

# Liberalism and Rationalism at the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1902–1903

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ERIC BRANDOM

**ABSTRACT** This article reconstructs and analyzes a debate on “the crisis of liberalism” that took place in a prominent philosophy journal, the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, in 1902–3. The debate was actuated by *combiste* anticlerical measures and the apparently liberal demand made by Catholics for freedom of instruction. Participants—all hostile to the church—sought to articulate a principled, rationalist liberalism that could respond to the needs of the republic in the post-Dreyfus era. Participants—including Célestin Bouglé, Dominique Parodi, Gustave Lanson, Elie Halévy, and Paul Lapie—balanced each in their own way the demands of rationalism, democracy, and modernity. The debate opens a window onto the transition between the Second Empire’s dissident, neo-Kantian, liberal republicanism and the antitotalitarian liberalism that Halévy and his student Raymond Aron would articulate in the interwar years.

**KEYWORDS** liberalism, republicanism, anticlericalism, philosophy, fin de siècle

“The Republic recognizes all liberties,” wrote Ferdinand Buisson in 1902, “except that of voluntary servitude.”<sup>1</sup> The problem of a freedom that abdicates itself has long been central to the politics of liberty, which is to say liberalism, and Buisson’s formulation finds echoes from Etienne de La Boétie through Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The servitude he had in mind was the result of moral and intellectual domination by the Catholic Church; *laïque* education overseen by the republic was, in contrast, supposed to be the foundation of true freedom. Buisson was among the great architects and administrators of the French school system and demonstrated profound faith in its mission. For him, as for republicans more broadly, freedom was not only a metaphysical fact and a political right but also a moral duty on the part of the individual. However, the implications of the growing capacity of the state to “organize enthusiasm”—as Elie

1. Quoted in Ozouf, *L'école, l'église*, 179. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

Halévy would put it in another context decades later—troubled some younger academics, themselves also professionally involved in elite pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> In the period of uncertainty just before the 1905 law gave definitive shape to the relationship between church and state, these philosophers worried that, perhaps, enforced *laïcité* was not much better than enforced Catholicism. The *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (hereafter *Rmm*), the premier philosophy journal of the time, printed a debate on the topic, titled “The Crisis of Liberalism,” initiated by a young professor working in Toulouse, Célestin Bouglé.<sup>3</sup> The discussion that took place in 1902–3 was over principles, so no decision was called for. Despite important differences in framing, and in evaluation of the forces at play on the social and political fields, there was broad agreement. One response, in the Jesuit periodical *Etudes*, summarized the result of the debate with some justice: “The true cure for the crisis, or the desirable endpoint of the evolution of liberalism, is a monopoly over the universities.”<sup>4</sup>

This article begins with some simple questions. In the wide-ranging discussion initiated by Bouglé’s essay, what was liberalism taken to mean? Over what terms, principles, or facts did the debate take place? Why was there a perception of crisis at this particular moment? In answering these questions through careful contextualization of this specific intellectual encounter, I suggest that we must revise accepted ideas about the contours of French fin de siècle liberalism, as well as the trajectory of liberalism in France across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I treat the entrants into this debate as a group and examine the debate itself, rather than pursuing one or several of these thinkers in isolation. This approach might be styled the study of disagreement, or perhaps a microhistorical approach to intellectual history.<sup>5</sup> It draws on insights from the sociology of knowledge and history of philosophy but rests on the cultural history of the period. Pinning down particular opinions at particular moments is a crucial step in the process, but the goal is to find the patterns and limits of a debate.

Divisions among this group sprang less from conceptual issues, although these could be significant, than from what we might call matters of judgment. How much did the republic really have to fear from the Catholic Church? A mirror of this question was their relative fear of the state—to what degree could this organ of generality as such itself become irrational? Was this possibility an

2. Halévy used the term in a talk, “L’ère des tyrannies,” given to the Société Française de Philosophie on November 28, 1936. Halévy, *L’ère des tyrannies*, 214.

3. Four responses were collected in one issue, those of Gustave Lanson, Paul Lapie, Dominique Parodi, and George Lyon. The next year saw an additional essay from Baptiste Jacob, followed by another from Parodi and something like a closing comment from Théodore Ruyssen. The essays appeared under the “Practical Questions” rubric, which Halévy managed.

4. Sortais, “La crise du libéralisme,” 578.

5. See the perceptive introduction by Prochasson and Rasmussen, “Du bon usage de la dispute,” in “Comment on se dispute: Les formes de la controverse,” the 2007 issue of *Mil neuf cent*.

essential or an incidental danger? The question was not abstract, because in 1902 the machinery of the state was actively engaged in persecuting—as Halévy, for instance, was willing to call it in private correspondence—the Catholic teaching orders in particular. But for the philosophers of the *Rmm*, this acute political question raised conceptual and moral ones: What was the compelling force of reason? Was there not a moral duty to pursue intellectual development?

Three related arguments run through this article, which are here presented in increasing order of abstractness. First, the liberalism of these scholars required, on a political, historical, and even conceptual level, the figure of the antiliberal Catholic Church. The negative example, this is to say, of a church not so far away from the Syllabus of Errors and the declaration of papal infallibility, assured these philosophers of their own liberalism. Second, the terms in which participants in this debate understood the relationship between the state and intellectual activity were analogous to their understanding of the relationship between the state and economic activity. The market for goods and services required, to function justly, intervention on the part of the state; in the same way, the state had an obligation to stage the competition between ideas in a certain way, for instance, by exercising some ideological control over the universities. Third, despite attempts to escape or mitigate it, a framework of dualistic rationalism dominated the thinking of these philosophers on social and political questions. This dualism took different forms, but the persistent division of the ideal from the material, and the association of freedom with the former and unfreedom with the latter, was especially important.

This article seeks to balance chronology, thematic presentation, and respect for the integrity of the original arguments. To this end, I begin by indicating implications of my own arguments for contemporary historiography. I then briefly situate the *Rmm* in intellectual and political context. Before I turn to Bouglé, a quick look at three figures, Ernest Renan, Jules Barni, and Henry Michel, specifies limits within which liberalism might be claimed and the problems that did, or did not, seem to call it into question. I then examine Bouglé's essay, highlighting both the issues that will be taken up by others in the ensuing debate and those that will be passed over in significant silence. Following this, I provide synoptic accounts of a selection of the most important contributions, drawing out major themes and points of disagreement. Last, I consider the immediate reaction of Halévy to the debate—which, in his capacity as editor of the *Rmm*, he had managed.

## Historiography

That the revival in the historiography of French liberalism has not focused on the first years of the twentieth century is perhaps reason enough to take a hard

look at self-conscious discussions of liberalism in this period. Pierre Rosanvallon and other scholars have argued persuasively that a major transformation in French republicanism took place in the final decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The individual-state model—supposedly dominant from the eighteenth century through the Jacobin tradition—was softened to admit the importance of mediating institutions. Another way of putting this is that republicans had by the end of the century come to articulate their idea of liberty through sociology. We see, however, powerful evidence here that many elite philosophers were committed to a rationalist liberalism and resolutely refused to rest their principles on the morphology of society. There can be, for these philosophers, really only one institution mediating between individuals and reason: the university. It is attached to the state and participates in its authority, but it is also autonomous by virtue of its reason.

This debate presents a transitional moment in the history of French liberalism. It allows us to see continuities between the “aristocratic” liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville, the Kantianism of Charles Renouvier or Jules Barni, and the antitotalitarian liberalism first of Halévy and then of his student Raymond Aron.<sup>7</sup> Essential to this transition are both the long-standing dualistic rationalism of the *Rmm* and the particular conjuncture of the years before 1905. Indeed, this debate and his place in it are evidence for the importance of Halévy, who was radical both in his commitment to rationalism as a moral position and in his willingness to take a stand *in history* for this rationalism. We here see Halévy on the way to the situational and antitotalitarian liberalism for which he and Aron would be best known. As Jean-Fabien Spitz has argued at length, a number of intellectuals around 1900 sought to put the state at the service of the moral and intellectual development of the individual.<sup>8</sup> For Spitz, this is a quintessentially republican moment, but it was also, especially for some of those committed to rationalist and dualist morality at the top of the university system, a moment of promise and danger for liberalism.

Pierre Macherry has recently suggested that in the nineteenth century all French philosophy essentially concerned the republic—as real, imagined, possible, impossible, hallucinatory.<sup>9</sup> Yet the historiography of philosophy has not been well integrated into the broader history of the Third Republic. Exemplary

6. Rosanvallon, *Demands of Liberty*. See also Logue, *From Philosophy to Sociology*; and Brooks, *Eclectic Legacy*. Also relevant is Spitz, *Le moment républicain*. See the contributions of Logue, “‘Sociological Turn’ in French Liberal Thought,” and Spitz, “‘Illiberalism’ of French Liberalism.”

7. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*. On Aron, see Hacoheh, “The Strange Fact That the State of Israel Exists”; and Müller, “Fear and Freedom.”

8. Spitz, *Le moment républicain*.

9. Macherry, *Etudes de philosophie “française,”* 39.

work on the earlier nineteenth century such as Jan Goldstein's does not, generally, find an analogue until the interwar period examined by scholars such as Samuel Moyn or Stefanos Geroulanos.<sup>10</sup> There is room for a more productive dialogue between history and the history of philosophy.

### The *Rmm* in Context

The *Rmm* was nearly ten years old when it printed Bouglé's "Crisis of Liberalism" in 1902 and had by this time established its position as a major representative of French philosophy. Two features defined the early 1890s: on the one hand, the reconciliation of Catholics with the republic—the *ralliement*—and, on the other, a new focus on the social question. We might say that as anticlericalism was muted, socialism asserted itself more loudly.<sup>11</sup> At this moment, in 1893, a tightly knit group of friends launched the *Rmm*. This journal, firmly identified from the beginning with a certain intellectual elite, would practice a liberalism of the mind and, eventually, mobilize intellect to defend the republic.<sup>12</sup> Théodule Ribot, the editor of the long-established *Revue philosophique*, referred unhappily, although not incorrectly, to his new competitors as "young people, rich, Jewish, and very metaphysical."<sup>13</sup> The journal was for professional philosophers or, more properly, for philosophy as a vocation. Its editors—principally Xavier Léon and Elie Halévy—sought to be, in Halévy's well-known phrase, "rationalistes avec rage."<sup>14</sup> As befitted their ambition to revive philosophy as a critical rationalism, the editorial policy was to be ecumenical rather than eclectic.<sup>15</sup> The *Rmm* had no declared political program, but its editors were to the left of most of the profession. Early in the journal's existence, for instance, a provocative intervention by the editors' former *lycée* professor Alphonse Darlu

10. Geroulanos, *Atheism That Is Not Humanist*; Goldstein, *Post-revolutionary Self*; Moyn, *Origins of the Other*. See, however, Revill, "Emile Boutroux"; and, although its orientation is somewhat different, Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*.

11. On this framing, see Lebovics, *Alliance of Iron and Wheat*; Silverman, *Art Nouveau*; Mayeur, *La vie politique*; Mayeur and Rebérioux, *Third Republic*; and Sorlin, *Waldeck-Rousseau*.

12. Soulié, *Les philosophes en République*. See also Prochasson, "Philosopher au XXe siècle"; for an account that places the *Rmm* at the beginning of a long tradition of French *épistémologie*, see the first chapters of Revill's dissertation, "Taking France to the School of the Sciences."

13. Quoted in Merllié, "Les rapports entre la *Revue de métaphysique* et la *Revue philosophique*," 77–78. At least in the early planning stages, the review was understood as, in Xavier Léon's words, "an anti-Ribotian and Renouvierist philosophical journal." Léon, Halévy, and Simon-Nahum, "Xavier Léon/Elie Halévy," 16.

14. Léon, Halévy, and Simon-Nahum, "Xavier Léon/Elie Halévy," 12. The phrase is perhaps best translated as "impassioned rationalists."

15. The terms are suggested by Stéphan Soulié. In practice, this means that although the directors of the *Rmm* and their closest associates were quite hostile to the divergent approaches to philosophy represented by Emile Durkheim and Henri Bergson, the *Rmm* became a venue for both. See Soulié, *Les philosophes en République*, 68.

on the desirability of an estate tax obliged the journal to switch publishers.<sup>16</sup> Nonconforming socialists such as Frédéric Rauh and Charles Andler represented the left wing of the *Rmm*'s associates, and quite radical opinions could be aired "among philosophers" without difficulty.<sup>17</sup>

Defending the autonomy of philosophy as a discipline against both positivist materialism and theological or spiritualist irrationalism, the journal sought to take philosophy to "the school of the sciences," to return to the ancient problems of philosophy with new energy, and finally to engage with the present world. Just as neo-Kantian philosophy of science had to be improved on in light of scientific developments, so too the political thought of republican neo-Kantians such as Barni and Renouvier required new elaboration when faced with the problems of a mature republican France at the dawn of the twentieth century. But it is important to recognize that this program fit into a broader reaction against the positivism of the previous decade. Something similar is visible in other fields, as Debora Silverman has shown, for instance, with regard to the transformation of visual and plastic arts after 1889.<sup>18</sup> As Ribot's unhappiness with the new journal suggests, its particular brand of republicanism did not immediately appeal to all parties. Indeed, the group would continue in later years to spar over the relation of science to philosophy—and the political conclusions to draw from this—with republicans of a more positivist orientation, Emile Durkheim in particular. If, for several years, the search for a nonrevolutionary solution to the social question could dominate mainstream political discussion, in 1897–98 the Dreyfus affair remade the politicocultural context.

The affair is usually seen as the essential factor in the turn to politics of the *Rmm* cohort. Certainly it provoked a new round of conflict over issues of national belonging, religious identity, and republican freedoms. I do not wish to minimize the disturbance—even trauma—that such an eruption of antisemitism precipitated for this social group. It was made up in large measure of people who may at most be called highly assimilated Jews, who experienced the affair in part as the imposition of a new identity.<sup>19</sup> A few points, however, are worth

16. See *ibid.*

17. As Rauh put it more than once during debate at the Société Française de Philosophie. See Michel, "La doctrine politique de la démocratie," 113.

18. Silverman, *Art Nouveau*.

19. Joel Revill and others have argued for the importance of the sudden imposition of Jewishness on some of these deeply assimilated individuals, people for whom it may well be inappropriate, from a historical perspective, to speak of Jewishness at all. Halévy, expressing in late 1897 his certainty that an injustice had been committed, writes to Bouglé, "I have a jewish name, and I am protestant: am I deceived by my caste [*victime d'une illusion de caste*]?" Halévy, *Correspondance*, 203. A good introduction is Julliard, "Elie Halévy, le témoin engagé." The literature on French Jews and Jewishness in this period is vast. One relevant and useful recent work is Joskowicz, *Modernity of Others*. See Revill, "Taking France to the School of the Sciences"; and Revill, "Bitterness of Disappointed Expectations." The most substantial recent work on Halévy is

emphasizing. First, students of Darlu's could hardly have failed to relate philosophy to life from the beginning of their studies. Indeed, Léon Brunschvicg—unofficial cofounder of the *Rmm*, who would exercise enormous influence, especially after the First World War—and Halévy were hashing out their own positions about political issues around the freedom of association and education even before creating the *Rmm*.<sup>20</sup> The “practical questions” rubric under which the “crisis of liberalism” would eventually be discussed itself dated from 1895, before the extraordinary mobilization of the Dreyfus affair. So the latter was by no means the beginning of reflection for these individuals on religion, freedom, and education. Nor was it the end. If the antirepublican forces marshaled around the guilt of Dreyfus proved how much work remained, they did not provoke a crisis in the concept of liberalism.

Rather, the *Rmm*'s “crisis of liberalism” was provoked by the political shift from republican defense to offense. After a period of serious ministerial instability and public unrest, in 1899 Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau formed a government of republican defense. He acted with some vigor suppressing the most outspoken opponents of the republican form of government. In July 1901 a law on associations created a new legal framework for the regulation of the various religious orders. As Maurice Agulhon has written, legislators cut the “Gordian knot” presented by “the republican need to complete the array of fundamental freedoms by granting the right of association, and the no less republican mistrust with regard to possible subversive groups . . . by preparing a frankly discriminatory law.”<sup>21</sup> Freedom of association was granted, but religious associations had to

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Frobert, *Elie Halévy*. A stimulating conference on Halévy, organized by K. Steven Vincent, came at an important moment in my work on this subject. Several papers given at this conference have since been published, but they appeared too late for me to materially engage with them here. See Duclert, “Elie Halévy Retrouvé”; Conti and Welch, “Receptions of Elie Halévy's *La Formation*”; Frobert, “Elie Halévy and Philosophical Radicalism”; Revill, “Practical Turn”; Vincent, “Elie Halévy on England and the English”; and Vincent, “Forum.”

20. Halévy's long response to Brunschvicg's 1891 *mémoire* on Spinoza raises some of these issues. Brunschvicg wrote to Halévy in 1892, continuing a longer discussion on the topic, about differences between the two over the question of church-state separation, anticlericalism, and freedom of education. Both the vocabulary and self-positioning are of interest: “I ask for separation to give the church dignity and liberty, and for your part you add that this separation cannot be made except with a law annihilating associations, which makes my ‘liberalism’ (oh! me liberal!) contradictory.” Later on in the same letter, on education: “The question is whether moral oversight [*tutelle morale*] belongs to the father, or the state. Liberals say the father: me, I say to the state. . . . It is nonetheless the case that education is a tyranny: must it be suppressed? . . . You think in principle that the state can only be either clerical or anticlerical.” For the Spinoza response, see Institut de Mémoire d'Édition Contemporain (IMEC), fonds Brunschvicg, correspondance divers. For the letter, see IMEC fonds Brunschvicg, BCR 01-02, BCR 01-03 H47, Feb. 11, 1892.

