

National history as an element supporting French republicanism in the 19th century (J. Michelet, E. Quinet, E. Lavissee)

Summary

Contemporary political discourse overlooks the role of historians in the development of political thought. The world of ideas is shaped rather by sociologists, political scientists, philosophers and lawyers, while historians are merely left with the task of analysing the past. This book's main hypothesis is that national history was an element supporting the republican order in 19th-century France, and that historians themselves contributed to the consolidation of the most significant republican slogans in the national consciousness, such as: national sovereignty, the ideal of civic virtues, education reform and secularization of the state.

It is not without good reason that the 19th century is known in France as the age of history. This was directly related to the French Revolution in 1789, and all historians were its heirs. The Revolution brought significant political and social change, and with its slogans liberty, equality and fraternity, transformed subjects into citizens. The doctrine of national sovereignty became the guiding principle of French political thought right up until the present day. The 1789 Revolution put an end to the *ancien régime* and absolute monarchy, and from that moment onwards legitimized power stemming from citizens.

This opened up new perspectives for many historians, and the general perception was that a gap existed that needed to be filled. The events chronicled up to that point were the tales of great kings, their courts, battles and victories. However, there was a need to give the people their history, to evoke a sense of national sovereignty furnished with a past hitherto not ascribed to it. The Revolution entailed the necessity to reinterpret history, to look at bygone times with a critical eye and ultimately to deal a final blow to the *ancien régime*.

The mission of endowing the people with their own story fell to pro-revolution historians, in particular Jules Michelet, Edgar Quinet and Ernest Lavissee. These three eminent professors made a significant contribution to enshrining the aforementioned values in French republican thought, and did so on three different levels:

- 1) Firstly, through their great historico-political books, which contained many republican themes, they created a new national history, thanks to which they consolidated flagship republican ideas in the nation.

- 2) Secondly, as popular and respected professors, they lectured on their vision of national history, thus influencing students and instilling the republican spirit in these young people.
- 3) Thirdly, through their varying degrees of political activity in many fields, they contributed to constructing the republican order in France.

There can be no doubt that Jules Michelet, Edgar Quinet and Ernest Lavissee are among the most valued French historians of the 19th century. Jules Michelet was called the father of French history, Edgar Quinet the chief republican history and Ernest Lavissee *l'instituteur national*, the national teacher. From a detailed analysis of their work one might state that they exerted a great influence on the development of republican thought and the dissemination of republican ideas among society as a whole. Through their great works they strengthened the notion of national sovereignty that lives on today, implanted the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, reinforced the ideas of national unity, a state for all citizens and the common good, which were the guiding principles of the republic. Their history thus performed a supporting role for politics. It helped shape national identity. The popularity of their works and their mission as teachers of the nation allowed republican ideas to be instilled not only among students and readers, but also among the younger generation. With the whole of France talking about their legends about them and the myths they created, they were elevated to the status of national symbols. The republic commemorated their names with streets, boulevards, schools, metro stations and library rooms. Although they are less known in modern-day France, their ideas and works have irrevocably permeated French political and historical thought.

Translated by Rob Rob Pagett