

mardi 6 février 2007

**Manifesto of the Comité de Vigilance face aux usages publics de l'histoire
(Committee of vigilance on the public use of history), June 17th 2005**

As researchers and teachers in history, our main role consists in elaborating and transmitting rigorous knowledges on the past. They result from a critical analysis of the available sources, and respond questions that aim to offer a better understanding of historic phenomena and not to judge them. But historians do not live in an ivory tower. Since the 19th century, the political and social context has played an essential role in the renewal of the objects of study. The fights of workers, the feminist movement, the collective mobilisation against racism, antisemitism and colonization encouraged some of them to take an interest in the "castaways" of the official history, even though France still lags behind in those transformations.

Therefore there is a narrow link between historical research and collective memory, but those two ways of comprehending the past cannot be merged. If it is normal that actors in the public life be inclined to draw arguments from history to justify their causes or interests, as academic lecturers and professors we cannot accept to make a tool of the past. We have to strive for letting at the disposal of everybody the knowledge and questionings likely to favour a better understanding of history, so as to feed the critical thinking of citizens, while providing them with the elements that will allow them to enrich their own political judgement, instead of speaking in their place.

Memory issues today

There have been multiple attempts aiming at using history to the profit of politics. Nationalism and Stalinism have shown that when historians and, beyond them, the whole group of intellectuals relinquished to the defense of the autonomy of critical thinking, the consequences could only be disastrous for the democracy. During the recent period, the manipulations of the past increased. The "Holocaust deniers", those "assasins of memory" (Pierre Vidal-Naquet), have sought to distort the history of the Holocaust in order to serve the thesis of the extreme right. Today the main issue concerns the colonial question. In several towns in the South of France, some steles and plates appeared to celebrate the activists of the OAS (Secret Army Organisation) who were yet sentenced by the justice for their anti-republican activities. Very recently, the government did not hesitate to pass a law (February 23rd 2005) demanding from the teachers that they stress the "positive role" of the colonization.

This law is not only worrying because it is underlied by a conservative vision of the colonial past, but also because it conveys the deep contempt of the authorities for the colonised people and for the work of historians. This law reflects a tendency much more general. The increasing intervention of the political power and of the Medias in historical issues tends to impose value judgments to the detriment of the critical analysis of the phenomena.

The polemics on memory grow in number and become more and more unwholesome. Some people do not hesitate to establish macabre records, aiming at organizing into a hierarchy the victims of the atrocities of history, or even to confront the victims to each others. We even see some activists, anxious to fight injustice and inequalities in present days France, to place themselves on the ground of their opponents by mixing up the polemics on the past and the social struggles of today. Presenting the castaways of the present capitalist society like "Indigenous of the Republic", is reasoning on the present with the categories of yesterday, it is like being trapped by the ones who have in their interest to conceal the fundamental problems of the French society, by reducing them to memory issues.

There are many other fields where historians are confronted with these partisan logics. The increasing number of "places of memory" denouncing the "horrors of the war" or celebrating "the enterprise culture" tends to impose a consensual vision of history, that masks conflicts, domination, revolts and resistances. The current debates ignore the acquired knowledge in historical research and generally just set a "past" invested with all the virtues against a worrying and threatening present: "In the old days, immigrants respected "our" traditions because they wanted to "integrate". Nowadays, they threaten us and live in their communities. Before, workers fought for good reasons, nowadays they only think of defending "corporatist" interests, encouraged by "populist" and irresponsible intellectuals."

We have had enough of being constantly asked to detail all the "positive" or "negative" aspects of history. We refuse to be used to arbitrate the polemics on the "true" victims of the atrocities of the past. Those views do not take into account the complexity of historical processes, neither the role the actors really played, or what was at stake for the authorities at that moment. After all is said and done, the citizens who wonder about problems that sometimes affected them (themselves or their family), are deprived from the tools that would allow them to understand.

The necessity of collective action

It is true that several of us rang the alarm bell a long time ago in books or articles in newspapers. But those individual reactions are insufficient now. The news presented as a show and the obsession for the audience rating

constantly push to escalation, they promote agitators and public entertainers to the detriment of historians who researched a topic in-depth, taking into account the complexity of the real. In order to resist efficiently to those enterprises, we need to act collectively. That is why we invite all those who refuse that history be thrown to the memory entrepreneurs to join the Committee of vigilance.

Two fields of reflection and action seem to have priority for us:

1. The teaching of history. The present debate on colonial history illustrates a far more general unrest regarding the teaching of our discipline, and the terrible discrepancy between the advances of the research and the content of the syllabus.

We should begin by drawing up an inventory, in order to reduce the gap between research and teaching, to reflect on a more democratic and transparent development of the syllabus so that one can deal more equitably with the different trends in the historical research.

2. The uses of history in the public space. It goes without saying that our role is not to regiment memory. We do not consider ourselves as experts who would possess the truth on the past. Our aim is simply to ensure that the knowledges and questionings we produce be available for everybody. To do so, we need to open a large reflection on the public uses of history, and to propose solutions that will allow us to resist efficiently to the ones who try to make a tool of the past.