POLITICAL CULTURE, POLITICAL CLASS, AND POLITICAL COMMUNITY

The past in French history. By Robert Gildea. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994. Pp. xiv+418. £30.00. ISBN 0-300-05799-7

Napoleon and his artists. By Timothy Wilson-Smith. London: Constable, 1996. Pp. xxx+306. £23.00. ISBN 0-094-76110-8

Revolution and the meanings of freedom in the nineteenth century. Edited by Isser Woloch. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. viii+447. £40.00. ISBN 0-804-72748-1

Over the past twenty years, Keith Baker, François Furet, Lynn Hunt, Mona Ozouf et al. have argued that the French Revolution gave birth to a new political culture, and by implication that one should study politics through this culture rather than through *l'histoire événementielle* of ministries and elections. The three books reviewed here all relate to political culture in the wake of the French Revolution, explicitly in *The past in French history* and implicitly in the other two volumes: under Napoleon, artistic culture was politicized and regimented, and after his fall nineteenth-century Europe was left to nurse the awkward offspring of 1789, the ideologies of revolution and freedom. Yet whilst these books provide fine studies of political culture, they make only passing references to two less clearly defined concepts which may be necessary adjuncts to such an approach. The first is that of a 'political class', meaning those who occupy office, usually by election and regardless of party, which enables one to put *l'histoire événementielle* aside, since elections or changes of cabinet are merely reshuffles within the political class. The second concept concerns the communities that create political cultures. What, though, creates these communities?

Robert Gildea defines political culture as 'the culture elaborated by communities competing for political power, to define themselves against competing communities, to bind together their members, and to legitimate their claim to power' (p. 9). Such political cultures are derived not from sociological factors but from collective memory, and these rival collective memories are drawn not from an objective past but from a mythical past, 'in the sense not of fiction, but of a past constructed collectively by a community' (p. 10). Gildea examines how these communities tried to get their version of the past to be accepted as objectively true and universally acknowledged, how they presented the same figures or episodes in different ways, and how subsequent events altered their understanding of the past. This thorough and persuasive book is an important contribution to debates about the formation of collective memory stimulated by the seven volumes of *Les lieux de mémoire*.[1]

[1] *Les lieux de mémoire* itself has now begun to appear in an English translation, entitled *Realms of memory: the construction of the French past*, edited by Pierre Nora, with a foreward by Lawrence D. Kritzman and translation by Arthur Goldhammer (vol. 1 of 3, *Conflicts and divisions*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. xxiv+651, £30.00). This first volume translates thirteen out of the original twenty essays contained in *Conflits et partages*, volume 1 of *Les France*, complete with all of their black-and-white plates. The translation has a couple of advantages over the first edition: the price is reasonable, and it has two indexes where the original had none (one for subjects and one for names). The essays not translated by Columbia are to be published by Chicago University Press.

Gildea convincingly demonstrates the weight of the past on the present and vice versa: for much of the past two centuries, French political life has been trapped by myths of its own making, and in turn has interpreted the past in the light of present experience. *The past in French history* takes a series of themes which are then explored chronologically; it is for the most part a study of political culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, marked above all by the French Revolution and Napoleonic empire. While this is tautologically true for the chapters entitled 'Revolution', 'Bonapartism' and 'Bridging the revolution' (the attempt to form a popular right-wing movement that accepted the Revolution), it is also true for the chapters on Catholicism and regionalism, since the problems posed by these subjects were transformed by the Revolution. Of the two other chapters, only that on anarchism does not depend on the Revolution, since Gildea commences his study of it in the 1830s; though French grandeur (the subject of the remaining chapter) did not begin in 1789, no one could deny that the revolutionary wars and Napoleon altered its reality and mythology irreversibly. Though several of the chapter headings choose themselves, these last two are unusual: why anarchism rather than syndicalism, socialism or communism, especially when Gildea makes it clear that anarchism ended in a self-imposed dead-end? And why grandeur? These topics merit attention as peculiar aspects of French political culture which are usually neglected. The chapter on grandeur is especially successful. Gildea describes how the myths of the soldiers of 1792 and of Joan of Arc have provided left and right with myths for their pursuit of grandeur, and suggests that perhaps France's only national religion is 'the cult of the greatness of the *patrie* itself' (p. 154). Yet even this myth might reveal France to be a prisoner of its own past: on the one hand, it may have been developed because of past failures, because 'the collective memory of defeat and humiliation has been too painful to bear' (p. 112), and on the other hand, it may have become a trap in itself, 'that the myth of French greatness, constructed for each generation with such care by French statesmen, politicians, publicists and intellectuals, is also a burden from which the French want nothing better than to escape' (p. 134).

