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K. Steven Vincent, *Élie Halévy: Republican Liberalism Confronts the Era of Tyranny*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 368 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$89.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812252033.

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If one considers the issues that Élie Halévy (1870-1937) wrote about, the timeliness of a book devoted to him is hard to dispute. The philosopher and historian probed the tensions in the idea of the free market, reflected on the relationship between religion and politics, analyzed the failure of democratic socialism, and theorized the rise of nationalistic tyrannies. Yet save for a brief nod to contemporary issues in his conclusion, K. Steven Vincent, in his book, completely eschews presentism. He is interested, rather, in Halévy's political judgment: his ability to make sense of the recent past as well as the tumultuous times in which he lived (specifically, the long European crisis extending from the 1890s until the eve of the Second World War). For Vincent, Halévy's basic outlook was that of a liberal, though his liberalism was tinted with republican and socialist hues. This liberalism, Vincent believes, was more than an ideology or a value preference; it was an intellectual framework, which allowed Halévy to propose compelling insights about his rapidly changing world. Vincent's book is less a thesis-heavy interpretation than a careful study of how an intellectual formed by liberalism reckoned with the distinctly illiberal forces unleashed in twentieth-century Europe.

Over the course of his career, Vincent has written four elegantly crafted intellectual biographies, each devoted to a French political thinker. The first two were about socialists (Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Benoît Malon), the latter two about liberals (Benjamin Constant and Élie Halévy). Though his subjects differ, Vincent's approach and concerns have remained remarkably consistent.^[1] His method, which he once described as a "socially sensitive intellectual history,"^[2] consists in showing how a particular philosophical outlook arose from an individual's immersion in the political and intellectual affairs of their time. He is particularly interested in thinkers who threw themselves into the political arena: Constant leading the liberal opposition in the Tribune, Proudhon haranguing the Constituent Assembly in 1848, and Malon editorializing on republican politics in his influential journal, *La Réforme socialiste* (in this respect, Halévy, with the exception of his activism during the Dreyfus Affair, is something of an outlier). Vincent, moreover, is drawn to pragmatists. Perhaps for that reason, his subjects tend to be ideological hybrids: Proudhon, the collectivist deeply attached to liberty; Malon, the socialist who defended republican institutions, and Halévy, at once a liberal republican and a liberal socialist. Finally, morality and religion are always central to the outlook of Vincent's subjects: Proudhon and Malon embraced republican virtue, Constant was obsessed with taming fanaticism, and Halévy insisted that religion could foster political stability. Though Vincent is

too cautious an historian to indulge in teleology, it is nonetheless possible to read his work as a genealogy of liberalism, distilled through the contentious history of modern France.

While Vincent offers an intriguing interpretation of Halévy's project, he does not state it upfront; he unfurls it slowly, through a step-by-step account of Halévy's trajectory. This approach might seem fragmentary, but by the conclusion, all the pieces have fallen into place. After introducing Halévy's extraordinary family—which descended from German Jews who moved to France around the time of the Revolution, rising to prominence in politics, business, and the arts—Vincent examines his early years as a philosopher during the Third Republic's heyday. Halévy, who helped launch the prestigious journal *La Revue métaphysique et morale* in 1893, was an avowed neo-Kantian. He staunchly defended the autonomy of human reason, firmly opposing contemporary efforts to reduce human thought to a physiological or social determination.

Yet Halévy, Vincent explains, “became concerned less and less with philosophical ‘truth,’ and more and more with the resonance and influence of ideas in specific locations”—in short, with economic and political doctrines arising in specific times and places (p. 56). Halévy first traveled to Britain in the 1890s, launching a relationship with that nation that he would cultivate for the rest of his life. After exploring Jeremy Bentham's archives, he began a study of utilitarianism that resulted in his pathbreaking (and still influential) *La formation du radicalisme philosophique* (1901–1904). In this book, Halévy famously identified the tension that, he contended, was constitutive of utilitarianism: Bentham and his followers simultaneously held that individual interests could be harmonized naturally through the market and artificially through politics. When the market failed to yield harmony, governments could always resort to more heavy-handed means to achieve social order. This imminent critique of utilitarianism testified to Halévy's emerging political views: a suspicion of laissez-faire non-interventionism and a cautious acceptance of certain forms of socialism. At the same time, it shows his continued investment in philosophical rationalism: Halévy saw the utilitarian commitment to egoism as dogmatic and the idea of a self-regulating market as “sophistical” (p. 74).

