

---

H-France Review Vol. 24 (February 2024), No. 16

Brigitte Gaïti and Nicolas Mariot, eds., *Intellectuels empêchés: Ou comment penser dans l'épreuve*. Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2021. 288 pp. Notes, bibliographies. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 9791036203251; €13.99 (pdf). ISBN 97910362032689.

Review by Sean Kennedy, University of New Brunswick.

Forced into exile by the Nazi regime, sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) struggled to continue his intellectual work. Arriving in Paris, he was denied access to the French university system by restrictions aimed at refugees and lacked contacts and more informal support networks. At one point, Elias contemplated opening a wooden toy workshop. Things improved after he relocated to Britain in 1935; Elias received support from the Jewish Refugees Committee and secured a temporary contract as a research assistant at the London School of Economics in 1939. However, it was his detention on the Isle of Man as an enemy alien from May to October 1940 that, in retrospect at least, proved surprisingly productive, as he and other refugees from Nazi Germany established an elaborate system of courses that reflected principles of German academia. Elias had experienced *empêchement*—profound obstacles and hindrances—but was able to reinvent and sustain himself as an intellectual.

Elias's experience is one of many examined with sophistication and nuance in this volume. With contributions from political scientists, historians, philosophers, and sociologists, *Intellectuels empêchés* attests to the determination of many intellectuals to persist despite confronting highly varied forms of adversity. Focusing on what their experiences reveal about “des habitudes et réflexes intellectuels,” (p. 11) rather than the works produced under these circumstances, the contributors offer valuable reflections on the social contexts and processes that shape and sustain intellectual identity.

In an expansive and stimulating introduction that includes discussion of case studies, Mariot makes clear that *empêchement* could take on many forms. Brutal conditions in concentration camps made any intellectual work nigh unthinkable. Severe illness constituted another powerful barrier. At the other end of the spectrum, other forms of confinement—to a prison, barracks, or hospital—could allow space for, and in some cases even stimulate, the life of the mind. And of course, individual choices, such as a decision to withdraw to a remote location, or rebel against the conventions of intellectual life, were deeply consequential.

Though the case studies are primarily from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Bénatouïl's study of how the Socratics, notably Plato, defined the *habitus* of the Western intellectual, sets the stage. Although other models, notably those of the Stoics, were on offer, Bénatouïl analyzes the

formation of Plato's more aristocratic conception of intellectual life, seeking detachment from worldly concerns while still engaged with audiences and attentive to public affairs. This model featured an inherent tension between the need for isolation and the necessity of connection in intellectual life which had a potent legacy.

The first part of the book concentrates on examples of particularly harsh restrictions; under such conditions, Mariot observes, a reversion "aux formes les plus élémentaires et intériorisées de l'intellectualité" (p. 19) could assert itself. Frédérique Matonti's exploration of the "techniques du corps" of a cohort of deported women intellectuals, a group comparatively neglected by scholars, explores this theme while also highlighting the salience of gender analysis. Matonti notes how witnesses stressed the desire of young women, reflecting their previous socialization, to maintain their appearance—in part to project an image of health and improve chances of survival. The individual pursuits of notable individuals like Germaine Tillion, who engaged in ethnography and wrote a clandestine operetta, were situated in a wider range of sustaining activities, including singing and the recitation of poetry, practices rooted in childhood, and now enacted by women from a wide range of social and political backgrounds.

Engagement in resistance activities, as discussed by Laurent Douzou, often disrupted traditional social hierarchies but could still allow space for intellectual activity. The historian Marc Bloch became a prominent resistance figure before his arrest, torture, and execution in 1944, but at first, Douzou suggests, he "est une recrue comme une autre, il doit faire ses preuves" (p. 93). At the same time, Bloch also sought to sustain himself as an intellectual, compiling a "table méthodique" of articles for a resistance review, *Cahiers politiques*. The case of the philosopher Jean Cavailles, who co-founded and led two resistance networks while still making conceptual advances in his research, was even more striking: "Il n'a pas été un intellectuel empêché mais un homme pleinement libre, libre de travailler sur la logique mathématique, libre de résister" (p. 96).

