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French History Textbooks as a Tool for Teaching Civilization

by Tom Carr

THE RECENT CONTROVERSY IN FRANCE over the new history textbooks based on the reforms promulgated under René Haby in the middle 1970s can serve as a reminder of the many uses such textbooks can have in our civilization classes. In the past ten years the Haby programs have become the symbol for what many observers in France take to be a serious weakening of the teaching of history since the late 1960s. At the primary level, history was joined to geography and the sciences as an *activité d'éveil*; no longer was it the privileged instrument for fostering national identity as it had been in the schools of the Third Republic where the manuals of Ernest Lavissee ran through edition after edition. Critics charge that the changes at the secondary level have been equally damaging. The number of hours devoted to history has been reduced. Thematic study has weakened the traditional chronological framework punctuated by the dates of battles and political regimes. Finally, French national history has been diluted by situating it in a wider current of international affairs.

The debate over these changes has not been confined to educational circles: it is widely reported in the popular press and has been raised at the highest levels of state. In August 1983, President Mitterrand addressed the issue at a cabinet meeting where he professed to be "scandalisé et angoissé devant les carences de l'histoire" that threatened to lead to "la perte de la mémoire collective des nouvelles générations."¹

However, the quarrel over the Haby syllabi is not my subject, even though it is symptomatic of the changing role of tradition in the French value system. My concern is not so much the modalities of initiating French youth to their past as the role this heritage should play in our own civilization classes. Teaching contemporary civilization has made such tremendous progress in the last thirty years that French history has often been taken for granted and left to fend for itself, if not overlooked. To be sure, a consensus exists among instructors that the antecedents of current culture must be invoked, and there is good evidence that students in our civilization courses have a strong interest in history which

¹ *Le Monde*, 2 September 1983, p. 1.

² In a survey of students in contemporary civilization classes, Marie-Christine Koop found that history was listed by students as both the favorite topic of students and the one they considered most important for the understanding of modern France. "Contemporary French Culture: Survey conducted from 1 January 1983 to June 1984," AAFT Convention (Chicago, November 1984).

can serve as a powerful motivating force.² Just the same, there is a certain complacency about teaching the past, as if history were an *acquis* whose main lines are frozen in time and whose pedagogy has been successfully elaborated. Thus most of the attention in our professional literature has been given to courses dealing with present-day France.³ Nonetheless, the increased emphasis on contemporary civilization has called into question the rationale of history in our classes. The traditional panoramic course composed of a succession of *grandes étapes* seems less and less appropriate. The alternative of referring to history chiefly as antecedent for some current phenomenon has the disadvantage of ignoring the specificity of the past era.

We need a pedagogy that recognizes the unique achievements of every era of French civilization both past and present and that takes into account the subtle interplay between French culture today and its previous manifestations. Ideally this approach for dealing with history will involve the same combination of sociology, anthropology, and semiotics which Francis Debyser has argued constitutes the most suitable method for dealing with contemporary civilization.⁴

We can gain insight into one form such approaches might take if we re-examine some of the ways French history textbooks can be used in our classes. Better than almost any other artifact these "lieux de mémoire"⁵ embody the mingling of past and present. Since they are conceived to indoctrinate French youth into what society judges the essential elements of its heritage, they reflect an official image adults wish to project of their history. Not that these views are necessarily synonymous with those of the government in every detail. The official syllabi set by *Education nationale* only outline the general topics to be covered. The textbook authors deal with these prescribed topics according to their own ideological bent and in light of the preferences of interest groups like teachers, school administrators, and parents. For example, critics have attributed the relatively indulgent view of Stalin in the manuals preceding the Haby ones to the generally leftist tendencies of large numbers of the teaching corps in the public schools.⁶ Nevertheless, the strongest impetus is toward a certain homogenized view of the past motivated in part by the quest for profit and in part by the desire to promote a national consensus. To be sure, France is multiple, an aggregate of subcultures; each of these spiritual or social *familles* based on religion, politics, region, etc., has its own version of the past. However, the goal of selling the textbooks as widely as possible fosters a historical vision which

³ An interesting exception is the report of Frank Paul Bowman on his course on France between 1789 and 1944 at the University of Pennsylvania, "Teaching French History in French," *French Review*, 56 (1983), 379-84.

