
H-France Review Vol. 24 (February 2024), No. 17

Thierry Dutour, *La France hors la France: L'identité avant la nation XII^e-XV^e siècle*. Paris: Vendémiaire, 2022. References and index. x + 362 pp. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 9782363583758.

Review by David Murray, independent scholar.

This remarkable book describes itself accurately as an “essai iconoclaste” (back cover). The icon it is attempting to tear down is “la France,” that hexagonal nexus of land, culture, and language bound inextricably, in many recent conceptualizations, to a strong state. Perhaps, however, as Thierry Dutour argues, there is another way of thinking “Frenchness” and perhaps implicitly “France” too, one inspired by the medieval world in which Frenchness (*francité*) functioned without reference to either land or the state, but rather to the interweaving of people. So begins a valiant attempt to ask searching questions about deeply rooted ways of thinking about France as we know it and as it has been constructed by historians and others. Dutour inveighs against France’s tendency toward navel-gazing history and praises the rise of the global history movement. Even more is possible, he suggests: “Ouvrir la fenêtre, c’est bien. Mais ouvrir la porte puis sortir, c’est mieux” (“Opening the window is good. But opening the door and walking out is even better”) (p. 14). Dutour therefore invites us to walk out the door into an alternative world of what France was (and might again be, it seems) through, firstly, the use of medieval French from Ireland to the Middle East, and, secondly, the fundamental change in how the French state functioned and was conceptualized in the early modern period. Although the reader may be left with some lingering doubts about how successful the attempt to escape post-medieval linguistic nationalism and statism is, there is a great deal to admire in Dutour’s book and reasons to be hopeful about the mark it will leave on future scholarship.

One of these concerns the first section on the French language. The changing perceptions of the place of the French language and its users in the medieval world has come to dominate medieval French studies in recent decades. Alongside the well-established study of French in medieval England, the life of the French language in places including Ireland, Wales, Iberia, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East continues to grow in importance as a field of study. As Dutour elaborates, this francophone world, composed of close familial and social links across substantial distances so common as to be “banal” (p. 36), invites a different way of thinking about what it meant to be *français* in the medieval world. Simultaneously, French, the language that held this world together, must be decoupled from any idea of “France,” being neither unitary nor enjoying unrivalled status relative to the other languages of France until well into the early modern period.

This is not in itself new information and Dutour draws extensively on recent scholarship. What is remarkable is that it is written in French by a French scholar and published in Paris. As Dutour himself observes, the evolution of the field of the francophone Middle Ages has principally been driven by scholars in the English- and Italian-speaking worlds, while colleagues in France have not often ventured into this area. For instance, a recent essay collection edited by Fabio Zinelli and Sylvie Lefèvre included only two contributions from France.[1] For the most part, however, there remains a quite firm division between French inside and outside France, with only select attention, for example, to those *incontournables* like the *Chanson de Roland* or the work of Marie de France that evidently originated in England. And yet, asks Dutour, what of the fact that the earliest attempts at a grammar of French were written in England, as was the first true grammar (the *Traité de la conjugaison françoise*, circa 1250 and the *Donat françois*, circa 1400, respectively)? What of the many other such examples of major developments in the history of the francophone world that happened outside France as we know it? Consequently, the call for francophone scholarship to rethink the world that used French in the Middle Ages is refreshing and very welcome.

Dutour is an historian, particularly of medieval politics in the broadest sense. It is understandable, therefore, that although he convincingly points to the central place of language in locating the individual in the world and indeed creating that world, the actual detail of language usage are not brought to center stage, which would have served Dutour's arguments well. Instead, the treatment of pre-modern French fits a larger pattern of talking about language and language ideologies rather than showing them. There is also a related editorial point: Old French quotations are translated into modern French prose, while sixteenth-century French is left to stand. Quoting the original text would have valuably borne out the author's valid point about the heterogeneity of medieval French. Moreover, highlighting the dialects and *scriptae* that composed medieval French with the philological study of exactly which forms of French travelled and how (for example, the work of Fabio Zinelli, Laura Minervini, or Cyril Aslanov), would have furthered a more nuanced understanding of these "banal" links around the medieval francophone world.[2] Greater detail could have reinforced Dutour's important argument that French identity only really came into being *outside* modern France and depended substantially on the wider francophone world. For example, as Gabrielle Spiegel demonstrated (and whom Dutour discusses), a prominent role in the evolution of French-language historiography was played by the northern nobility who also played a prominent role in the Crusades and the Latin Empire.[3] Some were vassals of the French king, others of the Holy Roman Emperor. What bound them together across political frontiers and sometimes substantial distances was a shared form of French, echoed in Dutour's observations elsewhere about the importance of language and the limited usefulness of political entities as a heuristic frame. In this context, however, there is distinct terminological slippage between *français* and francophone, one never properly resolved. Dutour seems keen on recouping a "French" identity, or at least a degree of "Frenchness" or *francité* for francophone populations outside the kingdom of France. The logical corollary, that is the question of how "French" people and culture *within* the hexagon are, is less present. It seems as though the expansion of the frontiers of a diachronic *francophonie* is more attractive than the possibility of having to take in the bounds of France.

