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Michel Pinault, *Maurice Barrès et “la grande pitié des laboratoires de France”: discours parlementaires pour une politique des recherches scientifiques en France (1919-1923)*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015. 330 pp. Illustrations, charts, notes, bibliography, and name index. €29.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-2-343-07605-8.

Review by Alex Dracobly, University of Oregon.

Most historians of France will know something of Maurice Barrès: the man of letters and “prince of youth,” the Boulangist, the advocate of “integral nationalism,” the militant anti-Dreyfusard, the parliamentary champion of the Catholic Church in France, and the World War I propagandist whom Romain Rolland memorably dubbed the “nightingale of carnage.”^[1] Before reading Michel Pinault’s excellent new book, however, I had no idea and would not have imagined that Barrès’s “last public combat” (p. 12) before his death in December, 1923 was in favor of a national program of scientific research. While this campaign proved stillborn, it sheds interesting light not only on the figure of Barrès but also on the emergence of what Pinault describes as the politics of scientific research in France.

According to Pinault, Barrès had long been interested in scientific issues. His involvement in this campaign, however, stemmed from a meeting in early 1919 with the noted chemist Charles Moureu. Moureu convinced Barrès not only that the mobilization of the French scientific community had been important to France’s victory in the war, but that scientific research could play a major role in post-war reconstruction and the maintenance of France’s stature as a great nation. Barrès agreed to participate in a public campaign designed to prepare the way for legislative action in favor of a national policy of scientific research, which he would also sponsor. Over the next year and half Barrès published more than a dozen articles on the topic and in the National Assembly, of which he had been a member since 1906, he became the leading spokesman for legislation in favor of a national program of scientific research.^[2]

The basis of the campaign was the poor state of research facilities in France. Much of the French state’s support of scientific research was funneled through a university system that prioritized instruction over research. One aim of the campaign was to create within the confines of the existing university system a larger space for scientific research independent of either direct practical application or the university’s instructional mission. Another objective was to establish a consistent source of funding—whether from the state or private sources—for “pure” scientific research in laboratories that could serve as a source of inspiration for the next generation of scientists.

One of the surprises of this book is the depth of Barrès’s commitment to this cause. Pinault convincingly argues that for Barrès the issue went well beyond the practical matter of funding and organization. He seems to have regarded his engagement in favor of scientific research as the third panel of the great triptych of issues that began with his campaign in defense of parish churches in 1913, continued with the “diverse spiritual families of France” crusade of the war, and would now culminate with a coherent national policy regarding scientific research.^[3] Why science? As Pinault explains, scientific research

had a double attraction for Barrès. It made an “indispensable contribution to economic and military power of the country,” at the same time as it served as an “expression of the spiritual power the nation” (pp. 157, 156). Science represented for Barrès a unifying force, an endeavor that all the “diverse families” of France could rally behind. In this respect, the campaign for scientific research could be seen as a continuation of the *Union Sacrée* of the war years, especially as the hope that scientific breakthroughs might lead to a more prosperous society was shared across the political spectrum. Equally, important scientific research seems to have appealed to Barrès’s sense of human aspiration and humankind’s never-ending quest for understanding. “It is a matter,” he wrote in his typically exalted manner, “of ensuring that the noble pursuit of high culture continues. It is a matter of establishing ... a disinterested cult of the true and the beautiful” (p. 112).

While Pinault’s work offers a new perspective on the last years of Barrès’s life, the central object of the book is not Barrès so much as it is the politics of scientific research in France. Pinault’s prior book documented the “beginnings of the politics of scientific research in France” from the 1890s to World War I.[4] That work focused on the parliamentarian Honoré Audiffred and his longstanding efforts to create a national policy in support of scientific research. To an extent Barrès’s post-war efforts represented a continuation of Audiffred’s policy initiatives. Both men sought increased government funding for scientific research and they both argued for a national policy capable of coordinating or “organizing” such efforts. But the differences are equally striking. Where Audiffred focused on the biological and medical sciences with an eye toward immediate practical applications, Barrès’s initiatives were inspired more by the chemical and physical sciences and explicitly emphasized the need to support “pure and disinterested” research. Equally intriguing, the nationalist element that was so prominent in all of Barrès’s thought was entirely missing from pre-war parliamentary discourse on scientific research.

