girard, l'homme du «développement culturel»"

Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, "Politique culturelle et recherche"

Jacques Rigaud, "Le «moment Duhamel»"

Chapitre 3 – Pratiques culturelles et statistique culturelle

Augustin Girard, "Les enquêtes sur les pratiques culturelles"

Olivier Donnat, "«Pratiques culturelles des Français» : une enquête de marginal-sécant, au croisement de la sociologie de la culture, des médias et des loisirs"

Entretien avec Jacques Toubon, « Il existe un bon usage de l'expertise qui n'enlève rien à la responsabilité politique »

Chapitre 4 – Décentralisation et aménagement culturel du territoire

Augustin Girard, "De l'analyse des dépenses culturelles à l'Observatoire des politiques culturelles : le sens d'une démarche" [in: *Coopération des collectivités publiques et action culturelle*, 1989 – extraits]

Jean-Pierre Saez, "Augustin Girard, prophète et acteur de la décentralisation culturelle"

Entretien avec Catherine Tasca, «Articuler une grande politique nationale avec la capacité d'initiative des collectivités»

Chapitre 5 – Industries culturelles et économie de la culture

Augustin Girard, “Industries culturelles” [in: *Futuribles*, 1978 – extraits]

Augustin Girard, “Pour une économie de la culture” [in: *Quaestio. Culture et recherche*, 1985]

Pierre-Michel Menger, “Action publique et production industrielle de culture.
Un coup d’audace d’Augustin Girard”

Entretien avec Emmanuel Hoog, «Civiliser l’internet est un enjeu de politique culturelle »

Chapitre 6 – Coopération internationale

Augustin Girard, “Pour une nouvelle stratégie de la culture” [in: *Éducation et Culture*, 1973]

Augustin Girard, “Avertissement à l’ouvrage *Le Projet suédois de démocratie culturelle*” [Claude Fabrizio, 1975]

Laurent Martin, “Augustin Girard, une vision tournée vers l’international”

Gérald Grandmont, “Un privilège”

Entretien avec Carl-Johan Kleberg, «De l’UNESCO au Conseil de l’Europe, le rôle central d’Augustin Girard»

Christopher Gordon, “Augustin Girard (1926-2009) : un hommage personnel” [in: *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2009]

Geir Vestheim, Ingmar Meland, Helge Petersen, “Vu de Norvège : «Augustin Girard et la politique culturelle française »” [in: *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidsskrift*, 2010]

Chapitre 7 – Mémoire et histoire

Augustin Girard, “Les politiques culturelles d’André Malraux à Jack Lang : ruptures et continuités, histoire d’une modernisation” [in: *Hermès*, 1996 – extraits]

Philippe Poirrier, “De la prospective à l’histoire... et retour”

Florence Descamps, “Étude du passé, compréhension du présent et prospective”

Augustin Girard, “Voici donc créé et installé ce Comité d’histoire...” [1993 – extraits]

Envoi

Augustin Girard, “L’enjeu culturel” [in: *Les Enjeux de la fin du siècle*, 1986]

NOTES

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- [1] Philippe Urfalino, *L'invention de la politique culturelle* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1996).
- [2] Jean-Louis Fabiani, "Festivals: Local and Global. Critical Interventions and the Cultural Public Sphere," in G. Delanty, L. Giorgi, and Monica Sassatelli, eds., *Festival and the Cultural Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 94-107.
- [3] Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979) and Pierre-Michel Menger, *Le Travail créateur. S'accomplir dans l'incertain* (Paris: EHESS-Gallimard-Seuil, 2009).
- [4] Jean-Louis Fabiani, Antoine Hennion, Nicolas Herpin and Pierre-Michel Menger, "Eléments de synthèse," in Olivier Donnat et Paul Tolila, eds., *Le(s) public(s) de la culture* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 2003), vol. II, pp. 309-323.
- [5] Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du Quotidien. 1. Arts de faire*, (Paris : UGE, 1980).

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