21. Agulhon, *French Republic*, 99. As Chloé Gaboriaux has shown, the law did not institute the sort of associations that republicans had most ardently desired, precisely because this would have allowed religious congregations to function with too great latitude. The law was, as she writes, “faute de mieux” and all the more suspect for this. Gaboriaux, “La loi 1901.”

apply for special authorization. If, for Waldeck-Rousseau, this was to have been the first step in a new “concordat of congregations,”<sup>22</sup> new elections in 1902 convinced him to step aside in favor of a radical, Emile Combes, who applied the provisions of the new law with rigor, denying en bloc applications for official status. He closed twelve thousand religious-run schools. Many republicans were appalled by Combes’s heavy-handed measures. However, the parliamentary elections of April–May 1902 were among the hardest-fought and best-attended elections of the era, and they seemed a mandate for Combes’s anticlerical policies.<sup>23</sup> In this charged context, Bouglé formulated his concerns and initiated debate over the status of liberalism. The 1905 law of separation, which would substantially change the terms of debate, was yet to come, and the form it would ultimately take could hardly have been predicted.

Judicial misconduct and antisemitic violence did not provoke this crisis of liberalism. Neither of them presented any conceptual challenge to a liberal worldview. It was, rather, the spectacle of schoolhouses shut because of *who* taught there, even more than *what* was taught, and the very real prospect of a state monopoly over higher education that provoked and sustained self-reflection on the part of these descendants of the “hussards noirs” of the republic. So although the Dreyfus affair was undeniably a formative event, we must look to its *suites* as well. The affair itself presented (at least as far as the Dreyfusards were concerned) a relatively clear-cut question of justice or injustice. But as the initial political danger receded and staunch republicans regained control of the situation, new questions arose that could not be so easily answered. *Mystique* gave way to *politique*. An appeal to reason, to justice, to law, to truth was an effective answer to an illegal imprisonment but offered little guidance as a positive political program.

Bouglé’s intervention fit very well with the spirit of the *Rmm* and provoked responses from other frequent contributors, including Dominique Parodi, Baptiste Jacob, and Paul Lapie, as well as Gustave Lanson, a literary historian relatively removed from this group. We can also follow, at least partly through his correspondence, Halévy’s response. These men would all have regarded themselves as liberal in the sense of undogmatic and tolerant of divergent opinion. All vigorously defended the actually existing Third Republic, of which most, although not all, were agents as educators. What they faced in 1902 was a philosophical and moral challenge of just the sort that their critical rationalism demanded they meet. How could their politics, broadly construed, be justified without deviating from their principles?

22. Cited in Mayeur, *La vie politique*, 184.

23. See Mayeur and Reberiou, *Third Republic*, 220. See also Mayeur, *La vie politique*, 188; and Mayeur, *La séparation de l’Eglise et de l’Etat*.



*Liberalism* as a term was worth arguing over in part because it was capacious. It indicated a mode of sociability as well as of intellectual engagement. But it also named a political position—even if, as Parodi lamented, “names . . . no longer express anything on their own. . . . It does not seem that the *progressistes* are always the most impatient for progress, or the liberals the most passionate about liberty”—and so was a standing challenge: could the ideals and strictures of *l'esprit* also be those of the republic?<sup>24</sup> When it came to action in the contemporary world, these philosophers were committed both to the universality and to the moral content of reason. But if reason was both public and moral, how could one maintain, as Darlu had written, “the distinction between the political order and the moral order” that is “the principle of liberalism”?<sup>25</sup> No clear and distinct compelling solution was put forward.

### Renan, Barni, and Michel

We can appreciate the limits of liberalism as a name in this period better by looking at two antecedents for the *Rmm* cohort and one contemporary: first, the idealist liberalism Ernest Renan claimed late in his life; second, Jules Barni's democratic and neo-Kantian republicanism; and finally the individualism articulated as a contemporary political philosophy by Henry Michel. These three suggest not only relevant intellectual coordinates for the *Rmm*'s debate over the term *liberalism* but also the dilemmas inherited from past discussions, particularly the political ambiguity of rationalism.

It was Renan, perhaps more than any other master thinker of the early Third Republic, against whom the *Rmm* group drew its position. Despite his political ambiguity, Renan remained a symbolically and intellectually important figure in the epic contest of science against the irrational for *laïque* republicans.<sup>26</sup> In 1890, near the end of his life, in a preface to the publication of his early manuscript *L'avenir de la science*, Renan articulated a vision of intellectual

24. Parodi, “L'idée et le fait en politique,” 246.

25. Darlu, writing in 1898, was involved in a dispute with Charles Andler over Léon Bourgeois's *Solidarisme*. Darlu, “Encore quelques réflexions,” 117. Darlu's original review sounds strikingly modern notes: he manages to object to Bourgeois's idea of *solidarisme* from the perspective of class distinctions (it is precisely the solidarity of worker and boss that generates hatred and fear between them), gender roles (how can political solidarity be a universal law when more than half the people in France are excluded from it because they are women?), and even the racial-imperial order (which justifies violence against the supposedly inferior races in faraway countries). Darlu, “La solidarité.” Jean Elisabeth Pedersen has recently explored discussions both of empire and of relations between the sexes that took place in different venues and that involved many of the figures appearing in the present article. See Pedersen, “Speaking Together Openly, Honestly and Profoundly”; and Pedersen, “Alsace-Lorraine and Africa.”

26. Agulhon has highlighted the distance between the reputation Renan earned with the antirepublican *Reforme intellectuelle et morale* and his eventual adhesion to the Third Republic: Agulhon, “Ernest Renan.” For a different perspective on Renan's cultural significance, see Priest, “Reading, Writing, and Religion.”

liberalism. The founders of the *Rmm* endorsed both Renan's self-conscious idealism and his valorization of science as a spiritually charged project. They might have agreed with him that "for us idealists, one doctrine only is true, the transcendent doctrine according to which the goal of humanity is the constitution of a superior consciousness."<sup>27</sup> They could not follow him, however, in his frankly aesthetic and elitist approach to this scientific idealism. For Renan, politics in democracy was incapable of direction or meaning. Liberalism allowed excellence to flourish, and this could be its only justification. It implied, however, that most humans would simply be the *caput mortuum* necessary to produce the sublime odor, the raw material required for the delicate and rare fruit. Democratic as the world unfortunately was, Renan wrote, this truth could not be openly avowed. Renan's liberalism had to be an esoteric one. The *Rmm* group, in contrast, was not simply resigned to democracy as a cultural as well as a political form. They believed passionately in a popular and engaged form of politics, although how this might look, especially in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, was up for discussion. Their liberalism believed itself to be democratic, universalist, egalitarian, constitutively exoteric.

The more democratic position of Barni, recently dubbed "idealist republicanism" by Sudhir Hazareesingh, was attractive but also no longer adequate.<sup>28</sup> Barni had been an influential republican dissident during the Second Empire and would have been known to readers of the *Rmm*, if only as French translator of Kant's major works. Barni's idea of the democratic state as one that would allow the development of all equally as *personalities* was a powerful inspiration to these younger men. But Barni, looking at the capacity of the Bonapartist state to intervene successfully in civil society, had been wary of state involvement in the economy or in other spheres. He was perfectly willing to accept autonomous worker's organizations but was hostile to the idea of state involvement in welfare distribution. Further, Barni unequivocally favored allowing plural educational establishments. "True democracy," he wrote, "is not afraid of liberty." Specifically addressing the danger of clerical education, he maintained that "a good public education" would, through competition, be "the best way of avoiding this danger."<sup>29</sup> Among the transformations that took place in the earlier 1890s was the broad acceptance of a significantly greater role for the state in the economy than Barni thought wise. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair and the apparently existential ideological conflicts it exposed, precisely this faith in the power of open political competition to bring harmony would be difficult to maintain.

27. Renan, *L'avenir de la science*, xvi.

28. Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic*.

29. Barni, *La morale dans la démocratie*, 164.

Perhaps the most articulate and vigorous defender of a restored neo-Kantian liberalism among the *Rmm*'s cohort was Michel, who worked at the intersection of the history of political ideas and political philosophy.<sup>30</sup> In June 1901 the Société Française de Philosophie—a professional organization closely associated with the *Rmm*—met to discuss Michel's attempt to define democracy. For Michel, democracy was both a liberalism, because it aimed at freedom, and a socialism, because it implied a certain interventionism in the economy.