⁴ Francis Debyser, "Lecture des civilisations," in *Mœurs et mythes*, ed. Jean-Claude Beacco and Simonne Lieutaud (Paris: Hachette/Larousse, 1981), pp. 10-12.

⁵ Pierre Nora, "Le Présent et la mémoire," *Le Français dans le Monde*, 181 (1983), 16.

⁶ Cf. Christian Jelen and Branko Lazitch, "L'Histoire à l'endroit," *L'Express* (2 July 1982), pp. 72-77.

will offend as few as possible and in which all groups can find at least some of their roots mentioned.⁷

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the views promoted in French textbooks. American teachers may be most familiar with Laurence Wylie's discussion of the themes in the Lavissee manuals. Wylie points out that the textbooks furnish a chronological frame in which are embedded various events and personages described with sufficient detail to become fixed in the collective imagination. Within the flow of history he indicates a number of central themes that give it its meaning: history as the advance of civilization, the unification of France, the growth of France as a person and a family.⁸ Researchers have analyzed other topics such as the image of the Revolution, of colonialization, or of European integration. Differences between manuals used in Catholic and public primary schools have been probed.⁹ As pertinent as the results of such studies are, such research is difficult in the classroom given the number of textbooks it requires. The suggestions discussed here, on the other hand, do not necessarily require access to numerous manuals and range from their use as a primary textbook to proposals for supplementary readings and outside projects. In most cases, students can work from photocopies.

These activities center around three poles: 1) the facts of history—the events, characters, and documents that furnish the raw material of historians; 2) the interpretation of these facts—how they are selected and valued in light of current preoccupations and thus live on today in the collective consciousness; and 3) the pedagogical approach implicit in the format of the textbooks. It is possible to study a single text from all three angles, but in any case, combining the first pole with either the second or the third allows us to consider both the past as past along with the past in conjunction with contemporary culture.

Choosing among the French textbooks

French manuals are generally attractively produced and profusely illustrated with art works, photographs, and maps; they also include a multitude of fairly short extracts from documents either written during the period under study or by modern historians. Teachers' manuals are usually available which provide additional information and pedagogical hints. These features make them, if nothing else, a convenient resource for American instructors. Notwithstanding these assets, it will probably be only in exceptional cases that a French text corresponds to the design of an American civilization class. In the new programs

⁷ Victor Prévot discusses the commercial pressures in "Heurs et malheurs des auteurs de manuels scolaires," *Historiens et géographes*, 279 (1980), 797.

⁸ Laurence Wylie and Armand Bégué, *Les Français* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 37–49. See also Christian Amalvi, *Les Héros de l'histoire de France* (Paris: Editions Phot'Œil, 1980), and Dominique Maingueneau, *Les Livres d'école de la République* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1979).

⁹ Jacqueline Freyssinet-Dominjon, *Les Manuels d'histoire de l'école libre, 1882–1959* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1969). Amalvi is even more useful on this point, pp. 57–198.

of the *collèges*, there is not even a separate history manual since history is grouped with geography, economics and *éducation civique*. However, this attempt to integrate the various *sciences humaines* has not been overwhelmingly successful, and the history chapters are usually fairly autonomous. Another factor that somewhat limits their usefulness is the fact that the new secondary manuals present not just French history, but European or even world history, although the emphasis is always strongly on France to be sure. Finally, there is no single secondary textbook covering French history from Lascaux to the present. Since history is studied every year in most tracks from *sixième* to *terminale*, rather than concentrated in one or two years, as is common practice in the U.S., the panorama of French history is divided over the seven years of secondary schooling.

