



9 November 2007 17:19

- [Home](#)
- [> News](#)
- [> People](#)
- [> Obituaries](#)

Jean-Pierre Vernant

Resistance leader and Hellenist

Published: 11 January 2007

Jean-Pierre Vernant, wartime resister and classical scholar: born Provins, France 4 January 1914; Director of Studies, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes 1958-75; Director, Centre de Recherches Comparées sur les Sociétés Anciennes 1964-75; Professor, Collège de France 1975-84; married 1939 Lida Nahimovitch (died 1992; one daughter deceased); died Sèvres, France 9 January 2007.

Towards the end of his long life Jean-Pierre Vernant was asked whether he saw any connection between his wartime exploits and his work as a scholar. Surprised by the question, he reflected briefly, and replied that perhaps his later obsession with the figure of Achilles and the concept of the youthful heroic death (*la belle mort*) did indeed reflect the experiences of himself and his friends in the Resistance.

Vernant was born in 1914, the son of a father who was killed in the First World War; in 1937 he passed out top in the agrégation in Philosophy for the whole of France, shortly after his brother had achieved the same distinction. Discharged from the army after the fall of France, the two found themselves in Narbonne in August 1940 at the height of the anti-British feeling caused by the destruction of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir with the loss of 1,300 French sailors; their first known act of defiance was to paste the walls of the city with the slogan *Vive l'Angleterre pour que vive la France* ("Long live England that France may live").

In 1940 at the age of 26 Vernant was appointed philosophy teacher at the main boys' school in Toulouse; his pupils did not guess the other life of their young professor. He helped form the Armée Secrète in 1942, and by the end of the Second World War, as Colonel Berthier of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur, was commander of the entire Resistance movement in Haute-Garonne, organising the liberation of Toulouse on 19-20 August 1944.

His ability to unify the many independent groups made Toulouse a centre of the Resistance and one of the most active theatres of clandestine warfare in France. Assisted by sympathisers in the railways, the police, the factories and local government, from among the refugees from Fascist Italy and the Spanish Civil War and French Jewish refugees from the north, with the help of military supplies spirited away from the army at the fall of France or dropped by the British SOE, their operations included disrupting railway and road supplies, sabotaging factory production, executing collaborators and organising the main escape route to Spain for Allied pilots who escaped or were shot down.

A potentially disastrous police raid on their headquarters in October 1943 led to the capture of five members and the movement's records. A message was sent to the prefect of police that if any of these records were transmitted to the Germans he would personally be executed on the orders of London: the records disappeared. Three agents were sprung with the help of a technique subsequently used often again, involving the fabrication of orders for their immediate release written on genuine official paper, and sent by official courier precisely at the last moment on Saturday before the closure of all offices for the weekend, when no telephone message could be sent to query the order. A forged official confirmation arrived on Monday; and the operation was repeated for the other two people arrested. So successful was this method that after the war the French government refused the title of member of the Resistance to one of Vernant's team, because his record showed that he had been officially declared to be a

collaborator.

Vernant himself escaped arrest partly because (as he later discovered) his government dossier had become inextricably confused with that of his brother: when finally in spring 1944 he was about to be "dismissed" by the Vichy education authorities and handed over to the French Fascist organisation known as the Milice, he received two anonymous letters (both misspelling his name in different ways) warning him not to trust the headmaster or the school inspector, and went into hiding.

After the war he was surprised to find that there was no record of any decision to dismiss (or reinstate) him in the archives, and finally concluded that, though a decision had indeed been taken, it had not been recorded because the authorities had postponed action over the holidays, being unwilling to commit themselves to anything at this stage of the war. Instead, when the war was over, he received promotion and a letter of commendation for his "professional qualities and civic courage" signed by the very same inspector whom he suspected of denouncing him.

Otherwise he was given little recognition, since, in their efforts to re-establish conservative control of France, the Allies, General Charles de Gaulle and the French establishment united in refusing to recognise the populist Resistance movements, which were dominated by the left. Vernant himself was a member of the Communist Party from 1932 intermittently until 1970; but his independence from the Party line dates from the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, and he was often publicly critical of the Party, regarding himself as a Marxist rather than a Party member.

His experiences in Vichy France taught Vernant that official history and official records were a worthless farrago of falsehoods; and the memory of his fellow fighters in the hour of victory was scarcely more reliable. The success of the Resistance had been due to the fact that it had created an alternative structure of "reality" that ran alongside the structures of the Vichy regime; the only truth was the psychological experience of the group, as Tolstoy had understood it - *mes copains*, Vernant called them.

