

The Myth of the French Nation

Anne-Marie THIESSE

Sylvain Venayre responds to politicians who, only yesterday, were asking historians to define national identity. With an exploration of the French nation's roots, he deliberately shifts the question by proposing a history of how historians are themselves involved in the production of a collective identity.

Reviewed : Sylvain Venayre, *Les Origines de la France. Quand les historiens racontaient la nation*, [The Origins of France. When Historians Told the Story of the Nation] Paris, Le Seuil, 2013, 430 p.

The Origins of French History

When did France begin? Was it on the Sunday of the Battle of Bouvines, in the Neolithic era, when Clovis was baptized, at the time of the Gauls, the Oath of Strasbourg, in Alesia, or when Joan of Arc entered Orleans? This heterogeneous list does not exhaust the series of beginnings that have been suggested since historians eagerly committed themselves to the search for the origins of the nation. This historiographical beginning, however, can be more precisely dated. As a precursor to this enterprise, Augustin Thierry provided its foundation. “We have no history of France”, he said in 1818, while outlining the principles of the program designed by this new historical school: to restore for France and for *our ancestors* this truth that the Revolution had made possible and necessary.

“The July Revolution lightning strike” provided fundamental impetus for this enterprise: by validating 1789 as the end – in both senses of the word – of national history, the new Revolution established the outline of the narrative that had hitherto been lacking. It also provided it with tools, since the constitutional monarchy created the academic institutions that would be responsible for establishing the sources of this new knowledge. During the following decades, historians set out to describe and explain this new filiation, which, by designating the true ancestors, would define scientifically the inheritance and the heirs. Thus, history was put in charge of establishing the identity of France. The French monarchy had been considered an instrument of Providence. Now that politics was freed from God's will, it became necessary to establish, both in this world and in reason, the shape and the destiny of the nation. Historical inquiry was from then on based on the conviction that a new genesis had to be written, which would free people from false beliefs, illuminate the present, and serve as a prescription for the

future. The post-revolutionary century focused intently on the search for the origins (of language, of nations, of Christianity, of species), which was meant to enlighten – with regard to their nature, rights and duties – societies henceforth destined for freedom.

One Nation, Several Peoples

The historiographical dossier of the quest for the national Holy Grail had already been opened, notably in many chapters of the *Lieux de Mémoire* book series. In a thick volume, Sylvain Venayre provides a well-documented study of the main contributions by 19th century historians, judiciously followed by a fine anthology of texts. We can see how the choice of the nation's origins has varied depending on the political or scientific context. Natural history, geology, philology, and archeology have been solicited to provide explanatory models, according to their novelty, their efficiency, or their prestige. Raciology, which knew its scientific heyday in the mid-19th century, was rejected after 1870 as a “German science”. The opposition that we often hear today between the French and German conceptions of the nation is a construction that resulted from both the annexation of Alsace-Moselle and the “German crisis of French thought”. Sylvain Venayre recalls how Ernest Renan changed his mind and, after having claimed that the issue of race was a decisive factor in history, completely rejected the determination of the nation through race in his famous lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882. Later, there would be a consensus among historians, including Maurras' followers, in describing France not as one people, but as the product of numerous blends. Regrettably, however, Sylvain Venayre did not push the investigation further by spelling out what peoples were explicitly – and especially implicitly – excluded from the original melting-pot, as defined by historians of the French nation. (We typically find the Visigoths, the Normans, the Ligurians, the Iberians, the Romans and the Germans among them, but hardly any Jews.). Because it occurred in a previously constituted State whose borders were rarely challenged, this process of nationalization encouraged, in fact, the claim of an early homogenization of the population, despite some obvious cultural or social differences. The theory of “the two nations” (the Gauls and the Franks), understood as Third State (*Tiers-Etat*, i.e. common people) versus aristocracy, which served as an explanatory system for the Revolution at the beginning of the 19th century, soon gave way, for the sake of contemporary France, to a representation of the nation as “diversity aspiring to unity”.

Otherness Absorbed

The most forceful expression of this assimilation can be found in the works of Michelet, who saw France as a substance of conversion (“French France was able to draw, absorb, and give an identity to the English France, the German France, and the Spanish France that surrounded her. She used them to neutralize each other, converting them all to her essence” (Michelet, *Introduction to World History*, 1831). Others, however, in the century of nationalities, believed that the French State did not coincide with one nation, and denounced the oppression at its heart of submissive nations who had a duty to claim their freedom based on their specific origins and history – like Brittany or the “South” that Sylvain Venayre briefly mentions. This historiographical issue is complex, because for the last two centuries, the same references have been part of the French national narrative, sometimes as regional variants and sometimes, to the contrary, as the main chapters of a national history antagonistic to the history of France. Linguistic plurality is another element whose treatment can be tricky in the search for origins.

The European movement of nationalities has promoted language as the source of the nation. And yet claiming that the history of France begins with the French language relegates the Gallic and Roman periods to national prehistory, while removing the obstacle of the long linguistic diversity of the population. Nineteenth-century historiography therefore did not identify one, but multiple origins of France, whether successive or simultaneous. Even if the dominant feature of this national narrative is the story of unity found (or found again), the reference to diversity allows the assertion of the nation's supremacy against competing narratives. While after 1830 the monarchists claimed that France was the "eldest daughter of the Church", the Republicans sought to celebrate it as "Nature's beloved daughter", as shown by the incomparable diversity of her soil, her climates, and her peoples, thus making it a nation superior to all others.

