

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 6 (February 2006), No. 17

**Philippe Bourdin, Mathias Bernard and Jean-Claude Caron, Eds.,** *La Voix et le Geste. Une approche culturelle de la violence socio-politique.* Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2005. 384 pp. Appendices and illustrations. €38 (pb). ISBN 2-84516-276-6.

Review by Charles Tilly, Columbia University.

---

Among its other features, collective violence visibly incorporates local cultural forms and broadcasts messages that only people who are already knowledgeable in the local culture can interpret fully. Building on that insight, professors Bourdin, Bernard, and Caron of Clermont-Ferrand's Blaise Pascal University have assembled papers from a conference they organized in September 2003. Fashionably, they portray violence as a form of "representation" in three different varieties: 1) as depictions of the body politic, especially when seen through authorities, heroes, and public enemies; 2) as portrayals of major groups of combatants; and 3) as objects of artistic activity broadly defined.

In the first category, Raymonde Monnier, Michel Biard, Jean-Luc Chappey, Bernard Gainot, Emmanuel Fureix, and Pascal Gibert take us from the Revolution of 1789-99 to the end of World War II, from tyrannicide as a theme in discussions of Louis XVI's flight to Varennes (Monnier) to shaming of collaborators, mostly female, in the Auvergne by means of forced haircuts and condemnatory graffiti (Gibert). In the second category, Louis Hincker, Jean-Claude Caron, Rémy Cazals, Laurent Dornel, Mathias Bernard, and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel range from claims to compensation for wounds received (or, as it happens, not actually received) in the battles of 1848 and 1851 (Hincker) to women's participation in demonstrations of May 1968 and thereafter (Zancarini-Fournel).

The third category—"les miroirs de la violence"—brings in Paule Petitier, Barthélemy Jobert, Philippe Bourdin, Jean-Claude Yon, Valérie Mazerolle, and Catherine Bertho Lavenir. The section includes essays on Michelet's treatment of popular violence (Petitier), changing historical conceptions of the Revolution's legislative leaders (Jobert), patriotic theater during the Revolution (Bourdin), the right to whistle down performers in the nineteenth century theater (Yon), the repertoire of twentieth-century popular singer Colette Magny (Mazerolle), and the attack on the Métro at Saint-Michel station in July 1995 (Bertho Lavenir). These studies cover a striking variety of phenomena and events. They center, however, not on causes, effects, or internal organization of collective violence, but on the negotiation of its meaning.

The book's editors announce their larger project as an exploration of how a public space (either democratic or state-dominated) formed and changed in France. Violence matters to public space, they argue, because civic discourse depends on the suppression of violence and because the memory and threat of violence always linger at the edge of civic discourse. They offer three tentative arguments to frame the book's analysis: that each political age creates its own system of representations, that in France the overall evolution of those representations has run from the eighteenth-century monarchy's sacred ceremonial to the relatively democratic secular discussion of the twentieth century, and that the French Revolution's public life left a stronger mark on political representations than any other comparable period. The book's contributors pay little explicit attention to these three arguments, but the arguments help identify the field within which they are working. Both editors and contributors ground themselves firmly in cultural and intellectual history.

---

Bourdin and his colleagues clearly demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of cultural and intellectual history in this representational mode. In general, the authors come to their analyses with enthusiasm, deploying their literary and descriptive skills in the style of critics who are reviewing works of art. In her analysis of how anti-foreign sentiment and action became republican toward the end of the nineteenth century, for example, Laurent Dornel moves easily from patriotic rationales for attacks on Italian workers to national debates on immigration, arguing that both of them represent a politicization of French attitudes toward foreigners facilitated by the installation of the Third Republic. She suggests cautiously that the movement of xenophobia into the political sphere helped cause anti-foreign violence to decline during the 1890s; politics tamed workers' readiness to attack their immigrant competitors. Thus, like many other contributors to the volume, she describes an arc from shifting mentalities to political action.

That very arc identifies weaknesses of a representational approach to political history. Violence, like other forms of political activity, does not simply express the attitude of one person, group, or nation at a time. It results from the structure of power, depends on previously existing relations among persons and groups, takes shape in response to the availability of violent means, responds to socially and politically shaped opportunities, and in any case usually consists not of solo action but of intense interaction. One might expect students of the French Revolution, the June Days of 1848, or of street demonstrations to begin from those presumptions. On the whole, however, the book's authors avoid them. These analysts of voice and gesture follow a simple causal trajectory from attitudes to violent action.

Michel Biard's essay on condemnations of *représentants en mission* in reaction to the Terror of 1793-94 illustrates the difficulty. Biard shows dramatically how contemporary critics distanced themselves from the likes of Jean-Baptiste Carrier, Guislain-François-Joseph Le Bon, and Claude Javogues by portraying them as subhuman animals, and points out how later critics of revolutionary violence such as Edgar Quinet, François Furet, and Alain Gérard echoed the labeling of the perpetrators as inhuman.[1] But Biard neither locates those critics in their political settings nor identifies the political programs their depictions of subhuman terrorists served.

Again, Michelle Zancarini-Fournel provides scintillating descriptions of how feminists broadcast their distinct identities and demands during demonstrations and other public occasions of the 1970s. Although not dealing with violence in any strict sense of the word, she shows how forcefully militant women mocked male pretensions and subverted such well known images as Liberty at the barricades. She even provides three rich appendices, one inventorying feminist parodies of popular songs, a second one citing posters for women's demonstrations, and a third giving a chronology of relevant demonstrations from 1968 to 1982. Yet she closes by making these claims:

[B]y voice and gesture, women's use of demonstrations between 1970 and 1982, and the symbolic violence that issued from it, opened the age of individual and group identities--people freely speak of "communities" at the start of the twenty-first century--in our very recent history, thus contributing to the weakening of republican universalism (p. 260).