The remaining two chapters of part one move away from a focus on French intellectuals during the Second World War. Olivier Marichalar examines the case of Hong Yi, a young Chinese man from a family with a long intellectual pedigree who was compelled by the Cultural Revolution to live in rural Yunnan from 1972 to 1979. Drawing upon Hong's extensive journals of this period, Marichalar details his subject's daily effort to continue educating himself, reading widely, journaling, seeing films, and when possible participating in discussion groups. Though Hong Yi struggled with despair, Marichalar finds—perhaps surprisingly—that it took years for him to grow disillusioned with Communist rule, though after returning to urban life he published a book that was soon banned, leading to three years of house arrest.

For the three individuals studied by Muriel Darmon—a rugby player and business executive, both from France, and an American neuroscientist—the obstacle they had to surmount came in the form of a stroke. Analyzing published accounts of their recoveries, Darmon highlights the significance of class in shaping their perspectives. For rugby player Grégory Mahé, the focus was consistently on the damage to his body, and his successful struggle to regain his physical capacities. For Christian Streiff, having trained as an engineer and worked as an executive, the focus was very much on regaining mastery of his mind; but in the process he revisited his priorities. As he put it, the stroke had led "de retrouver un vie en dehors de l'entreprise, et de redécouvrir qu'elle était belle, cette vie" (p. 136). For Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, whose scientific training afforded very different insights into her condition, recovering from a stroke entailed an even greater level of self-reinvention and empowerment, tied to managing brain function.

---

Though in a very different way from people forced to endure confinement, here again *empêchement* could lead to self-transformation.

Part two of *Intellectuels empêchés* examines situations where restrictions were less severe, with greater opportunities to adapt and persevere. Contributions by Frédéric Lebaron and Laurent Jeanpierre return to wartime France, examining the implications of military service during the *drôle de guerre* of 1939–40 for intellectual life. Lebaron finds that in the case of Jean-Paul Sartre, his duties in a meteorological unit proved conducive to extensive reading, correspondence, and writing; he engaged in sociological and psychological analysis of those around him, and himself, while also progressing on his novel *L'âge de raison*. Lebaron sees Sartre as in some ways reverting to “le habitus normalien” (p. 165), setting the stage for a conversion to political engagement. By contrast, Jeanpierre finds that for the Polish-born novelist Jean Malaquais (Vladimir Malacki), wartime service was a far more ambivalent experience. Serving in different units, sometimes doing heavy labor that depleted him, Malaquais also found his social relations with fellow soldiers fraught. Though not without empathy for their challenges, he abhorred their heavy drinking. In return, some of them taunted him for his intellectual activities—yet also asked for his help in composing letters to their spouses. Malaquais nevertheless wrote a journal about his wartime experiences and took solace in events such as winning a literary prize in December 1939. Following the defeat of 1940, he managed to return to Paris; Jeanpierre sees elements of a “regression vers le habitus” (p. 184) in his wartime writing, while also stressing the significance of his complex social status in a wartime context.

Shifting focus to the Algerian War, François Buton compares the sharply contrasting experiences of historians Paul-Albert Février and Antoine Prost, both of whom wrote accounts *sur le vif*—in real time. Prost, it seems, envisioned his work as a future source; Février’s writings, in the form of letters and journals, are more intimate. The contrast extends to their postings: Février was a sergeant at an internment center, where he had time to conduct research, while Prost was a junior officer in a combat unit; outside of writing his journal, he did not engage in intellectual work. Finally, while the two men shared some similarities in background as middle-class, Catholic, left-leaning intellectuals, Février’s work and dealings with prisoners led him eventually to advocate on their behalf; after being demobilized he soon returned to Algeria to conduct archaeological work. Prost was also troubled by the attitudes and conduct of many soldiers and European settlers but saw himself as obliged to serve. Intellectually, though, Prost was also marked by his Algerian experience, as it encouraged him to study war veterans.

The final two contributions in part two shift the focus away from military service, though Bernard Pudal studies the implications of service of another kind, as a militant in the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). Here he stresses the tension between party injunctions for supporters to become informed “organic intellectuals,” and the demands that activist work placed on members’ time. This often resulted in their efforts to expand their education—as prescribed by the party—being fragmented and incomplete, leaving a sense of inadequacy and frustration. In this context, the *empêchement* of imprisonment for Communist activities could in some instances facilitate intellectual development. In the Maison-Carrée prison in Algeria, where Communist deputies were imprisoned by the wartime Daladier government, prisoners were both teachers and learners, offering various courses according to their expertise.

