"The Bitterness of Disappointed Expectations": Elie Halévy and European Socialism

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In 1934, the great liberal French historian of Britain, Elie Halévy, alluded to a paradox that caused him the "bitterness of disappointed expectations."¹ His expectations were for progressive social reform, and his bitterness arose from the fact that when such reform had been undertaken in the previous sixty years, it had emerged from conservative, rather than left-leaning, governments. When in power, socialist parties had proven, paradoxically, too "liberal" in their concern for individual rights to attempt economic management. Halévy argued that "the Labor leaders are men whose doctrine requires them to make the state stronger, and whose good British instinct is to make the state as weak as possible." They were exhibit A for Halévy's claim that "socialists believe in two extremely different things, perhaps contradictory; on the one hand, liberty, and on the other, organization. Between them they fall to the ground."² In 1934, the opposition between organization and liberty seemed irreconcilable to Halévy, but pessimism was not the only register of his thought. In sunnier times he had hoped for a productive fusion of state planning and personal freedom. Despite a deep distrust of nationalism and a liberal's ambivalence toward state

¹ Elie Halévy, "Socialism and the Problem of Democratic Parliamentarianism," in Era of Tyrannies (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 251. This was, itself, a re-articulation of an argument Halévy had put forward in his 1929 Rhodes Lectures.
² Ibid., 258. This echoes a claim he made in his course on European socialism, where he argued that anarchism and statism are the two foundational, and contradictory, tendencies at the origin of socialism. Elie Halévy, Histoire du socialisme européen (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 22.
power, Halévy had, in his youth, seen the tension between planning and liberty as productive, with the potential to lead to a more egalitarian, but still free, Republic. At his most sanguine, he had even dreamed of a fusion of republicanism and socialism that could draw upon the emotive power of patriotism to conquer religious intolerance.

At the end of his life, in the context of Hitler's rise to power, Halévy looked back to Bismarck's social insurance program and the British Liberals' National Insurance Act to argue that successful social reform had thus far been a top-down, statist, and, ironically, conservative phenomenon. Those members of working class parties who, by the 1930s, did favor strengthening the state – he pointed to Oswald Mosley as an example – fled socialist parties for fascism or corporatism. Whether socialist parties' refusal to strengthen the state marked the failure of reformist socialism or a successful growth of the liberal vision of individual rights was less an issue for Halévy than was the emerging capacity for authoritarian states to use the language and methods of socialism in pursuit of nationalist and anti-democratic ends. The tension between organization and freedom had torn socialism apart, leaving fascism on one side and impotence on the other.

One might expect a French liberal, historically situated between Guizot and neoliberalism, to revel in socialism's failure to overcome its central dilemma, but Halévy was quite serious about his feelings of disappointment. Although he premised all his beliefs on a fundamental commitment to rights, his view of politics included an incremental social reformism aimed at leveling access to, if not equalizing, the social playing field. Our expectations about French liberals are confounded in Halévy's case by the flexible boundaries between socialism and republicanism on one hand and republicanism and liberalism on

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3 Tony Judt has recently expanded on Halévy's insight, arguing that interwar socialist and labor parties assumed that managed economies could only arise after capitalism's collapse, driving out members like Mosley and Hendrik de Man, who favored state planning: Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 68.
the other, which defined the milieu of his youth. Born of an Orléanist family that included liberal Bonapartist Lucien Prévost-Paradol in its ranks, Halévy identified with the Republic but seems to have retained much of the suspicion of state power and appreciation for associational life that marked strains of Second Empire liberalism.4 Looking back at Halévy's life, from his 1934 disillusion with centralist socialism to his earlier engagements with social reform and state planning, we can witness the growth and eventual disappointment of his expectations for a liberal, socially-minded Republic.

It took no great perspicacity to express concern over the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s, but Halévy's emphasis on the statist tendency of socialism stretched back to the beginning of his intellectual career in the late nineteenth century, when his interest in the fusion of nationalism and socialism seems rather more prescient. Halévy's ability to see the totalitarian potential in a set of ideas that most people associate with revolutionary rejection of the state emerged from a clear-eyed assessment of the popular appeal of patriotic sentiments juxtaposed with the weakness of the internationalist and pacifist ideals of the socialist-leaning thinkers in his circle. As he put it late in his career, "national fanaticism is something far more formidable than class fanaticism."5 Halévy was no conservative, but he was a realist who saw clearly that national feeling and the logic of state power had a stronger and much more ominous appeal than well intentioned internationalism. If Halévy's liberal take on

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4 Sudhir Hazareesingh, From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Philip Nord, The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Because Hazareesingh focuses on ideology while Nord looks at the culture of discrete associations, their use of political language and their definitions of "liberal" and "republican" are somewhat at odds. Both focus, however, on a center Left that defined itself in opposition to legitimism, conservative elements of the Empire, and the radical Left of the Commune, precisely the milieu of Halévy's childhood.

socialism ended with his warnings that it was as likely as not to lead to authoritarianism, he would have been a Cassandra at best. Halévy’s liberalism was not, however, purely contemplative. He also lived his ideas, and his engagements in politics and especially in teaching gave him significant influence in French political culture.6

