

# The Forgotten of the National Story

by *Déborah Cohen*

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**The popular history of France told by Michelle Zancarini-Fournel is the history of often hidden individual figures and political struggles. By filling our “memory gaps,” Zancarini-Fournel also suggests another narrativity.**

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Review of: Michelle Zancarini-Fournel, *Les luttes et les rêves. Une histoire populaire de la France de 1685 à nos jours*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, 1008 p.

Howard Zinn, the author of *A People's History of the United States*, viewed history writing as a means of raising awareness and inciting to action. With this aim in mind, he set five major political tasks for popular history, which he also termed “radical” history: Sharpening our perception of the fate of victims; denouncing the pretensions of governments to neutrality and beneficence; exposing the ideologies that cloud our consciousness; recapturing past moments that showed the possibility of a better life; and recalling the betrayals by revolutionary leaders.<sup>1</sup> Zinn intended to meet these tasks by allowing the voice of the forgotten to be heard alongside the official history written by the dominant.

Michelle Zancarini-Fournel follows in these footsteps as she tackles, in the context of France, the challenge of this popular history. Insofar as today the dominants allow themselves not only to rewrite the past, but also to impose readings of the present that openly ignore the facts, there is an urgency. And historians have understood this well: One also awaits *The People's History*

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<sup>1</sup> See the full text here : <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinnwhatISRadicalHistory.html>

*of France from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present Day* promised by Gérard Noiriel. But this was no easy challenge: We can only thank Zancarini-Fournel and her publisher, Grégoire Chamayou, for having tackled it.

The challenge was all the more difficult because popular history not only establishes another relation to sources and actors from the past, but also requires another—more lively—narrativity, one concerned with conveying the emotions of actors and the complexity of their motivations. And this may be where Zancarini-Fournel departs slightly from E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, whose “history from below” she inherited. Marcus Rediker, the American heir to this popular history, considers that “the historian must adopt the novelist’s gaze on his or her characters.”<sup>2</sup> He himself evokes the popular tales from Kentucky his grandfather told him. Zancarini-Fournel opens her book by mentioning “[her] grandparents’ and parents’ stories,” which shaped her imagination. Whether she has succeeded in giving her narrative the same vitality that ensured the success of those of Zinn, Thompson, and Rediker will be left to the reader’s judgment.

## Sidestepping Official History

Some politicians reaffirm the need for a “national story,” for a history exploited to legitimize the current world order. For her part, Zancarini-Fournel traces the “memory gaps,” that which the consensual narrative has obscured, transformed, or simply forgotten. Thus, she uncovers the gaps in the memory of slavery and that of colonialism—the latter concealing, for instance, the 1,600 or so Reunionese miners who were transferred to metropolitan France between 1963 and 1981, the Malagasy uprising of 1947 and its 30,000 to 89,000 dead, or the massacres in Algeria. She traces the forgetting of all those whom the nation does not really integrate, such as immigrants (the role of communist and internationalist foreigners in the Resistance was long ignored). And she discloses the falsification attempts by a Third Republic that erased the traces of the Communards and that built the supposed archives of the “crimes of the Commune.” The point is to challenge preconceived ideas—the static countryside, the war enthusiasm of 1914, the “Glorious Thirty”—and to debunk the myths of national glory. The author does not reject military history, but she writes it differently, highlighting the suffering of war, the brutality of armies, but also their hidden failures: Thus, the allegedly great Napoleon bit the dust in the Antilles in 1803, in Calabria in 1806, and in Baylen in 1808.

One must place, as Zinn did, the history of the forgotten—women, indigenous people, immigrants, workers, heretics, children—alongside official history. There are so many to save from

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Yves Citton, *Revue des Livres*, n° 2, Nov-Dec. 2011.

what E. P. Thompson called the “immense condescension of posterity” that every reader will be able to find, depending on his or her own culture and sensibility, numerous gaps in the narrative the author proposes. Yet the book’s great merit is precisely that it reveals the extent to which *all* history is discontinuous and only takes meaning from what it conceals. The national story seeks to give the illusion of continuity, as if nothing important escaped it; by contrast, *Les luttes et les rêves* makes choices—those that are rarely made. This history of the forgotten has already been written in fragments, since Zancarini-Fournel relies mainly on secondary literature for the periods beyond her specialty. She does not pretend to be reinterpreting these works, which she follows closely and cites scrupulously; however, by spinning them into the thread of long-term history, she adds a whole new dimension to their findings.

