

H-France Review Vol. 3 (October 2003), No. 107

Jennifer Michael Hecht, *The End of the Soul: Scientific Modernity, Atheism, and Anthropology in France, 1876-1936*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xii + 402pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-231-12846-0.

Review by Martin S. Staum, University of Calgary.

In October 1876 the members of the Society of Mutual Autopsy, led by Paris anthropologists, solemnly pledged to each other the donation of their brains after death. Inspired by Paul Broca's linkage of a localized brain area to aphasia, they hoped that brain dissection from a sampling of the "cultivated" class would contribute to understanding the relationship of the size and form of the brain to intelligence and character. By their sentiments, they disdained traditional concepts of the immortality of the soul and implied that the dead body had value only for science. With this nominally scientific, but in many respects religious, ritual Jennifer Hecht begins a work of operatic dimensions that could be called "Secularization and its Discontents." Her conclusion states three main objectives: first, given the support of the political "left" for scientism, she shows their disillusionment with determinist science from 1880 to 1914, and the new importance of science for elements of the political "right." Second, she illuminates the ambivalent potential—for social welfare and social control—of the social sciences. Third, she suggests that French anthropologists and social philosophers, long before Nazism, attacked scientific racism. This very comprehensively researched work uses archives from the Musée de l'Homme, the Collège de France, and Université de Montpellier, among others. For the most part, she fulfills her objectives and at times, she demonstrates a lyrical writing style befitting her poetic talent.

The principal actors in the original drama are a circle of "freethinking anthropologists" that others have called "scientific materialists," or the circle around Gabriel de Mortillet (André Lefevre, Eugène Véron, Charles Letourneau, Abel Hovelacque, Henri Thulié). This group dominated the Paris Anthropology Society from about 1880 to 1905. Whereas dissertations by Elizabeth A. Williams and Joy Dorothy Harvey discussed some of the political and ideological connotations of the work of these individuals, Hecht analyzes them as much for their atheism as for their anthropology.[1] Since the group coalesced in the late Second Empire around ephemeral freethinking journals, she argues that its members used science as a communal vehicle for their atheism, rather than adopted atheism as a consequence of their science.

Hecht leads off with the fruits of her greatest archival discovery, the papers of the Society of Mutual Autopsy. Chapter one details the secular memorial rituals, the earnestness with which militant atheists wished to "deconsecrate" and secularize burials and act almost as confessors to brain donors who wrote testaments. The next chapter presents fascinating vignettes of republican atheism. At the dinner celebrating Mathias Duval's promotion to a medical faculty chair, depictions of gorilla and human skeletons adorned the menu and an edible nougat of skulls was the centerpiece. Anti-religion thus had a dose of the macabre, for all the sober optimism of the participants.

When the freethinking anthropologists also held positions of political power (local mayors, Paris city councilors, or deputies), they removed the crosses from the Saint-Germain cemetery portal, changed theistic street names, and expelled the nuns from convents reclaimed for the city of Paris. Their socialist or left republican sympathies made them egalitarian and feminist. This portrait intends to revise the conventional image of anthropologists as conservative racists or colonialists.

However, this revision works partly by deliberately omitting descriptions of non-Europeans and downplaying reservations on feminism. For example, she notes Paul Broca's endorsement of the beneficial mixing of some human "types," as among the ancestors of the French (darker, shorter Celts and lighter, taller Kimris). But she neglects Broca's warnings about the mixing of Africans and Europeans, who were feared to produce less fertile and fragile descendants. Not only did Broca believe that certain aboriginals such as Australians were not perfectible, but the Anthropology Society as late as 1908 was still debating the perils of métissage. Even a more militant freethinker such as Letourneau, committed to a gradual evolution of all peoples to the European level of civilization, said, "the weight of the organic curse cannot lighten except with the efforts of more than a millennium."^[2]

Chapter three conscientiously charts the influence of the freethinking anthropologists. Authors such as Emile Zola conceived the Rougon-Macquart family with the aid of Letourneau's treatise on physiology of passions. The anthropologists found a friendly response in periodicals such as the *Revue scientifique*, edited by their colleague, the physiologist Charles Richet. Reviewers in the psychologist Théodule Ribot's *Revue philosophique* were generally laudatory, though they had reservations about materialism, whereas Charles Renouvier's neo-Kantian *Critique philosophique* was most suspicious of scientific determinism.

Chapter four focuses on the Bertillon family as an example of the practical application of anthropology to public policy. The theoretical context is Foucault's concept of a "pastoral" state replacing the functions of the church with the aid of the social sciences.^[3] The Bertillons made "scientific, public claims about subjects that had been understood as private and religious" (p. 167). Louis-Adolphe Bertillon's interest in the demography of wet-nursed infants may have inspired the Roussel law of 1874 that in effect blamed women (both mothers and wet nurses) for the babies' health problems and prohibited wet nurses from accepting other infants until their own child was seven months old.

