
H-France Review Vol. 12 (August 2012), No. 106

Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *De l'identité nationale, Science, race et politique en Europe et aux Etats-Unis XIX^e-XX^e siècle*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011. x + 271pp. Notes. 28€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-13-059155-9.

Review by Martin S. Staum, Professor Emeritus, University of Calgary.

Carole Reynaud-Paligot has already enriched the study of the racial paradigm in French social sciences with two works notable for painstaking research and clear argumentation. She has demonstrated the compatibility of notions of racial hierarchy with republican world-views during the Third Republic and the reinforcement of imperial domination by racial theories.[1] Here she aspires to investigate the contribution of physical anthropology to the idea of national identity in France, Britain, the United States, and Germany. The author shows that ardent nationalists of all political stripes could draw support and comfort from racial anthropology. Race played an important role even in western Europe, where “civic” nationalism supposedly overshadowed “ethnic” nationalism.

Inevitably in a work of such range some topics are treated in less depth (only pp. 155-63 on the Anglo-Saxon myth in Britain). On the other hand there is ample discussion (pp. 179-203) of the transnational eugenicist project of *anthroposociologie*, a creation of Georges Vacher de Lapouge and Otto Ammon.

In one sense, the argument that anthropological study increased national rivalries is counter-intuitive. Late nineteenth-century anthropologists liked to boast that the major European powers had similar racial components, albeit in different proportions. Hence their studies should have been conducive to international harmony with no inherent racial antagonisms.[2] However, Reynaud-Paligot does show that the myths of origins could indeed aggravate existing tensions. Moreover, at a time of diffusion of Darwinist notions of the struggle for existence, conflict could ensue from divergent ideas of superiority.

The early chapters of the book make up a catalogue of institutions that formed the “raciological international” of the years from 1850 to 1890. Besides the author’s own works, there has already been substantial study of the French anthropologists by Claude Blanckaert.[3] Reynaud-Paligot uses literature reviews in major French periodicals to explore the formation of anthropological societies all over Europe and beyond.

Everywhere there was the formation of specialized learned societies, publication of periodicals, gathering of collections in museums, and efforts to establish special courses, schools of anthropology, and university chairs, despite the resistance of literary elites. The Société d’anthropologie de Paris, founded in 1859, was the first of its kind. With the indefatigable Paul Broca as secretary-general until 1880, the Society would exert a leadership role in Europe for years to come. Nevertheless, heightened interest in anthropological classification and racial theory was apparent in the even more numerous memberships of German societies in Berlin and Munich at the turn of the century and the even greater interest in the Weimar period.

Reynaud-Paligot makes the general argument that public support from governments for these societies stemmed in part from their contribution to the myth of glorious national origins. Napoleon III tolerated the Société d’anthropologie, despite its aura of anti-clericalism, in part because it reinforced the Gallic

myth of French identity. However the author does not develop the reasons for the importance of this myth to the Emperor. There is abundant evidence, though, that national rivalries hampered the incipient international network developed through correspondence and congresses. Despite repeated efforts, there was no international standardization of anthropometric procedures. All anthropologists measured facial features, longitudinal and transversal cranial diameters, and recorded skin, eye, and hair color, but could forge no agreement on universal standards.

Nationalist sentiments in time of war also overshadowed collaboration. After German forces bombarded the French National Museum of Natural History in 1870, French anthropologist Armand de Quatrefages produced a theory of Prussian barbarism. He argued that Prussians were a distinctive Finnish and Slavic race of different ancestry from other Germans. Rudolf Virchow angrily responded that there was no scientific evidence for such a view, and eventually conducted a long series of measurements which resulted in distinguishing two major types of Germans (though not distinctive Prussians), somewhat similar to the two French types discerned by Paul Broca. Virchow and other German scholars at this stage set aside Nordic superiority and rejected anti-Semitism. After the First World War, the first session of an International Institute of Anthropology in 1920 benefited from French leadership, but excluded German and Austrian scholars, over the objections of French Americanist Paul Rivet and German-American Franz Boas.

