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Pierre Nora, ed.. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past (Vol. I: Conflicts and Divisions).* New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. xxv + 651 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-08404-8.

Reviewed by Jay Winter

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Pierre Nora is an agent-provocateur in the best sense of the term. As a publisher, he has spawned a veritable industry of cultural studies. As an historian, he has staked out a provocative position, intensely stimulating and widely influential among young scholars throughout the world. It is a position the current reviewer finds unacceptable, but only someone with a closed mind to innovation would deny its panache and scope for original insights.

This English translation is the first of a three-volume English presentation of a much larger project, published in French under Nora's guidance and inspiration between 1984 and 1992. Under the title *Les lieux de memoire*, Nora gathered together a galaxy of French social and cultural historians, who contributed dozens of erudite and original essays to the series. First he published one volume on the cultural history of France since the birth of the Third Republic in 1870, then three volumes on the more general subject of the French "nation," and finally seven volumes on other facets of French identity and cultural life, under the title *Les Frances*.

A publishing success of the first magnitude for his house, Gallimard, these books have set the agenda for European cultural history in the 1990s. The series contains essays of great erudition and ingenuity, investigating a dazzling range of issues in the symbolic history of French political, social, and cultural life.

This first volume on conflicts and divisions will be accompanied by two other English-language collections of some--but not all--of the original French essays. As in most collective projects, it is unwise to ascribe to the contributors the agenda of their impresario. Many of the essays stand robustly on their own. Alain Corbin's characteristically delightful essay on Parisian snobbery about the provinces, Roger Chartier's elegant account of the north-south divide, and Catherine Maire's learned tracing of the legacy of Jansenism are instances of cultural history at its best. Many companion essays offer similarly erudite and surprising tours of the cultural recycling of a wide array of symbols of facets of French history both glorious and ignominious. Still, the book's architecture and the visionary character of the project

arise out of Nora's own sense of the nature of cultural history.

It is this facet of the project which is both most tantalizing, and ultimately the least successful part of the enterprise as a whole. Following Jean Baudrillard and other cultural pessimists, Nora announces his agenda in powerfully emotive terms. "Memory is constantly on our lips," he writes, "because it no longer exists." Or rather it no longer exists in the midst of life: "***Lieux de memoire*** are there because there are no longer any ***milieux de memoire***, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience" (p. 1). Since "society has banished ritual", and thereby "renounced memory" (p. 6), everyone cries out for artificial or symbolic substitutes for what less rapidly changing societies have taken for granted. What we have is second-order memory--we collect, organize, exhibit, catalogue, but observe the form and not the substance of memory: "The trace negates the sacred but retains its aura" (p. 9).

The significance of this approach for the study of cultural history is of the first order. Its primary effect is liberating. Like the pioneers of the French journal ***Annales*** Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, Nora has dared historians to broaden their vision and to widen their repertoire of evidence. Street names, holidays, phrases with historical allusions are treated with the same curiosity and dignified with the same significance as conventional figures like Joan of Arc or conventional sites of pilgrimage like Verdun. This is refreshing and salutary, helping to obliterate the outworn and indefensible distinction between the history of "high" and of "popular" culture.

Nora has gone a step further. He has urged historians to see these ***lieux de memoire*** as having "no referents in reality; or, rather, they are their own referents--pure signs" (p. 19). This enables them to contain messages to be decoded by historians, complex, plastic messages capable of a host of meanings. This decoding is the task of cultural history.

So far so good. But Nora's vision is far broader. In effect, he sees history as a reflection of contemporary "sadness," of a mourning for a kind of society which we have lost, and for a sensibility we can never recover. Both Jules Michelet and Marcel Proust are his masters in this post-modernist project. But Proustian reflection and romantic history are closed options today. We cannot retrace their steps, but must accept the limits of our own fragmentary period by studying the fragments of an exploded cultural life.