Michel defended claims he had developed at length in his monumental 1896 study of the history of French political ideas, *L'idée de l'Etat*. Drawing on the writings of Renouvier—like Barni a neo-Kantian—Michel sought to ground his political ideals in a fundamental metaphysical orientation. At the origin of all systematic thought, according to Michel, was a stark choice. "One must choose, and one must dare to choose," between a philosophy of necessity and materialism, or one of freedom and idealism.<sup>31</sup> These, Renouvier showed us, present a fundamental alternative with no third term possible. But the very fact of this choice is an argument in favor of idealism, a philosophy of freedom. Once this choice is made, the *ends* of politics are essentially settled—only the means remain to be discussed.

Michel's account of democracy rested on an appealing idea of justice, which he summarized in two fundamental rights possessed by every person: "The right to live, with [the right] to raise oneself through culture."<sup>32</sup> He put the personality as a dynamic moral fact at the center of political thought. In explicating Rousseau's social contract, Michel expressed his own ideas: "The state must be strong *not for itself* . . . but *for the individual*."<sup>33</sup> Michel spells out the dilemma that nonetheless remains as he recapitulates and defends Renouvier's final position: "If it is for all persons to arrive at certainty freely themselves, spiritual agreement [*l'accord des esprits*] in this work of liberty can be realized only through a severe discipline of thought, through a rigorous application of the principle of contradiction. That alone guarantees both the success of individual efforts and the desirable convergence of their results."<sup>34</sup> This Kantian linking of both morality and reason to freedom is reminiscent of Henri de Saint-Simon's or other early socialist notions of harmony.

The 1901 discussion of Michel's ideas raised two fundamental objections: first about the status of the economy, and second about Michel's remarkable

30. Michel himself has been much neglected. But see Spitz, *Le moment républicain*. Serge Audier has sought to bring Michel back to attention. See the 2005 volume of *Corpus*, devoted to Michel, particularly Audier, "Présentation."

31. Michel, *L'idée de l'Etat*, 638. On Renouvier, see Blais, *Au principe de la République*.

32. Michel, *L'idée de l'Etat*, 646.

33. *Ibid.*, 83.

34. *Ibid.*, 622.

faith in the ultimate convergence of interests. Rauh in particular challenged Michel's reluctance to speak about economic matters, trying unsuccessfully to elicit from Michel a principled statement to the effect that private property was in itself antidemocratic. For Michel, the economy is a realm of pure means. From this it follows that private property has only historical or empirical value. It is in itself neither antidemocratic nor democratic.<sup>35</sup> This was related to a more apparently metaphysical question. For Michel, since reason is unified, autonomous humans will tend in the direction of harmony—at least once the dross of the material, economic world has been removed. Directly challenged on the question of innate egoism by André Lalande, Michel responded, “Once the chains are removed . . . will not order among wills [*volontés*] establish itself spontaneously?”<sup>36</sup> The material world is one of conflict and violence; the ideal realm is one of harmony and logic.

This position, however, only highlights the importance of the autonomous will, able to choose for itself. Autonomy is the condition compatible with both reason and a morality of freedom. This freedom in reason must be chosen, but the choice is not itself an act of reason:

The history of ideas . . . reduces the propositions [*thèses*] among which it is possible to choose to a quite small number. . . . Choice among these few propositions will always be a choice with the full force of that term, a free selection that must remain free. We suspend politics, like everything else, with a moral taking of sides [*un parti pris moral*]. History enlightens us without determining us.<sup>37</sup>

For Michel, we progress from animal to human and eventually to pure will. Morality, then, figured as denial of material determinants, is the last term of political discussion. The essential political decision is a moral one. Michel's dualism has issued already in an appeal to ethical practice.

Discussion of Michel's neo-Kantian arguments took place in terms of democracy, not liberalism. Political context, not the inherent content of these arguments, dictated this choice. The moment at which the *Rmm* did engage in a debate over the foundations of liberalism suggests the stakes of this discussion for the reading public that followed it. Debate was undertaken from a position of power, not one of weakness. For Bouglé, just a few months after the *Rmm* group had met with Michel, the political scene called into question less the values and language of democracy than those of liberalism.

35. Michel, “La doctrine politique de la démocratie,” 111–12.

36. According to the record, “M. RAUH does not approve.” *Ibid.*, 121.

37. *Ibid.*, 123–24.

## Bouglé's "Crisis"

Bouglé's "Crisis of Liberalism" was originally a public lecture given as part of his engagement in the *universités populaires* and other post-Dreyfus public education projects.<sup>38</sup> It was therefore only part of a broader attempt to clarify positions and stakes in the great debates of the day. Yet the problems it raised were central ones. Bouglé began by specifying his object: not economic liberalism. This, he wrote, was not undergoing a crisis. It was dead and buried. There was no need to discuss it.<sup>39</sup> Liberalism also indicated intellectual freedom. Indeed, the Third Republic was remarkable in the freedom it allowed the press to, for instance, print libelous information without legal consequence. Bouglé's interest lay in the merits of an "absolute intellectual liberalism" whose formula was "Let speak, let think, let men enlighten one another."<sup>40</sup> Did such an absolutism make sense any longer?

The conceptual foundation of this absolutism was, Bouglé suggested, an underlying faith in progress. Three recent events, he argued, made such a position difficult to maintain. First, the anarchist attacks of the 1890s convinced many that certain ideas should not be expressed at all, that perhaps it was not so easy to tell where word transformed into deed. Freedom of expression had to give way to obedience to law.<sup>41</sup> Second, the Dreyfus affair, during which the role of the press was similarly problematic, highlighted the practical importance of philosophical differences that, it had previously been thought, could be tolerated with no difficulty in a liberal society. In the aftermath of the affair Bouglé wrote, "We saw that these doctrinal divergences were of more significance than had been believed."<sup>42</sup> Finally, the ongoing crisis around the role of the Catholic Church indicated to many people that the unity necessary for any society to

38. Bouglé's lecture was given in February 1902, and Bouglé proposed the piece for the *Rmm* to Halévy in early August. The responses to Bouglé were finished by late November. Halévy, *Correspondance*, 324–29, repr. in Bouglé, *Vie spirituelle*, 39–70. Bouglé was a student of Durkheim and a collaborator at the *Année sociologique*—as were other participants in this debate—but he was also close to Halévy and the *Rmm*. Much can be said about the relations between Durkheim's group and the *Rmm*, but it seems to me wrong to frame this argument over liberalism as an argument between two tendencies represented by these two journals, so I do not emphasize this angle of investigation. See Barberis, "Moral Education for the Elite of Democracy."

39. Classical economic liberalism was still taught at the university, but it had more than a little mustiness about it. The Méline tariff reform of 1891 had signaled the acceptance of economic interventionism on the part of even conservative elements within the French business classes. The later 1890s saw other major reforms and innovations. For different approaches to this reformism, see Elwitt, *Third Republic Defended*; Horne, *Social Laboratory for Modern France*; and Lebovics, *Alliance of Iron and Wheat*.

40. Bouglé, "La crise du libéralisme," 636.

41. Here Bouglé may also have been thinking about the recent dismissal of Gustave Hervé from his post as schoolteacher for expressing antipatriotic opinions. Bouglé had been disturbed by Hervé's dismissal; Halévy disagreed with him, accepting the right of the state to defend itself in such cases. Halévy, *Correspondance*, 317–18.

42. Bouglé, "La crise du libéralisme," 644.

function at all was threatened by the church as a “state within a state.”<sup>43</sup> All of this, Bouglé says, has provoked a crisis among believers in “absolute liberalism” by suggesting that the principles of liberalism—freedom of expression, of conscience, of association—were coming into conflict with the minimal necessities of a coherent and functional society.<sup>44</sup> Intellectual liberalism might simply go the way of economic liberalism.

It is worth pausing over Bouglé’s staging of the liberal individual and interpersonal liberalism. We have all met men, he wrote, for whom “liberal feeling has passed to an instinctual state.” Indeed, it can be “a pleasure, of a quite particular kind and price, to chat in the most calm and friendly way with a man who we know to be an intransigent adversary.” Liberalism here is an intimate social pleasure. The pleasure is heightened by the knowledge that “a hundred years ago, I would perhaps have sent you to the scaffold. How times have changed!”<sup>45</sup> More than a pleasure of intimate sociality, liberalism is friendship carried on in the full consciousness of historical contingency. Friendship—so important to the *Rmm* group, all great readers of Plato—is in fact an escape from the material fatalism of history. Individual friendship is, in any case, imagined here as the pure form of liberalism. In this staging of liberalism as an interpersonal encounter within and against history, and in the broader concern that liberalism as a political program might simply become obsolete—and this through the collapse of the notion of progress itself—Bouglé exhibits a strong awareness of historical change driving transformations in value systems.

