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Jean Terrier, *Society as a Political Project in France, 1750-1950*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011. xxxii + 216 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$136 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-90-04-20153-8.

Review by James Livesey, University of Sussex.

Jean Terrier's new book offers us a really interesting example of a strong intellectual history. The subject of the book is the development of the concept of society in France from the Enlightenment until the outbreak of the First World War. It is a strong intellectual history because it works on two axes. Terrier develops a conceptual history that narrates the changing meanings of "society" within French intellectual debate. This narrative is one that most scholars of nineteenth-century France will be familiar with and is one of the slow emergence of an idea of society through a critique of the totalising ambitions of the political languages of the late eighteenth century. The idea of society emerged as a limitation and a corrective to that of the people and offered a different account of the nation. Intertwined with the conceptual history is a critical reflection on the utility of the concept of society to the human sciences in general and on the nature of social history in particular. These two levels of analysis are held in a creative tension and form the substance of the ambition announced in the title to recognise the implication of politics that is a vision of the legitimate use of power, within every vision of society.

This book puts the Cambridge School history of political languages together with sociologically-inspired interrogation of the fundamental categories of collective action. These two traditions are rarely integrated so the experiment is inherently interesting.

The heart of the book is its discussion of Durkheim. Durkheim is important because his treatment of the concept of society radically inflected its intellectual and political trajectory. In the work of writers such as Gobineau, de Maistre, or even Renan, society had been invoked as a natural, determining totality. France did not have a strong Social Darwinist tradition, but geographical or historical determinism emphasised limitations to political agency while simultaneously stressing national character as the most important element of society. This way of discussing society was so critical of the politics of the will, associated with Jacobinism, that it eliminated almost every kind of agency. What Durkheim recognised was that these accounts of society were deterministic and avoided the core problem of defining society by rendering it epiphenomenal to some more fundamental reality; "the object 'society,' in the understanding of the Durkheimian school of sociology, was declared to be related to, but still mostly autonomous from, the underlying layers of reality" (p. 88).

Durkheim conceptualised society as a sphere of collective action and so simultaneously offered a bridge to the categories of liberal political thought, centred on the individual, and an escape from the racial and nationalist consequences of prior ideas. On this account Durkheim's recognition of the repertoire of action possible in a modern society allowed negotiation with plural political projects where previous ideas of society carried far more univocal, determining consequences. Society remained categorically separate from politics but both realms were now understood as spheres of collective action, though under very different norms. This discussion of Durkheim's social theory aligns with the analysis, in the introduction, of the evolution of the practice of social history. Terrier suggests, very much along the lines of other reflexive social historians such as Miguel Cabrera, William Sewell and Patrick Joyce, that

this complex vision of society as a locus of action rather than a set of determining structures can help social history address the critique of reductionism associated with theorists inspired by Hannah Arendt.

Of course it is much simpler to identify the need for a non-foundationalist, realist theory of society or a related practice of social history than it is to satisfy those needs. This book offers a critical history of efforts in this direction rather than trying to make a direct theoretical intervention. In particular, Terrier recognises that Durkheim struggled with the ontology of “social facts.” Statistical regularity was not, for Durkheim, a sufficient basis on which to ground an account of social action as an entity in itself. He argued there were two kinds of properly sociological phenomena through which one could account for collective action: the collective unconscious and collective representations. Of the two the idea of a collective unconscious has been far less successful, though Terrier suggests that its use by figures such as Marcel Mauss is worth revisiting. Chapter five, for instance, offers a very promising account of Mauss’s analysis of the forms of international society such as communication, merchant communities, migrants and displaced persons in terms that are very close to current interests in global history. The idea of collective representations as resources for coordination and as constraints on the range of meanings available to actors has been of central importance in the evolution of cultural history. Terrier’s account points to the common roots of social and cultural history and suggests routes to their reconciliation.

A review should not neglect the many elements of fine intellectual history in this book. All of the ideas are placed in the context of contemporary debates and while there are strong claims for patterns of development, they do not rely on teleology or prolepsis. There is a very interesting discussion of Adhémar Esmein’s jurisprudence. Esmein defended universal rights from a historicist position and so pioneered a kind of social science that was neither reductivist nor relied on transcendental assertions. Versions of sociology that competed with Durkheim’s are also given space. Gabriel Tarde’s thoroughly constructivist sociology is put in its proper historical context as an alternative sociological resource for the liberal republicanism of the Third Republic. The book should be read in dialogue with the work of other scholars of the history of French political thought during and after the Revolution, such as Marcel Gauchet, Pierre Rosanvallon, Jeremy Jennings, Sudhir Hazareesingh and Jacques Guilhaumou. It makes a significant contribution to filling the breach between the history of political thought and the history of the social sciences.

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