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**David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiv + 296 pp. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-51936.**

### **Review – 800 words**

In this ambitious and rich work, David Hopkins tries to answer a classical question of social history: how to reconstruct visions of the world of ordinary people, those who haven't written their thoughts? To solve this large question, he proposes to use the neglect folkloric sources to introduce a "folklorist turn" in historiography, against those who tend to consider these sources as reactionary and regard it with caution. Whereas French historiography would prefer using administrative and judicial archives, Hopkins proposes a new paradigm dealing with oral archives and folklorist tradition. The first aim of the book is to free poor people of the cultural and socio-economic determinism which continue to model the way we see them. His methodology is borrowed from medieval and early modern history more than contemporary historians. His project is also linked to an old and important tradition in social science: since 19<sup>th</sup> century indeed a lot of scientists, among them anthropologists, sociologists or Historians, try to understand how people of the past thought the world they lived. Whereas most historians in France are not really interested in oral culture, Hopkins proposes a new way to study society by exploration of the way local communities construct themselves through the stories that "they told to themselves about themselves".

Each chapter presents a short monograph of a single social context. Each tries to explore a classical question with a new insight. The first two chapters study the life of the maritime community and fishing village of Saint-Cast in Brittany; the four others follow different kinds of rural French community dispersed in France, from Lorraine, to the Nièvre or Haute-Loire; from paysans, to home-workers and servants. In the first chapter for example – "Storytelling in a maritime community: Saint-Cast, 1879-1882" – the author explores the work of the most famous French Folklorist of the time, Paul Sébillot. Sébillot, Breton, republican and social scientist, tried to introduce new methods to study the local community in North of Brittany. For him folklore was a kind of archeology, a method to transform old practices of the past into narratives useful for the present. In the case of Saint-Cast Island, oral stories and legends told by women illustrate social interactions within the community but also strategies to preserve their community at a time of transformation of the island society with the beginning of tourism. The second chapter studies how sailors and fishermen constructed their own mythology of the sea, thought of as a place of liberty, of social success, despite the numerous difficulties of navigation.

The four other chapters study with the same careful approach folkloric tales – associated with more classical sources – to understand the language of poor people themselves. Chapter four follows the *dâyage*, an exchange of riddle-like verses between groups of men and women. He demonstrates how this custom was used as a demographic strategy by peasant families. In Chapter 5, Hopkins explores French agricultural work-songs to understand the singularity of peasants' language, and the way they articulate their own identity. In the final chapter he explores the "visionary World of the Vellave lace maker". Through careful examination of this group of women workers, Hopkins studies how women use the language of counter-Reformation Catholicism to express their personal choices and autonomy.

Each chapter is constructed with its own logic and seems separate from the rest of the book. But with patience and careful reading, the reader is taken step by step to some interesting generalizations. Each chapter discusses an important question of historiography: it may be Roland Mousnier's controversial "society of orders", the role of religion in popular culture, or the relation between men and women in Nineteenth century France. Each chapter is also an

occasion to understand a single social world in all its complexity. Finally, it is a very original study which combines local erudition with some fascinating conclusions about popular culture and agency of poor people of the past. The aim of David Hopkins is to understand the function that “storytelling had in the making of social organization” (p. 79), and we can conclude that each of his case studies succeeds in introducing “storytelling” in the complex way social groups functioned. In his Book, Hopkins also throws light on a lot of important questions. First of all he tries to demonstrate how social and cultural history could be reconciled to understand how people of the past lived and thought their own condition; but he demonstrates also how poor and ordinary people tried to keep control over their lives at a time of abrupt change and transformation. For him, and his book is really convincing in this respect, folklorist tradition can be very useful – if historians look closely at the condition of production of these discourses – to give us access to the agency of ordinary people.

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