In this exploration of national origins, what was specific to the successive French expeditions in terms of equipment and material? Did they use the same tools and maps as their counterparts from other nations? These questions are rarely addressed in this volume, where international circulation only appears sporadically in the context of how the French appropriated foreign intellectual productions, mainly from across the Rhine. It is because "the various myths of origins that have been developed by European nations since the late 18th century remain understudied", says Sylvain Venayre (p. 225). This judgment is severe and throws a fairly recent but already abundant production to the dustbin of historiography¹. And yet a transnational perspective is necessary since, if "men resemble their times more than their fathers", as Marc Bloch once said, the work of historians resemble more their foreign peers' than their fellow countrymen's.

The Poetics of History

Sylvain Venayre pays attention to the poetics of history, seeking to identify underlying metaphorical systems in the discourse on national origins. The concept of the "nation as family", for instance, of course calls for a conception of history as genealogy, extending the ancestral tree – which was until that point the prerogative of the monarchy and the aristocracy – to the mass of anonymous people. But the tree can also be deployed as an actual vegetal trope, inspiring thoughts on the relationship between essence and contingency. (Is the oak determined by the acorn it originated from, or is it also the result of the time and events in which it grew?). Michelet provided a metaphysical answer to this question of the relationship between nature and nurture in the development of the collective personality that is a nation. For him, France is a person, albeit an unborn one. It is the spirit of freedom embodied in a constantly self-generating nation. Michelet did not skimp on the transposition of Christian imagery to this "mysterious birth", where the initial elements of the population are "transmuted" or "transfigured" into one body (Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 1833). Later, Vidal de la Blache would think of France as a geographical being characterized by its precocity in becoming coherent: "Our country emerged

¹ We can mention, among various examples: Monika Flacke (dir.), *Mythen der Nationen, ein europäisches Panorama*, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 1998; Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations, the Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton University Press, 2003; or the volumes of the international series *Writing the Nations*, and in particular the volume edited by Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan, and Kevin Passmore, *Writing National Histories, Western Europe since 1800*, London, Routledge, 1999; as well as Stefan Berger, Chris Lorenz (ed.), *Nationalizing the Past, Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

earlier than others from this vague and rudimentary stage in which the skills and geographic resources of a country remain in a latent state, where nothing yet appears of what will make a lively personality.” (Vidal de la Blache, *Tableau de Géographie de la France*, 1903).

Committed Historians

Sylvain Venayre shows that 19th century historians, and liberal ones in particular, often took an active part in political life. Fustel de Coulanges used to lament that fact: “For the last fifty years, our historians have been the men of a party. (...) Writing the history of France was a way to work for a party and to fight an adversary. And so for us history became a kind of permanent civil war”² Within this decidedly teleological narrative, the establishment of a national origin was equivalent to taking a firm stance in the contemporary ideological arena. The academic history of the 20th century sought to distance itself from a historical approach that confused the succession of events with causality, and de-historicized the past by following the permanence of an essence throughout the ages. Sylvain Venayre mentions how, in a mordant critique, Lucien Febvre tore to pieces Seignobos’ *L’Histoire sincère de la nation française* [The Sincere History of the French Nation]. The historians’ field of action and excavation, Febvre said, is not made of a supposed permanence; it is, rather, the “vast margin between past and present”. And in his *Apologie pour l’Histoire* [Engl. *The Historian’s Craft*], Marc Bloch mocked “the idol of the tribe of historians: the obsession with origins”. Banned from conferences and dissertations for a long time, the idol flourished in other places. Today, it reigns over a vast and profitable market of films, games, shows and popular publications. It has also turned into a late-life temptation for many respectable historians, who feel, according to Sylvain Venayre, well into their retirement, “the urge to transmit to younger generations some of the legacy of which they were, perhaps, the most conscious custodians” (p. 223).

In a long list that starts with Ferdinand Lot, the most famous of these scholars is paradoxically Fernand Braudel, who, in his book *L’Identité de la France* [Engl. *The Identity of France*], went all the way back “to the dawn of time” to perceive the nation as part of a process steeped less in transformation than in permanence. This posthumous publication has been brandished as the scientific backing for the essentialist conceptions of the nation that have been recently reactivated in the public sphere. Sylvain Venayre’s book is the explicit result of the confusion that professional historians have felt when history was again summoned to define national identity. The complex history of the historians’ involvement in the production of national identity is a response to the political – and media-based – demand that old functions be repeated in a radically different context. Ultimately, the project led by Venayre, with as much caution as conviction, opens up a field of investigation in areas left at the margins of his approach (including the forms and the reception of “non-academic” history and the question of national origins in the colonial context). The stakes are high and the challenge must be taken up. Let us finish by saying that, for the pleasure of his readers, Sylvain Venayre is keen on sharing his fascination with the style of 19th century historians, allowing for wonderful rediscoveries in terms of stories and chiseled figures of speech.

² Fustel de Coulanges, “On the writing of history in France and Germany in the last fifty years”, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, September 1, 1872.

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