

H-France Salon
Volume 13, Issue 9, #5

Dominique Kalifa: *L'art du passeur*

Quentin Deluermoz
Université de Paris

Thomas Dodman
Columbia University

Hervé Mazurel
Université de Bourgogne

Among the many things that he was, Dominique Kalifa was what the French call “*un passeur*”. The word is polysemic and does not translate easily into English. Its earliest usage, in Middle French, refers to a person who conveys someone or something across an obstacle, typically a river (*passeur d'eau*). Fittingly enough, it was the Normans who brought “*passur*” across the Channel into English. This *passeur* could bridge banks, open borders, or ferry deceased souls across the river Styx. By the early modern period, it was mostly about smuggling things into or out of places in which they weren't supposed to be. Goods and money smugglers, drug dealers, human traffickers, and resistance fighters guiding people across the Pyrenees in World War Two—all count as passers. Today, athletes and students sitting exams may also be designated as such. Interestingly, whereas a French “*passeur*” can refer to a particular form of transmission of ideas, across disciplines, epochs, and languages, in English, a “passer” tends to be a person able to “pass” as a legitimate member of another social group, as in “racial passing” (the French speak of a “*transfuge*”). A cursory search in Google Ngram bears out further differences: whereas the English “passer” rose steadily in usage in the nineteenth century, only to decline in the twentieth, the French “*passeur*” picked up in the 1970s.

Dominique Kalifa had a bit of all these *passeurs* in him, except for the egregiously unlawful ones (though they too surely fed into his scholarly fascination for crime and vice). He sometimes seemed to pass for a Marc Bolan (minus the glam rock hairdo), and had no trouble ferrying us back in time to a Belle Époque cabaret late at night. But it was as an intellectual *passeur* that Kalifa made his name among his students, his colleagues in France and abroad, and beyond the high walls of the academy itself.

Kalifa's entire intellectual project was a crossover of sorts, a back and forth between social structures, practices, and representations that welded ethnography, literature, and anglophone cultural history to *l'histoire des sensibilités*. It is a project he pursued in his own tireless investigations of nineteenth-century underworlds, but also, and perhaps primarily, with his graduate students. He would surely laugh at the idea, but numbers sometimes say it better than words, even for an historian of *l'imaginaire*. In the twenty years since he was *habilité*, Kalifa directed 35 PhD theses (13 are pending), participated in a further 28 *jury*s *de thèse*, and oversaw

no fewer than 12 *Habilitations à diriger les recherches*. Only a handful of contemporary French historians can claim to have trained as many junior colleagues, and over much longer careers.¹ At Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Kalifa oversaw a new generation of French *dix-neuviémistes*, arguably the first to be equally versed in domestic and foreign historiographical traditions. His acknowledged model was Susanna Barrows, “*salonnière des temps modernes*” as he called her, who inspired young historians from either side of the Atlantic in Berkeley and in Paris. In a tribute to his soulmate of marginality, Kalifa lamented French historians’ reluctance to open up to anglophone scholarship, despite timid advances since the fiftieth anniversary conference of the Society for French Historical Studies in Paris in 2004.² His seminars “*Histoire des imaginaires*” and “*Histoire des représentations et des sensibilités*” did much to change this, systematically expanding reading lists and inviting foreign colleagues to participate. In his last year of teaching (2019-20), Kalifa’s youngest graduate students were thus able to listen to Venita Datta, Sarah Maza, Thomas Laqueur, Sheryl Kroen, Judith Surkis, and Suguru Minemura among others. (Kalifa always made a point of inviting colleagues from Asia and South America, as well as Europe and North America).

