

## Memory of War in France, 1914-45: César Fauxbras, the Voice of the Lowly

**Review Number:**

1112

**Publish date:**

Monday, 1 August, 2011

**Author:**

Matthew Perry

**ISBN:**

9780230594418

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£55.00

**Pages:**

272pp.

**Publisher:**

Palgrave Macmillan

**Place of Publication:**

Basingstoke

**Reviewer:**

Gearóid Barry

This book is written with a clear purpose: to unsettle assumptions conditioned by the power of institutions such as states and armies to frame the first draft of history. Matt Perry has taken the decision to put before readers the subaltern voice of a French socialist activist. In so doing it was perhaps inevitable that he would draw on the categories of cultural power set down in the prison writings of Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. This book takes one socialist life and makes of it an exemplar of Gramsci's 'organic intellectual', less concerned with grandiloquence as with the rational working out of the everyday power relationships that structure their world (p. 176). Neither a conventional biography nor a literary study, Perry structures his narrative of political consciousness around a punctual series of texts from the pen of César Fauxbras, the nom-de-plume of Kléber Gaston Sterckeman (1899–1968). In a life lived mostly at odds with the status quo, Fauxbras was a French witness to the era of the two world wars who was 'simultaneously unique and typical' (p. 181). Expressing his approval of the recent publication of a growing number of studies of intellectual itineraries, such as the work by Simon Epstein and Philippe Burrin, Perry embarks with the ambition to refine the form.<sup>(1)</sup> Perry acknowledges that while there were 'trigger-events', 'individuals did not conveniently obey general trends ... All this suggests an erroneous over-determination of political ideas in some of the historical literature about political itineraries during this period' (p. 98).

Fauxbras – as the left-wing activist and writer came to be known – was born in 1898 in modest circumstances on the north French coast near Dunkirk,. An inveterate contrarian, Fauxbras was touched by great events and commented on them. An 'ordinary sailor' in the French navy, he published in the 1930s a pair of anti-militarist novels – *Jean le Gouin* (1932) and *Mer Noire* (1935) – based on this experience. *Mer Noire*

was a fictionalization of the French Navy's Black Sea mutiny of 1919 during the French intervention against the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. These novels anchor the first of the three parts into which the seven chapters of Perry's monograph are helpfully grouped. The second part deals with the crisis of the 1930s as refracted through Fauxbras's novels and journalism. In 1935, he published *Viande à Brûler*, a searing social realist novel on the Depression: it recounted the despair of the little people on the dole, and was written with the authority of the author's direct experience of unemployment. In 1937, as a disenchanted supporter of the faltering left-wing Popular Front coalition, Fauxbras issued *Antide* as a satirical allegory of French politics in the frenetic years since 1934, poking as much fun at left-wing pieties as it heaped scorn on the right. Analysis of them reveals Fauxbras as a valuable witness to, and sometime protagonist in, major public controversies. In the third part of the book, subtitled 'Defeat and occupation', Perry concentrates on two unpublished manuscripts of Fauxbras dating from the Second World War. The first – a survey of fellow French POWs in 1940 – and the second, a polemic against pro-Germanism in the French navy, were both out of sync with national requirements in wartime and then liberated France and never saw print. These writings, published and private, span, therefore, Europe's 'Thirty Year War' and the most fractious years of what historians have terms the 'Franco-French' civil war, providing a rich vein of material expertly mined by Perry.

As the author of maritime equivalents to Henri Barbusse's war novel *Le Feu*, Fauxbras is a writer of note. An apprentice sailor in February 1915, he served between the ages of 16 and 21 in the French navy. His war was one of battleship tours in the Mediterranean punctuated by the terror of Austrian U-boat attacks and a period in 1918 as a newly licensed airship pilot patrolling the sea lanes between Algiers and Marseilles. In his novels, Fauxbras speaks up for Jean Le Gouin or 'Jack Tar', the title denoting the archetypal mariner. From the preface to the novel, reproduced by Perry in an appendix, we see that Fauxbras is driven by rage at the official history of the war at sea as perpetrated by Paul Chack, Chief of the Historical Service of the Navy from 1923 to 1935. Disdained by Fauxbras in his press columns as 'Chack-connerie' (a pun implying deception), Chack's beatific account stressed phlegmatic self-sacrifice on the part of officers who went down with their ships and their patriotic men, *noblesse oblige*. Instead of sacred union of the high seas, Fauxbras depicts French warships as sites of muted class warfare, which boils over on the Black Sea in 1919. Perry correctly sees in this account of navy life a 'claustrophobic contestation of space quite unlike the hundreds of miles of trenches on the front' (p. 48). The mutiny of part of the fleet at Sevastopol in April 1919 was a key founding myth of the French Communist Party (1920) even if, from the first, Fauxbras kept a studious middle distance from the regimented 'Muscovites'.

