
H-France Review Vol. 3 (May 2003), No. 56

H.L. Wesseling, *Certain Ideas of France: Essays on French History and Civilization*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 2002. xvi + 205 pp. Notes and index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 0-313-32341-0.

Review by James E. Genova, Indiana State University.

Inspired by the now famous opening phrase from Charles de Gaulle's *Memoirs*, H.L. Wesseling's *Certain Ideas of France: Essays on French History and Civilization*, with a forward by Eugen Weber, presents a sweeping personal reflection on various, and sometimes contradictory, imaginings of France and French civilization spanning the past two centuries. Wesseling uses the prism of artists, writers, public intellectuals, and politicians to access conceptions of what it means to be French and of the place of "French civilization" in the world as articulated from the period of the Restoration following Napoleon to the Gaullist 1960s and the triumph of the *Annales* School in the social sciences. His subjects range from the internal struggles of competing monarchist factions to sports and academia, from heated public controversies (including the Dreyfus Affair) to de Gaulle's attempts to reassert French *grandeur* following the debacle of World War II and the turbulent 1950s. Throughout Wesseling's narrative is smooth, but without eliding the complexities of his subject. Consequently, *Certain Ideas of France* is accessible to audiences without an in-depth knowledge of French history and culture as well as satisfying to those intimately acquainted with the temporal procession of the hexagon since 1815.

Part one, "Culture and Society," situates culture and cultural achievement as a centerpiece in the articulation of certain ideas of France. The prominent roles of painters (Ary Scheffer), writers (Émile Zola), and sports enthusiasts (Pierre de Coubertin) suggests a uniqueness for French identity that has been seized upon by politicians ever since as a marker of difference between France and the 'others' against which French identity has been constructed over the years—including in the vituperative propaganda of the Great War during which French *civilisation* was pitted against German *kultur*. Wesseling uses the vignettes in this section to set the stage for the struggles to define French identity during the twentieth century and the very public place of intellectuals in the midst of them. Most interesting in this regard is the chapter on sport and de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games. Wesseling furnishes an interesting and compelling argument that sport served, as did colonialism, "as a training ground for action, initiative, and energy, and offered an escape from modern society" (p. 35). The case of de Coubertin provides insight into the development of a certain notion of French nationalism, one that has as backdrop and inspiration a conviction that France is in decline, suffering from decadence, and in need of the restoration of French glory—a theme revisited in de Gaulle's "certain idea of France" in the following century. What is curious though, and not discussed by Wesseling, is the relative failure of sport to take hold in France at that time. In comparison to its neighbors—Germany and England—France is rather apathetic toward physical sport. Yet France did take to colonialism as a field of engagement, even if vicariously for almost all Frenchmen. Therefore, one wonders whether a focus on colonialism, in addition to an essay on sport, might have provided an

interesting contrast, especially considering that de Gaulle's later vision was also heavily influenced by colonial affairs and experiences, rather more so than sport.

In part two, "Intellectuals and Politics," Wesseling tackles some familiar themes--the Dreyfus Affair, Robert Brasillach and fascism, and Raymond Aron's career, particularly those episodes during the Cold War when he found himself on the intellectual margins of French life. The temptation for fascism among French intellectuals of the 1930s and early 1940s is a subject that has generated much speculation and scholarship over the years. Wesseling's use of Brasillach as his window onto the period and the phenomenon of French fascism provides the reader with the story of a writer continuing the tradition of nationalists dating to the early 1800s of constructing a certain notion of France on the basis of "ideas of renewal" (p. 71). For Brasillach the problem of French renewal was fundamentally cultural in nature. Consequently, Wesseling argues that "fascism for Brasillach was first and foremost something else, namely a cultural phenomenon." Fascism was read "as a cultural revolution" (p. 72). Yet there is something troubling in Wesseling's analysis of "the problem, 'writers and fascism'" (p. 74). Giving primacy to the cultural in this manner has the effect of masking the horrors of fascism, horrors to which Brasillach and his cohort of fascist writers contributed in no small measure. Wesseling has already demonstrated the long-accepted case for the unusually influential role of intellectuals in French public life; therefore, one also can relatively safely note the role French fascist writers played in popularizing and legitimizing fascism in France before and during World War II. It is disappointing that Wesseling does not raise the question of accountability in this short chapter on Brasillach.

