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London Review of Books

Diary

Perry Anderson

France is fabled as the land of bureaucratic centralisation, the epitome of administrative reason, where once a year every adolescent takes the same exam on the same day across the country. The image is not just a foreign legend. It was Tocqueville who first supplied it, as the brand-mark of French Absolutism and the Revolution that followed it. In modern times, its element of truth lies in the exceptional position of Paris as political and intellectual centre of the nation, a position occupied by no other city in a European society of comparable size. Madrid, Rome, Berlin may be capitals, but to their rank as seats of government corresponds no such predominance in culture, where Barcelona, Milan, Frankfurt can in different ways rival or outdo them. London is flanked by seats of learning whose prestige has long surpassed its own. Paris is set apart by the aura of its double pre-eminence. The halo of an unmatched concentration of national life and power radiates around it.

The reality of the country, however, exceeds its capital more deeply and vividly than the reality of England exceeds London. Not France, but the regnant bulk of the United Kingdom, embracing 84 per cent of its population, is by far the most centralised major society in Europe. (Britain, inseparable from the imperial pretensions of its adjective, remains a state, not a country, as the contemptuous abbreviation for its subjects implies: its inhabitants have no common name.) The historical reasons for that go back a long way. Full-blown feudalism was imposed in one fell swoop from above, by a Norman conquest that left a medieval monarchy structurally always more powerful than its Capetian rival, which slowly and painfully extended its reach, by piecemeal assemblage, beyond the Isle-de-France. Capitalism, in turn, arrived much earlier, in good measure because of the unique commercial and demographic predominance of London, a port which by the mid-17th century had more than three times the relative weight of Paris in France – a superior concentration of wealth and population whose effects remain still more pronounced today, when Greater London is now in absolute terms nearly four times the size of Paris: 8.2 to 2.2 million. The scale of the difference is, of course, a function of where the administrative boundaries are drawn. But these, in every sense, matter. The width of the moat separating Paris from its various banlieues can be gauged from the ethnic and generational risings around it in 2005 – not overnight riots, but weeks of vehicles in flames – as from the term itself, whose connotation of a violent high-rise slum is the opposite of the cosily respectable ‘suburb’ of the Anglosphere. Paris, as a meaningful city, is of modest proportions beside London.

The other side of the same coin is the far greater prominence in the national landscape of

provincial towns in France. In the 19th century, literature offers a striking index of the difference. Paris is the epicentre of the *Comédie humaine*, but Balzac's world in no way stops there, as that of Dickens does in London. Equally memorable are his depictions of Saumur, Angoulême or Tours. In Stendhal and Flaubert, the narratives of *Le Rouge et le noir* and *Madame Bovary* depend on Besançon and Rouen. In the 20th century, cinema has relayed the tradition. The extreme example is Eric Rohmer, whose *Comédies et proverbes* and *Contes des quatre saisons* include settings in Clermont-Ferrand, Annecy, Le Mans, Biarritz, Cergy-Pontoise, Nevers, St Malo. The list, like that of Impressionist paintings a century earlier, leans towards resorts, without being confined to them. But larger centres have their filmographies too: Marseille in Robert Guédiguian's movies; Bordeaux in *Moderato cantabile*, Nice in *Baie des anges*; Lyon in Melville's *L'Armée des ombres*; Lille in Zonca's *La Vie rêvée des anges*. In such cases, the location of novels and films is precise and explicit, each accorded their distinctive colour and atmosphere.