That is why sites of memory--called "realms" in this translation--matter so much. These sites, and their study by historians, reproduce what literature once did, and now--in Nora's view--no longer can accomplish. Hence the study of these artifacts and phenomena help refill "our depleted fund of collective memory." Thus a new kind of "[h]istory offers profundity to an epoch devoid of it, true stories to an epoch devoid of real novels, [and] Memory has been promoted to the centre of history: thus do we mourn the loss of literature" (p. 20).

Even if we discount some of this as the effusions of a kind of French rhetoric that tends to get out of hand, and even if we set aside the clear ignorance of literature--perhaps not French literature, but literature nonetheless--to carry on doing what Nora says it no longer can do, there is still a central claim in Nora's approach which we must examine and which this reviewer for one cannot accept.

When he argues that "society has banished ritual" (p. 6), or claims that "for the time being we have no further use for the sacred" (p. 7), he displays the weakest link in his position. Gerard Noiriel's essay in this volume refutes it. Anybody observing the rise of Fundamentalism in France in the 1980s and 1990s, primarily among Muslims but also among some Jews and Catholics, would scoff at such claims. The sacred has not vanished, though few would seek it primarily in institutionalized religion.

Secondly, if the claim is "society has banished ritual," and not "French society has banished ritual," we need to pose the question of the strength of the claim in other than French contexts. The introspective character of Nora's argument raises doubts as to its relevance outside the history of France. It is true that historical legitimacy has been contested terrain since the revolution of 1789, and ever since, polemicists have ransacked the symbolic vocabulary and imagery of French history to espouse one cause and deride others. But the same is true of German history, and more recently, of Russian history. What is missing here is an account of precisely what is French about the exercise Nora conducts with such zest and skill.

The Frenchness of the position is its particular kind of cultural pessimism. Again there are equivalents across the Rhine and elsewhere, but French pessimism has its own distinctive flavour. Where else would intelligent commentators equate the decline in the birth rate and the drop in the number of people speaking their language with the decline of Western civilization itself? This is not Nora's position, but it is one of his *milieux de memoire*, the unspoken assumptions of a world of French intellectuals who take themselves just a bit too seriously.

The insularity of the claims made by Nora have another source. The French government spends more on museums and cultural activities per capita than does any other Western country. Why? Is it because the sacred is dead and we need a set of symbolic substitutes? The explanation may be more mundane. History sells: it is a popular and money-making trade because it locates family stories in bigger, more universal narratives. The government invests in this part of the service sector because it pays to do so.

The huge growth of museums at the end of the twentieth century is also a reflection of another facet of the development of the "memory business" not addressed in Nora's work--surprisingly given his interest in generational history. It is the contemporary link between grandparents and grandchildren, which has spawned a huge market for museums and literature about this turbulent century. Yes literature--like Jean Rouaud's masterful *Champ d'honneur*, winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1993 (the year after the last of the eleven volumes of *Lieux de memoire* was published). Literature like Sebastian Japrisot's moving *Un long dimanche de fiancailles*, or across the channel like Pat Barker's trilogy on the Great War or Sebastian Faulks' moving *Birdsong*. These are not indications of the death of the novel, but rather its solid anchoring in precisely the soil Nora savours and celebrates in his series. Today's grandparents were children after the 1914-18 war, and their stories--family stories--are now the stuff of history, and exhibitions, and museums, and pilgrimage, all the stuff of ritual Nora considers as signs of a loss of "true" collective memory. The linkage between the young and the old is so central to the concept of memory that it is surprising that Nora does not simply urge us to leave our libraries and simply look around, at our own families, at our own *milieux de memoire* still so firmly rooted in family life, however unconventionally lived it may be.

It would be churlish to end on a note so critical and empty of gratitude and respect for an extraordinary book. Nora's achievement is manifest. He has moved the discussion of cultural history onto a new level. But the significance of such pioneering work is surely to provide a point from which to move on. All students of that quicksilver concept "collective memory" will need to consider and weigh Nora's claims. His work is now indispensable. But once they do so, invigorated and enlightened in so many ways, they will, I believe, put behind them Nora's politics of cultural despair, and attend to the real and pressing tasks of European cultural history at the end of this disastrous century.

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