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Hilary Bernstein, *Historical Communities: Cities, Erudition, and National Identity in Early Modern France*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. xi + 435 pp. Notes, references, index. \$190.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-90-04-42646-7; \$190.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-90-04-42647-4.

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Does place matter? In a moment when the term “identity” tends to be shorthand for a form of solidarity based on ethnicity, language, culture, or religion, Hilary Bernstein convincingly reminds us that historically rooted attachments to urban centers was a primordial inspiration of civil cohesion. The story she tells in *Historical Communities* is one of identity formation in the early modern period as cemented through a deepened pride of place. To establish a distinctive status for their respective cities and, consequently, for their inhabitants, scholars in the early modern era strategically employed historical narratives that highlighted the past glories of individual towns. This effort to recover a lost past, often in the dim recesses of time, aimed at securing urban privileges in the present. The resulting enriched and theorized sense of local distinctiveness served as a catalyst for the development of the French national identity in the title. Within this construct, the privileged relationship between the city and the kingdom of France was integral to the broader project of the nation’s formation out of a patchwork of decentralized provinces and towns.

In this study of early modern chroniclers and historiographers, covering roughly 1550 to the 1660s, Hilary Bernstein focuses on the making of historical memory through historical method. She demonstrates how standards of historical research and argumentation among elites that formed a European-wide republic of letters forged new standards for legal evidence and argumentation based on precedent. Starting in the mid-sixteenth century, town councils in Lyon, Nîmes, Reims, Beaune, Poitiers, Clermont, Bourges, Limoges, Riom, Carpentras, and numerous other municipalities engaged in frequent and often conflicting assertions of exclusive corporate rights. These claims aimed at securing privileges such as taxation, monopolization of specific trades, or the safeguarding of existing markets, illustrating the dynamic interplay of local interests during this period.

A present-day social historian of the Ancien Régime will most certainly recognize such functions as naturally accruing to town councils in what a later period called *la police des villes* or the urban administration. Bernstein demonstrates there was nothing organic or inevitable in the development of provincial municipal authority. In an earlier period, adversaries to civil authorities were often wealthier neighboring provincial towns or influential ecclesiastical representatives seeking to expand archepiscopal influence in secular affairs, particularly during the tumultuous Wars of Religion (1562-1598). In a strategic effort to assert both their autonomy

and allegiance to the Crown, provincial town councils in the mid-sixteenth century adopted the practice of engaging skilled chroniclers and historiographers, many lacking legal backgrounds. These scholars were tasked with authoring pamphlets or books aimed at endorsing the distinct status of particular towns in contrast to their counterparts. What these scholarly agents brought to the table was, foremost, a systematic approach to constructing historical context through archival material. They also demonstrated an adept ability to articulate compelling claims grounded in the extensive and impeccable lineage of urban centers.

Two well-known major projects encompassed by this study provide pivotal markers to guide readers through a dense, fine-grained, intricately detailed exploration of the creation of a national narrative through a multitude of local histories. The first project was organized by François de Belleforest (1530-1583), cosmographer and translator, originally from the Gers, who researched and wrote *La Cosmographie universelle de tout le monde* between 1571 and 1575. This was a France-centered alternative and augmentation of the German-language *Cosmographia* by the cartographer Sebastian Munster, intended as an early global history of the entire earth.

Belleforest's contribution on the French kingdom was the result of substantial interactions with the municipal officers and councils of the major towns across France. The ensuing publication was a rich synthesis of written descriptions of the historical origins, monuments, and major events that had distinguished the principal urban centers of the kingdom. Bernstein argues that the impact of Belleforest's commercial success was, above all, to reinforce many a provincial French town's identification with its supposed Gallo-Roman lineage. In turn, this reinforcement of regional identity highlighted a narrative of the significance of sites that contained the indigenous roots of the kingdom. The often-fabulous historical affinity of early modern cities for their foundation myths became all the rage among the provincial elites of early modern France.

A second prominent historical project was orchestrated by André Duchesne (or Du Chesne, 1584-1640), a prolific royal historiographer and geographer, appointed by Richelieu, and based in Paris. Duchesne is broadly acknowledged as the father of modern historical method rooted in archival sleuthing. In 1617, he was commissioned by Louis XIII to compile the ensemble of histories and geographies of the provinces of France. Although Duchesne only completed five of twenty-four projected volumes of the *Historiae Francorum scriptores* at the time of his death, he established the gold standard for the meticulous compilation of critical sources for national chronicles. In 1624, the town council of Reims, attracted by his royal bona fides, hired Duchesne to complete a study of the city's origins following the death of its local historian, Nicolas Bergier. The purpose of the assignment was to refute the Church's hegemonic claims of authority over the city's people (and thus a stake in taxing Reims' coffers) and to prop up the fragile authority of the town council. At risk too was the scope of civic control over the police, administration, the military, and even certain legal jurisdictions.

