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Philippe Le Goff, *Auguste Blanqui and the Politics of Popular Empowerment*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. vii + 263 pp. Bibliography and index. \$115.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-3500-7679-2; \$103.50 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-3500-7681-5.

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Many books have been written about the life of Auguste Blanqui, the famous insurrectionist of the nineteenth-century French revolutionary tradition. His life was exceptional, given his participation in nearly all of the popular insurrections in Paris during that century, brief moments of freedom from more than forty years of imprisonment that he suffered for his role in abetting them. Sympathizers and critics alike have expressed admiration for his steadfast courage in the face of the power of his adversaries to subdue him, time and again. Blanqui was a notorious celebrity in his own day, and an enigmatic legendary figure for our own, as his life story has been retold.^[1]

In his new book, Philippe Le Goff pursues a route into the meaning of Blanqui's legacy less often taken—an analysis of his thought as a contribution to a theory of popular empowerment, which he believes to be as relevant today as it was in the age in which Blanqui lived. He contends that Blanqui as political philosopher has too long stood in the shadow of Marx, and has been judged by the tenets of Marxism rather than on his own merits. Blanqui shared some ideas with Marx about the coming of a proletarian revolution and the making of a communist society. But Marxism had a greater appeal to leaders in the incipient socialist movement in France in the late nineteenth century as a better developed theory of the economic forces shaping history, and became its guiding paradigm. For its enthusiasts, Marxism conveyed the authority of science and forecast the coming collapse of capitalist society. The making of social democracy would follow. By then the practices of mass politics were becoming more effective, and the Left looked to electoral campaigns as a better method than insurrection in furthering that goal. By comparison, Blanqui's tactics for fomenting a popular uprising seemed obsolete. Blanqui the theorist never measured up to Blanqui the activist.

Le Goff proposes that it is time for a new look at Blanqui's theory. Over the course of the twentieth century, Marxism lost favor among labor leaders in France, and by century's end even among diehard left-wing intellectuals. Still, the cause that Marx championed continues to motivate the Left in the face of social and economic inequality more deeply entrenched than ever before in the social structures of late capitalism. In light of the waning influence of the Marxist paradigm, Le Goff argues, we should return to an analysis of Blanqui's political philosophy with an open mind. "Today," he remarks, "'in our bleak age so adoring of every form of necessity', in the ruins of 'scientific socialism' and any pretensions to have discovered the internal and

immutable logic of history, Blanqui's anti-determinism and anti-positivism re-emerge with timely forcefulness" (p. 189).

Tracing Blanqui's thought from his debut as an activist in the Parisian revolution of 1830 through his release from prison in 1879 has never been an easy task. Blanqui wrote incessantly in his role as a revolutionary militant, publicly as a journalist when he was free to do so, but also privately during his long years of imprisonment. Most of the writings that he composed in his prison cell were jottings in miniscule script on thin pieces of paper. Upon his death, the archiving of his manuscripts did more harm than good. Ernest Granger, his devoted follower and executor of his estate, packed off the lot of them to the Bibliothèque nationale in no apparent order.[2] Selected writings by Blanqui were published infrequently over the century following his death, though Le Goff's bibliography notes an uptick in more complete collections since the turn of the twenty-first century.[3] None of these, however, provides ease of access to his writings, published and unpublished, on a par with the "Blanqui Archive," an online platform created by Le Goff and his colleague Peter Hallward.[4] Their initiative is a welcome contribution to scholarship for its comprehensiveness and organization. Particularly helpful within this resource is their full set of scans of the aforementioned collection of Blanqui's manuscripts housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. They have also edited a *Blanqui Reader*, a collection of essential material for understanding Blanqui's thought. Most of Le Goff's references for the book that I am reviewing are drawn from this collection. [4]

Le Goff's method for analyzing Blanqui's thought is based upon a close reading of these documents. His presentation of Blanqui's ideas is didactic, much in the manner of an *explication de texte*. He lifts Blanqui's theory out of its historical context for examination on a philosophical plane. The events of Blanqui's life and particular passages from his writings are referenced only insofar as they exemplify his interpretation. I was struck by the contrast between biographers' passionate narratives of his life as intrepid activist and Le Goff's step-by-step rendering of the cool logic of Blanqui's argument as rational strategist. In bracketing his life in favor of his theory, Le Goff elevates Blanqui into a contemporary discussion of the common cause among rebels who throughout history have struggled to create a more just society. He makes particular mention of Machiavelli and Rousseau as antecedents upon whose ideas Blanqui drew. Along the way, he accords Blanqui a place among the heroes of radical political theory in times closer to our own—Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Régis Debray, and Franz Fanon.

