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Chair of Contemporary French History from 1986 to 1997

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Tribute to Maurice Agulhon (1926-2014)

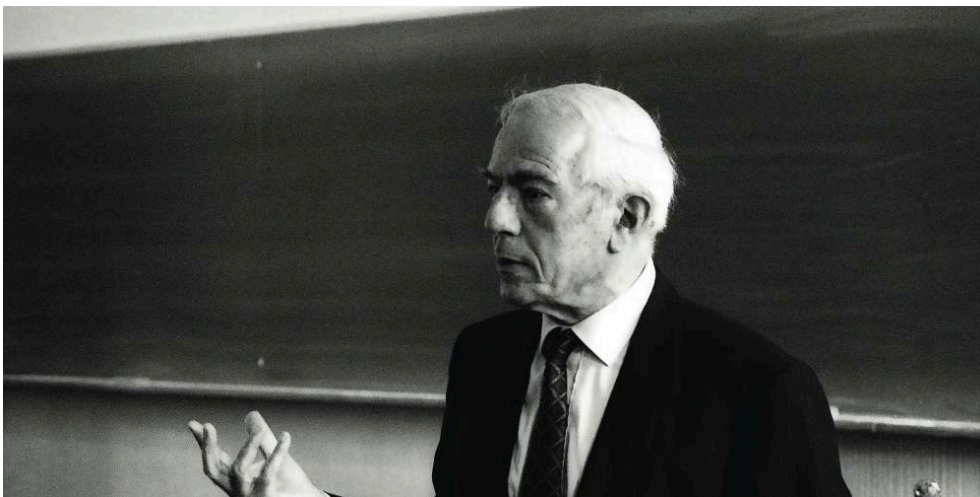
Chair of Contemporary French History from 1986 to 1997

Roger Chartier and Pierre Rosanvallon

EDITOR'S NOTE

Source: La lettre, no. 39, March 2015

- 1 **The school teacher's son. This was how, in an autobiographical essay published in 1987, a year after his election at the Collège de France to the History of Contemporary France Chair, Maurice Agulhon summed up his childhood – a childhood which he had spent not so much in a village as in a school, that of Pujaut, in the Gard, where his parents were both teachers.**



- 2 Both were staunchly secular, left-wing and fervent pacifists. Both were protestant and had a private and strict faith. Their family ancestries however exemplified the dividing

line of Christianity that had split the Provence region since the Protestant Reformation: the Huguenot Cévennes on his father's side, and the Catholic Midi on his mother's side, before she crossed the religious boundary.

- 3 "They did not like history, that I am sure of", wrote Maurice Agulhon, pointing out that for his pacifist parents, history was but a detestable tale of patriotic chauvinism, bloody wars and horrifying violence. And yet he chose history after completing his studies that led him from the Lycée Frédéric Mistral in Avignon, which he attended throughout his secondary education, to the *classes préparatoires* of the Lycée du Parc in Lyon which he entered in 1943.
- 4 He decided to be a historian when he was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure in 1946. This choice was supported by the teachings of Joseph Hours, the history professor of the *khâgne* preparatory course in Lyon. Hours was a Christian democrat resistant who introduced the new themes of the *Annales* in his lessons and made his students enjoy and respect politics, both inside and outside the classroom. Agulhon dedicated his most famous book, *Marianne au combat* [1979], to him. Of Hours he said, in 1987, "that he [was] the historian who had most profoundly influenced the history that he was then doing".
- 5 At the Rue d'Ulm, Maurice Agulhon joined the Communist Party and was an activist in the École Normale Supérieure and fifth *arrondissement's* cell. He remained a member of the Party until the late 1960s and has long reflected on the reasons for this disciplined and devoted commitment. There were the same reasons that many people his age, time, and background, shared, drawn as they were to a party that claimed to represent the Resistance movement, the nation and Republican democracy, and demanded rigorous moral intransigence. Agulhon described the more secret reasons for his commitment as the search for a surrogate family, once removed – "freed" as he wrote – from the protective but constraining affection of his parents.
- 6 Choosing activism had its intellectual consequences, making him prefer contemporary history as his research field and Ernest Labrousse as his mentor, even though Labrousse was a member of the despised S.F.I.O. However, his history was economic and social, his references were Marxist and his historiographic horizons were very broad.
- 7 It was therefore with Labrousse that Agulhon submitted a thesis subject proposal on the Republican tradition in Provence, after passing his *agrégation* in 1950 and being appointed to the Lycée de Toulon and then the Lycée Thiers in Marseille as a *khâgne* professor. The fact that, at the time, many scholars were researching the history of the French *départements*, and that thesis subjects on the Bouches-du-Rhône and the Var after 1851 had already been submitted, forced him to amend the subject of his thesis, which he defended at the Sorbonne in 1969 as "A Popular Movement in the Days of 1848: history of the Var populations in the first half of the nineteenth century". The rapporteur was Pierre Vilar, who had succeeded Ernest Labrousse, also a member of the thesis jury.
- 8 By 1969 Maurice Agulhon had already authored another thesis and had introduced into historians' vocabulary the notion of sociability, which remains associated with his work. In 1957, after a three-year secondment at the CNRS, he became Pierre Guiral's assistant at the Aix-en-Provence Faculty of Letters. He was exploring the reasons for which traditional Provence, both urban and rural, had readily embraced republican democracy, and posited that the lively civil society life in Provence was the crucible of the republican political preference. The nineteenth-century local associations,