For a comprehensive survey within the covers of a single book one must turn to the *cours moyen* manuals used in the last years of primary school. Their intellectual content may seem beneath the level we expect of high school or university students, but they offer a number of advantages. Their relatively simple language makes them accessible to students at or just above the intermediate level. I have used photocopies of extracts from a *cours moyen* text dealing with the Gauls in the first weeks of a sixth semester class to replace similar chapters in a more linguistically difficult text written for the American market. Another approach is to use a *cours moyen* manual throughout the course to provide a succinct narrative that exposes the American students to the same historical mythology their French counterparts have learned, but to require more substantive supplementary readings as well.¹⁰

Instructors interested in experimenting with the *collège* and *lycée* textbooks can identify the class in which particular periods are studied by using the accompanying chart. They can also compare the distribution in the Haby programs to the ones previously in use. Often these older manuals offer a more detailed treatment of periods up to World War I than the manuals based on the new programs. Some of the former textbooks are listed in *French Books in Print* as still available, or they might be located in used book stores.¹¹ Among the new manuals, the ones for *seconde* offer the most comprehensive account since they summarize the preceding four years of study which cover French history up to 1914 in preparation for a detailed study of the twentieth century in *première* and *terminale*; nevertheless, the coverage up to 1914 in the *seconde* manuals is highly selective, and they do not purport to provide a complete history of France. Another possibility is to assemble a more panoramic history

¹⁰ This approach was described by Jean-Pierre Ponchie of West Virginia University at the AAFT Convention (Denver, November 1974).

¹¹ For example, manuals in the collection of Jules Isaac and of Serge Bernstein and Pierre Milza are listed as available for almost every grade. The Lavissee manuals do not appear to be still in print, but editions which were published in the U.S. in 1919 and 1923 by Heath are located in many university and public libraries according to *The National Union Catalogue*. In addition, Amalvi reproduces numerous illustrations, and in many cases whole pages, from both lay and Catholic manuals of the Third Republic.

Periods Studied by Class		
Haby Syllabi		Previous Syllabi
Prehistory and the great civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean World	<i>classe de sixième</i>	Antiquity
The ninth through the fifteenth centuries	<i>classe de cinquième</i>	The Middle Ages: the fifth through the fifteenth centuries
The sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries	<i>classe de quatrième</i>	The sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries
1914 to the present	<i>classe de troisième</i>	From the Revolution to the present
Selected themes from Antiquity to 1914	<i>classe de seconde</i>	1789–1848
1914–1939	<i>classe de première</i>	1848–1914
1939 to the present	<i>classe de terminale</i>	1914 to the present

(Publishers of history textbooks include Hatier, Hachette, Larousse, Magnard, Nathan, and Bordas. Those published by Hatier can be ordered from Hatier-Didier USA, 2805 M Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20007, (202) 333-4435.)

by piecing together chapters from various French textbooks—i.e., the Gallo-Roman period from a *sixième* manual, the Middle Ages from a *cinquième*, etc. These chapters can be reproduced and assembled by one of the “professor publishing” photocopying services, although instructors interested in this approach should be sure that appropriate copyright regulations are respected.

Interpreting the past

The past lives on in the work of historians not as neutral facts, but as interpretation. Students with little previous exposure to French history can most easily see that the French manuals present merely a version of the past, an interpretation, if their study is comparative. This might involve comparing the textbook’s presentation to more complete sources of information, perhaps one that provides a more comprehensive account or one that offers a greater range of interpretation—encyclopedias, scholarly historical studies, or their own textbooks. If a range of French history manuals is available, they can be compared, and if older ones such as those by Lavissee or Jules Isaac can be located, the changes in emphasis over the years make fascinating study.

