

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (November 2008), No. 145

Ursula Haskins Gonthier, ed., *Opinion, Voltaire, nature et culture*. SVEC, 2007:12. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007. xi + 307 pp. 36 illustrations. \$140 U.S. (pb); ISBN 978 0 7294 09186.

Review by Jeremy L. Caradonna, University of Alberta.

Evaluating the text under consideration does not present an easy task for the reviewer. The clumsy title—*Opinion, Voltaire, nature et culture*, edited by Ursula Haskins Gonthier—only partially reveals the contents of the “book.” The publication is, in fact, a hybrid installment of *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (SVEC). There is nothing unusual about SVEC devoting an entire issue to a monograph and marketing the text as a book, and many important works in French history, including Raymond Birn’s 2001 *Forging Rousseau*, have appeared in this form.[1] However, what is puzzling about this particular issue of SVEC is that it inexplicably blends together three different publishing genres: an edited theme-issue, a monograph, and random journal articles.

More precisely, the issue is divided into five sections: 1) Les opinions au dix-huitième siècle; 2) Voltaire; 3) Book History; 4) Bayle; and 5) Nature et culture. Only the first of the five sections is edited by Gonthier; the other four sections were presumably edited by the staff at SVEC. Section three is an eighty-eight-page mini-monograph by the late Robert L. Dawson. Sections two, four, and five are basically random articles that touch on subjects as diverse as Pierre Bayle and the anthropology of the Enlightenment. Thus, the extreme diversity of subjects makes it difficult to review the book as a book, and I think SVEC would have been better off presenting the tome as a collection of journal articles. That said, since Gonthier is listed as the editor, this review will largely confine itself to the portion of the issue edited by her.

The unusual format of the book is unfortunate because the essays in section one deserve our attention. In a brief introduction entitled “le dix-huitième siècle—l’âge de la raison ou l’âge de l’opinion?,” Gonthier makes the claim that the true innovation of French culture in the eighteenth century lies in the cultivation of the concept of public opinion. Gonthier explains, as many others have done before her, how the concept of “opinion” (in the singular) became separated from “opinions” (in the plural). Whereas the latter term tended to connote individual, capricious, and erroneous beliefs, the former, in at least some texts from the late eighteenth century, indicated a rational, infallible, unanimous force. In this regard, Gonthier might have cited Louis-Sébastien Mercier who, in 1782, wrote that “in the last thirty years alone, a great and important revolution has occurred in our ideas. Today, public opinion has a preponderant force in Europe that cannot be resisted.”

The problem is that Gonthier never tells us why this “force” is important. At the end of the introduction she notes that “dans les livres, les périodiques, les pamphlets, et dans les remontrances du Parlement, on observe des tentatives d’influencer l’opinion, ou de résister à son influence; de la manipuler, de la codifier, de l’analyser et, enfin, de la représenter” (p. 4). Yet this rather vague statement hardly explains the significance of public opinion in the intellectual and political culture of the period. Even more troubling is the fact that Gonthier invokes the four main historians who have investigated the concept without differentiating between the divergent conclusions that they reach: Jürgen Habermas, Mona Ozouf, Roger Chartier, and Keith M. Baker.[2]

For Habermas and Chartier, the advent of public opinion is largely seen as a positive development, helping to establish a relatively independent sphere of intellectual exchange in the Enlightenment. Ozouf and Baker, on the other hand, focus more on the political and polemical character of opinion, arguing that the concept subtly undermined royal authority by “substituting” public opinion for “divinity” and royal prerogative (Ozouf, p. S10). Yet differences also exist between Ozouf’s and Baker’s interpretations. Ozouf brings to light the element of elitism and manipulation associated with public opinion, for example (p. S17). She also boldly claims that “public opinion was a concrete reality,” as though the eighteenth century possessed a simple means of aggregating and gauging public attitudes (p. S7). Baker, at least on my reading, characterizes public opinion less as a “concrete reality” and more as a rhetorical tool. Hence the title of his famous chapter in *Inventing the French Revolution*: “Public Opinion as Political Invention.” According to Baker, a shrewd group of thinkers bent on creating a “politics of contestation” inserted public opinion into political discourse in the middle and late eighteenth century: “‘public opinion’ had become the articulating concept of a new political space with a legitimacy and authority apart from that of the crown” (p. 199). Does that make public opinion a “concrete” or rhetorical concept? Is public opinion a revolutionary force? Is it safe to group Habermas and Baker into the same category vis-à-vis the history of public opinion? Unfortunately, Gonthier never grapples with these sorts of issues and leaves the real argumentation to the seven essayists who contributed to section one.

