

H-France Review Vol. 17 (December 2017), No. 242

Julian Wright, *Socialism and the Experience of Time: Idealism and the Present in Modern France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Chronology, bibliography, and index. xv + 276 pp. \$97.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-953358-9.

Review by K. Steven Vincent, North Carolina State University.

Anglo-American historians of my generation, when they looked to the political and social thought of the Third Republic, devoted most attention either to the founders of sociology, to existentialists, or to figures and movements of the radical Left and Right – extreme nationalists, anti-Semites, and proto-fascists on the right; terrorists, anarchists, syndicalists, and revolutionary socialists on the left. Julian Wright represents a new generation of English-language historians looking at figures and movements between the extremes.

Wright's first book was about the regionalist movement during the Belle Époque, and it focused on the intellectual and organizational leader of this movement, Jean Charles-Brun.^[1] Wright situated Charles-Brun within a French political discourse that recommended regionalism, federalism, conciliation, and gradualist praxis, a discourse that extended back to the Old Regime, but grew in importance during the nineteenth century, as prominent intellectuals like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon criticized the state and recommended mutualist and federalist organizational forms. Charles-Brun, Wright insisted, should be placed at the center of the French political tradition that looked to regional bodies to make reforms, one that respected the cultures and particular needs of local populations. Wright took a generous view of what Anne-Marie Thiesse termed Charles-Brun's "consensual nationalism,"^[2] arguing that even when Charles-Brun served on the *Commission des Provinces* set up by Pétain, he was not a collaborator, but instead was pushing for moderate reforms, an agenda that avoided socio-political abstractions and focused on quotidian concerns. Whatever one's reservations concerning Charles-Brun's politics,^[3] Wright convincingly points to a French reformist tradition that transcended the left-right ideological divide, and that endeavored to avoid the familiar, and at times debilitating, dichotomies of French political discourse: revolution versus counter-revolution; religious versus secular; bourgeoisie versus proletariat.^[4]

Julian Wright's new book focuses on moderates further to the left on the ideological spectrum – reform socialists of the Third Republic – but there is an intriguing element of continuity, because these socialists were also suspicious of revolutionary mentalities. Though committed to a socialist transformation of French society, they, like Charles-Brun, proposed gradual change rather than radical rupture. Believing that the Third Republic was flawed but not evil, they called for the preservation of its civil and political institutions, insisting that these should be used to transform property relations and to alleviate socio-economic inequities.

Wright makes a convincing case that these reform socialists were part of a robust tradition – variously labelled "reformist," "moral," or "idealist" – too frequently passed over by historians in favor of the revolutionary wing of French socialism.^[5] It was "reformist" because it insisted that the democratic institutions of the Third Republic were a precondition for socio-economic reform and socialist debate. It

was “moral” because it rested less on Marxist notions of the inevitable unfolding of history than on a belief that action would result from a sense of outrage at injustices confronted. It was “idealist” because it was not entirely grounded in the present, but rather imagined a better future based on human rights and justice.

This did not make them “utopians,” though they did, according to Wright, attempt “to revalorize and reinvigorate aspects of utopian thought from the 1830s, while explicitly criticizing their understanding of change over time and the way they overemphasized the future at the expense of the human present” (p. 15). Wright means by this that they rejected the notion that the transition to socialism entailed a complete sweeping away of current society, a revolutionary caesura with the past. Rather, they believed attention should be given, not to an imagined future, but to an actually existing present that was pregnant with possibilities for fundamental change. “The central question for left-wing critics of modernist revolution was this: was the modernist ideal of political volition and rupture incompatible with social transformation? And if so, should socialists seek a different description of social change, one which left behind the idea of radical political upheaval, and sought a different kind of change, one closer to everyday human life?... At the end of the nineteenth century, socialists focused more and more on that which was practical and achievable” (p. 19). In short, they favored reform, not revolution.

Wright recognizes that revolutionary socialism and revolutionary syndicalism were strong movements in France in the decades before World War I, but he insists that reform socialism was an equally important presence on the left. This is an important corrective. He emphasizes how the experience of the Paris Commune led reform socialists to challenge the idea that France was on the brink of sweeping revolutionary change. They were hopeful that the new Republic, with its protection of civil liberties and universal male suffrage, would provide the framework for fundamental socio-economic change. They encouraged working-class organizations and militated for economic reform. They viewed themselves as descendants of a socialist tradition that extended back to the early the nineteenth century, a tradition that would include, among others, the Saint-Simonians, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Louis Blanc, François Vidal, and Constantin Pecqueur.[6] Their focus on production and a more equitable distribution of wealth, in addition to their demands for work-place safety, for shorter work days, for security of employment, for working-class control of the workplace, and for alternative bases for property were similar to the proposals by earlier French socialists. Rejecting Engels’s critique of the French “utopian” tradition in *Anti-Dühring*, French reform socialists like Eugène Fournière and Georges Renard insisted on the continuity of the French socialist tradition.

