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Yannick Marec, *Vers une République sociale? Un itinéraire d'historien: Culture politique, patrimoine et protection sociale aux XIXe et XXe siècles*. Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009. 543 pp. 37.05€ (pb). ISBN-10: 2877754766

Review by Philip Nord, Princeton University.

This book is a curious mélange. The title advertises it as “an historian’s itinerary,” and it is certainly that. Yannick Marec has been publishing in the field of welfare history for many decades, and this volume is a collection of a score or so essays he has written along the way. The essays themselves range from the serious journal article to less weighty pièces d’occasion dealing with not always well-remembered nineteenth-century personalities, some with but the most remote connection to welfare policy. A number of documents are added in, and the whole is richly illustrated, one of the book’s considerable pleasures. *Vers une République sociale?* is the summing up of a life’s work, a memorial to the author but also to the subject he studies: the coming of the welfare state. Marec has been active over the years in various official bodies charged with chronicling the Republic’s achievements in welfare reform and preserving their memory as part of the national patrimony. This book then is part summa, part *souvenir pieux*, but it has a third dimension as well. Its various and divers pieces add up to make an intriguing intellectual point: that the first decades of the Third Republic constituted a peculiar, transitional moment in the history of France’s welfare institutions. Charity was ceasing to be the dominant mode of looking after the poor and incapacitated, yet a coherent alternative had not quite crystallized to take its place. There were glimmerings of the elaborate system of public insurance that came to be known as *l’Etat providence* but not a lot more than that. So what did this in-between period look like?

The post-Second World War founding of *la Sécurité sociale* is associated with a single name, that of Pierre Laroque. The social reform package of the late nineteenth century, however, as Marec is at pains to point out, was the work of a network of reformers, made up of Republicans (Opportunists as well as Radicals), Freemasons, and liberal Protestants. These men—and in Marec’s accounting they were all men—were inveterate do-gooders who sponsored crèches, public libraries, and the like to improve the lives of the less unfortunate. They also did the things that good republicans do, running for office, extolling the virtues of laïcité, and erecting statues to honor one another’s accomplishments.

A well-meaning philanthropy, however, was just a small part of the republican welfare agenda, taking a distant second place to schemes of self-help. Pastor Wilfrid Monod, scion of a distinguished Protestant family, ran a temperance organization, La Solidarité, in turn of the century Rouen. He was also a member of the board of the local popular university where, on occasion, he delivered public lectures, urging listeners to live right but more than that: urging them to cooperate. The cooperative movement, of course, was near and dear to socialists as much as or even more so than to republicans. When it came to mutual-aid, however, republicans meant to take a back seat to no one. The regime enacted a charter of mutuality in 1898, establishing a legal framework which allowed mutualism to flourish, which indeed it did. The Fédération nationale de la Mutualité française was founded in 1902 and it did not take long for its membership to soar into the millions. The local savings-and-loan bank was no less favored. Private investors furnished the start-up capital, but it was often municipal officials,

retired or still active in government, who took charge of managing the institution. The small account and strategic business loan were the Caisse d'Épargne's stock-in-trade, making it a bastion of values that ranked high in the republican code: *prévoyance* and *la petite entreprise*. Bastion is a well-chosen word, for the Caisse d'Épargne was often housed in an imposing, stand-alone building, heavy on the brick and masonry, and Marec's volume includes a compelling suite of illustrations of the architectural type.

For good causes—cooperation, mutualism, savings—the fledgling Republic provided legal back-up, manpower, or moral support, but in the domain of public assistance, it was prepared to go a step further: to move from the role of benevolent second to central player.

