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Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Rethinking the Political: The Sacred, Aesthetic Politics, and the Collège de Sociologie*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. xv + 294 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7735-3901-3.

Review by Sandrine Sanos, Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi.

When Aimé Césaire published his *Discourse on Colonialism* in 1950, his scathing indictment of European colonialism included an especially damning attack on those French thinkers who stubbornly held on to the idea of Western superiority that had legitimated the racism and violence of the colonial enterprise. Roger Caillois, by then an administrator at UNESCO, was singled out by Césaire as an exemplar of this kind of thinking who “while claiming to be dedicated to rigorous logic, sacrifices willingly to prejudice and wallows so voluptuously in clichés.”[1] For Césaire, Caillois was no different than Henri Massis, the well-known far-right writer associated with the Action française, who had penned the infamous *Défense de l'Occident* in 1927.[2] An unusual figure in the post-war intellectual scene, Caillois had, by the early 1950s, become distant from Georges Bataille with whom he had been involved for most of the 1930s in attempts to reimagine the social and its forces, an enterprise especially urgent in the face of the rise of fascism and the role played by communism in French culture. From the short-lived experiments that were the political and intellectual coalition *Contre-Attaque*, the secret society and journal *Acéphale*, and especially its heir, the Collège de Sociologie, their initiatives became an enduring topic of interest after Denis Hollier edited and published the Collège's lectures in 1979.[3] These lectures are the centerpiece of this book.

A historical sociologist of fascism whose previous work has explored the aesthetics of Mussolinian fascism, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi has turned here to the Collège de Sociologie in order to tease out the ways in which the relation between aesthetics and politics have been at the heart of interwar efforts to rethink the political—the title of her book.[4] Surprisingly, despite the enduring influence of and fascination for these intellectual figures, comparatively little has been published on the networks and groups that formed the Collège and their efforts to redefine the political and the social. Following the work of Michèle Richman who examines the particular nature of the “sacred revolutions” called for by the Collège and its particular form of “intellectual activism,” Falasca-Zamponi offers instead a genealogy of the Collège's concerns and interests, focusing especially on the figures of Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, while paying attention to some of the network and intellectual ties that bound them and ultimately drove them apart in the late 1930s.[5] In her account, Durkheimian sociology, ethnography, and surrealism constitute the three poles shaping Bataille and Caillois's interwar reflections on the nature of the social. While Richman focused on the theorization of “collective effervescence,” moments when the individual could experience and generate “social energies,” Falasca-Zamponi explores the role of affect in their definition of community: how were myths and the sacred a means to access the emotional life that seemed to have all but disappeared from the postwar era?[6] Her study thus lies at the crossroads of historical sociology and intellectual history and aims to situate this anomalous yet significant moment in the history of sociological thought. Falasca-Zamponi's work is also symptomatic of recent scholarly interest in the interwar period that seeks to shed a different light on how a number of thinkers and intellectuals across the political spectrum were involved in redefining conventional epistemological and political categories. Within the larger context of a postwar society faced with

political challenges both at home and in Europe, the question of aesthetics and politics loomed large in discussions of culture and politics.[7]

Rethinking the Political implicitly addresses recent works that have looked somewhat skeptically at these influential thinkers who have been accused of ambiguity and even complicity with fascist thought. One might read Falasca-Zamponi in conversation with Richard Wolin's impassioned indictment of writers like Bataille who, he argues, embodied a certain "left fascism" through the celebration of the "aesthetics of violence." [8] For, in many ways, Wolin and Falasca-Zamponi address the same conundrum: how did Bataille (and, with him, Caillois) fare in his desire to use fascist weapons against fascism itself? While Wolin emphasizes Bataille's delineation of "an aesthetics of transgression as the norm for social action," Falasca-Zamponi is more interested in carefully tracing the genealogy of Bataille and Caillois' various experiments and the meaning of their yearning for a different form of community that did not disavow the affective bonds of the sacred but instead would reenergize some form of the political. [9] For Falasca-Zamponi, turning to the Collège is thus important as it illuminates this singular elaboration of a thought of the social that takes seriously the sacred and seeks to harness the power of myth for a different politics that refuses both the authoritarianism of fascist regimes and the alleged weakness of parliamentary democracies. That said, she ultimately shows "the sacred is imagined by the Collège as an alternative to traditional politics, yet in actuality, becomes a displacement of politics rather than its dissolution" (p. 21).

