

The following response was posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Judith Miller's review of Mark Ingram, *Rites of the Republic: Citizens' Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Southern France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011)

*H-France Review* Vol. 12 (January 2012), No. 8

The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol12reviews/vol12no8Miller.pdf>

---

April 6, 2012

Mark Ingram

mingram@goucher.edu

Dear colleagues,

In January, H-France published a review by Judith Miller of my book, *Rites of the Republic. 'Citizens theatre' and the politics of culture in southern France*. University of Toronto Press (2011). The book has since been reviewed elsewhere but because some of the views expressed in the H-France review are considerably different from my own, I thought it might be worthwhile to write a response. Interested readers will find that response below.

Cordially,

Mark Ingram

Professor of French

Goucher College

It is always rewarding to read Judith Miller's writing on the contemporary French theatre. Her H-France review of my book (Vol. 12, January 2012) is no exception. She raises many of the issues that are addressed in the book with regard to the contradictions and paradoxes of French and European cultural policy, and concerning the relevance of arts activism and arts policy to the most contested issues involving racism and exclusionary ideologies in France today. Ultimately, Miller finds that the book lacks a sufficiently stout critique of the universalist pretensions of the French republican model, in part because she believes the author was blind to the pluralism of French society that belies universalist rhetoric. While these issues are in fact discussed extensively in the book, the approach taken toward them differs considerably from Miller's. I have taken this opportunity to respond to help clarify the difference.

One cannot include everything in a review, even one of some four pages, but there is an important omission here. Miller neglects to describe and situate the book as an anthropological study. While the book presents and analyzes the point of view of its subjects, the primary objective is not to assess how close people are to their professed ideals (although this is part of it), but rather to understand what people realize (beyond the ideals) when they act on their convictions, and what this can tell us about the broader social worlds they inhabit. The position I advance is not a vigorous defense of the French republican tradition, but rather an argument that

there is much to learn from looking at how its ideals are interpreted, reworked and acted upon. The theatre activity discussed in the book is one setting for debate about the republican model, here in the context of arts activism and European, state, and regional cultural policy. I examine the contradictions and paradoxes of each troupe's project in part by considering discrepancies between the stated goals of artists and their actual practice. In the case of an amateur theatre troupe, for example, their stated goals of promoting both social solidarity and civic awareness in a new "citizens' Europe" are challenged by the exclusionary ideologies expressed by some of their hosts while touring across Europe, thus revealing contradictions in EU cultural policies devoted to "unity in diversity". While I do then take seriously the statements of my subjects, these examples are highlighted as part of a broader consideration of the changes in the national and European context for culture as a discourse about the arts, politics, and society.

The book draws on anthropological and historical studies to show both the deep continuities in French cultural policy, and the important changes in recent years, especially with regard to the centralized state. The research addressed includes the body of work that has underlined the "particularizing" and racializing practices that were integral to the French colonial project, and the influence of which continues to be felt today. Clearly, the universalist ideals of the French republic remain unrealized, challenged by persistent racism, xenophobia, and inequality. Still, there is more to this story than the realization that in France, as elsewhere, the reality fails to match the democratic ideals pursued.

There are two related issues here. The first concerns the accuracy of representations of France that remain tied to a Manichean division between cultural pluralism and cultural homogeneity. Might there be ways of conceiving of French social diversity that do not force us to choose between an anti-universalist (often essentialist) conception of plural cultural identities on the one hand, and on the other, a pro-universalist ignorance of the racist and racializing practices that reproduce inequalities and exclusion? To understand what is distinctive about France requires acknowledging (and this is the second issue) the diverse ways the republican tradition is engaged, reworked, and remade : the ways it is efficacious in influencing the shape of contemporary France. While this means acknowledging the colonial legacy and the distance between ideals and reality, it also means recognizing other distinctively republican results.

Studies examining the history of French republicanism (the changing interpretations of *laïcité*, for example) have helped us understand the mutability of that tradition over time – a mutability far greater than what is acknowledged by either its staunchest supporters or fiercest critics. Similarly, recent ethnographic work on exclusion and civic engagement emphasizes the diverse ways the republican tradition has been employed and appealed to by those of immigrant descent. What is described is a constant push and pull between differentialist and universalist appeals, not only by government and other officials, but by individuals in their daily lives. This same process of negotiation over what is defined as properly universalist, and what is inappropriately particularist, is also present in high-profile debates – in the opposition to the creation of the Ministry of National Identity and Immigration in 2007, for example, where critics defending the rights of immigrants and those of immigrant heritage accused Nicolas Sarkozy of being insufficiently universalist by encouraging an overly narrow conception of French national identity. The point here is that republican universalism is not always or only mere rhetoric, but

an ideology mobilized by a wide range of actors that serves to motivate and sustain a diverse range of social practices.

In the book I discuss the Ministry of National Identity debate (and others) in order to show the broader national and European discourses addressed by several different arts groups in Marseille, Avignon, and rural Provence. What the book presents, and what I invite readers to discover for themselves, is an argument that the language of culture in France, conceived as a discourse on the political meanings of art in the universalist terms of the republican tradition, is being stretched, adapted, and made to fit new circumstances – in the theatrical work devoted to Arabic and other languages, in highlighting the distinctive voices of the residents of the northern neighborhoods of Marseille, and in confronting racist audience-members in a small mountain town while touring with a play centered on immigration. What the work of these artists offers then is neither an uncritical acceptance of universalist rhetoric, nor a radical challenge to the French republican tradition, but rather, new perspectives on its interpretation and enactment.

Mark Ingram  
mingram@goucher.edu