The book is not only a history of the dominated, but also another history of the dominant in which these no longer systematically play the heroes. The author, of course, sheds light on the different forms of state repression (in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Cévennes, on October 17, 1961, or on February 8, 1962) and of military and police violence—a violence at once brutal and refined in its cruelty, such as when the heads of Protestant insurgents or slaves were exposed in public places. She shows the contempt and violence expressed in speeches, including those of “great men,” like Tocqueville who assured his listeners that “war authorizes us to ravage” Algeria.

The dominant also played with the law, influencing its production (in 1936, the colonial circles defeated a bill granting citizenship to indigenous populations) or bending it to suit their interests (the representatives of the Saint-Domingue population in 1789 were non-elected colonists who had lobbied to join the Assembly). At times, their position even allowed them to ignore the law. Thus, the colonies appeared to be lawless zones: The proprietors of Reunion Island refused to pay their workers even after the slave trade was prohibited, and in Guadeloupe the legal provisions of 1841 aimed at improving the conditions of the slaves were no more respected than were those of 1848 or 1947 on the organization of labor. In the army, where corporal punishment had been banned in 1850, the practice continued until the 20<sup>th</sup> century—as did military labor camps. But the French metropole was no exception: The merchant manufacturers of Lyon allowed themselves not to apply the tariff voted in 1831, and the rules governing the organization of labor, enacted by the Luxembourg Commission in 1848, were happily flouted. The book opens the door onto the vast cornucopia of government lies and betrayed commitments. First, there was the betrayal of promises to the colonial populations—to the dey of Algiers in 1830, Abd el-Kader in 1847, the indigenous infantry in 1918, and, of course, the Harkis. But there was also the betrayal by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, who backtracked in 1997 on the Socialist Party’s promise to repeal the Pasqua-Debré laws.

Not to reproduce dominant history is also to write a history that is decentralized in space and time. When considering events usually thought of as Parisian—be they the uprisings of 1848, 1851, 1871, and May 1968, or the protests of 1995—Zancarini-Fournel takes into account the

provinces. But she also seeks to decentralize time, so as to extend it (1968 is a “moment,” and she could have construed the Commune in the same way) and restrict it at once. By not allowing herself to be caught up in major episodes, the author can focus on low-intensity events, “micro-insubordinations” (p. 788), and “small” individual actions (p. 680). Thus, she recalls how, on the evening of the uprising of June 5, 1832, “the laundryman Mina spent his time fishing the wounded who had been thrown into the Seine” (p. 252).

## A Subjectivation of Social and Political Identities

This history is written first starting from individual figures. Astonishing, admirable, poignant figures—oftentimes we merely glimpse them, we lose their trace, at times we have the feeling of not knowing enough to understand. An example is the story of that woman, Mokondzi mwasi, who became chief by negotiating between the colonial apparatus and Congolese villages. Taken together, however, these figures make sense. Oftentimes, history has preserved so little of them that the struggle against the complete erasure of their memory—sometimes even just of their name—is quite a challenge in itself.

How difficult, how exposed are the lives told to us by M. Zancarini-Fournel! And yet, there is no trace of miserabilism in the book: The author shows human beings acting to change their lives, or seeking spaces of freedom in the midst of oppression, navigating between social constraints and what Natalie Zemon-Davis termed “self-fashioning.”

The author takes into account all dimensions of subjectivity—the fears, anxieties, and joys—in particular by being attentive to the imprint of history on bodies, but also on souls. This is the imprint of post-traumatic shock, of the “African nostalgia” which struck the soldiers sent to Algeria in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in the many suicides that pepper the narrative.

To start from individuals is an ethical and political choice. It is also a choice of method, the one taught to us by Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*: A story made of close-ups can see something else. It complicates the picture infinitely, as men and women seen up close are often neither monsters nor heroes: “The same men who write tenderly to their mother are also those who commit massacres and rapes” (p. 200), or attack a synagogue and Jews’ houses after having accomplished their duty as voters (p. 303). To say that history is made by men and women is not to reduce it to individual choices, nor to neglect the forces that drive individuals—quite the contrary.

It is sometimes said—as an excuse for not writing it—that sources are lacking for popular history. We see here that this is not the case. Judicial or police sources, commissions of inquiry, letters, ex-votos, books of accounts, memoirs, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, popular songs and

poems, diaries, interviews, photographs, films: Sources abound, even for ancient times. And the history written by Zancarini-Fournel is a lively one; it is a history that went searching in the secondary literature for traces of these sources very close to actors. To make us feel the past, the author also uses literature and painting, taking us on a journey with Chateaubriand, Hugo, Rimbaud, and Georges Dahiel. It is to our subjectivities that this history of individual and collective ways of entering History is addressed.