The French national myth evolved from early beliefs in the reputed Trojan ancestry of the French through the later contention in the eighteenth century that the Germanic origins of the Franks and their noble descendants made them superior to the Gallo-Roman peasantry. By the early nineteenth century, Amédée and Augustin Thierry created a new mythology of heroic bourgeois Gauls overcoming the domination of the Frankish nobility.[4] By the 1830s there was increased interest among the Ethnological Society of Paris (founded 1839) in physical characteristics for racial classification. By the time of Broca's anthropologists, cranial measurements had replaced visual estimates of head shapes. The Gallic myth now consisted of glorifying the civilization of the migratory Celts, some of whom were blond, tall, and long-headed (Kymris) while the majority was shorter, dark-haired and more round-headed. Later it became commonplace to distinguish at least three major European races--tall, blond, long-headed Germanic or Nordic; dark-haired, shorter, round-headed Celts or Alpines; and even shorter, dark-haired, round-headed Mediterraneans.

Literary intellectuals such as Jules Michelet would try to limit the exclusive importance of race focusing the role of geography and social circumstances, and would also emphasize the most common form of the national myth--heroic Gauls becoming even more civilized by Roman culture and philosophy. Reynaud-Paligot argues that even the most nuanced portraits of French origins or psychology--those of Ernest Renan and Alfred Fouillée--rested on a foundation of the importance of race. Renan is famous for his refusal to base national identity on race or language, yet he himself subscribed to racial hierarchy in regard to "inferior" Africans and Asians and, despite his opposition to pan-Germanism, considered Aryans superior to Semites. Reynaud-Paligot portrays Fouillée as considering race more important than climate in French psychology. There are in my view some question marks about her interpretation of Fouillée, however, since he at least at one time concluded that European "types" in the modern era were less important for psychology than social milieu.[5]

In England in the late nineteenth century, authors such as William Stubbs and Edward Freeman celebrated the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Germanic race. Particularly characteristic of the new racial nationalism in Britain was the disparagement of the Irish and occasionally of other Celts. Some concluded that the Irish were too inferior for self-government, while others like John Lubbock rejected home rule so that the Irish would be more likely to improve themselves by intermarriage.

In the United States, theories of racial hierarchy, including research on crania and by implication brain size, fit well with the Manifest Destiny of western expansion (including subjugation of Mexicans), the

repression of Native Americans, and the continuation of slavery. After the Civil War, racial theorists invoked black inferiority to justify racial segregation or impediments to voting. The era of the Spanish-American War (1898) heralded a resurrection of Anglo-Saxon superiority claims. From 1890 to the 1920s, the ethnic labeling of desirable immigrants, including legal exclusion of Asians and quotas on southern and eastern European immigrants, virtually overwhelmed the civic nationalism characteristic of the American polity. Apparent scientific support for alleged natural differences legitimized discriminatory practices. Several paragraphs retell the story of Charles Davenport's Eugenics Record Office, the use of army intelligence tests to promote Nordic superiority, and the denunciation of race mixing.

The most creative detail and use of manuscript correspondence appear with the description of the racialization of the Aryan myth by Georges Vacher de Lapouge and his German colleague, Otto Ammon.^[6] For Lapouge, craniological studies showed the superiority of blond, long-headed (dolichocephalic) peoples, equated with Aryans, over the dark-haired, shorter (brachycephalic) Alpine (among Broca's Aryans) or Mediterranean peoples. Constantly warning against any mixing of races, he thought that war and revolution had weakened the Aryans, while philanthropy and social welfare perverted natural selection in saving the uncreative round-headed. Lapouge unsuccessfully promoted both positive and negative eugenics. He also contributed to the polarized perception of Semites as dangerous rivals to the Aryans. As an atheist and anti-clerical, Vacher de Lapouge was more controversial than Ammon, but neither would satisfy the more moderate German nationalists. Clearly they alienated French enthusiasts for Celtic civilization. Hence Lapouge tended to be marginalized in France, but attracted more attention from the adherents of Nordic superiority in Germany after 1900. Hans Günther was a direct link from Lapouge to Nazism, and eugenic organizations, or courses in "racial hygiene," flourished in Germany in the decades before World War I.