Maybe so. Yet it seems odd not to connect such a claim either with the well-documented recent history of French demonstrations or with the more general history of French feminism. Often brilliant in themselves, the book's chapters fail to make serious connections with larger questions concerning *rappports de force* in French political history.

That happens in part because the authors choose very narrow lenses to view their subject. Three kinds of narrowing radically constrict the book's field of vision. First there comes language. Except for a

handful of citations from books or articles in languages other than French and a few more from French translations of foreign publications, the authors conduct an entirely franco-français conversation. Second, non-historians get almost no attention, even when writing in French on relevant subjects. Among scholars who have written knowledgeably in French about violent events, readers learn nothing of Jean-Claude Chesnais, Jan Willem Duyvendak, Olivier Fillieule, or Danielle Tartakowsky, even if Vincent Robert (like the latter three, a close student of French demonstrations) draws a citation by virtue of being a historian.[2]

Third, even among historians the authors generally ignore analysts of political and social history in favor of fellow cultural and intellectual historians. I was astonished, for example, to see no mention whatsoever of Jean Nicolas' comprehensive book-length catalog of French violent events between 1661 and 1789, which appeared in 2002--just a year before the conference from which this book emerged.[3] Perhaps the book's temporal range (mainly 1789-1995) justified the omission of references to work on earlier periods. But since some of the finest French historical work on collective violence concerns pre-revolutionary politics and since the editors claim to be tracing changes in the French public sphere from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, that self-denial exacts a high intellectual price. It would be a pity if the talented observers on display in this volume continued to pursue their conversation in such a closed room.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

- Philippe Bourdin, Jean-Claude Caron, and Mathias Bernard, "Introduction"

### Part One: "Le corps politique mis en scène"

- Raymonde Monnier, "Évolution d'un thème républicain en révolution: les expressions du tyrannicide dans la crise de Varennes"
- Michel Biard, "Les voix de la déraison ? Les représentations de la violence exercée par les 'proconsuls' révolutionnaires (1793-1795)"
- Jean-Luc Chappéy, "L'assassinat de Radstadt et les enjeux du 'cri de vengeance' sous le second Directoire"
- Bernard Gainot, "Le dernier voyage: rites ambulatoires et rites conjuratoires dans les cérémonies funéraires en l'honneur des généraux révolutionnaires"
- Emmanuel Fureix, "La violence et la mort: funérailles opposantes sous les monarchies censitaires (Paris, 1820-1834)"
- Pascal Gibert, "Marquer pour stigmatiser. La place des tontes et des inscriptions comminatoires dans l'épuration. Quelques exemples auvergnats"

### Part Two: "Communautés combattantes"

- Louis Hincker, "Blessures de citoyens: Paris, 1848-1851"
- Jean-Claude Caron, "Ouvriers en grève: représentations d'une culture de la protestation (Le Creusot, 1899-1900)"
- Rémy Cazals, "La voix et le geste dans une grève de la Belle Époque"
- Laurent Dornel, "Naissance politique de la xénophobie (France, fin XIXe siècle)"
- Mathias Bernard, "Les violences du 6 février 1934 vues par les droites françaises"
- Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, "Stratégies de distinction par la voix et le geste: provocations et violences symboliques des femmes dans les manifestations des 'années 68'"

---

**Part Three: “Les miroirs de la violence”**

- Paule Petitier, “Violences populaires dans l’Histoire de la Révolution française de Michelet : de la foule révolutionnaire à la mécanique du massacre”
- Barthélémy Jobert, “La représentation du parlementaire révolutionnaire, de la Révolution à la Troisième République”
- Philippe Bourbin, “La voix et le geste révolutionnaires dans le théâtre patriotique (1789-1799), ou la transcription scénique de l’histoire immédiate”
- Jean-Claude Yon, “Du droit de siffler au théâtre en France au XIXe siècle”
- Valérie Mazerolle, “Quand la chanson se fait violence’: analyse socio-sémiotique du répertoire de Colette Magny (1967-1972)”
- Catherine Bertho Lavenir, “L’attentat du métro Saint-Michel: une politique de l’émotion”

---

**NOTES**

[1] Edgar Quinet, *La Révolution* (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1869), 2 volumes; François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), and Alain Gérard, “*Par principe d’humanité...: la Terreur et la Vendée* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

[2] Jean-Claude Chesnais, *Les Morts violentes en France depuis 1826: comparaisons internationales* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1976), translated into English by Oxford in 1992; Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The Power of Politics: New Social Movements in France* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995); Jan Willem Duyvendak and Claude Lambrechts, *Le Poids du politique: nouveaux mouvements sociaux en France* (Paris: Éditions l’Harmattan, 1994), translated into English by Westview Press in 1995; Olivier Fillieule, *Stratégies de la rue; les manifestations en France* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Politiques, 1997); Danielle Tartakowsky, *Le Pouvoir est dans la rue: crises politiques et manifestations en France* (Paris: Aubier, 1997); and Vincent Robert, *Les Chemins de la manifestation* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1996).

[3] Jean Nicolas, *La Rébellion française: mouvements populaires et conscience sociale, 1661-1789* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

Charles Tilly  
Columbia University  
ct135@columbia.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for non-profit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of

H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172