By 1628, due to the escalating influence of Counter-Reformation archbishops, an exasperated Duchesne gave up on his struggles to complete the so-called true history of Reims. The town's cathedral chapter had found ways to refuse access to the city's historical papers. In the battle for Reims' historical narrative, the city's site of the royal *sacre*, where the nomination of the Crown was made by the local archbishop, had trumped the city's secular myth of the prominent role of the city's bourgeoisie with links to a civic past in ancient Gaul. Failure in Reims seems also to have posthumously tarnished Duchesne's legacy as national chronicler. Despite Colbert's later collaborative attempt, in 1674, to revive and complete Duchesne's original twenty-four-volume

work for his private library with Duchesne *films*, the earlier, much larger project was never completed.

By delving into this lost battle for memory, Hilary Bernstein shows how a largely unknown historical community of scholars thrived within the intellectual realm of the republic of letters. Thus, the term historical community refers both to this scholarly world and to the urban centers they study. The convergence of these two communities occurred infrequently, such as during the convening of the Estates-General in 1614. Regardless of whether they had physically met, the individuals affiliated with the networks that Belleforest and Duchesne frequented, developed, and cultivated, formed a sort of *Internationale* of librarians, chroniclers, historiographers, and even independent-minded Church archivists. They were, in fact, a sort of historical intelligentsia. By occasionally entering into opposition to the Church hierarchy, correspondence within this scholarly network showcased the growing significance of urban history. In a timeless template for scholarship within academic circles, the ever-rising bourgeoisie of Reims provided an intellectual cause for a scholar who deemed his research to be strictly impartial. This claim to objectivity sought to counteract ecclesiastical monopolies on memory: savant references to supposedly unimpeachable archival sources were supposed to out-bid powerful communities of faith for certain privileges. The author cautions, however, that the sources employed to narrate origin stories are inherently shaped to serve a “preconceived outlook,” whether “purposefully or unconsciously,” highlighting the complex nature of historical narratives (p. 360).

At times in painstaking detail, Bernstein reconstructs foundation stories and the resulting arcane urban debates. The status of one’s town or city, as she demonstrates, often hinged on obscure Frankish, Gallic, Roman, or even Trojan pedigrees. Evidence of these ancestral ties was buried, like treasure, in the archival collections of families, municipalities, and the Church itself, as well as in the architectural ruins of many towns. The town council that compellingly demonstrated a direct connection to the earliest occupation could gain privileges granted over rival towns making similar claims. The sheer antiquity of a municipality conferred indigenous legitimacy and prestige within a given province.

Historiographers parsed the slightest coincidence between present town names and past references to the crudest Gallic settlements. In later property law, this form of argumentation would be elaborated as forms of continuous, open, actual, and exclusive possession. (At the risk of anachronism, the author might have made clearer some of the legal concepts being debated, even in embryonic form, such as the privileges of property and first occupation.) For example, after Dijon, the city of Autun, boasting its widely reputed “age and dignity,” (p. 167) had clear right of precedence in voting at the provincial estate of Burgundy over its smaller rivals, Beaune, Chalons-sur-Saône, Nuits, and Saint-Jean-de Losne. But the scholarly melee to determine the order of vote after Dijon had historiographers poring over the minutest tribal settlement mentioned in Caesar’s *Commentary of the Gallic War* (58-49 BCE) or referred to in the works of Strabo, Pliny, and Ptolemy.

Such references served to rebut or to support claims by town councils over which urban center corresponded geographically to which specific tribal area. In the battle for privilege within Burgundy, no stone was left unturned, as even the haphazard dating of ancient ruins within city walls became polemical material for historical communities. Consequently, local authorities, in their pursuit of long-lost urban privileges, postulated seamless continuity between ancient Gaul, Gallo-Roman centers, and French provincial cities. The criterion of first occupation and the

scholarly apparatus supporting such claims emerged as the benchmarks by which inter- and intra-urban disputes in provincial France were ultimately resolved.

