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Loïc Rignol, *Les Hiéroglyphes de la Nature: Le socialisme scientifique en France dans le premier XIXe siècle*. Dijon: Presses du réel, 2014. 1141 pp. Bibliography and index. €42.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8406-6622-6.

Review by Jonathan Beecher, University of California, Santa Cruz.

This book is, among other things, a rescue operation. It's an attempt to recapture a dead language and to make sense of the extraordinary blending of science and religion in the writings of the first generation of French socialists in the two decades prior to the Revolution of 1848. Loïc Rignol notes the facile mockery by Champfleury and Alexandre Erdan of the "philosophico-religioso elucubrations" of the early socialists. How much laughter has there been, he writes, with regard to these "eccentrics" of "mystical France" (p. 33)? [1] But the book's provocative subtitle, "le socialisme scientifique en France dans le premier XIXe siècle," makes it clear that he also seeks to rescue the early French socialists from their entombment in Friedrich Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Rignol's aim is to understand the early socialists on their own terms and not as the "utopian" precursors of "scientific socialism." This means taking seriously their attempt to put their own economic and social theories on a scientific basis by grounding them in an epistemology rooted in the discovery of the symbolic language of nature. As he puts it with epigrammatic gusto, his aim is "to grasp the reason of their revelation, the logic of their faith" (p. 33).

Rignol's argument in brief is that the early socialists saw themselves as living in a time of crisis—a time of disunity and individualism when Christianity had lost its power to move people and to bring them together. It was necessary to find or create a new spiritual power which would replace the now moribund Catholic Church with a new religion grounded in principles revealed by another recent discovery: social science. Society was more than a collection of individuals, the early socialists argued. It was an organism that functioned according to a logic of its own. The goal of the new social science, which included its own moral code and its own cosmology, was to grasp this logic—to understand it and eventually to control it. What this required was the discovery of nature's symbolic language: the recognition that the natural world *speaks* to human beings and that its forms, colors, sounds, odors, and sensations are the *words* of its language. To understand the workings of society and to grasp the true meaning of the cosmos, it was necessary to decipher this language and to reveal the mysterious affinities, veiled continuities, and secret analogies hidden in nature.

The early socialists were hardly alone in their belief that all of nature is governed by God-given laws which express the divine will through "living symbols, religious hieroglyphs" (p. 113). This was one of the great Romantic themes. And much of Rignol's book is devoted to situating the socialists' quest in the context of the comparable efforts of contemporary scientists in fields ranging from biology and physiology to phrenology and eugenics. Rignol describes Charles Fourier as "no doubt the most audacious" of the investigators who sought to decode nature's hieroglyphs (p. 512). And one might argue that Rignol's great accomplishment in this book is to provide a context for an understanding not of early French socialism as a whole but rather for the thought of Fourier and his followers. The work of Proudhon and Louis Blanc and Constantin Pecqueur receives less attention here than that of Fourier

and Victor Considerant and even minor Fourierists like Julien Le Rousseau. Rignol attributes to Fourier a “Copernican revolution” according to which “cosmology serves as the model of all possible knowledge” (p. 353). This is certainly a tenable position with regard to Fourier, but it is not a position that Proudhon or Louis Blanc or even some of Fourier’s followers would have found appealing.

Still, this is a work of breathtaking intellectual reach and erudition. The reader is immediately struck by the breadth of the list of contemporary thinkers who subscribed to a notion of “social science” that included at least some of the features of Rignol’s paradigm. The Saint-Simonian “pope,” Prosper Enfantin, could write that God’s will can be discerned in nature through symbols and hieroglyphs “because God speaks OUTSIDE OF US as he speaks IN US, and we touch and see his WILL in nature” (p. 113). The radical writer and historian Alphonse Esquiros adhered to what Rignol aptly describes as “a historiographical new Christianity that detected in the laws of Nature the echo of Providence in History” (p. 724). The statistician Aldophe Quetelet founded his “social physics” on the idea that “the great architect of the universe” had “perfectly equilibrated” the laws governing the moral and intellectual world with those governing the movement of the heavenly bodies (p. 408). And finally, the celebrated phrenologist Johann Gaspar Spurzheim and his followers had developed a “scientific religion” around the notion that “a code of IMMUTABLE LAWS” could be established through the careful examination of the bone structure and tissue of the human brain (pp. 652-653). The recitation of these names and these statements should convey some sense of the ubiquity of the appeal to the idea of a symbolic language of nature both within and outside the early socialist movement of the 1830s and 1840s.

