
H-France Review Vol. 2 (September 2002), No. 91

Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire. Under the direction of Pierre Nora; translation directed by David P. Jordan. Vol. I: *The State*. Translated by Mary Trouille. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. xxxiii + 483 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-59132-8.

Review by Lloyd Kramer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The history of nations and the meaning of history itself have become closely linked in recent years to the concept of memory. Where earlier generations discussed national histories or national events, historians now like to talk about national memory. Nations define their identities by remembering and praising the past, but memories are always selective because a coherent identity (for nations as well as individuals) requires a lot of forgetting. As Ernest Renan noted in an often quoted nineteenth-century essay, “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.”[1] Historians thus become controversial when they call attention to unpleasant national events that most of their compatriots prefer to forget. At the same time, however, historians play a much-valued cultural role when they help their nations remember people and events that were unique or important in world history. Historians, in short, work at the cultural intersection of memory and forgetting, where all modern nation-states are forever building and rebuilding the institutions that shape and protect human identities.

The recent historical fascination with national memory owes a great deal to Pierre Nora’s influential work on cultural remembrance in France. Throughout the 1980s Nora directed a large-scale, evolving study of various “sites” in French culture and society that have become important components of French national memory and identity. Although Nora avoided the jargon of contemporary cultural studies, he and his colleagues were examining what is now called the “cultural construction” of nationalism. This vast research project brought together 127 essays in a seven volume series called *Les Lieux de mémoire*, which was published in France between 1984 and 1992.[2] Much of this material (44 essays) was translated into three English-language volumes and published by Columbia University Press under the English title, *Realms of Memory* (1996-1998). These volumes attracted wide attention because they were well edited and clearly translated and also because they focused on the historical meaning of important “conflicts and divisions,” “traditions,” and “symbols.”[3]

Now the American historian David P. Jordan is directing the careful, well-organized translation of forty-five additional essays, which the University of Chicago Press is publishing in an important new four volume series entitled *Rethinking France*. Nora’s introduction to this first volume explains that the new series moves from a more abstract, symbolic emphasis in *Realms of Memory* to “the most specific elements of national identity in their material dimension” (p. xx). These more “material” aspects of identity include “the state” (the theme of this volume), “space,” “culture,” and “historiography,” but these categories do not seem to be much more “material” than the forms of identity that were examined in the earlier Columbia volumes. Most of the essays in *Rethinking France* show how state institutions use symbols and cultural narratives to shape the meaning of national memories. Nora does not use explicitly psychological language, but he clearly assumes that national memory becomes the public expression of deep cultural desires and anxieties that are regularly forgotten or suppressed. *Rethinking France*

therefore seeks to foster a new historical consciousness about underlying cultural and political processes that give meaning to national memories, much as a psychological awareness of the unconscious mind offers individuals a new way to understand the symbols that give meaning to their dreams and personal memories.

This emphasis on the processes that produce human memory supports the volume's broad historical claim that modern personal identities often have merged with collective national identities. These two intertwined levels of identity evolve through the individual's repeated contacts with the institutions and *lieux de mémoire* that represent the nation in both the transactions of daily life and the rituals of public events. More specifically, as the authors of the book's eleven essays explain the process, the traditions and institutions of the French state have shaped a collective national memory that sustains belief in a coherent French national identity. Public and personal identities converge in collectively remembered events and commemorative sites that produce what Benedict Anderson famously called an "imagined community" (these words never appear in this book, but the *lieux de mémoire* create the kind of imagined, national connections that Anderson describes).^[4] Although Nora's project focuses entirely on France, his theoretical framework can be applied to all modern nations. We have seen, for example, how the World Trade Center and September 11 immediately became powerful *lieux de mémoire* that will continue to influence American national identities and memories in future contexts and conflicts that we cannot yet imagine.

Rethinking France thus develops an important general argument about the overlapping levels of modern human identities, but the argument is persuasive because each essay analyzes specific institutions that have defined the symbolic meaning of the French state. One of these institutions was of course the long-developing French monarchy, which Alain Guéry examines in a perceptive essay on the French deference to state power. Kings gradually displaced the medieval church as the symbolic center of the "public good," Guéry argues, because they claimed to serve the whole society and to provide a collective defense against particular, self-interested groups such as nobles, regional factions, or economic elites. Guéry suggests that this belief in the state's protection of the common good carried over to the French Revolution and later republics, which expanded the state's ambitious aspirations to include the collective "happiness" of all French citizens. The royal claim to represent a common good never disappeared from French conceptions of the state, however, and French national identity continued to draw meaning and coherence from the memory of French kings. French schoolchildren still learn their national identities as they study Charlemagne, the "Age of Louis XIV" or the Valois and Bourbon royal families. Indeed, the monarchy has been such a pervasive collective memory that even anti-royalist Third Republic educators used the story of Charlemagne to encourage national unity, as Robert Morrissey explains in an excellent essay on historical interpretations of the "French" king who was really German.