As Falasca-Zamponi explains, for Bataille and Caillois in the early 1930s, "aesthetics was at the centre of a modern crisis that, by loosening bonds and promoting individualism, had extinguished the flame of the sacred. For both the critique of aesthetics constituted the necessary step for remedying the lamented depletion of the social" (p. 103). How to overcome the demystification and depletion of the social formed the thread that drove their thinking. She traces how Bataille especially developed an anti-aesthetic stance in his "desire to reinstate communal bonds and rekindle the social" (p. 65). Like Richman, she shows how the turn to Durkheimian sociology (at a time when it was waning institutionally) fit within the larger constellation of interests that drove Bataille and why the turn to sociology in 1937 did not indicate a sudden shift but, in fact, made sense within the genealogy of Bataille and Caillois' concerns. Pointing to Bataille's repeated references to Durkheim's influence and to Caillois' training by Marcel Mauss from 1933 to 1935, she argues that both men absorbed the suspicion held by Durkheimian followers towards art and their "disdain for art's autonomy" despite Mauss's reevaluation of the role of art in the social (p. 69).

According to Falasca-Zamponi, Bataille thus began theorizing a "counter-aesthetics" that led to the imagination of the Collège while Caillois never abandoned his early belief in the possibilities of science to reinvent "the imaginary [that] would systematically and coherently reveal the underlying poetic structure of a seemingly rational empirical reality" (pp. 95, 144). She points to the short-lived art journal, *Documents*, overseen by Bataille with some dissident Surrealists from 1929 to 1931, as the place where he first articulated his attack on aestheticism "supported by French ethnology" by focusing on the "formless, ugly, and monstrous" in contrast to the impasses of idealism and materialism (p. 89). That denunciation of rationalism—perceived to be the hallmark of an exhausted, and for some, decadent, western world—was shared by Bataille's friend Michel Leiris who similarly called for a turn to ethnography's mining of "primitive" societies where a "poetry" could be found that "would survive the deadly spirit of bourgeois Europe" (p. 93).

The "primitive" had been a topic of sociology and emerged with particular force in early twentieth-century France. Falasca-Zamponi shows how the creation of the ethnographic museum, the avant-garde's appropriation of "primitive art," as well as anthropology's attempts to legitimate itself as a science influenced the critiques leveled at art. These provide the context for Bataille's efforts to reinvent conventional aesthetic categories and "at the same time develop a scientific procedure for studying heterogeneous artefacts" (p. 89). The mid-1930s thus inaugurate the moment when "Bataille and Caillois

began to combine their critique or art with a concern for the social via an interest in affective movements” (p. 106). Their coalition with André Breton and the Surrealists (despite earlier disagreements), *Contre-Attaque*, especially figures large for it signaled the ways the two thinkers were trying to conceive of a new form of politics, driven by a “feverish need to act” (p. 138) in the wake of the far right’s February 1934 riots, and the political fervor that continued through the 1936 electoral victory of the left-wing Popular Front. It departed from conventional political activism all the while refusing the simple subordination to politics it identified with Communist initiatives like the Action des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires. The failure of *Contre-Attaque* and the split with the Surrealists drove Bataille and Caillois to seek other avenues that led to the formation of the secret society *Acéphale* and the theoretical Collège, where Bataille put politics aside in order to focus on a “sociology of the sacred” (p. 143).

