

Action Française and culture : Life, Times and Legacy

Review of :

Olivier Dard, Michel Leymarie, Neil McWilliam (éds), *Le maurrassisme et la culture. L'Action française. Culture, société, politique (III)*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2010.

In a seminal work Eugen Weber has already pointed out that the Action Française (the AF) dominated French intellectual life in the inter-war years¹. Through publications from a series of symposiums held between 2007 and 2011, it becomes possible to understand better the project of this monarchist, nationalist and anti-Semitic movement that made culture a form of political intervention in its own right. Co-edited by Olivier Dard, Michel Leymarie and Neil McWilliam, the last published volume, *Le maurrassisme et la culture*, crosses different approaches in order to try to determine how the AF was able to exercise this intellectual hegemony².

The first line of study focuses on some of the actors who built the 'plural object' called Maurrassism, including, of course, Charles Maurras. Christian Amalvi, for instance, examines how throughout his life Maurras devoted himself to an ideological reconstruction of Antiquity that viewed Ancient Greece as the model of an 'aristocratic' society finally ruined by democracy — obviously a lesson for the revolutionary France that had squandered the legacy of the old regime. The rapid dissemination of this ideological construction was in part due to the fact that the first generation of Maurrassians, often formed of men coming from literary criticism such as Charles Maurras and Jacques Bainville, was able to use all the resources of the cultural-political field. Several papers describe their positioning strategies. Léon Daudet, for example, adopts the violent anti-Semitic rhetoric of the pamphleteer Edouard Drumont and shrinks from no physical characterization, in contrast with Maurras who adopts a more 'literary' tone supposed to express the preoccupations of a man of letters fighting for ideas. The case of Louis Dimier, an art historian marginalized by his political loyalties, recalls, however, that at the beginning of the twentiethth century in France the struggle between the secular Republic and catholic traditionalists like him was extremely harsh. Michela Passini shows that after writing a thesis on Primaticcio (1900) he defended trans-historical classicism with Italian Renaissance art as one of its climaxes, in alignment with the Action Française, while Republican history celebrated a native realist tradition (Nordic Realism) and denounced the influence of Italy as foreign to the national genius. This position could not but cut him off from the emerging discipline of art history.

¹ Eugen Weber, *Action française*, Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1962.

² Two volumes have already been published : Michel Leymarie et Jacques Prévotat (dir.), *L'Action française. Culture, société, politique*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2008, and Olivier Dard et Michel Grunewald (dir.), *Charles Maurras et l'étranger. L'étranger et Charles Maurras. Culture, société, politique (II)*, Bern, P. Lang, 2009. A fourth symposium entitled *Maurrassisme et littérature. L'Action française. Culture, société, politique IV* was held at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3 (October 20-22, 2011).

Reactionary classicism, which he helped to popularize, triumphed after the war of 1914-1918 along with the ideas of the AF. However, Dimier broke with Maurras at the same time, while remaining constant in his ideas.

If, in contrast with the Republican figure of the intellectual, the Maurrassian journalist / essayist takes on the accents of a tribune or a man of letters struggling with the lack of culture in democracy, he can also take the guise of a cultural entrepreneur, as is the case with Henri Massis, a follower of Maurice Barrès, who became a sympathiser of the AF at the eve of the First World War. Literary critic, political essayist, chief editor and later director of the *Revue universelle*, he developed a coherent project which, says Olivier Dard, focused on the *Defence of the West* (*Défense de l'Occident*, 1927), and remained faithful to it until and throughout the years of the Cold War, although the dressing changed. Best known for his participation in the 'neither right nor left' groups of the 1930s, Thierry Maulnier also led a typically Maurrassian fight for a return to the eternal values of a French culture presented as the last bastion of the West. This loyalty ensured him a rapid success. From 1930 to 1944, he wrote numerous articles on literature in the newspaper *L'Action française*, while joining the *Jeune droite*, and was hailed by critics for works such as *La Crise est dans l'homme*. He broke with the AF at the end of the war. But he would decline the same antirealist themes, in particular as a member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and it was in complete fidelity to Maurras that he continued to fight against any committed art on behalf of an autonomous culture.