Where do these essays fit in the historiography of public opinion? I would say that most of the essays ultimately build off of Mona Ozouf’s interpretation, albeit with less attention to the political culture of the 1780s and 1790s. For example, Marion Lafouge’s “Pour une critique aristocratique: Grimm et la *Correspondance littéraire*” provides strong evidence that Grimm cared little about the opinion of the masses. For him, the only opinion that counted was that of the aristocracy and the intellectual elite. Positioning his journal between the tepid style of the *Mercure de France*, on the one hand, and the shrill attacks of Fréron’s *Année littéraire*, on the other, Grimm crafted a publication aimed at advancing not “public” opinion, but rather the “enlightened” opinion of the *philosophes*.

To be sure, the *Correspondance littéraire* did not intend to speak for (or be read by) the broader public, “absorbé dans l’erreur et dans le fanatisme” (p. 25). Lafouge seems surprised by the fact that the *philosophes* could be elitist and condescending, but the argument has been made before, most recently by Simon Schaffer in an article entitled “Enlightened Automata.”<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed by most accounts, the “party of humanity” was more like a snobby cocktail party than a raucous bonfire on the beach. Likewise, James Hanrahan’s essay on the pamphlet wars during the Maupeou coup argues that Voltaire, who defended the Chancellor against the Parlements, generally appealed to the “intérêt général” of the nobility, not “la voix publique” or the “reasoning enlightened public” (pp. 33-35). As Hanrahan notes, perhaps with Habermas in mind, “to look at Enlightenment as a stock of progressive ideas is extremely limiting” (p. 40).

Éric Gatefin’s essay on Diderot, Rousseau, and public opinion reaches a similar conclusion. In both Diderot’s *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* and Rousseau’s *Dialogues de Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, the opinion of the public is treated with great hostility. As he argues, “...Diderot et Rousseau délaissent sensiblement l’opinion publique comme entité inéluctablement destinée à être trompée” (p. 44). Rousseau, in particular, became “torturé par une opinion publique unanimement dressée contre lui” (p. 47). Thus, what Gatefin demonstrates is that two of the leading *philosophes* actually rejected (or at least cast doubt on) the utility of public opinion. Instead of seeing public opinion as rational and infallible, they viewed it as oppressive and easily deceived.

Arnaud Decroix, in one of the more broad-minded essays in the collection, contends that most thinkers in the late eighteenth century knowingly upheld the division between “opinion publique” and “opinion populaire”: “L’opinion publique n’est donc pas, à proprement parler, démocratique et l’incapacité du

peuple est soulignée par des très nombreux auteurs” (p. 53). Alexandra Hyard finds similar misgivings about public opinion in the works of the physiocrats. Arguing against historians who have credited the physiocrats with developing public opinion, Hyard shows that the physiocrats rarely employed the term, and when they did it was either to denounce it or to advocate for provincial assemblies made up exclusively of wealthy landowners (pp. 67,73).

Finally, in a very well-written essay on public opinion and metaphorical language, Nicolas Veysman demonstrates the extent to which writers likened the concept to a multi-headed Hydra. The essay, which is somewhat reminiscent of Antoine de Baecque’s investigation of bodily metaphors in late eighteenth-century political culture, reveals that most observers continued to view public opinion as contradictory and unstable until quite late in the century when the metaphor switched from “hydra” (negative) to “tribunal” (positive).<sup>[4]</sup>

The leitmotif in these essays is that public opinion was often denounced, questioned, or rendered elitist by the very writers who, according to Habermas and others, were using the concept to forge an egalitarian and democratic intellectual culture. Taken as a whole, then, the collection adds weight to Ozouf’s contention that one cannot simply assume that public opinion in the Old Regime foreshadowed a democratic political culture in the French Revolution. As Gonthier notes in the introduction, summarizing Ozouf’s position on the subject, public opinion created a new “forme d’absolutisme, aussi despotique que les anciennes structures qu’elle était censée remplacer” (pp. 3-4). Indeed, as many of the authors demonstrate in this collection, public opinion often functioned as (or was seen to function as) a very elitist and anti-democratic concept. For that reason alone, these essays deserve to be integrated into the historiography on public opinion in eighteenth-century France.

