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**Gérard Noiriel**, *Penser avec, penser contre: Itinéraire d'un historien*. Paris: Belin, 2003. 310 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. 23.00 € (pb.) ISBN 2-7011-3347-5.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

*Penser avec, penser contre*, Gérard Noiriel's new collection of essays, is really two books: an assortment of essays on thinkers who have influenced the author's approach to French social history (which continue the theoretical and methodological discussions he launched in his 1996 book, *Sur la 'crise' de l'histoire*) and a highly personal afterword in which Noiriel recounts the unusual path that brought him to his present professional position.<sup>[1]</sup> Both sections of the book show that their author, best known in the United States for his work on the history of immigration to France, is something of an exception among contemporary French historians. It is not surprising that a scholar of Noiriel's generation should acknowledge debts to the *Annales* school tradition, to Norbert Elias, to Pierre Bourdieu, and above all to Michel Foucault. But it is unusual to find a French historian paying homage to Max Weber, Virginia Woolf, and to the American philosopher Richard Rorty; as Noiriel writes at the beginning of the latter essay, "Qu'un historien français puisse trouver de l'intérêt à lire un philosophe pragmatiste américain peut paraître étrange, voire même inconvenant" (p. 209). As his autobiographical afterword shows, however, Noiriel's entire career has been, by French standards, an unusual one, and he sees his own experiences as one reason why he approaches history differently than many of his French colleagues.

Although Noiriel argues throughout his book for a more collegial, less polemical tone in French academic life, his essays on French thinkers have a critical edge, justifying the "*penser contre*" in his title. A chapter on François Simiand, one of the ancestors of the *Annales* tradition, sees the aggressive tone in which Simiand castigated the "traditional" historians of his day as anticipating the battles that have marked French philosophy and historiographical debate ever since. Marc Bloch comes off better: Noiriel praises the constructive terms in which he engaged with the work of other scholars, and Bloch's concentration on issues of historical practice rather than philosophy. Fernand Braudel's famous attempt to establish the *longue durée* as the basis of history's pre-eminence among the social sciences receives a withering deconstruction, however. Noiriel notes that the concept was virtually absent from Braudel's masterpiece, *La Méditerranée*, and he interprets it essentially as a device to promote Braudel's position in the struggle for academic power in Paris at the end of the 1950s.

As Noiriel's autobiographical afterword indicates, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu played a larger role in his own intellectual development than the *Annales* school scholars. Both helped him liberate himself from Marxism, while at the same time encouraging his hope that he could find a theoretical framework that would justify his desire to write history that would engage contemporary political and social issues. In the end, however, he found both these *maîtres à penser* inadequate. In the first of the book's two essays on Foucault, "Foucault et l'histoire: les leçons d'un désenchantement," Noiriel argues that Foucault, despite his interest in reading historical sources, remained essentially a philosopher, unwilling to abandon the power claim inherent in his own discipline's insistence that it had the right to judge what constituted historical truth. A second essay, "Michel Foucault: les trois figures de

l'intellectuel engagé," is somewhat more sympathetic, arguing that Foucault gradually moved from his imperious claim that all intellectual systems were mystifications of power in need of exposure to a more pragmatic definition of the ways in which a *chercheur engagé* could contribute to collective movements. Noiriel's chapter on Bourdieu, though subtitled "Hommage," begins with a denunciation of Bourdieu's cavalier incursion into Noiriel's homeland, the metal-working region of Lorraine, and concludes that Bourdieu was never able to keep his promise of creating a sociological theory that would be both scientific and a guide to action. Bourdieu complained that his works were never properly understood and therefore never integrated into practice but, Noiriel writes, "si personne ne parvenait plus à comprendre sa sociologie, à quoi pouvait-elle bien servir?" (p. 169). Bourdieu takes a further shellacking in Noiriel's essay on Virginia Woolf, where he castigates the sociologist for his heavy-handed and reductionist reading of *To The Lighthouse*, calculated to "trouver dans le roman des arguments qui permettent de valider la théorie préalablement constituée" (p. 190), in this case, Bourdieu's notion of universal patriarchy.

