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Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, ix + 294 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-231-13740-0.

Review by Edward Berenson, New York University.

One of Samuel Moyn's many intellectual projects has been to introduce the philosophical and historical work of Pierre Rosanvallon to Anglophone readers. He did so first in a comprehensive and illuminating review article (written with Andrew Jainchail), then in a conference on French liberalism that featured Rosanvallon, and now in this new collection of the French scholar's essays. [1] Moyn collaborated with Rosanvallon in putting the book together, and the younger historian did many of the translations himself. The result is an admirable overview of Rosanvallon's intellectual trajectory, complete with a lucid introduction by Moyn and a Postscript that the Frenchman wrote expressly for this volume.

Until now, very little of Rosanvallon's writings have appeared in English. [2] One reason is doubtless his focus on France; the other is the difficulty of placing Rosanvallon in a distinct disciplinary category familiar to editors and readers alike. His chair at the Collège de France, conferred in 2002, is in the "philosophical history of the political." The title identifies him at once as a historian and political philosopher, though his work transgresses in certain ways against both disciplines. Rosanvallon's focus on present-day politics would disturb many a historian, while his meticulous attention to the past might seem beside the point to political philosophers. But for historians of France familiar with the oeuvre of François Furet, Rosanvallon's work should sound recognizable chords.

In the Moyn volume under review, as in virtually all of Rosanvallon's work, his subject is democracy, especially its dangers and deceptions, its mysteriousness, even unknowability. Like his mentors Claude Lefort and François Furet, Rosanvallon understands the form of democracy invented during the French Revolution in Rousseauian terms. Democracy, in this reading, is a political system grounded in a popular sovereignty seen as unified and unanimous, one in which each individual's will dissolves into a transcendent common will. It makes sense that a country accustomed to absolutist rule would produce a form of democracy such as this. As Furet wrote, political sovereignty was undivided under the Old Regime, concentrated in theory, if not always practice, in the absolute monarch himself.

What revolutionaries produced in its stead was a new, democratic form of politics in which sovereignty remained absolute and undivided, only now it resided in "the people" or "the nation," seen as a unified, undifferentiated mass. The "people" was composed of equal individuals, and equality, defined in opposition to the Old Regime's hierarchy of difference, implied that all individuals were the same—at least for political purposes. Revolutionary politics thus demanded that society be depicted not as it was—not, that is, as a vast diversity of wealth, education, language, religion, age, sex—but as a collection of equal individuals, each stripped of his particularities and thus identical to all the others. The role of each individual was not to express particular interests and needs, but to lose himself in a collective sovereignty that manifested itself as the general will. In the process, society collapsed into sovereignty, the social into the political, such that the political appeared to become so perfect an embodiment of society that the latter would, for all intents and purposes, cease to exist.

The evaporation of the social was, of course, pure democratic fantasy, and it produced troubling results. Since revolutionaries understood democracy as the political will of a unified people or nation, the expression of particularities looked like outrages against democracy, even as violations of the social

contract itself. Such violations were said to threaten the entire political edifice and, for that reason, warranted harsh punishments. Terror was thus a logical outcome of revolutionary democracy, as was dictatorship. By definition, a unified citizenry needed no plural representation—or any representation at all. Since the people together expressed sovereignty as if a single man, a “man of the people” like Robespierre could embody popular sovereignty in his person. Here, Rosanvallon’s analysis, like Furet and Lefort’s, claimed to reveal the totalitarian danger lurking within the very genes of democratic politics.[2] Totalitarianism was not the converse of democracy but one of its logical, if perhaps mutant forms. Worse, totalitarianism was impossible without democracy and without the individualist modernity that had bequeathed it to the world. Individualism had meant freedom from the Old Regime’s corporate structures. But unmoored from their former identities and the standing corporations had conferred, individuals found themselves vulnerable to the exercise of absolute power in their collective name. There are obvious resonances between this analysis of the French Revolution and the Communist and Nazi “popular” dictatorships of the twentieth century, whose evils French intellectuals belatedly denounced in the 1970s.[3]