To assess the political and cultural weight of Maurrassism, this book also takes into account such instruments of collective action as journals. Supervised by Jean Rivain, who was one of the leaders of the AF in the early 1910, the *Revue critique des idées et des livres* (1908-1924) was one of the most important publications of the movement until 1914. It was initially dominated, as Laurent Joly reminds us, by Georges Valois and his friends who tried to reconcile right and left anti-democrats. But in late 1910 Rivain took over and transformed the *Revue critique* into a neoclassical journal whose ambition was to prepare its readers' minds for a return to order. In 1914 internal tensions would eventually lead Rivain and his collaborators to split with the AF, while remaining faithful to Maurrassism. Founded by the literary critic Jean Variot and the well-known theorician of Revolutionary Syndicalism Georges Sorel, who in 1908 had established contacts with Maurras based on their common rejection of democracy, *L'Indépendance* (March 1911- August 1913) followed a different trend. According to Thomas Roman, who implicitly criticizes the analyses Zeev Sternhell has developed in works such as *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, the AF had little interest in this magazine that was content to reunite various forms of nationalism³. This last point is debatable, and Thomas Roman himself gives very useful information on the individuals who participated in this endeavor, many of whom were close to Maurras. Jean Variot himself, it appears, was in the process of rejoining him. Even if this takeover had not been planned from the beginning, it proved that the AF was determined to stifle any competition. In

³ See Zeev Sternhell (avec la collaboration de Mario Sznajder et Maia Ashéri), *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste*, Paris, Fayard, 1989 (Zeev Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Ashéri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1994).

1913, Sorel had no other choice than to split with *L'Indépendance*, which disappeared a few months after his departure.

If some case studies highlight discursive practices that sought to single out a counter-revolutionary position while collecting a variety of trends far beyond the right-wing nationalists, and if others show the constant concern of the Maurrassians about the control of communication channels that would allow them to dominate the cultural field, a series of contributions analyses AF doctrine, at once aesthetic and political, in its many aspects. Thus various subjects are addressed, from the chronicles of ordinary life proposed by the newspaper *L'Action française*, which, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson shows, diffused ideology without appearing to do so, to a critique of Kantianism. Neil McWilliam tackles the issue of Maurrassian anti-romanticism in the broader perspective of AF attacks against democratic individualism. Charles Maurras, Pierre Lasserre and many others indeed saw romanticism not as a literary movement but as 'a collective pathology' ('une pathologie collective'), a triumph of instinct which was leading to a degeneration of the social body. It was necessary to fight the feminization of the French culture, to return to the discipline of the mind, to promote strength and physical energy and to regenerate a declining population as advocated by the representatives of social Darwinism. The emphasis is again, and this contributes to the interest of this collective book, on the ability of the AF to renew itself, even after World War II. Besides the contributions already mentioned on Massis and Maulnier, one can cite from this perspective a study on the musical aesthetic of the movement in which Jane Fulcher identifies different types of classicism whose combination would allow the Resistance to reinvent a modern classicism on the eve of Liberation. In another register, William Gros sketches a story of the history written, after Vichy, by supporters of the Action Française such as Daniel Halévy and Philippe Ariès, and a typology of its production sites in which he rightly sees a way to follow the ramifications of a still present heritage.

The analyses collected in this volume are full of information and its new hypotheses are too numerous to be all cited. It is regrettable that the visual arts and their history occupy little space in this panorama of the AF endeavors to establish its cultural hegemony. The strategies for controlling communication channels (journals, publishing houses) described above are thus identifiable in the French art magazines of the 1920s, where a number of the *Revue critique* collaborators swarmed, especially after the journal's disappearance in 1924. The politics of the de-politicization of art that characterized the AF could have also been studied in more detail. But one of the strengths of this book is precisely its capacity to raise questions. It will attract the attention of all those interested in the political uses of culture. Thanks to a remarkable pooling of resources specific to different areas of study, it allows opening of many avenues of research on a still understudied topic.

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