Le Goff disassembles Blanqui's theory into its component elements chapter by chapter. He works mostly with ideas from Blanqui's writings. But he makes occasional references to thinkers whose ideas resonate with those of Blanqui concerning the moral underpinnings of a democratic society, and at times supplements his analysis with comment on theorists who have elaborated upon Blanqui's ideas.

I shall not rehearse Le Goff's exposition of Blanqui's theory in detail, but only note the particular attention he gives to the revolutionary vanguard, an elite of militants that lay claim to the title "proletarian" by virtue of their commitment to act in behalf of the poor of society. The revolution that Blanqui had in mind, Le Goff explains, is at once political and intellectual. The good society is based not only upon social equality but also intellectual enlightenment. The quest for its realization, therefore, is as much psychological as it is economic, for it aspires to promote rational understanding within the proletariat about the unfairness of their exploitation by the privileged class. For this reason, Le Goff explains, Blanqui emphasized the role of the revolutionary

vanguard in its sustained supervision of their education during the long journey toward an egalitarian society. Blanqui never explained the specific characteristics of this future society, whose nature, he believed, would only become clear in the process of making it. There are certain to be contingent problems along the way, and patience will be required. But the time to act is now, if the cause is eventually to succeed. Political action requires faith in the cause, and the devotion needed to carry it through. The leaven in this mix, therefore, is willpower—"the collective conscious volition" of the vanguard to persevere against the odds (p. 113).

Le Goff's explication of Blanqui's political theory draws out its differences from Marxism. Now that the structure of Marxist historiography has been dismantled, he suggests, Blanqui's theory no longer appears as a prelude to Marxism, but rather as an alternative. They share some common concerns. Both envision the coming of a classless society through revolutionary transformation. Both assign a role for a revolutionary vanguard; both hesitate to describe the features of a classless society. Beyond these foundational concepts, their differences appear. To Marx's stress on economics, Blanqui asserts the primacy of politics. For Marx, the proletariat is a social status; for Blanqui it is also a comradeship. Marx stresses impersonal factors in the historical coming of the proletarian revolution; Blanqui demands a disciplined vanguard that shapes the course of the transition. For Marx, the conditions of revolution unfold over time as a synthesis of social antagonisms. The course of revolution may be explained but not hastened. Blanqui's answer to Marx's dialectic of history is an insistence on the immediacy of the need for action, based on the paradoxical concept of the now/not yet. One acts now politically in the faith that the full possibilities of the social revolution will be brought into being in the future. While Marx forecasts the inevitable coming of a classless society, Blanqui underscores the willpower needed to make the revolution a reality, for history is full of contingencies that might thwart its realization.

Le Goff's exposition of Blanqui's ideas is clear and compelling. I would offer only a few points to take the discussion in a different direction. First, I would elaborate on Blanqui's general attitude about the value of education. His followers, if not Blanqui himself, put a decided accent on the importance of history as an inspiration for action. Education, insofar as it was a practice for Blanqui's youthful entourage during the Second Empire, centered on commemorative activities that celebrated episodes of revolt and personal martyrdom in history, antecedents to their own endeavor. All of the journalistic ventures in which Blanqui participated included articles that reached into the past for edifying reflection on the outcasts (*damnés*) of history. They showcased the combats of Pierre Chaumette and Jacques Hébert and their followers in the service of the poor of Paris during the French Revolution, and in a past deeper still, the heroism of Giordano Bruno and Michael Servetus in the cause of religious liberty. During the near past of the nineteenth century, the martyrdom of the four sergeants of La Rochelle for republicanism and the death of Alphonse Baudin on the barricades during the revolution of 1848 became objects of veneration. Commemorative rituals were enormously important to Blanqui and his followers during the Second Empire and the early Third Republic as an emotion-laden method of consciousness-raising that enabled the people to grasp more concretely the passions that through the ages had motivated their cause. Such commemorations punctuated a revolutionary calendar.

Second, I would explore the ways in which Blanqui's conception of a philosophical revolution concerned not only the rational recognition of a social ideal, but also a commitment to his cause that could easily be characterized as religious in nature. Blanqui was an atheist, and his convictions were the deep source of his theory of popular empowerment. His stance entailed not

merely a rejection of the cults of revealed religion, but also an affirmation of his faith in human willpower to combat and overcome all the obstacles that stand in the way of making a terrestrial paradise, a world of equality based upon rational understanding. To live by the motto “neither God nor master” required commemorative acts as well as rational strategies along the way. In their politics, Blanqui and his followers were closely allied with the Free Thought movement (*La Libre Pensée*), which sought to establish civil ceremonies of baptism, marriage, and burial to displace those of the church. In these practices, they recognized the need for institutions and rituals that can sustain devotion to the cause. Blanqui’s atheism had the makings of a civic religion.

