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La Belle Époque des *Chrononymes*

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In a May 2020 interview with France Culture just four months before his death, Dominique suggested that his interest in *chrononymes* followed naturally from his teasing out the “*véritable histoire*” of the Belle Époque. What was “veritable” about this period name, Dominique discovered, was its great malleability, its capacity for generating a multitude of diverse, often contradictory representations drawing on an imaginary of the past. Did the same hold true for what Dominique termed the Belle Époque’s “*compagnons de route*,” *chrononymes* forged either during the era they described (*fin de siècle*, *Risorgimento*) or retrospectively (*les années noires*, *les Trente Glorieuses*)?

Protocols of both naming and periodization have preoccupied historians from the mid-twentieth century onwards, as Dominique rightly pointed out in tracing the historiography of *chrononymes*, initially in a 2016 issue of the *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, and more fully in “Dénommer l’Histoire,” the introduction to the volume he edited on *Les noms d'époque* (2020), his final work. While in his approach to *chrononymes* he drew on the prior research of linguists and historians, he charted an innovative course, as always, investigating these multiple signifiers through the lenses of both histories of the imaginary, of *sensibilités*, of memory, and of French cultural and social history more broadly, thereby furthering his pathbreaking work in these fields. He shifted his focus to the modern and contemporary eras, whose period names—*les années noires*, *le printemps des peuples*—had received scant scholarly attention. “Study problems, not periods,” Lord Acton advised young historians in 1895. But what if, as Dominique noted, it’s the period that’s the problem? For *chrononymes* are subject to repeated reconstruction and instrumentalization; their meanings mutate in relation to their chronologic or geographical contexts. Deciphering these temporal palimpsests, analyzing their genesis, their often transnational diffusion, uses, and ultimately survival or failure, for Dominique, meant understanding how the past becomes embedded in a network of intellectual, cultural and political forces that shape it discursively. And studying period names critically, as historical facts, might enable in turn a more subtle understanding of history, stripped of essentialized conceptions of historical eras and anachronistic projections onto the past.

Dominique’s writings on *chrononymes*—compelling, lucid, at times lyrical—demonstrate convincingly that the concept, for historians and societies alike, is “*bon à penser*.” Further, as he typically engaged questions of historiography as well as history, he posited that studying *chrononymes* exemplified the historian’s primary task, that of patiently unraveling the multiple

historical layers interfering between their present and the past of their object of study. Naming time, Dominique offered, was therefore an indispensable function for historians, informing their competent reordering of traces of a past forever disappeared. Yet this same approach should also serve as a lesson in humility, cautioning against triumphalism and underscoring the historian's modest status as a footnote in a constantly evolving relational process.

If the *chrononyme* “Belle Époque” is absent from *Les noms d'époque*, it is because Dominique had already excavated the origins of this period name in *La véritable histoire de la Belle Époque* (2017). Through an examination of a variety of documents, including songs, films, fiction, memoirs, and postcards, Dominique determined that the term emerged not in the wake of World War I, as many historians had mistakenly stated, but in the aftermath of World War II, as a consequence of the German Occupation. The Germans, in particular, were invested in evoking this anachronistic view of “la belle France,” particularly of Paris. Dominique then proceeded to examine how contemporaries of successive historical eras viewed the Belle Époque, focusing on the ways in which they concentrated on certain aspects of the period, in order to advance the needs of their own time.

The term, “Belle Époque,” far from being discredited by its association with the Occupation, flourished in the years thereafter. If the Belle Époque of the war highlighted popular entertainments, contemporaries of the Fourth Republic placed emphasis on the avant-garde artists, musicians, and writers who had been vilified by Vichy authorities in order to reclaim the modernist legacy of these years. Furthermore, as Dominique noted, during the uncertainty of the post-war era, it was important to connect the Fourth Republic to its predecessor, the Third Republic, thereby restoring republican legitimacy in the wake of the collaborationist Vichy Regime. The Belle Époque also harkened back to a more glorious age when France had been a world power, especially compared to the 1940s and 1950s, when the French grappled with the new reality of their secondary status. In the 1960s and 1970s, the French witnessed the search by ordinary French people for their personal family histories and their regional roots. The Belle Époque thus became rural and national, not just Parisian. Moreover, given movements in history and literary criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, workers, anarchists, women, and other previously excluded groups were examined by historians.

Through this *tour de force* of the uses and abuses of history, Dominique illuminated not only the history of the Belle Époque, a period that marked the emergence of modern French identity, but also that of successive periods, and as a result, of the twentieth century. In the process, he obliged us as historians to think critically about our craft. This is no small contribution to French history.

