Febles on Le Hir (2014)


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Using the sociological theories of Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu as a framework, Marie-Pierre Le Hir explores in *The National Habitus* the ways in which “feelings of national belonging became central to one’s sense of identity” (1) from 1789 to 1870 in France. The volume is organized around two broad parts grouping three authors who experienced the French Revolution firsthand (Olympe de Gouges, François René de Chateaubriand, Germaine de Staël) and three who did not (Stendhal, Prosper Mérimée, and George Sand). Each author is accorded a chapter in which Le Hir examines a broad array of textual materials, from novels and plays to political pamphlets and travelogues.

In the introduction, Le Hir traces the construction of a national habitus as the culmination of a process going back at least as far back as the Renaissance and through which a new subjective relationship to the abstract entity of “the nation” was concretized. A mental orientation toward the past characterizes this habitus, thereby essentializing *la patrie*: “In the national age, immanence (the nation as always already there) takes precedence over process. The transformation of dynamic into static concepts is a manifestation of this change” (9). One of the salient characteristics of the habitus is its generation of a strong “we-feeling” and its exclusionary mechanism needed for self-definition (16).

In the first part of the volume, the three authors studied represent different attitudes and responses towards the emerging national habitus. Gouges, for instance, evolves from a monarchal stance to an attachment to an abstract republican nation defined by its people and embodied in patriotic symbols, such as the imagined Pantheon of great men that Gouges stages in her play *Mirabeau aux Champs-Elysées*. In contrast, Chateaubriand represents a recalcitrant backward-looking attitude through his espousal of religious values and aristocratic medieval chivalric culture: “To the revolutionary conception of the nation as expression of the will of the people, he [Chateaubriand] opposes an organic conception of the nation as a community rooted in its soil and connected to ancestors through blood” (120). Ironically, according to Le Hir, this reactionary stance paves the way for the radical nationalist discourse of fin-de-siècle France as Taine, Maurras, and Barrès are positioned as direct ideological descendants of Chateaubriand (121). Finally, Staël’s cosmopolitanism seems on the surface to propose a third viewpoint which transcends both Gouges’s and Chateaubriand’s. Indeed, though born in Paris, Staël was often branded a foreigner, in part due to her family history—she was the daughter of the Swiss Jacques Necker—and her marriage to a Swede. Yet, Le Hir demonstrates in her reading of *Corinne* that this third option becomes increasingly problematic as nationalist impulses make it impossible to escape a national identity (153).

Whereas the three authors treated in the first part of the study approach the national problem from an elitist perspective, the post-revolutionary authors enlarge the concept of the nation to incorporate fellow countrymen of other classes. Stendhal, for instance, gives voice to characters from different social horizons in his novels and foregrounds individual will over societal constraints. In so doing, his writings “testify to a wider understanding of the concept of the nation, one no longer limited to high society” (224). To Stendhal’s quasi-utopian response to the new nation, Mérimée’s work as *Inspecteur général des monuments historiques* gives a tangible face to national memory by forging a patrimoine culturel. Paradoxically, the juxtaposition of monuments empties them of historical resonance as they become artifacts in “the national project of cultural unification and political integration” (233). Le Hir finishes her study with a chapter on George Sand, replacing her latter production (post-1848) in a narrative of national construction by asserting that these works contribute to a process of “daily plebiscite” through which different classes achieve consensus.

Marie-Pierre Le Hir’s *National Habitus* will be of interest to nineteenth-century scholars and to all those interested in nationalism and its genesis. Her prose is controlled and clear, leading the reader seamlessly from one author to the next, from one epoch to another. Furthermore, her erudition comes to the fore in her wide-ranging treatment of authors and texts, including those less studied. Ultimately, Le Hir’s analysis allows us to turn a critical eye to our own national habitus and thus to begin a process of “dishabituation” in order to avoid the pitfalls and follies into which nationalism has taken us in the twentieth century, and continues to do in the dawn of the present one.