

Nora, Pierre. *Présent, nation, mémoire*

Luciana Fernandes Boeira*

Paris: Gallimard, 2011. 432p.

On 6 October 2011 the French historian and editor Pierre Nora simultaneously launched two books: *Historien public* and *Présent, nation, mémoire*, both published by the prestigious Gallimard, a publishing company he has directed since 1965. Both books consist of articles written by Nora during his long career. In the more than five hundred pages of the first book Nora presents numerous manifestos, public interventions and positions adopted by him in more than fifty years of public life. Amongst various subjects, Nora looks at editorial work and makes observations on contemporary history and the French nation. He also speaks about the Algerian War and the important journal *Le Débat*, which he founded with Marcel Gauchet in 1980 which continues to be very successful in the intellectual world.

Présent, nation, mémoire is part of the *Bibliothèque des Histoires* collection and includes more than thirty articles by Nora, all related to mutations between history and memory. This massive range of articles is the result of reflections which preceded, accompanied and succeeded the publication of *Les lieux de mémoire*, the monumental seven volume collective work written between 1984 and 1992, which was also the most important publishing venture Nora directed in his career. This career also included *Faire de l'Histoire* (organized in partnership with Jacques Le Goff in 1974), another outstanding success of the *Bibliothèque des Histoires* collection, consisting of three volumes in which numerous French historians presented their reflections on the new history in the 1970s.

Everything in *Présent, nation, mémoire* is related to *Les lieux de mémoire* and it is, thus, inseparable from that work. What gives unity to its 32 articles, divided into three distinct parts – Present, Nation and Memory (which are also the three central axes which tie the articles together and which, according

* Doctoral Student in History, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Capes Grantee. PPGHIST – IFCH/UFRGS. Caixa Postal 15055, Agronomia. 91501-970 Porto Alegre – RS – Brasil. l.boeira@uol.com.br

to Nora, constitute the three centers of contemporary historical conscience) –, is the intention to represent an introduction to *Lieux de mémoire*. Although the subjects of each of the articles are very different (what Nora explore ranges from the question of heritage to references to Michelet and Lavissee as models of national history, also including questions such as the end of the Gaullo-Communism in France, the appearance of the best-seller in the publishing market, and the trauma caused by the memory of Vichy), the three axes are used to guide reading of the material. Material which the author admits is presented in an unusual way, both due to the subject which the title of the book announces, and the content, which flees to the erudite canons of the discipline of history. However, as he himself underlines, his intention in proposing the collection, was not to provide a theoretical reflection on history, but rather to present a reflection which emerged from his practice as a historian.

It is exactly this practice as a historian and the events which composed which Nora shows, providing a retrospective of the most important moments experienced by the discipline of history during the twentieth century, especially after the advent of the *Annales* and which culminated in the 1970s and 1980s, with the explosion of what he calls a ‘wave of memory’, which swept over not just the France, but the Western world as a whole, and of which the presentist moment dominated by heritagization would be the heir.

Reflecting on the advent of this generalized memorial wave and, with it, the movement of the acceleration of history, which condemned the present to memory, is the main intention of the book. The same purpose, according to Nora, that he and more than a hundred historians had when they launched *Les lieux de mémoire*, trying to understand what were the principal places, both material and abstract, in which the memory of France had become incarnate.

At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, Nora’s ‘places of memory’ pointed to the rapid disappearance of French national memory, and at that moment, making an inventory of the places where it had effectively become incarnate and still remained as shining symbols (parties, emblems, monuments, commemorations, funeral eulogies, dictionaries and museums) was a form of unraveling and dissecting the national memory, the nation and its relations. In 2011 *Présent, nation, mémoire*, which brought together articles written over a lifetime, has a dual function: to serve as basis for *Les lieux de mémoire*, but, independent of this, to show the public how Nora created his own path as a researcher and, concurrently, how a new field of study was built. A field, he states, which was delimited by these three words: present, memory and nation. According to Nora, these terms condition the form of contempo-

rary historical consciousness and are words that also allowed him to regroup the articles according to a logic that he calls ‘retrospective’ and which, for him, have an effective ‘pedagogical meaning’ effective for his intention of demonstrating how he formed this field of study involving memory and history in present time.

In the book, Nora has not updated the articles. At most, he subtly changes some of the titles. Nor does he present them in a chronological manner, but according to the subject being discussed in each section, so a text written in 1968 can be followed by one written in 1973, or a subject worked on in 2007 may be placed immediately after another article, related to it, but written in 1993. This feature is quite interesting because it enables the reader to perceive a coherency in the author trajectory in relation to the issues raised and for how long they have been part of his universe of concerns.

With this retrospective look at his own work as a writer, Nora admits that each of the texts that form the collection could have been subject to further development and, perhaps, even have resulted in specific books, which did not actually happen. This is because, despite the large amount of articles published until now by Nora, his dedication, as a historian, to the writing of his own work, is very small. Before the publication of these two volumes which bring together some of his many scattered texts, Nora had participated only in collective works and published just one book: *Les Français d’Algérie*, in 1961.

His interest in bringing these various texts together in a volume he called *Présent, nation, mémoire* resides, according to Nora, in reconstructing an intellectual route and a desire to show how during his career he built a ‘construction site’ consisted of several historiographical strata which he examined as a historian.

However, looking at the content of articles included in the volume, what we notice is that Pierre Nora insists on pointing out the significance that his own work had in the renovation of historical studies in France. Just to cite one example, in the article “Une autre histoire de France,” originally published in *Dictionnaire des sciences historiques* by Andrew Burguière (1986), under the title of “Histoire national,” Nora highlights that the moment in question was that of historiographical renewal of national history, in which historians were interested in dissecting the inheritance of the past. For him, *Les lieux de mémoire* perfectly fits into this perspective: learning traditions in their most significant and symbolic expressions, the ‘places of memory’ knew how to make a critical history of history-memory and produced a wide topology of the French symbolic. Here is demonstrated Nora’s somewhat subtle manner of

revering his own venture as a unique contribution to contemporary historiographical renewal. In the following article, “Les lieux de mémoire, mode d’emploi,” a preface written by the author for the American edition of the work, published between 1996 and 1998, Nora is much more emphatic in situating his work and, also, very more direct in reaffirming the importance that *Les lieux de mémoire* had in the ‘era of the historiographical discontinuity’ of the new French historiography.

While Nora is a master at highlighting the importance of his work, he also knows how to defend it. The text chosen by him to close the volume, “L’histoire au second degré,” published in his magazine *Le Débat* in 2002, is a response to Paul Ricoeur’s criticism of the “unusual *lieux de mémoire*” in *A memória, a história, o esquecimento* (Memory, history, forgetting), published in the same year. In the article Nora, once again, denounces the current invasion of the field of history by memory to the point that we are immersed in a world where everything is ‘heritage’ and of history as celebration. He says that he shares the same analyses as Ricoeur about commemoration and his irritations about the ‘duty of memory,’ but with one difference: for him, there is no possibility of escape from this situation, unlike what Ricoeur believed. According to Nora, the best way to deal with the tyranny of memory is to understand it and see it in its interior, as he proposes at the end of the day in his *lieux de mémoire*.

Review received on 31 March 2012. Approved on 21 May 2012.