The third section, "Politics and Diplomacy," offers a glimpse into the fundamental debates that have shaped French foreign policy throughout much of the twentieth century, centering on the towering figure of Charles de Gaulle and his certain idea of France. This section shifts our focus from the more explicitly internal discussions of French identity to the "certain conception(s) of France's role in the world" (p. 97). According to Wesseling, the central point of contention in this regard is whether France envisions itself primarily as invested with a "continental or overseas role" (p. 96). This diplomatic struggle dates at least to the origins of the Third Republic and the premierships of Jules Ferry during the early phases of France's imperial expansion and the ascendancy of Chancellor Otto von Bismark in Germany. Without explicitly stating it, Wesseling demonstrates the inability of French history and identity in the modern period to be read without inscribing the colonial experience within it. Even the terms of debate itself imply the centrality of colonialism in shaping the narratives of modern France. Therefore, it is all the more surprising that Wesseling does not bring out this imperial heritage in his retelling of de Gaulle's presentation of France's place in the world. Moreover, Wesseling's discussion of the European Union/Common Market and French attitudes toward it is perhaps the weakest section of the entire book. Playing with Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation-state as an "imagined community," Wesseling argues, "The nation-state did not occur spontaneously, but was the product of a political will. [This] means, after all, that the nations [within the European Union] will exist only as long as the people want them to do so" (pp. 112-113). While it is generally agreed that nation-states did not suddenly appear, presenting them as the product of "a political will" suggests premeditation and a focus of purpose that is not at all evident in the historical record. In fact, the history of the emergence of the nation-state is quite convoluted, contested, and always incomplete, and the psychosocial boundaries of the nation-state are always slipping and blurring. Similarly, arguing that the demise of nation-states as a form of psychosocial and political organization is simply the question of popular will underestimates the power and durability of cultural discourses and hegemonic institutions.

The final part of *Certain Ideas of France*, "History and Historians," brings the reader back to the role of intellectuals in shaping discourses of French identity and imaginings of France's place in the world. The section looks at the work of historian and colonial theorist/propagandist Gabriel Hanotaux and later at the *Annales* School, in particular the influential oeuvre of Fernand Braudel, as vistas onto the ways in which certain ideas of France have influenced the writing of France's history and how historians have helped to deepen and crystallize those notions. The chapter on Hanotaux provides Wesseling's most in-

depth treatment of the colonial question and, again, shows how significant the colonial experience was in giving play to certain ideas of France, while also profoundly influencing them. The final chapters on the *Annales* School and Braudel indicate the ways in which particular neo-nationalist and Gaullist conceptions of Frenchness have become integrated as established ways of seeing France in-itself and in-the-world, to borrow a Sartrean formulation. The closing chapter on Braudel provides an effective conclusion to *Certain Ideas of France* in that it resolves the diplomatic struggle--continental or overseas--through situating France as Mediterranean (both continental and overseas simultaneously). It also legitimizes the framework of the book in its own version of the *longue durée*, a sweep not quite as *longue* as Braudel's but still a skillful presentation of intellectual currents spanning two centuries.

Overall, Wesseling's collection of essays gives the reader a sense of the dominant intellectual themes from the Restoration to the Gaullist 1960s and beyond without becoming immersed in detail while at the same time providing some commentary and conjecture on the future life of those issues visited in the text. *Certain Ideas of France* delivers on what it promises, a survey of some notions of Frenchness and about France's role in the world written in essay format and, therefore, meant to inform and speculate on what are still considered to be fundamental "problems" for France today--the search for a definable and sustainable identity, as well as the recurring themes of decline and renewal that seem to be at the genesis of so many French nationalisms.

James E. Genova
Indiana State University
higenova@isugw.indstate.edu