## How Men and Women Struggle

Without denying a certain effectiveness to trade unions and parties, Zancarini-Fournel is interested primarily in more autonomous collectives. In this she is the child of an era which is described at the end of the book—the era of associations (for the right to housing), networks (of nurses or farmers), and movements (of undocumented migrants). Thus, she shows revolt's ability to organize “order in disorder” (p. 250). She also presents direct democracy in action (in 1792 or in 1840), the worker-controlled Berliet and Lip factories, as well as the emergence of concrete modes of contestation, mutualism, and forms of community life (around Pierre Leroux in 1843) such as consumer cooperatives and soup kitchens.

While the struggle often involved violence, the latter seems to have been a last resort. A winemaker claimed in 1970: “When we vote on motions, no one hears us; when we end up smashing everything, we are heard” (p. 728). Thus he echoed that club of Lyonnaise Women who in 1792 would have liked “to provide themselves with subsistence without needing to resort to these violent means” (p.130). Zancarini-Fournel shows the dominated trying their hand at enforcing the law: The peasant communities of the 18<sup>th</sup> century sought to defend communal lands before the court by bringing proceedings against their lords. They often met with as little success as did Vincent Oge, who was accused in 1790 of holding an illegal gathering for asking the governor of Saint-Domingue to apply the decree favoring freedmen and people of mixed-blood. The dominated also tried to skirt the edges of the law: In 1789, town workers could only participate in the drafting of the list of grievances as members of corporations; yet, 2,000 excluded weavers nonetheless attempted to contribute as “people of no corporation” (p. 97).

Collective resistance also involved insults, irony, and symbols. Dance itself could become discourse (pp. 453-55), and riots could go hand in hand with celebrations—e.g., in 1789 at the toll houses, just as in 1936 at the Renault-Billancourt factory. Celebrations expressed the joy of solidarity, as practiced by villagers who hid salt smugglers and refractory soldiers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or by workers who hosted the displaced children of strikers in 1909. Yet Zancarini-Fournel does not construe this solidarity as evidence of a shared condition: Maroon hunting was sometimes

performed by militias composed of mulattoes and blacks; French workers sometimes pitted themselves against their immigrant co-workers, Yellows against strikers, neighbors against neighbors (as in the Olivier-de-Serres housing project in 1975); the forces of repression sent against proletarians in struggle were very often composed of their alter egos (in Saint-Brieuc, on April 6, 1972, the inseparable high school friends Burniaux and Antignac clashed with each other during the repression of the Joint Français strike).

Conversely, to the extent that Zancarini-Fournel does not construe struggle as the inescapable result of social position, she can describe furtive encounters between elites and peoples: mayors and the deserters or strikers to whom they gave support, workers and students in 1968, intellectuals and artists. Some paid a high price for their commitment. In 1789, the judge of Petit-Goâve, Ferrand de Baudières, was murdered for writing a memorial for people of color. In 1959, the vice-rector of Martinique, Alain Plenel, delivered an anti-colonialist speech in Fort-de-France: He was immediately recalled. At other times, equally committed elites could escape repression with greater ease. This was the case of the veterinary school students who were spared after the Lyon uprising of June 1849.

The role of the dominated could also be indirect. The book poses the question of empowerment, of that which, beyond anger, helps to sustain revolt. Some elite speeches could provide concepts and hopes. Such was the case with a letter by Condorcet, president of the Society of the Friends of the Negroes, and with the word “liberty,” both of which helped to give impetus to the Guadeloupe uprising of 1790.

Revolt was also sustained by the memory of past struggles. During the food riots of 1816-1817 in the northern and western countryside, what one heard were the principles of the Revolution. In Algeria, indigenous poetry has preserved the exact memory of the “enfumades” of 1844-1845. The memory of the Communards, that of the 1948 miners’ strikes, or that of Charonne for the French Communist Party, are still being transmitted in families and in activist groups, despite being suppressed by official French history, or, as in the fight for the Larzac, despite being petrified in an ecomuseum. Likewise, the great fresco proposed today by Michelle Zancarini-Fournel participates in the preservation of a living memory, capable of arming the struggles to come.

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