Such comparisons are especially useful because our lack of perspective on our own era makes it difficult for us to identify the links between current preoccupations and the interpretation found in contemporary textbooks as clearly as the same correlation when examining older manuals. However, even the simplest of questions (for example, the choice of antecedents selected for inclusion in the textbooks) is both a significant component of the interpretation put forward by the manual and a function of the concerns of the period when the manual was written. Take, for example, the issue of when French history

begins. Eighteenth-century textbooks composed for aristocratic youth began with the arrival in the fifth century of the Frankish tribes from whom the nobility claimed to be descended. "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois" is a nineteenth-century innovation, part of an effort to extend the point of view from which history was written from that of a single class to that of the whole French people.¹² Contemporary primary school manuals push back the beginnings to the first stone tools. At the turn of the century Lavissee presented the Gauls as rather primitive tribes of courageous warriors, noble even in defeat. With the memory of the Franco-Prussian War in mind, he draws this lesson from Vercingétorix's surrender to Caesar: "Dans les guerres, on n'est jamais sûr d'être vainqueur; mais on peut sauver l'honneur en faisant son devoir de bon soldat."¹³ The manuals of today's industrial France retain the portrait of a valorous Vercingétorix, but rather than depict the Gauls as primitive, modern textbooks compare their achievements as farmers and craftsmen favorably to those of the Romans.

While it is often difficult to pinpoint the current concerns that underlie today's manuals, questions from the following categories can be useful in uncovering the viewpoint of their authors:

Perspective. American textbook authors have met the accusation that in the past they wrote exclusively the history of white males by adding sections on the role of women and minorities when revising earlier editions. Is the French manual written from an inclusive point of view? Social class, sex, political or religious ideology, and region might be considered. Is there a tendency to cast one group as villain (the nobility? the bourgeoisie)? While students will generally note an effort to take into account the effects of events on all social classes, especially peasants and workers, they might examine the attention given to women's issues. To what extent is the history of France identified with the history of Paris?

Causality. What causes and motives are invoked for events? The personality of great individuals? The influence of ideas? Environmental factors? Economic conditions? Class struggle? Foreign intervention? The values and ideology of historians are often revealed by the causes they ascribe to events, although generalizations in this area are likely to be tentative. Here, in fact, it might be useful to compare how American textbooks treat similar topics. For example, one would not be surprised to find less attention given to the role of ideas and class conflict in the U.S. where anti-intellectualism and distrust of leftist ideologies is prevalent.

Judgments. To what extent does the author draw judgments, whether overt or hidden? It is rare today to find the open moralizing of Lavissee's comments on Vercingétorix. Authors today often prefer the opposite tack of hiding behind

¹² Henri Duranton, "Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois: genèse et avatars d'un cliché historique," *Cahiers d'Histoire*, 14 (1969), 339-370.

¹³ Ernest Lavissee, *Histoire de France* (New York: D.C. Heath, 1923), p. 9. Maingueneau notes that in many manuals of this era the Roman colonization of Gaul is presented as a model, and thus a justification, for France's "civilizing" influence in Algeria (*Les Livres d'école de la république*, p. 175).

a careful selection of facts and documents chosen to speak for themselves or behind emotionally charged language. However they express their verdict, historians can seldom resist the temptation to set themselves up as judges, and the standards that underlie their judgments should be examined for their notion of what is good and proper.

Interpretation. As we have seen, the mere selection of events to be recalled by history is in itself an interpretation, but it is useful to study the extent to which the manual draws attention to the fact that to write history, or to study it, is invariably to interpret it. Does the textbook allude to interpretations by a variety of modern historians? Are interpretations by contemporaries of the events discussed offered? Is attention given to the image historical figures tried to project of themselves during their lifetimes?

Questions dealing with these issues might be used when focusing on some event, theme, or historical figure. It is often particularly revealing to examine unpleasant moments in history—events that have set the French against each other like the Terror or the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, or events like May-June 1940 which represent collective disasters.

The past as "signe culturel" and myth

If the past as it is recorded by historians is inevitably an interpretation, history as it lives on in the popular consciousness takes the form of a store of commonplaces about the past. The data in this reservoir may be simplified to an extreme, but all members of a culture are expected to recognize its content. Francis Debyser calls such clichés "signes culturels" which are "compris" and "acceptés par tous."¹⁴ History textbooks, particularly the ones written for primary schools, play a crucial role in maintaining this shared awareness of the past. American examples might be the first Thanksgiving or Washington crossing the Delaware. French clichés include Saint Louis rendering justice under the oak of Vincennes, the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, or Henri IV's "poule au pot."