The central practical question was the degree of control and power to be handed over to the state, particularly in educational matters. Citing Benjamin Constant and Tocqueville but arriving finally at terms borrowed from his mentor, Durkheim, Bouglé declared the existence of “a hypertrophic state over an unorganized mass of individuals” to be “a veritable sociological monstrosity.”<sup>46</sup> Mediating institutions are necessary to check the power of the state. Some such institutions are more dangerous than the state itself. Still, to the socialists who wanted to use the state to crush the church, if only so that socialism itself had room to grow, Bouglé warned, “Be on guard . . . lest the weapon you have forged be turned against you,” and then considered “advanced parties” more generally, asking if, “in hurrying to wall up the past in its tomb, they do not crush the

43. *Ibid.*, 643–45.

44. For Bouglé, it is sociologically demonstrable that a society requires, to act in concert and therefore to exist as a society, a certain amount of obedience to a code of law, resemblance among its members, and centralization of administration. Bouglé’s own work as a sociologist in this period tended in a formalist direction. His *Idées égalitaires*, first published in 1899, signals this by supplementing Durkheim’s framework, established in *Division du travail*, with the work of Georg Simmel. Bouglé and Audier, *Les idées égalitaires*.

45. Bouglé, “La crise du libéralisme,” 637.

46. *Ibid.*, 648–49.

future in its cradle?”<sup>47</sup> Few of the responses to Bouglé demonstrated the same concern about the power of the state to thwart salutary change, or the same interest in mediating institutions.

Bouglé offered no explicit solutions to this crisis. He ended by expressing the perhaps modest hope that clearly articulating the trade-offs involved in certain state actions, as well as the values actually thereby defended, would raise the level of public discourse and thus protect indirectly “the *moeurs* of a free country.”<sup>48</sup> However, a practical conclusion is implied by the form he gives to the real problem of state involvement in education. The great danger is less state direction in itself than the threat that each successive “party in power” will attempt the reconstitution of moral unity according to its own views and tendencies by putting pressure on teachers. Implied here is the Durkheimian solution: the educational institutions of the republic should have their own autonomy as the guardians of public reason.<sup>49</sup> Thus Bouglé’s hesitation over the idea that the “monopole d’enseignement” will restore moral unity to France comes not from the monopoly itself but from concern that it will be insufficiently isolated from notoriously capricious and shallow representative government.

Bouglé was distant from the Parisian center, teaching in Toulouse and committed not to academic philosophy but to the emerging discipline of sociology. He was, perhaps for this reason, more willing than his interlocutors would be to locate reason institutionally within the state. Still, for Bouglé the institution tasked with spiritual freedom as such—education most broadly construed—had to be free to act according to its own principles but also safeguarded from illegitimate competition by a rationally directed public power. It was absurd, this is to say, that *two* institutions might both claim to represent reason in society. The terms in which Bouglé framed the question of liberalism thus retained the dualism typical of French philosophy and left little room for a pluralist solution.

### Reasoning Out the Crisis

Bouglé’s essay merited a clutch of responses, the first from Lanson. He lamented recognizing himself among those Bouglé designated as “authoritarians” and

47. *Ibid.*, 650.

48. *Ibid.*, 652.

49. In an important sense, this really was the direction that reform of the school systems took in those years. Increased financial autonomy was an important aspect of the creation of universities in 1896, as well as of the secondary school reform of 1902. This latter reform was perhaps more important for the debate over liberalism than the former. The content of the *lycée* reforms may not have been transparent to contemporaries, but in retrospect it can be said that they represented the result of a debate internal to the ruling classes and that they satisfied to some extent commercial interests, the requirements of class distinction, and the anticlericals. See Isambert-Jamati, “Une réforme des lycées et collèges”; Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge*; and Weisz, *Emergence of Modern Universities in France*.

insisted on his essential liberalism. Lanson claimed to offer only “the confession of an elector trying to reason things out.” Even in this capacity, Lanson divides the “liberal party” from a “speculative liberalism” that, while still a historical entity, has a doctrinal and moral existence beyond any party.<sup>50</sup>

For Lanson, the advent of democracy changed the nature of the government’s authority. For the democratic state to assert authority is

simply the legal organization of freedom, the definition by law and conservation by government of national freedoms. Even here there is no contradiction between liberal republic and authoritarian democracy: the one is the realization of the other. To accept, for example, the authority of M. Waldeck-Rousseau is not to recover, through a reactionary apostasy, the principle of Louis XIV or Gregory VII.<sup>51</sup>

On this basis Lanson defended the capacity of the state not only to manage education—although, as many seemed to think best, indirectly through control of certification—but also to enforce a strong distinction in the realm of the printed word between thought and action.<sup>52</sup> This is because the state, as the organization of liberty, is in a position to say when one individual’s freedom has become another’s tyranny. Freedom of thought, Lanson wrote, indeed had to be defended absolutely, and along with it freedom of expression—even democratic authority could not trump these individual freedoms. But some expressions were really actions. While any journalist should be free to write, “I wish someone would deliver us from this terrible government,” without fear of legal reprisal, a statement such as “Meet at Place de la Nation at 3 p.m., and bring your revolver” or a lie about a specific individual “can make no claim on the freedom of thought.”<sup>53</sup> Highlighted here, in almost lawyerly fashion by this literary critic, is a distinction between a realm of pure thought and one of action.

50. Lanson, “A propos de la ‘crise du libéralisme,’” 749.

51. *Ibid.*, 751.

52. The *loi Falloux*, as Théodore Ruysen reminded readers while arguing against a state monopoly, gave the state broad powers to inspect nonstate schools. How bad could things really get, he maintained, if such secondary schools were obliged to be staffed by people with university training and were more aggressively inspected? Ruysen, “Le monopole universitaire.”

53. Lanson, “A propos de la ‘crise du libéralisme,’” 752. Lanson, immediately having made this distinction, insists that it is always better to err on the side of freedom and let some of the guilty go free, that the freedom of the press to attack politicians is crucial to democratic politics, and that the press should not, as such, be held responsible; the state should not concern itself with the press as such, only with things done through it. *Ibid.*, 753. John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* offers an adjudication of this question, in perhaps a more open spirit, suggesting that even if tyrannicide has met with broad approval throughout history, “instigation to it, in a specific case, may be a proper subject of punishment, but only if an overt act has followed” (Mill, *On Liberty*, 20–21). Mill, although he had been the subject of Michel’s Latin thesis and must have been well known to Halévy through his work on English radicalism, was rarely evoked in this debate. I would like to



Lanson's implicit distinction between a realm of the spirit and one of the material—that is, of freedom and constraint—is evident in his discussion of religion. Of course beliefs must be absolutely protected. Society has nothing to object to in any kind of individual belief, “but,” Lanson says,

as soon as the exterior life of the believer is no longer the simple and direct expression of his mystical activity—as soon as it develops beyond the properly religious terrain into the domain of economic interests and social functions—then, although the believer might well attach all these modes of activity to his mystical activity and give them out as necessary prolongations of it, we are not obliged to believe him.<sup>54</sup>

Religion is essentially a mystical relation between an individual and deity. Here we see, perhaps, evidence of the long association of liberalism with Jansenism and Protestantism.<sup>55</sup> Although Lanson allows that some “prayer or ritual” may “express this relation” and therefore deserve protection, such expressions seem to him minimal and easily subtracted from real, material, society: “The organization of property, of teaching corporations, of aid societies, the conditions for the recruitment of functionaries: all this has nothing at all to do with the question of religious freedom.”<sup>56</sup> For Lanson, religion is spiritual, and the spiritual cannot legitimately impinge on the material except through the mediating functions of science and universal suffrage. On this way of understanding religion, Lanson went unchallenged. As Halévy had written to Bouglé, “The basis [*fond*] of Catholicism is the idea of a state religion, of the unanimity of religious consciences; the day Catholicism becomes a Protestant sect, I will believe in religious liberalism.”<sup>57</sup> The underlying dualistic rationalism of the group effectively ruled Catholicism out of bounds on apparently philosophical rather than political grounds.

Jacob's intervention is perhaps the most acute articulation of Lanson's dilemma. Jacob made his name with an 1898 defense in the pages of the *Rmm* of rationalism against Henri Bergson's *Matière et mémoire*. Here too he defends a rigorously rationalist liberalism.<sup>58</sup> Jacob draws out the analogy with economic liberalism. Like Bouglé, he is confident that the economic perspective of liberalism is no longer that of free competition: “In the order of ideas as in the order

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thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested Mill's relevance, as well as Elizabeth Everton for suggesting that this passage may refer to a specific event.

