



Laura Downs, Laudatio for Michelle Perrot, Honorary Doctor of the European University Institute, 10 June 2016

“L’histoire s’adosse à l’oubli; History rests on those who have been forgotten,” wrote Michelle Perrot in 2001. “Indeed, social history has traditionally focused on the fundamental structures that lie at the heart of societies, leaving society’s margins unexplored.” But Mme. Perrot has always been interested in history’s silences, in that which has been forgotten and those who have been pushed to the margins: Peasant-workers in the early years of France’s industrialization; the prison as a technology of power that is both hidden and visible; the history of women, whose oppression, built on their exclusion from education, civic and political rights and decently-paid labor, has also entailed their erasure from history.

Michelle Perrot’s first book, *La jeunesse de la grève*, focused on worker protest in late 19th century France, when the working class was still in formation, moving gradually from the peasant world of charivari to the factories and mines of the industrializing nation. They carried with them rites of charivari, singing and dancing *la farandole* and exchanging lily of the valley on the first of May, all of which entered into the repertoire of worker protest. And so the strike was not only a moment of violent confrontation, it was also one of celebration, as women and

men escaped the relentless, dreary regime of factory labor and poured onto the streets in a flood of expression; singing, dancing, chanting, waving flags and banners. “I remember the strikes of 1936, recalled Mme Perrot “when the Popular front had just come to power. In my neighborhood, the textile factories fell silent as the women workers streamed out into the streets and filled them with the sound of their young voices. There are clear existential and political reasons that explain my desire to escape institutional history in favor of those shadowy zones that lie far from the State and from the history of politics. But surely there are also moral ones having to do with my Catholic education. For although I am an atheist, the idea of the “Other” that I acquired in the course of that Catholic education remains with me to this day.”

Given her own personal story – a child at the time of the Popular Front, a young girl sent to Catholic school several years later, during the “dark years” of France’s occupation – it is perhaps not surprising that Michelle Perrot decided to study history; a field that corresponded well to her serious nature and desire to understand the searing conflicts that so deeply marked her childhood and youth. In 1947, Mme. Perrot enrolled at the Sorbonne. Here, she worked with the renowned quantitative historian Ernest Labrousse, who drew in the crowds with his eloquent speech, his commitment to working-class history and his rigorous approach to the history of economic structures and conditions.

It was during these years that Mme. Perrot’s life of political militancy also began, as she got involved in circles of students and young teachers working in tandem with the worker-priest movement of the 1940s and early 50s. As a young schoolteacher in Caen, Michelle Perrot accompanied future colleagues (and her future husband, Jean-Claude Perrot) into the working-class districts around the *Société Métallurgique de Normandie*, where they conducted socio-anthropological studies of local religious, demographic (birth control?) and cultural practices. But in 1955, the Vatican brought the worker-priest experiment to an abrupt halt, excommunicating any and all priests who stubbornly pursued this path. At that point, Mme. Perrot broke with the church that had shaped her youth and joined the Communist party. It was 1955. France’s “dirty” war in Algeria was heating up fast and the Communists were the principle force of opposition to this cruel and unjust war.

Yet the Communists were not without their own difficulties, what with Krushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin's crimes at the 20th Party congress, followed some 8 months later by the Soviets' violent suppression of the Hungarian revolution. So in 1958, when Mme. Perrot left Caen for Paris, she quietly let her membership drop. She nonetheless continued to feel a "fellow traveller" for many years thereafter, and rejected not only Cold war anticommunism but any and all criticism of the Party. "In this way I participated in the great illusion of my generation," she reflected soberly in 2002.

Scholarship and political militancy would continue to feed each other in a remarkably productive dynamic over the next 58 years of her career. "I lived May 68 and its aftermath with great intensity, as a *maître-assistante* at the Sorbonne. Women were very present, but as second-class citizens only. When in 1971 I took up an assistant professorship as one of the founding members of the newly established Université de Paris VII, we were able to put a new seminar on the program devoted to the marginal and the excluded; an interdisciplinary exploration that was animated by the conviction that history is moved as much by the margins as it is by the center." These were the years of important prison riots in France (1970-74) and Paris VII was deeply implicated, teaching classes inside the prisons, while Mme. Perrot's friend and colleague Michel Foucault organized the GIP (Information Group on Prisons). Her second major book, *L'impossible prison*, on the 19th century carceral system, drew inspiration from these experiences as well as from Foucault's thinking on the subject: the prison as a technique of governmentality that is central to social order yet also hidden in its daily operations.

At the same time (and really, one wonders where and how she FOUND the time), Michelle Perrot was deeply implicated in the women's movement, organizing with sociologist Andrée Michel France's first course on the history of women, "which opened in a stormy atmosphere as the boys, especially the leftists, loudly hissed and heckled us all", while meeting regularly with the *Groupe d'études féministes*, a consciousness-raising group that she'd set up with Françoise Basch in 1974. The Groupe opened up broad avenues to the Anglophone world of women's studies, as Françoise Basch was employed in the University's Anglophone studies program, through which important and enduring contacts were made with British and American feminists. Michelle Perrot would soon find herself paying for this contact, as, from the late

1970s onward she became *the* feminist historian of reference, looking after us all as we washed up, one after another, eager but ignorant, on the banks of the Seine.

It was in the sparsely documented history of women that Michelle Perrot – by now a confirmed specialist of the margins - faced the most stubborn challenges yet in her determination to illuminate the shape of experience in history’s most obscure nether-regions. In order to do this she practiced with great intelligence and sensitivity the interdisciplinarity that was constitutive of women’s and gender history as a sub-discipline, drawing in particular on the tools and approaches of contemporary ethnography. She also sought to overcome the terrible paucity of sources on the “hidden” history of women through the creative use of non-traditional sources, developing techniques that were hardly familiar to historians in the 1970s and 80s but which have since entered the mainstream: oral history, the history of memory, the study of material objects and material culture: “By rehabilitating all kinds of written sources that have been seen as too minor, too personal, too idiosyncratic to serve as historical sources, I strove to recover the words of those who lived in history’s shadows, and so bring these evanescent subjects back into the historical record. For to make them objects of history is to give them an existence. After all, things do not exist except through the narratives we write. If you have no properly historical approach to these shadowy zones on the margins, then the darkness sets in forever and oblivion submerges everything. For forgetting creates an unfathomable sea.”

Ultimately, her meditations on historical epistemology led Michelle Perrot to write her remarkable *Histoire des chambres*, which offers a magnificent illustration of that which many of us have long known to be true: that the tools developed to recover the history of women can be fruitfully applied to other topics in such a way as to open out dimensions of human experience that are difficult to grasp and yet lie close to the heart of what it means to be human: The modes of subjectivity and sociability that are shaped by the slum-housing of industrial workers, the prison cell or the closed rooms of (bourgeois) femininity; the sense of creative space and of individual being that thrives in the “room of one’s own,” famously celebrated by Virginia Woolf and Anatole France.

Over the course of her long and variegated career, Michelle Perrot has played a central role in re-invigorating France’s very rich tradition of social and cultural history precisely

through her decision to remain on the margins and invent techniques and sources for shedding light on subjects that most of her colleagues had deemed impossible, incapable of study. A pioneer on every level, Michelle Perrot breathed new life into the fields of social and cultural history, making a vital contribution to the renewal of a field that scholars and pundits have for the past 25 years been only too happy to declare dead: the history of the generally unheard-from on whose oppression and exploitation rest the more familiar stories of states, economies and élites.

I hereby invite Michelle Perrot to the degree of Honorary Doctor of the European University Institute