The meaning attached to these signs tends to be of a rather generalized moral nature to the extent that the commonplace is widely accepted throughout all French subcultures. The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre represents the horror of fratricidal intolerance; Saint Louis's oak is a reminder that even the humble should have access to justice. Of course, it is also possible to give this web of moral and emotional connotations a more specific partisan orientation. One could emphasize that Louis IX is *Saint Louis*, or conversely that Catholics were responsible for the slaughter of 24 August 1572. Most textbooks, in fact, take advantage of this potential and bind such historical commonplaces into a network of myth using some central theme as a unifying device. Perhaps the best analyzed example of this mythologizing tendency is the republican ideology of Lavisser in whose manuals the revolution of 1789 is the watershed event. In

¹⁴ Debyser, p. 13.

this optic even monarchs like Saint Louis can be commended to the extent that they contribute to what Lavissee saw as the broad spirit of the revolution: France's territorial integrity, the centralization of the administration, or the expectation of high moral standards for its leaders.¹⁵

1. Students might first be directed to the picturesque details that give these commonplaces the vividness of an *image d'Epinal*: some visual element, an anecdote, a famous quotation or *bon mot*. Does a document or illustration reinforce this appeal to the imagination?

2. Next they might show that these colorful touches are overlaid with meaning; it is this meaning, even if it seems at times rather bland, as much as the vivid details of the sign itself that keeps the historical commonplace embedded in the collective memory.

3. Is the commonplace integrated into an ideological network within the textbook that gives it a particular slant? The republican mythology of Lavissee has been superseded in later manuals by points of view that have not been analyzed as systematically, although one often finds an emphasis on class struggle, and on social and economic equality.

4. Even though such commonplaces have their roots in the past, by becoming myths they have been detached in some sense from history. As Roland Barthes put it, "Le mythe prive l'objet dont il parle de toute histoire. En lui l'histoire s'évapore."¹⁶ It is fitting then, once the components of the myth have been analyzed, to restore it to history by plunging the myth back into the context from which it was extracted. Students might inquire how accurate the popular myth is when examined in light of the more complete historical record. Does the textbook itself go beyond the simplification typical of the commonplace?

5. It is also interesting to see how some of the traditional myths have fared in the new manuals. The emphasis on life styles and thematic topics in the Haby programs has left such figures as Charlemagne and Jeanne d'Arc all but forgotten in the new secondary manuals.

6. The true test of a commonplace's vitality is not its appearance in history manuals but in popular culture. Is the cliché quoted in sources like comic strips, political speeches, advertisements, literary works, films, etc.? It is often easier to show students how commonplaces can be given a slant to serve the purposes of the person using them with examples taken from popular culture than from textbooks. For example, a recent advertisement for Courvoisier has simplified the reference to Napoléon to an enormous shadow of the emperor projected onto a wall behind an elegant couple sipping cognac, but Napoléon's silhouette alone is enough to conjure up an image of power and authority for the product.

The preceding suggestions for dealing with historical commonplaces and myths are based on the notion that the ability to recognize allusions to them is

¹⁵ On this theme see the books cited in note 8 as well as Pierre Nora, "Ernest Lavissee, son rôle dans la formation du sentiment national," *Revue Historique*, 228 (1962), 88–106, and Claude Billard and Pierre Guibert, *Histoire mythologique des Français* (Paris: Galilée, 1976).

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 260.

only the threshold level of students' proficiency in the area of history. We should aim for higher levels of understanding by showing how the commonplace or myth functions and why it continues to appeal to members of today's society.

How the French manuals present the U.S.

