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Hubert Bonin, *Les Tabous de Bordeaux*. Éditions Le Festin: Bordeaux, 2010. 253 pp. 20€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-36062-006-7.

Review by Seth Armus, Saint Joseph's College.

Every city has an official story, the one its boosters present to the world, and an unofficial one, known only to the initiate. This seems to be especially true of “secondary cities,” the Clevelands, Manchesters, Colognes, and Sevilles of the world. A leading city, especially if it is the capital, is the public face of the nation and, as such, acquires a certain transparency. But in secondary cities, the situation is more complicated. Fewer questions are asked, and fewer people are in the know. Power might be controlled by a select group of families upon whom the city believes its prosperity depends. This makes for civic conformity. And, if the press is restrained and the city fathers are careful and quiet, certain facts or assumptions (“taboos” as Hubert Bonin has it) may be avoided. While anyone can “have” Paris, the honor of Bordeaux, for example, is kept closer to the vest.

Hubert Bonin, an economic historian at IEP-Bordeaux, who has written extensively about finance and politics in the Gironde, offers a set of essays on the taboos in contemporary Bordeaux, a city, he argues, that is virtually built upon what has been “left unsaid.” This unusual book approaches eight subjects which have been off-limits to polite conversation in his city, ranging from the slave trade to the wine trade, from the financial health of its port, to the impartiality of the regional newspaper. For Bonin, what is interesting here is not so much the origin of these taboos, but their durability. And since, in very recent years, many of these taboos have been broken, Bonin is especially intrigued by what happens when circumstances conspire to break the silence.

The author is modest in his ambitions. He is quick to inform us that he has not written a regional study or a systematic analysis of the city. What he presents is, rather, a series of related essays on the general subject. With a light historical touch, he begins by taking on the background to these taboos—the city’s foundational taboo, as it were, the slave trade. The *bordelaise* cultural elite engaged in extensive intellectual gymnastics to avoid an honest accounting of the role played by this trade in the wealth and prominence of the city. In the realm of public culture, Bordeaux was especially cautious, virtually eliminating slavery from the city’s public narrative in museums and monuments (p.19). This chapter is fascinating, but disappointingly brief. He then moves on to a second major taboo—the Occupation—a time which saw the disgracing of the old political figure (Adrien Marquet) and the creation of the new (Jacques Chaban-Delmas). While this chapter is more substantial, it’s clear that Bonin’s major interest is not the city’s past, but Bordeaux today. The occupation and resistance led to the ascendancy of Chaban, Bordeaux’s mayor for nearly the entire postwar period and author of his own style of political patronage, the Florentine *système Chaban*. Chaban and his cronies had a very precise “Bordeaux” they wished to present. The process of taboo-breaking, Bonin implies, only really began within the last two decades, following the death of Chaban.

With that in mind it makes sense that the largest part of the book is devoted to the hyper-contemporary. And for those with an interest in the political and cultural scene of today's Bordeaux, the book is quite useful. Yet there is something a little too (for want of a better word!) "provincial" about it all. It's certainly fair to describe how the *bordelaise* elite perpetuated certain myths about the city, and how the regional institutions (newspaper, vineyards, port) have promoted their own *omertà*, but there's an awful lot of inside baseball in this book. Any academic appeal beyond the above-mentioned specialized reader will likely be limited.

This is a shame, because there's something very appealing about Bonin's style. One gets the impression of being in the presence of a very *branché* insider who has been taking careful notes about recent events. Partially because Bonin's approach is so novel, yet so regional, it leads us to want a broader comparison. How, one wonders, do the taboos of Bordeaux compare to other places? Bonin mentions Liverpool (whose International Museum of Slavery makes an obvious contrast) and occasionally gestures toward Marseille and Nantes—port cities with similarly closed, autocratic political systems (pp. 23, 207). But for the most part, his story is strictly focused.

Perhaps it's best to see this study as a microcosm. Because he knows the story of Bordeaux so well (and, crucially, knows what has been routinely left out of that story) he can gently expose the narrative of the city's elite, perhaps most especially the "taboo" of their own decline. In that spirit, these "mini" *lieux de mémoire* in contemporary Bordeaux and the debates that have surrounded them, give the reader a most unusual lens into how wars over narrative can be replicated on the most local of levels.

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