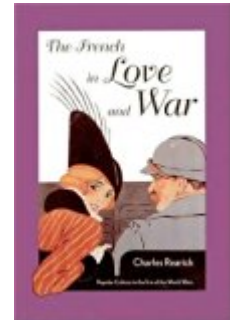


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles Rearick. *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the Two World Wars, 1914-1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997. 384 S. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06433-9.

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This superb study should be “must” reading for all students of modern French history—as well as for anyone seriously interested in the nature of popular culture in general (not the least of its side benefits being the way it increases one’s awareness of both similar and different patterns in one’s own country). Rearick’s decision to focus on film scenarios, song lyrics, and stage performances rather than books, even bestsellers, is itself a comment on what has become increasingly important in the way so many people view themselves and others. Especially valuable is the way Rearick analyzes major themes in French popular culture from the outbreak of the First World War to the end the Vichy regime by relating them to changing economic and political circumstances and to the ways these themes appealed to (or irritated) members of different social classes.

Based on a wide variety of sources—from crude wartime propaganda to sociologically-sophisticated movie reviews, from the lyrics of songs played in plebian dance halls to those sung at expensive stage productions of the Casino de Paris, from the hit movies of Maurice Chevalier and Jean Gabin to the much less successful political films of the Popular Front and the Vichy regime—Rearick’s book is a marvellous *tour de force*.

Rearick disagrees with the view taken by the Marxist Frankfurt School of Sociology that popular culture in a capitalist society is not really “popular,” but largely the result of what the “culture industry” want the masses to believe and that such culture renders the masses politically quiescent.[1] Although Rearick does not ignore the diversionary possibilities of apolitical media—on the contrary, he underscores them on a number of occasions—he demonstrates that French movies, stage productions, and

songs during the interwar years presented a mix of contradictory messages which left individuals with considerable choice. For Rearick, the masses were not merely uncritical, passive objects which were acted upon by those with money and power, but were thinking subjects who rejected some, if not all, of the brainwashing directed at them. The choices they made gave meaning to their lives. Rearick acknowledges, however, that media did play a major role in shaping, albeit in varying degrees at various times, the imaginations which governed these choices.

In Rearick’s analysis, cultural cause and effect is presented as neither totally from the top down nor totally from the bottom up but rather as a dialectical interaction. Just as deconstructionists privilege readers over authors, Rearick underscores the differing responses of listeners and spectators to the same cultural products. To use the current jargon (my apologies), individual French men and French women had more “agency”, more independence and will, than Pavlov’s dog. In 1942 what a Vichyite took away from a movie or song might be quite different from what a supporter of the Resistance took away from the same movie or song.

Rearick’s study also raises the question of the nature of French identity. He writes: “At the heart of this history is a national argument about the character of the French people and their responses to life’s difficulties. What are the truly French ways of doing battle, dealing with disappointment, and meeting adversity?” (p. vii). He believes that in defining Frenchness it is not enough to dwell on such symbols as Joan of Arc and Marianne. For millions of French men and women during the interwar period, just as important, if not far more important, were the images projected by show business stars

like Maurice Chevalier and Mistinguette, whose publicity machines “made them out to be representatives of Paris, of France, and of the French people” (p. viii).

Significant too, was the way media representations of *le petit peuple* changed in the 1930s in response to the growing political and economic strength of the workers and the lower middle classes. As critical swing voters and major consumers of mass entertainment, members of these classes gained a new cultural leverage. A movie industry that previously had often presented the “little guy” as marginal, uncivilized and dangerous, as virtually indistinguishable from a criminal, now made him the leading figure and a warm-hearted as well. This trend was not always welcomed by right-wing movie critics, as rival groups, contending for power in the political system, battled over different “myths” depicting the common folk. In the iconography of “the people,” certain images became primary symbols to be emulated: the endangered but jovial infantryman (the *poilu*), the devoted and patriotic woman, the bantering working-class Parisian (the *faubourien*), the militant striker, the plebian trickster who, down on his luck, kept a smile on his face and a song in his heart. As Rearick extensively and delightfully documents, such types became part of France’s social imagination. However simplified, distorted, and sanitized, this myth-making may have been, it helped organize the experience and form the identities of millions of cultural consumers. It helped shape more than one French person’s sense of self.