societies, circles and barrack-rooms undoubtedly had deep roots that Maurice Agulhon found in the penitent brotherhoods of the Old Regime. Through a subtle prosopographical analysis, he showed that during the eighteenth century, the same men had gone from religious brotherhoods to Masonic Lodges, which was a new way of conceptualizing the secularization processes and transfers of sacredness that marked the Enlightenment era. The study was defended as a PhD thesis in Aix-en-Provence in 1966 and was published by a small local publisher under the title of *La Sociabilité méridionale*. It drew the attention of André Latreille, a columnist in *Le Monde* at the time, and was republished more widely two years later as *Pénitents et franc-maçons de l'ancienne Provence. Essai sur la sociabilité méridionale*, in an Éditions Fayard series edited by François Furet and Denis Richet. Daniel Roche, with whom I have written this tribute, dedicated a warm review to it in the *Revue historique*.

- 9 Having become an assistant lecturer, then a lecturer, and after defending his PhD thesis, a professor, it was at the University of Aix-en-Provence that Maurice Agulhon took part in the May '68 events. As head of the SNESup branch, he fought for a democratic university reform and, he added, for "the fall of the Gaullist government". This activism did not go so far as to shake his *habitus* since, as he confessed, "during those days, despite the heat, I always came to the faculty wearing a jacket and tie". The government did not fall, but the Faure Act democratized universities and, from then on, Maurice Agulhon was an advocate of the new academic procedures.
- 10 This first period of his life ended with the fragmented publication of his great work in three books published in 1970 and 1971: *Une ville ouvrière au temps du socialisme utopique. Toulon de 1815 à 1851*; *La Vie sociale en Provence intérieure au lendemain de la Révolution*; and, the most famous of the three, *La République au village*. This work marked what Maurice Agulhon called his "historiographical move", taking him from Labrousian history, that of the prices of structures and of conjunctures, to the exploration of the collective mind. It is no coincidence that the conclusions of *La République au village* ended with a citation by Michelet and an explicit reference to "cultural history". In 1972, Maurice Agulhon was elected professor at the University of Paris I. As a Parisian, he henceforth became Marianne's historian.
- 11 Maurice Agulhon's arrival in Paris marked a change of direction in his work. Regarding the "scientific justification" of his application to the Sorbonne, some of his friends were surprised that one could leave Aix-en-Provence to go "bury themselves in Paris". He thus noted: "through research more easily scaled up to national level, I wanted to come to test the systems I had constructed in a provincial microcosm that was perhaps a little too specific. In short, as professional sportsmen put it, I wanted to move up to the national league"¹. He began this "translation from the particular to the general" by accepting two commissions from publishers. He first wrote a two-volume synthesis on twentieth-century France for Éditions Nathan. Then, more importantly, in 1973 he wrote *1848 ou l'apprentissage de la République (1848-1851)* for the "Nouvelle histoire de France", a new series published by Éditions du Seuil. This book was to be his best-seller (nearly 100,000 copies sold). Answering Pierre Nora's call, he also contributed *Les Quarantes-huitards* (1975) to the "Archives" series of the publishers Julliard and Gallimard.
- 12 Not long after 1968, Maurice Agulhon contributed to giving this "forgotten and depreciated revolution", in his own words², its place in French history, and revived the old "Society of History of the 1848 Revolution and of the Nineteenth-Century

Revolutions”, which he presided in 1975 and 1981. It was a sign of the times that he then felt the need to justify at length his application of the term revolution to the February 1848 events, at a time when the star of 1917 still shone bright for many.