But it was not just specific kings who represented an imagined, early national unity; in fact, the monuments they left behind became even more valuable *lieux de mémoire* for the French state. These monuments included famous *châteaux*, government buildings, and the great palace at Versailles, whose legendary political meanings are examined in a well-documented essay by Héléne Himelfarb. Although Versailles was designed to represent royal power, it has remained a symbol of French nationhood through all the subsequent changes in French political culture. Modern republicans soon discovered that this royal palace could serve their political purposes as effectively as it had served the policies of Louis XIV (renovation of the château and gardens has been an ongoing public project for both the Fourth and Fifth French Republics). Foreign leaders travel to Versailles during official state visits, schools take their students to the palace for lessons in French history, and busloads of tourists arrive every day to photograph a royal monument that still exemplifies France's national identity, memory, and unity.

The French monarchy, however, is only one of the state traditions and institutions that have shaped the memory and meaning of the French nation. Maurice Agulhon's essay in this volume, for example,

notes the state's role in promoting a common language that became the shared literary and linguistic resource for national identity. The state encouraged use of the French language by making it essential for anyone who wanted to advance in the education system or in the government bureaucracy, so that language itself became a *lieu de mémoire*. Other intriguing essays by Bernard Guenée and Daniel Nordman show how royal tours of border areas helped to establish well-defined national boundaries and produced enduring memories of famous military campaigns or famous royal meetings with local nobles and foreign rulers. More generally, the publication of maps in sixteenth-century books gave French readers a vivid visual image of national borders that have defined the geographical limits of French identity for almost four centuries.

Other kinds of "borders" emerged in the new national laws that developed rapidly during the French Revolution and appeared most conspicuously in the famous Civil Code that Napoleon promulgated in 1804. No matter what cultural identities French people might claim after that era, they were linked to a collective community through their shared adherence to the legal code that became an influential *lieu de mémoire* as well as a controlling power in the daily activities of French social life. Jean Carbonnier describes the symbolic power of the Civil Code in a perceptive essay that portrays laws as another "monument" of the French state. Indeed, as Hervé Le Bras describes it, even the government bureau of statistics had become an important site of national memory and identity by the late nineteenth century. Statistical accounts of the nation—like law courts, maps, famous buildings, and the stories of celebrated kings—provided a symbolic narrative of the nation's identity and gave every French citizen a quantitative place in the national story.

These examples from different authors suggest how this book of diverse essays manages to achieve a surprising intellectual and historical coherence, but Nora's own concluding essay ("Memoirs of Men of State: From Comynnes to De Gaulle") makes the most innovative contribution to the study of national identity. Arguing that the cultural tradition of memoir writing fused individual and collective identities in narratives of French selfhood, Nora stresses the political significance and popularity of memoirs during the early nineteenth century (500 different memoirs from the early modern and modern era were published or republished between 1820 and 1840). This kind of writing, as Nora describes it, attracted popular interest in this post-revolutionary period because it expressed a deep fascination with the complex link between individuals and the French state. Memoirs resembled autobiographies in describing the actions or career of the author, yet they carried the author's story in very different directions. Autobiographies usually referred to the author's **internal** psychological or spiritual development, whereas the typical memoir referred to the author's **external** actions as he represented state institutions or enacted public policies.