Returning to academic life, he began a thesis on the notion of work in Plato, and pursued a form of research into Greek civilisation inspired by the social psychology of his colleague in the Resistance Ignace Meyerson: he sought to understand the specifically Greek conceptions of those general ideas common to all human experience, like labour, value, time, space, memory, the will and the person, imagination and sacrifice, or the difference between us and them, Greeks and barbarians (*altérité*).

Between 1948 and 1962 he followed the seminars of Louis Gernet, veteran sociologist and pupil of Emile Durkheim. From these two influences he developed one of the first and most successful approaches in the *histoire des mentalités*. He was always open to new ideas, being editorial secretary for the *Journal de Psychologie* in the Fifties, and later embracing anthropology and structuralism without becoming imprisoned by them.

His first book ran to only 130 pages - he was never a man to waste words - but *Les Origines de la pensée grecque* (1962, translated as *The Origins of Greek Thought*, 1982) changed the history of Greek studies: in the wake of the decipherment of Linear B it asked the simple questions, what was the relationship between the newly discovered Mycenaean world of palace bureaucracies and the invention of rationality by the Greeks, and how did Greek rationality relate to modern ideas?

To him the answers lay in the democratic political experience of archaic Greece, and the forms of verbal exchange developed in relation to civic duties. In this book he posed the fundamental questions which have been the starting-point for all studies of ancient Greece for the last 40 years. His later work concentrated on the place of religion in Greek society and the evidence of literature and art for Greek social forms - his books including *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (1965; *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 1983), *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne* (1972-86, with Pierre Vidal-Naquet; *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 1990), *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne* (1974; *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, 1979), *Entre mythe et politique* ("*Between Myth and Politics*", 1996), *Mortals and Immortals: collected essays* (1991) and *La Traversée des frontières* ("*Crossing Frontiers*", 2004).

In 1948 Vernant entered the CNRS and in 1958 joined the group around Fernand Braudel in the VIe section of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (later the EHESS). In 1964 he established his own research centre in the house of Auguste Comte, devoted to "comparative research on ancient societies". Initially the group included experts not only on ancient Greece and Rome but also on Assyria, Egypt, India, China and Africa, and a number of anthropologists. Religion was treated as a central aspect of all societies, which must be studied for their unifying principles.

The centre became the focus of intellectual activity in comparative history throughout Europe and the United States: everyone would make the pilgrimage to the cramped collection of rooms in Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Slowly, and to the regret of Vernant himself, the pressures of academic life and the interests of enthusiastic young researchers pushed the focus of the centre towards the classical world, until by the time he handed over its direction to his friend and collaborator Pierre Vidal-Naquet, it had emerged as the centre for a new type of Greek and Roman history.

Once again, as during the war, he had created an alternative structure of subversion alongside the official academic *cursus*: when the events of 1968 arrived, it was members of the centre who took over control of classical studies in the universities, and the Centre Louis Gernet is now the most important institution in the world for the study of Greek

civilisation.

Vernant was proud of having established what an outsider called the "Ecole de Paris":

neither my work nor my life nor my personality can be separated from the team . . . may the centre continue. A living research team is an institution and a sort of family, with all its tensions.

Although he remained closely connected to the centre, from 1975 to 1984 Vernant was Professor at the Collège de France in the comparative history of ancient religions, where his lectures were famous for the clarity and elegance of their French style.

The charisma of "Jipé" (as he was called by his disciples) rested on the warmth of his personality: he always used the "tu" form and recognised you as a fellow worker whatever your age; in seminars he had an uncanny ability to understand what the speaker really meant, and to formulate it afterwards to the speaker privately. As an orphan he had built his life on friendship: it was easy to understand how people could have risked their lives for him.

Once he told the story of how he came to acquire a holiday house on the exclusive island of Belle-Ile. For many years he and his adored wife Lida (the daughter of Russian émigrés, whom he had met in 1932 when she was 14, and married in 1939) had rented the house for holidays; one day the owner came to him to say that he had to sell. Regretfully Jipé said that he could not possibly afford to buy it. "You don't understand," the owner said, "I want to sell it to you. Tell me the price."

Jean-Pierre Vernant was a very private person, who refused to write his memoirs, and accepted the honours heaped on him simply as the gifts of friends. He retained his mental and physical powers until the end, and was a champion swimmer able to outpace all rivals even in his late eighties.

He nursed his wife until her death from Alzheimer's in their idyllic Russian-style house at Sèvres outside Paris; their only daughter died soon after. But he continued to retain his positive attitude to life, looked after by his son-in-law and surrounded by disciples and friends, the most loved and revered classical scholar of his age.

Oswyn Murray

[Interesting? Click here to explore further](#)

© 2007 Independent News and Media Limited