Yet one of the problems with this collection of essays is that the contributors, like Mona Ozouf herself, often uncritically assume that public opinion became a “concrete reality.” Hanrahan states, for instance, that “we must accept that public opinion was a concrete reality, as its existence can be clearly located in the appeals made to it by writers” (p. 31). Decroix would seem to agree. However, I would have liked to have seen more attention paid to this assertion. What is meant by “concrete reality?” With regard to Hanrahan’s statement, the “appeals” made by writers should not be confused with the object of those appeals. Clearly, the concept of public opinion became a major element in the new political culture that developed in late eighteenth-century France. But we should not reify the concept as though the eighteenth century possessed Roper or Gallup polls—themselves worthy of scrutiny. What would Bourdieu say?<sup>[5]</sup> One of the strengths of Baker’s study of public opinion is that it shows how the concept was used and abused to meet certain political ends. It was a construct, a rhetorical instrument, an invention. Only Nicolas Veysman seems to grasp the complexities of the issue. As he notes, in regard to the switch from the “hydra” to the “tribunal” metaphor, “une chimère a remplacé l’autre” (p. 89).

Second, I think the collection could have benefited from a closer look at public opinion in practice. Did public opinion play a role in academies, musées, Masonic lodges, or philosophical societies? Can we embed the term in particular social practices? Can we talk about public opinion “from below”? In general, the collaborators tend to focus on the printed works of social elites, and in that sense the collection reinforces a somewhat outdated vision of the Enlightenment, rooted in a limited number of texts, philosophers, and ideas. As a result, the work of Robert Darnton, Daniel Roche, Margaret Jacob, Simon Schaffer, and Steven Shapin appears only infrequently in the footnotes. I also found it difficult to differentiate between the different Enlightenments invoked by the contributors. By my count, there are at least five Enlightenments currently found in academia: the literary-artistic Enlightenment, the Enlightenment of cultural-intellectual practices, the philosophical-radical Enlightenment, the scientific Enlightenment, and the political culture Enlightenment. Each of these Enlightenments have different methods, practitioners, theoretical influences, textual canons, casts of characters, and, most importantly, historiographical stakes. Perhaps the importance of public opinion simply differs depending on the Enlightenment we choose to analyze.

Finally, a few words about the other sections of the book. Sections two and five contain an assortment of essays on Voltaire, Charles Bonnet, and the *philosophes'* view of Lapland. Section four contains a thoughtful essay by Anthony McKenna on recent scholarship on Pierre Bayle. Section three is a very long essay (or short monograph) by Robert Dawson, entitled "Naughty French Books and their Imprints during the Long Eighteenth Century." The essay/monograph is divided into two parts: the first is a narrative history of the illicit book trade, and the second is an annotated bibliography of scandalous books. As Dawson illustrates, years of grubbing in the archives allowed him to expand the catalogue of illicit works that circulated in the eighteenth century. His piece thus rounds out the bibliographies produced by Darnton, Chartier, Jean-Marie Goulemot, Barbara de Negroni, and Françoise Weil, not to mention Dawson's previous works on the subject.[6] There are a couple of oddities that emerge, however. First, Dawson never clearly explains why he chose to annotate some illicit works and not others. He merely claims that all of the books in the bibliography are "very rare" (p. 186). He also inexplicably refers to Christophe de Beaumont, the Archbishop of Paris, as a "loser" (p. 180, 75f).