Between 1914 and 1945, the media retailed countless stories of what was considered to be two distinctively French ways of coping with difficulties: facing up to adversity with a smile or a song and resigning oneself to an injustice with a *je m’en fous!* (“I don’t give a damn!”). Neither of these coping methods threatened the economic or political power of France’s upper classes. Nor did they fuel the army mutinies of 1917, which occurred despite them.

During the First World War, government propaganda, as well as government-censored movies and songs, extolled those qualities which served the war effort. Faced with a nation which, contrary to legend, greeted the declaration of war with little or no enthusiasm, French cultural producers highlighted not the public’s anxiety and sadness about going to war but the *poilu*’s alleged patriotism and gaiety in the face of death. The *poilu* was portrayed as a resourceful *debrouillard* who coped with the most trying circumstances with a laugh, a hale fellow who enjoyed his *pinard* (his ra-

tion of wine), played cards during breaks in the action, and remained “French” in his irrepressible cheerfulness. Wartime songs promoted these clichés with such lyrics as “Always happy, never beaten, that’s what we call a *poilu*.” Indeed, the ultranationalist writer Maurice Barres wrote that these “gay-hearted” soldiers were “having fun”. The image of the light-hearted *poilu*, repeated endlessly in the press and on the stage, was also meant to reassure the home population. This *boufrage de crane* (“stuffing the head with rubbish”) was less successful with the troops themselves. When the *poilus* produced their own songs and skits expressing their discontents, this part of French identity went unreported in the home-front press.

The *poilu* counterculture was antagonistic toward the state-sponsored official culture echoed in Parisian music halls. As one soldier wrote to a former professor in 1915: “To die (for the fatherland) is the most beautiful fate—that’s not true. The most beautiful fate is to live a long time and to be happy. Why lie?” Bouts of depression—*le cafard*—became so widespread in the trenches that not even the Parisian press could completely ignore them. Soldiers’ letters to the editors ridiculed the journalists’ images of the playful, laughing *poilu*. Soldier-produced songs with grumbling lyrics describing maimed bodies—one was entitled “Maudite sois la guerre”—were banned by the censors. Some of these songs portrayed the workers as heroes and the rich as villains and were denied public performance, as were lyrics about husbands being cuckolded while they were off fighting at the front. In 1915, the year of the great bloodbath at Verdun, civilians who read the heavily-censored press were given little idea of the real magnitude of the casualties. It is not surprising that *poilus* often felt they were misrepresented and misunderstood by the patriots of the rear.

One of the most popular songs of the war was “Quand Madelon,” about soldiers flirting with a lovely young waitress in a country tavern. What was distinctive was the song’s lack of bawdiness (Madelon does not give her body to any of these men) at a time when many soldier-created songs were full of explicit sexual references and when brothels just behind the front lines were staffed by prostitutes “doing” fifty to sixty men a day. “Quand Madelon” appealed to another side of these men, to their desire to return after the war to a housewife not a harlot, to an old-fashioned “girl” who was virtuous, comforting, and subordinate. Madelon also represented an alternative to the “new women” in Paris who were moving into jobs previously reserved for men and who worried soldiers at the front with their more independent ways. Unlike these women, the super-traditionalist Madelon knew

her place. The song also reassured civilians with its image of the *poilu* as a clean-minded *bonhomme* and a read-to-die patriot rather than a client of prostitutes and a war-sick mutineer.

In the decade following the war, two groups were viewed by most producers of mass entertainment as potential disturbers of the peace: militant workers and new women. Both threatened a return to pre-war normalcy. It was not uncommon for returning troops in 1919 to shout such threats as “We’ll show the bosses! Our comrades won’t have died in vain.” The shared joy in victory had not overcome social antagonisms. In factory towns, employers provided movies for workers on Sundays, movies free of objectionable political content. Most commercial films steered away from political or collective causes, dwelling instead on private life and individual relationships. Public fascination with sports figures also diverted attention from politics. The boxing champion, Georges Charpentier, a former *poilu*, became a national hero. By contrast, the contribution of female workers to the war effort was largely ignored, since they were too closely associated with the new woman. When the new woman was caricatured in songs and films, her more threatening aspects were ridiculed or trivialized: she was pictured as being more obsessed with doing the “Shimmy” than obtaining the vote. Images of politicized workers were also avoided. The entertainment industry ignored the factory life of the proletariat and concentrated on after-work romances. The demand for a five-day work week was treated by one song as a joke. France’s Tin Pan Alley often made light of the gravest problems of the day. Not all songs, however, promoted compliance. Some expressed opposition to the rich and powerful. “Realist” songs soliciting sympathy for the poor were perennial favorites among working-class audiences—even if the result was often a good cry rather than political action.