Meanwhile, Reynaud-Paligot shows that there were differences between anthroposociology and Nazi ideology, as well as between Nordic theorists and Nazi practices. Lapouge did not advocate German expansionism or militarism, or equate all Germans with his Aryans. Nordacists would be suspicious of south Germans, and Nazis would ally with non-Nordic nations. Apart from the specific influence of anthroposociology, the very concept of racial hierarchy allowed, from the time of Houston Stewart Chamberlain to Nazi ideologists, a fusion of hierarchy and pseudo-Darwinist racial struggle possibly leading to persecution, if not extermination, of races deemed inferior.

One of the major issues of the book then becomes the reasons for the virulence of racially-based German nationalism in the early twentieth century. In answering this question, Reynaud-Paligot can only draw upon the hypotheses offered in works of social and political history dealing with this abundantly studied era. The most plausible is that the traumatic aftermath of World War I and the Versailles treaty, along with the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, created a psychological need for the positive reinforcement of concepts of Nordic superiority and the displacement of tensions onto an allegedly dangerous minority--the Jews. Supporting this thesis could easily demand another volume in social, economic, and cultural history that would be beyond the scope of the present project. The second more speculative idea is that the proportion of aristocrats among German intellectuals promoted a concern for heroic ancestry, as in the era of a flourishing nobility. However, the author also points out that most German anthropologists were not hospitable to Nordic and anti-Semitic racial ideology until the Nazi ascendancy.

By comparison, the myth of the Gauls in France and even of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the United States were lower in intensity, though they certainly allowed sometimes violent exploitation of the excluded, whether in the colonies or the American South. Moreover, most French anthropologists rejected Nordicism and anti-Semitism, and some of these vocally opposed Nazi ideology in periodicals such as *Race et racismes* (1937-1939). By this time, German anthropologists would tolerate no criticism

and excluded themselves from international conferences. In France, the Aryan myth would not triumph until the ascendancy of the Vichy regime.

Given the substantial work of the author on the 1930s, however, it is worth noting that this book does not address the question of continuity between policies of the Third Republic and Vichy. The other elephant in the room is the attitude toward immigrants and how it affected concepts of French national identity. On that score the links between the Third Republic and Vichy might be more evident than in the isolated support among French anthropologists of Nordicism and anti-Semitism.^[7] With 1940 as a chronological limit, the book cannot consider the careers of the extremist anthropologists that the author has previously studied—René Martial and George Montandon—and who served the Vichy regime. To some extent, both of them leavened the concept of racial groups with cultural factors. Montandon developed the idea of *ethnie*, or ethnic group, not based on physical factors alone. This notion facilitated an attack on the Jews who were not commonly considered an anthropological “race.”

Granted, Reynaud-Paligot had limited space to deal with questions of great breadth. Within that compass, she has succeeded in presenting a comparative and transnational study of great usefulness to advanced students as well as to scholars who would like an introduction to the contributions of racial theory to nationalism.

NOTES

[1] Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *La République raciale 1860-1930: Paradigme racial et idéologie républicaine* (Paris: PUF, 2006) and *Races, racisme et antiracisme dans les années 1930* (Paris: PUF, 2007).

[2] Abel Hovelacque, *Langues, races, nationalités* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1873).

[3] Most recently in the essay collection by Claude Blanckaert, ed., *De la Race à l'évolution. Paul Broca et l'anthropologie française (1850-1900)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

[4] Amédée Thierry, *Histoire des gaulois* (Paris: Sautet, 1828), 3 vols.

[5] Alfred Fouillée, “La Psychologie des peuples et l'anthropologie,” *Revue des deux mondes* 127(1895): 365-396, esp. p. 396.

[6] For previous literature on Vacher de Lapouge, see Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Couleur et le sang: doctrines racistes à la française* (Paris: Editions mille et une nuits, 2002); Jennifer Hecht, *End of the Soul: Scientific Modernity, Atheism, and Anthropology in France, 1876-1936* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Benoît Massin, “L'Anthropologie raciale comme fondement de la science politique; Vacher de Lapouge et l'échec de l'anthroposociologie en France 1866-1936,” in Claude Blanckaert, ed., *Les politiques de l'anthropologie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), pp. 269-334.

[7] Gérard Noiriel, *Les Origines républicaines de Vichy*. (Paris: Hachette, 1999); Gérard Noiriel, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme (XIXe-XXe siècle): Discours publics, humiliations privées* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

Martin S. Staum, Professor Emeritus
University of Calgary
mstaum@ucalgary.ca

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit 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 edistribution/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