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Journal of Contemporary History 2011 46: 531

DOI: 10.1177/0022009411403338

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The Poisoned Madeleine: The Autobiographical Turn in Historical Writing

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Abstract

This article examines the recent fashion for autobiographical writing among historians. It argues that this fashion goes with a rehabilitation of contemporary history, which was sometimes regarded with disdain during the time in the mid-1960s when approaches associated with the *Annales* school seemed most influential. Autobiographies by historians have attracted particular attention in France and all such works are sometimes labelled with the term first coined by Pierre Nora: *ego-histoire*. However, this article argues that the historians brought together by Nora (all French, mostly born between 1917 and 1930 and heavily influenced by the political upheavals of the period 1940 to 1962) were rather different from those historians (mostly from a younger generation) who have been drawn to autobiographical writing in the Anglo-American world. It is finally suggested that there is now something of a reaction against autobiographical writing by a younger generation of historians who argue that, even when writing about the very recent past, absence of direct personal experience can be an advantage.

Keywords

Algerian War, autobiography, autocritique, *Ego-histoire*, Pierre Nora, Vichy

The 'poisoned Madeleine' is the name that Timothy Garton Ash gives to the file on himself compiled by the Stasi while he was a historical researcher in East Berlin during the late 1970s. He uses this file as an aide-memoire to write a book about his own youth. The book opens with him lying naked on a bed with a young woman who suddenly gets up and throws open the curtains (Ash wonders whether this is so that the Stasi can photograph him); it closes with Ash leaving his study to talk to his young sons - he has, by this time, ascertained that his lover was not a Stasi spy. Along the way, Ash discusses himself, his family and his friends - with interesting diversions into such matters as his father's war record and the psychological legacy

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of education at an English public school.¹ The tone of the book would seem extraordinary to those contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History* who were enjoined, a little more than a century ago, to remove their own personalities from their work to such an extent that the reader should not be able to tell where one author had put down his pen and another had picked it up.²

Autobiographical writing by historians has become so important that there is now a literature devoted to its study – a literature that is itself indicative of historians' capacity for introspection. Jeremy Popkin's book on historians' autobiography includes an autobiographical section which touches on, amongst other things, his father, a historian of science who wrote an autobiography and who also features in George Mosse's autobiography, which Popkin (*films*) discusses.³

My own approach is narrower than Popkin's, in two senses. First, I am mainly interested in how historical autobiography and contemporary history interact – that is to say, the relation between how historians write about their own lives and how they write about events that occurred within their own lives, and I am also concerned primarily with historians of the twentieth century – so I will not attempt to address the issues that might be raised by looking at, say, Edward Gibbon. I will argue that the autobiographical turn has gone with a new willingness to take contemporary history seriously. Secondly, I am interested in historians from France and from what might broadly be described as the Anglo-American world (though one of the defining features of the Anglo-American world is that it takes in quite a wide range of historians who have origins outside it).

My interest in France and the Anglo-American world springs partly from the fact that there are revealing differences between the two. Autobiography by historians in the Anglo-American world has often involved personal revelation about, for example, love affairs,⁴ homosexuality⁵ and transvestism.⁶ Some such works spring directly from the author's experiences of psycho-analysis.⁷ This kind of

1 Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (London 1997), 46, 225. For Garton Ash's autobiographical reflections on his autobiography, see his interview with Harriet Swain in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 11 July 1997.

2 Acton wrote to the Syndics of Cambridge University Press that the reader should be unable to tell 'where the Bishop of Oxford [Stubbs] laid down his pen and whether Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison took it up': cited in G.N. Clark, 'The Origins of the Cambridge Modern History', *The Historical Journal*, 8, 2 (1945), 57–64.

3 Jeremy Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography* (Chicago 2005); *ibid.* 'Is Autobiography Anti-Academic and Un-Economical? Some Thoughts on Academic Autobiography', *History of Political Economy*, 39 (2007), 30–47; *ibid.* 'Holocaust Memories, Historians' Memoirs: First-Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust', *History and Memory*, 15 (2003), 49–84; *ibid.* 'Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier', *American Historical Review*, 104, 3 (1999), 725–48; *ibid.* 'Ego-histoire and Beyond: Contemporary French Historian-Autobiographers', *French Historical Studies*, 19, 4 (1996), 1139–67.

4 Alice Kaplan, *French Lessons: A Memoir* (Chicago 1993).

5 Martin Duberman, *Midlife Queer: Autobiography of a Decade, 1971–1981* (New York 1996).

6 Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing: A Memoir* (Chicago 1999).

7 Martin Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey* (New York 1991); Carmen Callil, *Bad Faith: A Forgotten History of Family and Fatherland* (London 2006). This book is, in part, a biography of Anne Darquier who, apart from being the daughter of a French collaborator, had also been Callil's analyst in the 1960s.

intimate detail is almost unknown in France, and the revelations of French autobiographers concern mainly political matters.⁸ For this reason, I propose to focus mainly on the relation between recent political history and historical autobiography. I will argue that French autobiography is more explicit about politics, more *événementiel* and more focused on a particular period. However, this does not mean that, even in France, the writing of autobiography and contemporary history are simply the same thing. Often the most striking features of autobiographies are the hints that they give about why historians avoid certain subjects.

Historians have always written their autobiographies, and all historical writing is autobiographical in the sense that authors seek to project a certain image of themselves. However, during the early stages of the professionalization of history (from, say, the late nineteenth century until 1980), many well-known historians did not write their autobiographies. Namier and Trevor-Roper, for example, were sufficiently important to attract biographers,⁹ but neither wrote an account of their own life. E.H. Carr's remark, 'Before you study the history, study the historian' is sometimes quoted as a justification for historical autobiography¹⁰ – but Carr himself was reticent about his own life (so much that a hostile reviewer described his work as 'autistic').¹¹ Some regarded the notion of autobiography by historians with distaste. In 1970, Lewis P. Curtis asked 52 American historians to write autobiographical essays; 37 turned him down. One of the refusniks wrote: 'I find this kind of self-consciousness so characteristic of our psychoanalytic age, rather offensive, both from the scholarly and the aesthetic point of view.'¹²

Those historians who wrote autobiographies were often public figures and their recollections were remarkably like those of men who had made their reputations in, say, politics or the civil service: they rarely said much about the practice of history itself. John Masterman read history as an undergraduate at Oxford before the first world war and taught the subject in the Oxford history faculty from 1918 to 1939. His memoirs might be read with profit by those interested in the history of intelligence (Masterman worked for MI5 during the second world war), or by those interested in the history of amateur sport (he was a first-class cricketer and played tennis at Wimbledon), or by those interested in the nature of the British establishment (he ended his career as master of an Oxford college, after having been offered the headmastership of Eton and the deputy directorship of the BBC). However, Masterman was not really writing as a historian. His memoirs are, in fact,

8 Jo Burr Margadant, 'The New Biography in Historical Practice', *French Historical Studies*, 19, 4 (1996), 1045–58. Speaking of autobiography by French historians, Burr Margadant writes: 'Only confessions about a misplaced political trust or intellectual conviction get full exposure.'

9 Linda Colley, *Lewis Namier* (London 1989); Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier: A Biography* (London 1971); Norman Rose, *Lewis Namier and Zionism* (Oxford 1980); Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: The Biography* (London 2010).

10 Quoted in Luisa Passerini and Alexander C.T. Geppert, 'Historians in Flux: The Concept, Task and Challenge of *Ego-histoire*', *Historein: A Review of the Past and Other Stories*, 3 (2001), 5–18.

11 Norman Stone, 'Grim Eminence', *London Review of Books*, 5, 1 (10 January 1983).

12 Lewis P. Curtis, *The Historian's Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians* (New York 1970), xv.

remarkably similar to those produced by other academics who became prominent in public life (such as Lord Wolfenden).¹³ Masterman claims himself to have done no research and he evinces little interest in those of his colleagues who were more active in this respect. He does not mention Marc Bloch or Lewis Namier – both of whom were known in interwar Oxford. Hugh Trevor-Roper features as an example of a Christ Church teacher, rather than as an active scholar. Furthermore, Masterman seemed to take a perverse pride in not applying the techniques of a historical scholar in his own life and drew attention to the fact that he had failed to anticipate the coming of either world war.¹⁴

Sometimes the writing of an autobiography went with a deliberate renunciation of ‘serious history’. The two most famous British historians to write their autobiographies in the 1980s were A.J.P. Taylor and Richard Cobb.¹⁵ Both men had once been seen as important historians. Both, however, began to flirt with autobiography at a time when their historical work seemed to be slowing down. Cobb published a series of autobiographical essays from the 1960s onwards and then published his first volume of pure autobiography in 1984. Taylor wrote an autobiographical essay at the request of the *Journal of Modern History* in 1977¹⁶ and then *A Personal History* in 1983.

