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FRANÇOIS HARTOG. *LA NATION, LA RELIGION, L'AVENIR. SUR LES TRACES D'ERNEST RENAN.* PARIS GALLIMARD, 2017, 156 PP. ISBN 9782072699573.

Pedro Paulo A. Funari

University of Campinas, Brazil

François Hartog is a leading thinker on historicity, memory, heritage and all matters related to the representation of the past, its relevance to the presence and perspective for the futures. Born just after the war (1946), Hartog studied with Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914-2007), early on specialized on ancient Greek historiography and published a landmark book on Herodotus (*Le Miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur la représentation de l'autre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1980). Hartog turned then to modern historiography (*Le XIXe siècle et l'histoire. Le cas Fustel de Coulanges*, Paris, PUF, 1988) and then produced a masterpiece on all things relating to the past (*Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003). His epistemological stand is akin to Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) and the conceptual and philological approach to the relationship in different societies and epochs to the past. His concept of *régimes d'historicité* (*Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, NYC, Columbia University Press, 2015, translated by Saskia Brown) has been widely discussed as an important contribution to understanding the subject. Traditional societies tend to use the past as a model, the Enlightenment brought the future to the fore (1789-1989) and the

post-Cold War world established what he defines as presentism. Historical understanding has focused on the past, prior to the 18th C, the future during the modern period, followed by the overwhelming dominance of the ephemeral from then on.

Hartog follows the steps of Pierre Vidal-Naquet, but also others, such as Paul Veyne, in studying ancient and modern times and in theorizing about the epistemology of historical knowledge. Hartog is a classicist, a classical Greek ancient history specialist, who then turned also to modern historiography, as did Arnaldo Momigliano or Moses Finley, and finally turned to think how we relate to the past, it's meaning for the present and for the outlook. It is probably not casual that Hartog started his study by the father of history, Herodotus, and the pioneer of anthropology, geography and much more. Early on he has been relating past, present and future, as did Herodotus himself, praising diversity, contradiction, and complexity over straightforwardness. Again, he followed the steps of Herodotus, like Paul Cartledge or Momigliano, rather than Thucydides, pretending not to be right and eternal (*ktema eis aei*), but rather human, ephemeral and opinionated.

Hartog has been publishing on all those subjects: ancient historiography, epistemology of knowledge, modern historiography. He considers that there is no way to disentangle this triplet. He championed this approach as early as 1988 with his masterpiece on Fustel de Coulanges, step by step preparing his opus magnum on the way we understand the past (*Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003). This essay on Ernest Renan (1823-1892) in a way is a tribute to scholarship and to the endeavor itself of searching for meaning. It may be interpreted as a eulogy of quest for human knowledge, a goal deemed worthwhile in itself.

Ernest Renan may be considered one of the most prolific French authors, ranked among the highest in style. This is no mean feat in itself, and more so considering his span of interests, some of them most difficult, such as Semitic languages and cultures, Judaism and Christianity, but nowadays Renan is most often quoted for his piece on the nation state (*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* 1882). Hartog wrote an essay on Renan, stressing an overall interpretation, rather than a detailed discussion of Renan's life and work, and this is the main lure of the book, starting with the epigraph: *mens agitat molem* (Virgil, En. 6, 727), the mind moves the matter, the idealist motto of Renan himself, translated in a much developed French ("c'est l'esprit qui met en branle la masse du monde").

In his lifetime and for several decades after his passing, Renan has been known for his *Life of Jesus* (1863), a best seller in French and in dozens more languages, still a must read book, and indeed most read. Educated to be a priest, he was first and foremost a philologist, and from that a Semitist, a historian of religion, and a political scientist *avant la lettre*, theorizing about society at his own age. Hartog follows this track, from philology to politics, from young to old age. Renan was schooled to become a most erudite scholar, being as fluent in Latin, as in his native French, as well mastering several other languages, from German to Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, several disciplines, such as epigraphy and archaeology, not to mention Biblical subjects, from theology to exegesis. He was soon excommunicated and spear headed a defense of secularism (*laïcité*) and in a way followed the enlightened steps of Voltaire's in reason, truth and idealism: *dilexi ueritatem*, his epitaph ("I have chosen the truth").

Renan understood the world through the lenses of language, anticipating somewhat the philological hermeneutics of Heidegger and others. Renan

opposed Indo-European and Semitic outlooks first, then French and German perspectives. He considered that Indo-European languages were analytic, complex and prone to producing abstract thinking, whilst the Semitic languages were synthetic and leading to simpler and direct reasoning. Indo-Europeans as a consequence were polytheistic, the Semites invented a single God and that led to a supreme tautology in Muslim: *allahu la ilaha illa hu* (God, there is no god but He). This early understanding in Renan led to a philological, so-called scientific interpretation of language, religion and civilization, deemed as racist by Edward Said and Aimé Césaire. Hartog argues that Renan was explicitly anti-racist and that the way he opposed French and German proves that. In fact, his stand on the nation, nowadays widely referenced to, opposes the German *ius sanguinis* to the French humanist understanding that the nation is a continued act of faith: “The existence of a nation (you will pardon me this metaphor) is a daily referendum, just as the continuing existence of an individual is a perpetual affirmation of life”. The German perception is understood as an arbitrary conflation of language, race and identity. His piece on the nation (1882) is a response to the German annexation in 1870 of Alsace, on the grounds that German speakers were German, whilst Renan argued that belonging is a subjective choice, surpassing language affiliation. Did Renan change his early perception of language as defining a fixed worldview to the late change due to the German conquest of 1870?

Hartog prefers not to venture on this, but he pays due attention to circumstances, contradictions, oxymora, aporias, and niceties. Renan was always under the influence of women, most of all, his sister and his wife: *dans ma manière de sentir, je suis femme aux trois quarts* (“I feel like a woman”). In the 19th c, the woman was deemed as fickle (“*la donna è mobile*”), so that Renan did not bother too much about changing. The main point Hartog

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stresses is that Renan is relevant for the present. His description of Islam as single-minded tautology (*Dieu est Dieu*, God is God) is immediately related to Daesh and the Islamic State. It is also relevant to the European Union and a possible post-national future. Is it still possible to figure out a future beyond narrow concerns? Ernest Renan is still most relevant and François Hartog proves that there is no modernity without antiquity, there is any future, without the past, in the present. Thinking about story telling is not only blissful; it is the only way of fostering an examined life and better future.