In the end, then, the structure of the book ends up creating a distraction for the reader that could have been avoided if SVEC had simply marketed the tome as a journal issue. The wide range of subjects makes it rather difficult to write a traditional book review. That said, the essays in section one, in particular, merit careful attention as they shed new light on an increasingly complex historical object.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

### Part 1. Les opinions au dix-huitième siècle

Ursula Haskins Gonthier, "Introduction: le dix-huitième siècle – l'âge de la raison ou l'âge de l'opinion?"

#### Section A. L'opinion et les périodiques

Sébastien Drouin, "Les opinions des jésuites sur les sociniens dans les *Mémoires de Trévoux*"

Marion Lafouge, "Pour une critique aristocratique: Grimm et la *Correspondance littéraire*"

#### Section B. Les philosophes et l'opinion

James Hanrahan, "Appealing and Appearing to 'Reason': Voltaire's Political Pamphlet of 1771 and the Battle of Public Opinion"

Éric Gatefin, "Les tourments de l'opinion: hantise du jugement dans l'*Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* de Denis Diderot et dans les *Dialogues de Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* de Jean-Jacques Rousseau"

#### Section C. Autour de l'opinion publique

Arnaud Decroix, "L'instrumentalisation politique de l'opinion publique dans les dernières décennies de l'ancien régime"

Alexandra Hyard, "L'opinion publique et les physiocrates"

Nicolas Veysman, "Une métaphore de l'opinion publique au dix-huitième siècle: l'hydre de Lerne"

## Part 2. Voltaire

Emeka Abanime, "Voltaire et le prince de Timor"

Michel Mervaud, "Tragédie et philosophie dans la correspondance de Voltaire: le cas d'Ivan VI"

## Part 3. Book History

Robert L. Dawson, "Naughty French Books and their Imprints during the long Eighteenth Century"

## Part 4. Bayle

Anthony McKenna, "Pierre Bayle in the Light of New Research: Faith and Reason in the Classical Age"

## Part 5. Nature et Culture

Lyndia Roveda, "Entre contemplation et observation: l'esquisse de la nature selon Charles Bonnet"

Martin Wählberg, "L'anthropologie des Lumières et le mythe de l'hospitalité lapone – Regnard, Buffon, Maupertuis, Voltaire, Sade"

## NOTES

[1] Raymond Birn, *Forging Rousseau: Print, Commerce, and Cultural Manipulation in the Late Enlightenment*. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 2001:08 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001).

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger with F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989/1991); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. L. Cochrane (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991); Mona Ozouf, "L'opinion publique," in *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. K.M. Baker (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1987), 1:419-434, published in translation as Mona Ozouf, "'Public Opinion' at the End of the Old Regime," *Journal of Modern History* 60, suppl. (September 1988): S1-S21; Keith M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch.8, first published (in a different form) as Keith M. Baker, "Politics and Public Opinion under the Old Regime: Some Reflections," in *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France*, eds. J. Censer and J. Popkin (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 204-246.

[3] Simon Schaffer, "Enlightened Automata," in *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe*, eds. W. Clark, J. Golinski, and S. Schaffer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), chapter five.

[4] See Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800*, trans. C. Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[5] Pierre Bourdieu, "Public Opinion Does Not Exist," in *Communications and Class Struggle*, vol.1, ed. A. Matelart and S. Siegelaud (New York: International General, 1979), pp. 124-130.

[6] See, for instance, Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995); idem, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789* (New York: Norton, 1995); *Histoire de l'édition française*, eds. H. Martin, R. Chartier, and J.-P. Vivet (Paris: Promodis, 1982), 4 vols.; Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Ces livres qu'on ne lit que d'une main: lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Alinea, 1991); Barbara de Negroni, *Lectures interdits: le travail des censeurs au XVIIIe*

---

*siècle, 1723-1774* (Paris: A. Michel, 1995); Françoise Weil, *Livres interdits, livres persécutés, 1720-1770* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999); see also, Robert L. Dawson, *The French Book Trade and the 'Permission Simple' of 1777: Copyright and the Public Domain...*(Oxford: Alden, 1992); idem, *Customs Confiscations and Banned Books in France during the Last Years of the Ancien Régime* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2006).

Jeremy L. Caradonna  
University of Alberta  
caradonn@ualberta.ca

Copyright © 2008 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 re-publication of 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. ISSN 1553-9172