Cobb’s and Taylor’s autobiographies seemed calculated to underline the distance between themselves and the cutting edge of the historical profession.¹⁷ Their books and essays in this genre were whimsical, nostalgic and self-consciously eccentric. Cobb’s celebration of bourgeois life in Tunbridge Wells and an English public school would have seemed extraordinary to those fashionable Oxford undergraduates who had admired Cobb as an exponent of ‘history from below’. Taylor’s autobiographical writing seemed marked by a decision that he would adopt the persona that fashionable young historians had projected on to him – that of an ‘old-fashioned’, quintessentially English historian. No one reading *A Personal History* would have guessed that Taylor was the anonymous reviewer who had championed the work of Bloch and Braudel in the *TLS* in 1954.¹⁸ Taylor entitled his autobiographical essay of 1977 ‘Accident Prone’. The title must have been chosen to annoy those younger colleagues who were still prone to dismiss anything that smacked of ‘conjuncture’. He insisted that he had been ‘an old-fashioned hack historian’ and that the most important lesson of his autobiography was that he had ‘run out of other historical subjects’.

13 John Wolfenden, *Turning Points: The Memoirs of Lord Wolfenden* (London 1976).

14 John Masterman, *On the Chariot Wheel* (Oxford 1975).

15 A.J.P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (London 1983); Richard Cobb, *Still Life: Sketches from a Tunbridge Wells Childhood* (London 1984).

16 A.J.P. Taylor, ‘Accident Prone, or What Happened Next’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 49, 1 (1977), 1–18.

17 Perry Anderson, contrasting them unfavourably with Eric Hobsbawm, wrote of the ‘eccentric cameos of Richard Cobb and causeries of A.J.P. Taylor’: Perry Anderson, ‘The Age of EJH’, *London Review of Books*, 24, 19 (3 October 2002).

18 ‘French History in Dispute’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 March 1954.

The attitude of the historical profession to autobiographies by historians has, however, changed. When, in 2006, Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson sought to commission autobiographical essays from American historians working on France, they were struck by the fact that their reception was so much more favourable than that of Lewis Curtis a few decades previously; only a handful refused their request.¹⁹ Autobiographies were no longer seen as eccentric and individualistic. Many of them were in some way the product of collective enterprises – seminars, edited collections or transcripts of interviews between historians of different generations. Authors presented their experience as important because it tied in with that of some larger group. Three books have been particularly associated with the new interest in historical autobiography. These were Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986); the *Essais d'ego-histoire* (published under the aegis of Pierre Nora in 1987); and Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (first published in 1988).²⁰

There was no sharp turning point in the reception of such work. Nora stressed that *ego-histoire* was part of a group of works by French historians that had begun with the autobiographies of Philippe Ariès (published in 1980)²¹ and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1982).²² Some of the change was driven by publishers as much as by authors. Nora began his career as a publisher and is still an important figure at *Gallimard*. The autobiographical interviews with Philippe Ariès, which inspired Nora's project, were conducted by Michel Winock, who is Nora's opposite number at *Seuil*, as well as being a historian/autobiographer in his own right.²³ Carolyn Steedman's autobiography was inspired partly by the publisher Carmen Callil, who eventually published a book of her own that blended history and autobiography.²⁴

Two things distinguished these three books from most previous autobiographies by historians. First, the relative youth of their authors. Carolyn Steedman was less than 40 when she published her autobiography and Passerini was just a few years older when she published hers. The contributors to Pierre Nora's *ego-histoire* were aged between 50 and 70 years old when the work was published – quite young by the standards of previous historical autobiographers. Secondly, all these works were intended to be, in some sense, reflections on ways of writing history as well as simply recollections of the authors' own lives. Passerini's *Autobiography of a*

19 Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson (eds), *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination* (Ithaca, NY 2006).

20 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London 1986); Pierre Nora (ed.), *Essais d'ego-histoire* (Paris 1987); Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Hanover, NH 1996): first published in Italian, 1988.

21 Philippe Ariès, *Un historien du dimanche* (Paris 1980).

22 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Paris-Montpellier: PCF-PSU, 1945–1963* (Paris 1982).

23 Michel Winock, *La république se meurt, 1956–1958* (Paris 1978): this work is an account of the last three years of the Fourth Republic as seen by Winock's generation or – at least – by those who lived in the same milieu as Winock. It begins with Winock's speculation on the circumstances of his own conception, which, apparently, took place in the aftermath of the festivities that marked the Popular Front of 1936.

24 Callil, *Bad Faith*, op. cit.

Generation mixed autobiography with a diary (partly about her historical research) and with a historical study, partly based on an oral history project conducted amongst her own contemporaries, of 1968. Steedman's *Landscape with Figures* mixed her own autobiography with a biography of her mother and with more general reflections on the nature of working-class women's autobiography. Nora assembled autobiographical essays by his colleagues at the same time as he presided over the influential collection of work on 'realms of memory', and he saw both as part of a tendency by historians to turn their attention to the study of history itself. Françoise Thébaud has suggested that an institutional change in the French historical profession lay partly behind the new interest in both historiography and historical autobiography:

le diplôme d'habilitation à diriger des recherches, qui a remplacé en France la thèse d'État autrefois nécessaire pour prétendre à une chaire universitaire, a valorisé le regard réflexif sur des travaux antérieurs et autorisé l'expression d'un intime, qu'il n'est plus nécessaire de combattre pour atteindre l'objectivité scientifique.²⁵

Since the late 1980s, historians' autobiographies are likely to be seen as beginnings rather than ends, because they provide means by which historians launch themselves into new domains. *Ego-histoire* has been a continuing source of reflection for Nora (more so, indeed, in recent years than in the immediate aftermath of the book's publication). *Ego-histoire* also stimulated a wave of other publications in France. Two historians who had refused Nora's invitation went on to produce full-length autobiographies,²⁶ which they explained partly as responses to *ego-histoire*.²⁷ Three of the historians who had contributed to *ego-histoire* – Raoul Girardet,²⁸ George Duby²⁹ and Jacques le Goff – subsequently wrote book-length accounts of their lives – the latter has published three different autobiographical books in the last ten years.³⁰ Two historians – Mona Ozouf and Jean-Jacques Becker – who belonged to the 'Nora generation' and who were associated with some of Nora's contributors have written autobiographies in the last few years.³¹ Carolyn Steedman's autobiography effectively shaped her career as a historian and provided her with material for a later collection of essays.³² Geoff Eley's

25 Françoise Thébaud, 'Entre parcours intellectuel et essai d'*ego-histoire*: Le poids du genre', *Genre et histoire*, 4 (2009).

26 Anne Kriegel, *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre* (Paris 1991), 11: 'Ma contribution [to *ego-histoire*], la voici. Avec des années de retard et quelques centaines de pages en trop'; Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mémoires*, 1: *La brisure et l'attente, 1930–1955* (1998); *ibid.* *Mémoires*, 2: *Le trouble et la lumière* (Paris 1998).

27 *Ibid.*

28 Raoul Girardet, *Singulièrement libre* (interviews with Pierre Assouline) (Paris 1990).

29 Georges Duby, *L'histoire continue* (Paris 1991).

30 Jacques le Goff, *Une vie pour l'histoire: entretiens avec Marc Heurgon* (Paris 1996); Jacques le Goff (with Jean-Maurice de Montrémy, *A la recherche du moyen âge* (Paris 2003); Jacques le Goff, *Avec Hanka* (Paris 2008).

31 Mona Ozouf, *Composition française: retour sur une enfance bretonne* (Paris 2009); Jean-Jacques Becker, *Un soir de l'été 1942... Souvenirs d'un historien* (Paris 2009).

