

Intellectual History and Democracy: An Interview with Pierre Rosanvallon

Introduction

In this wide-ranging interview with Javier Fernández Sebastián, Pierre Rosanvallon (1948–) provides a useful introduction to his trajectory over three decades and to his by now voluminous body of work.

A professor at the Collège de France for several years, Rosanvallon is hard to categorize. Is he a political theorist? If so, then why are his books chiefly historical in content? Is he then a historian? But the material he wants to study includes concepts like sovereignty and representation that, as he shows, cannot be understood without a vivid sense of their philosophical complexity, even if historians often assume that their meaning were obvious. (In recent histories of “American democracy,” for example, the concept has been treated as a metric of inclusion, even simple electoral inclusion, as if that were all there is to it.) All the same, Rosanvallon is very far from being an intellectual historian. Though elite thinkers occupy his attention from time to time, he is much more concerned with the way that the political consciousness and action of a populace as a whole is always and necessarily inflected by conceptual premises and commitments.

In this way, Rosanvallon’s “history of the political” (a phrase in the title of his chair) remains distinctive. This interview goes some distance towards showing how, and why, he has arrived at such an unusual blend of approaches, positioning himself athwart the current disciplines. As he recounts, he got his start in politics, and could well have embarked on a career as a political actor.¹ As a result, his life as an academic has always

¹ For an account of the political scene in Rosanvallon’s youth, and of his transition to academia, see my article with Andrew Jainchill, “French Democracy between Totalitari-

been oriented toward the present—without, he claims below, ever falling into the vice of “presentism.”

In a fascinating section of the discussion, Rosanvallon responds to the opportunity to distinguish his approach from that of Quentin Skinner, perhaps the most methodologically influential Anglophone intellectual historian of the past several decades. Interestingly enough, while rejecting the “antiquarianism” that launched Skinner’s career as a theorist, Rosanvallon’s language here comes close to endorsing the project of “re-enacting” the past most familiar from the work of R. G. Collingwood—one of Skinner’s own sources of inspiration.

But the contrast nonetheless remains instructive. In recent years, as Javier Fernández Sebastián rightly suggests below, Skinner has tried to move away from the strict antiquarianism on which he first insisted. Though he says that this move is faithful to his original stance, that claim fits ill with Skinner’s original attack on the “mythology of coherence”—the assumption that thinkers remain consistent over time. Salutary in its era for its response to various forms of presentism and perennialism, the historicist rhetoric of recent intellectual history will likely need to give way to some form of more explicitly present-minded interpretation, and Rosanvallon’s remarks to his questioner suggest one way that might happen. Later in the interview, Rosanvallon returns to this problem in his discussion of the role of the “intellectual,” which has changed over the century since the term was invented, but which Rosanvallon does not consider an exhausted pursuit.

Such an interview can convey but a sample of the wealth of information and insight to be found in the full studies of Pierre Rosanvallon, most of which, alas, are not available in the English language. This, however, is beginning to change, with the translation or forthcoming translation of a series of works. Increasingly recognized as a figure to read as much for his methods as for his conclusions, Rosanvallon is an important reference point for theorists and historians alike.

Samuel Moyn, Columbia University.

anism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004): 107–54.