If Furet argued that the danger of totalitarianism resided mainly in democracy’s Rousseauian guise, for Rosanvallon that danger also existed in François Guizot’s archetypal effort to contain revolutionary excess. For Guizot, the answer to the unrestrained demos, to what Rosanvallon calls “political voluntarism,” was to promote a sober political rationality by removing popular will from the equation. The antidote to democratic excess was to smother its fires in a blanket of administrative calm. Guizot’s liberalism moved him to select his administrators not from an aristocracy of birth, but from the society as a whole. He had no intention, however, of representing that society politically, but rather of distilling from it a superior rationality whose best proponents would govern from above. The danger of creating an entrenched, unelected elite is evident, but it is difficult to see how the perils of Guizot’s system resemble those of Robespierre. It is possible, perhaps, to see the germ of Vichy in Guizot’s theory of rule by a rational elite. But as Maurice Agulhon has pointed out, the sort of oligarchic liberalism identified with Guizot, repressive as it was, proved impossible to contain within the narrow bounds the philosopher politician had intended. Regular elections, especially the relatively democratic ones at the municipal level, plus a vibrant press injected a healthy dose of politics into a restrictive regime.[4]

Guizot’s July Monarchy was open enough to allow a fair amount of political expression but too closed to satisfy those eager for change. The result, as everyone knows, was the Revolution of 1848. Rosanvallon has an interesting take on the so-called “springtime of the people” (Feb.-May, 1848), when the French public appeared overwhelmingly in favor of the new republic. Historians have seen these months either as a time of Romantic illusions or as an “apprenticeship” (Agulhon) for future, more successful republics to come. For Rosanvallon, the springtime of the people harked back to the First Republic, when the fantasy of a unified, homogeneous nation set the stage for terror. The point of universal suffrage, enacted in March 1848, was not, Rosanvallon writes, to allow France’s diversity of opinions and interests to find political expression. As during the Revolution, the goal of universal suffrage was to sublimate that diversity into an undivided popular sovereignty created and expressed by the public ritual of the vote. As the republican tribune Ledru-Rollin put it, universal suffrage “will involve nothing more than convoking the people in great masses, the total sovereign, and calling upon unanimous consent to those questions about which the popular conscience speaks so eloquently and unanimously by acclamation” (p. 108). Far from an exercise in political pluralism, the universal (manhood) vote of April 1848 served as a form of “social communion,” a rite giving the new republic its “baptism of liberty” (*La Réforme*, p. 107). The religiosity of 1848, so acidly mocked in Flaubert’s *Education sentimentale*, was an entirely serious thing. It signified a popular ballot understood, Rosanvallon writes, as “a sacrament of social unity.” As such, the republican political culture of 1848 expressed “the essential illiberalism of French democracy,” a democracy that considered pluralism divisive and therefore un-republican (p. 108). Without saying so directly, Rosanvallon suggests that the 1848 experience provides historical context for understanding French republicanism’s present-day resistance to multiculturalism and especially to “divisive” cultural and religious symbols like the veil.

Intriguing as it is, Rosanvallon's argument about 1848 goes a little too far. The republicans did, after all, renounce terror early on, forbidding capital punishment for political crimes. And the largely royalist results of the April 1848 election taught them that universal suffrage wasn't the panacea many hoped it would be. Republicans came to understand the need for propaganda and partisan campaigns, creating a fledgling political party, the *démoc-socs*, dedicated to electing likeminded candidates and to peaceful political reform. It is true that the *démoc-socs* maintained a near-messianic faith in the looming election of 1852, a vote in which a united people would supposedly reign supreme. But republicans realized that there was nothing automatic about such unity, that it would have to be forged through patient political work. Illiberalism, yes, but 1848 also revealed hints of the pluralism that would manifest itself more durably thirty years later.