32 Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London 1991).

intellectual autobiography of 2005³³ gave rise to a symposium that was published in the *American Historical Review*.³⁴

Whereas once autobiographical writing was seen as something to be separated from respectable academic writing, now the lines between the two are often blurred. Kristin Ross's book on 1968 contains reflections about her own experience³⁵ whilst Daniel Bensaid's autobiography contains a critique of the way in which Ross interprets his role in 1968.³⁶ George Mosse discussed his homosexuality in his autobiography (published in 2000);³⁷ however, he cited a friend who had told him that his *Nationalism and Sexuality* (published 15 years previously)³⁸ was his real 'coming out' book, because intelligent readers would have seen it as a statement about himself. Works of history or, even more strikingly, historiography frequently include autobiographical elements. Paul Addison's account of postwar Britain begins with a reference to Addison himself in the Lower Fifth Form Modern at King Edward VI School, Lichfield.³⁹ Tony Judt turned entirely to autobiographical essays during the Beckettian Endgame of his career as a historian.⁴⁰ The Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University (having just turned 60) recently referred to having reached the 'autobiographical age'. David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism* contains a chapter on a lower-middle-class boy in Birmingham during the 1950s.⁴¹ Gérard Noiriel's book *Penser avec, penser contre: Itinéraire d'un historien* contains an autobiographical postface.⁴²

Sometimes the autobiographical turn goes with a degree of self-absorption on the part of the historical profession. Geoff Eley's intellectual autobiography is also in part a biography of three historians whom he admires, one of whom (Steedman) is known largely for having written an autobiography. Eley cites remarks that Steedman made in 1990 about E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Classes*. Steedman apparently suggested that Thompson's book now deserved to be read not because of 'its overt subject matter' but as 'an epic telling of a history that we watch with wonder and pity, that is also now, in our reading, about *us* and our lost past'.⁴³ Here is a historical autobiographer citing another

33 Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Chicago 2005).

34 *American Historical Review*, 113, 2 (2008), 391–437: contributions by William Sewell, Gabrielle Spiegel, Manu Goswami and Eley himself.

35 Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago 2002).

36 Daniel Bensaid, *Une lente impatience* (Paris 2004).

37 George Mosse, *Confronting History* (Madison, WI 2000), 180.

38 George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectable and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York 1985).

39 Paul Addison, *No Turning Back: The Peacetime Revolutions in Post-War Britain* (Oxford 2010), 1.

40 The essays, published in the *New York Review of Books*, began with 'Night', published on 14 January 2010. Judt spoke about his autobiographical writing in an interview at the end of his life. He seemed to divide his autobiographical writings into two periods. Before he was diagnosed with a fatal disease in 2008, he sometimes wrote about his own life (particularly with reference to communism, see below, or Zionism), but this was part of an exercise in which he sought to invoke the personal 'to create a space in which to be political'. His writings after 2008 were more intimate and harder to classify: Tony Judt, interview with Peter Jukes, *Prospect*, 173, 21 July 2010.

41 David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire* (London 2001), 181–200.

42 Gérard Noiriel, *Penser avec, penser contre: itinéraire d'un historien* (Paris 2003).

43 Eley, *A Crooked Line*, op. cit., 179.

historical autobiographer describing another historian who is, in turn, seen as important because he is part of 'us and our lost past' or, in short, because he features in historians' own life stories.

The recent tendency to blend history and autobiography is illustrated by Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm was born in 1917. He is a contemporary of the oldest contributors to Nora's *ego-histoire*, and 30 years older than the most important of the recent historical autobiographers. For most of his career, his writing was characterized by a conscious flight from autobiography. He began his research career with a study of a period shortly before his own birth, but he then worked backwards to move into the nineteenth century (with excursions into the seventeenth). He distinguished between his journalistic writing, which concentrated on politics and jazz music (the latter was often published under a pseudonym), and his proper historical writing. Much of the latter concerned the austere impersonal world of economic history. In his academic books, he deliberately avoided treating events that had occurred in his own lifetime and he wrote about groups (agricultural labourers in nineteenth-century Britain; Sicilian bandits)⁴⁴ who were often far removed from the world of the twentieth-century academic. From 1991, Hobsbawm changed. After this date, much of his academic work concerned events that had occurred during his own life. This was especially true of his last major historical work – *The Age of Extremes* (1994)⁴⁵ – which dealt with the history of the world from 1914 to 1991, more or less the period of Hobsbawm's own life.

Hobsbawm's later work was increasingly framed as a reflection on the particular qualities of history that was written by someone who lived through the times that he or she described.⁴⁶ When his autobiography was finally published in 2002, many reviewers treated it as the extension, perhaps even the culmination, of his historical work. Perry Anderson wrote a long review essay in which he blended an appreciation of Hobsbawm's memoirs with one of his historical work, to talk about 'the century of EJH'.⁴⁷

The publication of Hobsbawm's memoirs had important effects on other historians. He was a touchstone of academic respectability and historians often cited him as a means of underlining their own credentials: the subtitle of Geoff Eley's intellectual autobiography (from 'Cultural History to the History of Society') alluded to a phrase coined by Hobsbawm. Often, discussion of Hobsbawm's memories seems to have provided younger historians with a reason, or excuse, to discuss their own experiences. Tony Judt referred to the reputation that Hobsbawm had enjoyed when Judt himself was an undergraduate at Hobsbawm's Cambridge college.⁴⁸ Ross McKibbin compared his own exposure to Marxism in Australia during

44 Eric Hobsbawm, *Captain Swing* (London 1968); *ibid.* *Bandits* (London 1969).

45 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London 1994).

46 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Present as History: Writing the History of One's Own Times: The Creighton Lecture*, 8 November 1993 (London 1993).

47 Anderson, 'The Age of EJH', *op. cit.*

48 Tony Judt, 'The Last Romantic', *New York Review of Books*, 50, 18 (2003), 43–5.

the 1950s with that of Hobsbawm in the 1930s.⁴⁹ Richard Overy compared his experience of Cambridge in 1968 with Hobsbawm's experience of it in 1939.⁵⁰

Hobsbawm's particular status came partly from his age and partly from the sense that he was an 'homme mémoire' who had unique personal insight into certain aspects of the past. In this respect, Hobsbawm benefited from the fact that he had simply outlived his contemporaries.⁵¹ However, Hobsbawm also benefited from a particular relation with a younger generation. He had come to prominence relatively late in life and therefore enjoyed special prestige amongst the generation of historians who had been students in the 1960s. He was personally close to many left-wing historians born in the 1940s and indeed talked about these protégés in his autobiography more than he talked about some of his own contemporaries (notably his patron Noel Annan).⁵² It is revealing that – though his admirers often made pious references to Hobsbawm's personal knowledge of the Weimar Republic – the most influential element of Hobsbawm's interpretation of the twentieth century probably concerned his characterization of the period from 1945 to 1975 in western Europe as the 'Golden Age'. This was a characterization that had special appeal to academics who were born in the immediately postwar period – the people who benefited most from the Butler Education Act and the Robbins Report.

The autobiographical turn has implications for the status of contemporary history in the last few decades. *The Journal of Contemporary History* was founded in 1966. This was, in some ways, an awkward moment for the study of the recent past. There was a sense in the mid-1960s that the most interesting and innovative work involved the relatively distant past. Works such as *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II* (1949) or *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1963) seemed to hint at a whole new way of doing history. The study of the twentieth century was still, in large measure, dominated by questions about politics, diplomacy and, in particular, the origins of war. It was also dominated by intense attention to documents (particularly the official documents that had been released in the aftermath of the two world wars). Contemporary historians had embraced a notion of Rankean professionalism in their bid to give respectability to their discipline. However, they had done so at the very moment when the most fashionable young historians were turning to the sweeping insights of Marxism, the *Annales* school, sociology, anthropology or economics. All of these seemed to make more sense to those who were working on periods before 1900 than to those who had their noses pressed up against the immediate questions posed by, say, the Hoare-Laval pact. In the very year that the *Journal of Contemporary History* was founded,

49 Ross McKibbin, *English Historical Review*, 119, 480 (2004), 155–7.

50 Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (2009), xiii.

