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Julian Wright, *The Regionalist Movement in France 1890-1914: Jean Charles-Brun and French Political Thought*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. xvi + 286 pp. Notes, appendices, bibliography, and index. £55.00 UK (hb). ISBN 0-19-926488-0.

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French regionalism has suffered a bad press, typically identified at best with the doomed and archaic Legitimists, nostalgic for the *ancien régime*, or at worst with the late nineteenth century “proto-fascist right”, with Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès seen as its leading exponents. In this perspective the ostensibly regionalist Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain marks the natural culmination of the regionalist movement’s association with reaction. The patently foolish and unsuccessful “return to the land” policies of Pétain’s “National Revolution” point to a second perceived characteristic of regionalism: its hopelessly anachronistic nature. Folklore and the nineteenth-century *félibrige* movement, celebrating the language and traditions of Provence, are undeniably of interest as cultural phenomena but hardly indicate that regionalism was in any way compatible with modernity. Regionalists, the assumption runs, were bound up in a sentimental celebration of a rural France that was in urgent need of modernisation. In his bold rethinking of the subject, Julian Wright’s starting point is therefore to attack what he labels the “occultation of regionalism”, arguing that such skewed visions of regionalism that have led to its unfair neglect. Such neglect has also enveloped the man at the heart of this monograph, the regionalist Jean Charles-Brun, founder and animating force of the *Fédération régionaliste de France* (FRF) and the embodiment of moderate republican regionalism. It is a mark of the regard in which Charles-Brun has been held that his extensive private papers (which Wright has found so valuable) were languishing forgotten in a cellar at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires less than a decade ago.

As Wright admits, Charles-Brun, no less than regionalism itself, is vulnerable to misrepresentation. Firstly, there is the issue of reaction: he was given to citing Maurras whom he had known as an *avant-garde félibre*, and he imprudently accepted a position on Vichy’s committee on regionalism. Secondly, there is the issue of anachronism: he was closely associated with the interwar explosion of folklore movements and played a key role in organising the regionalist pavilions of the 1937 exposition. Yet Wright is not arguing so much that Charles-Brun was a republican as that he was a diverse and complex thinker, whose ideas cannot be understood in terms of left and right. Indeed, it is Wright’s contention that the determination to apply the language of left and right explains why regionalism has been so misunderstood and marginalised. Nonetheless, Charles-Brun emerges as a paradoxical figure: he argued that regionalism had to engage with economic and social issues, but was indulgent towards sentimental federalism; he was profoundly Catholic (and associated closely with social Catholic thinkers) but carried on an adulterous liaison; he was the leading light of regionalism, but stood for parliament on a programme that virtually ignored the regionalist issue. On the other hand, Charles-Brun was entirely consistent in his stance of unity over division, and he welcomed political regionalists and literary regionalists, regionalists of the right and regionalists of the left. As Wright points out, Charles-Brun’s citations of Maurras in his work *Le Régionalisme* were balanced by his citations of the moderate republican Paul Deschanel. He was careful not to take a position in the debate between Maurras and future premier Paul-Boncour as to whether the Republic was capable of adopting a decentralist programme, insisting “L’action, pour le moment consiste à réunir, sur le minimum communément accepté, ceux qui pensent comme M. Maurras et ceux qui pensent comme M. Paul-Boncour” (quoted in Wright, p. 29). Likewise, *Action régionaliste*, the newspaper of the FRF, did not take a clear line but gave space to a range of regionalist thinkers of often conflicting views. Charles-Brun’s determination that the regionalist movement should flourish led to the paradox that though “widely accepted as the most serious thinker of regionalism, he avoided passing down academic judgments which might have given the movement more focus” (p. 31). This reluctance to elaborate a precise regionalist or federalist programme was both the weakness and the strength of the FRF.