A spate of anti-war songs also found a receptive audience in the 1920s and 1930s. During the war, censors had deleted inflammatory lyrics about war profiteers, but after the war such lyrics were permitted. Patriotic songs disappeared from the repertoire of café-concerts and music halls. As one journalist wrote in 1926, even “Quand Madelon” was “too entangled with atrocious memories for us to keep it in memory” (p. 61). The romantic American war film, *The Big Parade*, struck many French moviegoers as too much like the old *boufrage de crane*. A series of French-produced films now portrayed the war as full of tragic suffering, not manly gaiety. The *Grande Illusion* (1937) was one of the interwar period’s most powerful films—although like other pacifist movies, it received

mixed audience reactions as the French remained deeply ambivalent about war.

In the early twenties, Paris music halls produced extravaganzas celebrating luxury, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and eroticism, its bare-breasted beauties reinforcing the tourists’ image of Paris as the mecca of anti-puritanism. Two pre-war entertainers from plebian backgrounds reigned throughout most of the twenties: Maurice Chevalier, the epitome of French cheerfulness and charm, and Mistinguette, the fun-loving flapper queen. Both exploited their images of representatives of “the people” who had gone from rags to riches and were now thoroughly enjoying their good fortune. The lyrics of Chevalier’s 1921 hit song, “Avec le sourire,” captured his stage persona: “You have to know how to take everything with a smile.” According to one reviewer, it was Chevalier’s “habitual roguishness and his air of good faith nonchalance which (made) him so likable to the public.” Not to take anything seriously, including politics, was his hallmark. At the same time, the characters he played in movies were civilian versions of the mythical *poilu*: they, too, were master *debrouillards* and always good-humoured. As one reviewer wrote of Chevalier in 1928: “he is what we would like to be.”

When Chevalier and other stars sang of the “little people,” they contributed to a folklore which, as Rearick writes, “focussed on the people’s leisure times without mention of long grinding workdays or cramped, miserable housing and nights of sleepless torment when hundreds of bedbugs attacked and neighbors quarrelled loudly” (p. 95). If on stage Chevalier often wore an elegant tuxedo and dapper straw hat, on the screen he often played the unflappable *faubourien* resigned to his lot in life, content with his “petite menage,” his little bed, his little sofa, and his *grande amour*. The cinema *faubourien* was no social malcontent striving for a revolutionary future but a good-natured soul longing for the good old days. His problems arose from disappointments in intimate relationships, not from social and political forces; his victories stemmed from chance and individual williness, not from collective action.

Populist nostalgia fuelled xenophobia. Old stock working-class neighborhoods resented both the alien presence of the new wave of immigrants who poured into France after the war and the internationalist influences flaunted by the French well-to-do. In crime films, the villains were frequently foreigners. The “immorality” of the latest American dances delighted flappers but offended traditionalists. Even in the 1920s, fears of the American-

ization of French culture were regularly expressed. For some, populism provided consoling myths; for others, on both the Right and Left, it was seen as an unsatisfactory solution to the troubled thirties.

How did the entertainment industry respond to the Depression? What stories and heroes did it highlight? In films, Chevalier repeatedly played cheerful lower-class tricksters whose philosophy was not to worry, all will turn out well in the end, and it did: his characters always got the girl and often ended as millionaires. On the other hand, Jean Gabin's tender-hearted tough guys remained class-bound and often went down to defeat. Rearick writes: "If one takes a Gramscian view of these Gabin movies of the late thirties, one would say that powerful groups exercising hegemony in France were sending a message to the workers and other supporters of the Popular Front. The message was that the 'little people' and their efforts for change were, like the screen hero, destined to go down in defeat" (p. 238). At the same time, according to Rearick, such films gave voice to the worst fears of the little people, helping them to release the tensions that these fears created. For Rearick, neither interpretation is mutually exclusive. Moreover, "moviegoers always had a choice of fare in the mass-culture marketplace, and no one genre or theme ever drove out the others" (pp. 239-40).