*Viande à Brûler* (1935) is an immensely valuable social document, putting a human face on the humiliating reality of mass unemployment in the 1930s. Bullied at the dole office and harried by blood-sucking slum landlords, the life of its unfortunate main male character spirals downwards into the suicide that closes the morality tale. It may not have endured as much in cultural memory as the journeys across the economic dustbowls of England and America published by Orwell or Steinbeck but this was Fauxbras's best reviewed book, and earned him a nomination for the Prix Goncourt. The economic system, Fauxbras claimed, made of the workers 'meat to be burned', a human waste produced by the dysfunction of capitalism. Lighter in mood (which would not have been hard) was Fauxbras' next novel. *Antide* was a satire updating the allegorical journey of Voltaire's *Candide* from the 18th century to the 1930s, with a happy-go-lucky guide whose hope is for all to be for the best in the 'best of all possible republics.' Savage on all fronts, the novel allows one hint of sentiment: not even Fauxbras can remain unmoved by the election night of May 1936, on which *Antide* and his lover Manoute weep for joy. The novel made explicit the distrust of Stalinist Communism implicit in Fauxbras' earlier work. Attracted by the French Communists' professed anti-militarism, *Antide* undergoes an amusing membership interview for the French Communist party where heedlessly mentioning Lenin and Trotsky in the same breath elicits horror of the part of his orthodox boards of assessors. Arriving in Moscow, *Antide* is disgusted to be told that the finest achievement of Communism is the Red Army. He concludes that Stalin – the 'Vulcan of the Urals' – reigned over a brutal regime of discipline (p. 90). Not popular with French Communists for belling the cat, Fauxbras once more spoke his truth to power, irrespective of the season's fashions.

Perry concludes his treatment of the 1930s by putting in context Fauxbras's prolific output as a journalist in this period. Both contributing to the Radical newspaper *L'Oeuvre* and writing his own weekly column in the more niche *Merle Blanc*, Fauxbras was an assiduous part of the anti-establishment mosquito press that had grown up in response to the Great War and its diet of nationalist 'bourrage de crâne' or 'brainwashing'. Fauxbras' 'Commentaries of César' scanned the press, from left to right, for hogwash. He had rich pickings because, as Perry explains in an immensely valuable two-page excursus, the corruption of the press was not just a phantasm of the left (pp. 101–3). In truth, papers of nearly all political hues were being manipulated by any number of trusts and vested interests, acting on the part of big business, politicians and even foreign powers (as evinced by the monies doled out by the Soviet embassy). Though he does not make this explicit, Perry's useful statement of evidence parallels the case against the media for dereliction of duty sketched out, fleetingly, in Marc Bloch's *Strange Defeat* (1940). Fauxbras' columns displayed his distrust of authority: after the police shot and killed worker protestors at Clichy in March 1937, Fauxbras declared that the Popular Front 'government had tamed the revolutionary crowd' (p. 109). Over and against governments, Fauxbras constructed a 'model of intellectual engagement which viewed the intellectual as inseparable from the people' (p. 119).

The transition for peace to war between 1938 and 1940 tested Fauxbras' political commitments further. Attracted by the new integral pacifism of 1930s dominated by figures such as anti-colonialist Félicien Challaye, Perry asks the pertinent question of how it was that Fauxbras did not go down the line of other pacifists who, after 1940, collaborated with Vichy or the Germans as the most effective way to peace. For Perry, it was Fauxbras' very sectarianism as a man of the left – often in itself unattractive – that guarded him from the vertigo of Vichy. Though briefly in the integral pacifist Parti Frontiste party of Gaston Bergery in 1939, for Fauxbras, the peace issue never bridged the gap between the left and the defeatist right, meaning there was reactionary company he would never sup with. Though critical of the French left, 'his arguments were with Marxists, not Marxism' (p. 119). A reluctant reservist, Fauxbras was mobilized as a sergeant into the 511th Infantry Division of Dunkirk in March 1940. Seeing up close the collapse of the French army in the face of the Wehrmacht advance, Fauxbras was amongst those who were taken prisoner on 28 May 1940. In the weeks from then to July 1940, he jotted down carefully the opinions of his fellow POWs, covering the first weeks of their captivity at the Kaisersteinbruch Stalag 17a, south of Vienna. Black humour and stoic withdrawal marked their observations. The investiture of Pétain and his policy decision for an armistice in late June the captives greeted favourably by and large though Fauxbras speaks up to remind his fellow inmates of Pétain as executioner of the mutineers of 1917. Perry rightly sees in this direct testimony from the POW camp a 'unique source of grassroots consciousness' which helps to puncture the bubble Vichy propaganda constructed around the prisoners (p. 147). Tying his research here with the recent scholarship on the POWs, Perry argues, along with Richard Vinen and Sarah Fishman, that there was a yawning gap between the patriotic victims who 'constituted the regime's legitimizing rationale, and the prosaic and more mundane reality of the prisoners' fractiousness' (p. 126). Repatriated in 1941, Fauxbras shared fully the hardships of the time, peddling knick-knacks from a kiosk near his home in Vincennes. Though not an active resistance man, Fauxbras chronicled the drab world around him in a private Occupation diary. Perry argues persuasively for its value as an unedited source, closer to the people than that of author Jean Guéhenno. The diary takes the measure of the black market, the Allied bombing raids and the valency of support for Vichy; well-chosen quotes are supplemented by a more extensive reproduction of extracts in an appendix.