Yet there is no simple connection between the strength of a political myth and the success of the community which believes in it. As Gildea shows, some myths, notably that of the Revolution, have proved so powerful that any community must come to terms with it to succeed. However, some communities appear to have preferred defeat, such as the anarchists. Their doctrinal purity gave them a strong sense of identity and internal solidarity, but it doomed them by preventing co-operation with other forces. How did this self-asphyxiation come about? Gildea explains it by their myth of isolation. Recent work on the French working class has emphasized how heterogenous it was, and how a working-class consciousness could not be formed out of a common relationship to the means of production; instead, it was formed as a 'community of suffering'. Because the anarchists' political culture was forged from this suffering, they were unable to make compromises without dissolving their sense of identity. On the other extreme, Jean-Marie Le Pen has escaped from the dead-end of fascism by combining 'the ideological baggage of the 1880s with the organisational flair of the 1930s' (p. 338). Since the ideology of the 1930s was fatally compromised by the Second World War, Le Pen has needed the rhetoric of Maurras, Barrès, and Drumont to gain a certain legitimacy. However, the reason for Le Pen's further success lies essentially in a combination of immigration and recession, and this book does not attempt to account for factors such as these.

Timothy Wilson-Smith's book is a study of the artistic creations of the French

Revolution and Napoleonic empire. It is written for the general reader, amply illustrated with 112 black-and-white plates but without footnotes. Wilson-Smith provides an able précis of revolutionary and Napoleonic history (though his historical analogies are best ignored), before turning to artistic matters more specifically; the more closely he attends to the details of artists and their creations, the more satisfying the book becomes, notably in his chapters on David and revolutionary art, on Directorial and imperial styles, and on Denon's 'art of conquest'.

Successive regimes sought to promote a distinct political culture, supported by the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, clothing, décor, and furnishings. Although neo-classicism had begun its ascent under Louis XVI, republican Rome was an ideal model for the political culture promoted by the First Republic. This culture was expressed in David's heroic canvases, in the grand festivals he choreographed for it, in a new martyrology, in the Pantheon, in fashions in clothing and in architecture. Unlike the First Republic, the Directory did not attempt to force an artistic style on France – though this was in itself a political choice. Wilson-Smith describes the Directory's search for compromise through the new fashions of the period and the revival of female-dominated salons after the excessively virile heroics of the Convention. It found expression in David's art too, after his release from prison; reconciled with his ex-wife, he painted the *Sabine women* (1799), where violence is quelled by the active intervention of women, in contrast to his earlier historical paintings in which men fought and women mourned.

It was, of course, Napoleon who launched the most sustained effort to develop an artistic culture which would bolster the consular then imperial regimes. One of the most obviously serviceable forms of art was painting, and here Wilson-Smith deftly explores the work of David, Jean-Antoine Gros, Guérin, Girodet, Isabey, and Ingres. In the realm of architecture, the grandest plans for palaces and for the reconstruction of Paris were left unbuilt; Napoleon's pragmatism kept a limit on such expenditure, and his practical projects fared better, with the construction of streets, quays, bridges, markets, fountains, abattoirs, and cemeteries. Pierre Fontaine and Charles Percier were the masters of the imperial style, whether in the layout of Paris, the architecture of imperial buildings and their internal décor, or in court ceremonials. Military motifs dominated their interiors, as uniforms dominated male dress and as vast battle scenes dominated the Salon. Salon exhibitions continued under the empire, organized by Vivant Denon, Napoleon's director of the Louvre. Denon had 'the easy adaptability of a natural propagandist' (p. 249), and had served Napoleon since the Egyptian campaign of 1798. But Denon's main achievement was not to create Napoleonic art in France: it was to make the Louvre into 'the principal museum of the arts in western Europe' (p. 292), by following in the train of Napoleon's armies.

Wilson-Smith argues that Napoleon's artistic legacy was of great importance, whether in the form of the city of Paris, in the Louvre's collections, or in the works of art created under his impulsion. Wilson-Smith also shows that the imperial style spread right across Europe, through the satellite courts of the Bonaparte family, the prestige of the empire, and the publication of Percier and Fontaine's designs. Some of the keenest supporters of the imperial style were to be found amongst Napoleon's enemies, notably Bernadotte, George IV, Wellington, and Alexander I. Here then was art designed to serve a particular political culture which could serve foreign rivals equally well, for these rivals were also men of hierarchy, military prowess, and conquest. It was only in Bourbon France that the imperial style was a more awkward legacy, for Louis XVIII and Charles X could not bask in Napoleon's glory.

The French Revolution and Napoleonic empire affected political as well as artistic culture across nineteenth-century Europe. In the first essay in *Revolution and the meanings of freedom*, Sergio Luzzatto demonstrates that European interpretations of the French Revolution were as varied as those expounded inside France. He places these visions in five categories. The heroic vision emphasized the role of the individual, related to political liberalism and artistic romanticism. The organic vision of Saint-Simonianism saw the Revolution as destructive of the old regime's organic system, whereas the messianic vision emphasized unity, whether in a secular cause or in popular Catholicism. Further revolutions cast a shadow back over 1789: a critical vision developed after the failure of 1848, and a pathological vision formed after 1871. Napoleon emerged from some of these interpretations with more credit than the Revolution: for example, he was the romantics' supreme individual, and he laid the foundations for a new organic system after the Revolution's devastations. These visions supported competing political cultures, prompting one to ask if there can also be such a thing as a single national political culture. In his essay on Italy, Raymond Grew maintains that there can be. He analyses a paradox by which nineteenth-century Italy abounded in revolutions that changed very little, leading to the historical myth of a 'missing revolution'. The distinguishing feature of Italian political culture was its distrustfulness, because its ideals of national consensus and of public institutions free from private interests were never realized.

