

PREFACE

The study of French regionalism is the study of a struggle between two views of the state. Regionalism attacks the centralized unitary state, for which France, since the Revolution or since Louis XIV (depending on one's political outlook), has become known as the archetype. In this book that state will be described as 'Jacobin'. Neither the regionalist nor the Jacobin model of the state marry with the classic divisions of French politics, however. Jacobinism has perhaps been associated most with the 'Jacobin party' of the French Revolution, and the centralized terror of December 1793 to July 1794; and yet, like regionalism, Jacobinism has found advocates in all parts of the political spectrum. This is a fact that is commonly overlooked. The struggle between regionalism and the unitary state has often been made into a sub-plot within the quintessential battle in French politics between reaction and revolution, right and left. This book seeks to dismantle these associations and show that the regionalism of the early twentieth century was eminently republican. It is obvious from the outset, then, that our examination of regionalism must be situated within an ongoing debate about the nature of the French republic. Regionalism continues today to question older models of the state. Whether one sees it as a movement for devolution to the provinces or regions, a pressure-group for the acceptance of linguistic difference, or an approach to the problems of state reform, it continues to evoke the essential problems of contemporary French politics and society. This study of regionalism in the Third Republic examines the antecedents of the modern regionalist movement, and contends that regionalism has all along been a central part of political debate within republicanism. There would be no incongruity, then, in describing the regionalists of the Belle Époque as republicans against the Jacobin state.

The latest vogue for regionalism in France is now over twenty years old. It is particularly since the early 1980s, when a new socialist government introduced a much-vaunted reform of the centralized state, that regions and regionalism have been to the fore. François Mitterrand took up the idea of the region as it had been laid out in 1964 for economic development.¹ Now the region would be a unit (between the state and the

¹ J. Ardagh, *France in the New Century: Portrait of a Changing Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 282 ff.

department) where decentralization could take place. It was no coincidence, however, that a decentralizing government should conceive of the region as an obvious tool in this process. For over a hundred years regionalists and decentralists had demanded that the state adapt the overly rigid structure of the department, reduce the powers of the prefect, and establish intermediary bodies between the locality and the state, for two ends: they would be better adapted to the exercise of many of the state's powers than a central ministry in Paris; and (it was hoped) they would reinvigorate local life by bringing democracy closer to the people. The 'lois Defferre' (named after Mitterrand's interior minister, the main architect of the reforms) did not go as far as many regionalists would have liked. Nevertheless, the process of decentralization continues twenty years later. State reform was an issue in the presidential elections of 2002, with Lionel Jospin's plan for devolution in Corsica continuing to provoke heated debate. After the cataclysm of the first round of those elections, when the far right pushed Jospin out into the political wilderness, the nature of the Fifth Republic was called into question. A great variety of reform ideas, among which decentralization had a prominent place, were floated in the centre-left press. Chirac's response to the great issues of state reform, as ever, remained cautious. Nevertheless, as the French observe developments in Scotland and Wales, or compare the situation of their own regions with that of German Länder, and as politicians across the spectrum are confronted with the problem of political apathy in the new century, decentralization remains on the agenda.

Beneath the regional level, developments in this ongoing process of decentralization have moved fast. Prior to the elections of 2002, communes were being urged (by an unlikely alliance which included the Jacobin Jean-Pierre Chevènement and the Green Dominique Voynet) to unite in rural areas, forming 'pays'; the concept of 'démocratie de proximité' has led to proposals for democratically elected 'conseils de quartier' in towns where the commune (the original basic unit of administration) is too large. Although the Senate dragged its feet over this last proposal, many cities had by February 2002 already taken the initiative into their own hands.² The new prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, took up the notion of 'proximité' as an essential element of his programme: this concept embraces a variety of decentralizing measures. The abstention rates in both presidential and legislative elections underlined what the political class had known in any case: somehow the state must engage

² Béatrice Jérôme, in *Le Monde*, 13 Feb. 2002.

more with the electorate. Because of this, the regionalist idea retains a central place in political debate.