The Collège was designed to act as an informal gathering of thinkers whose (implicit) purpose was to provide a “theoretical basis” for the political and social experiment of the “headless community” that was *Acéphale* (p. 125). Led by Bataille, Caillois, and to a lesser extent Leiris, the inaugural declaration included Georges Ambrosino, Pierre Klossowski, Pierre Libra, and Jules Monnerot. They were joined by Jean Wahl and Denis de Rougemont and, from 1937 to 1939, the Collège offered a series of lectures on its main themes—attraction and repulsion, ambiguity, tragedy, Sade, shamanism, and festivals. These attracted much attention and counted among its audience figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin, who had been scheduled to give a presentation in 1939, Julien Benda, and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle (p.168).^[10] Taking their cue from “Durkheim’s conception of society as a collective being” (p. 172), Bataille and Caillois investigated the existence of the sacred in the social, Bataille driven by his interest in the principles of excess, abjection, and heterogeneity and their potential for the social.

The question of the sacred in the social seemed especially urgent if human existence was to be regenerated into some form of community. The sacred was, however, distinct from the religious and both men, with Leiris, suggested that the ambiguity at its heart usually provoked ambivalent reactions. While Bataille explored the ways in which attraction and repulsion were intertwined, Caillois elaborated a series of reflections on the nature of power. The emotional nature of power was a particular focus: Bataille thus offered the army as a “formation creative of unity” (p. 189). Still, he criticized fascism, which he had early defined as instances of the realm of heterogeneity where affect and force determined the social (p. 130) for their militarization of societies that produced only an illusory experience of the sacred. Caillois, on the other hand, sought to dissolve the ambivalence of the sacred. In 1938, Bataille and Caillois turned to “elective communities” as embodied in brotherhoods or secret societies as the only productive solution for generating excess, and thus affect. Ultimately though, the divergences that emerged between Bataille’s concern for “tragedy” and emphasis on ambiguity (p. 190) and Caillois’ insistence on aristocratic secret societies and the “active pursuit of a model of social regeneration” (p. 202) could not be reconciled and meant the Collège reached an impasse neither man could fully resolve.

Historians, however, may feel somewhat disappointed upon reading Falasca-Zamponi’s study. While she touches upon the larger historical context that framed these writings, these often read like a flat backdrop. France too often stands in for Western thought. Despite the colonial context in which ethnography emerged (and which she attends to, mostly in chapter 2), Falasca-Zamponi does not further interrogate the complex ways in which these thinkers, Caillois especially, appropriated ethnographic thought and the interwar fascination with “the primitive.” Considering the last decade of sophisticated scholarship on the ways race, colonialism, and imperial thought were both challenged and reproduced in this particular period, such historiographical consideration might shed a different light on the ways the category of the “primitive” functioned in relation to fantasies of community and self.^[11] Césaire, after all, had come of age in this intellectual and political world. Equally, how might a consideration of the ways in which gender and sexuality infused interwar political imaginaries also illuminate both men’s analysis of the “devirilization” of contemporary democracies, their analysis of fascism, and their focus on the army and brotherhoods as model sacred communities (pp. 203, 218)?^[12] Unfortunately, *Rethinking*

the Political exhibits the same silences around gender and race as analytical categories that still mostly characterizes intellectual history.

Similarly, one regrets her lack of engagement with interwar political developments when much of her exploration seeks to illuminate the ways in which Bataille and Caillois responded to and sought to provide (political) answers for fascism, even as they refused traditional political activism. Fascism preoccupied many French commentators in the interwar years, from the Surrealists (who remain undifferentiated in her account) to the generation of far-right, Catholic, personalist and non-conformist intellectuals (who occasionally appear in her account). Italian fascism was a source of fascination that elicited both admiration and worry, while Nazi Germany divided many, even among the far right. In fact, the argument that parliamentary democracy was depleted and that fascism represented a new political form was hardly confined to Bataille and his companions. It was a commonplace of political commentators, especially in the wake of the Popular Front election and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Just as commonplace was the debate over the relationship between art and politics, especially in relation to literature and the fate of the novel—from discussions of André Gide's politics, to debates on Popular Front cultural politics, to the proper relationship of intellectuals to Communism. Intellectual Julien Benda's disagreements with Bataille, for instance, should be understood within this context (p. 208).^[13]