51 Hobsbawm himself made this point when interviewed at UCLA by Ivan Berend on 29 January 2004: 'My life has a certain scarcity value inversely proportional to the age of my readers.'

52 Noel Annan's memoirs, by contrast, say much about Hobsbawm: Noel Annan, *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation* (London 1990).

Keith Thomas published his widely noted essay in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 'The Tools and the Job', in which he urged British historians to embrace the kind of broad structural approaches that he believed to be practised elsewhere. He also attacked the fetishism of seeking new facts and new documents (a major interest for contemporary historians), and the single historian that he singled out for attack as representing the 'dying animal' of old-style political history was A.J.P. Taylor, the most famous historian of the contemporary period.⁵³

The hopes that Thomas invested in sweeping analysis of structures over long periods have not proved well-founded. The great collective projects based on the accumulation of statistical information often came to nothing. However, this did not mean a revival of 'old-fashioned' political history based on finding new facts and new documents. Instead, historians became interested in questions of culture, representation and, often, subjectivity. This, in turn, has meant an interest in autobiography as a historical source. Indeed, some of the most significant works of the mid-1970s (such as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*)⁵⁴ were based on subjective accounts. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that historians have become interested in the autobiographies of their own colleagues.

The turn away from a history of big structures towards a history of subjectivity and hence towards autobiography had a special dimension in France. Here, the *Annales* reached the height of its influence in the 1960s. Once, the *Annales* school had been characterized by an interest in blending the study of the past with the study of the present. Furthermore, the most esteemed member of the pre-1945 *Annales* group, Marc Bloch, had written a book, *Strange Defeat*, that was, among other things, a kind of autobiography.⁵⁵ After 1945, however, there was a change. Contemporary history, which came, in large measure, to mean the study of the Resistance, did draw heavily on personal recollection (partly because there was no other source for such work) and Resistance veterans controlled the *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale* (founded in 1950). However, the study of the Resistance was seen as morally worthy rather than intellectually demanding – not until French historians began to respond to Robert Paxton's work in the 1970s was there much sense that there were real debates to be had about the second world war in France. Furthermore, in the two or three decades after 1945, the autobiography was often seen as a rather trivial form of intellectual endeavour – and often associated with the defence of personal positions, and sometimes associated with authors who had been on the 'losing side' of history.⁵⁶ Philippe Ariès, as an adviser to the publisher Plon, was behind works such as Juan Antonio Ansaldo's *Mémoires d'un monarchiste espagnol, 1931–1952*, Guell y Comillas' *Journal d'un*

53 'The Tools and the Job', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966.

54 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore 1980): first published in Italian, in 1976.

55 Marc Bloch, *L'Étrange défaite* (Paris 1946).

56 This was, to some extent, true of even the most significant autobiography of the 1950s – Charles de Gaulle's *Mémoires de guerre* – which were published at a time when the general's political career seemed to have hit the buffers.

expatrié catalan, 1936–1945, or Jean Giraudoux's *Armistice à Bordeaux*.⁵⁷ Autobiographical reflection by historians themselves was rather frowned upon during these years. Ariès did write a highly personal book – *Le temps de l'histoire* – with an autobiographical chapter, but it was rejected by Plon, the Paris publishers with whom he was most associated, and only published by an obscure press in Monaco. It did not receive widespread attention until it was republished in 1986.⁵⁸

The postwar years, the 1960s especially, saw the apogee of Braudel's influence. Braudel's position could be paradoxical, because there was a contradiction between the kind of history that he advocated and the style of the works in which he advocated it. His own writing was full of literary flourishes (he was an admirer of Michelet) and personal references (such as the suggestion that the historical event might be as transient as the fireflies that he had seen in the Brazilian night), and he was, in fact, one of the few historians who cited Ariès' *Le Temps de l'histoire*.

Having said all this, Braudel's influence was certainly associated with an emphasis on the *longue durée* and the study of 'structure', which was held up as a model to be imitated by non-French historians such as Keith Thomas. Equally, Braudel's hegemony went with a conscious turn away from contemporary history – which the early *Annales*-school historians had tried to foster. Braudel's distaste for the short-term, the contemporary and the political went with distaste for autobiographical writing (perhaps, as he himself sometimes suggested, because immersion in the panorama of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean had been a means of 'escaping' from a German prisoner-of-war camp between 1940 and 1945).⁵⁹ When Braudel was finally persuaded to write an autobiographical essay for the *Journal of Modern History*, he spent most of his time discussing his early life and peasant origins. He devoted just one sentence to the subject that later historical autobiographers would regard as the most important episode in their lives – the second world war.⁶⁰

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie illustrates the transformations associated with the move away from the Braudelian model. In 1966, Le Roy Ladurie published *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (1966) – a book that illustrated the kind of large-scale quantitative analysis over many centuries that was praised by Thomas. Ten years later, Le Roy Ladurie turned to history on a smaller scale and to sources that emphasized people's subjective feelings (the most important result of this turn – *Montaillou, Village Occitan de 1294 à 1324* [1975] was based on the accounts that people gave of themselves to the Inquisition), accounts that were, in a sense,

57 Works cited in the preface by Roger Chartier to the 1986 edition of Philippe Ariès, *Le temps de l'histoire* (Paris 1986), 11.

58 Ibid. See also Patrick Hutton, *Philippe Ariès and the Politics of French Cultural History* (Boston and Amherst, MA 2004).

59 Fernand Braudel, 'History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée' (first published in 1958), in Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (eds), *Histories: French Constructions of the Past: Postwar French Thought*, vol. I (New York 1995), 115–43, at 138: 'I myself, during a rather gloomy period of captivity, struggled a good deal to get away from the chronicle of the difficult years (1940–1945).'

60 Fernand Braudel, 'Personal Testimony', *Journal of Modern History*, 44, 4 (1972), 448–67.

autobiographical. Le Roy turned to his own autobiography in 1982,⁶¹ and then devoted increasing amounts of attention to the contemporary period and to political history. In some ways Le Roy Ladurie's interest in contemporary history was an autobiographical one – because his work involved a study of his own father, who had been a minister in the Vichy government.⁶²

Some writers on historical autobiography have associated the whole genre with *ego-histoire* – the phrase coined by Nora in the 1980s – and assumed that this term can be applied everywhere from Russia to Australia.⁶³ However, *ego-histoire* was rooted in specifically French preoccupations. Nora suggested that it was associated with 'la remontée d'intérêt pour l'histoire nationale',⁶⁴ and, in some respects, the very notion that there was a nation to return to was peculiarly French. Historians all over the world were interested in questions of national identity during the late 1980s, but France was probably the only western country in which historians regarded themselves as exponents and celebrants of national identity. The historical profession became increasingly globalized in the 1980s and 1990s. Large numbers of historians took jobs in the United States, transnational academic co-operation became increasingly important and English became the language in which most historical research was communicated. Eley – who was born and educated in England, made his reputation working on Germany and moved to the United States in 1979 – exemplified this internationalism. Luisa Passerini is Italian but was educated partly in the United States and draws her academic prestige partly from the reception of her work in England and America. She edited her collection of autobiographies by historians at a time when she was based at the European University Institute and very much concerned to establish transnational ways of approaching history. The collection of historical autobiographies that she edited in 2001 excluded all French contributors other than Nora himself. Though the collection was described as 'European', it was, in fact, notably Anglo-American. All of the contributors other than Nora wrote in English. Three of the contributors were English (one of them working in North America) and one of them was a North American working in England.

The seven contributors to Nora's original *ego-histoire* collection, by contrast, were French historians who had spent their careers in France and who had made their reputations with books about France. Nora seems to have taken it for granted that *ego-histoire* was a term that could only apply to French historians – it is revealing that his numerous discussions of historical autobiography have never referred to those historians of east European origin – Lilly Marcou or François

61 Le Roy Ladurie, *Paris-Montpellier*, op. cit.

62 Jacques Le Roy Ladurie, *Mémoires, 1902–1945*, ed. by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Antony Rowley (Paris 1997).

63 Jeremy Popkin, 'Ego-histoire Down Under: Australian Historian Autobiographers', *Australian Historical Studies*, 38, 129 (2008), 106–23.