A defining feature of Pinault’s books is the use of quantitative methods to analyze the language of scientific advocacy. The methodological details escaped this reader but Pinault argues that Barrès was a key figure in articulating a vision of science that made it an “essential form of modernity and of French power” that redefined the role of the state in supporting scientific research (p. 158). Barrès may have failed in his efforts, Pinault argues, but he played an important role in establishing the conceptual framework for the idea that “the State had a primary responsibility in the development of science” (p. 279). From this perspective, this book documents a transitional moment between the “voluntarist” approach and practical orientation of the pre-war period and the creation in the late 1930s of the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS), an institution that was a focus of Pinault’s first book on the father of French nuclear energy, Frédéric Joliot-Curie.[5]

Pinault also employs quantitative methods in his analysis of the political, social, and institutional networks involved in the campaign for scientific research. As might be expected of someone who was primarily known as a writer, Barrès was not well networked within the world of French science. Pinault uses network analysis to support his contention that Charles Moureu recruited Barrès specifically to give the campaign sufficient visibility through his reputation and rhetorical skills, as well to provide a bridge to the world of Parisian high society that was Barrès’s natural milieu. It was “a winning bet,” in Pinault’s estimation (p. 243).

Perhaps, but in the end Barrès’s efforts, much like those of Audiffred before him, largely failed. A massive increase in state support of scientific research ran counter to the main priorities of the French parliament, a parliament dominated by Barrès’s own National Bloc, which was focused on reducing the budget and rolling back the wartime expansion of the state. Barrès may not have been the right person for the job anyhow. If Barrès voice was a significant addition to the campaign, he was arguably too independent and aloof to deploy significant political power within the Assembly itself. As he wrote to Henri Massis *à propos* of another topic in 1919, “even in the Chamber, I belong to no group.”[6] This was most certainly a misperception if what he meant was his political alignment, which was consistently conservative. It is a misperception that nevertheless suggests Barrès’s limits as a legislator. In the event

Barrès realized before his death that his legislative proposals were going nowhere and he seems to have lost interest in the issue. In an unexpected last section, Pinault suggests that Barrès himself began to harbor doubts about the project, not for budgetary reasons but rather, in typically Barresian fashion, because he had developed doubts regarding the elevated concept of science as an “incubator of high spirituality” (p. 272), a position from which he had begun.

While the narrow subject-matter will likely limit the book’s readership, scholars interested in Barrès’s intellectual evolution will want to consult it, especially in light of the almost complete absence of this topic in the existing literature. [7] Pinault brings to the subject a depth of understanding of the world of French science that no scholar of Barrès could match. He makes a strong case that Barrès’s advocacy of science was important not only to Barrès but also to the broader political history of scientific research in France. Readers unfamiliar with this literature might have some difficulty in understanding what is at stake in this book. Here Pinault’s central concern is the emergence of “big science,” the kinds of scientific research that, arguably, only governments are capable of underwriting. By most measures France lagged behind other leading powers, most notably Germany, in state support of scientific research. Looming over the horizon is the creation of the CNRS in 1939. Pinault intimates that the creation of the CNRS was not just a matter of budgetary allocations and administration. It also implied a reconceptualization of what science was, how it was conducted, and its role in modern society. Together with the earlier volume on Audiffred, this book provides a valuable account of this conceptual pre-history of the development of state-supported scientific research in France.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People* (Oxford: Berg, 1985), 162.

[2] These articles and speeches were posthumously collected and published as Maurice Barrès, *Pour la haute intelligence française* (Paris: Plon, 1925). The volume was edited by Charles Moureu.

[3] See Maurice Barrès, *La Grande pitié des églises de France* (Paris: Émile-Paul éditions, 1914) and idem, *Les Diverses familles spirituelles de la France* (Paris: Émile-Paul éditions, 1917). While Barrès was not responsible for the title of his posthumous book on science, he did employ similar rhetoric in his earlier campaign in favor of parish churches.

[4] Michel Pinault, *La science au Parlement: les débuts d’une politique des recherches scientifiques en France* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2006).

[5] Michel Pinault, *Frédéric Joliot-Curie* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 2000).

[6] Henri Massis, *Barrès et nous: suivi d’une correspondance inédite (1906-1923)* (Paris: Plon, 1962), 166.

[7] Most of the literature on Barrès’s political career focuses on the pre-war period, but brief references to this campaign can be found in Charles Doty, *From Cultural Rebellion to Counterrevolution: The Politics of Maurice Barrès* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976), 241; François Broche, *Maurice Barrès* (Paris: Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1987), 512-513, 517; Massis, *Barrès et nous*, 232; and, from a different perspective, Harry W. Paul, *From Knowledge to Power: The Rise of the Science Empire in France, 1860-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 341.

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