Not until the Dreyfus Affair, however, did Halévy bring his philosophical outlook to bear on contemporary politics. What he learned from his engagement as a Dreyfusard was that liberal democracy was vulnerable to fanatical movements on the right as well as the left—specifically, nationalism and socialism. These lessons informed Halévy's reflections on socialism, to which he devoted a course at the *École libre des sciences politiques* that he offered regularly for the rest of his life. Socialism, Halévy concluded, was beset with an intractable problem: on the one hand, it was a necessary consequence of liberalism, extending the principles of liberty and equality to the economic realm; on the other, it was susceptible to the irrational politics that had surfaced during the Dreyfus Affair—“disastrous eloquence,” “heroic convulsions,” and the penchant for authoritarianism that came with them (pp. 118, 120). In practice, this conflict took the form of two competing socialist currents, one emphasizing emancipation (including individual freedom), the other favoring organization and authority. For Halévy, socialism thus became a bellwether of contemporary politics. Though it was a European-wide phenomenon, different national cultures inflected its course. In his own country, socialism instantiated Halévy's fear that the “French are only good at two things: to be governed and to quarrel about doctrines” (quoted p. 122).

The terrain upon which Halévy chose to explore his growing concern with democratic stability was history—specifically, British history. In the first volume of his *Histoire du peuple anglais au*

XIXe siècle (1912), he sought to explain the remarkable solidity of British society and institutions, despite the potential for upheaval unleashed by industrialization and class conflict. Halévy's argument was primarily cultural: the *mœurs* or customs that disposed the British to moderation and compromise were rooted in Methodism and utilitarianism (less as a philosophy than as an attitude). The "Halévy thesis," as it became known, held that Methodism was the "mystic foundation of English liberalism" (quoted p. 136), which "channeled religious fervor in socially and politically conservative directions" (p. 143). In Britain, religion had played the role of a folk rationalism—a role that in France, he believed, was sorely lacking.

Like most of his contemporaries, Halévy was devastated by the First World War. Yet, as Vincent skillfully shows, the war sharpened his thinking and brought his multiple concerns into alignment. First, he made no concession to the pervasive nationalism, refusing to serve in the government's propaganda agencies (he volunteered in a provincial hospital instead) and extolling the rational core of German culture to temper his compatriots' xenophobia. "Let us protect our intelligence for the day when we are able to give it full liberty," he wrote a colleague (quoted p. 153). Next, with grudging fatalism he accepted the necessity of nationalism and an autocratic state in wartime. He simply hoped that they could be rolled back once the war was over. Finally, he despaired of the pacifism embraced by fellow intellectuals, notably his friend and fellow philosopher Alain. Peace as an end in itself, Halévy concluded, was as much a paralysism of reason as the self-regulating market. As Vincent astutely observes, Halévy's views, in this context, have a distinctly Weberian ring: against Alain's embrace of an "ethics of ultimate ends," Halévy favored an "ethics of responsibility," concerned with realistic outcomes—particularly since he was convinced that, despite the horrific loss of life, the only path to a European peace was Germany's defeat (p. 178). Once again, Halévy clung to the hope that destructive passions could serve the demands of reason.

Postwar Europe—predictably, one is inclined to say—left Halévy bitterly disillusioned. Yet at the same time, his political thought achieved new levels of lucidity. In politics, he observed, passion had become the order of the day. "Utopia is the air that we breathe," he mused. "Between the utopias of pacifism and the utopias of conquering, how are we to maintain an equilibrium that is in some way miraculous?" (quoted p. 191). But more disturbingly, the interwar years also witnessed a disturbing indifference to political liberty. Vincent's discussion of Halévy's assessment of the British labor movement is particularly revealing. During the war, the British state had leaned on the authority of trade unions, but this embrace proved fatal: as the government made workers' compensation a priority while transforming unions into quasi-state institutions, they also sapped workers of their desire to participate in workplace governance. The tension in socialism had been resolved, but unpropitiously: organization had defeated liberation. What some have described as the "dashing of Halévy's English hope" was in fact, Vincent observes, "the dashing of Halévy's hopes for... a non-authoritarian form of socialism" (p. 205). He had worried about the French being only good at being governed and quarrelling about doctrines; after the war, Europe had become France writ large.

As democratic socialism waned, Halévy argued, nationalism and the administrative state increasingly fed off one another. He developed this insight in the widely lauded lecture he gave at Oxford in 1929, "The World Crisis (1914-1918): An Interpretation." The origins of the war, Halévy contended, lay not in a military or diplomatic crisis, but in nationalism and revolution—mutually reinforcing passions that functioned as solvents of the liberal order. The "revolutionary principle of nationality" (quoted p. 219) that fueled Balkan resentment against Austria,

compounding the destabilizing forces of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism, stymied efforts to find a peaceful solution to European tensions. To these were added a “revolutionary syndicalist-like militancy against capitalism” (pp. 221), which the French pioneered but the Russians brought to fruition. The upshot, as Vincent puts it, was a troubling “combination of nationalism and state socialism,” as “increased control of industry from above—that is, a form of ‘state socialism’...frequently combined with a new fervent nationalism” (p. 221-222). As forces conducive to moderation and rationality receded, Halévy grew increasingly pessimistic: the toxic mix of nationalism and statism could only erupt in a new cataclysm. Halévy drew on these insights to analyze Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Soviet Russia in his 1936 lecture “The Era of Tyrannies.” He worried, too, that democratic societies, as they confronted these regimes, would themselves become more tyrannical. As his ideals were systematically foreclosed by the direction of European politics, he succumbed to despair. Only the past offered him respite: “I sense that I am anachronistic,” he reflected, “but not unhappy for that” (quoted p. 251).