64 Pierre Nora, 'L'Ego-histoire est-elle possible?', *Historien: A Review of the Past and Other Stories*, 3 (2001), 19–26, at 20.

Fejto – who grew up in central Europe but subsequently moved to France and wrote their autobiographies in French.⁶⁵ Two things tied French historians closely to the national culture. The first of these was the education system. Three out of seven of the contributors to *ego-histoire* belonged to the tiny elite who had attended the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Others were simply influenced by the existence of the ENS or by having attended those elite lycées that prepared students for it. Pierre Nora was not admitted to the ENS but did attend the preparatory classes at both Henri IV and Louis-le-Grand. Receiving Nora into the Académie Française (another quintessentially French institution), René Rémond, a contributor to *ego-histoire* who had been both a student and a teacher at the ENS, remarked that Nora ‘made a religion’ of the Ecole Normale.⁶⁶ Whereas British and, a fortiori, American universities see themselves as international institutions, French *grandes écoles* are, or were, distinctively French; they have a sense of their own history and even a language (*khâgnes*, *hypo-khâgnes*, *câgnes*) that would be meaningless to most foreigners. The world of the French education system and historical profession are particularly enclosed; there are close links between schools and *grandes écoles* (the ENS exists for the explicit purpose of training teachers) and large numbers of *normaliens* have been the children of teachers. A small number of academic historians, of whom the most notable is Pierre Goubert, have actually risen from being primary school teachers themselves – via that other quintessentially French institution, the *agrégation*.⁶⁷ Whole dynasties exist within this world. Jean-François Sirinelli is a *normalien* and the son of a *normalien*; his study of *Khâgneux et normaliens dans l’entre deux guerres* (only in France would such a subject be considered worthy of a large thesis) was dedicated to his four grandparents (all of whom were primary school teachers).⁶⁸

Amongst French historical autobiographers, Agulhon, Ozouf and le Goff were also the children of teachers (in the case of Agulhon and Ozouf, both their parents were teachers and they grew up in houses attached to schools); writing an account of their early years also meant, to some extent, writing the history of the French education system. Writing the history of the French education system, in turn, linked autobiography to nation. French schools were intimately linked to the state, because their curriculum and even their teaching staff were both chosen centrally, but they were also linked to a certain conception of national culture because they were so associated with the diffusion of republican and *laïc* values. The titles of Mona Ozouf’s books – *L’école, l’église et la république, 1871–1914*; *L’école de la France: essai sur la révolution, l’utopie et l’enseignement*; *La république des instituteurs* are revealing and show how working on the school

65 Lilly Marcou, *Une enfance stalinienne* (Paris 1982); François Fejto, *Mémoires: De Budapest à Paris* (Paris 1986).

66 *Discours de réception de Pierre Nora à l’académie française et réponse de René Rémond* (2002). These speeches were given on 6 June 2002 and can be found on the web.

67 Pierre Goubert, *Un parcours d’historien: souvenirs, 1915–1995* (Paris 1996).

68 Jean-François Sirinelli, *Génération intellectuelle: Khâgneux et normaliens dans l’entre deux guerres* (Paris 1994).

system led both to work on the republican idea more generally and to her own autobiography.⁶⁹ Nora himself has been interested in the ways that the education system diffused quintessentially French values and has written on the author of historical textbooks, Ernest Lavissee.

Jewish historian autobiographers in France have a particular relation to the nation, which contrasts with that seen elsewhere. In America, historians of Jewish German origin became important to the historical profession after 1945. Not surprisingly, people who had grown up in Weimar Germany but then made their careers in, say, Princeton or Chicago thought of themselves as cosmopolitan.⁷⁰ They were often, like George Mosse, interested in nationalism, but they regarded it as a problem to be studied rather than a virtue to be embraced. Peter Gay's autobiography revolved around his own rejection of his German origins.⁷¹ French Jewish historians had different experiences. Those of them who survived generally came from families that remained in France. The autobiographies of Georgette Elgey and Annie Kriegel recognize French antisemitism, but they also make much of the help that French gentiles provided to French Jews – indeed, French Jewish historians who survived in wartime France are often striking in their willingness to defend the conduct of French people, if not the French government, during the Occupation.⁷² This tendency is reinforced by three things. First, and once again, the French education system: elite schools, which were so tied up with republican culture, also sometimes provided refuges with shelter, and even physical protection from antisemitism during the Occupation.⁷³ Secondly, the most famous French historian of the twentieth century – Marc Bloch – was a Jew, but a Jew who saw himself as having particularly close relations with the nation and who died a hero's death as a Resistance leader, rather than a victim's death as the object of racial persecution. Thirdly, Charles de Gaulle could be presented as the representative of 'true France' against the 'false France' of Vichy. Georgette Elgey's autobiography is shot through with references to de Gaulle: to the cross of Lorraine that she bought at the Liberation; to the diary entry that she wrote in 1944: 'Once de Gaulle is here I'll not be frightened any more'; and to the fact that she became de Gaulle's research assistant when he composed his memoirs.⁷⁴ Pierre Nora is

69 *L'école, l'église et la république, 1871–1914* (Paris 1962); *L'école de la France: essai sur la révolution, l'utopie et l'enseignement* (Paris 1984); *La république des instituteurs* (Paris 1989). The last of these was written with Jacques Ozouf.

70 Felix Gilbert, *A European Past: Memoirs, 1900–1945* (New York 1988); Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago 1996).

71 Peter Gay, *My German Question: Growing up in Nazi Berlin* (New Haven, CT 1998).

72 Kriegel, *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre*, op. cit., 148.

73 Annie Kriegel points out that her brother became a boarder at Louis-le-Grand in October 1941 in order to avoid the risk of being arrested on the street. She suggests that this was a common tactic and one that school administrators encouraged: Kriegel, *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre*, 142. Even Jews of central European origin who passed through France during the Occupation and subsequently left Europe (people whose life was harder than French-born Jews) seem to have regarded French schools as a refuge. Saul Friedlander recalls that the population of the small town in which his family stayed included 'the three schoolmasters fiercely anti-German and anti-Pétain from the start': Saul Friedlander, *When Memory Comes* (New York 1979; first published in Paris 1978), 51.

74 Georgette Elgey, *The Open Window* (London 1974; first published Paris 1973), 202–3.

Jewish and argued that a renewed awareness of de Gaulle's importance contributed to the autobiographical turn that lay behind *ego-histoire*.⁷⁵

Contributors to Nora's volume were also associated with the particular world of French politics. Historical autobiographers outside France have often been identified with a broad left. Luisa Passerini said that she had drawn the historians who were invited to contribute to the autobiographical volume that she edited exclusively from amongst those with 'progressive' political opinions. Geoff Eley also seems to take it for granted that interesting historians will be, in some way, on the political Left and this is certainly true of the three historians – Tim Mason, E.P. Thompson and Carolyn Steedman – that he singles out for special study. Steedman's own autobiography deals with the political conservatism of her mother and with her father's uncomfortable views on matters such as race – but these views are treated as interesting precisely because it is taken for granted that they contrast with Steedman's own views and, perhaps, with those of anyone likely to be reading her book.

Progressive views, however, are rarely defined. Indeed, we learn more about what historians are against than what they are for. John Brewer is against the Crosslandite technocracy of the 1960s;⁷⁶ Stedman Jones is against the 'furtive Mandarin Leninism' of the *New Left Review*.⁷⁷ None of these writers, however, says much about what they actually wanted. Indeed, in some ways the writing of history, especially contemporary history, provides them with an alternative to political engagement. Historical writing suggests alternative possibilities – not necessarily a political programme, but simply a sense that things might have been different. Historical autobiography is informed by a kind of nostalgia for the future – a sentimental recollection of the time when the Left hoped for things – which goes with the implicit or explicit assumption that it cannot hope for much now and also with the fact that what the Left once wanted, and what might have happened if it had got its way, is not much explored.