Marec is a municipal historian first and foremost. He has published on public assistance policy in Paris and Le Havre, but it is Rouen that preoccupies him most of all. Little wonder as he has taught at the University there for many years, acquiring an unmatched knowledge of the local welfare scene in the process. It was a scene, moreover, that experienced a major shake-up in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Republicans made deep inroads into Rouen town politics in the 1870s and 1880s. As they took over, they brought a new order to city finances, which in welfare matters translated into a tightening up of the so-called *droit des pauvres*. All public entertainments were subject to a poor-tax earmarked for the support of local welfare bodies. Rouen's republican town fathers made sure that all liable parties paid up, even Masonic charity balls, much to the chagrin of lodge brothers otherwise sympathetic to the republican cause. The funds collected were put to novel use, subsidizing at-home or neighborhood-based care facilities. Local *bureaux de bienfaisance* were encouraged to reach out to the indigent, to visit them where they lived to make sure they got what they needed in food or heating supplies, and a network of dispensaries was created, a new line of defense against sickness and the ills attendant upon a life of poverty.

These measures took pressure off of Rouen's hospital complex. The old-style hospital was a full-service affair. It took in the sick, whether the sickness was major or minor, and it gave shelter to the abandoned, whether unwanted children or the aged who were no longer up to looking after themselves. But with home-care and dispensaries now supplying some of these services, Rouen's hospitals began to medicalize in a way they had not been able to do before. Laboratories were added on, as might be expected in this first age of the Pasteurian revolution. And to round out the new order of things, the Rouen municipal government set up a nursing school which welcomed its first class in 1900. The city council had two complaints against the old-model nurse: she was untrained, and she was more often than not a habited nun. The new school was intended to set things to right on both counts, although, as Marec points out, it had more success in the first department than in the second. Nuns, after all, were free to apply to the school and did so with more success than republican reformers anticipated.

An amalgam of philanthropy, state-backed self-help, and city-based public assistance: such was the republican recipe for dealing with the down-and-out in the late nineteenth century. It is not difficult at all to decipher what is "republican" in all this. Mutualism and *prévoyance* were watchwords of the new regime. So too were municipalism, financial rigor, science, and *laïcité*.

Now, Marec is well aware that not everyone welcomed this package of changes. The Church, of course, did not care for its secularizing thrust. Self-help, moreover, posited the rough equality of all involved, which ran counter to an understanding of charity as a *de haut en bas* gesture, the work of the better-off helping out their impoverished brethren. There were corporate interests as well which were not always enthusiastic, Rouen's doctors for example, who had reservations about the emphasis on dispensaries. Decentralized health care, they felt, distracted attention from what ought to be the cornerstone of any medical system worthy of the name, the doctor-run hospital.

Not least of all, there were some who, while applauding the advances of a municipal-based welfare system, wanted something more. The old-age pensions law of 1910 gives an indication of what that something more was. It guaranteed all wage-earners covered a pension funded out of worker, employer, and state contributions. There were ways in which the legislation was timid: the spectrum of employments covered was limited; legislators set the retirement age at sixty five, this at a time when life expectancy was a good deal more modest than it is today; and the state made sure to keep its own contribution to a minimum. That said, the law was the harbinger of a new welfare order in the making. It targeted not just the needy but wage-earners in general. It did not provide benefits here-and-now but insured against future difficulties; and it did so by requiring all parties involved to pay in. This is not to say that the era of self-help and public assistance came to an end. The mutualist movement, indeed, had many good years ahead of it. The new order in fact understood itself as building on the old, as a supplement to it, but it was a supplement that enshrined an alternative set of values: universal coverage (or the aspiration to it), insurance against risk, and obligation. This was the ethical universe of the welfare state and not that of philanthropy, self-help, and public assistance.

The great strength of Marec's book is the clear picture he draws of an in-between moment when charitable institutions no longer ruled but had not yet been supplanted by a welfare-state that still lay on the horizon. That charitable world is not Marec's propos, and he invokes it as a foil more than as a functioning system in its own right. The welfare state gets fuller treatment but not in all its aspects. Marec mentions the 1913 laws providing maternity leave for working mothers and incentives to reproduction, but in general the pronatalist and familist imperatives that drove welfare construction in France do not figure much in his account.

While the before and after of Marec's republican moment may be vague, the moment itself is not. France is sometimes thought of as backward in welfare matters, but Marec shows this was not altogether so. A close look at the municipal scene in the Third Republic's first decades reveals a regime hard at work, innovating, creating a welfare order consonant with the values it espoused, even if that order was not destined to last.

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