While Vincent acknowledges Halévy’s contribution to a range of scholarly fields, his real significance, Vincent maintains, is as “a participant in the tradition of French liberal republicanism” (p. 267). Halévy instantiates the characteristics of this tradition, which recent scholarship has explored. Liberal republicans were acutely aware of the destructive tendencies that democratic passions could unleash; they believed that the state was instrumental to protecting liberties; their intellectual idiom was history rather than abstract theorizing; and they emphasized the central role of culture, particularly *mœurs*, in grounding liberal dispositions.[3] The essence of Halévy’s liberalism, Vincent maintains, was his conviction that the common good could be achieved not by subsuming individual interests under an all-encompassing state, but through “continuous negotiation” (p. 273). Interestingly, this is the very quality—the emphasis on “negotiation” between often incommensurable “individual interests”—that Vincent also identified as the cornerstone of Constant’s liberalism.[4]

Vincent’s characterization of Halévy’s political thought and the tradition to which it belongs is persuasive. It also allows one to recognize his intellectual progeny. Halévy’s Weberian commitment to an ethic of responsibility and his skepticism of dogma and enthusiasm prefigures Raymond Aron, just as his conviction that tyranny thrives on the obliteration of civic participation foreshadows Hannah Arendt. Yet the careful narrative Vincent presents of Halévy’s development brings to light a distinctive—and at times limited—political vision that is not fully captured by the category into which Vincent understandably wants to place him. Even after he had shifted from philosophy to history, Halévy remained an instinctive rationalist, for whom political passions were problematic but also irritating. His admiration for Methodism suggests that he was drawn to religion only when it served as an emotional shortcut to neo-Kantian dispositions. Halévy is, in this respect, quite different from Constant, who, as Vincent notes, was “insistent that enthusiasm was essential for a full life, and that passionate attachment to values beyond self-interest were defining characteristics of modern individual fulfillment.”[5] Halévy also betrayed impatience with utopian thinking, rather than viewing it, like Aron, as an inevitable if regrettable tendency in modern politics. Though undeniably a liberal, Halévy was steeped in Third Republican rationalism, which distinguished him from the romantically inflected liberalism of the early nineteenth century and the chastened liberalism of the Cold War period.

Vincent’s book is enjoyable to read because it provides a running commentary on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European politics viewed through Halévy’s eyes. It would have been interesting, though, to take a more Kantian approach on this neo-Kantian philosopher—shifting

perspective, as it were, from the objects of his study to the a priori features of his personality. The thesis that emerges over the course of Vincent's book goes something like this: as a liberal concerned with fostering democracy and political stability, Halévy, after the First World War, became increasingly doubtful that nationalism and statism, which endangered political freedom and the international order, could be reined in, especially once socialism's orientation shifted from liberalism to authoritarianism. Of course, this trajectory cannot be separated from the events through which Halévy lived, but it also tells us quite a bit about his character. His intellectual obsession, it would seem, was finding an objective correlative to the rationality that, as a Kantian, he believed was hardwired into the mind: an institution or social practice that could make rationality socially concrete. This was, after all, the reason for his longstanding fascination with English history. His growing despair seems tied to his recognition that socially embedded rationality had become a pipe dream. Though there is a real heroism in Halévy's lucid analysis of the era of tyrannies, one also senses that he represents the endpoint of a particular shade of liberalism. An alternative subtitle of Vincent's book might have been: "The Demise of Liberal Rationalism."

These considerations notwithstanding, Vincent's *Elie Halévy* is an exquisitely crafted intellectual biography that proposes a comprehensive and compelling interpretation of a major French thinker whose work is too often considered in piecemeal fashion. Vincent uses the tools of intellectual history to make a subtle yet powerful case for the importance of liberalism to understanding modern politics—a liberalism that is neither self-confident nor scolding, but all too cognizant of the forces capable of undermining it.

NOTES

[1] In addition to the Halévy book, Vincent's monographs include: *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); *Between Marxism and Anarchism: Benoît Malon and French Reformist Socialism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992); and *Benjamin Constant and the Birth of French Liberalism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

[2] Vincent, *Proudhon*, 5.

[3] For the classic statement on the French liberal tradition, see Larry Siedentop, "Two Liberal Traditions," in Alan Ryan, ed., *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honor of Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 153-174.

[4] Vincent, *Constant*, 215.

[5] Vincent, 215.

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