Third, and finally, I have some reservations about Le Goff’s interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s critique of Blanqui’s essay “Eternity by the Stars” [*L’Éternité par les astres*] (1872), which serves as the core of his penultimate chapter on Blanqui’s ideas about history. In his reading of passages from Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, Le Goff concludes that Benjamin misunderstands Blanqui’s essay. Benjamin, he argues, sees Blanqui as having at last acknowledged defeat, taking refuge in a meditation on the limitations of the human prospect. Blanqui, Le Goff counters, neither succumbed to the fatalism implicit in Benjamin’s judgment, nor abandoned his belief in humankind’s singular capacity to fashion its own world, whatever the cycles of the forces of nature in the universe.

About that steadfast devotion of Blanqui to his ideals, Le Goff is right. Blanqui never gave up. Liberated in 1879, he returned to the political stage and died after collapsing at a political rally on New Year’s Eve, 1880. Still, I would propose a more sympathetic interpretation of Benjamin’s remarks about Blanqui’s essay, especially as he is one of the few major intellectuals of the twentieth century who took Blanqui’s ideas seriously. Benjamin’s references may have been reflections on their shared plight, rather than a judgment on the limits of Blanqui’s resolve. Consider their late-life circumstances; Blanqui in a fortress prison he did not expect to leave, Benjamin a stateless refugee facing a precarious future. In Blanqui’s essay, I would argue, Benjamin caught a glimpse of his own conception of the idea of eternal return as time travel to forgotten episodes out of the past that are morally edifying, and so serve as an appeal for their redemption. Blanqui may have failed to achieve his goal. But the Blanqui moment, retrieved from its time and place in history, might yet inspire others as worthy of emulation. Such an interpretation is in keeping with the way Blanqui and his followers in their own writings honored the *damnés* of history. Like Blanqui, Benjamin was a religious atheist. He acknowledged the “weak Messianic power” of his own understanding of the concept. Blanqui did not, despite the grandeur of his expectations.

In a way, Le Goff engages in time traveling himself in seeking to convey the profane illumination of Blanqui’s ideas for our contemporary age. His evocation of Blanqui’s political theory, tethered as it is to the particular circumstances of mid-nineteenth-century France, leads me to wonder about the degree to which it is possible to bracket historical context—not only Blanqui’s life, but also his twentieth-century legacy. Le Goff’s interpretation would be enhanced by some discussion of the viability of Blanqui’s theory in light of the failed experiments with communism over the course of the twentieth century. In practice, communism bred authoritarianism. The history of communist programs for the education of the people was at best one of indoctrination. Nor does his analysis of Blanqui’s rationalism as a basis for social perfection take into account all the findings post-Freud about the complexity of the human psyche in the interplay of the irrational unconscious with rational understanding in ways that profoundly influence the decisions humans

make. The notion of transforming cerebral processes in the workings of the brain to make humans more enlightened is a tall order.

Still, I do not think that Le Goff is proposing acceptance of Blanqui's theory standing alone. My sense is that he is rescuing Blanqui from stereotyping, and in the process showing how and why his ideas are of sufficient interest to include him in a conversation about comparative theories of radical politics. Blanqui's theory contains elements that might be recomposed with those of radical political thinkers today who are seeking ways in which to enable ordinary people to improve their condition in an age in which the agencies of the social elite are so formidable. I can see his book as a useful contribution to college courses on political theory.

NOTES

[1] See Patrick H. Hutton, "Legends of a Revolutionary: Nostalgia in the Imagined Lives of Auguste Blanqui," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 39/3 (2013): 41-54.

[2] Papiers philosophiques d'Auguste Blanqui, nouvelles acquisitions françaises, 9578-9598, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. While I was studying these manuscripts years ago, I found the guide to this collection by Maurice Paz an invaluable resource for solving its puzzles: Maurice Paz, "Auguste Blanqui, le révolutionnaire professionnel," (thèse supplémentaire, doctorat ès lettres, l'Université d'Aix-en-Provence, 1974), pp. 161-260.

[3] For the complete list, see Le Goff, *Auguste Blanqui*, pp. 242-243.

[4] Philippe Le Goff and Peter Hallward, "Auguste Blanqui and His Legacy: Writings, Manuscripts, Resources," The Blanqui Archive, <https://blanqui.kingston.ac.uk/> (accessed Oct. 14, 2020).

[5] Philippe Le Goff and Peter Hallward, eds., *The Blanqui Reader: Political Writings 1830-1880* (London: Verso, 2018).

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