54. Lanson, “A propos de la ‘crise du libéralisme,’” 754.

55. See Welch, “Jansenism and Liberalism.”

56. Lanson, “A propos de la ‘crise du libéralisme,’” 755.

57. Halévy, *Correspondance*, 324 (Aug. 10, 1902).

58. On Jacob and this defense, see Soulié, *Les philosophes en République*, 264–73.

of interests, liberalism has ceased to be an apology for absolute *laissez-faire*. . . . Rational pedagogical liberalism consists in establishing the conditions for a just competition between ideas, as rational economic liberalism does in establishing the conditions for a just competition between practical ambitions.”<sup>59</sup> Rational liberalism is therefore entirely comfortable, in theory, limiting, but not suppressing, the freedom of action of those who would themselves abolish the conditions of just competition in intellectual development as in economic. What Jacob calls “rational liberalism” in the economic sphere might be better described as *solidarisme* or even, depending on who is speaking, creeping socialism.<sup>60</sup> But for Jacob, since the goal is individual freedom, we are still speaking of liberalism.

Rational liberalism, however, can only ever be an ideal—regulative, to be sure, but never more than that. Jacob arrives at this position not simply through political realism but through a basic metaphysical principle: “To realize the conditions of true liberalism, it would be necessary—absurd hypothesis—to eliminate the whole of the sensible and leave on the field only pure minds [*esprits*].”<sup>61</sup> This is impossible because, following Aristotle, the intelligible is inseparable from the sensible, and the sensible always contains something indeterminate and irrational. So we have a regulative ideal of just competition, in economic as well as spiritual matters, but one that recognizes what might be called the irreducible contingency of the original situation: all competition actually takes place in history, and the constitutive injustice of history viewed abstractly cannot be eliminated. Rational liberalism is an impossible dream; empirical liberalism, an endless battle.

Jacob’s framing is a particularly clear example of the patterns that this article argues dominated this debate over liberalism. Even while attempting to mitigate the sharp dualism implied by his rationalism, he accepts an odd parallelism between markets for commodities and for ideas. In both cases there are only two terms: the individual and the general or the state. Just as Léon Bourgeois’s *solidarisme* was an ideological toolkit for explaining socioeconomic reform without accepting the substantive existence of institutions mediating between—or even constituting—the two extreme terms, so rational pedagogical liberalism leaves room for discerning state involvement in education without admitting the substantive existence of the church.

59. Jacob, “La crise du libéralisme,” 102.

60. On *solidarisme*, see Audier, *Léon Bourgeois*; Blais, *La solidarité*; and Horne, *Social Laboratory for Modern France*. Important in the present context, especially in foregrounding the question of dualism, is Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*.

61. Jacob, “La crise du libéralisme,” 106.

In practice, however, metaphysics did not determine Jacob's position on the issue of *liberté d'enseignement*. The decisive factor was his belief that Catholicism was a spent force. Bouglé had been perturbed by the ability of Catholics and monarchists to claim to stand for real liberty; Jacob concluded from this, more optimistically, that "true Catholicism, logical Catholicism, is dead forever."<sup>62</sup> Although the mechanism of change would not have satisfied his more sociologically minded readers, Jacob asserted that "definitively, popular Catholic sentiment has repudiated civil intolerance in religious matters. . . . Under the action of modern thinking [*la pensée moderne*] . . . the old intolerance is singularly weakened."<sup>63</sup> The danger that a state monopoly on education would be *perceived* as antiliberal, even though it accorded perfectly with rational liberalism, was too great. Safe in the knowledge that its adversary was dying, the state should avoid even the merely apparent tyranny of a monopoly in education. Political or historical judgment, not principle, was immediately decisive.

Jacob's metaphysical position was by no means universally shared, and if its political consequences were not decisive, they did pull in the direction of *less* state intervention. Lapie, in contrast, defended a less modest rationalism. A cofounder of the *Année sociologique* with Durkheim, Parodi, and Bouglé, Lapie was very much a product of the republic's meritocracy and would spend the last part of his life in high administrative positions.<sup>64</sup> In 1921 he would reaffirm his antipluralism in the clearest possible way: "There is no conflict, bloody or verbal, local or global, that does not have at its root an error or a misunderstanding. . . . Correct action follows correct thought."<sup>65</sup> This same fighting faith is visible in his 1902 defense of liberalism. Lapie insisted that the law of the state, to retain "its impersonality, that is to say its moral value," must never be aimed at individuals or specific classes of individuals.<sup>66</sup> Only social functions can be the legitimate objects of laws. It therefore makes no sense to target religious teachers, teaching institutions, or religious associations. Laws of general application would be entirely sufficient to protect what had to be protected from religious influence. Without making any reference to religion, the state should simply

62. *Ibid.*, 112.

63. *Ibid.*, 113.

64. Lapie attended the Sorbonne on scholarship. He took up the rectorship at Toulouse in 1911, later becoming the director of primary education. See Terral, "Paul Lapie." His trajectory is in sharp contrast with the inherited cultural and material capital of Léon and Halévy, both of whom were in a position to pursue whatever vocation they chose, no matter how little it paid.

65. Lapie, *Pour la raison*, iv. Halévy: "I do not blame Lapie for having said, like Plato, that [no one is bad intentionally]; but his definition of justice . . . seems to me indefensible;—more exactly, it seems to me that it should never be defended by anyone other than him." Halévy, *Correspondance*, 322.

66. Lapie, "La crise du libéralisme," 768.

oblige all teachers to complete a given course of study.<sup>67</sup> The implication here is that religion is not a social function. Inasmuch as it can be discussed at all, it is purely individual and therefore outside the purview of the law. But, further, Lapie implies that no Catholic of deep belief would be allowed—able—to pass the relevant course of study.

Lapie, resting comfortably on his rationalism, is much more willing to use the coercive power of the state than is Jacob. In what might be a direct response to Lapie, Jacob worried that “to invite the state to paralyze the influences that artificially favor conservative or reactionary ideas is to forget that the state can itself by artifice attribute to certain ideas, old or new, an influence that does not naturally belong to them.” Jacob is happy to admit that the “tyranny of social and worldly prejudices is not a chimera, but neither is that of the state.” Perhaps speaking again to Lapie, as well as to Lanson, Jacob says that many “are confused on this point, because they imagine that in a democratic regime the opinion of the state becomes one, through the intermediary of universal suffrage, with common sense. Nothing could be farther from the truth.”<sup>68</sup> For Jacob, although he professes himself to be as attached as Lapie to a rationalist ideal, this ideal can by its nature never be realized. The practical consequence of this position is that Jacob will not trade—as Lapie will—liberal means for liberal ends. The spirit of liberalism must be protected, especially given the increasing traction found by demands for economic restructuring coming from the socialists, demands with which Jacob, like most of the *Rmm* circle, was broadly sympathetic. The best grand strategy, Jacob believes, is to let the church die the natural death that is already, he is confident, on the horizon.<sup>69</sup>

Something like the last word in the *Rmm*'s discussion of the crisis of liberalism went to Parodi, who claimed to side firmly with Jacob's distinction between a rational and an empirical liberalism even as he took an effectively different position.<sup>70</sup> If we regard a rationally constructed liberalism as a mere principle of action, we must investigate it fully with the tools of philosophical analysis: “Principles are, in the practical order and for the conduct of life, what theories are in the speculative order and for the progress of the sciences.”<sup>71</sup> These principles of course come into contact with messy reality. Looking to Renouvier, Parodi explains that since “human action takes place in an unjust,

67. *Ibid.*, 771–72.

68. Jacob, “La crise du libéralisme,” 116.

69. *Ibid.*, 120.

70. Parodi's father was Italian, but he had success writing, among other things, verse in French. Parodi, a firmly rationalist Dreyfusard, taught philosophy at various *lycées*, after the war becoming inspector general of public education. He took over the direction of the *Rmm* after Halévy's death. See Lalande, “Dominique Parodi”; Soulié, *Les philosophes en République*, 57n147; and Parodi, “Encore la crise du libéralisme,” 279.

71. Parodi, “Encore la crise du libéralisme,” 265–66.

abnormal, and irrational milieu, reason cannot pretend to determine it entirely [*intégralement*], under pain of working against itself” and, yet more strongly, that human action “cannot conform to intransigent principles except at the price of their eclipse, their more complete and durable violation in humanity as a whole.”<sup>72</sup> Parodi, then, is really pushing in a different direction from Jacob’s cautious, methodological optimism. To save liberalism, Parodi asserts, its principles *cannot* be sacred. Rational liberalism is, in a sense, irrational.