Profoundly different was the case of Robert Guyon, the son of a respected literary scholar, and himself a student at the École Normale Supérieure. In 1967 he decided to break with familial and

institutional expectations, embarking on the cargo ship *Aristotle* with Chile as his destination. As detailed by Boris Gobille, Guyon, who was fascinated by the merchant marine, envisioned a less settled, more literary intellectual vocation. His notebooks detail a complex relationship with the mostly Greek officers and crew of the *Aristotle*; though treated with kindness and accepted to a degree, it was “plus comme une mascotte” (p. 242) than a colleague. Exploring Guyot’s perceptions and psychological tribulations in detail, Gobille notes that while in retrospect his subject regarded his voyage as a turning point, at the time, the new and sometimes constricting path he chose occasioned doubts about his choices, and who he was.

Brigitte Gaïti closes the book by reflecting on the varied and complex ways in which intellectuals, confronted with obstacles of various kinds, often partially reinvented themselves while drawing upon deep-rooted skills and social practices. Commenting on the most severe instances of *empêchement*, she discusses the reflections of Primo Levi, whose intellectual status was in many ways annihilated by the Nazi camp system. Yet even in these direst circumstances, there were fleeting moments when one could reassert intellectual identity, such as when Levi was “interviewed” for work as a chemist and explained his training and qualifications.

Gaïti also notes the profoundly different case of those who sought to abandon traditional intellectual practices but continued them in very different ways. Alongside the case study of Robert Guyon as discussed by Boris Gobille, she invokes the example of individuals from the “Generation of 1968” who sought to depart from the conventional path, “en devenant aventurier, leader des masses ouvrières, berger en Ardèche, ou reclus dans un monastère” (p. 271); sometimes they found themselves continuing to behave as intellectuals, informally assigned such roles by communities where they did not easily fit in.

Another insight that emerges from this collection is the centrality not only of informal communities and collective endeavors, but also individual performances, in sustaining intellectual status. Returning to the individuals afflicted by strokes studied by Muriel Darmon, Gaïti recalls that for both the French executive Streiff and the American neurologist Bolte Taylor, one significant step in their refashioning was giving professional presentations. However, due to the stroke they had suffered each had to memorize their texts, giving the impression of full knowledge. “Cette intellectualité-là, qui maîtrise une certaine dose d’imposture, et qui consiste à mimer les rituels les plus institués de l’exercice intellectuel, devient une des manières de retrouver une place et de *continuer*” (p. 282). This is one of many thought-provoking insights offered in this sometimes challenging but always stimulating volume; this review has only scratched the surface regarding the range of concepts advanced, and examples discussed, in it.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

### Introduction

Nicolas Mariot, “L’intellectuel au révélateur. Comment continuer malgré et avec l’empêchement?”

### Ouverture

Thomas Bénatouïl, “Empêchement(s) et genèse de l’habitus philosophique chez Platon”

---

Part One, Écroulement. Persévérer contre l'empêchement

Frédérique Matonti, "Les 'techniques du corps' des intellectuelles déportées"

Laurent Douzou, "Intellectuels affranchis en clandestinité"

Olivier Marichalar, "La persistance à étudier en contexte de 'rééducation.' Le cas d'un jeune instruit envoyé à la campagne dans la Chine de la Révolution culturelle"

Muriel Darmon, "Les empêchés de l'intérieur. Perception sociale des pertes et travail de recouvrement des dispositions dans le cas de patients atteints d'AVC"

Part Two, Altération. Continuer avec l'empêchement

Frédéric Lebaron, "Sartre dans la 'drôle de guerre.' Réactivation des dispositions scolastiques et début de conversion socio-politique"

Laurent Jeanpierre, "Un écrivain dans le rang. Entraves au travail intellectuel et représentations du peuple dans le *Journal de guerre* (1939-1940) de Jean Malaquais"

François Buton, "Témoigner, sauver ou server. La guerre d'Algérie de deux historiens (1959-1960)"

Bernard Pudal, "Le devoir être intellectuel des militants communistes et ses obstacles"

Boris Gobille, "L'épreuve du large. Le voyage en cargo de Robert Guyon, normalien aspirant écrivain (1967-1968)"

Conclusion

Brigitte Gaïti, "Comment continuer dans l'épreuve? Les intellectuels et leur équipement"

Sean Kennedy  
University of New Brunswick  
skennedy@unb.ca

Copyright © 2024 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 redistribution/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 republication in 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.