

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kevin Passmore.** *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928-1939.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xvii + 333 pp. \$59.95 US (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-58018-2.

Reviewed by William D. Irvine (York University)

Published on H-France (October, 1998)

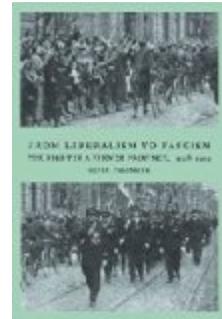
A good deal has been written about the parties and movements of the Right in Third Republic France. At the national level we now have a solid knowledge about the programme, ideology, and organization of most of the components of the French Right. Yet, compared to what we know about parties and movements of the Left, our grasp of the Right remains superficial. What kind of people joined the various movements of the Right? Why and under what circumstances? What distinguished a member of the *Federation republicaine* from that of the *Parti democrate populaire*, the *Alliance democratique* or the *Parti social francais*? Students of the French Left have few problems with such questions because they can draw on a rich collection of local studies of which the works of Joan Scott, Michael Hanagan, Tony Judt, and Katherine Amdur are but the most venerable examples. Until recently nothing comparable has existed for the French Right.

Kevin Passmore's study of the Right in the department of the Rhone is therefore a pioneering contribution. And a very good one. At first sight the Rhone would seem an unlikely choice since it was one of the more left-wing departments of France: a Radical stronghold in the early twentieth century, drifting gradually towards the Socialists. But there were important pockets of conservative strength, both in Lyon and in the rural regions, most notably the Beaujolais. Getting a handle on conservative movements can be exceedingly frustrating for the historian because they rarely have the degree of organizational cohesion characteristic of parties of the Left, although in the Rhone the largest party, the Republican Federation, was far better organized than it was anywhere else in France. But Passmore's detailed and exhaustive probings of local sources has yielded impres-

sive results. Throughout the book there are maps and tables dealing with the electoral geography and the electoral sociology of the Right. Of considerable value are his findings concerning the comparative sociology of the members—or at least the leaders—of the various right-wing formations.

Passmore has an acute eye for the informal networks, both religious and economic, that provided the Right in the Rhone with its strength. The Right here was a fractious one and the author traces the political infighting with some care. He is very good on the prevailing tension between the old Catholic families who dominated the declining silk industries and the anti-clerical and petty bourgeois elements who dominated the modernizing and expanding engineering industries. Although his analysis is never reductionist, the otherwise bewildering feuds between representatives of the Federation, the Alliance and the *Parti democrat populaire* are seen in the larger context of the religious and interest group conflicts within the department. At the same time, developments in the Rhone are presented in the larger optic of national developments and in particular the series of crises which would trouble French conservatives from 1928 until the end of the Third Republic in 1940.

The empirical work is very solid, but the author is also impressively up to date on the latest theoretical contributions to our understanding of French politics. At times, though, his efforts to inform his work with theoretical rigour tend to do violence to his careful empirical findings. On page 14, he presents a graph offering a typology of conservative parties. All parties are represented on a graph with two axes: the vertical one representing the elite-popular continuum; the horizontal axis showing



the democracy-authority continuum. In the upper right quadrant( ie. authoritarian-elitist) one finds two examples: Vichy and Andre Tardieu (1934). Neither were “political parties.” Moreover, picking 1934 for Tardieu is a bit misleading given that scant years earlier he was the dynamic leader of the *Alliance democratique*, a party Passmore includes (correctly) in the democratic-elitist quadrant. The same chart indicates that whereas the *Croix de feu* and its successor the *Parti social francais* (PSF) are both in the popular-authoritarian quadrant, the PSF is represented as being significantly less authoritarian and less populist than the *Croix de feu*. This seems odd, at least with respect to the question of populism, because, on the author’s own evidence, the PSF had between three and five times more members than did the *Croix de feu*. This difference is consistent with figures from the national level and raises the question of how a party that is much larger than its predecessor can somehow be less “popular”? The same chart shows the Republican Federation as being much less “popular” and more “elitist” than either the PSF or the *Parti democrat populaire*. This reading sounds intuitively right until one gets to the author’s data on these movements where the proposition is flatly contradicted. On page 142, he finds the “elites were meanwhile less prominent in the Federation than the Alliance [which one would expect] or even in the PDP [which one would not].”