Willa: It was a joy to collaborate on *Les noms d'époque* with Dominique and the group of international scholars he assembled for this endeavor. While he and I first met *tête à tête* in 2017 during my sabbatical year in Paris, his work, especially his publications with Philippe Artières on personal archives, had long influenced my own. Further, I had been captivated by his talks on Fantômas at the annual gatherings of American historians of France. Dominique was a familiar figure at these conferences, an Americanophile French historian deeply curious about the research of his colleagues *outré-Atlantique*.

Our first meeting at a café in the Marais to brainstorm ideas for my next book project—Dominique bubbled with suggestions—prompted a cascade of generosity on his part. An invitation to speak to his Sorbonne seminar on the “Histoire des imaginaires” soon followed. Lively, informal, yet intellectually heady, the seminar Dominique presided in a room packed with admiring, impressively sharp students, seemed to me to bear traces of his enthusiasm for academic life in the United States. After the seminar, I joined a group of students that trailed Dominique to a noisy café on the place de la Sorbonne, where, hunched over a café table until nearly 9:00 p.m., he held impromptu meetings, between sips of kir, with several *doctorants*. A few weeks later, he offered me unlimited access to the website of his Centre d’histoire du XIXe siècle, should I wish to publish digital editions there. And in March 2018 he graciously reviewed my edition of Henri Vever’s diaries in *Libération* in a scintillating piece that revealed his astonishing acuity as a critic. As a member of the team whose essays comprise *Les noms d’époque*, finally, I was privileged to enjoy the environment of generous, comradely exchange forged by Dominique, who enlivened not only our convivial multilingual lunches but also the long work sessions that followed, as we helped one another refine our essays. He had a talent for uniting people.

I was unable, unfortunately, to attend the book launch for *Les noms d’époque* as I had recently been diagnosed with cancer and had begun undergoing treatment. Dominique’s kindness when I shared the news touched me: “Je te souhaite... de revenir très vite parmi nous en pleine forme,” he wrote in an email. “Tu nous manqueras.” Poignant words, which now convey my own sense of loss on Dominique’s passing.

Vinni: I was literally Dominique’s voice long before I met him. In 1996, when Dominique was unable to attend a Society for French Historical Studies meeting, our mutual friend Robin Walz asked me to read his paper aloud. I couldn’t do justice to his elegant prose but remember thinking how smart the author was. That paper later became one of the chapters of Dominique’s book *Naissance de la police privée: Détectives et agences de recherche en France* (2000). I finally met Dominique in 2006, when we were on the same panel at a conference in Paris organized by another mutual friend, Vincent Duclert. So when I began writing a chapter of my book on a *fait divers*, I naturally thought of Dominique and took the opportunity to write to him. To my pleasant surprise, he responded shortly thereafter, giving me excellent feedback. We also engaged in an ongoing conversation on my use of the terms “fin de siècle” and “Belle Époque,” a conversation that I have, alas, continued after his death in my postscript to the English translation of his book on the Belle Époque, to be published by Columbia University Press later this year.

Thus began my friendship with Dominique. I would contact him whenever I came to Paris, and even amidst his busy schedule, he found time to meet me, as he did with his other American friends. Over the years, he met my entire family. Thanks to the generosity of the Sorbonne’s Centre d’histoire du XIXe siècle, which Dominique directed, I made two trips to France, to work on his edited volume *Les noms d’époque*. During the celebration of the book’s publication at the Sorbonne on January 23, 2020, I was struck once again by Dominique’s generosity. Refusing to put himself forward, he instead sought to highlight the contributions of his co-authors, giving us center stage.

While I remember these moments with pleasure, it's the personal memories of Dominique that I recall in great detail. Dominique invited me, along with our friends Vincent Duclert and Diana Gonzalez, to dinner, after a work session on the *chrononymes* book in February 2018. How did he have the energy to host a dinner after such a long day, I wondered? When I arrived, he thanked me for an Indian tea blend I had given him, telling me that he indulged in “*le thé Vinni*” every afternoon, an anecdote I found both charming and touching. At the end of the evening, well after midnight, as I walked down the rue de Vaugirard with Vincent and Diana, I felt a sense of happiness that comes not only with good food and wine but also excellent company and friendship.

But my favorite memory of Dominique is the last one. I was leaving his apartment after the cocktail he had hosted following the session at the Sorbonne on January 23, 2020. As he walked me to the door, I remember thinking—not for the first time—that he reminded me a bit of Arsène Lupin, the gentleman burglar, about whom he had written. The elegant, generous, witty gentleman, of course, but also with sides to his personality that he kept to himself. He looked luminous, so happy to engage in the next chapters of his personal and intellectual lives. And that image of a smiling, happy Dominique is the one that will forever remain etched in my mind.

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