Although Charles-Brun is at the heart of this study, this is not a work of intellectual biography. Wright’s concern is maintain a sharp focus on Charles-Brun and the regionalist movement during the Belle Époque; the latter’s role in organising the regionalist pavilions of the 1937 Exposition, internationalist support for the League of Nations,

importance in the interwar folklore movements, and problematic role under Vichy are all therefore referred to in passing. In all of this, Wright presents Charles-Brun as an intriguing figure (although this reader is left wondering about other Charles-Brun not encountered in these pages). The breadth and diversity of Charles-Brun's influences vindicates Wright's central contention that regionalist and federalist ideas permeated the entire French political spectrum. Charles-Brun prided himself on both the eclecticism of the FRF--the committee included republicans, Marxists, social Catholics, and Legitimists--and the eclecticism of his own personal political philosophy. Among his influences he counted Proudhon, Le Play, Comte, Maurras, Mistral, the "red *félibre*" Xavier de Ricard (who held an inclusive and internationalist concept of *latinité* sharply at odds with the exclusive ideas of Maurras), and the "*abbé démocrate*" Gayraud. Just as he remained in demand as a speaker at both the Universités Populaires and the Sillon's Institut Populaire (founded in response to the free-thinking Universités Populaires) so "Charles-Brun revelled in aligning the views of men who ostensibly had little in common" (p. 153). Explaining his regionalism to the conservative followers of Frédéric Le Play at the Société d'Économie Sociale, he pointed to concordances between Le Play and Proudhon, hailing both as influential precursors of regionalist thinking. In one of his many articles on regionalism he moved from a Barrèsian notion of the importance of the realities of "la terre et les morts" to ideas of individualism and international federalism antithetical to Barrès' understanding of regionalism. Charles-Brun's regionalism was thus eclectic and inclusive, embracing both mystique and politique, as Wright puts it.

It is Wright's achievement to make sense of this diversity and suggest that the apparent paradoxes in Charles-Brun's thought can be resolved. Firstly, Wright develops a wide-ranging argument about late nineteenth century thought, arguing that the idea of a turn away from the Enlightenment to irrationalism is mistaken. Thinkers such as Maurras and Charles-Brun should instead be appreciated as "post-rationalists." Both disliked *a priori* thinking, blaming it for the divisions and instability of nineteenth century France. Both could be described as positivists and both drew on Comte. For Charles-Brun, Comte held the key to a new method: What was necessary was to turn away from abstract ideas to an examination of the political and social realities. In Charles-Brun's view, Comte was correct to argue that effective reform was impossible in an age of abstract "metaphysical" principles. The rise of "post-rationalist" thought was a widespread phenomenon, reflected in the development of empirical political and social science. This dominant "post-rationalism" explains why Charles-Brun was drawn to the empirical social thought of Le Play, believing that Proudhon's federalist ideas needed to be grounded in social realities.

Wright's second major argument is that the praxis of regionalism must be examined. For Wright regionalism not only had a coherent praxis, but "this praxis was in fact the most distinctive and original aspect of regionalism" (p. 105). The chapters on praxis form the longest and perhaps strongest section of the book. Charles-Brun insisted that regionalism was a method rather than a system: those who criticise Charles-Brun for his failure to define a precise programme of regionalist reform are therefore wide of the mark. Charles-Brun was not interested in pressing a regionalist blueprint on the government, believing that the arbitrary imposition of regionalism from above was in direct contradiction of the regionalist principle. The only purpose of proposed maps of a regional France was to stimulate debate: it was on these grounds that Charles-Brun eventually published a set of regionalist proposals in 1912 in the *Petit Journal*. This explains the remarkably anodyne and bland nature of the FRF manifesto, designed to command support from the entire spectrum of regionalist opinion. In Charles-Brun's vision, the purpose of the FRF was to act as an agent of reconciliation and propaganda. Its mission was to popularise the cause of regionalism and build links with all groups of a regionalist nature. This also explains Charles-Brun's attachment to sentimental regionalism: his "deep personal interest in the literature of Mistral" (p. 71) was overshadowed by his appreciation of the role of the *félibrige* in raising consciousness of regional issues. Charles-Brun therefore saluted the *félibrige* as a precursor and chose to appropriate Mistral as a regionalist: in his book on Mistral he reused a passage from his own *Le Régionalisme*, replacing "*le régionalisme*" with "Mistral" to argue that Mistral was not locked in tradition, but only took from the past "tout ce qui est logique et vivant" (p.73).