In some ways, Anglo-American historians benefit from the luxury of defeat. As the political climate since the 1980s has been so hostile to their ideas, they are spared having to say anything about how – or perhaps even whether – they would like to see those ideas implemented. The luxury of defeat has, of course, been particularly luxurious for those British historians who took refuge from Thatcherism in the United States – a country in which many academics espoused Left-wing ideas in the certain knowledge that there was no chance that they would ever be asked to implement them. Soviet communism and its fall induced little self-criticism amongst Anglo-American historical autobiographers. Left-wingers did not see themselves as compromised by events in the Soviet Union. Most of them

75 Pierre Nora, 'L'ego-histoire est-elle possible?', op. cit., 20. Nora associated his project with 'la montée en puissance de l'image historique du général de Gaulle'.

76 John Brewer, 'New Ways in History or Talking about my Generation', *Historien: A Review of the Past and Other Stories*, 3 (2001), 27–44, at 36.

77 Gareth Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory: An English Story', *Historien: A Review of the Past and Other Stories*, 3 (2001), 103–24.

had not been members of the Communist Party. In any case, the Communist Party in Britain (and even more in America) was so small and removed from real political power that membership was rarely seen as entailing commitment to a particular political programme.⁷⁸ If anything, the fall of communism actually went with a certain self-satisfaction on the part of historians. Because history was seen as important by central European dissidents (and because the fall of communism, in conspicuous contrast to that of nazism, could be presented as the result of an intellectual revolution), historians came to see themselves as more significant historical actors in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was most obviously true of Timothy Garton Ash, who had links with central European dissidents and who had already written a certain number of autobiographical articles even before the Berlin Wall came down. It was also true of Robert Darnton, who kept a diary of the sabbatical year that he spent in Berlin during 1989–90.⁷⁹ Tony Judt's transformation from being a historian of nineteenth-century France to being one of late twentieth-century Europe went with learning Czech and running errands for Prague dissidents.⁸⁰ His book on Europe since 1945 (roughly the period of his own life) was marketed with much reference to Judt's own 'back story'.⁸¹

The sense of autobiographers as belonging to a broad and not very sharply-defined Left contrasts with the politics of those French historians associated with *ego-histoire*. Nora specifically chose his authors from among historians drawn from a variety of different political traditions, but he gave special emphasis to two. The first was made up of Maurassian Right-wingers – people who had grown up in the milieu of French Catholic royalism and who had, to some extent, been associated with the Vichy government and with the defence of French Algeria. Nora was very influenced by Philippe Ariès and argued that Maurasian historians had a particularly strong sense of a vanished past that needed to be recuperated.⁸²

The second important group for Nora was composed of ex-communists – or, more precisely of those who had joined the *Parti Communiste Français* during the period of its greatest prestige, in the late 1940, and who then left it at some point in the 1950s. Two of the seven contributors to *ego-histoire* (Maurice Agulhon and Michelle Perrot) belonged to this group. Le Roy Ladurie was the first historian of the 'Nora generation' to write an autobiography and he defined his life in explicitly party terms – its subtitle being 'PCF/PSU'. The autobiographies of Annie Kriegel,

78 Richard Pipes was an explicitly anti-communist historical autobiographer: see Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven, CT 2003). However, he was unusual; it is notable that the response to his work by left-wing historians rarely involved much criticism of their own past – see Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'The Rise and Fall of the Baggy-Trousered Barbarians', *London Review of Books*, 26, 16 (19 August 2004).

79 Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal, 1989–1990* (New York 1991).

80 Tony Judt, 'Saved by Czech', *New York Review of Books*, 11 March 2010.

81 Tony Judt, *Post-War* (London 2005).

82 Nora, 'L'ego-histoire: Est-elle possible?', op. cit., 20: 'de famille monarchiste et traditionaliste, ce sentiment de la perte induisait chez ce réactionnaire un rapport existentiel intense avec ce passé, le besoin de le comprendre dans sa différence, de rétablir avec lui une manière de filiation'. . . L'histoire n'était pas pour lui une carrière ou une curiosité, mais une raison de vivre.'

Alain Besançon⁸³ and, to a lesser extent, Mona Ozouf are all, in large measure, attempts to explain their communist pasts. Nora himself sometimes wrote as though *ego-histoire* was simply a subset of works by ex-communists and, indeed, defined François Furet's book on the past of the communist 'illusion' as a form of autobiography.⁸⁴

The autobiographies of French historians were marked by two things. First, in conspicuous contrast to the Anglo-Saxon emphasis on a broad Left, by their emphasis on a precise political position. People who had ceased to be communists needed to explain what they had become instead. There were considerable differences between those (Annie Kriegel, Le Roy Ladurie) who ended up on the Right and those who remained in what Kriegel herself contemptuously described as the 'soapy waters' of the democratic Left. Secondly, French ex-communists had learned from the traditions of self-criticism in the Communist Party itself. More specifically, they were influenced by one particular deployment of that tradition – that of the sociologist Edgar Morin, who published *Autocritique*, to explain his own membership of, and eventual departure from, the communist party.⁸⁵ His book was particularly notable for its attempt to explain the communist enthusiasm of his own youth and background. Historians who wrote their autobiographies were not necessarily sympathetic to Morin,⁸⁶ but they were all influenced by the need to present some similar critique of their own past.

The particularity of the role of former communists amongst French historians is highlighted by a cross-channel perspective. Leaving the party was a less traumatic process for British historians. Personal relations between communists and those who had left the party often remained amicable. Communists and ex-communists often continued to think of themselves as part of a broad Left alliance and, in the historical profession itself, this alliance extended to take in anyone who was willing to countenance a certain kind of social history – even the Conservative Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote for *Past and Present*, a journal that had pretty much been founded by the Communist Party Historians' Group. Eric Hobsbawm's autobiography is remarkably free of the agonizing about a communist past that so often marked his French counterparts. And indeed, Hobsbawm's status in the English and American historical profession always depended partly on a feeling that it would be polite not to make too much of his political affiliations.⁸⁷

Among ex-communists in the British historical profession, only Raphael Samuel – a historian who took a sympathetic interest in French intellectual life and was particularly influenced by Pierre Nora – attempted anything close to Edgar Morin's *Autocritique*,⁸⁸ and Samuel's essay on an English communist childhood was

83 Alain Besançon, *Une génération* (Paris 1987); Mona Ozouf, *Composition française*, op. cit.

84 Nora, 'L'ego-histoire: Est-elle possible', op. cit., 22: 'C'est l'autobiographie intellectuelle de François Furet qui donne à son analyse historique de l'idée communiste son poids d'expérience'.

85 Edgar Morin, *Autocritique* (1959).

86 Kriegel, *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre*, op. cit., 493–5.

87 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London 2002), 390.

88 Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London 2006).

dismissed as an excessively personal and untypical account by other former communist historians.⁸⁹

Alongside the more explicit and varied political engagement of French historical autobiographers went a different attitude to the recent past. The key period for French authors was that which lasted from 1914 until the late 1950s – it took in the two world wars (especially the second),⁹⁰ Stalinism and the conflict over French Algeria. This was not because all historians took a simple or unified attitude to these events – rather the contrary. The historians that Nora regarded as associated, in one way or another, with *ego-histoire* included those with Pétainist sympathies, such as Ariès, and those with Resistance sympathies, such as le Goff. It included some authors with awkward personal trajectories. Raoul Girardet came from a Right-wing milieu but had also joined the Resistance and almost been executed by the Gestapo. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie was, at the time of writing his autobiography, a democratic socialist who had passed through the Communist Party, but he was also the son of a Vichy minister and he eventually became a conservative columnist with *Le Figaro*. Annie Kriegel was a Jew and a *résistante*, who was intensely aware of Vichy antisemitism but who became a conservative.

Even autobiographers who were too young to play any direct role in the second world war or those who were born after it (and comparatively few French historians born after 1945 have written autobiographies) are sometimes haunted by the conflicts of the Occupation. Mona Ozouf was born in 1934. Her father died before the war, but he had been a Breton nationalist and she, as an adult, was troubled by the question of whether he, like many Breton nationalists, would have become a collaborator during the war.⁹¹ Gérard Noiriel was born in 1950, but a sense of being an outsider came partly from the fact that his grandfather had been a collaborator.⁹² Françoise Thébaud was born in the early 1950s, but her youth was overshadowed by the fact that her grandfather and great-uncle had both been shot during the Occupation.⁹³ During the Algerian war, historical autobiographers took both sides. Ariès, Girardet and François Bluche⁹⁴ were defenders of French Algeria (sufficiently vociferous in Girardet's case to be imprisoned for a time), while Leroy Ladurie, Agulhon, Rebérioux and Vidal-Naquet were all opponents of the French presence in Algeria (sufficiently vociferous in Le Roy Ladurie's case to have had his house bombed by right-wing activists).