On page 274, his careful analysis of the social composition of local parties shows that “the PSF turns out to have been substantially the most bourgeois of the three major right-wing parties of this period.” On the next page we learn that “The Federation, in contrast, retained its implantation in the proletarian suburbs...” (p. 275). At this point Passmore explicitly challenges Pierre Milza’s well known claim that the PSF was an “interclass” (i.e., populist) party which is what distinguished it from the more elitist traditional right. “Indeed,” Passmore notes “the Federation had a greater claim to this title” (p. 275). If true, this would be a very interesting finding. But it simply cannot be reconciled with the conceptual framework with which Passmore begins his book. In fact, the author seems to be uncomfortable with this claim since one page later he announces that the Federation “remained more conservative and elitist than the PSF” (p. 277). Both sets of propositions cannot easily be true. The latter is closer to conventional wisdom and sounds about right (it would almost certainly be true in most parts of France since the Federation of the Rhone was utterly atypical of the party elsewhere). But if his final verdict is correct, what then are we to make of his careful chart on the previous page

which shows the Federation as having more workers and substantially fewer businessmen and senior managers in its ranks than did the PSF?

Any discussion of the Right in the 1930s leads inevitably to the famous debate about French fascism. Here the author contributes a number of perceptive and intelligent observations. Central to the whole question, of course, is the *Croix de feu* and the PSF and whether or not they were fascist. The great majority of specialists in the field have long argued that calling either movement fascist is, at best, to adopt the partisan rhetoric of the inter-war Left. Only a handful of dissidents, Passmore correctly argues, challenge this consensus although for some reason he thinks that this dissent owes something to Marxist views about monopoly capital (p. 210), a proposition that would come as a surprise to the historians in question. Passmore’s own answer is that whereas the *Croix de feu* was fascist, the PSF was not. What distinguished the two movements? Borrowing a celebrated phrase from Roger Griffith (in *The Nature of Fascism* [1992]), Passmore argues that the *Croix de feu* represented a “palingenetic ultra-nationalism” whereas the PSF did not. More concretely—and more usefully—he argues that the PSF was not a paramilitary organization in the way the *Croix de feu* had been. Up to a point this is probably true since the PSF, unlike its predecessor, was always under the threat of dissolution owing to the Popular Front governments. The *Dispos* of the *Croix de feu* became the *Equipes volantes de propagande* (EVP) of the PSF and the title of the latter was decidedly less menacing. Yet the EVP, on the authors account, were like their predecessor in providing a “service d’ordre” and in being, periodically at least, armed. Former members of the *Dispos* continued in the EVP. “The PSF also mounted set-piece demonstrations which dwarfed those of the *Croix de Feu* [and which] unmistakably owed something to fascist rallies” (p. 262). There were still incidents of armed violence at PSF rallies; members of the EVP at least once shot to death a counter-demonstrator. Indeed, one searches in vain for any rigorous comparison of the amount of paramilitary violence in the period of the *Croix de feu* as compared to the years of the PSF. The author does not seem entirely convinced by his claim since he qualifies it repeatedly. The paramilitary violence of the *Croix de feu* did not disappear under the PSF, but was only “attenuated” and “less central.” “Political violence remained a feature of the PSF throughout its existence” even if “it was steadily marginalized” (p. 265).

One suspects that Passmore’s real reason for believing that the PSF, unlike the *Croix de feu*, was not fas-

cist is that the new party did engage in electoral activity and its “real goal was the legal conquest of power” (p. 260). For fifty years this has been the stock argument of those, beginning with Rene Remond, who do not believe that the PSF was fascist. Of course it invites the (by now equally stock) question: what then do we make of the electoral activities of the Italian Fascists and the German Nazis and their (successful) attempts at a “legal conquest of power”? Even Passmore seems to waver on this point. After describing a series of armed clashes involving the PSF, the author notes that this had not prevented the party from winning a local by-election and concludes, “Remond’s view that the PSF’s spectacular success was

due to its having embraced constitutionalism must be questioned” (p. 263).

No one can write a book about the French Right these days without starting a fight. The above quibbles are in no way intended to diminish the importance of Passmore’s book. It is a fine piece of craftsmanship which will make a major contribution to the topic.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/>

**Citation:** William D. Irvine. Review of Passmore, Kevin, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province, 1928-1939*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. October, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2420>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).