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Sylvie Aprile. *La Révolution inachevée, 1815-1870*. Paris: Éditions Belin, 2010. 670 pp. Tables, maps, illustrations, notes. €36 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7011-3615-8.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Sylvie Aprile describes the decades between the fall of Napoleon and the consolidation of the Third Republic as the “unloved” nineteenth century, decades of political instability from which the names of writers like Hugo, Chateaubriand, Offenbach and Balzac may shine, but not those of Ledru-Rollin, Guizot, Persigny or Pereire. Her task is to remind her readers of the extraordinary social and economic changes which underpinned this political and cultural ferment, and in that she succeeds unquestionably in making these decades, if not “loved,” then the bedrock of contemporary France.

The volume is part of a thirteen-volume history of France under the overall editorship of Joël Cornette, aimed at a general readership. It is a sumptuous production at a reasonable price. Its format is distinguished by an interweaving of Aprile’s overview with judiciously chosen brief extracts from key documents and Francophone and Anglophone historians. The maps and tables are superbly crafted. Above all, the mass of illustrations are distinguished not only by their choice (many are unfamiliar) but by Aprile’s superb, instructive captions. Her comments on the imperatives of propaganda in the official patronizing of art are compelling and recall Michael Marrinan’s studies of the July Monarchy.[1] She completes the book with a chronology, forty succinct biographies of political figures, and a bibliography.

Sylvie Aprile teaches at the Université Charles de Gaulle–Lille 3, and is well known for her recent studies of contemporary migration and of French political exiles 1789-1871, and numerous edited collections.[2] She is currently President of the Société d’histoire de la Révolution de 1848 et des révolutions du XIXe siècle. Not surprisingly, this latest book is marked by an authoritative command of the internal and international dimensions of French history of these years. She weaves a detailed account of French politics expertly into a broader tapestry of socio-economic change and European power politics. It is uncommonly good general history.

It is true that interest in the political history of the nineteenth century has waxed and waned since the conventional political histories of the early twentieth century and the remarkable upsurge in the “social history of politics” in the 1970s and 1980s. Today there is as much interest in trying to create “global” histories of the nineteenth century and Aprile, also a specialist in British history, is ideally placed to do this. As she stresses in her engrossing discussion, “peut-on encore faire une histoire franco-française?,” a new global history must be neither the old diplomatic history nor simply comparative history (pp. 542-47). But what is “global history”? Certainly it is too simple to ransack the past in a search for examples of international networks of whatever kind and to announce a “global history” treasure. For her part, Aprile skillfully places the history of France within the context of European and colonial history, the latter however limited to Algeria and Senegal.

But it is here that her conceptualization is least convincing. While her international contextualization of French history is outstanding, it is based on fixed national categories such as “France,” “Spain,” and “Germany.” The most significant cultural change for the ethnic and linguistic minorities who together made up most of the French population in these decades was the gradual, uneven “francisation” of their landscapes of meaning and identity, through economic change, political upheavals and education. It is strange to see languages as ancient as French (Basque, Breton, Catalan, Occitan) dismissed as “patois” (p. 138). It was these frontier minorities who experienced directly—and at times violently contested—the making of these nation-states. Indeed, the pages devoted to rural France, while skilled, are cursory. This is essentially a history of urban France at a time when at least two-thirds of French people were rural. “L’âge d’or des campagnes françaises” under the Second Empire receives less than five pages, while “vers un monde ouvrier” has fourteen. Similarly, peasant politics are understood essentially as reflections of urban activism.[3]

What is particularly welcome and innovative in Aprile’s overview are her concluding chapters grouped as “L’atelier de l’historien.” Here she considers the way contemporaries wrote about their nineteenth century, as well as the ways historians have done so since. Particularly engaging are her subsequent discussions on the uses and limitations of literature as an historical source. This, of course, was a great age of the “social novel” (Balzac, Flaubert, Hugo and others), but how deeply did the authors’ politics discolour the vivacity of their social portraits? There is a final discussion of the rise of photography as a historical source, noting how limited is its initial value for social history. A recent study of 16,000 photographic visiting cards in Second Empire Paris has identified only twenty as belonging to artisans or workers.

So this is an excellent volume, not just for the general reader, with its engaging prose and captivating illustrations and documents. The specialist also has much to gain from Aprile’s attempt to write a national history in a global context, and her astute reflections on the historian’s craft.

NOTES

[1] In particular, Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe: Art and Ideology in Orleanist France, 1830-1848* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988) and *Romantic Paris: Histories of a Cultural Landscape, 1800-1850* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[2] Sylvie Aprile and Stéphane Dufoix, *Les mots de l’immigration* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2009) and Sylvie Aprile, *Le siècle des exilés: Bannis et proscrits de 1789 à la Commune* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2010).

[3] Ted Margadant’s *French Peasants in Revolt: The Insurrection of 1851* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), which presents a contrary view, is puzzlingly absent from the bibliography.

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