The contrast with England is marked. Here, 19th-century literature could represent life outside London only with vague gestures of generalisation, as if the naming or describing of actual towns in the provinces fell under a pudeur scarcely less than that obscuring sex. Pallid typifications were the rule. *Middlemarch* is the title of a great novel, but the town itself is an abstraction, whose relation to the Coventry at which scholars try to peer behind it is notional. Was 'Coketown' – one of Dickens's few excursions outside London – based on Preston, as some believe? It hardly matters. *North and South*? Skirts drawn up around Manchester, set in 'Milton'. In Hardy, the faux-archaism of 'Wessex' and its cod-toponyms – Casterbridge, Melchester, Christminster and the rest – belong with the faux-mythology of the fates, though in this predominantly rural world, in which towns are subordinate, the veils, coy rather than classifying, are of less moment. Even in modern times, Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* evaporated Leicester, Amis's *Lucky Jim* tippexed Swansea, and Lodge's 'Rummidge' trilogy could not bring itself to name Birmingham. The persistence of the convention speaks volumes for the low standing of urban life outside the capital, novels risking loss of audience if they speak too openly of a particular city, as unlikely to be of much interest to anyone outside it. With few exceptions, films have followed suit. Liverpool in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* honourably aside, settings have tended to be either in London or a generically blurred North or Midlands.

Underlying this peculiarity of the English scene is the pattern described by Tom Nairn, fresh from Pisa, writing fifty years ago of the assimilation by the local bourgeoisie of the conservatism of the landowning rulers of the country:

The very urban world, the bricks and mortar in which most of the population lives, is the image of this archaic, bastard conservatism – an urban world which has nothing to do with urban civilisation, as this is conceived in other countries with an old and unified bourgeois culture. That most bourgeois of Conservative premiers, Stanley Baldwin, could solemnly and characteristically declare, as late as 1924, that he thought the countryside was 'the essential England', and that

England would always be ‘essentially in the countryside’. Few would have contradicted this sentiment then. In 1964, the aberrant obsession with the countryside is still a powerful feature of our culture – the country house, as the image of true civilisation and social cultivation, has sunk so deeply into the national soul. The modern British town is merely the obverse of this, in its meaninglessness. Culturally, as an artefact of real civilisation, it has never existed, because civilisation went on elsewhere, in the residences of the territorial aristocracy and gentry (or, just possibly, in the West End of the metropolis, where they customarily spent part of the year, and in the institutional embodiments of gentlemanly culture at Oxford and Cambridge). The squalid, crassly utilitarian town with neither shape nor centre; the suburb, which grotesquely mimics the rural ideal; the dignified country home in its landscaped park, an inevitable focus of taste, ideal social relations, and natural authority, all that the merely bourgeois town is not and has renounced: in this contrast of environments ... the heterogeneous, paradoxical character of English society and culture is revealed – the true meaning of the ‘slow evolution’, the conservative empiricism of which (until yesterday) apologists were so proud.

Are such judgments of Ukania overdrawn? The political fate of English cities offers its own kind of confirmation on them. Joseph Chamberlain was the last politician of national consequence whose career was rooted in control of a major provincial city. But the mayor of Birmingham never became prime minister, and since his day municipal power has dwindled into the opaque Brownian motion of anonymous councillors, save in the recent case of the capital, a platform for lightweight acrobats rather than a ladder to Downing Street. Across the rest of the country, mayors are little more than dummies with gold chains around their necks. Whitehall and Westminster level the landscape. In France, on the other hand, not only are there 22 regions, most – though not all – identified with historic provinces of the country, endowed since Mitterrand with considerable autonomy in their jurisdictions, but every city enjoys a directly elected mayor, who by reason of the *cumul des mandats* can play a role on the national stage at the same time. The roll-call of politicians who have occupied or contested the highest positions in the state while holding mayoral office includes virtually every major city. Chirac vaulted to president after becoming mayor of Paris (the city having at last expelled enough of its *menu peuple* to be a reasonable electoral bet for the right). From Marseille, Gaston Defferre ran for president against Pompidou. From Bordeaux, both Jacques Chaban-Delmas and his successor Alain Juppé became prime minister. Likewise, Pierre Mauroy from Lille. Raymond Barre, prime minister under Giscard, subsequently became mayor of Lyon.