This should not be confused with a twentieth-century antitotalitarian liberalism. Parodi asks, “Can I act toward the invalid or the madman as with a healthy man?” and, more directly, “Is the best way to prepare the development of reason in a child . . . in fact to address ourselves from the beginning and exclusively to it [reason]?”<sup>73</sup> The child—and, by extension, “the worker, the peasant . . . the alcoholic or the son of an alcoholic”—does not yet possess “rational autonomy,” and so it is reasonable for the pedagogue who seeks to inculcate reason to draw on resources exogenous to it.<sup>74</sup> In earlier writings for the *Rmm*, Parodi had outlined a powerful moral defense of gradualist social reform. Liberty and equality were, he argued, morality itself. To give something like an equal chance at freedom to all was the only way to foster republican *fraternité*. Such reasoned freedom was not something that could be bestowed by the rational state: “It is difficult for the state . . . to make reason rule in collective relations, because no one infallibly knows how to find or how to obey it.”<sup>75</sup> Freedoms were felt to be real only when they had been won. Parodi’s individualist rationalism put the development of the individual as person at the center of morality and, for him, fit into a politics of gradualist reformism that made the state the privileged terrain, if not the agent, of social action.

Whatever their metaphysical roots, the differences among Parodi, Jacob, Lapie, and other participants in this debate amount to different evaluations of the danger presented to liberalism by the church. Parodi himself is deeply pessimistic, objecting strenuously to Jacob’s idea that Catholicism will die a natural death. On the contrary, Catholicism is on the march: “Undeniable, constant, menacing. The struggle is open. Great care must be shown in the choice of weapons: it would be imprudent, perhaps naive, to disarm.”<sup>76</sup> A secular

72. *Ibid.*, 268.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, 277. Conspicuously missing from this list of not fully autonomous subjects is, of course, women. The *Rmm* group as a whole had a bad conscience on the question, as demonstrated by Pedersen (see n. 25). While theoretically committed to the equality of men and women, and in some cases actively involved in campaigns for political equality, this group found itself unable to include women’s voices within public discourse, never mind the actual practice of philosophy. In this bad conscience the *Rmm* mirrored the ideology of the radical socialists. See Stone, *Sons of the Revolution*.

75. Parodi, “Liberté et égalité,” 391.

76. Parodi, “Encore la crise du libéralisme,” 276.

worldview should have spread from the top of society downward, but something like the reverse happened in France during the nineteenth century. “The people” have steadily shed their religious beliefs, while the bourgeoisie has turned increasingly toward the church, producing “an ever-deepening scission [*scission*] between two hostile Frances: it is to be feared that only violence can resolve the conflicts that arise quietly between them.”<sup>77</sup> Such, Parodi believes, is the besieged situation of liberalism in France at the dawn of the twentieth century.

To the questions, what violence? and in whose favor? Parodi gives a clear answer signaled, if nothing else, by repeated references to 1848. The violence need not be bloody, but it might well be the forceful imposition of secular education on the whole nation, carried out in the name of the people. Indeed, there is a messianic imperative to educate—the lower classes, of course, but yet more urgently the upper ones, who are the more at fault. The Second Republic was lost by the too hasty ascription of rational autonomy to the people as a whole. The republic was betrayed by workers and peasants not yet ready to be free. The Third Republic must avoid this fate and so must insist on fashioning for itself a free—that is, a republican—electorate. This indeed is where Parodi places his bet, however hedged: “We perceive, at least in theory, and putting aside the question of the right moment, only one clear and whole way of respecting the principle of equal liberty for all: this is *le monopole universitaire*, but corrected, or rather completed, by the greatest freedom for the teaching corps,” as well as complete freedom of religious instruction outside school.<sup>78</sup> Parodi’s solution, then, like Bouglé’s, demanded autonomy for the teachers but unsurprisingly, to those not reassured by such a possibility, reeked of creeping state monopoly. Parodi wanted to extend the logic of the earlier campaign for state control of primary education into the field of higher education. That he should regard this as a fundamentally liberal program puts him sharply at odds with the remainders of classical antistatist liberals in France, such as Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, who continued to polemicize against state-led education.<sup>79</sup>

One might well ask where Parodi thinks he stands here: not among the bourgeoisie, and clearly not among *le peuple*. Parodi, it seems clear enough, understands himself as a sworn man for the republic—a functionary, an autocrat, for freedom. Unlike the pure rationalist Lapie, Parodi gives us a fully,

77. *Ibid.*, 277. Halévy indeed also identifies the influence of Catholicism over the French bourgeoisie as France’s most pressing problem. This is a rather self-serving and incorrect account of the progress of Catholicism in France. As others noted even at the time, among the distinguishing features of the new culture of pilgrimages and Marianism were powerful popular involvement and bottom-up pressure on the church hierarchy. See Clark and Kaiser, *Culture Wars*; and Harris, *Lourdes*.

78. Parodi, “La crise du libéralisme,” 781.

79. Or, indeed, state-led initiatives of any kind. But see esp. Leroy-Beaulieu, *L’état moderne et ses fonctions*, 331.

remarkably, historicized world: “On the moving scene of our social life, conditions of action are constantly changing, and perhaps the solution that seems to impose itself today will no longer be possible tomorrow, if some irrevocable act intervenes, some event that decisively engages us on a path from which we can no longer exit: for such is the inevitable tyranny of social solidarity.”<sup>80</sup> For Parodi, social action is a gambit that each person must undertake individually. Is Jacob right that the church is in decline and that enforcing secular education will only poison liberalism for the future? Or is the church really more powerful than it might appear, and is it necessary to actively defend the freedoms already won? In 1848 the wrong choice was made, and a generation or more was lost. History condemned that choice. Perhaps one day a secular monopoly on teaching will not be experienced as dogmatic or intolerant but will be understood as all good liberals understand it now, that is, “as a social organization of intellectual freedom.”<sup>81</sup> This organization can take place only through the organ of the general will, that is, the state. Appeal to reason covers over the potential contradiction between the requirements that the state enforce the singularity of this organization and that teachers be autonomous.

Just as economic liberalism had dissolved into state action—for instance, the breakup of monopolies—in support of the market, so the liberalism of the mind would have to give way to the social organization of a truly free intellectual field, in which competition would be managed carefully by the state. Parodi together with Jacob explicitly justifies this freedom as a mechanism for creating legitimate hierarchy. The goal of economic intervention was equality of opportunity, not leveling of outcome. The inevitable difference in outcomes could then not be accused of injustice or exploitation. Those who succeeded would be those more naturally talented, or those who applied their wills more resolutely. The intervention of the state was supposed to clarify natural differences and therefore to be moral, rather than immorally to eliminate difference. The same logic applied in the intellectual sphere both to ideas and to individuals. Under just conditions of competition, reason would emerge from error, just as individuals would find their proper place in the social hierarchy.

But this was from the perspective of the whole, of the nation. For individuals—once their rationality was beyond question—liberalism could be a fighting faith, quite removed from any economic discourse. Parodi in particular, then, defending liberalism, arrives at a Manichaean, scissionistic vision of social reality that demands what might be called an existential commitment on the part of individuals, to take coercive political steps now in the hopes of future justification in the name of a utopian rationalist project. Not all the participants

80. Parodi, “Encore la crise du libéralisme,” 278.

81. *Ibid.*, 279.

in the discussion arrived at such an extreme vision of the world, but all of them mobilized the same basic dualistic framework: reason and freedom in a realm of the ideal; irrationality and constraint in the material world. None of them was eager to entertain deeply pluralist possibilities, nor could they really escape—even as they rejected—the competitive model of economic liberalism.

### Halévy's Republicanism

If anyone was in a position to think creatively and historically about liberalism in France, it was Halévy, already in the midst of teaching and publishing on English radicalism and the history of European socialism. We have heard at several points from Halévy. His positions deserve more attention because in the interwar he will emerge as the most intellectually serious and influential of the lonely French liberals. Halévy did not contribute publicly to the debate except in his capacity as editor of the *Rmm*'s rubric for "practical questions." But he did respond privately to Bouglé's suggestion that he present his opinion. Halévy agreed that, in thinking about liberalism, to begin with individual *liberté* is to frame an impossible question. Liberalism, rather, "admits the necessity of a state but recognizes that the state can become tyrannical in its turn." Liberalism thus takes as its task maintaining conditions under which the state is prevented from becoming "tyrannical" but remains "effective."<sup>82</sup> Yet Halévy gives a distinctively republican turn to this problem: "I believe that the state, *in essence*, is not tyrannical; it is, *in essence*, the defensive organ of society in general [*la société générale*] against particular societies, of all individuals against all groups."<sup>83</sup> The general—the universal?—resides in the whole and the individuals, while the particular resides in groups that would interrupt the communion of individual and whole. As Halévy put it in his study of English radicalism, echoing Michel's neo-Kantian republicanism, many difficulties fall away if one sees "the interventions of the state as necessary not only to render individuals more happy but to render them more free."<sup>84</sup>

To be sure, the state is an imperfect tool and can be corrupted by falling into the hands of particular groups. Moreover, as Halévy had written elsewhere, the fundamental limit of state action to repair injustice is "our ignorance" of particular cases, in the obscurity of which the situation is more likely to be worsened than improved.<sup>85</sup> But the fact that this danger exists should not cause us,

82. Halévy, *Correspondance*, 329.

83. *Ibid.* He would use quite similar language in the conclusion to Halévy, *La formation du radicalisme philosophique*, 3:375.

