

**The Discovery of France:
A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War**
Graham Robb

New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007, 358 pp.
Reviewed by Bliss Leonard

A number of works have described the explosion of unifications in the late nineteenth century—Germany, Italy, even post-bellum America—but Graham Robb's *The Discovery of France* may be the first book to explore the unification of France. Well into the nineteenth century, no more than ten percent of the population spoke what we think of as French. Before the birth of the French nation state, there was no "France," per say, but rather territory vaguely controlled by the "French" government; even the absolutism of Louis XIV loses its certitude when faced with Robb's magnificent deconstruction of the creation of France. To assuage any semantic quibbles before the substance of the review, you will forgive this reviewer the use of the term "France" to mean the territory of the country currently known by that name.

Robb organizes his exploration of France into two roughly chronological parts. The first describes the various routines, attitudes, beliefs, and dialects that comprised the daily existence of most people living within the boundaries of what is now France. The second explains how the mapping—both literal surveying and mapping by Cesar-Francois Cassini in the late eighteenth century and figurative mapping by domestic and international tourists—of these "undiscovered" regions led to France's eventual cohesion into a fairly close-knit modern nation-state. Robb employs the concept of "mapping" to describe both the actual act of cartography and the more figurative sense of knowing or understanding those disparate regions. Robb argues that our modern understanding of France is an amalgamated notion derived from Parisian conceptions of a homogeneous and mono-linguistic French society. The capital's cultural and political prominence, Robb asserts, led to a veritable hegemony of homogeneity, as the language and culture specific to Paris became the defining aspects of France and the French.

Although the book is putatively about mapping, Robb argues that language is a truer indicator of a region's political and cultural affiliations and practices than somewhat arbitrary borders drawn on a map. Language was both a cause of France's original fractiousness as well as the key to its eventual cohesion. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, according to Robb's narrative, not only did non-French languages such as Basque and Breton dominate the periphery of France, but dialects of French spoken in the heart of the country were so varied as to be incomprehensible, a veritable Tower of Babel. Each village had its own dialect nearly impenetrable to those more than five miles away. These invisible linguistic barriers, Robb argues, made political unity nearly impossible. There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that various French regiments in World War I, unable to understand each other's dialects, engaged in lengthy and futile skirmishes, killing their supposed countrymen. The creation of public education and subsequent imposition of French helped to spread the language throughout the land, diminishing the role of dialect. But Robb makes the interesting point that although many of these dialects have been "dying out" for over a hundred years, a good number remain alive and well.

Perhaps necessarily, Robb overtly sympathizes with the rural communities, ruing modernity's erosion of their unique identities, lamenting the vast and efficient network of railways and highways that destroyed many of the small local networks of infrastructure. Robb's sentiments are particularly evident when he discusses the growing influx of tourists; while Robb admits that this industry facilitated both the economic development and the political and economic integration of the village into the rest of France--often far bettering the quality of life for most villagers--he spends far more time explaining how the tourism industry irreparably damaged the local life of the villages. Robb's nostalgia for the seemingly idyllic pre-industrial era at times distracts from the fascinating and previously obscure material he is bringing to the foreground.

Robb's engaging but dense narrative moves along the back roads of France at a fairly brisk pace, covering an immense amount of information. The incredible detail and specificity of much of Robb's text must be attributed to his personal method of research; he actually biked 14,000 miles around France, stopping in every commune and canton. In his rural wanderings, Robb explores the odd gap between the creation of a technological innovation and its implementation. When one reads that the railways were first introduced to France in a certain year, one assumes that the entire country was swiftly connected by those narrow ties. Yet Robb explores the incongruity of a gradually industrializing society that still relied heavily on the mule for its commercial and personal transportation. When Eiffel was building his famous tower, some communes were still persecuting witches.

Yet instead of history, most of Robb's work could be better described as a retrospective anthropology. The interdisciplinary nature of his work is inherent to Robb's research; the sources that accurately describe France outside of Paris are generally folkloric, personal, and anthropological and Robb tends to provide dramatic and narrative reinterpretations of historically verifiable scenes. In the past decade, history has been liberalizing the use of sources and expanding the very definition of what history can mean. To be sure, the sum of Robb's work seems less concrete due to its often conversational character, but there is no other way that he could have explicated this fascinating subject without using such evidence. Invoking his figurative understanding of "mapping," Robb argues that much of modern France remains unmapped, using the example of the frequent violence that erupts in the outer suburbs of Paris, which are inhabited mainly by North African immigrants, a minority France has yet to integrate or understand. This anecdote demonstrates the utility of Robb's model of mapping to other historians and, indeed, to other anthropologists. While Robb's narrative strays at points from pure history, he offers a unique view of everyday dimensions of the French story that are so often ignored.

Bliss Leonard
Cambridge, MA
2011