In connecting the illiberalism of 1848 to the fate of pluralism later on, Rosanvallon insists on the resonances between past and present, resonances that constitute the *raison d'être* of his work. "History enters the project," Rosanvallon writes, not "to provide banal 'enlightenment' of the present through the study of the past [but rather] to make the succession of presents live again as trials of experience that can inform our own." History, he adds, "is the *active laboratory* that created our present and not simply its background" (pp. 38-9). Rosanvallon's scholarship is thus focused at once on the past and the present, an angle of vision that owes a great deal to his own relatively unorthodox roots. He began his professional life not as a university academic but as a house intellectual for France's main non-Communist labor union, the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT). A baby-boomer who came of age in May 1968, Rosanvallon sought to create a left-wing movement free of French communism's bureaucratic rigidities and untainted by the PCF's indulgence toward the Soviet Union. When the Socialist Party failed to reject statism and outmoded ideological orthodoxies, he turned away from full-time activism and toward an academic career.^[5] Having tried to democratize the left and by extension French society as a whole, Rosanvallon took as his scholarly subject the study of democracy, especially its pathologies and the various forms it has taken since 1789.

In the process, he placed democracy within the larger concept of "the political"—*le politique* as opposed to *la politique*. The former refers to the social, political, economic, and cultural environment in which *la politique*—elections, day-to-day decision-making, the functioning of institutions—takes place. Democracy, therefore, is a culture, a set of ideas and a succession of practices, all of which have changed over time, even if certain key elements of continuity can be found. One of those continuities, Rosanvallon says, is the fantasy of a world in which politics—*le politique*—withers away. For French revolutionaries, as for the republicans of 1848, popular sovereignty or universal suffrage creates such harmony that conflicts disappear. Since politics, *Le* and *La*, encompasses society's effort to manage conflict, if conflict is imagined away, politics must disappear as well.

If radicals sought to render politics unnecessary, so, Rosanvallon writes, did Guizot and those who imitated his approach. The belief that society could be managed rationally from above is itself a fantasy of a world in which conflict, and therefore politics, gives way to what Marx, echoing the spirit of Guizot, called "the administration of things." In this sense, Marxism shares with Guizotian rationalism a belief that under the right conditions politics can be overcome and that the goal of political action is to make politics go away.

Turning to Adam Smith, Rosanvallon writes that the Scottish liberal, like the French liberal Guizot, shared Marx's belief in a post-political world. For Marx, the proletarian revolution occurs once capitalism has created such abundance that every human need can be fulfilled. With no unmet needs, there is no economy to manage and no politics required to navigate among rival claims and suppress those that can't be resolved. Society operates harmoniously on its own. For his part, Smith also foresaw a harmonious world, only it resulted not from a post-economic utopia of abundance but from the complete freedom of individuals to pursue their interests and satisfy their needs. With all restrictions lifted, individuals possessing no particular attachments to one another would collectively to do what the

society as a whole required. No regulating authority was needed; the economy, and with it, the society, regulated itself. Not only was political intervention unnecessary, it threw the system off. In Rosanvallon's fascinating reading, oversimplified here, Smith's "utopian capitalism" joins Marx's utopian communism in dispensing with "the political" once and for all. What's distressing about this odd couple of parallel utopias is the extent to which they have served as ideal types to which so many political actors and ordinary citizens have aspired. Beneath the surface appeal of a world that operates harmoniously on its own lurks a realm devoid of human will and therefore of freedom itself.

Rosanvallon returns again and again to the question of will. If revolutionaries mobilized too much political will, counterrevolutionaries, whether liberal or conservative, sought to banish it from the realm. The result, says Rosanvallon echoing Tocqueville, was an oscillation of extremes of will and anti-will throughout the century following 1789. Only in the Third Republic did the French succeed in modulating the system. They did so not by fusing liberalism and democracy, as in the British and American cases, but by allowing forms of democratic participation to seep in around the edges of a republican regime designed to keep political will in check. Although Rosanvallon only alludes to this question in the volume under review, elsewhere he refers to a "silent revolution" that began in the 1880s with the advent of labor unions and political parties.[6] These associations differed from the corporate bodies of the Old Regime in being voluntary rather than a priori, and their efforts to represent particular interests placed them outside the traditional realm of Rousseauian popular sovereignty. Their effects were silently revolutionary, Rosanvallon suggests, because they demonstrated that "the people" could be represented as divided without undermining the republic itself.