- 13 Those years of teaching at the Sorbonne also afforded him the opportunity to develop further his hypotheses on the speed of acculturation to democratic and republican ideas in the rural world, which he had presented in *La République du village*. He did so in the re-edition of the book, and in a significant contribution to *L'Histoire de la France rurale* edited by Georges Duby³. But most importantly he started to become the historian of the republican idea through its symbols. In his thesis research, he had often noticed Republican statues erected on Provencal village squares, and had made it a habit to photograph and to index them. Gradually he had come to see them as “a national more than a regional subject”. The hobby thus became a historical problem, as he put it⁴. This is where his research on Marianne began, which he launched in 1979 by publishing *Marianne au combat. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880*.
- 14 This work, of a pioneering nature as regards its method and its subjects, was to flourish fully after his election at the Collège de France – where he taught for eleven years, from 1986 – with the publication of another two volumes: *Marianne au pouvoir. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914*, and then *Les Métamorphoses de Marianne. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1914 à nos jours*⁵. With these books, Maurice Agulhon provided a perceptive explanation of the conflicts and convergences that gradually led the French to recognize themselves in the Republican idea, through a study of the variations of the Marianne busts which an 1884 law had made compulsory in every town hall⁶. This work led him to the figure of de Gaulle, who is central to the volume *La République* (1990) of the prestigious history of France published by Hachette, which he concluded, following Georges Duby's, Emmanuel Leroy-Ladurie's and François Furet's contributions. Whereas he initially saw the Croix de Lorraine as competing with Marianne and de Gaulle as a “Mariannophobe”, he ultimately painted a more nuanced picture of them. He was thus breaking with all the caricatures, which were still prevalent at the time⁷, of de Gaulle as the one who had definitively brought the right into the Republic. He also incorporated into this Republic the values of the State and the nation, which had previously been largely excluded from it. He was thus one of the first, in turn, to perceive the meaning of the consensus that was starting to form among the French around the figure of the General.
- 15 Through the subjects that he studied, Maurice Agulhon was always interested in the politics of his time. But he did so in his scholarly and objective way, with equanimity, never again joining a political party after saying his farewells to communism. He simply called himself a “socialist of the most moderate wing”⁸, still however joining forces with the left wing historians which, at the time of the 1789 bicentenary, crossed swords with interpretations of the events inspired by François Furet. Ultimately, he was more of a free spirit. It is therefore not surprising that in 2005 he signed the famous appeal, “Freedom for History”, launched by those (including his colleagues Jean Leclant, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Paul Veyne) concerned about the excesses of memorial laws, of which the so-called 1990 Gaysot Act constituted the first part.
- 16 I will cite the terms that he endorsed:
- 17 *History is not a religion. The historian accepts no dogma, respects no interdict; knows no taboos. He can disturb.*

- 18 *History is not moral. The historian's role is not to praise or condemn, but to explain.*
- 19 *History is not a slave to current affairs. The historian does not map contemporary ideological systems onto the past and does not introduce today's sensitivity into the events of the past.*
- 20 *History is not memory. The historian, following a scientific approach, collects the memories of people, compares them with one another and with documents, objects, traces and established facts. History takes memory into account; it does not amount to it.*
- 21 *History is not a legal fact. In a free state, it is neither for parliament nor for the judiciary to define historical truth.*

The Collège de France's Administrator and Professors are sad to announce

the death of three of their colleagues:

Edmond Malinvaud, Chair of Economic Analysis (1987-1993), on 7 March 2015,
 Georges Blin, Modern French Literature (1965-1988) on 14 May 2015 and George Le
 Rider, Chair of Economic and Monetary History of the Hellenistic Orient
 (1993-1998), on 3 July 2014.

We will pay tribute to them in forthcoming issues of *La lettre du Collège de France*.

NOTES

1. « Vu des coulisses », in Pierre Nora (ed), *Essais d'égo-histoire*, Gallimard, 1987, p. 47.
2. *Les Quarantes-huitards*, Gallimard, 1976, p.10.
3. *L'Histoire de la France rurale*, Vol. III: De 1789 à 1914, Georges Duby and Armand Wallon (eds), Éditions du Seuil, 1976
4. « Vu des coulisses », *op. cit.*, p. 41.
5. Respectively in 1989 and 2001.
6. Which also led him to contribute to the first volume of *Lieux de mémoire*, edited by Pierre Nora, Gallimard, 1993, a beautiful contribution on "the town hall".
7. See his *Coup d'État et République* (Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), in which he presents a first report on his reflection on the Gaullist phenomenon.
8. « Vu des coulisses », *op. cit.*, p. 57.

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Writings and Cultures in Modern Europe

PIERRE ROSANVALLON

Modern and Contemporary History of Politicsen