89 John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London 2003), 11.

90 Perhaps the most notable reference to the second world war comes with the opening sentence of Georges Duby's autobiography: 'l'histoire que je vais raconter débute en 1942' – a sentence that is striking precisely because Duby does not expand and seems to assume that the reader will draw their own conclusions: Duby, *L'histoire continue*, op. cit.

91 Mona Ozouf, *Composition française*, op. cit., 39: 'certains de ses amis, militants de gauche comme lui, se sont laissé séduire: les facilités ouvertes à la pratique et à l'enseignement du breton par l'occupation allemande les ont conduits à céder à la possibilité miraculeuse, si longtemps convoitée, de faire à Radio Rennes des émissions en breton. Qu'aurait fait ton père? Cette question, anxieusement posée par ma mère, a accompagné comme une basse continue mon enfance et mon adolescence.'

92 Noiriel, *Penser avec, penser contre*, op. cit., 250.

93 Françoise Thébaud, 'Entre Parcours intellectuel et essai d'*ego-histoire*', op. cit.

94 On Bluche's career, see *77 ans d'enthousiasme: ressouvenirs* (Paris 2006), 235–9.

Three related things mark the way in which French historians have written about their own experience during the mid-twentieth century. First, a strong sense of the recent past as something that is hard to recapture – the world of, say, French Stalinism in the late 1940s or French Royalism in the 1930s is presented as being remote from the present. Secondly, there is a strong sense of moral complexity: authors themselves do not believe that they were necessarily on the ‘right side’, or even that there was a right side to be on. Thirdly, French authors recall the recent past in a fashion that is – to use a word that would once have been a term of abuse – *événementiel*. They see particular moments at which things changed for ever. Le Roy Ladurie recalls cycling through the streets of Montpellier on the morning of 4 November 1956 to hand in his Communist Party card on the day that he heard of the Soviet invasion of Hungary;⁹⁵ Raoul Girardet regrets that he did not protest on 3 October 1940 – the day that the Vichy government passed the Statut des Juifs.⁹⁶

Once again, the contrast with Anglo-Saxon autobiographers is striking. British historians emphasize the very recent past – often beginning at the end of the very period that French historians define as most important. Gareth Stedman Jones (born in 1942) briskly insists that the two world wars were ‘not the really important divide in British history’ and were less important than the changes that began in the early 1960s: ‘there was more similarity between the 1870s and the 1950s than there is between the 1950s and now’.⁹⁷ Tony Judt (born in 1948) argues that ‘Postwar London, where I grew up ... would have been immediately recognizable to an observer from half a century before’.⁹⁸ Geoff Eley (also born in 1948) hardly mentions the second world war – which is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that some of his historical work has focused on memories of that war. Eley’s view of his own life is centred on the period after 1945 and, comparing himself with Carolyn Steedman, he writes: ‘I might likewise describe parallel journeys through the safe but dispiriting social and cultural landscapes of the long postwar’.⁹⁹

The difference between the approach of French historical autobiographers and Anglo-American ones is revealed by their attitude to 1968. The student protests of that year feature in almost all academic recollections. However, the role that it plays in their accounts is different. For Anglo-American historians it is not important as a year in which particular things happened – or at least not things that most historians approved of. Rather, ‘68’ is used as a kind of political brand name that evokes a powerful but vague sense of association between political and intellectual forms of ‘progressive outlooks’. John Brewer writes:

1968, and its immediate aftermath saw a radical transformation of the world I seek to describe – one that replaced the universal aspirations of pop and counter culture, and

95 Le Roy Ladurie, *Paris/Montpellier*, op. cit., 171.

96 Girardet, *Singulièrement libre*, op. cit., 34.

97 Stedman Jones, ‘History and Theory’, op. cit., 105.

98 Tony Judt, ‘Why the Cold War Worked’, *New York Review of Books*, 44, 15 (October 1997).

99 Eley, *A Crooked Line*, op. cit., 173.

of scientific socialism with the particularist claims of sub-cultures, identity politics and new social movements, a shift that was reflected as much in the writing of history as in leftist politics.¹⁰⁰

Geoff Eley defines himself with reference to 68 – ‘like many children of 68’; ‘profoundly the sensibility of 68’; ‘the new period opened by 68’¹⁰¹ – while telling his readers almost nothing about what he, or anyone else, actually did in that year.

For French historians the whole point of the *événements* is that they were *évènementiels*. They had a beginning (in Nanterre in March 1968) a middle (around the Sorbonne in May) and an end (which came on 30 May 1968, when conservative Parisians marched down the Champs Elysées in support of de Gaulle, or when de Gaulle won the legislative elections in the following year, or when left-wing militants themselves finally abandoned their radical projects at some point in the 1970s). Historians describe 1968 and some of them take positions for or against the students (Anne Kriegel, the ex-communist, is the most hostile and the two old Royalists, Ariès and Girardet, are rather sympathetic). However, though there are historians who were *soixante-huitards*, there are not really any *soixante-huitard* historians, in the sense that French scholars do not regard 1968 as something that changed their perspective on history as a whole. This is most dramatically illustrated by Yves Cohen. He has discussed his own past as a Maoist militant who went to work in a car factory in the aftermath of 1968.¹⁰² However, he did not blend autobiography and history: when he returned to academic life and wrote a thesis about Taylorization in the motor industry in the 1930s, he did not even mention the fact that he had once worked in the factory about which he now wrote.¹⁰³

It might be worth drawing attention to some paradoxes about the writing of historical autobiography. First, the autobiographical turn obviously has something to do with a more general rediscovery of subjectivity on the part of historians. However, in practice, there is a difference between the ways in which historians treat the memories of other people and the ways in which they treat their own recollections or those of their colleagues. The study of memory, notably pioneered by Nora, has gone with an emphasis on the extent to which personal recollections are retrospectively constructed. Nora’s own career reflects a change in the treatment of autobiographical accounts. In his youth, he edited the diaries of the French politician, Vincent Auriol. This was a work that suggested that a certain kind of historical actor had privileged access to the truth and that the historian’s job was merely to insert footnotes and clarify details.¹⁰⁴ More recently, however, Nora’s work on political memoirs had tended to present them as works of literary

100 Brewer, ‘Talking about my Generation’, op. cit., 29.

101 Eley, *A Crooked Line*, op. cit., 13, 59, 96.

102 Marnix Dressen, *De l’amphi à l’établi: les étudiants maosites à l’usine, 1967–1989* (Paris 2000).

103 Yves Cohen, *Organiser à l’aube du taylorisme: la pratique d’Ernest Mattern chez Peugeot, 1906–1919* (Paris 2001).

104 Vincent Auriol, *Journal du septennat, 1947–1954*, ed. by Pierre Nora (7 volumes, Paris 1970–1979).

artifice – things that tell us about a certain construction of the past but not about ‘what really happened’.¹⁰⁵

Personal memory has become seen as a poor guide to the past and this is especially so in France, where personal memory once constituted almost the only source about what was once seen as the most important subject in contemporary history: the Resistance.¹⁰⁶ French historians have, to a large extent, subjected themselves to the same scepticism that they apply to their historical subjects. Anne Kriegel – perhaps because she was a Resistance veteran – was careful to allow for the possibility that her own memory might be at fault and her autobiography contained footnotes referring to her personal archives.

Historian autobiographers in the Anglo-American world have taken a rather different approach. For one thing, as Luisa Passerini noted, Anglo-American historians rarely feel the need to check their memories against any other source. Often they seem, in fact, to have treated the personal memories of historians as a particularly valuable kind of source. Eric Hobsbawm quoted an article about himself that had described him as a ‘travel guide to the past’. Norman Stone’s ‘personal history’ of the Cold War was not only autobiographical in the sense that it drew on his personal memories of, say, advising Margaret Thatcher or imprisonment in Czechoslovakia, but also drew quite heavily on the autobiographies of other historians, including French historians, such as Annie Kriegel or Alain Bescançon, who had themselves been quite reluctant to make claims for the importance of their personal memory.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, in some ways the ‘old-fashioned’ autobiographies of A.J.P. Taylor and Richard Cobb are actually rare examples of autobiographical works in which historians draw their readers’ attention to the possibility that the author may not be a reliable witness.

