



## Socialism and the experience of time: idealism and the present in Modern France

WRIGHT, Julian Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xiii + 276 pp., £83.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 978-0-19-953358-9

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## BOOK REVIEW

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The electoral cycle of 2017 was a nightmare for French socialists. After five years of a socialist presidency under François Hollande, their presidential candidate—the thoughtful but forgettable Benoît Hamon—came in 5<sup>th</sup> place. In the subsequent parliamentary elections, the Parti socialiste (PS) and its allies gained a mere 46 of 577 available seats. Not since the disastrous elections of June 1968 had French socialism been so poorly represented in the Assemblée nationale.

Unsurprisingly, the post-mortem was long and protracted. Some blamed the party leadership, especially Hollande, for its lack of imagination, while others maintained that the PS had become entirely disconnected from the working-classes it purported to represent. One of the most damaging criticisms, however, was that French socialism had somehow run its course. Critics suggested that the idea of a progressive compromise with capitalism—a central tenet of the European social-democratic tradition—had been rendered obsolete. The compromise politics of socialism could not survive in an age of populist strongmen, protracted financial crisis and global inequality.

Historians of the French left know that such criticisms are not new. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, socialists were frequently accused of being laggards in the onward march of history. Above all, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the emergence of a powerful communist movement put socialists on the back foot and forced them to justify their emphasis on gradual social change in the face of revolutionary idealism. But, as Julian Wright shows in this carefully researched book, the caricature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century French socialism as coolly pragmatic and ideologically lacklustre is far from the truth. On the contrary, many socialists agonized about the value of revolution and the best way to achieve social transformation. Some of them had seen revolution unfold first-hand during the Paris Commune, and they were steeped in the lessons of 1789, 1793, 1830 and 1848. They all had to grapple with the question of how French socialism would, as Wright puts it, 'recast its vision of time and society' after a century in which the 'political culture of revolution had been so dominant'.

Wright uses two different approaches to bring to life the debates surrounding the past, present and future of French socialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first is a form of intimate cultural history; the second is intellectual history. The first is generally much more prominent than the second. The bulk of the book is made up of fascinating portraits of well-known and lesser-known figures of French socialism, including Benoît Malon, André Léo, Georges Renard, Marcel Sembat, and Léon Blum. Using extensive archival material, Wright draws biographical sketches of these characters that remind us of some of the personal dilemmas they faced. These allow us to understand key debates and decisions against the backdrop of troubled romantic relationships and professional dissatisfactions. The result is a story of French socialism that highlights personal commitments and painful individual ruptures.

Wright's emphasis on inner worlds extends a tradition of writing about the politics of this period through the lens of cultural history. This includes Ruth Harris's work on the Dreyfus Affair, as well as a substantial French-language scholarship on the culture of late 19<sup>th</sup> century

French socialism by historians such as Christophe Prochasson, Gilles Candar, Marion Fontaine and Émmanuel Jousse. Indeed, one of the great merits of Wright's book is that it brings this scholarship to an English-language audience. It draws on and synthesizes the latest historiography in a way that restores a welcome emotional intensity to the history of socialism. In the same way that Sembat wanted workers to have a 'physical experience' of socialism, so too we are encouraged to think of socialism as an embodied political tradition.

The book does not work quite as well as a study in intellectual history. The frameworks that Wright deploys, many of which represent the burgeoning field of 'time studies', have huge potential for making us think differently about the specificities of French socialism, especially as they relate to ideas about the future. Unfortunately, Wright does not always succeed in combining the intimate histories of his protagonists with the ideas that underpinned their writings. His dual approach works best in the lengthy chapter on Jean Jaurès's project for a new history of French socialism, where we see clearly how different contributors struggled to define the temporality of revolution. Elsewhere, the analysis of texts too often appears as a fragment within a larger biographical sketch.

Still, there is little doubt that Wright succeeds in his primary aim of making us 'rediscover' French socialists' 'capacity for reflecting intelligently on modern culture and politics'. By focusing on individual political commitment, he pushes beyond traditional accounts of staged ideological disagreements at party congresses. At a time when French socialism is in bad shape, a book like this might just reassure the party faithful that the future is not as bleak as they thought it was.

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