

H-France Review Vol. 17 (January 2017), No. 26

Mariana Saad, *Cabanis, comprendre l'homme pour changer le monde*, Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2016 (Collection 'Histoire et philosophie des sciences', 10), 309 pp. Preface by Jackie Pigeaud, bibliography, index nominum and index rerum. 37.00€. ISBN 978-2-406-05803-8

Review by Ann Thomson, European University Institute.

Pierre Jean George Cabanis (1757-1808), while far from unknown, has attracted less detailed interest than one might expect, although his name comes up in many studies of the Revolutionary period and in particular of the Idéologues, of whom he was a leading figure. The Idéologues are, as a whole, a relatively under-studied group, attracting much less attention than other Revolutionary figures. There is little available in English on them; the main overall study is still the one by Sergio Moravia. [1] In the long-running debate on the relationship between Enlightenment and Revolution, there seems to be little place for them, perhaps because, as Mariana Saad writes, they do not represent simply a continuation of the Enlightenment but a radically new philosophical position, elaborating a programme for future generations (p. 37). Cabanis was a medical doctor who is best remembered today for his *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* (originally presented in lectures given at the Institut in 1796 before being published in book form in 1802) and the monistic conception of humans that is developed there, with the claim that the physical and the moral cannot be distinguished. He was also a reformer of hospitals and medical education (his first work, *Observations sur les hôpitaux*, in 1790, presented hospital reform as a moral and political issue), as well as a leading figure in the political life of the Directoire. He was in many ways an heir of the Montpellier vitalist school, as is made clear by Saad, building on the late Roselyne Rey's classic study of vitalism published posthumously in 2000, with a picture of Cabanis on the front cover. [2]

The only work available on Cabanis in English, Martin Staum's intellectual biography, dates from 1980; [3] it places him firmly in his historical context, both of eighteenth-century thought and the revolutionary events. Mariana Saad's study of Cabanis (which originated in a doctoral thesis in philosophy but has benefited from the extensive research she has since undertaken on reform projects in the revolutionary period), while including Cabanis's fellow Idéologues in much of the analysis, takes a very different tack from Staum's. It is definitely not an intellectual biography, but rather a detailed study of the epistemological foundations of Cabanis's thought, bringing out his original view of medicine closely linked to the Idéologues' project of political and moral reform. As she explains in her introduction, her method combines philosophical and historical analysis in the context of traditions of thought and changes in medical practice. But the philosophical analysis constitutes the main emphasis, eschewing purely sociological or cultural approaches to the history of medicine and medical practice. It is significant that, contrary to what many Anglophone readers might expect, there is only one brief mention of Foucault, when Saad distances herself from his *Birth of the Clinic* by demonstrating that Cabanis does not correspond to Foucault's analysis. There is no reference to any other of Foucault's works, even when Cabanis's thinking on madness is discussed. Saad's approach is not the dominant one in contemporary scholarship on the history of medicine, particularly in the English-speaking world, but this book shows that it has much to teach us.

It provides a detailed analysis of the basic elements of Cabanis's thought, bringing out clearly and skilfully the coherence and complexity of his thought around certain basic themes, whose origins and link to traditions of medical thinking are investigated, as well as their relationship to the thought and events of his time. The author then shows how they lead him to his view of politics and revolutionary reform projects, with the aim of ensuring human happiness. The first chapter, 'L'excès et le manque', discusses the foundations of Cabanis's thought, starting from the role of the doctor, which is to observe and interpret. This empirical approach is linked both to Condillac's sensualism and to the Montpellier vitalist school. These elements are explored through a detailed and sensitive discussion of Cabanis's different writings, leading from the basis of sensibility to the role of the vital principle. The importance of harmony is emphasized, as the individual is part of an interdependent universe, following Newtonian laws; for Cabanis pathology is the result of a lack of harmony. Thus, as is analysed in the following chapter, the medical doctor must read the signs to understand the causes of the excess or insufficiency which disturbs this harmony. It is here that M. Saad takes issue with Foucault's interpretation of medical knowledge and practice in this period centred on Bichat, whose discoveries were based on the dissection of corpses rather than the observation of the sick (pp. 76-7). For Cabanis, instead, she shows that what was important was the interpretation of the language of disease by observation, based on the link between sensitivity and pathology (the latter being an excess of sensitivity), which was the foundation of the medical teaching he defended.

