
H-France Review Vol. 5 (November 2005), No. 120

Response to Annie Jourdan's review of Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon*. London, Granta Books, 2004. xiii + 336 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. 20.£ U.K. ISBN 1-86207-667-7.

By Sudhir Hazareesingh, Balliol College, Oxford University.

Professor Jourdan's review raises a number of important questions about the meaning and significance of the Napoleonic legend. I am grateful to the editors of H-France for the opportunity to open up this fruitful discussion, which is of interest not only to Napoleon scholars but also to historians of modern French political culture more generally.

The review rightly underscores the fundamental premise of the book: the indissoluble nature of politics and mythology in nineteenth-century France. In other words, the cult of Napoleon was an inescapably political phenomenon, and French political culture during this period was heavily laden with myths, symbols, and memories; and these, in turn, could have lasting effects on popular perceptions and behaviour. The latter point is commonplace in studies of revolutionary and republican political culture.^[1] But it is still somewhat controversial in the field of Napoleonic scholarship, in the sense that much (French) writing on Bonapartism still routinely distinguishes between an apolitical, sentimental, backward-looking "myth" of Napoleon and a structured, purposive political movement which (it is claimed) emerges only around 1848. If *The Legend of Napoleon's* only success is to have helped transcend this dichotomy, the book will have fulfilled a useful function.

Where there is disagreement, however, is on the extent and political implications of the Napoleonic legend. Despite having accepted the premise that Napoleonic mythology has to be understood in political terms, the review in effect proceeds systematically to play down any substantive political effects of the cult. This is the position adopted in Professor Jourdan's recent work *Mythes et légendes de Napoléon*, written on the basis of memoir literature and secondary sources, where she concludes that the popular legend of Napoleon was not "truly perceptible" in the early years of the Restoration.^[2] I have come to my own, opposite, conclusions by drawing largely on public archives, and attempting to widen the lens through which we perceive the "political" sphere in nineteenth-century France by exploring popular cultural practices. A key issue between us, therefore, is the reliability of these primary sources, and the legitimate "scientific" inferences which can be drawn from them.

There is little doubt that administrative reports from the police, the judiciary, and local officials need to be handled with subtlety. But it is perhaps unduly prudent to conclude that these thousands of reports merely reveal a widespread sense of popular discontent towards the government. Such an inference would hardly distinguish the police records of the Restoration from those of any other modern French regime (indeed has there ever been a time when the French people were "content" with their government?). The real question is not that there was popular discontent, but rather why its expression took this very particular form (support for Napoleon), and why this support emerged so forcefully and spontaneously as from 1815. Such questions cannot be answered by relying on memoir literature and secondary material: not only because the archives contain substantive material which it would be remiss to ignore, but also because this material requires an inclusive methodological approach, drawing upon the instruments of socio-political history as well as cultural history.

Archival sources also have much to contribute to our understanding of the social history of the period. It is entirely fair to note, as Professor Jourdan does, that the social and institutional dissemination of the legend after 1815 needs to be approached carefully, and without yielding to the temptation to stereotype any particular group. Given this warning, we should probably take Paul Louis Courier's categorical view of peasant beliefs with a pinch of salt (how would he have known what "all peasants think"?). The key issue here is the extent to which the veterans of the Grande Armée remained committed to the memory of the Emperor after 1815. It is no doubt important that seven and a half per cent of those arrested and prosecuted under the Restoration were veterans (although such apparent statistical precision flies in the face of the review's warning that police and judicial archives should be treated with caution!). But, even if accurate, this statistic is hardly conclusive. Not everyone engaged in dissident and underground Napoleonic activity was arrested—partly because Bonapartist activists (including veterans) were skilled at avoiding detection, partly because of police incompetence, and partly because the authorities did not feel strong enough in some areas to confront local Bonapartist agitators.

More fundamentally, taking arrest and prosecution as the only (or even the principal) measure of Napoleonic popular support is insufficient. If we adopted the same standard, we would have to conclude that there were hardly any liberals in France during the Restoration, because very few were arrested and prosecuted. Political support and mobilization for the Napoleonic cause could take myriad forms, as the early chapters of the Legend of Napoleon demonstrate. Veterans, along with other social groups, manifested their enthusiasm in numerous ways, including forming associations, celebrating the Emperor's birth and the anniversary of his return in 1815 (and later, the anniversary of his death), writing poems and singing songs in honour, and selling "seditious" objects and images. The archives show that veterans were heavily implicated in all these "cultural" activities after 1815: hence it seems legitimate to conclude not only that their attitude to the government was oppositional, but that they expressly and positively identified with Napoleon.