But Kalifa built bridges both ways, also serving as an ambassador for a certain kind of French history abroad, at a time of extraordinary historiographical creativity but lessened visibility due to reduced interest for French history and anglophone historians’ own forms of intellectual provincialism. He was a regular of annual meetings of French history societies in North America and the UK, often bringing students and friends along (we, the essay authors, met this way in Boston in 2012). For better and for worse, Kalifa loved to travel, discover places, and make new friends. From the mid-2000s onward, he found ways to organize up to a dozen trips abroad in between classes every year (without ever taking a sabbatical, it should be noted). He particularly enjoyed prolonged stays as invited professor and, over the years, spent much time in Moscow, Tokyo, Rio, Mexico City, and St. Andrews. He also taught twice at NYU’s Institute of French Studies, introducing American students to French scholarship on temporalities and chrononyms during his last stay in 2015. After class, after hours, one could easily find (and lose) oneself with him, talking similarities between French and Mexican historiographies over margaritas on a ranch.

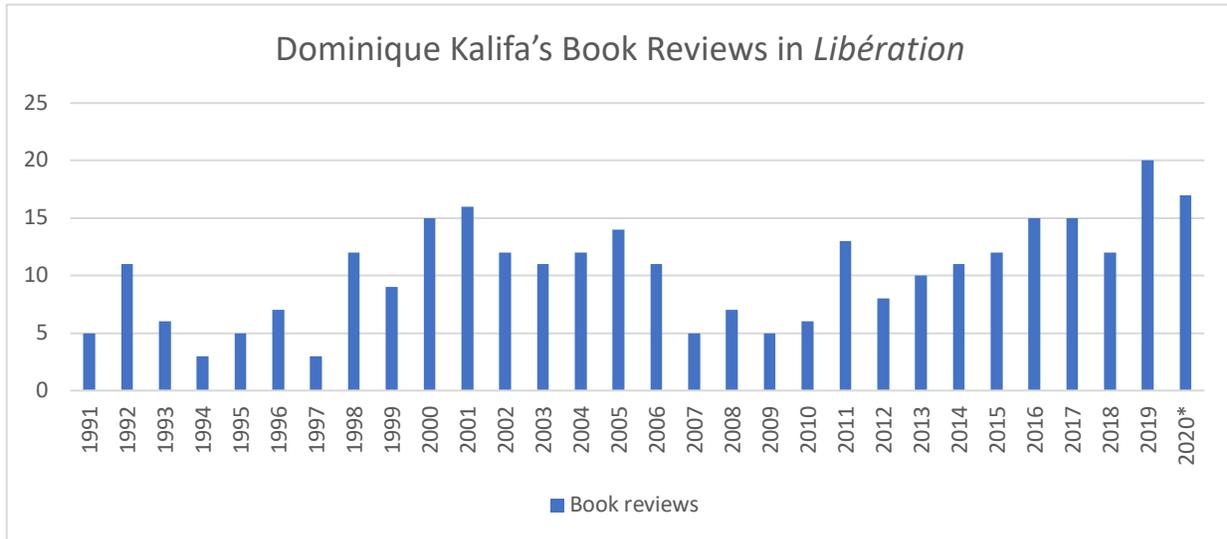
An *universitaire* through and through, with one of the most prestigious positions in the country, Kalifa was nonetheless weary of speaking solely to the academy. Before becoming a historian of the press, he decided to be *in* the press. In 1991, as a 34-year-old graduate student, he submitted a book review to *Libération* (emulating his advisor, Michelle Perrot, whose contributions to the newspaper’s weekly “Cahier Livres” defined “*un moment qui marqua, et qui manque*”).³ The

¹ The list includes Kalifa’s own two mentors, Michelle Perrot and Alain Corbin, as well as the likes of Pascal Ory, Daniel Roche, Jacques Revel, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Patrick Fridenson, Yves Lequin, Antoine Prost, Philippe Boutry, Dominique Barjot, Jacques-Olivier Boudon, Denis Crouzet, Olivier Forcade, and Jean-Pierre Poussou.

² Dominique Kalifa and Jann Matlock, “Aux marges de la France. L’histoire de France vue de Berkeley, Californie”, *Société & Représentations*, no. 38 (2014/2), pp. 7-19.