The evolving modern state thus produced changes in memoir writing that Nora traces through three broad historical and literary phases. The genre began in *mémoires d'épée*, which typically described a heroic aristocrat's opposition or service to royal power. The memoir later took on the literary style of early novels, however, as the genre evolved into the *mémoires de cour*, which portrayed aristocratic behavior in court society and provided insider information about the lives of social elites (the duc de Saint-Simon's account of Versailles is a classic example). Finally, the memoirs of people in the modern state began to describe how political leaders or cabinet ministers influenced public policies as they moved in and out of different government administrations. François Guizot established this new pattern in the nineteenth century, but the modern style of political writing culminated in the memoirs of Charles De Gaulle. In addition to tracing these historical phases of memoir literature, Nora categorizes memoir writers in three different groups of political actors: ministers who held important, cabinet-level powers (e.g., Sully, Richelieu, Guizot), literary figures who lived on the margins of state power (e.g., Saint-Simon, Chateaubriand), and the most influential national rulers who virtually embodied the French state at important historical moments (e.g., Louis XIV, Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles De Gaulle).

Despite the many differences among these various writers, they all defined their personal identities through constant references to the state and state power. The typical male memoir writer narrated the meaning of his own life as he narrated the actions and meaning of the state, thereby trying to ensure that he would be remembered because of the role that he played in the French government. Louis XIV may have been the only political leader who was reputed to say “*l'état, c'est moi*,” but Nora convincingly argues that the whole *corpus* of memoir writing emphasizes the connection between a self-defined, important self and an important state. It does not much matter whether the memoir is historically accurate because its critical identity-shaping purpose is to connect the personal narrative with political actions and to place the individual life within public memories. These connections between writing, identity, and public action lead Nora to conclude that memoirs may well provide “the secret history of our collective or state memory” and that they should be viewed “not as a marginal, anecdotal genre but as the royal and even sacred path to the French national identity” (p. 440). This is a big claim for an often-ignored literary genre, but Nora’s description of memoirs resembles the Freudian account of the link between identity and dreams—which Freud called the “royal road” to the unconscious mind. The memoir, like the dream, reveals the deep structures of human identities. And these modern personal identities (as Nora describes them in France) have an intricate connection with collective memories of the French nation and state.

Rethinking France thus provides an imaginative new fusion of political and cultural history. It pushes political history toward a new, detailed attention to the symbols, narratives, and public monuments that sustain personal and collective identification with a national state, but it also pushes cultural history toward a new detailed analysis of political institutions, political leaders, and the exercise of state power. Nora and his collaborators show that power is rarely exercised simply through public policies or specific laws. The state more often gains legitimacy through the symbols and memories that national leaders claim to represent or embody, and the modern state wields exceptional power because its individual citizens link their personal identities and achievements to the collective identity and actions of the nation.

Each essay in this volume adds valuable examples to the overall argument, but you would not have to read every chapter to understand the general themes. Some of the authors wander from the “construction of memory” into detailed descriptions of how the memories were wrong, thus losing sight of the argument that memories depend on interpretations rather than on historical realities. A teacher of French history therefore could launch a good discussion of national memory or identity by using only the introductions and a couple of essays from the rest of the book—which is otherwise far too long for a class reading assignment.

Although readers will find much specific information about French cultural traditions in this book, they may also discover that the book’s broad themes carry a particular resonance in our own moment of resurgent nationalism and expanding state power. *Rethinking France* shows how modern selfhood has become embedded in the multiple, complex layers of modern nationhood, and it reminds us that all personal and collective identities require constant appeals to memory. This inescapable cultural process thus offers both challenges and opportunities for historians who may mistakenly assume that contemporary societies have little interest in the past. Given the importance of memory and forgetting in every national culture, historians are bound to attract suspicion or hostility as well as a guarded appreciation from the people who hold power in modern nation-states.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Pierre Nora, “General Introduction”

- David P. Jordan, "Introduction"
- Pierre Nora, "Volume Introduction"
- Alain Guéry, "The State: The Tool of the Common Good"
- Maurice Agulhon, "The Center and the Periphery"
- Bernard Guenée, "From Feudal Boundaries to Political Borders"
- Daniel Nordman, "From the Boundaries of the State to National Borders"
- Robert Morrissey, "Charlemagne"
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- Jean Carbonnier, "The French Civil Code"
- Hervé Le Bras, "The Government Bureau of Statistics: La Statistique Générale de la France"
- Pierre Nora, "Memoirs of Men of State: From Comynes to De Gaulle"

NOTES

[1] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" [1882], translated by Martin Thom, in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.

[2] The seven French volumes, which contained more than 5600 pages, were published by Gallimard.

[3] *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, under the direction of Pierre Nora, edited and with a foreword by Lawrence D. Kritzman, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-1998).

[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2nd ed., 1991).

Lloyd Kramer
University of North Carolina
lkramer@email.unc.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172