The underlying issue here is how we should—or indeed whether we can—provide a satisfactory definition of "Bonapartism." After observing the ideological heterogeneity of Napoleonic support after 1815, and its incorporation of liberal and republican motifs, as well as its references to the heritage of 1789, Professor Jourdan concludes that popular Bonapartism was much more of a negative, populist movement, and in this sense not a "real" form of Bonapartism. There is evidently room to discuss the extent of the coherence of Bonapartism between 1815 and 1848. But we should avoid three traps here. The first would be to rely on an anachronistic definition of "party", thereby presuming that a political movement could exist only if it was unified and cohesive. Very few political movements of the period would meet such a yardstick. For most of the nineteenth century, the republicans were an extremely broad church, incorporating elements ranging from moderate constitutionalists such as Alphonse de Lamartine to radical revolutionaries such as Louis Blanqui. Liberals were also very diverse and heterogeneous, divided as they were among individualist, statist, and Catholic strands.[3] These forms of diversity are recognized by all historians of nineteenth-century France, without however giving rise to the claim that the concepts of "republicanism" and "liberalism" are in some sense heuristically inappropriate. Bonapartism should be treated no differently, and not have imposed upon it a set of criteria which we would not apply to its political counterparts.

The second pitfall would be to question the identity of Bonapartism simply because the style and content of its politics were resolutely adversarial. It is perfectly true that the Bonapartists of the Restoration were oppositional; in the terminology of modern political science, they were an "anti-system" force. But so were, for the most part, the republicans. Yet, again, it would not occur to anyone to doubt their identity because they shared the Bonapartists' objectives of overthrowing the Bourbons and questioning the role of the Church and the notables. Moreover, being radically opposed to the status quo is entirely compatible with the possession of a coherent world-view. This synthesis is precisely what ultramontane Catholicism represented for much of the nineteenth century, and

communism for most of the twentieth. Indeed one could argue that “being against everything” is form of politics which is something of a French speciality...

Thirdly, and most importantly, the absence of a coherent memory of the First Empire among Bonapartist enthusiasts after 1815 is not evidence of a blurring of Bonapartist identity, but simply a reflection of its transformation. Political movements and ideas do not always remain static: they evolve and adapt. And it is precisely this capacity to change which enabled Bonapartism to be so successful for much of the nineteenth century. Even Louis Napoleon, who represented the imperial tradition as from the 1830s, amended it in a number of crucial ways, as a response both to his own ideological preferences and the political constraints he faced. Such adaptability is a condition of political success: it is unlikely that the republicans would have achieved their striking triumphs after 1871 had they failed to learn the lessons of the 1790s and the late 1840s. Therefore it makes no more sense to define nineteenth-century Bonapartism in terms of the exclusive worship of the memory of the First Empire than to define modern republicanism as the sole embrace of the memory of the Terror.

What was the historical weight of Bonapartism as compared to other political currents in nineteenth-century France? Professor Jourdan is surely right to warn that we should be wary of exaggerating the salience of Bonapartism. But it is very paradoxical to suggest that we could just as well argue that liberalism and republicanism ‘used’ Bonapartism as a convenient mechanism for furthering their own ends after 1815. It should be remembered that Liberals denounced Napoleon’s tyranny relentlessly between 1800 and 1815. After 1815, however, many liberals rallied to the Emperor and defended his memory, in the process softening many of their earlier criticisms of Napoleon’s rule. This intellectual metamorphosis turned a man Madame de Staël denounced as the “fatal foreigner” into a ruler who had ‘had well deserved of mankind’ (Benjamin Constant). It is puzzling, to say the least, how such a realignment could be presented as evidence of an “admirable” liberal victory. Most analysts of modern French political culture now agree that, in the historical interface between liberalism and Bonapartism, the former took on many properties of the latter. Liberalism adopted key elements of the Napoleonic heritage (most notably the preservation of centralization, and the social regulation of society by the State). This is indeed one of the key explanations for the weakness of the liberal tradition in France.[4]