Even in classes where French history is not the primary topic, selections from manuals dealing with America can be introduced. Students are normally curious about how their own culture is presented to others, and in addition, since students are often dealing with American history in their other courses, the view of the U.S. that appears in French textbooks can become the basis for interdisciplinary work involving other departments. The *quatrième* and *seconde* manuals contain sections on the American Revolution; in *troisième*, parallel chapters deal with contemporary society in the Soviet Union and the United States; and the role of the U.S. in twentieth-century international affairs is given attention in *première* and *terminale*.

When examining some of these sections students might be asked if they agree with the choice of information given. Do they detect any bias either for or against the U.S.? How are unpleasant aspects of our history treated? On the whole are they satisfied with the image of their country as it is presented? If not, they might be asked to prepare a supplement to the manual to be given to French students.

Another interesting topic is the extent to which American history is seen in terms of its relation to France. Are contacts between France and the U.S. exaggerated? The American Revolution is a good test case since without French aid there would have been no victory at Yorktown. In the Berstein, Milza *seconde* manual two of the four documents that accompany the narrative text illustrate the French role in the Revolution. Of the four participants in the American Revolution mentioned in the narrative, all but Washington have their names printed in bold type; might this be because the other three (Jefferson, Paine, Franklin) all spent time in Paris? Does the perspective of the manual reflect concerns that are prevalent in France? For example, the same Berstein, Milza text, under the heading "Une Lutte anti-coloniale?" is sceptical about whether the American Revolution can be considered a model for twentieth-century third world anti-colonialist struggles. Likewise, its answer to the question "La Première Révolution occidentale?" implies that this honor belongs to the Revolution of 1789.¹⁷

Finally, after studying how such topics are treated in French manuals, students might examine the textbooks used in American schools. How do American textbooks treat France's support to the thirteen colonies? How is the French Revolution handled in manuals written for American students? Once students have been sensitized to the fact textbooks present only one version of

¹⁷ Serge Berstein and Pierre Milza, *Histoire classe de seconde* (Paris: Hatier, 1981), pp. 98-99.

the past through their study of the French manuals, they will be better equipped to read their own more critically.

Intellectual style and method

Textbook authors may be intent on promoting some ideological agenda such as the republicanism of Lavissee or the class consciousness of some current manuals. Student preoccupations, however, are more practical. Students want textbooks that will prepare them to pass the *bac*. This involves not only mastery of a body of knowledge about the past but the ability to display a certain intellectual style. The *bac*, in fact, is one of the most prominent expressions of French intellectuality. The publicity surrounding the examination and its importance in the lives of students is an indication of the prestige accorded to matters of the intellect. Intellectuality stresses method, giving priority to careful observation and rigorous analysis of data. Rather than the self-expression dear to many Americans, orderly exposition of the results of one's analysis is prized along with admiration for verbal virtuosity, although it is sometimes difficult to strike a balance between these two requirements. One way of introducing this intellectuality to American students who are trained in a looser, less rigorous tradition is to have them compare the French manuals to their own.

Students can become aware of the analytic tendencies of French textbooks even before they read the text itself if their attention is directed to the layout and format. They will note that the typography makes the structure of each chapter readily apparent. The double page format that is very common in France forces authors to divide their broad subjects into topics that can be reduced to two pages. Within each two page spread, further divisions are clearly indicated so that the text takes on the appearance of an outline. When an explicit summary is not provided at the end of a section, topic sentences and key words are highlighted in a way that creates a summary within the text itself. The overall impression is of an intellectual style that favors clearly compartmentalized ideas and an orderly progression of thought.

