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Leon Sachs, *The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First-Century French Literature and Film*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. xi + 240 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN-13: 978-0-8032-4505-1.

Review by Daniel Fairfax, Yale University.

Is French republicanism dead in the water? This question seems to have only heightened in pertinence in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in early 2015, but the ensuing political climate has provided contradictory answers. The attacks and their aftermath put the spotlight on the nation's roiling debates on immigration, multiculturalism and *laïcité*. While many in the country's impoverished immigrant neighborhoods are alienated from, if not overtly hostile to its prevailing political structures, the magnitude of the *marches républicaines* showed an unexpected willingness among large sections of the population to publicly defend those "republican values" that have been a mainstay of French politics since the Third Republic. And yet polls now consistently show the Front national—a group that explicitly rejects a number of the central tenets of the republican consensus—to be the most popular party in France. In spite of this paradoxical situation, Leon Sachs' recent monograph, *The Pedagogical Imagination: The Republican Legacy in Twenty-First-Century French Literature and Film*, persists in offering an optimistic outlook for an increasingly beleaguered creed.

That Sachs's chosen battleground should be the French education system only increases the stakes. Since the contentious 2004 ban on the wearing of the *foulard* (the headscarf worn by some Muslim women) in public schools, disputes over the compatibility of the putative universalism of the school system with the nation's contemporary demographic reality—one marked by the co-existence of a diverse range of cultures and beliefs—are rarely far from the media's eye. As Sachs stresses, however, such discord has existed since the establishment of a comprehensive secular education system under the auspices of education minister Jules Ferry in the 1880s.

To forcefully make this point, Sachs opens his book in potentially controversial fashion: by evoking a short story, "La dernière classe" (The Last Class) written by the monarchist, openly anti-semitic author Alphonse Daudet. Here, in the wake of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, a schoolteacher in an Alsatian village gives the final French lesson to his pupils before the mandated onset of German-language study. Too emotional to offer some parting words, the patriotic Monsieur Hamel instead turns to the blackboard and chalks up, in bold majuscules, the phrase "VIVE LA FRANCE!" For Sachs, although "Daudet's Prussian troops have been replaced by text messaging, Hollywood movies, and the *hijab*," his story retains a relevance for the present period, as France's "leaders, intellectuals and educators today invoke the school as a bulwark against these potential threats to French culture and identity" (p. 2).

The resulting study takes for its focus four works of twenty-first-century literature and film that, in concerning themselves with the state of crisis pervading French schools, are considered to be present-day versions of "La dernière classe": Agnès Varda's essayistic documentary, *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), Érik Orsenna's children's story, *La grammaire est une chanson douce* (*Grammar is a Gentle, Sweet Song*, 2001), Abdellatif Kechiche's film, *L'esquive* (*Games of Love and Chance*, 2003) and

François Bégaudeau's novel, *Entre les murs* (*The Class*, 2006). Before concentrating on these individual works, however, Sachs embarks on a historical overview of the politically charged nature of pedagogy in France. France's military defeat to the Prussians was above all seen as an intellectual failure—"it is not the heart but rather the head that has failed us" as Ernest Renan put it (p. 25)—and was to be rectified by a renewed focus on education reform. Under Ferry's tutelage, a moralistic system of *éducation* run largely by the Catholic Church and reliant on the rote recitation of set texts was superseded by a more science-oriented model of *instruction*, which, inspired by the writings of François Rabelais, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Nicolas de Condorcet, had the active intellectual engagement of the *leçon des choses* (object lesson) at its center.

An appreciation for the progressive effects of republican pedagogy—fostering, in the author's view, an emphasis on intellectual autonomy and critical inquiry—consciously pits *The Pedagogical Imagination* against the prevailing attitude since the 1960s that "the republican school founded at the end of the nineteenth century was primarily a state instrument for forming a docile citizenry and maintaining social order" (p. 8). Tracing this viewpoint to the landmark scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu/Jean-Claude Passeron and Michel Foucault, Sachs notes its continuation in studies such as Christian Nique/Claude Lelièvre's *La République n'éduquera pas*.^[1] Against this purported "demythologization" of Ferry's pedagogical model, Sachs sides with the strand of historical scholarship, marked by the recent work of Yves Déloye, Pierre Kahn and Eric Dubreucq, that seeks to rehabilitate the emancipatory merits of the late nineteenth-century education reforms and shed light on their origins in the guiding ideas of the Enlightenment.^[2]

What sets Sachs's study apart from its predecessors, however, is the second of its polemical stances. Rather than a wide-ranging survey of the contemporary and historical school systems in France, the author seeks to defend republican pedagogy by engaging in critical readings of aesthetic works. Not only this, but Sachs consciously distances himself from what he sees as the New Historicist tendency toward "excessive concern" with thematic content when grappling with works of art, instead aligning his project with a "New Formalist" movement that prioritizes the exploration of formal strategies when discerning the "meaning" of a literary (or cinematic) text (pp. 13-14). Moreover, the author insists that these two facets of his argument are closely imbricated with one another: the practice of close reading and textual analysis as developed by twentieth-century formalism finds an uncanny predecessor in one of the warhorses of literary study in the republican *lycée*: the *explication du texte*. As such, Sachs sees good reason to make the claim, repeated several times throughout his book, that "the critical reader is a republican reader" (*passim*).