During the Popular Front, the Left and Right fought a struggle over representations of "the people" in films and songs. The Left portrayed the masses as good-natured and fun-loving even in battle, whereas the Right dwelt on hate-filled mobs dominated by "riffraff". Commercial culture usually avoided altogether the major social, political, and foreign policy issues of the day. Audiences were taught to sing their way to happiness, not fight for it. None of the films of the French Left in the early thirties reached a mass audience. Edith Piaf invited her listeners to laugh or cry, not actively to challenge the social status quo. Other singers celebrated the joys of nature, offering a mental escape from urban economic problems.

French films continued to relegate women to secondary roles and depicted them as rightfully subservient to men- "often as merely useful commodities" (p. 221). Female characters in these movies did not have jobs and often contributed to the downfall of the male hero. Camera techniques directed viewers to identify with the male hero.

In 1939, soldiers sent to the Maginot line often rejected the morale-boosting songs of the First World War, including even "La Marseillaise" and "Quand Madelon".

Some *poilus* defiantly sang "L'Internationale" when Daladier visited them at the front. Once again there was censorship eliminating anything less than upbeat. Renoir's "Grande illusion" and "Hotel du Nord" were deemed too depressing for war time consumption.

The Vichy regime appropriated certain well-established currents of popular culture which suited its political goals—such as those romanticizing rural life—and condemned those which did not—such as those condoning "decadent" cosmopolitanism and urban hedonism. Lucien Rebatet and other right-wing cinema critics denounced populist realism for its "degrading determinism" and blamed its existence on foreigners and Jews. Vichy banned all French films released before October 1937 as "demoralizing". The National Revolution redefined national identity: the hard-working peasant who respected authority now replaced the irreverent *faubourien* who skirted the law as the Frenchman par excellence—although Vichy, too, promoted the attitude that all difficulties could be surmounted as long as one kept on singing.

Under the German Occupation and Vichy, the French press and radio cultivated a light-hearted tone, and French entertainers continued to personify good humoured Frenchness. Songs like "Paris sera toujours Paris" offered a comforting denial of the German presence. The songs of Tino Rossi, Charles Trenet, and other crooners filled the airwaves with soothing voices which, Rearick says, conjured up "visions of fulfilment in love" in a time of "profound anxieties, hardships, and horrific cruelties" (p. 260). Vichy's promotion of a cult of the past and a culture of smiles encouraged avoidance, a denial of painful realities. Most French feature films under the German occupation and Vichy eschewed political messages, while newsreels and documentaries which extolled Vichy ideology enjoyed little public favor. German and Vichy authorities apparently felt, at least where mass entertainment was concerned, that escapism was more effective than propaganda in preventing political dissent. Indeed, attempts at ideological indoctrination could backfire: in the last two years of the war, hissing and booing at government newsreels became a problem for the Vichy police.

In 1940, most entertainers, having little interest in politics, simply continued their careers as before. A few, like Gabin, went into exile. Chevalier sang for French prisoners of war in Germany—but also for German audiences. In 1940 he declared: "I blindly follow the Marshal (Philippe Petain), and I believe that everything that

can bring about collaboration between the French and the German peoples must be undertaken” (p. 258). He sang on German-controlled Radio-Paris and performed at concerts sponsored by collaborators, actions he tried to gloss over after the war (someone should write a book on all the prominent figures in postwar France who tried to gloss over their actions during the Vichy years, Francois Mitterand being hardly unique in this respect). Chevalier later claimed that his songs were part of a morale boosting effort to keep French identity alive, i.e., part of a patriotic will to resist. Rearick, in his deconstructionist fashion, thinks that the songs which Chevalier sang could have spurred both feelings of accommodation toward and resistance to the Germans—with the latter gaining ground as the tide of the war turned against Hitler’s armies. Audience responses were not monolithic: some films, such as Louis Daquin’s “Premier de corde” (1943), were interpreted by some spectators as encouraging Petainism and by others as supporting the Resistance.

The Liberation did not put an end to attempts to deny painful realities—including the reality of 600,000 French having been killed, of 75,000 Jews having been deported to Nazi death camps, and of the French State’s complicity with Hitler’s “New European Order.” Happy American movies, swing, and bebop were welcomed by thousands who preferred to forget the past and get on with life.