The elder son Jacques Bertillon was also one of the loudest advocates of natalism, with a plan for tax advantages proportioned to family size--foreshadowing the legislation of the 1930s. In response, early feminists (Nelly Roussel and Madeleine Pelletier) would combat the obligation to motherhood and the production of cannon fodder for the next war. The most famous Bertillon--Alphonse--insinuated his name into the language (*bertillonage*) by developing a system of pre-fingerprinting judicial identification of criminals with multiple measurements of body parts derived from anthropometry. Alphonse won the plaudits of Sherlock Holmes, but was also a notorious handwriting expert in the implication of Alfred Dreyfus.

Using the extensive files at the University of Montpellier, Hecht then details the darkest side of extremist anthropology outside the mainstream of the freethinkers, the "anthroposociology" of Georges Vacher de Lapouge.^[4] Lapouge studied anthropology, published in anthropological periodicals, and shared the freethinkers' atheism and anti-clericalism, but he exaggerated even their most racist contentions. He developed a brutally Darwinist theory of superior, enterprising Nordic or Aryan long-headed races (and dangerous Semitic long-headed races) and servile, plodding Latin and Slavic round-headed races, classified by the "cephalic index." Eugenic selection of an elite would bring about a new society: anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-Semitic. For Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, he substituted Determinism, Inequality, and Selection. French nationalists found his anti-clericalism and transnational Aryan worship ultimately unpalatable. Like Gobineau before him, he achieved wider renown in Germany. Through Hitler's racial theorist Hans Günther, he had direct influence on Nazism.

The American eugenicist Margaret Sanger invited Lapouge to her birth control conferences. Such theories created an atmosphere conducive to restrictive immigration laws and enforced sterilization of the mentally challenged.

The anthropologist Léonce Manouvrier, the protagonist of chapter six, is a pivotal figure in the entire study, not only because Hecht first analyzed his importance in a previous article.^[5] Manouvrier was a fellow traveler of the freethinkers for years but then became firmly committed to defending the equality of women's intelligence, attacking the idea of stigmata of the "born criminal" espoused by Cesare Lombroso, and eviscerating Lapouge's anthroposociology. For Hecht, he represents the ability of French anthropologists to rein in their excesses from within the discipline. Also, his critique, at least of Lombroso and Lapouge, was based on no new measurements. He argued measurements could not predict definite acts as contrasted to aptitudes that could be easily inflected by sociological factors. To Manouvrier, Lapouge was merely propounding pseudo-science as meaningless as classifying people by hat size. In the view of the French scholar Laurent Mucchielli, this is just another example of the Durkheimian tide ("the discovery of the social") unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair. Hecht, however, sees Manouvrier as turning to indeterminism, although he never criticized scientific activity as such.

On feminism, the issue is a bit more complicated than Hecht allows. Manouvrier had impeccable credentials in defending the proportionately heavier size of women's brains (hence his influence on Maria Montessori's belief in the superiority of women's intelligence), of welcoming women interns in Paris hospitals, and castigating prejudices of sex. Hecht notes that in his 1899 application for the Collège de France, he took an uncharacteristically critical view of feminism (p. 362). She does not include a reading of his 1909 article that favored severe restriction of the competition of women for men's jobs. There he asserted, "sexual differentiation penetrates the totality of the organism," so that maternal and familial roles were a "bio-sociological truth."^[6] The result is that, rather than joining the more liberal freethinkers in their feminism, he appears to have been a half-hearted feminist, only somewhat more open-minded than Letourneau or Paul Topinard. The end of the chapter provides a brief overview of the clinical psychology of Jean-Marie Charcot and his disciple Bourneville as examples of deconsecration, evangelical atheism, and a partial shift to indeterminism.

Chapter seven, somewhat questionably titled the "leftist critique of determinist science" begins with the questioning of scientism by three republicans--Alfred Fouillée, Célestin Bouglé, and Jean Finot--who renounced their enthusiasm for science if it meant abandoning moral ideals. Fouillée and his politically prominent ally Léon Bourgeois moved to a "civil solidarism" that required society to intervene against natural brutalities to promote cooperation. All three cited Manouvrier's attack on Lapouge. Bouglé rejected any moral or political standard stemming from science, while Finot attacked the whole idea that race could be an objective scientific concept. These viewpoints illustrate Hecht's argument that attacks on racism long preceded the confrontation with Nazism.

Given the complexity of the philosophies of Bergson and Durkheim, it is somewhat jarring to find them juxtaposed as "left-wing" critics of scientific determinism. In addition to a popular vitalism, Hecht shows that Bergson deliberately attacked the idea that Broca's characterization of aphasia proved the loss of the non-material power of thought. Durkheim may have been occasionally determinist, but by 1912 he found the reality of the spiritual in the soul of the collectivity, in enduring institutions that served human needs. In this context, the anthropologists' attack on religion was no longer relevant, since the spiritual represented real moral power and could be discussed in a naturalistic, functionalist way.