The third chapter, 'Une logique médicale' goes on to analyse in the light of these discussions Cabanis's thinking on the causes of diseases and on the interaction between the individual and the environment, or 'climate', understood in a wide sense, together with the pathologies induced by certain circumstances. Given that pathology results from an excess of feeling, and that the centre of feeling is the brain, this leads on to a discussion of mental disorders and makes clearer the connection made by Cabanis with abnormalities in the brain. The implications of this and of Cabanis's linking of the physical and the moral are developed in the following chapter, 'La Place du fou', which analyses his reinterpretation of madness and its treatment. Here we come to the famous and often misunderstood analogy he makes between the brain and the stomach, saying that the brain digests sense-impressions and secretes thought. In this connection, the perfectly justifiable description of Cabanis's philosophy as materialistic could have benefited from a discussion of what precisely is meant here by this term for those unfamiliar with the literature. This would have been particularly useful inasmuch as Martin Staum questions the use of the term to refer to the thought of Cabanis and the *Idéologues* (Staum, pp. 304-7).

This chapter also contains an important analysis of Cabanis's discussion of women, and the connection he makes between female sexuality and mental illness, which links his conclusions to other eighteenth-century discussions, particularly that of Pierre Roussel. Saad shows how Cabanis's position, somewhat at odds with the logic of his theories, is dictated above all by a political imperative, namely to prevent women from having a public role (pp. 159-75). This leads on to a demonstration of how his reform projects follow from the idea that mental illnesses (which include crime) are linked to imbalance in society; this stance founds his commitment to the moral reform of society, including educational reform. M. Saad demonstrates convincingly in the following chapter, "Médecine et politique" the coherence of Cabanis's medical, philosophical, political and moral philosophy, the basis of his defence of human rights. She ends with his commitment to the ideal of national regeneration and to belief in human perfectibility, showing how it is connected to Lamarckian theories of evolution.

It is difficult in a summary to do justice to the subtlety and complexity of the analysis which constantly links Cabanis's thought both to classic tradition, in particular the Hippocratic corpus, and to several eighteenth-century thinkers like Condillac, while bringing out in a nuanced way his aims and the originality of his contribution. His thought is consistently situated in a wider context, emphasizing sometimes surprising connections to other thinkers, as in an interesting development on Cabanis's relationship to Franz Anton Mesmer or to the British and American reformers of the late eighteenth-

century, whose views on the link between crime and madness are adopted by Cabanis. Other analyses contribute to rethinking the link to German thought by reference to his relationship with Humboldt. Elsewhere, in the discussion on the role of climate, the Idéologues' disagreement with Montesquieu is underlined, while the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on Cabanis's political thought is brought out. What Saad is proposing is a contextualist reading of Cabanis's thought, in the tradition of an important strand of the history of philosophy in France. This is an approach that is somewhat rarer in the study of the history of medicine, but M. Saad clearly owes a debt to the late Jackie Pigeaud, who prefaced the book. She demonstrates here the fecundity of this approach and the light it throws both on the thought and practice of Cabanis and on that of the Idéologues more widely. In so doing, she questions many of the generalisations about intellectual life during the French Revolution, helping to construct a more complex picture of the period.

At the end of her Introduction Mariana Saad claims that she is writing not only for specialists but for all those interested in 'the history of our modernity' (p. 37). Perhaps therefore, in concession to these more general readers, she could have provided more information about Cabanis and his life, and the wider context of his writings. The introduction presents briefly Cabanis's major works, notably *Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme* and *Observations sur les Hôpitaux*, their genesis and reception, and situates him usefully in the intellectual and political life of the period. But there is a nevertheless a tendency to suppose that the reader is familiar with many details of medical thought or events during the Revolution, in particular the Directoire, which might have gained by a little more explanation. It would be a pity if less specialised readers were discouraged from reading this work because it gives the impression of plunging them with little preparation into an analysis of medical philosophy. In fact, the intelligence and clarity of the analysis make the demonstrations always convincing and enlightening. The reader is led skilfully through the complexities of medical thinking, in nuanced analyses which explore in depth the issues involved. This is an important book which contributes to broadening our understanding both of an important thinker and of aspects of the Revolutionary period that are too often ignored.

NOTES

[1] Sergio Moravia, *Il pensiero degli Idéologues: scienza e filosofia in Francia (1780-1815)* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1974).

[2] Roselyne Rey, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France* (Oxford : Voltaire Foundation, 2000).

[3] Martin S. Staum, *Cabanis. Enlightenment and Medical Philosophy in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1980).

Ann Thomson
European University Institute
Ann.Thomson@EUI.eu

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 redistribution/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 re-publication 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