This volume appears in a series entitled 'The making of modern freedom'. It tackles its subject country by country rather than thematically; the contributions are substantial, at thirty-five to forty pages, providing the reader with a considerable amount of background material and ample references to secondary sources. In addition to Isser Woloch (who wrote the introdution), Luzzatto, and Grew, the contributors are Richard Herr (on Spain), Richard J. Walter (Latin America), Iain McCalman (England and Ireland), John H. Merriman (France), James J. Sheehan (the German states), István Deák (the Habsburg monarchy), and Laura Engelstein (Russia). Individually, the essays are of a high quality, but there are two disappointments with the volume as a whole. First, that 'modern freedom' and its meanings are deliberately construed in a narrow perspective: political liberalism and constitutionalism are the core concerns, and revolutions are of interest insofar as they developed them. It is not obvious why other sorts of freedom should not be explored, and indeed John Merriman's chapter centres on the conflicting freedoms espoused by liberals and socialists in France's revolutions from 1830 to 1871. Secondly, though certain themes do recur, this country-by-country approach does not pursue comparisons in depth. For example, press freedom is a prerequisite of western liberalism; it is frequently mentioned here but is not systematically explored by, say, looking at censorship or newspaper circulations in each of the countries studied.

The key relationships in these essays are between state authorities, the political class, and the populace, which returns us to the problem of what a political class might be. This term recurs frequently in Gildea's book, usually referring to those who held political power through elected office (Gildea uses the term twenty times in the chapter on Bonapartism alone; the index to *Revolution and the meanings of freedom* includes half-a-dozen entries for 'political culture' but none for 'political class', although that term is also used). Its members could come from any social background and represent any party, but in the nineteenth century they were mostly liberals, because of their adherence to electoral methods, and aristocrats or bourgeois because of restricted franchises. A broad formula for the 'making of modern freedom' emerges from these

essays: successful revolutions occurred when political elites managed to direct popular uprisings against state authorities; liberal freedom was established when these authorities were then constitutionally controlled by the elected political class, who adequately satisfied the needs of the populace. Iain McCalman's parallel study of England and Ireland shows that liberalism worked in England, where popular movements were contained within a constitutional framework and where a broad political class held power electorally, but not in Ireland because popular grievances ran too deep and the Protestant-dominated political class was divided from the Catholic populace. Laura Engelstein's chapter on Russia serves as another counter-example to the liberal formula, because of the profound divisions between the state, educated elites, and the general population: the would-be political class was excluded from an authoritarian state and became an intelligentsia opposed to it, but with little or no influence over the masses.

However, other contributors show that this pattern did not always run true. Richard Walter shows that in Latin America, while it was true that revolutions only succeeded when local elites took command of popular risings, newly independent states often degenerated into authoritarian rule by caudillos, who defended the interests of the elites but did not institute liberal constitutions. Even more perverse was the case of the Habsburg monarchy, as described by István Deák: after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, Francis Joseph ruled a centralized, authoritarian regime. Yet this regime had reformed itself by the early twentieth century, and had become the defender of liberalism and the rule of law against political parties that had turned to anti-liberal radical nationalism.

These books, along with *Les lieux de mémoire* itself, demonstrate that the study of political culture is well advanced. It might therefore be worth pursuing the concepts of political class and political communities in future. Is a political class a minimal category of those holding elected office, or can it mean more than this? For example, the concept of *trasformismo* describes a limited and identifiable segment of the population that continued to hold power in Italy despite changes of regime as well as of ministry. Alternatively, in democracies with universal suffrage, elected representatives are supported by party members, trade unions, intellectuals, and newspapers. How far does the political class extend into this hinterland? Although elected politicians are drawn from different parties and political cultures, does membership of a single political class create its own culture? (As expressed by the saying that 'two deputies, one of whom is a revolutionary, have more in common than two revolutionaries, one of whom is a deputy'.) Finally, we should return to the communities who give shape to and perpetuate rival cultures, to ask what shapes and perpetuates *them*. Evidently common interests play a major part, whether of social class, economic position, religion, ethnicity, language, or nationality, and these interests are duly expressed in political culture, along with related ideological beliefs. However, one might wonder to what extent this process is reciprocal. Does one first become a member of a political culture, by family or local tradition, whose myths and rituals subsequently inspire identification with the interests and ideology of its respective community? Do we perform the rites first, then seek the reasons afterwards?

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