The relationship between republicanism and Bonapartism is more complex, as it brings into question the events of 1848 and their aftermath, and the interpretation of the political victories of Louis Napoleon. Professor Jourdan denies any possible link between the Prince’s successes and his assumption of elements of the republican heritage, citing the provincial revolts of 1851 as evidence of strong republican opposition to Bonapartist rule. What these revolts show without any doubt is that the new Napoleonic regime was violently contested at the time of its establishment. But so were the Second Republic in June 1848 and the Third Republic at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871. Should we therefore deduce that both of these regimes forever lost any claim to popular legitimacy? This would hardly be a prudent inference. In fact, the events of 1851 tell us little about the subsequent two decades of Louis Napoleon’s rule—decades which witnessed a string of electoral victories (including the plebiscite of May 1870), a successful appeal to French nationalist sentiment, and (above all) a strong entrenchment of the Empire in the countryside, based on the regime’s perceived defence of the Revolutionary principle of civil equality. In these respects, as in many others, the Second Empire was seen by the French people as a continuation of the Revolutionary heritage—as many of the imperial regime’s republican adversaries acknowledged. Félix Pyat summed up the point soberly: “Le peuple devenu souverain, voilà le mot de l’énigme, voilà le secret de la puissance impériale”. [5]

Bonapartism was thus influenced and shaped by republicanism. But the reverse was also the case. My research on the celebration of the Saint-Napoléon showed that, despite their virulent anti-Bonapartist rhetoric, the republicans essentially adopted the exact format of this Napoleonic festivity when they came to devise their own fête of 14 July under the Third Republic in 1880.[6] They did this not out of

any love or nostalgia for the Empire, but because they recognized that the Bonapartists had succeeded in symbolizing and representing French popular sovereignty. Léon Gambetta was not saying anything different when he referred admiringly to Napoleon in 1871 as the man who “a fait la France, malgré tout, incomparablement belle et puissante, belle d’une splendeur qui ne périra pas malgré ses défaites, puissante d’une souveraineté qu’elle retrouvera, malgré ses mutilations temporaires”. [7]

All of this is not merely of antiquarian interest: the Bonapartist tradition and its mythology have continued to irrigate French political culture in modern times, and the legend of Napoleon haunts the nation’s collective imagination through the Gaullist myth. Here too, Professor Jourdan invites a relativization of the importance of Bonapartism, noting that Gaullism was essentially different from its predecessor because of its “respect for [universal] suffrage and legality.” This is more an expression of political mythologization—we could call it “the liberal legend of de Gaulle”—than a statement of historical fact. De Gaulle had many remarkable qualities, but respect for “republican legality” was hardly one of them. Had he been a scrupulous legalist, he would not have rebelled in 1940; nor would he have colluded in the military insurrection which helped bring him back to power in 1958. Since mention is made of François Mitterrand, perhaps it would apposite to note here that one of his most scathing polemical attacks against Gaullism was called *Le coup d’état permanent...*

Yet it is also undeniable that De Gaulle is viewed today in France as one of the greatest statesmen of all times, and that his image is no longer weighed down by any of these negative attributes. This is no inconsistency here, provided we do not confuse history and memory. Professor Jourdan, like most of her compatriots in France today, celebrates de Gaulle as a republican hero and a champion of liberal values—even though this was not how many of his contemporaries saw him, or indeed how he saw himself (he never wavered in his contempt for Parliament and parliamentarians—hardly the sign of a ruler who “respected universal suffrage”). But this does not matter. This is the very stuff of political mythology, where such transformations are natural and in some senses inevitable; Napoleon’s memory experienced a similar alteration after 1815. We can serenely and dispassionately observe and seek to understand this, and debate what it signifies, without condoning what happened under the First Empire, just as we can celebrate de Gaulle as one of the greatest French statesmen without forgetting that he occasionally confused the general will with the will of the General.

NOTES

[1] See notably the works on republican festivals by Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976) and Olivier Ihl, *La fête républicaine* (Paris, Gallimard, 1996) and Maurice Agulhon’s trilogy, *Marianne au combat* (Paris, Flammarion, 1979), *Marianne au pouvoir* (Paris, Flammarion, 1989), and *Les Métamorphoses de Marianne* (Paris, Flammarion, 2001).

[2] Annie Jourdan, *Mythes et légendes de Napoléon. Un destin d’exception, entre rêve et réalité...* (Toulouse: Éditions Privat, 2004), p. 47.

[3] See Lucien Jaume, *L’individu effacé* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

[4] On this theme, see notably the recent work of Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[5] Cited in Jean Lucas-Dubreton, *Le Culte de Napoléon* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1960), p. 462.

[6] Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Saint-Napoléon: celebrations of sovereignty in 19th century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[7] Cited in Natalie Petiteau, *Napoléon de la mythologie à l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p.140.

Sudhir Hazareesingh
Balliol College
Oxford University
sudhir.hazareesingh@politics-and-international-relations.oxford.ac.uk

See also Annie Jourdan's comments on Sudhir Hazareesingh's response to her review in the Discussion Archives.

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172