In light of the many examples Rearick gives of the apolitical nature of so many of the products of France’s cultural industry—even in the 1930s when French governments faced domestic and foreign policy problems of enormous magnitude—it comes as a surprise that in his conclusion Rearick lets that industry largely off the hook. “The producers of popular culture,” he writes, “did not bear primary responsibility for addressing the nation’s difficulties; that lay with political, military, and religious leaders” (p. 278). Perhaps not “primary” responsibility, but certainly a *huge* responsibility—especially if one recalls Rearick’s own original claim that these producers had much to do with the “shaping” of French imaginations and notions of identity. By emphasizing that French cultural consumers between the wars had many scenarios to choose from, by implying in his conclusion (contradicting his introduction) that these choices were largely impervious to previous media conditioning—i.e., that they were the “free” choices of consumers rather than choices, more often than not, subliminally and successfully suggested by producers (as in modern television commercials)—and, above all, by downplaying the quantitative differences between the popularity of one scenario over another, Rearick excuses what much of his previous

evidence seems to demonstrate. The French public were not Pavlov’s dogs, but the media did not encourage them to be Critical Theorists either. Was the overwhelming popularity of one film scenario over another, the result of mass individualism? I doubt it.

Nor, as Rearick himself makes clear, were there many left-wing film or stage scenarios which French audiences could choose from, even during the Popular Front era. Just as United States television viewers never see American socialists like Noam Chomsky or Barbara Ehrenreich on *Nightline* or the McNeil-Lehrer, now Lehrer news program (although Chomsky occasionally appears on 1:00 a.m. cable television and Ehrenreich was once selected as a potential guest for the McNeil-Lehrer program before being cut by its screening process), French film and theater audiences between the wars were faced with a limited menu featuring items which were either apolitical or politically innocuous. It is not evident why responsibility for addressing France’s difficulties lay primarily with its political, military, and religious leaders and not its mass media, when the electoral constituencies these “leaders” had to please were bombarded by the lop-sided programming which Rearick describes.

Still, the interaction between producer and consumer is neither simple nor static, and Rearick’s insistence on the “agency” of every consumer is a useful antidote to viewing millions of consumers as some kind of passive *bloc*. At the same time, by pointing out the shared responses of so many French men and women to certain themes and appeals, which were indeed “popular,” Rearick comes closer to the Frankfurt School than he may care to admit, a school which, like Rearick, also honored critical thinking but which was more pessimistic, as well as more psychoanalytical, about expecting very much of this kind of thinking from a public so heavily dependent on elite-dominated media. It would be interesting to know in this regard who were the major financial backers of the French film industry during the interwar years, what their politics were, and why there were not more left-wing films produced? Rearick does not say.

One might also question the condescending tone which Rearick occasionally adopts when talking about the emotional “cliches” found in popular songs and films (for example, images of abandoned lovers and home-sick soldiers) which provided listeners or viewers with stimuli for a “good cry” or some other kind of immediate catharsis. And yet, can we really patronize, say, the thousands of French as well as German soldiers who responded wistfully to the song, “Lily Marlene,” in 1939? Histo-

rians are often trained (as I was) to be unsentimental and tough-minded in their pursuit of truth, an ideal which I still believe to be one of the finest of our profession. And yet the danger we run, as Yale's Robert Lifton has observed, is to make a professional virtue of an emotional "numbness" which, by privileging detachment over empathy, can lead us sometimes to be indifferent to the *reality* of other people's hardships, including their emotional hardships.[2] Rearick does display considerable empathy for his subjects at times—as when recording the anger expressed by French *poilus* and proletarians when they felt exceptionally abused by those over them or the stresses experienced by *faubouriens* who dwelt in miserable, bug-infested housing—but this empathy is seldom extended to the "softer" emotions. Rearick's study could use a bit more recognition of the fact that what may strike an observer as an emotional cliché can be for the participant an all too human feeling. Nor, of course, are only plebian populists vulnerable to such clichés.

How does one "do" popular culture, exposing the many myths propagated by the entertainment industry while at the same time respecting some of the very emo-

tions which are manipulated and exploited by that industry? It is difficult task which, for all my carping, Rearick does much better than most. He has also written a brilliant and fascinating book with political implications extending beyond interwar France.

#### Notes

[1]. See Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (written in 1944), in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972), pp. 120-167. For French critiques of popular culture, see Brian Rigby, *Popular Culture in Modern France: A Study of Cultural Discourse* (London, 1991).

[2]. Robert Jay Lifton, *Survivors of Hiroshima: Death in Life* (New York, 1967), pp. 500-510; and Robert Jay Lifton, *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* (New York, 1990), pp. 98-155, 192-217.

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