

Eva-Karin Josefson. *Röster, tystnad, ekon: Om kulturutbytet mellan Belgien, Frankrike och Skandinavien kring sekelskiftet 1900* [Stimmen, Schweigen, Echos. Über den kulturellen Austausch zwischen Belgien, Frankreich und Skandinavien zur Jahrhundertwende 1900]. Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag, 2011. ISBN 978-91-7844-833-3.

Reviewed by Liesbeth van de Grift

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2013)

The Belle Époque in France was a period characterised by a sense of optimism, belief in peace and progress and numerous scientific and technological advances. However, the prosperity that became synonymous with this era was only enjoyed by the few, while large segments of the population lived under dire circumstances in industrialised cities and the impoverished countryside. A group of French artists and intellectuals, among them Georges Renard, Dick May (Jeanne Weill), Gabrielle Réval, André Antoine, Romain Rolland, and Jules Romains, decided to use their art and writings as a means to expose the hypocrisy, inequality and corruption that they considered inherent features of the French Third Republic and, moreover, effect societal change.

It is this group of intellectuals and their plea for a socially engaged form of art that is central to Eva-Karin Josefson's book, "Röster, tystnad, ekon. Om kulturutbytet mellan Belgien, Frankrike och Skandinavien kring sekelskiftet 1900". Building upon the work of the French leftwing historian Madeleine Réberieux of the 1970s, Josefson's point of departure is the relative political backwardness of the French Third Republic, by which she means the glaring discrepancy between its official republican credentials and the limited influence that the ideals of the French Revolution in fact exerted within political and educational insti-

tutions. Instead, traditionalist values such as hierarchy and obedience, a legacy of Napoleonic times, prevailed in France more so than in other European countries. As a result, reform-minded writers and artists sought inspiration across the border, primarily in Belgium, the Nordic countries and Russia.

The cultural exchange that resulted from this interest took different forms. Actors and theatre directors such as André Antoine in his Théâtre Libre and Théâtre Antoine, and Aurélien Lugné-Poë in his Théâtre de l'Œuvre staged plays by contemporary German, Scandinavian and Russian writers. Dramatist and Nobel Prize laureate Romain Rolland was strongly inspired by authors such as Henrik Ibsen and Leo Tolstoj and his 1903 manifesto 'Le Théâtre du Peuple. Essai d'esthétique d'un théâtre nouveau', in which he pleaded for the establishment of a genuine people's theatre, was based on the example of La Maison du Peuple in Brussels. Feminist authors drew inspiration from Scandinavian plays and novels, in which women's subordinate role within marriage, and society at large, was analysed, and an activist such as the Polish emigree and dramatist Marya Chéliga-Loévy invited female writers from the Nordic countries to contribute to Le Bulletin de l'Union universelle de femmes, thereby turning the journal into an international platform of the

feminist movement. Literary critics Jean Jaurès and Lucien Maury frequently discussed Scandinavian literature, in contrast to their colleagues who thought the interest in international novels and plays revealed a snobbish and anti-French attitude on the part of the intellectuals discussed here.

In chapters that are organised biographically, Josefson addresses a wide range of topics, including in her analysis the lives of a selected group of artists and intellectuals, their mutual exchange of ideas, as well as their critical points of view vis-à-vis the outdated educational system, which failed to train young people to become independent-minded citizens, the subordinate position of women, and the arts, which many agreed should be made accessible to larger groups of people and foster class consciousness.

While the author touches upon many interesting issues, it is precisely the multitude of aspects addressed in the book that gives the whole a somewhat kaleidoscopic character. The book goes in many different directions and lacks a clear structure. The causes of this can in part be attributed to its diffuse aim. Several questions are raised throughout the book, one referring to practices of cultural exchange among Scandinavian, Belgian and French artists, another asking to explain the relative absence of artistic forms of protest in France as compared to other countries. Josefson's work certainly reveals the extent to which French artists were influenced by the work of colleagues abroad, but hardly examines the factors that contributed to the 'silence of insurgent voices' in France at the turn of the century, as the title of the last chapter seems to promise. While the author puts forward the de-radicalising effect of Jean Jaurès on radical authors and the division among socialist ranks as factors, these are nowhere analysed in detail. Moreover, the reference to Gabrielle Réval's private life, in particular her marriage, in order to explain her change of mind and adoption of more conservative views in

the course of years remains not more than a suggestion.

The impression that a clear aim is lacking is reinforced by the fact that Josefson fails to embed her analysis in a scholarly framework and does not elaborate on the selection of the intellectuals and countries: Why, for instance, does the book include a treatment of Gabrielle Réval and Dick May, who none of them seem to have had any particular connection to either the Nordic countries or Belgium? And why was not Russia a part of this project, taking into consideration that so many French artists at the time were influenced by Russian culture as well? Choices like these remain unexplained and leave the reader wondering about the organising principle of the work.

An explanation that could possibly justify the absence of scholarly justifications and references to the sources used in the text may be that this book was originally meant to reach a wider, non-scholarly audience of interested readers. However, if that was the intention, the author presupposes a substantial amount of prior knowledge of the French cultural scene around the turn of the century, presenting, in addition to the book's protagonists, a large number of people often without properly introducing them.

As such, one must conclude that whereas the book does contain a wealth of information, it would have benefited from a clearer focus, structure, and position in the scholarly debate.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Liesbeth van de Grift. Review of Josefson, Eva-Karin. *Röster, tystnad, ekon: Om kulturutbytet mellan Belgien, Frankrike och Skandinavien kring sekelskiftet 1900* [Stimmen, Schweigen, Echos. Über den kulturellen Austausch zwischen Belgien, Frankreich und Skandinavien zur Jahrhundertwende 1900]. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39152>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.