Noiriel's own approach to Woolf's novel is more nuanced, emphasizing the multiplicity of themes in the story and the way in which the act of writing allowed Woolf to challenge the structure of male domination. Like his other essays on non-French thinkers, the chapter on Woolf is positive in tone. Noiriel's appreciation of Norbert Elias is not particularly heretical in the French context, although his emphasis on Elias's theory of national identity, as opposed to his depiction of court culture, is unusual. American readers will have some difficulty following Noiriel's discussion of current French debates about Max Weber, many of whose writings have only recently been translated into French. The most provocative of Noiriel's essays, however, is certainly the chapter he devotes to Richard Rorty. In the United States, as Noiriel remarks, Rorty is often lumped together with French post-structuralist philosophers such as Derrida, but Noiriel turns to him as an alternative to his own countrymen. Noiriel's claim--not really illustrated by any example--is that Rorty's pragmatic philosophy offers a way of illuminating historical problems without imposing an empirically unverifiable universal framework. For historians, "Rorty nous offre des moyens qui nous permettent d'évoluer tout en restant nous-mêmes" (p. 219). Rorty's antifoundationalist argument suggests the futility of confrontational disputes and offers support to Noiriel's program for a community of historians open to differing points of view.

The autobiographical final essay with which Noiriel concludes this collection is interesting in its own right and also helps clarify the sources of some of the author's intellectual likes and dislikes. Unlike the numerous French historians of the previous generation who published accounts of their careers during the 1980s and early 1990s, most notably in the *Essais d'ego-histoire* volume edited by Pierre Norain 1987, Noiriel grew up in an impoverished and dysfunctional family.[2] Despite impressive academic achievements in elementary school, he was routed into a *collège d'enseignement général* rather than a *lycée*, and it was only with difficulty that he made his way into the university system. The shake-up of May 1968 encouraged his ambitions, but he had no sympathy for the utopian notions of students from bourgeois backgrounds. Instead, he joined the Communist Party in the early 1970s. Although he would quit the Party at the end of that decade, Noiriel remains grateful both for the introduction to the world of ideas that Marxism gave him and for the contacts within the Paris academic scene it provided. As he was completing his *thèse* on the deindustrialization of Lorraine and breaking with the Communists, he discovered Foucault and Bourdieu, who took the place of Marx and gave him continued assurance that there was a role for the *intellectuel engagé*. The critical essays on these two *maîtres à penser* earlier in the book reflect his eventual disenchantment, particularly with Bourdieu (who, as Noiriel notes, came from a modest social background similar to his own). Noiriel's critique of Foucault and Bourdieu is part of a broader dissatisfaction with the "cité savante" he had struggled so hard to enter: "en avançant, je découvrais qu'il s'agissait d'un monde social comme un autre, avec ses grandeurs et ses faiblesses" (p. 277).

Noiriel's account of the travails of an outsider making his way in an academic universe dominated by the *héritiers* portrayed in Bourdieu's work has similarities to the autobiographical accounts in a recent

American volume of essays by professors from working-class backgrounds, although Noiriél has achieved an entirely different status from these authors.[3] His critical attitude toward the practices of French academia and its tutelary deities, and his openness to non-French intellectual influences (which parallels the insistence on the contribution of immigrants to French life in his scholarship), clearly reflect aspects of his personal experience. Indeed, Noiriél opens himself up to the same kind of critique he makes of earlier French intellectuals: his identification with outsiders serves, to some extent, to legitimize his own position in the country's intellectual life. *Penser avec, penser contre* also has some of the defects common to essay collections that bring together pieces composed for different purposes. The inclusion of Noiriél's autobiographical self-portrait, however, gives the collection an unexpected unifying element and provides new insight into the work of one of contemporary France's most significant historians.

## NOTES

[1] On *Sur la 'crise' de l'histoire*, see the critiques by Joan Scott and Lloyd Kramer in *French Historical Studies*, 21 (1998): 383-414.

[2] Pierre Nora, ed., *Essais d'ego-histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). For a fuller discussion of French historians' autobiographical writings, see Jeremy D. Popkin, "Ego-histoire and Beyond: Contemporary French Historian-Autobiographers," *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996): 1139-67.

[3] C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law, eds., *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

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