This is a book that is well situated in relation the existing secondary literature, both building on it and qualifying it, where Perry's findings lead to such revisions. Already author of several books on Depression-era Britain and France, Perry's present book is an addition on several historiographical fronts, engaging with previous historians of the First World War, the 1930s and the 'Dark Years' of occupation, as well as studies of the French working class. The French history-writing of the First World War has been much enlivened in the recent past by debates over the place of witness narratives and the roles of consent and coercion in the war. Perry declines to take an explicit stance between the different parties, showing familiarity with arguments he does not want his own work to be defined by. With an even-handed eclecticism, he accepts Stéphane-Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker's warnings against the narrative hegemony of the witness,

while still speaking out for the hermeneutical value of the witness he is about to call to testify. On the naval mutinies, Perry builds on the history of the events by Philippe Masson whose work he praises but for its neglect of the ‘emergence of a shared political culture of dissent’ which Masson downplayed in favour of dissatisfaction with conditions instrumentalized by agitators (p. 39). Drawing on the scholarship of the 1917 mutinies in the land armies, Perry situates the Black Sea rebels in the same space Leonard V. Smith placed the Fifth Infantry Division of his case-study: ‘between mutiny and obedience’ (p.50).<sup>(2)</sup> However, Perry jibs at a ‘citizen-soldier’ interpretation of the end of the protests, seeing, in keeping with historians like André Loez and Nicolas Offenstadt, the strong arm of compulsion where Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker saw an underlying patriotism in the end of the ‘strikes’.

On the 1930s and 1940s, it is clear that this Fauxbras micro-history is grafted onto the sturdy stock of work like that of Julian Jackson. The chapters on the war are a good fit in terms of approach with the bigger canvas of the ‘unfree French’ painted in Vinen’s recent book. Fauxbras’ concept of the ‘people’ chimes with the theme of Jessica Wardhaugh’s recent study on political culture in the 1930s <sup>(3)</sup>, too recent a book for inclusion by Perry, unfortunately. Overall, the immersion in the secondary literature that saturates the footnotes is both helpful and impressive, as is the range of primary sources other than novels consulted, ranging from state and police archives to a large number of newspapers and periodicals as well. Taken in the round, this monograph constitutes the deserved resuscitation of an author’s reputation, a witness and actor with a privileged insight into the grandeur and misery of the worker’s lot in the first half of the 20th century in France. Perry highlights him as a raiser of consciousness, almost intentionally leaving his character undefined, apart from the intriguing cover photograph of him with fellow POWs in 1941. One is intrigued to know, for instance, why he went silent from 1945 on. Fauxbras died on the very eve of the events in May 1968 that were animated by the type of anti-authoritarian rejection of power structures, including the Communist party, that he had identified himself with in 1937. In time, the spirit of 1968 tore down icons of war and nation as Fauxbras had wished to do to over the memory of the Great War. By constantly opposing to power the subaltern voice, he gained a passing recognition in his own time, but one that was quickly forgotten (even by his own family). Matt Perry’s fine book at last echoes his summons to justice, amplifying once more César Fauxbras as ‘the voice of the lowly’.

## Notes

1. Simon Epstein, *Un paradoxe français: Antiracistes dans la Collaboration, Antisémistes dans la Résistance* (Paris, 2008); Philippe Burrin, *La Dérive Fasciste: Doriot, Déat, Bergery 1933–1945* (Paris, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Matt Perry, *The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend* (Sunderland, 2005); Philippe Masson, *La Marine Française et la Mer Noire* (Paris, 1982); Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, 1994); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Understanding the Great War* (New York, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934–39* (Basingstoke, 2009).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author accepts this review and does not wish to comment further.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1112>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7752>