Hecht does not explore further the concrete reasons for failure of determinist anthropology, such as the lack of agreement on measuring standards, or even on the term race itself. Nor does she acknowledge that the heirs of the freethinkers in the Anthropology Society continued their physicalist ways, until they were ultimately overshadowed by the new Institut d'Ethnologie in 1925.^[7]

On the whole, Hecht has given us a very strong account of the republican scientific vision. She reconfigures the history of racism as promised, albeit at the price of omitting much of the racism inherent among the freethinking anthropologists. One might also question the assumption that the left equals egalitarianism. There was an affinity to racial hierarchy of figures on the left from the time of the Saint-Simonians and phrenologists to some of the freethinking anthropologists. Hecht has certainly shown that elements of the left (whether or not one includes Bergson and Durkheim) became skeptical about the uses of determinist science. In that sense, Finot and Bouglé were breaking not only with science and Lapouge but also with a racism coming from the left. The compatibility of the new right with science and numbers via Lapouge might be examined in terms of the extent of French support for Lapouge and Zeev Sternhell's thesis of the origins of French fascism.[8]

On the tasks of the social sciences, the conclusion backs away from the implicit attack on all things "pastoral" to acknowledge that French theorists controlled the excesses that might have led to Nazi crimes (Vichy anthropology is outside the scope of the book). In an admirably balanced statement, Hecht concludes, "science is neither always emancipatory (as was suggested by positivists and materialists alike) nor always devoted to control, classification, and domination (as is often part of the contention of postmodern theory)." (p. 314).

While portions of some chapters have previously appeared as articles, the whole is much greater than its parts. This book will be richly rewarding to scholars of the Third Republic, to historians of anti-clericalism and of the social sciences, and even to laymen with an interest in the current round of the nature-nurture culture wars about the genome and evolutionary psychology.

NOTES

[1] Elizabeth A. Williams, "The Science of Man: Anthropological Thought and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century France" (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1983); Joy Dorothy Harvey "Races Specified, Evolution Transformed: The Social Context of Scientific Debates Originating in the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris, 1859-1902" (PhD dissertation Harvard University, 1983).

[2] For Broca on Australians, see *Bulletin de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris* 1 (1860): 338. For the continuing fear of *métis*, see Filippo Zerilli, "Il dibattito sul meticciato. Biologico e sociale nell'antropologia francese del primo Novecento" *Archivio per l'antropologia e la etnologia* 125 (1995): 237-273. For a recent overview on *métissage*, see Claude Blanckaert, "Of Monstrous Métis? Hybridity, Fear of Miscegenation, and Patriotism from Buffon to Paul Broca," in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds. *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, N.C.: Duke, 2003): 42-70. For Letourneau on "retarded races," see "La psychologie noire," (1868) *Science et matérialisme* 2nd ed., (Paris: Reinwald, 1891): 320-21.

[3] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990) and "Omnes et Singulatum: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'" in *The Turner Lectures on Human Values* (Salt Lake City: Sterling M. McMurrin, 1981) vol. 2. Aside from Foucault, Hecht relies on Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

[4] A good supplement to Hecht's reading is Benoît Massin, "L'Anthropologie raciale comme fondement de la Science politique: Vacher de Lapouge et l'échec de l'«anthroposociologie» en France" in Claude Blanckaert ed., *Les Politiques de l'Anthropologie. Discours et pratiques en France (1860-1940)* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001): 269-334.

[5] Jennifer Hecht, "A Vigilant Anthropology: Léonce Manouvrier and the Disappearing Numbers" *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 33 (1997): 221-240. However, she could have profited from reading the essays on Manouvrier in Laurent Mucchielli, ed. *Histoire de la criminologie française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994) and the more recent article, Claude Blanckaert, "La crise de l'anthropométrie. Des arts anthropotechniques aux dérives militantes (1860-1920)," in Claude Blanckaert, ed. *Les Politiques*, 95-172.

[6] Léonce Manouvrier, "Conclusions générales sur l'anthropologie des sexes," *Revue mensuelle de l'Ecole d'anthropologie* 19 (1909): 41-61, esp. 44-5, 49.

[7] For this story, see Filippo Zerilli, *Il lato oscuro dell'etnologia: il contributo dell'antropologia naturalista al processo d'istituzionalizzazione degli studi etnologici in Francia* (Roma: CISU, 1998) and the current work by Alice Conklin, including "Civil Society, Science, and Empire in Late Republican France: The Foundation of Paris's Museum of Man," *Osiris* 17 (2002): 255-90.

[8] Zeev Sternhell, *La droite révolutionnaire, 1885-1914: Les origines françaises du fascisme* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1978).

Martin S. Staum
University of Calgary
mstaum@ucalgary.ca

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172