Hopeful as it was, this silent revolution did not, according to Rosanvallon, resolve the tensions between liberalism and democracy. During the interwar and postwar periods, liberalism in the form of elite rule and democratic constraint coexisted with a belief that a sovereign people possessed the power to revolutionize society and make everything right. If faith in political voluntarism helped produce the events of May '68, that faith did not survive the disillusionment that followed in their wake. Nowadays, few people hope to mobilize a huge reservoir of political will. If anything, Rosanvallon writes, there is too little such will in present-day France. But he's not overly worried by this problem, wasting little space lamenting, as is fashionable to do, the cynicism and disaffection of the people. He notes the erosion of trust in elected leaders and other officials but doesn't believe mistrust leads to apathy. It results, rather, in alternative forms of political expression, something he sees not only as vital to democracy but as one of its constituent forms.

In response to the erosion of trust, citizens have long tried to act politically outside the electoral and parliamentary realm. They have turned to various forms of populism, to a variety of advocacy organizations, and to social movements—civil rights, women's rights, gay rights—designed to influence parliaments, courts, and presidents, often indirectly through the media. Recently, Rosanvallon writes, citizens have tried to compensate for the loss of trust by institutionalizing distrust. He calls this new development "indirect democracy," a phenomenon with three components: mechanisms of oversight, independent institutions, and the formulation of powers of rejection.

Oversight includes acts of denunciation and revelation of uncomfortable facts, using what Rosanvallon calls "counter-expertise." The goal is to undermine the reputation of particular leaders and thus to curtail their power. The media is crucial here, as is the apparatus of scandal long central to American politics, but especially so since Watergate.[7] The creation of independent institutions helps shield citizens from elected or appointed authorities. Rosanvallon cites the judiciary here, especially in the American case, where judges have the power to limit what the President and Congress can do. (Judicial review is a relatively new phenomenon in France.) He points as well to the U.S.'s Interstate Commerce Commission (1887), designed to protect consumers from an executive branch seen as too close to the major railroad interests. Though typically part of the state, regulatory agencies such as the ICC can nonetheless shield individuals from state action. This is, of course, not always the case, and Rosanvallon

might have noted how commonly regulatory agencies identify with the interests they are supposed to oversee, rather than the consumers needing support.

As for the formulation of powers of rejection, these examples of what Rosanvallon calls “negative democracy” range from mechanisms to recall elected leaders to community organizations created to block a highway extension or the closure of a public hospital. Rosanvallon says that, for all the voluminous writing about democracy, its indirect forms have received precious little theoretical attention. He intends to remedy this situation in his forthcoming work, distilling two key conceptual categories from the examples above: the “judicialization of politics,” in which citizens seek to indict political leaders for various failings, moral or otherwise, rather than oppose them with an alternative program; and the “socialization and dissemination of legislative power,” which places in the hands of ordinary people, often acting through the media, “mechanisms of censure and veto” (p. 245). These phenomena, he writes, highlight a new division of powers in which organized groups of citizens exercise the checks and balances once reserved for legislatures, now increasingly impotent in the face of executive authority.

Despite the promise of these developments, there are dangers and limits. The principal pathology of indirect democracy, Rosanvallon writes, is populism, whether of the right or the left. Moyn’s introduction alludes to one of these dangers in criticizing the anti-globalization movement, which advances a populist critique of international capitalism without even hinting at realistic alternatives. As for rightwing populism, it makes life harder for recent immigrants and European Muslims, without offering acceptable ways to slow the influx of newcomers or speed the integration of those living in the West.

The limits of indirect democracy lie in its essentially negative force. It can weaken political leaders, block their political agendas, and expose corruption. But it is ill equipped to create positive alternatives or forge durable, cohesive majorities capable of developing fresh ideas and enacting new and better political programs. For these reasons, indirect democracy belongs to the “unpolitics” so characteristic of our contemporary life. Like the exultation of the market and the growth of unchecked administrative power, indirect democracy narrows rather than expands civic life.