Wright is even-handed enough to concede that there are criticisms to be made of Charles-Brun--for instance, his failure to provide effective leadership, exacerbated by his ill-health and his enforced absences from Paris. Nonetheless his defence of Charles-Brun and the FRF from contemporary and recent critics is robust. He argues that criticisms of the FRF for its lack of clarity and coherence and its reluctance or inability to play a significant political role spring from a failure to fully grasp the nature of the movement. Charles-Brun wanted the FRF to act as a forum for debate, promoting a cause that was above party and--as with several members of the secrétariat--he was not convinced that the movement should aspire to political activism. Wright clearly demonstrates that "the core regionalists were far from being *régionalistes régionalisants*"(p. 160), believing that regions should define

themselves in a process of “spontaneous regionalism”. The theory of “spontaneous regionalism” was a perfect illustration of Charles-Brun’s rejection of *a priori* reform and his belief that regionalism should effectively come from below. The operation of designated regional centres, which brought together the political, economic, and intellectual institutions, would result in the precise boundaries of the region defining themselves. The consequent debates over the zones of influence of differing regional centres would only help foster regional consciousness. Charles-Brun’s perceived timidity was in fact a realistic espousal of a gradualist approach to reform grounded in an unyielding commitment to the “post-rationalist praxis”. There are, however, hard questions to be asked. Though Wright hints that the growing acceptance of regionalism (for instance in the elections of 1910 over 400 deputies referred to regional reform) was problematic, I feel that he does not fully draw this out. It is not clear to what extent there was serious engagement with regionalism, let alone commitment to the regionalist cause. It would be instructive to have a more sustained consideration of the achievements of the FRF in their mission of influencing “enlightened opinion”.

There are also some problems raised by the figure of Charles-Brun himself. The sheer range of his activity and intellectual involvement is astonishing and Wright is careful to show his links to a range of movements--notably Sillon, the Universités Populaires, the Cercle du Luxembourg, and even moderate Catholic feminism. However it is possible to question Charles-Brun’s consistency or even his sincerity--his declared sympathy for syndicalism did not translate into any mention of syndicalism in his discussion of economic regionalism, and smacks rather of political opportunism, given that he expounded the merits of syndicalism when attempting to play a political role. Indeed, the issue of his unsuccessful foray into politics raises some awkward questions: whilst his cautious and conciliatory stance within the FRF is understandable, his failure to offer more than vague equivocations on regionalism and religion when standing for parliament is a different matter. Although there were socialists in the FRF (notably Charles Longuet and Eugène Poitevin, *secrétaire-adjoint* of the CGT) it is not clear that Charles-Brun himself actually “occupied a certain amount of socialist ‘political space’” despite his debts to Proudhon and unquestionable commitment to the cause of working-class education. Whilst the evidence presented convincingly demolishes the notion that Charles-Brun was a reactionary, it is worth considering the case that, despite his moderate republicanism, there were distinctly conservative aspects to his thought. Arguably his social Catholicism and organicist and corporatist beliefs pointed in a conservative direction.

Overall, however, there is no denying the strength of Wright’s book, in particular his persuasive argument that it is simply wrong-headed to identify regionalism with reaction. Wright convincingly argues that moderate republican regionalism, as practised by Charles-Brun, fitted into the wider movement for republican regeneration: its republican advocates saw it as a means to achieve a rejuvenated democratic France, a France that would enable the full development of the individual. Yet Charles-Brun’s achievement was not to build a regionalism of the left, but to show that regionalism was beyond party: his influence ensured that the FRF drew adherents from across the political spectrum and sought “to move discourse on from the dichotomy of revolution/counter-revolution” (p. 241). In his sharp analysis of this diverse movement (in the words of historian Thierry Gasnier, “un carrefour idéologique”), Wright provides an illuminating and original perspective.[1] Moreover, within this reinterpretation of regionalism Wright succeeds in opening up a series of wider questions, challenging us to rethink French political thought in the Belle Époque. This is a ground-breaking and important work that deserves a wide readership.

NOTES

[1] Thierry Gasnier, “Le local: une et divisible,” in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, vol. III, cited in Wright, p. 22.

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