So too today, the prime minister under Hollande is Jean-Marc Ayrault, the long-time mayor of Nantes (and head of the Socialist delegation in the National Assembly), who unlike his predecessors gave up his position at the head of the city on entering the Matignon, but remains on its council as the mentor of his successor. Situated in the estuary of the Loire, Nantes was the capital of Brittany under its last ruler, François II, on whose death in 1488 the

duchy was absorbed into France with the marriage of his daughter Anne to two successive Valois kings. It was there, in rather obscure circumstances, that Henri IV issued the famous edict which brought the Wars of Religion to a close. There, too, the young Louis XIV staged the arrest of Fouquet, the overmighty minister he inherited from Mazarin, to dramatise his political coming of age – the climax of Rossellini's famous film for television, *La Prise de pouvoir*. By the 18th century, Nantes was the capital of a slave trade that made its merchants among the richest in France. When the Revolution came, Nantes was the Stalingrad of the Republic, its bastion where religious counter-revolution was beaten back in the west – the popular leader of the Vendée, the former carter Cathelineau, 'Saint of Anjou', fell in the attempt to storm it – and in its wake the Terror was most ferocious: at night, in the *noyades*, thousands were drowned in the river by the Jacobin emissary Carrier. Under the Restoration, the solitary statue of Louis XVI still standing in France was erected, but when Charles X was overthrown, the last Legitimist bid to turn the clock back – the attempt in 1832 by his daughter-in-law the Duchess of Berry to launch a second Vendée – petered out miserably in Nantes, where she was captured in hiding.

Four years earlier, the country's most widely read writer was born in the city. The planetary imaginary of Jules Verne – second only to Agatha Christie in number of works translated worldwide – was nurtured in a port where clippers still docked. But though naturally honoured in Nantes, where his statue presides over its botanical gardens, he retained no affection for it, sentimental setbacks in local society prompting a vitriolic ditty on 'the sixth town of France':

Des sots bâtissant sur le sable
 En affaires peu scrupuleux;
 De science un peuple incapable
 A son endroit toujours crasseux;
 Quelques milliers de cerveaux creux
 D'une bêtise indécrottable. [*]

It was another writer, of a very different kind, who would lend Nantes its literary distinction. In the 1920s, Julien Gracq, pen-name of Louis Poirier, boarded for seven years in the forbidding Lycée Clemenceau that adjoins the botanical gardens, the most gifted pupil in its history. Inspired, but never brigaded, by Surrealism, he came to occupy a position apart in the literary scene after the war, shunning its conventions and connections. A teacher for 35 years in secondary schools, all his work – which crossed many genres – was produced by a small editor, antithesis of the publishing establishment in Paris. In 1951 he refused the Goncourt Prize when his novel *Le Rivage des Syrtes* was awarded it – the only writer ever to do so. Retiring to his native Saint-Florent-le-Vieil, a small town in the Loire, downriver from Angers, in his mid-seventies he wrote a memoir of the Nantes of his schooldays, *La Forme d'une ville*, of a level-headed beauty and sobriety unlike any other description of a city in France.

The title alludes to Baudelaire's line on a Paris that had disappeared in his life-time, 'la forme

d'une ville/Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel,' with which the book opens, but here there is no lament – a town can change a heart as well as itself. Composed without nostalgia or melancholy, free of 'the acrimonious ruminations of ageing', these are memories of streets and squares that, as in Goethe's naturalistic morphology, imprinted the form of the town in the existence of the writer. Confined with little respite to a scholastic barracks – with 'its icy dormitory, parsimonious linen, fish smelling of ammonia', where 'any spontaneous movement risked a bruise' – the young Gracq lived in a city in which he was neither truly an inhabitant nor a visitor, yet perhaps because of that, experienced what he discovered of it all the more intensely. In those days, Nantes was a crossroads of water, divided by six arms of the Loire, intersected by the Erdre, a river of 'Irish calm', a place where horses still ambled past trams and cars and housemaids in Breton caps.

In later years Gracq taught geography, a subject occupying a larger place in French than English culture, which lacks equivalents to Vidal de la Blache or Braudel, and his descriptions of the districts and outskirts of the city in the 1920s – quays, theatres, factories, parks, boulevards – marry the lucid precision of the discipline to a lyrical poetics of image and association filtered from his time with surrealism. Spatially, Nantes benefited from its detachment from any too solid local setting, the agricultural wealth that enveloped Angers or Rennes in rural somnolence. But historically, this was a period in any provincial town of 'refrigerated conformism', an established order still squatting on the laurels of victory in 1918: an order that Gracq says he registered without resistance, while finding it strangely insipid. Of class divisions, in his adolescent blindness, he saw little. Strolling among crowds, he felt himself vaguely at home in a 'vast social *juste milieu*', that left him with the image of a kind of peaceful Eden from which in adulthood a flaming sword of knowledge would ever after expel him. Nantes was, after all, a Manichean city where the internecine conflicts of France had for two centuries found their most extreme expression.