The ensuing chapters are thus structured around critical readings of the four works in question. While the author's ability to home in on key passages and beguiling formal maneuvers in his selected subject matter demonstrates a reliably impressive interpretive acuity, the degree to which these readings convincingly support Sachs's broader argument on the fortunes of republican pedagogy varies. In the case of *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, it is freely admitted that Varda's concern for reading has received little critical attention, with the film's reception overwhelmingly dominated by discussions of its stance on ecology, waste and the irrationality of much contemporary economic practice. And indeed, Sachs's attempt to draw out links between the septuagenarian filmmaker's newfound digital video aesthetic and the life's work of nineteenth-century lexicologist Pierre Larousse, on the basis of a single brief opening sequence in which Varda looks up the Larousse dictionary entry for the word *glaneuse*, comes across as overly forced. The tenuousness of this affinity is even acknowledged by Sachs himself, who defends his action by pointing to Varda's practice of "intellectual gleaning" (pp. 74-75).

Questions of reading and pedagogy, however, are indisputably of major significance when it comes to the encounter, in the film's closing moments, with Alain Fonteneau, an urban gleaner who sells street magazines and fossicks for food in order to spend his evenings teaching literacy classes to African migrants in a hostel in the Parisian *banlieue*. Fonteneau's commitment to universally accessible

education places him, in the author's view, in the lineage of Larousse's pedagogical mission, but while Sachs focuses closely on a briefly-shown page of one of Fonteneau's makeshift instructional manuals, he neglects to make mention of the key contradiction between Fonteneau's work and the republican education system of which Larousse is an avatar: far from being a central pillar of French letters, Fonteneau is an outsider, eking out an existence on the margins of society in order to give lessons to those who are categorically excluded from the French state's social contract.

Shifting his attention to Érik Orsenna's *La grammaire est une chanson douce* (a work with striking parallels to G. Bruno's 1877 paean to French chauvinism, *Le tour de la France par deux enfants*), Sachs seeks to align the tale's polemic against the bowdlerized textual structuralism that predominates in the present-day French education system, in favour of a more humanistic, creative approach to the country's literary patrimony, with the stated argument of his own project. Orsenna unquestionably mines much of the same terrain as *The Pedagogical Imagination* for his fable, but one cannot help but feel that the erstwhile Mitterrand advisor is fighting a different battle to that pursued by Sachs. Whereas the latter positions the structuralist methodology of Genette and Barthes as a worthy successor to the scientific outlook of republican pedagogy, Orsenna sees the take-up of this theoretical trend as leading to a deplorably reductionist approach to the power and grace of great literature (Proust, Saint-Exupéry and La Fontaine are his literary paragons), relegating it to the status of a mere "text," indistinguishable from more workaday writing, and subject to the same jargony discursive analysis. Sachs' argument correspondingly becomes more contorted at this point: acknowledging that the parable is a "polemic against the scientification of literary studies," he nonetheless claims that "it would be more accurate to read it as a corrective to the possible excesses of the science of literature, but a corrective that simultaneously remains indebted to the contributions of the very tradition that it critiques" (pp. 110-111).

The author is on firmer ground when tackling two works which, with their diegetic settings in modern French public schools in areas with large immigrant populations and their highlighting of the often tempestuous relationship between teachers and students, more overtly tackle the subject matter of Sachs's monograph. *L'esquive* relates a staging of the canonical Marivaux play *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard* by an ethnically diverse group of *lycéens*. Once again, *The Pedagogical Imagination* bristles against critical consensus: in this case, the commonly held view that the Franco-Tunisian filmmaker unambiguously denounces the republican school's "failure to integrate France's multicultural population and the authoritarian manner in which it imposes high literary culture" (p. 113). Sachs opts for a nuanced understanding of the film and the issues it addresses, and in doing so seeks to avoid the unequivocal dichotomies offered in a high-profile dispute between Alain Finkielkraut and Philippe Choulet. Whereas Choulet sees present methods of teaching classical French literature to secondary students as the imposition of a "new dead language" comparable to the Greek and Latin lessons of earlier eras, and thus "an instrument of selection, marginalization and cultural exclusion" (p. 119), Finkielkraut "faults the school's excessive commitment to creating a curriculum that valorizes the students' own culture instead of pushing them to discover the unfamiliar cultural universe afforded by the classics" and decries the "demagoguery" and "sheep-like subjectivity" of the outlook espoused by his adversary (pp. 133-134).