This format is in many ways merely a reflection of the pattern of the traditional history class composed of *interrogation*, *cours*, and *résumé*. The emphasis on the formal lecture where the professor is a priest of intellectuality who bestows his distilled wisdom on sometimes recalcitrant, but respectful charges is far from dead, especially in the last years of the *lycée* where the pressure to prepare students for the *bac* is especially strong.¹⁸ However, strategies which demand more active participation have been promoted in instructions accompanying the official programs from the Ministry for years, and they are quite visible in the format of the manuals. In fact, one of the most striking changes in the make-up of history texts since World War II has been the extent to which the various historical documents that were formerly grouped at the

¹⁸ See Bernard Phan, "Enquête sur les programmes de seconde," *Historiens et Géographes* (December 1982), p. 289.

end of chapters as a sort of optional appendix have invaded the text proper so that now in most cases only about half the space on a page is devoted to the miniature *cours magistral* of narrative. This written text is surrounded by illustrations, graphs, and extracts of documents that are certainly meant to appeal to the students' imaginations, but even more so are intended as raw material for their analysis. If the narrative text is in many ways a model of proper exposition, the documents serve as an initiation into proper method of inquiry. Of course, there is a more authoritarian side to this pedagogical exercise since the conclusions the students will reach are predetermined in some measure by the choice of documents, and the clearly outlined structure of the narrative allows students to memorize its contents more readily.

Perhaps the fundamental question students should address when they study the pedagogical style implicit in the French manuals is to which mental faculties do the textbooks appeal. To the imagination through the colorful illustrations? To the memory through easily digested exposition and convenient summaries? To analytic skills through the abundant documents? They might particularly question the relation of the various documents to the written text. Does the narrative supply sufficient information to make meaningful interpretation of the documents possible? Does the choice of documents and any accompanying questions seem tendentious? Throughout such an exercise students will be implicitly comparing the French manuals to the textbooks used in their own history courses. Thus it might be useful to compare the format of the American books to the French ones and to discuss how in their own experience the format of a textbook reflects its use in class.

The French educational system

As artifacts of French classroom life, the history manuals make excellent points of departure for a comparison of the American and French educational systems. The centralized character of *Education nationale* can be seen in the official programs to which all textbooks throughout the country conform. The role of history in the weekly schedule of French students can be used as a springboard for discussing how students spend their week at school. According to the official instructions, history is to be studied every year in the *collèges* and *lycées*, with classes meeting three hours a week in *sixième* through *troisième*, and four hours a week in most tracks of *seconde* through *terminale*. This schedule includes geography, economics, and *éducation civique* as we have already seen. Finally, when studying the *bac*, it might be noted that in 1978 a written examination in history was reintroduced with a coefficient of 2 or 3. American students for whom multiple choice or short answer exams are the norm will have a better appreciation of both French textbooks and the whole educational system of which they are a part if they realize that the ultimate goal of history classes in France is to produce students who are able to write lengthy essays on

topics like “The French Left from 1919 to 1939” or extensive commentary on documents such as an extract of a speech by Pétain.¹⁹

In conclusion, my immediate aim has been to point to the rich potential in our classes of history manuals. They are attractive because even a brief sample of a few pages can be analyzed at multiple levels. Students can use the primary historical documents that are so abundant in the French textbooks to analyze the past in terms of its discourse about itself. As the official (or semi-official) discourse of the education establishment, the manuals are examples of how contemporary society interprets its heritage as it attempts to harness the past for its current purposes. As pedagogical discourse, the manuals offer insight into the methods and forms of expression that characterize French intellectual and teaching styles. My suggestions for analyzing these three forms of discourse have necessarily been somewhat general, but I hope that other instructors will have the same success I have had in adapting them to the needs of particular classes.

Finally, as part of a broader goal, I hope this discussion of history books as cultural artifacts will contribute to a re-evaluation, if not a revalorization, of the status of history in our civilization courses.²⁰

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¹⁹ For a chronology of various reforms concerning history see Jean Peyrot, “Les Calamités de l’enseignement de l’histoire,” *Historiens et Géographes*, 279 (1980), 719–23. The history sections of the *bac* are discussed in *Le Monde de l’éducation*, 62 (1980), 12, 17–18.

²⁰ See my article “Contemporary Culture: A Model for Teaching a Culture’s Heritage,” in *Meeting the Call for Excellence in the Foreign Language Classroom*, ed. Patricia B. Westphal, Report of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Lincolnwood, Illinois: National Textbook Co., 1985), pp. 71–83.