

***The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*, Gerson, Stéphane (2003) Ithaca: Cornell University Press.**

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This is a dense, difficult, yet fascinating book that will appeal to readers with a strong background in French history and scholars interested in the relationship between civil society and the state. It outlines what Gerson terms a “cult of local memories,” a movement that swept through France in the nineteenth century. This public effort of “unprecedented magnitude” (p. 3) involved the resuscitation of the local past and attachment to individual localities, reflecting anxieties about France’s future in the tumultuous period following the French Revolution. While a previous wave of French historiography represented nineteenth-century nation-building and modernization as a shift away from ties to local regions, with their distinct customs, languages and lifeways, towards national identification through relentless centralization, Gerson’s book joins the next wave of works that challenge this view, and shows instead how “the local and modernity were interlaced rather than inimical in France” (p. 2). Love of the local went hand in hand with nation-building, he argues, and the “cult of local memories” even contributed to processes typically associated with modernity, such as the rise of science, and increased civic participation.

This is a work of remarkable scholarship that, strangely, does not adequately engage with the vast theoretical literature on social memory, leading to some notable omissions. Gerson never explains why he calls this phenomenon a cult of local memories, for instance, when much of what he describes involved historical research and writing. The book is primarily descriptive, yet may be sufficiently rich without another layer of analysis, for the diversity of activities he describes that comprise the “field of local memories” is astounding: monographs on local history were published by the hundreds, and scholars put forth dictionaries, inventories of archaeological sites, journals, and developed local learned societies, contests, and historical pageants. While some of these efforts were promoted or sponsored by governmental agencies such as the Comité des Travaux Historiques, most were carried out in the provinces by local elites: almost exclusively men, members of the landed aristocracy, local bourgeoisie (members of the liberal professions, public servants, factory owners and merchants), and the clergy. They organized themselves into an array of scientific and scholarly organizations that met regularly and participated in wider congresses. The author focuses exclusively on the activities of these elites and national and local state representatives and does not explore how these efforts may have been received by non-elite locals. He outlines this “cult” on a national scale, spotlighting activities in the department of the Nord.

The periodicity of this book presumably follows that of the movement itself, but, as a result, the decades of concern here (1820s to 1880s) straddle several political regimes. This is refreshing, and certainly good historical practice, but can lead to confusion to all but those readers well versed in French history. During the “Restoration” (1814-1830), France was ruled by a Bourbon king, then Napoleon I, followed by the Bourbons and then finally ultraroyalists under Charles X until the July Revolution of 1830. The “July monarchy” lasted until the “February” Revolution of 1848. A republic followed with Louis Napoleon III as president, who led a coup in 1851, and ruled as emperor until 1870, when the Third Republic was established. Gerson argues for a certain continuity across this period, noting for instance that many key individuals engaged in the state’s efforts to promote local historical research survived these political shifts or reemerged in subsequent administrations, but it is unclear to this reader just how we should conceptualize “the state” across so many major political breaks. It is also not always clear what the ramifications of these many changes in government were either on the local elites engaged in the “cult,” or on officials sponsoring them.

Perhaps in part due to so many regime changes, the motivations of the participants across this period were multiple and often contradictory. In the broadest sense, this “cult” can be viewed as a response to the French Revolution. During the Revolution, there was a considerable destruction of noble and church property, and a concern arose regarding the need to preserve those properties remaining and to inventory the nation’s new patrimony, including buildings, manuscripts, statues

and archaeological ruins. The decades following were of considerable upheaval, and many French elites by the 1830s and 40s viewed a return to the local as a means of finding meaning and of resolving disharmony. They hoped “to rebuild what had been toppled but also to create something new” (p. 87). In addition, France was experiencing rapid social and economic change, with urbanization, industrialization, the inexorable linkage of previously distant French provinces with the expanding railroad. Many participants felt the need to preserve local memories, which they considered in danger of vanishing forever. Some elites who had held hereditary positions or who experienced diminished access to political power may have also wanted a refuge from politics or a means of regaining some power through their involvement in learned societies. They may have used their involvement in these learned societies to serve hidden political agendas, to promote decentralization, or to make a stand against the capital. Finally, elites interested in fostering ties to the region among their subordinates may have been motivated by a desire to encourage peasants to remain on the land and workers to stay on the job, and thus retard mass flight to the capital or other large urban areas.

The focus of chapter three is on the strong pedagogical angle of the “cult of local memories.” For many elites, knowledge of local history was a pedagogical enterprise, a way to foster self-understanding, unity, and, ultimately, civic participation among the residents of their region. Gerson shows that this view was bolstered by the Enlightenment faith in the perfectibility of humans, along with a related view that historical knowledge held transformative powers and could improve people morally. Elites consciously sought to create lasting memories by encouraging people to experience history with all of their senses through the development of elaborate historical pageants, such as the bizarre and wonderful “festival of the Incas,” a fascinating facet of this “cult” discussed in greater detail in chapter 5. Scholars of the Third Republic will be particularly interested in Gerson’s discussion of republican pedagogies of place, which clearly demonstrates continuities with similar efforts of the preceding administrations.