These critiques, however, reflect a historian's disciplinary frame and Falasca-Zamponi is a sociologist whose project is, first and foremost, to "better estimate the value of the Collège's sociological vision" (p. 233). Falasca-Zamponi wishes to restore the Collège to the canon of sociological thought while pointing out that, when defining the conditions for a different form of political community, misreading the relation of the aesthetic to the political may have dire consequences. For her, "[...] the Collège's extreme belief in the power of the sacred and its conception of the social as a self-sustained organism unfettered by other spheres led inevitably to theoretical impasses that resulted in political ambiguity" (p. 8). Falasca-Zamponi thus argues that artificially divorcing the aesthetic and the political while conceiving the political in narrow terms (that is, merely the world of political events) led to the impasse that haunted the Collège in 1938 and 1939. It is that evaluation that motivates her turn to philosopher Claude Lefort's postwar elaboration of a thought of the community that, she argues, is best able to deal with the ambiguity at work in the political so that "the risks of totalizing tendencies inherent in the Collège's musings on the sacred" (p. 22) are kept at bay and resolved. For her, Lefort, unlike the Collège, offers a way to define community in ways that takes seriously the relationship of aesthetics and politics and neither ignores nor misjudges the affective binds generated by democratic politics. While *Rethinking the Political* offers a thorough exploration of these interwar writings, the Collège still awaits its historian.

NOTES

[1] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 73. For a biography of Roger Caillois, see Claudine Frank's introduction to a collection of Caillois' writings, *On the Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[2] Henri Massis, *Défense de l'Occident* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1927).

[3] Denis Hollier's reprint of these texts was so momentous that few believed they were authentic when he first edited them, *Le Collège de Sociologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995, 2nd ed.).

[4] Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[5] Michèle Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 1.

[6] Richman, *Sacred Revolutions*, pp. 5, 136-154.

[7] On the interwar as a moment where philosophy and critical thought inaugurated a radically different understanding of the “human,” that shaped the intellectual world after World War Two, see Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2010). On the intimate ties of fascism and modernism, see Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). On the ways French far-right intellectuals were embedded in interwar contemporary debates over the nature of the self, literature, and aesthetics, see my *Aesthetics of Hate: Far-Right Intellectuals, Antisemitism, and Gender in 1930s France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2012). For historians productively revisiting the political and intellectual genealogies of the interwar: see, for instance, Jessica Wardaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-9* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Philip Nord, *France’s New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Jackie Clarke, *France in the Age of Organization: Factory, Home and Nation from the 1920s to Vichy* (London: Berghahn Books, 2011). For excellent analyses of the question of the aesthetic and the political, see Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), and Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[8] Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism, from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 161. For a different reading of Bataille’s turn to “sacrificial violence,” see Jesse Goldhammer who situates him within a genealogy of French thought on sovereignty, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). See also Stefanos Geroulanos, “The Anthropology of Exit: Bataille on Heidegger and Fascism,” *October* 117(Summer 2006):3-24.

[9] Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason*, p. 165.

[10] Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie*, p. 13.

[11] Among others, see especially Gary Wilder, *The Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). For an example of nuanced analysis of the ways “primitivism” has functioned as “a discourse, a myth, [and] a fantasy,” see Daniel J. Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), p. 5.

[12] This would have been especially illuminating considering the ways Durkheim himself had offered a vision of the republican morality undergirded by a gendered conception of the individual and an emphasis on conjugal heterosexuality as the foundation for proper social regulation. On this, see Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), which the author cites.

[13] For an overview of the literary debates, see Michel Raimond, *La crise du roman: Des lendemains du naturalisme aux années vingt* (Paris: José Corti, 1993, 5th ed.), and *Eloge et critique de la modernité: De la première à la seconde guerre mondiale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000).

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