

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2021

The biographical sketches were written by staff and
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity

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PHILIP NORD



The same words that history department colleagues use to describe Philip “Phil” Nord as a person also capture much about the work that has long established him as one of the leading historians of contemporary France: brilliant (of course!), but also unfailingly thoughtful, generous, measured, and humane. These qualities explain why Phil, the Rosengarten Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, has been such a universally admired and beloved member of the department where he has spent forty years, including two terms as chair (1995–2001) and four years as director of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies (2012–16). His work has investigated many different subjects, ranging from Parisian municipal politics to Impressionism, from social policy to the Fall of France to the memory of wartime deportations. But throughout, the reader always senses an author working creatively to understand how and why the best human impulses towards justice and social welfare have sometimes managed to prevail—and how and why they sometimes have not.

Phil, as acquaintances generally learn within a few minutes of meeting him, is a proud son of Chicago. Growing up there in the era of Mayor Richard J. Daley left him with a keen appreciation of politics, both as a subject of supreme importance and as a spectator sport. Thanks to the city’s magnificent Art Institute, Chicago also gave him his first introduction to great art, notably the French Impressionists. And as he himself wrote in a lovely autobiographical essay (originally drafted for a French audience and republished in English on the website H-Diplo in 2020), despite now having lived well over half his life in suburban Princeton, he remains at heart an urbanite.

Two other cities, New York and Oxford, also helped to shape Phil. He attended Columbia University as an undergraduate and a graduate student, first arriving in the late 1960s. He flourished there, even as his academic interests migrated from art history to politics and finally to history. While at Columbia, he met the Barnard College student who would become his life partner and his Princeton colleague: Deborah Epstein Nord, a distinguished scholar of Victorian English literature, and Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature, Emeritus, and professor of English, emeritus. After a stint at Oxford on Columbia’s prestigious Kellett Fellowship, Phil returned to his alma mater in 1973 to begin his Ph.D.

Despite a fascination with German history originally sparked by the charismatic scholar Fritz Stern, once in graduate school Phil found himself pulled inexorably towards French history. In addition to the attractions of French culture, and the strengths of the French historical school, he was also driven by sympathy for the humane, ethical socialism of Jean Jaurès (1859–1914) and Léon Blum (1872–1950). Taking seminars with Robert Paxton, the great historian of Vichy France, and with Arno Mayer, his future Princeton colleague, confirmed his choice, and oriented Phil towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mayer also suggested a subject for a seminar paper: Paris shopkeepers, and their increasingly right-wing politics in the *fin-de-siècle*. The paper became the basis for his doctoral dissertation supervised by Paxton, and then for a splendid first book: *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment* (Princeton University Press, 1986). Phil argued that shopkeepers' grievances, notably against department stores, spurred a political movement that pushed Paris, the former urban bastion of revolution, decisively towards the right.

Besides winning him an assistant professorship and then tenure at Princeton, this project also drew Phil to the third of his cherished cities—Paris—and introduced him to French academia. At a time when many French scholars still looked on American historians of their country with suspicion, Phil's professional and personal qualities quickly brought him the respect and friendship of French colleagues, and a series of fruitful collaborations that have continued to this day. He has held no fewer than seven visiting appointments at major French academic institutions. Five of his six books have been translated into French, a record of which few other American historians of France can boast.

These books have gone in many different directions but have always remained true to Phil's fascination with politics, and to his political values. *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Harvard University Press, 1995), traced the emergence of democratic republicanism in France before and then immediately after the birth of the Third Republic in 1870. Rather than remaining at the level of political theory, the book looked closely at particular social groupings (including freemasons, commercial organizations, lawyers, artists, and religious minorities), and their roles in bringing about political change. Phil emphasized that the republicanism in question was a flexible, tolerant one, quite unlike the rigid doctrine that sometimes goes by the name in France today. A subsequent book, *Impressionists and Politics: Art and Democracy in the Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2000), highlighted the role that impressionist painters—

especially Édouard Manet—played in these developments, and in what Phil called “the flowering of a democratic impulse which, it is to be hoped, has not altogether played itself out.”

Phil’s next major project turned from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, and to what he called, in a pithy book title, *France’s New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton University Press, 2010). It was an innovative, deeply researched study that persuasively presented the period in question as one in which major French institutions, private as well as public, recast themselves in more expansive, ambitious forms to address the social and cultural challenges of the twentieth century. Strikingly, Phil argued that the process continued across multiple regimes, including the collaborationist Vichy state created after the fall of France in 1940. The book received the most extensive and enthusiastic reviews of any of Phil’s books (which is saying something). In an extended “forum” dedicated to it on the H-France platform, an eminent French historian justly concluded: “We can safely bet that this fine work will become, very quickly, a classic.”

Most recently, Phil’s attention has turned more insistently to World War II, and the deep scars it left on France. In a book-length essay entitled *France 1940: Defending the Republic* (Yale University Press, 2015), Phil himself persuasively defended the Third Republic against the charge that even before the Nazi Blitzkrieg, its moral and political collapse had made the German victory inevitable. The events of 1940 were in fact, he argued, far more contingent and unpredictable. And in a major study published just this past year, *After the Deportation: Memory Battles in Postwar France* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), Phil investigated the ways in which different groups—Jews, Catholics, Communists, and Gaullists—worked to memorialize their wartime experiences of persecution and deportation, and how the different postwar narratives intersected with each other. It is a beautifully written, deeply felt work of history.

Even as Phil produced these remarkable pieces of scholarship, he also compiled an absolutely exemplary record of service and teaching. During his two terms as chair, he guided the history department with a steadfast hand. As director of the Davis Center, he not only chose innovative themes (“Belief and Unbelief” and “In the Aftermath of Catastrophe”), but also developed exceptionally close relations with successive groups of fellows. His conversations with them on the “catastrophe” theme strongly influenced *After the Deportation*. Phil also regularly taught undergraduate and graduate courses on modern France, undertook many collaborations with colleagues in French literature, and advised more than a dozen Ph.D. dissertations on topics ranging

from French missionaries in Africa to immigrants in twentieth-century Paris to the French role in ballooning and the early history of powered flight. His advisees speak of him in worshipful terms. As one of them wrote: "I am grateful to him for teaching me how to be a historian. And for teaching me how to live a more engaged and meaningful life by thinking, questioning, and learning to make my voice heard." It is safe to say that Philip Nord has left a permanent, positive mark, not only on his students, but on the field of modern history, and on the institution he has served so well for four decades. His colleagues stand in his debt.