The second part of the book turns to another aspect of French identity, that of the strong centralization, not to say often absolutism, of government. Dutour draws out skillfully the long evolution of France's political functioning and gives this impression that this is his principle concern in the book. Central is the idea that while modern conceptions of being French all go

back to the state, medieval Frenchness is above all a question of the individual person and their relation to power, a fact often obscured by the common habit of thinking of the Middle Ages as essentially collective. In amongst all this, the king must rule *with* his people and exists principally as an instance of consultative justice. With the arrival of the sacralized king, particularly under Philip IV, all possibility of a contractual relationship between the person and power began to erode. This reduction of personal freedom goes hand in hand, Dutour observes, with the long-term reduction in the area of the French-speaking world.

The move from the linguistic to the political-historical is a swift one, pivoting on the topic of individual identity: “La communauté de langue et de culture est le lieu du partage d’une manière d’être politique. Elle rend possible une certaine pratique de ce que signifie être Français. Elle est bien l’objet d’un partage général dans l’espace francophone : si elle ne le distingue pas toujours, elle le caractérise pourtant” (“The community around a language and culture is a place of sharing a way of being political. It makes possible a certain realization of what it means to be French. It is certainly generally shared in the francophone world; if it does not always mark it out against others, it is, however, typical”) (p. 187). The two principal fields of the book—French language outside France and the evolution of the French state and polity—complete each other fruitfully but are never brought into satisfying dialogue. Quite the reverse, they occasionally jar: for instance, the conclusion that the one concept to link the past and present in this rediscovered francophone constellation is “liberté” seems slightly disingenuous in view of the not always peaceful foundations for this “espace de partage” (p. 81).

This brings us to an issue that requires specific treatment, which is the short shrift given to colonial and post-colonial thought. Taking a lead from Florian Besson, Dutour argues that because there was no direct governmental control by the French monarch over those places where French was spoken, the colonial model is inapplicable.^[4] And yet, this seems to be exactly the type of imposition of post-medieval structures on the medieval world that Dutour himself denounces. Indeed, a case Dutour himself cites, in which Geoffrey II de Villehardouin, prince of the Peloponnese Morea and Guy de la Roche, duke of Athens, invited Louis IX to provide judgement and decide a penalty for Guy seems, on the contrary, to be convincing evidence of how applicable colonial thought could be. The barons of the Morea were not Guy’s peers and therefore unable to judge, and so they appealed to Louis as their common liege lord and guarantor of the legal process. This is surely precisely the personal link to power that Dutour himself proposes structured the medieval state, placing both the Morea and Athens rather closer than arm’s length. Similarly, the observation that the Frankish rulers of the Peloponnese were as French as the French of France would also lend credence to a broadly colonial interpretation of the situation. It is precisely for this reason that the concentration of the final chapters of the book on liberty and identity are provocative. Dutour seems to be resisting a “hard” colonial model of power and exploitation while replacing it with a subliminal implication that the medieval francophone world can be associated above all with a certain liberty of the individual, one that decreased as the francophone world shrank over the later Middle Ages. If elsewhere in the book the image of modern France is hard to avoid, and indeed often deliberately conjured, it seems tendentious to avoid any reference to modern *francophonie* and associated histories of un-liberty and the part they play in the elaboration of the French nexus of culture, language, and state.

In brief, then, Dutour’s book is extremely stimulating. It is welcome in particular for its efforts to question the often oversimplified modern connections between France and French, and for the way it engages with recent scholarship from outside France on French outside France. To use

the author's own metaphor, it does much to open the window and tempt others outside. That it takes this work for the most part as a weapon to be wielded in what is at heart a very France-centric argument is perhaps ironic. This does not, however, detract from the fact that *La France hors la France* is a major intervention in discussions of what "France" was in the Middle Ages that will, with luck, give rise to important conversations in the future, not only about the past.

NOTES

[1] Fabio Zinelli and Sylvie Lefèvre, eds., *En français hors de France: Textes, livres, collections du Moyen Âge* (Strasbourg: ELIPHI, 2021).

[2] For example, Fabio Zinelli, "Il francese di Martin da Canal," in Anna Maria Babbi and Chiara Concina, eds., *Francofonie medievali. Lingue e letterature gallo-romanze fuori di Francia (sec. XII–XV)* (Edizioni Fiorini: Modena, 2016), pp. 1-66; "Espaces franco-italiens. Les italianismes du français médiéval," in Martin Gleßgen and David Trotter, eds., *La régionalité lexicale du français au Moyen Âge* (Strasbourg: ELIPHI, 2016), s. 207-268, or, equally, "I codici francesi di Genova e Pisa. Elementi per la definizione di una 'scripta'," *Medioevo romanzo*, 39 (2015): 82-127; Laura Minervini, "Le français dans l'Orient latin (XIIIe-XIVe s.): Éléments pour la caractérisation d'une scripta du Levant," *Revue de linguistique romane*, 74 (2010): 119-198; Cyril Aslanov, *Le français au levant, jadis et naguère: À la recherche d'une langue perdue* (Paris: Champion, 2006).

[3] Gabrielle Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[4] Florian Besson, "Vivre en communauté ou entre communautés? Une réflexion sur le *middle ground* des États latins d'Orient," *Questes*, 32 (2016): 35-50.

David Murray
Independent scholar
damurray54@gmail.com

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