84. Halévy, *La formation du radicalisme philosophique*, 3:372.

85. *Ibid.*, 3:357–58.



Halévy wrote Bouglé, to “renounce the only means in our power to defend *liberty*.” Halévy gives some precision to this thing that must be defended. “*Liberty*, understood in the intellectual meaning of the word, as the use of reason, and faith in reason: liberty as virtue . . . the philosophy of liberty demands that we consider, a priori, all men as reasonable.” We are again on an unstable terrain between concept and history. This Kantian invocation of reason and freedom is immediately supplemented by a reference to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, according to which “one must tolerate all opinions, *even* religious ones.” But, like Lanson, Halévy draws the lines around opinion rather tightly: “Priests, monks, mark themselves out for suspicion.”<sup>86</sup> They cannot be excused for their unreason. “They are, they intend to be, living symbols of unreason.” After all, Halévy writes, with perhaps a little irony, “Do we not owe it to them to take seriously their most solemn vows?”<sup>87</sup> He concludes that “there is a meaning of the words *liberty* and *liberalism* in which these words are synonymous with *state anticlericalism* [*d’anticléricisme d’état*].”<sup>88</sup> Religion is bad particularity—an individual abdicating freedom to a group or another individual—while liberty and reason are universals at the level of the whole and the individual.

Halévy, too, at least in responding to the arguments set in motion by his friend Bouglé, put his commitment to rationalism first. Commitment to rationalism, for Halévy, carried with it political consequences pulling against conservatism.<sup>89</sup> Liberalism would then be, at best, the recognition that the world will not, ultimately, be rationally organized. Yet for Halévy, a true liberalism also implied assigning to the state the task of holding people responsible for the rationality of their actions. But this was necessary only because, Halévy believed, the republic was profoundly challenged by antirational authoritarianism, especially stemming from the Catholic Church. Like Parodi, Halévy wagers that this threat is real and therefore that the republic can legitimately pursue liberal ends with illiberal means. But this is not a question that can be resolved conceptually. Rationalism in the public sphere becomes a matter of will rather than of intellect.

## Conclusion

In the political and institutional conflict between church and state at the end of the nineteenth century, and in the efforts of the republican state to defend itself

86. Halévy, *Correspondance*, 329.

87. *Ibid.*, 329–30.

88. *Ibid.*, 330.

89. For instance, “There is no doubt a connection between the rationalism of the utilitarians and their radicalism in politics.” Halévy, *La formation du radicalisme philosophique*, 3348.

through the educational establishment, Bouglé recognized a crisis of liberalism on a theoretical as well as a political level. He found it self-evident that an adequate response demanded a thoroughgoing reappraisal of metaphysical foundations and the relation of politics to these foundations. This reappraisal was, of course, historically implicated with the Dreyfus affair. Nonetheless, for the *Rmm* group liberalism was thrown into question neither by the occult, illegal, and antisemitic machinations of the army nor by virulent resistance to revision of the Dreyfus verdict. The affair as a whole was a formative experience, a catalyst for politicization. It presented setbacks and problems, to be sure, but only deepened the liberal faith. In contrast, use of the coercive power of the state to enforce, rather even than to form, a condition of autonomous rationality challenged the liberal worldview of these philosophers on its own terms. *This* was a crisis. Its political aspect was state action—violence, as Parodi explicitly called it. The force of the general will had a right and even a duty to intervene to protect reason in the world. The conceptual heart of the issue was a grappling with dualism and the relation of metaphysics and the ethics of philosophical practice to the active world.

Liberalism was indivisible from the republic—and this means the historically existing French Third Republic. The historical transformations of liberalism were not to be ignored. These were the crises of a liberal *party*, and these philosophers were all quick to assert that liberalism was not only a party but also a spirit. It was to this concept or idea of intellectual liberalism, expressed philosophically in an individualism articulated in terms borrowed from Kant by way of Renouvier, that the *Rmm* tried to hew. The question of *liberté d'enseignement* was inseparable from the conflict of church and state. It also highlighted divisions between republicans and liberals, as well as between the more intransigent or workerist socialists and parliamentary socialists or radical republicans. For philosophers in particular—who were of course not immune to the influence of the above ideological affiliations—it activated questions of *will* and *intellect*, of freedom and moral responsibility, ultimately the moral content and universality of reason itself.

These philosophers used the language and logic of the economic realm to think about intellectual liberalism. They specifically rejected the idea that liberalism was only an economic project, but they immediately analogized from the critique of free-market economic liberalism to a critique of an absolute intellectual liberalism. A problematic tension subsisted, however, because these two realms could not be parallel: the economic or social realm was managed to produce a just order, but the telos of the intellectual realm as articulated in society was less clear. What differentiated the debaters was their confidence in the capacity of the modern democratic state to be faithful to this poorly defined

telos—not the ultimate desirability of such a public enforcement of rationality. *Public* is significant because there is also a competing private model of liberalism, which is interpersonal friendship and conversation. Here we see most strongly the traces of an older tradition of aristocratic liberalism that is not easily squared with the democratic presuppositions of all these philosophers.

The challenge these philosophers did not meet was to articulate a *political* liberalism consonant with their rationalist universalism. The *Rmm* itself functioned as an ideal and liberal republic. In its pages and in the social field around it, reason could be plural without danger because faith in its unity brought everyone together in the first place. The empirical Third Republic, warts and all, could boast no such unifying purpose. In any event, political, as opposed to merely interpersonal, liberalism was possible only with help from the antiliberal church. Pluralism could be articulated temporally—the church had not *yet* ceased to exist—without endangering the principle of rationality.

Liberalism was thus historically and empirically defined against the nonliberalism of the clerical party. In this debate, at least, anticlericalism was essential to the political and even conceptual justification of liberalism. The Catholic Church, and the abiding refusal of its minions and their dupes to accept reason, provided a sort of historical alibi for the embarrassment into which the *Rmm*'s rationalist liberalism sometimes fell. Antisemitism and bigoted nationalism were contained within *cléricalisme*.<sup>90</sup> That was, and remained, the enemy. Historians have recently been more willing to see continuities in rhetoric, logic, and even organization between the flourishing popular culture of Catholicism in the later nineteenth century and the fascist movements of the twentieth century.<sup>91</sup> The material examined here suggests that in the French case, at least, there is continuity also between nineteenth-century anticlericalism and twentieth-century antitotalitarianism.

Because the struggle between the forces of the church and those of the republic was a historical one, its real outlines could not be reliably known. Rationalists were thus called on to make a choice for a given policy under conditions of uncertainty. Principles could not reliably authorize or condemn action. Halévy wrote to Bouglé in mid-1902, apropos of the law on associations, that “it is . . . not for reasons of formal legality or justice that you condemn the law that today attempts are made to apply, but *because it is condemned to fail*.”<sup>92</sup> Liberal rationalism, this is to say, resolved itself into an ethics of commitment to the

90. This would be Bouglé's argument in lectures given over the next few years. Bouglé, *Solidarisme et libéralisme*.

91. See esp. Clark, “New Catholicism.”

92. Halévy, *Correspondance*, 325 (Aug. 15, 1902).

actually existing republic—here, too, the interpersonal model of the liberal returns. Reason was held to be by nature individuating, to put the autonomous individual at the center of moral judgment. Yet personal ethical commitment to the republic was supposed to bridge the gap between universal and particular, ideal and material, rational and historical. Will, a central philosophical category for these readers of Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, was essentially individual. The transformation of individual will into collective will was always dangerous, always a moment of potential irrationality. The republic, then, was the unstable but necessary condition of liberalism.

This rationalist ethics was intimately connected to a thoroughgoing dualism. These philosophers—“critical idealists”—placed themselves on the side of Plato and Kant over and against a form of nonrationalism that they would variously describe as pantheism, mysticism, or pragmatism—indicating by this Hegel and Marx but also, in a different way, Bergson and William James. For Halévy as for Bouglé, to be liberal was to insist on the moral centrality of the transcendental reality of reason. If Lapie is hopelessly vulgar, Halévy is no less insistent that to compromise the differentiation of mind and matter is to compromise everything. Yet the individual, who must act, is the point at which mind and matter connect. How to conceptualize institutions that could take *action* in a way that did not undermine either reason (the general) or morality (the rational freedom of the individual)? The liberal ideal was always a conversation, but not one carried out in the smudged pages of the daily press or even in the *Rmm*. It was, rather, as Bouglé had imagined, a civilized conversation carried on face to face between two individuals engaged with total freedom.

ERIC BRANDOM is visiting assistant professor at Kansas State University. He is working on a book tentatively titled *Autonomy and Violence: Georges Sorel and the Problem of Liberalism*.

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