As Gracq's time at Clemenceau came to an end, the town underwent a physical transformation; islands were joined to reduce the arms of the Loire to two and the Erdre was driven into a tunnel underneath a boulevard, making the 'Venice of the West' less malaria-prone, if also less picturesque. Financed in part by German reparations under the Dawes Plan, the works featured a team of German engineers and labourers from Düsseldorf, whose leader would return to Nantes as Feldkommandant under the Occupation, and be assassinated in front of the cathedral by a trio of Communist Resistance fighters, triggering Hitler's order for the first mass execution of hostages in France on 22 October 1941. Indiscriminate American bombing – particularly heavy in 1943, when Nantes suffered the highest civilian casualties in the country – wrought further changes in the urban fabric, requiring considerable restoration of the city's ensemble of fine 18th-century buildings. More lasting damage was inflicted by its most powerful postwar politician, André Morice, Radical senator and minister under the Fourth Republic, mayor of the city under the Fifth: a figure of unrelieved greed and opportunism, whose construction firm helped build the fortifications of the Atlantic Wall for the Nazis during the Second World War, and then during the Algerian War, when he was minister of defence – he was a rabid colonialist – erected the electrified

barrier against the FLN forces in Tunisia known as the *ligne Morice*. To Nantes he bequeathed the solitary, hideous high-rise in the centre of the town – ‘Dracula’s stake’ for Gracq – marring its contemporary skyline.

This eyesore aside, Nantes retains the attractions of its Renaissance and mercantile past – ducal castle, cathedral adorned with one of the most elegant funerary monuments in the country, neoclassical theatre and opera house, *hôtels particuliers* of its patriciate – along the Loire. Spared the curse of tourism that has ruined so much Parisian or Provençal cuisine, local restaurants and manners reflect the advantage. Since 1989, the city has changed colours, becoming under Ayrault one of the safest strongholds of French socialism. This is a political transformation that rests on a social paradox. Traditionally, Nantes was a mainly working-class town – shipping, engineering, canning, biscuitry – but one that was an appanage of the right, ruled by its commercial bourgeoisie. Since the 1970s, deindustrialisation has made it a middle-class city of professional and public services dominated by *cadres moyens*, who by contrast now vote steadily for the left. What explains this inversion? The Church, historically very strong in Brittany, kept its grip on popular life long after the Revolution, sinking Catholic roots deep into the urban workforce created by modern industry, providing enough support for the Party of Order to keep Nantes safe for a conservative elite. Even today, one out of two pupils in the city is educated in private – notionally religious – secondary schools, more than double the national average. But substantively secularisation has trumped de-proletarianisation in the political balance of forces, handing power to what was once the Party of Movement.

Prosperous and well run, Nantes now regularly ranks near or at the top of social and environmental league tables – *Time’s* ‘Most Livable City in Europe’, *L’Express’s* ‘Best City to Work In’. With relatively few immigrants – 6 per cent, about half the national average – yet unemployment close to 9 per cent, the municipal record is not unblemished. Turnout in city elections is well below the French norm, due only in part to the predictability of the outcome. But with unusually good public transport (its excellent modern trams were the first of a new system built in France), substantial public housing, parks making it the Green Capital of Europe last year, well-designed swimming pools and the like, there are good reasons for the stability of the PS administration. Reversal of a long local tradition has been perhaps its most distinctive hallmark. Culturally, under the Ancien Régime the commercial bourgeoisie of Nantes was so little interested in letters that there were repeated attempts to extrude its university to Rennes, and after the Revolution abolished all the universities of the old order, no move was made to create a new one until the 1960s. Half a century later, Verne’s diatribe no longer holds. Municipally, philistinism has given way to the cultural activism of any postmodern European town of moderate ambition, in which concerts, festivals and colloquia are designed to project the image of the city and attract investment. Distinguishing Nantes among the ruck of such programmes is the hospitality it has given to films from Africa, Asia and Latin America in a Festival of Three Continents whose prizes have often made the careers of directors at home. All three of the finest Chinese directors working today, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Jia Zhangke and Wang Bing, owe their breakthrough to success at Nantes, a city that