Secondly, the autobiographical turn in historical writing has a particular relation to the writing of contemporary history. In his introduction to the *ego-histoire* collection, Pierre Nora associated it with ‘l’investissement du présent par le regard historien’.¹⁰⁸ Obviously, all autobiography is contemporary history in one sense. Equally, it is true that the autobiographical turn in historical writing has gone with changes that have tended to make contemporary history seem more acceptable. The emphasis on ‘detachment’ or complete access to the sources that might once have provided opponents of contemporary history with their most telling arguments is less evident in the historical profession now. More importantly, perhaps, the emphasis on large-scale structures studied over the ‘*longue durée*’ that partly underlay the distaste for contemporary history in the mid-1960s has declined in recent years.

105 Pierre Nora, ‘Memoirs of Men of State from Comynnes to de Gaulle’, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, I, The State (Chicago 2001), 401–451.

106 In his biography of the Resistance leader Jean Moulin, Daniel Cordier was careful to base his conclusions on primary documents and avoid relying on his own memories from the time when he had been Moulin’s secretary: Daniel Cordier, *Jean Moulin: la république des catacombes* (Paris 1999).

107 Norman Stone, *The Atlantic and Its Enemies: A Personal History of the Cold War* (London 2010).

108 Pierre Nora, ‘Présentation’, in Nora (ed.), *Essais d’ego-histoire*, op. cit., 5–7, at 5.

Having said all this, the writing of contemporary history and historical autobiography do not always go together. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Eric Hobsbawm have moved into writing about events that happened in their own lifetime at the same time as they began to write autobiographies, but other autobiographers – such as Georges Duby or Pierre le Goff – have kept their autobiographical and their historical writing largely separate.

There are also some striking recent examples of historians who present the fact that their accounts are not autobiographical as a virtue. Dominic Sandbrook, born in 1974, has stressed, in his accounts of postwar Britain, that he has no personal memories of the period about which he is writing and suggested that this is an advantage – not so much because it gives him detachment (his work is overtly opinionated) as because it removes him from the particular unspoken assumptions that have governed the approach of an earlier generation:

As probably the first historian to write about the period whose earliest memories only just encompass the years before Thatcherism, I have very little interest in either celebrating an exaggerated golden age of hedonism and liberation, or in condemning an equally exaggerated era of moral degradation and national decline.¹⁰⁹

It is equally notable that the historians who have produced the most influential work on the Algerian War of 1954 to 1962 – Claire Mauss-Copeaux, Sylvie Thénault and Raphaëlle Branche¹¹⁰ – were all born after the end of the war (in at least one case, ten years after it). These historians present their absence of direct experience as a defining feature of their research.¹¹¹ This is not because they are making old-style claims to the ‘objectivity’ that goes with distance, but rather because their lack of immediate experience frees them from the easy assumptions that might be made by earlier historians. This lack of immediate experience is, furthermore, not simply a function of age – as has been stressed, historians may feel a personal association with events that happened before their birth. It is also associated with their sex. Women born in the early 1970s did not have the military experience that would be shared by almost all Frenchmen (even men of their age) and consequently approach discussion of armies and violence with a kind of useful naivety and an insistence on asking particular kinds of questions.

The Algerian War raises an important issue in historical autobiography. This was, after all, a central event for many French historians. Pierre Nora himself spent two years teaching in Algiers and his first book was about the French settlers in Algeria.¹¹² The relation between personal experience and historical writing is

109 Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had it so Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London 2005), xvi.

110 Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris 2001); Sylvie Thénault, *Une drôle de justice: les magistrats dans la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris 2001); Claire Mauss-Copeaux, *Appelés en Algérie: la parole confisquée* (Paris 1998).

111 Sylvie Thénault, ‘Travailler sur la guerre d'indépendance Algérienne: bilan d'une expérience historique’, *Afrique et histoire*, 2, 1 (2004), 193–209.

112 Pierre Nora, *Les Français d'Algérie* (Paris 1961).

complicated. During, and in the years immediately after, the war many historians seem to have felt that their own experiences (especially as conscript soldiers in a war with comparatively low casualties on the French side) were not ‘real history’. Antoine Prost remarked, in his history of *anciens combattants* from the first world war, that he felt his own experience to be overshadowed by that of his elders¹¹³ and Alain Corbin seems to have had similar feelings.¹¹⁴ As time has passed, this feeling has changed and French historians do talk about Algeria in autobiographical works. Prost has, for example, published the diary that he kept as an officer in Algeria in 1960.¹¹⁵ However, references in autobiography have rarely gone with explicit academic study of the subject. Pierre Nora has, indeed, been reproached by American historians for failing to include studies of France’s colonial past in his great work on the *lieux de mémoire*.¹¹⁶ Algeria is, however, important to a certain generation of French historians – not as an object of study, but rather as a prism through which history is seen. Nora does not include any essay on Algeria in the *Lieux de Mémoire*, but he does see the war as central to the ‘crisis of memory’ that has gripped modern France – he describes it as ‘our war of secession’.¹¹⁷ Algeria has an influence on how previous French history is written, precisely because it is difficult to fit into the neat categories of the ‘roman national’. This is a war in which the French were occupiers, and the republic was seen by some as the destroyer of liberty. Raoul Girardet, one of the historians who was most implicated in Algeria and certainly the one whose stance would have been regarded as least defensible in the France of the late 1980s, remarked in his contribution to *Ego-histoire* that the implications of autobiographical essays might not be seen by the authors themselves, and one might argue that the most useful function of autobiography is precisely to draw attention to those events that do not feature in a historian’s ordinary writing but that, nonetheless, have had some important influence on their historical writing.

The question of unspoken assumptions brings us to the ways in which autobiographies may be peculiar to particular generations and particular national cultures. Pierre Nora’s *ego-histoire* volume is probably the best-known single contribution to the autobiographical turn and some commentators assume that *ego-histoire* is indeed a term that can be applied to autobiographical works by almost any kind of historian. The *Ego-histoire* collection, however, belonged to a specific time and place. It went with a group of historians who belonged to a certain generation (born between 1917 and 1936, with a special concentration of those born around 1930) and who were associated with particular kinds of institutions – particularly the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the *Annales* and the *Parti Communiste Français*. The accounts produced by these historians were not homogeneous (in terms of

113 Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française (1914–1939)*, 3 vols (Paris 1977), 1:1.

114 Alain Corbin, *Historien du sensible: entretiens avec Gilles Heuré* (Paris 2000), 16.

115 Antoine Prost, *Carnets d’Algérie* (Paris 2005).

116 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ‘Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory’, *American Historical Review*, 106, 3 (2001), 906–22.

117 Pierre Nora, in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, I, op cit., viii.

their political views, they were more diverse than the autobiographical accounts produced by Anglo-American historians), but they were all concerned with particular episodes – the Occupation, the large-scale disillusionment with communism that took place in the mid-1950s and the Algerian War of 1954–1962. It is notable that the momentum of *ego-histoire* has not been sustained. France has not seen the big wave of autobiographical accounts produced by young historians in the Anglo-American world in recent years. In short, French historians never thought that personal revelation was an end in itself. Accounts by historians were only worthwhile because the historians had lived through episodes of special importance.

This highlights the odd fact that focus on the personal itinerary of a historian can actually end up neglecting the very context in which the historian operates. It is worth going back to Timothy Garton Ash's account of his time in East Germany. He notes that the Stasi's code name for him was 'Romeo' and he seems to assume that this is a reference to his success as a seducer. He places less emphasis on the relative privilege of his own social position – a matter that might be expected to excite the interest of the communist authorities – though he does reveal, in passing, that he arrived in Berlin as a 23-year-old research student, in a brand new sports car: it was an Alfa Romeo.¹¹⁸

Biographical Note

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118 Garton Ash, *The File*, op. cit., 20.