Meanwhile, regular opinion polls reflect a slow but nevertheless significant shift towards public acceptance of the region as one of the most important units in French society. Those questioned in such polls seem largely positive towards the basic idea of decentralization. The favoured administrative units for pursuing this process are increasingly the region and groups of communes, more so than the department and the commune itself.³ More than regional reform itself, it is the public-opinion shift in favour of such a reform that regionalists have been longing to see. Educating the French out of their attachment to the administrative forms of 1789-90 (department and commune) was the greatest problem facing the regionalists of 1900. A century later, the state, through its tentative moves in this direction, has encouraged the change in opinion needed to inspire further decentralization. This is not to say that the full regionalist agenda is uncontroversial: it insists on cultural difference in a country where the Constitution cleaves to one language, French, as the language of the Republic. Bilingual schools in Brittany have become well established, but ask Parisian teachers what they think of them and one hears only of the problems such developments bring. The very idea of a divisible Republic seems too much of a paradigm shift for many. Those in favour of the old unitary state see regional decentralization as destabilizing. Moreover, some have argued, it plays into the hands of European integrationists. The sight of a Flemish embassy being established in Paris early in 2002 could not but underline this: Belgium, most European of nations, has devolved the large part of the state's role to its two regions, and the Flemish half in particular seems to be spreading its wings as an international force. Nevertheless, local leaders in Grenoble, Marseille, or Rennes, are well aware of the need to build links to the regions closest to them in other countries. Economic development is often most successful when a region places itself within groupings such as the 'Atlantic arc' (from Scotland and Ireland, through Brittany, to Portugal) or the Barcelona-Lyon-Turin arc. Those regions with a strong cultural identity have perhaps been particularly anxious to develop relationships that make economic connections across national boundaries.

Regionalism is thus an essential aspect of debates about internationalism, particularly (though not exclusively) within the European Union. The idea of a 'Europe des régions' has seemed the apogee of modern thinking about the nature of the nation-state. The persistence of an older

³ Report in *Le Monde*, 29 Jan. 2002.

regionalism, reminiscent of the folklore movements of the Third Republic, seems nothing more than a backdrop to a movement associated particularly with the centre-left in France. Thus the centre-left government of Lionel Jospin after 1997 advertised itself (with mixed success, it must be admitted) as the more technically advanced and more socially aware of French political groupings. It brought the Europhile and the Green, the Jospinist and the regionalist, together in the face of attacks from Jacobins such as Chevènement and his allies (they included former Communists as well as right-wing deputies). Political scientists, reflecting on these developments, describe them as an inevitable process in politics, as European leaders, fresh from their Eurozone celebrations, but equally concerned with the apathy of European voters and the attendant threat from the far right, develop new ideas about democracy in the state. What place is there, then, for a history of regionalism from a hundred years ago, when such a glittering array of modern anti-Jacobins could hardly have been envisaged; when regionalism was a sentimental movement, traditionalist in social terms and ultimately condemned by its association with Vichy?⁴

In this book, it will be conclusively demonstrated that the creative thinking of many state reformers in the twenty-first century, far from representing a new departure, in fact builds on a tradition of moderate and modern regionalism that was firmly established in France by the First World War. With the leader of regionalism, Jean Charles-Brun, at the heart of my analysis, I will show how this tradition became a powerful force in the early twentieth century. Charles-Brun saw himself as an inheritor of the Girondins, of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, of the liberals of the 1820s, indeed of all those who called for federal forms of government in the place of the unitary state, and pragmatic ways of reforming rather than the dogmatic prescription typical of Jacobin governments. Having described Charles-Brun's own contribution to ideas of state reform in France, I will be able to show the federalist/Girondin tradition in a new light. The connection between Proudhon and a modern left-wing politician such as Jospin takes in many political thinkers and actors from

⁴ One example—among many—of how the debate is proceeding without reference to the history of regionalism was presented in a recent paper by the eminent student of modern Europe, John Loughlin. For Loughlin, developments in recent decades have not much to do with regionalism in the early twentieth century. Perhaps it is the tone of technocratic modernity which political actors such as Dominique Voynet adopt when describing their plans that has seduced us into seeing these developments as relatively new. This book shows nevertheless that neither the tenor nor the substance of current debates would after all have been alien to the world of Belle Époque political reform movements. (J. Loughlin, unpublished paper given at the Maison Française, Oxford, 25 Feb. 2002).

different points on the political spectrum. It is only in the light of the study of Charles-Brun and Belle Époque regionalism, however, that the most important gaps in that tradition can now be filled in. The centralized state has been questioned consistently throughout the last two centuries. Yet there is still great reluctance among academics to accept that, before the Vichy experience, regionalism could have been of interest to left-leaning and democratically motivated politicians.

The Introduction to this study is divided into two chapters. In the first I will revisit recent debates about Third Republic regionalism, and discuss why it is that the movement which underpinned the culture of the Third Republic has been so ignored in the last fifty years. The scale of the problem facing the student of Belle Époque regionalism will gradually unfold, underlining the need for the sustained and detailed re-examination which this book attempts. Although recent developments in cultural history, discussed in the first section of Chapter 1, have brought new light to bear on Belle Époque regionalism, the difficulties remain. In the second and third sections of the chapter I will discuss those difficulties in some detail. Regionalism has, for a variety of reasons, been made into a right-wing movement. Few historians have pursued the claim of regionalism to be a politically eclectic movement, and examined the political thought that lay behind this claim.