Participants in this “cult” faced difficulties integrating the local with the national: the local was difficult to manage, and too great a focus on local memories could deflect attention away from the nation. State organizations such as the CTH were most comfortable promoting projects that tied local memories into a national framework within a uniform grid. Yet local places and histories were unique, and any attempt to generate knowledge systematically risked distorting local specificities. Most interesting were the cases in which local organizations criticized the CTH, as in its creation of a geographical dictionary of France. Local scholars complained that since each region of France had its own special and unique heritages, it did not make sense for officials to send them identical questionnaires (p. 270). Societies sometimes refused to follow ministerial guidelines, and submitted entries that were subsequently rejected due to their inclusion of narratives viewed by officials as of purely local interest.

Tensions integrating the local with the national were faced not only in the nineteenth century, but in this book as well, reflecting the difficulty in focusing on two levels of analysis simultaneously. While Gerson highlights the activities in the Nord, and discusses events, individual personalities and disputes from key towns in this department, he also draws much wider conclusions on a national level, and we sometimes move uneasily between regional and national concerns. At times further knowledge of local issues is needed to illuminate the discussion at hand. For instance, when he describes the creation of a great room in the Montargis City Hall commemorating local celebrities, he states that the town’s 1,500 indigents betrayed an “unmistakable ‘social problem’” (p. 105). To the casual reader, this is an amazing number of indigents for a town of under 8,000 in the 1840s (p. 104) and requires further explication. The reader has no way of knowing if this high level of indigence was a temporary response to the national economic crisis of 1846-7, or if it was a long-lasting problem of local origins. Gerson’s discussion here would have been enhanced with more information on local social, political and economic conditions.

Perhaps the most important sections of this book are those in which Gerson focuses on the relationship between local elites and state officials, revealing the changing and blurry boundary between state and civil society in France during this time. Before the Third Republic, the state played very little role in the pedagogical realm, and yet such organizations as the Comité des Travaux Historiques were engaged in developing cultural policies and promoting a certain kind of local knowledge, as Gerson outlines in chapter 4, “Local Memories and the Governing of the Minds.” Local officials established archaeological organizations, and the CTH played important roles, formulating questionnaires and deciding which elites would receive funding or prizes. The

dance between centralization and autonomy is especially nicely drawn here. State officials wanted to direct elites into local research, but saw that autonomy was one of the principal strengths of these various societies, and tried to avoid intervening too much or drawing them too closely into one centralized administration. Yet these same officials needed to develop institutional structures to better communicate with the array of learned societies in the hinterlands, to promote research of a consistent quality, and to encourage peer-review. Some administrators also viewed the local as potentially dangerous, and wanted to keep an eye on local societies, playing an indirect or “behind the scenes” role to prevent the fostering of splinter political movements. As Gerson outlines, several conceptions of civil society were held at this time, ranging from those of de Tocqueville, who opposed centralized state power and argued for the development of a rich network of local voluntary associations, to the Hegelian understanding of civil society as potentially divisive. The “official cult of local memories” had the daunting task of integrating these incompatible models, Gerson argues, and often zigzagged between them. Ambivalence regarding civil society led to an uneven and sometimes faltering promotion of local historical efforts. Over time, both state and civil society continued to expand in this domain, and their connections to each other multiplied. In the process, French identity was not produced solely in the capital, or only in the provinces, but “articulated at the juncture of Paris and the provinces, of state and civil society” (p. 278).

In sum, this is a work of remarkable scholarship that attempts to unite several political breaks and local and national units of analysis to reveal a nineteenth-century fascination with the local and local pasts that, perhaps contrary to our expectations, was actually encouraged by the state. Historians of France will find that this work provides a refreshing new look at this period, and scholars of contemporary French society intrigued by today’s “return to the local” will enjoy delving into a detailed examination of quite similar trends of quite a different era.

***Regulating Eden: The Nature of Order in North American Parks*, by Joe Hermer (2002), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 150 pp.**

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Edward Abbey once wrote that “the itch for naming things is almost as bad as the itch for possessing things.” In *Regulating Eden*, Joe Hermer trains a cooler, theoretical lens on the same issues of constraints on human freedom and commoditization of the land that fueled Abbey’s scratchy rage. Hermer’s provocative book argues not only that places thought of as “natural” or “wild” are in fact constituted by the most human means, but that parks in particular represent sites within which the authority and power that maintain order in the larger society are replicated and reinforced. It investigates the consequences of “the itch for naming things” by examining how the classification and ordering of space, along with policies governing “appropriate” visitor behavior, are instruments of moral regulation of a population beyond park boundaries.

Hermer draws the reader in with an arresting anecdote from his father’s experience bundling firewood for campers in a Canadian provincial park. When one particularly choosy customer demanded wood “without knots,” the woodman replied, motioning to the branches above their head, “If we had wood without knots, where would all the little birds sit?” (xii). Hermer wields this metaphor to powerful effect. He depicts national, state, and provincial parks as attempts to manufacture sanitized, homogenous versions of the natural world, a forest of “knotless trees” and safe Kodak viewpoints (often with disastrous consequences for ecosystems), even while the discourse of park regulations invokes imagery of a frightening or pristine wilderness in order to ensure voluntary compliance with ideals of patriarchy, conformity, and moral “hygiene”. Hermer sums up these two related theses of his book when he writes, “parks do not simply ‘protect’ nature, as we are so often educated to believe, but rather manufacture an experience of wildness and disorder which is not only congruent with widespread practices of environmental toxification, but also plays a central role in constructing particular social relations as ‘natural’ and ‘normal.’”