produced its own talent in Jacques Demy, whose film *Lola* made flamboyant use of it, and whose boyhood is commemorated in Agnès Varda's *Jacquot de Nantes*.

Here by the Loire, too, counterintuitive aspects of the relationship between the capital and the provinces in France find vivid expression in the country's first Institute of Advanced Studies. Asked by the minister of education in the Jospin government to head a commission on the future of French research, Alain Supiot – philosophical jurist at the University of Nantes – included in his report a proposal to create an equivalent in Paris of the celebrated *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin, which brings together as fellows for a year in a host institute some forty scholars, writers and artists from across the world to exchange ideas and work in progress. The reaction was instantly negative. What need did Paris have for any such thing, came the unanimous objection of the *Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales*, *Collège de France*, *Sciences Po*, *CNRS*, the *Ecole normale* and other august bodies, when we are already institutions of such international fame? Five years later, Supiot received a call out of the blue from Ayrault's right-hand man in Nantes: the mayor wanted to put the city on the cultural map – did he have any suggestions? Ayrault's authority in Nantes was such that within three years, an institute housed in a purpose-built edifice, shaped like a narrow, elongated vessel along the banks of the Loire, had been created, as at the command of a latter-day duc de Bretagne.

Smaller than the *Wissenschaftskolleg* – thirty rather than forty fellows a year – the IEA in Nantes was conceived in a spirit closer to the Festival of the Three Continents than to the establishment in Princeton that inspired the German institute, whose contingents typically include many North Americans and East Europeans. Supiot set its compass instead to the global South, with a preponderance of African, Asian, Arab and Latin American recruits among the Europeans and occasional American. To bring such an institution to life requires a diplomatic intelligence and set of skills at which Berlin has traditionally excelled, and Supiot has developed a French version. The result is a unique creation, combining lively intellectual exchange, high-spirited conviviality and an international sensibility for North-South relations without equivalent in Europe, or indeed anywhere else. Here, for a year, you are at the same table with Mauritanian, Brazilian, Chinese, Indian, Russian, Lebanese, Senegalese or Ivorian or Iraqi, along with French, German or other Union scholars and artists, learning more every week about the real world – not the artificial Atlantic one – we live in. That the institute should be situated on the Loire, rather than the Seine, is a tribute to ancestral French diversity. Anything less 'provincial', in the pejorative sense of the term, could not be imagined than this vantage-point for reflecting on what globalisation should, and does not mean.

In due course, the success of the institute became, inevitably, an irritation where the proposal for one had been declined. How could Nantes enjoy what Paris did not? So five years later, embryonic Institutes of Advanced Study exist in Lyon and Marseille as well as Paris, though scarcely off the ground in the capital. Supiot now at the *Collège de France*, his successor will have to contend with a competition for resources in which the capital is unlikely to be worsted. But the contrast with the blighted landscape of higher learning of England, where the very idea of institutes of this kind is unthinkable, as universities risk reduction to so many

sales outlets for customers in need of livery for the market, remains arresting. Stefan Collini has compared the vice-chancellors and assorted notables who acquiesced in this disaster with the collaborators of occupied France. But Vichy was never just an isolated handful of traitors. How should the failure of the English academy as a whole to put up any serious resistance to its degradation, by Conservative and New Labour regimes alike, be described? ‘Spineless’, offered an Irish colleague. Inveterate national prejudice?

[*] Idiots building on sand

None too honest in business

A people who’ll never know anything

Invariably living in squalor

Several thousand vacant brains

Of an incorrigible stupidity.

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