Rosanvallon claims that indirect democracy does not have to add to the “hollowing out of the political,” but he is extremely vague about its positive possibilities. To be fair, he has only begun to think along these lines, but since he plans the new work to be less francocentric than his old, he might want to take certain recent American developments into account. The Internet, it seems to me, will be crucial not solely for indirect democracy but for deepening the political and creating new and potentially productive forms of political solidarity

It is easy to see the indirect, counter-democracy that the Internet represents. The now-proverbial “blogger in pajamas” can quickly dredge up information capable of embarrassing political leaders, exposing their equivocations, and advertising evidence of corruption or wrongdoing. But the Web has “positive” implications as well—positive in the sense of creating new political possibilities. It is unlikely that Howard Dean’s antiwar campaign of 2001-02 could have enjoyed even a temporary success without his advisors’ Internet skills. All at once, Deanites used the Web to spread the candidate’s message, organize his supporters into a volunteer electoral force, and raise sums of money otherwise inaccessible to the little-known former governor.[8] As this example shows, the Internet can democratize democracy both by drastically lowering the cost of entering a political contest—email, after all, circulates for free—and then by making possible, on the cheap, a huge grass-roots fundraising effort.

Even before the Dean campaign, a group of activists (MoveOn) used the Net to mobilize people against the effort to impeach President Clinton. Eventually, Move-On became a kind of virtual mass movement, flashing emails to members several times a day, and using those messages to do for a variety of

democratic candidates what the Internet had done for Dean. More than a mere mechanism of political organization, MoveOn has brought a large number of people together around a relatively coherent political program--whatever one thinks of it--and an ideology that tries to combine electoral pragmatism with classic leftish Democratic planks. The Daily Kos and a few other widely read progressive blogs have done much the same thing. Individual citizens will have different reactions to these developments, as to analogous practices on the right. But the potential here is enormous, both to deepen participation and create new political communities organized around common narratives and the effort to elect candidates determined to put those narratives to use. The potential exists, that is, to bring representative and indirect democracy together. It's no panacea, but there seems little doubt that part of democracy's future will reside in cyberspace.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Samuel Moyn, Introduction: Antitotalitarianism and After

Part I. The Study of Politics in History

Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France

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Postscript: Democracy in an Era of Distrust

NOTES

[1] Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, "French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 76 (March 2004): 107-154; "Liberalism's Return: French Social Thought Since 1968," Columbia University, April 2004.

[2] François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elbourg Forster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Furet, *La Révolution endébat*, ed. Mona Ozouf (Paris: Gallimard, 1999; Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Deborah Furet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Claude Lefort, *Un homme en trop: réflexions sur "L'archipel du Goulag"* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1976); Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). On these views of democracy and totalitarianism, see also the excellent books by Dick Howard, *The Specter of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and Michael Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

[3] Rosanvallon's American fans will be pleased that Moyn's volume will be followed by Arthur Goldhammer's translation of *Le Modèle politique français: la société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2006), a study of the relationship between politics and society over the *longue durée* of contemporary French history.

[4] It is wrong, however, to argue, as many do, that French intellectuals of the left were entirely silent about the wrongs of Soviet Communism until them. See Michael Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

[5] Agulhon, Maurice, "La Révolution de 1830 dans l'histoire du XIXe siècle français," *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 1980 52(4): 483-498; Agulhon, *Une ville ouvrière au temps du socialisme utopique: Toulon de 1815 à 1851* (Paris: Mouton, 1970); Agulhon, *La République au village* (Paris: Plon, 1970); Agulhon, *La République au village* (Paris: Plon, 1970).

[6] Jainchill and Moyn, pp. 110-16.

[7] *Le peuple introuvable: histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

[8] There is a large literature on the politics of scandal. See Damien de Blic and Cyril Lemieux, "Le scandale comme épreuve," *Politix* 71 (September 2005): 9-38; John B. Thompson, *Political Scandal. Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000); Eric de Dampierre, "Thèmes pour l'étude du scandale," *Annales ESC* IX (1954); James Lull and Stephen Hinerman, *Media Scandals. Morality and Desire in the Popular Culture Marketplace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Andrei S. Markovits and Mark Silverstein, *The Politics of Scandal. Power and Process in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988)

[9] Bill McKibben, "The Hope of the Web," *New York Review of Books*, April 27, 2006.

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