³ Dominique Kalifa, “Michelle Perrot journaliste,” *Critique*, no. 843-844 (2017/8), pp. 742-749. As Kalifa candidly remarks, he submitted his book review without telling Perrot, ultimately replacing her at *Libération*.

book was Christophe Prochasson's *Les années électriques, 1880-1910* (La Découverte, 1991), an intellectual history of a period—the fin de siècle—that would soon become Kalifa's, albeit viewed from below and *in extenso* (from c. 1860 to 1940). Ten more reviews followed over the next twelve months, revealing a wide range of interests, and no doubt the hesitations of a graduate student still finding his way, from nineteenth century *faits divers* to surprising forays in colonial history and literary crossovers (hardly as popular back then as they now are).



Kalifa's collaboration with *Libération* would prove to be a durable love affair. Over the next thirty years he published 308 book reviews for the newspaper, averaging 10.3 a year, with a minimum of 3 (in 1994, when he defended his PhD) and a maximum of 20 (in 2019). Over the same period, he also contributed shorter notes, six interviews (all with anglophone historians), and several articles for the *Libé des historien.ne.s* (a yearly issue of the newspaper edited entirely by historians in which he played a central part).⁴ Most of Kalifa's reviews for *Libération*, approximately three in four, are relatively long dives into new books (2 to 4 *feuilles*, or roughly 450-900 words long). With witty titles—"La guerre, nouveaux canons"—and a friendly eye to the general reader, they offer incisive analyses and never fail to tease out the main historiographical debates at stake. Many belie their author's life-long fascination for crime, marginality, and popular culture; but clearly Kalifa saw this as an opportunity to explore new topics and share them with his readers. In addition to colonialism and literary studies, mentioned above, he was drawn to cultural histories of war, social struggles and anarchists, reedited classics, historiography and methodology, environmental and global turns, and more. The corpus reveals both systematic engagement with an *œuvre*—Alain Corbin's or Eugène Sue's—and improbable *coups de cœur* (the memoirs of Empress Sissi's assassin, or Gustave Aimard's travels in the American West). Kalifa's choice of books was anything but random, and he sought

⁴ Dominique Kalifa's contributions to *Libération* since 1995 are available online at liberation.fr. Over the course of his career, Kalifa also served on editorial and advisory boards for a dozen academic journals, including *Romantisme*, *Sociétés & Représentations*, the *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, the *Journal of Social History*, and *Sensibilités: Histoire, critique & sciences sociales*.

to promote recent translations, first books by young scholars, and independent publishers (these account for, respectively, 1, 4, and 10 of the 20 books he reviewed in 2019).

As Kalifa remarked in a 2015 *H-France Salon* on book reviews, writing for a daily newspaper allowed him to partake in that very French tradition of *haute vulgarisation* without having to get into fistfights with colleagues or reinforce the discipline's overspecialization. He regretted the diminished status of the book review in our time, noting how Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch had authored an astonishing 58% of the *Annales'* often fierce *comptes rendus* from 1929 to 1945, using these to spearhead the journal's historiographical revolution.⁵ In a more modest but perhaps also more democratic way, Dominique Kalifa made this "*exercice étrange, une sorte d'écriture parasite*" his own from 1991 to 2020, sharing his historical imagination with curious readers as well as students and colleagues around the world. He practiced history with industry, flair, and generosity—as it should be. His many passing acts, and all those things that numbers cannot tell, are sorely missed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank Bénédicte Dumont, Responsable de la documentation at *Libération*, and Sophie Lhermitte-Blondi, of the Centre d'Histoire du XIXe Siècle at Paris I, for their precious help.

Quentin Deluermoz, Université de Paris
Thomas Dodman, Columbia University
Hervé Mazurel, Université de Bourgogne

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2021 by the H-France, all rights reserved.

⁵ Dominique Kalifa, "Le compte rendu, une 'police scientifique'?" *H-France Salon*, vol 7, issue 20 (2015).