The most heated controversy among socialists around the turn of the twentieth century, well-rehearsed in general histories of socialism and discussed by Wright, was the debate over “ministerialism” that emerged when Alexandre Millerand entered the government of René Waldeck-Rousseau in 1899. Millerand and his reformist supporters faced the strident opposition of Guesdists and others on the revolutionary wing who refused any compromise with extant “bourgeois” governments.[7] The strain was partially papered over when French socialists attained a tenuous unity in 1905 with the creation of the SFIO, but the tension remained. And even though it appeared that revolutionists had won control of the new party, the intellectual prominence of leaders like Jean Jaurès indicated that those looking for reform within the context of the Republic were equally important.

This issue of the tension between reform and revolution is directly related to the unusual theoretical framework within which Wright bookends his discussion. Wright wishes us to see reform socialists experiencing time in a specific manner. He draws here from the conceptualizations of Georges Gurvitch and Walter Benjamin. From Gurvitch, Wright takes the idea that there are different kinds of “present time,” and, more specifically, different ways of experiencing the relationship of present time to the past and future—“erratic time,” “alternating time,” “explosive time,” etc. However, while Gurvitch’s abstract categories are interesting to think about—or to “think with,” to employ the current phrase—they do not

provide significant new clarity. Moreover, they lead Wright to make some questionable generalizations about how different classes experienced time.[8]

From Benjamin, Wright takes the notion of the “messianic present”—the idea that the redemption of the world is so close at hand that it is almost already here. Wright suggests that the notion of “redemption” that was expressed in the work of Benjamin and contemporaries like Franz Rosenzweig provides a key to the time orientation of reform socialists. This is an even more curious framework than that provided by Gurvitch. Rosenzweig was confronting the problem of finding his bearings while facing human finitude and “the icy solitude of self” after the collapse of Kantian idealism and any hope of Hegelian totality. Benjamin was more drawn to literary, Marxist, and aesthetic issues, but his final work, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which is the focus of Wright’s interest, combined Jewish mysticism and Surrealism, and ended with a suggestion that the only hope in dark times was revelation—as he put it, “for every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.” Both Rosenzweig and Benjamin (in this final work) were facing the issue of the irreducible individualism of existential existence, and both were attempting to create an ethics of authenticity that responded to bleak times and denied the relevance of traditional history to any set of permanent ethical questions. Traditional history depicted only anthropocentric immanence for Rosenzweig, only conformist abstractions for Benjamin. Ethics, they concluded, derived not from history, but from revelation: for Rosenzweig, from the existential experience of God’s love; for Benjamin, from the fleeting illumination provided by the fragmentary intervention of the messianic. Revelation was their solution to the problem of an individual’s introverted confinement and historical limitations. Revelation was their solution to the problem of finding an ethical stance that was not based on abstract reason (that is, Kantianism), but rather was based on hope and personal experience: though a special form of experience that was mystical/religious.

This seems very different from the intellectual world inhabited by reform socialists. These French socialists were activists whose ethics derived from their concern about human exploitation, from their criticism of economic inequality, and from their sense of outrage when faced with the injustices created by industrialization. I’m not aware that they spent much time pondering how each individual must endure his/her existential solipsism (Léon Blum, while in prison during World War II, is perhaps the exception), or concerned about how to take a stand against the bastardized everyday inauthenticity of mass culture. Rather, they responded warmly to the critical and emancipatory elements in strains of thought that assumed the social nature of human existence. Their demands for reform were based on their sense of pity and outrage, on their embrace of collective politics, and on their belief that work in the present would lead to a more humane future. It is difficult to see their ethics or their hope for change deriving from revelation.

The connection to “revolution” in the thought of reform socialists was not related to revelation, but to their belief that serious socio-economic reforms would bring about the transformation of society – that their actions would work toward the realization of socialism. Wright usefully characterizes this dedication to everyday struggle in the hopes of bringing about socialism as “the sense of a present that tilts forward with anticipation” (p. 81), as the embrace of “a present that was infused with the possibility of change in the future” (p. 212). The substantive chapters of the book – that is, all the chapters between chapter one and the conclusion where these “frameworks of temporality” are highlighted – demonstrate their commitment to pragmatic reform.[9] They bring to life the intellectual tradition of reform socialism between the late 1860s and the early 1940s. Wright correctly emphasizes that socialist reformism – what he terms “present-minded socialism” – was not “shallow parliamentarianism,” but addressed issues of human rights, political organization, and religious and cultural reform, in addition to the obvious economic questions concerning property ownership, pensions, wealth distribution, and taxes. It did not entail the destruction of bourgeois society, but rather its adaption and amelioration to create socialism every day.