By any standard, this book is a daunting read. Its 763 pages of text are supplemented by 270 pages of notes plus a bibliography that runs to another ninety-three pages. According to my scale, the book weighs four pounds and four ounces. More seriously, one should note that an odd, or at least unconventional, feature of Rignol’s approach is that he rarely enters into dialogue with the scholarly literature on the multitude of topics he considers. He obviously knows the literature, and it all appears in his bibliography. But what other historians have said does not appear to be important to him. His great aim is clearly to give a fresh reading and interpretation to a huge number of primary sources. Thus, the vast majority of the 4482 endnotes do not consist of arguments with other scholars or of interventions into the ongoing discussion of questions of interpretation. Rather, most of the notes consist simply of citations from primary documents supporting points made in the text. And long quotations are so important a feature of the text itself that at times the book assumes the character of an anthology. But what an original and provocative and elegantly shaped anthology! And how much there is to learn from it!

One of Loïc Rignol’s main accomplishments in this book is certainly to add richness and complexity to our picture of early French socialism. In the process of rescuing the Fourierists, Saint-Simonians, Icarians, and their brothers and sisters in the other socialist *écoles* from their entombment by Engels as eccentric precursors to “scientific socialism,” he gives voice to fascinating figures like the anarchists Joseph Déjacque and Ernest Coeurderoy. He shows that the communist Théodore Dézamy, dismissed by Marx (and by most historians) as a hopelessly simple-minded and dogmatic materialist, was also a mystic capable of investing considerable intellectual energy in an argument concerning the similarity of the properties of the *corps social* and the body of Christ (p. 487). Rignol has also had the imagination and patience to work into his analysis the writings of a number of minor eclectic thinkers like the *Nantais* Ange Guépin and the *Grenoblois* Joseph Rey who served both as intermediaries between different socialist *écoles* and translated the theories of major thinkers into language readily intelligible to particular provincial audiences.

What I find particularly valuable in this book is the light it sheds on a problem that has long mystified or at least troubled historians: the strange blending of science and religion, of prophecy and sociology, in the writings of the early French socialists. Rignol argues that each of them (including Proudhon, who

coined the term “scientific socialism”) described himself as the founder of an exact science—a science of social organization that would enable humans to create a world organized in a way consistent with the true laws of human nature and society. But each also spoke in the tones of a religious prophet. Not everyone saw his new science as the basis for a new religion. But they all used religious language and imagery. Rignol’s argument may be overstated on some points, but what he has accomplished in this book is to open up the problem and to show how the blending of Christian language and socialist ideology was both possible and plausible in the 1830s and 1840s.[2]

There is another point to make about Rignol’s achievement in this book. One can argue, as I have already suggested, that the argument works best when applied not to the early socialist movement as a whole but rather to the Fourierist movement in particular. But even if one accepts this limitation, I think it is evident that the book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Fourierism. As Rignol points out, even admirers of Fourier have often tended to speak of his cosmogony and his theory of universal analogy as laughable extravagances. For decades, Marxist accounts of Fourier’s thought were organized according to a conventional distinction between Fourier’s “shrewd” social criticism and his “childish” or even “insane” fantasies. But something similar can be found in more sophisticated contemporary studies—in the work of Roland Barthes, for example, where Fourier’s hieroglyphs are described as completely arbitrary, as the inventions of a wild and unbridled imagination.[3] Rignol’s point, which seems to me to be absolutely correct, is that Fourier’s hieroglyphs, his analogies, and all of his cosmological writings are, in his terms, totally rational. Having discovered the symbolic language of nature, Fourier believed himself in a position to demonstrate the underlying rationality of the universe, and, throughout his career, he never tired of contrasting his own “fidelity to the system of nature” with the “arbitrary” and “imaginative” character of the views of most contemporary social thinkers (pp. 517-518).

This book is clearly a labor of love. Rignol has steeped himself in the sources; he shows a remarkable capacity to enter into the views of his socialists and to “think with” them; and his prose, always clear, often elegant, rises at times to heights of eloquence. Thus, every now and then, while developing his argument concerning the ubiquity of the appeal to a symbolic language of nature in the early nineteenth century, he pauses to reflect in a general way about the importance of understanding the early socialists in the context of their own time. He does this lyrically in his conclusion. There he writes that the great challenge confronting anyone who seeks to understand the early socialists is not only to recognize the difference between their world and ours but also to understand that they spoke a different language. For us, he writes, “the world has lost its voice and the idea that Nature no longer speaks to us” (p. 762). For us the hieroglyphs of the nineteenth century are metaphors and the intellectual systems of the early socialists are utopias. But to say this is to speak our language. To understand these thinkers on their own terms we need to think our way back into a world in which utopia is science and hieroglyphs are clues to the structure of reality.

NOTES

[1] All quotes are the author’s translation from the original French.

[2] On the problem of the blending of religion and science in early French socialism see Gareth Stedman Jones, “Religion and the Origins of Socialism,” in Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones eds., *Religion and the Political Imagination* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 171-189; Miguel Abensour, “L’Utopie socialiste: une nouvelle alliance de la politique et de la religion,” *Le Temps de la réflexion* 2 (1981): 61-112; Jonathan Beecher, “Fourierism and Christianity,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 22 (1994): 391-403; and Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-wing Politics in France, 1830-1852* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[3] Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980), pp. 99-102.

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