In the culminating scene of *L'esquive*, however, Kechiche presents a different position that adroitly dodges the binary logic of Finkielkraut and Choulet's quarrel: the Marivaux performance is preceded by an elementary school class's recitation of *The Conference of the Birds* (a twelfth century Arabic poem by Farid al-din Attar) in French translation. This allegorical plea for cultural tolerance is used by the director to "make the case for republican universalism better than any French text could, for it situates an argument for the universal value of autonomous political and individual self-realization in a non-French source, thereby corroborating the true universality of the principle" (pp. 140-141).

Entre les murs, a “docunovel” relating Bégaudeau’s own experiences teaching in a Parisian high school, similarly depicts an education system mired in crisis and unsure of its overarching mission. While the novel’s interpolation of “authentic realia” (excerpts from lesson plans, samples of student work, lyrics to rap music, et cetera) ineluctably elicits an initial response querying its “verisimilitude, its referential fidelity, its mimetic precision,” Sachs prefers to focus on its “larger, ‘literary’ reality,” arguing that its “deeper political engagement resides in its poetic features” (p. 147). The resulting discussion—as Bégaudeau’s formal gambits, his adoption of the pervasive metaphor of walls and boundaries, and the *mise en abyme* effect of a self-reflexive discussion of the Socratic method are all probed—is undoubtedly *The Pedagogical Imagination*’s strongest section, and the most compelling support for the author’s contention that “the palpability of the text, its own formal constructedness or poeticity, achieves in the artistic realm what a pedagogy based on unmediated encounters with the natural world...attempts in the progressive classroom” (p. 175).

As befits an unabashedly polemical work, there is much to take umbrage with in Sachs’s presentation of republican pedagogy and its ostensibly progressive pedigree. While the liberating effects of the spread of literacy and the extension of basic education to all layers of society should not be underestimated, the centralist disposition of the Ferry reforms, and their concomitant intolerance for minority languages and cultures (which had a devastating impact on the Breton, Corsican and Provençal populations), are hastily skirted over by the author, despite the clear parallels with the integration of subaltern cultural groups (albeit more preponderantly of immigrant origins) today. Moreover, in presenting an overly idealized vision of French republicanism, Sachs refrains from grappling with some of its more underlying contradictions. Most notably, the question as to how a doctrine that emerged from the radically egalitarian impulses of the French revolution could morph into an ideological cover for cultural exclusivity, intolerance and, in some cases, outright xenophobia is largely avoided. Sachs makes a stirring argument for equating the “critical reader” with the “republican reader,” but in the face of so much countervailing evidence of the French state’s hostility to genuinely critical thinking it is hard to agree that this relationship is a privileged one. Republicanism may not quite be dead in the water, but if France is to rise out of its current spiritual marasmus, it will do so by regaining the emancipatory ethos of its politically ebullient moments (1789, 1848, the Commune, the Liberation, 1968), rather than by regressing to the stultifying authoritarian conformism of the Third Republic.

This dissensus ought not to take away from the strength of *The Pedagogical Imagination*, which lies in the author’s superlative ability to tease out a wealth of meaning and historical resonance from a seemingly inconsequential detail of a film or literary work. Sachs reserves perhaps his most revealing close analysis for the book’s conclusion. In a scene from *Entre les murs*, a school group is shown an art installation entitled *L’infini matérialisé* (*Infinity Materialized*), which consists of “a case built of wood and metal, with mirrored trusses reflecting back and forth endlessly.” When one of the students peers into the work, he sees nothing but himself in the act of looking. This moment of infinite introspection is, as Sachs recognizes, an eloquent allegory for “the act of formalist reading” (p. 185). But the installation’s endless game of reflection may also be a metaphor for what seems, from the present standpoint, to be the interminable nature of debates on the French school system and its broader social function, debates with which Sachs stimulatingly engages, but cannot hope to resolve.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La reproduction: Éléments pour une théorie du système d’enseignement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970); Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Christian Nique and Claude Lelièvre, *La République n’éduquera pas* (Paris: Plon, 1993).

[2] See, for instance, Yves Déloye, *École et citoyenneté: L'individualisme républicain de Jules Ferry à Vichy: controverses* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1994), Pierre Kahn, *La leçon de choses: Naissance de l'enseignement des sciences à l'école primaire* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2002), and Éric Dubreucq, *Une éducation républicaine: Marion, Buisson, Durkheim* (Paris: Vrin, 2004).

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