What makes the book so rich is Wright’s demonstration that reform socialism was not restricted to a couple of luminaries like Jaurès and Blum (though they are included), but engaged people within and

outside various socialist organizations and government administrations. The core sections of the book provide detailed biographical-intellectual sketches of important, but often neglected, figures. They make a solid contribution to our knowledge of socio-political contestation during the Third Republic. There is an extended examination of the authors – Gabriel Deville, Louis Noguères, Henri Turot, René Viviani, Eugène Fournière, Georges Renard, Albert Thomas, Louis Dubreuilh, and John Labusquière – all of whom wrote (or helped write) volumes of the *Histoire socialiste* organized by Jaurès in the first decade of the twentieth century. They were, Wright points out, “characterized less by their prominence in politics and more by a commitment to scholarly engagement alongside socialist militant activity” (p. 46). Some of these individuals are known to scholars of French socialism; others are rarely even mentioned. Their re-introduction is long overdue and extremely welcome.

The longest section of the book is also very informative. It is devoted to examinations of moderate socialists prominent in their era: Benoît Malon, André Léo, Georges Renard, and Marcel Sembat. These are joined by a chapter on Blum. The focus is on how these thinkers conceptualized the relationship of present to future, and the importance of having ideal(s) that guide action. There is discussion of a passage of Renard’s 1892 novel *La Conversion d’André Savenay* that captures this idealistic, but not utopian, stance. The protagonist of the novel, a moderate socialist, explains that the humane ideal of generosity and altruism that socialists hold out is like a lighthouse beacon that guides a mariner to port.

Wright’s orientation is biographical and intellectual. There is little discussion of the connection of these figures to working-class movements or to internal party disputes; there is no chronological analysis of party congresses or of the splits among the numerous socialist factions. What we get, instead, is a sense of the lived experience of prominent reform socialists, and how this affected their views of politics and social change. It is a book that anyone interested in French socialism should read. It will help, in addition, to re-center discussion of Third Republic political and social thought between the extremes.

NOTES

[1] Julian Wright, *The Regionalist Movement in France 1890-1914: Jean Charles-Brun and French Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

[2] Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Ecrire la France: le mouvement littéraire régionaliste de la langue française entre la Belle Époque et la Libération* (Paris: PUF, 1991); Wright, *Regionalist Movement*, p. 197, n. 107.

[3] Wright is perhaps too generous. Does not his view overlook Charles-Brun’s stubborn refusal to confront the real divisions of French politics and society and does it not ignore Charles-Brun’s troubling inattentiveness to the disturbing nature of the Vichy regime?

[4] See also the volume of essays edited by Julian Wright and H.S. Jones, *Pluralism and the Idea of the Republic in France* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[5] There is good recent French scholarship: Emmanuel Jousse, *Les hommes révoltés: les origines intellectuelles du réformisme en France (1871-1917)* (Paris: Fayard, 2017) and volume 30 (2012) of *Mil neuf cent: revue d’histoire intellectuelle*, devoted to “socialistes réformistes en Europe (1880-1930).” Twenty-five years ago, I made a contribution: *Between Marxism and Anarchism: Benoît Malon and French Reformist Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[6] On this longer tradition, there are good recent works. See for example Ludovic Frobert, “What is a Just Society? The Answer According to the Socialistes Fraternelles Louis Blanc, Constantin Pecqueur, and François Vidal,” *History of Political Economy*, 46:2 (2014): 281-306; Ludovic Frobert et George Sheridan, *Le Solitaire du ravin: Pierre Charnier (1795-1857), canut lyonnais et prud’homme tisseur* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2014); Clément Coste, Ludovic Frobert, and Marie Lauricella, eds., *De la République de Constantin*

Pecqueur (1801-1887) (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2017); and Jonathan Barbier and Ludovic Frobert, eds., *Une imagination républicaine: François-Vincent Raspail (1794-1878)* (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2017).

[7] In spite of their ideological commitment to revolution, Guesdists did work for some practical reforms. On this issue, see Robert C. Stuart, *Marxism at Work: Ideology, Class, and French Socialism During the Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[8] Wright claims that “The nineteenth-century bourgeoisie was above all concerned with the mastery, the organization and the quantification of time. The proletariat carried within it a large part of the great nineteenth-century myth of progress and time moving forward” (p. 10). Shouldn’t we be suspicious of generalizations concerning the attitudes and beliefs of large groups or classes? How do we know that the French bourgeoisie was concerned with “the mastery...of time,” or that the proletariat believed in the “myth of progress and time moving forward”?

[9] Wright argues (mistakenly, I believe) that Jaurès’s historical view of socialism involved the search for an ideal state that was related to “the Jewish idea of the imminent arrival of the Messiah” (p. 82). His detailed discussion of the final chapter of Jaurès’s *L’Armée nouvelle* (pp. 79-97) makes a strong case, to the contrary, that Jaurès remained committed to reason, democracy, and to working in the present to eliminate exploitation and oppression.

K. Steven Vincent
North Carolina State University
svincent@ncsu.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172