With those reflections in mind, the second chapter lays out the framework for the study of Belle Époque regionalism to be pursued throughout this book. The character and context of Charles-Brun will be laid out briefly. My particular approach to the study of the man, his thought, and his movement needs to be explained at the same time. Regionalism privileged praxis over dogma. This is a central premiss of the study offered here: in fact, the question of the occultation of regionalism can only be effectively answered by grasping the central role of praxis in regionalist thought. But putting praxis into the heart of a political idea is a delicate business. I will thus have to make some brief reflections about the way in which this particular history of an idea is to be written, before, in the main chapters of this book, that idea can be examined in more detail. As the approach to this particular idea is discussed, my approach to French political thought as a whole will be subtly adapted. In fact, the study of Charles-Brun and Belle Époque regionalism has constrained me to revise some of the principal premisses of French political thought.

The present monograph has grown out of my doctoral thesis. Writing both has been a pleasurable task. That this is so is due in large part to the

encouragement and assistance I have received from many quarters, many of them unlooked for. My supervisor, Dr Robert Gildea, has instilled confidence in me and continues to support my work: I owe him a great debt of gratitude. Dr Ruth Harris, Dr Stuart Jones, and Dr Sudhir Hazareesingh have written reports on my behalf and made welcome reflections on my work. I have felt part of a genuinely supportive academic community, and thank them in particular for having made this so.

I benefited as a D.Phil. student from the postgraduate scheme of the British Academy, latterly the Arts and Humanities Research Board; the Faculty of Modern History at Oxford elected me to a scholarship should other sources be unforthcoming. New College housed me for my first year and provided both financial assistance and employment. I thank the authorities at Merton College for allowing me to take their exchange place at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris during 1999–2000. In electing me to a Junior Research Fellowship, the Governing Body of Christ Church has given me the opportunity to rewrite the thesis as a book; thanks to them I have been able to begin a wider project on the thought of moderate politicians in the Third Republic, following up the unanswered questions which abound in this study.

The Musée des Arts et Traditions populaires (MATP) continues to be an important centre for research in many areas of folklore studies and ethnology. The curator of its archives, Mme Jacqueline Christophe, is typical of the new approach to folklorists of the pre-Vichy period. She, and the editors of the journal *Ethnologie française*, have done much to revive interest in Jean Charles-Brun and Georges-Henri de la Rivière, co-founders of the MATP.⁵ The principal unpublished source materials for this study—the private papers of Charles-Brun—were only made available and reorganized within the last ten years. These documents (even now crammed into twenty-five cartons and not fully classified) had been languishing in the cellar of the MATP, itself relegated to the Bois de Boulogne from its original site in the Palais Chaillot, and were in the state of disorder in which they had first arrived at the museum on Charles-Brun's death in October 1946.⁶ Mme Christophe has been in charge of

⁵ *Ethnologie française*, a journal which has many links with the MATP, consecrated one of its 1988 numbers to French regionalism.

⁶ See Appendix I for a detailed inventory of these archives. Classifying the documents has been essential, as the papers are still organized somewhat haphazardly. Moreover, not all of Charles-Brun's papers are in the museum. Some of the most important papers—in particular, letters from major personalities of the Belle Époque—were preserved by the family, and are now in the possession of Mme Simone Burgues.

their reorganization. This thesis, then, represents the first sustained examination of this intriguing journalist, teacher, and leader of regionalism to make use of his private papers. I am grateful to Mme Christophe for her interest in my project, and for permitting me to work out of office hours on the Charles-Brun papers.

Writing about regionalism with the support of contemporary regionalists has been a privilege. The *Félibrige de Paris* welcomed me graciously, and M Jean Fourié furnished me with useful contacts and material. I am honoured by the continuing support shown by the historians M Stéphane Giocanti and Mme Anne-Marie Thiesse. Above all, Mme Simone Burgues, the great-niece of Charles-Brun, welcomed me warmly, furnishing me with some of the most essential materials for this thesis, together with the benefit of her own memories and insights. My friends Mario Longtin, Nicolas Barreyre, and Kim-Loan Tran Van Chau helped me when I was in Paris. Dr Roger Allen gave up holiday time to proof-read a draft of the thesis. He must stand for the large number of friends and colleagues who have expressed support for my work.

My parents have constantly encouraged my research. In the midst of his other duties, my father (not for the first time) gave me the benefit of his own rigorous editing skills. The best passages in this book are those where his principles for good writing have been followed most closely. Above all I thank Miranda, to whom this book is dedicated, for her love and devotion, which has given me confidence in my project and new energy for my work.

N.J.G.W.

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