Examined through a later perspective, endless citations of a town's tribal roots in ancient Gaul might evoke certain forms of a later, more malignant form of nationalist primitivism. But Bernstein shows that affinities to this past had political purpose: to allow town councils to claim age-old privileges within a larger kingdom. The customs, traditions, and local practices of Gallic tribes, like the Helvetii, Sequani, Aedui, and Arverni, were preserved in the Gallo-Roman period, as described by ancient writers. At the same time, these indigenous peoples were tangible precursors of the French people. Both local and national aspirations were thus fulfilled by these genealogical studies of the origins of urban centers.

Simultaneously, a Renaissance-era focus on antiquity produced local specialists of ancient Roman history and architecture within the republic of letters, such as Jean Poldo d'Albenas of Nîmes, Elie Vinet of Bordeaux, and Guillaume du Choul of Lyon. These widely read sixteenth-century authors, known as *antiquaires*, specialists on Gallo-Roman France, played a crucial role in further popularizing the argument of continuity from ancient Gaul to classical antiquity to early modern France. The methodological ambitions of Belleforest's ambitious *Cosmographie universelle* to create a national sentiment out of the sum of many local municipal parts enjoyed a triumphant scholarly ascendance by the mid-seventeenth century.

Yet, as the final chapters of the study reveal, two distinct contexts changed the trajectory of the historiographical contribution by the republic of letters. First, the incendiary memory of the Wars of Religion, and such events as the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the Edict of Nantes, and the later assassination of Henri IV, meant that Duchesne's setback, rather than Belleforest's earlier success, may have foreshadowed things to come in the field of early modern urban histories. Faced with deep divisions arising from certain towns aligning with Protestant rule or the Catholic League, historiographers in the early- to mid-seventeenth century often opted for stoic silence in the face of the complex realities on the ground. This silence resembled a deliberate historical amnesia, illustrating how the search for political and religious orthodoxy by the second half of the seventeenth century led to irreparable schisms within the scholarly community, while revealing the limitations of identity-seeking through local urban histories.

Secondly, although beyond the chronological scope of Bernstein's study, urban histories fashioned by an informal and dispersed scholarly community ceased to wield influence in settling disputes. As the age of Louis XIV unfolded, their relative decline was precipitated by the rise of centralized monarchical institutions. Above all, royal academies, as promoted by Colbert and as exemplified by the French Academy of Sciences (1666) and Academy of Architecture (1671), fueled momentum for the Crown's centralized control of geographical, archeological, and historical knowledge. The establishment of Paris' *lieutenant général de police* in 1667 created a centralized paradigm of urban administration with little need to refer to esoteric foundation myths in ancient Gaul. The humble provincial town council of the late-seventeenth century now had a compelling institutional model based not on backward-looking historical lineage, but on forward-looking forms of civil administrative efficiency.

Nonetheless, the methodological contributions of historical communities were enduring, not in the rise of objective history as championed by nineteenth century positivism, but rather in what the author aptly calls "the reputation for probity" on the part of the scholar (p. 360). The

diligence, rigor, and precision needed to recover lost knowledge about the past generated a virtuous cycle of valued methods and forms of scholarship. As the standing for those with precise understanding of the past gained favor among urban and ecclesiastical elites, the republic of letters became more closely aligned with local governing elites. The most adept chroniclers and historiographers, with their solid reputation for an intimate grasp of archival material, had become vital for political, religious, and cultural legitimacy.

Hilary Bernstein's book offers numerous valuable contributions. Her adept contextualization of past historiographers diligently sleuthing away in obscure provincial, ecclesiastical, and family archives, paints a vivid foundation narrative for the modern historian. In essence, this study serves as a genesis story for the very type of history it exemplifies: a rigorous, factual, and precise narrative that avoids convoluted jargon and references to obscure historical debates. It also rehabilitates a type of "tedious" (p. ix) early modern historical writing that rarely found subsequent favor outside of the occasional footnote. While the book's somewhat austere production, lacking illustrations or appendices, might be attributed to the publisher, the result is nevertheless an invaluable resource for scholars delving into the roots of how France evolved into the historical nation par excellence. In summary, this book indirectly addresses why the historical profession dedicated to French history continues to be preoccupied with the search for origins, the study of the *long durée*, and *histoire totale*. Fittingly, it turns out that the germ of Belleforest's universal history, with its ambition to describe all the habitable and uninhabitable parts of the Earth and the Sea, is to be found in the most obscure urban history of the smallest town in the hinterlands of France.

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