Halévy’s lifelong pedagogical engagement with social planning began with his decision in 1901 to accept a course at the Ecole des sciences politiques on the history of European socialism.7 His understanding of the topic emerged from three contexts, all of which are well documented in his personal correspondence. First, an ongoing conversation with Durkheimian sociologist and partisan of the cooperative movement Célestin Bouglé provided Halévy with a negative model of what he considered utopian reformist socialism. Second, his activism on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus made Halévy appreciate the power that patriotism could exercise over the masses while inclining him to be suspicious of socialist leaders, whose commitment to the Republic he questioned. Finally, a trip to Germany provided him with a working model for statist and nationalist socialism. I will discuss these influences in reverse chronological order, moving back from Halévy’s paradoxical reading of socialism toward his earliest engagement with social problems in the mid-1890s.

6 It is easy to criticize French liberalism for its apparent political impotence; while such a critique is valid in the realm of politics narrowly defined, French democrats’ profound emphasis on the role of education in shaping political views makes the pedagogical vocation of most liberals of the 1890s a kind of ersatz politics. In other words, their liberalism was as much enacted as professed. The late years of the Third Republic have been much maligned on numerous counts, but the Republic was a democracy in an era when representative government was growing scarce, and the teaching corps was one of the strongest, and in the interwar one of the last, institutional supports for liberal republicanism.

7 This course, which Halévy had intended to turn into a book, was published posthumously by his students as Halévy, Histoire du socialisme européen.
Halévy spent his youth in the upper strata of the French political and social world, at least in the highest reaches attainable by French Jews. His father Ludovic had been a librettist and playwright, and his illegitimate cousin was journalist and diplomat Lucien-Anatole Prévost-Paradol. His brother Daniel was a prominent Dreyfusard and writer, notably of *The End of the Notables*, and his childhood milieu included luminaries like Edgar Degas, Henri Poincaré, and Marcel Proust. Although the older generation of Halévys had been supporters of the liberal Empire, Elie, born with the Republic in 1870, was a democrat, if an elitist one. His closest intellectual relationships were with center-Left republicans, committed Dreyfusards who had sympathy for the poor but shied away from revolutionary language or aspirations. During his extended tours of England and Germany, Halévy kept up an active correspondence with many in his generation; measured by the volume of letters, his Ecole normale supérieure classmate Célestin Bouglé was his closest collaborator. The two worked together on Halévy's journal, the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, where Bouglé showed particular interest in using the "Questions pratiques" section to address social issues. They compared notes on socialist thinkers from across Europe, and they spurred each others' engagements in the Dreyfus Affair and the subsequent Popular University movement.

Although Halévy thought that his friend cut a quixotic figure, Bouglé's social thought was hardly out of step with the time. Bouglé was a proponent of consumers' cooperatives and philosophical solidarism, the classically Third Republican attempt to mediate the twin dilemmas of social reform and political stability on one hand and individual rights and social cohesion on the other. Bouglé developed his theory under the aegis of Durkheim's school but also endeavored to put his ideas into practice, thrice running for office and losing each contest.  

Halévy never fully approved of his friend's political vocation, arguing that Bouglé would inevitably be drawn into ideologically distasteful positions because of the exigencies of party politics and, in any event, that he was unelectable. Bouglé's larger political vision, based on his philosophy of solidarism, also struck Halévy as pie in the sky. Solidarism and consumer cooperatives addressed social problems that were being tackled by far more powerful forces that the Durkheimian school to which Bouglé belonged. Ever willing to be critical of his close friend, Halévy pointed out that even Jean Jaurès had the advantage over Bouglé, since "there exists, in France and in all the countries of Europe, an organized Socialist Party, while solidarism only exists in the heads of a few French professors. In this sense, and if your goal is to create a French solidarist party, you're more utopian than Jaurès." After reading Bouglé's book, Solidarisme, Halévy asked whether even Bouglé himself took the idea completely seriously.

Jaurès may have surpassed Bouglé in terms of political organization, but like solidarism, socialism was, in Halévy's mind, cut off from a true mass following, in this case by its internationalism. Both solidarism and internationalist socialism were, Halévy thought, doomed to fail in the real world where states could harness popular nationalist sentiments to top-down social legislation, subduing class conflict and buying social and political stability at the cost of individual rights. Although he must have disagreed with Halévy's assessment of solidarism, Bouglé shared his reservations about socialist internationalism. Their discussions were more than abstract musing, as in 1904 Jaurès and Jules Guesde would begin to unify French socialism under the banner of the Section française de l'internationale ouvrière (SFIO). Just before planning for the SFIO officially began, Halévy had argued that "internationalism is ill-defined and badly accommodated to the legislative demands of

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10 Ibid., 381.
11 Ibid., 388.
socialism; I'm convinced that right now patriotic sentiments are powerful and must be employed in the direction of civilization." Beyond their shared criticisms of Jaurès, Halévy and Bouglé collaborated closely on their readings of the continental socialist tradition, and Bouglé clearly provided Halévy with a resource for his own evolving understanding of social thought. After they had spent a contemporaneous year in Germany, the two bounced readings of Marx off each other in an era when he was not widely read in France.

The political baptism for Halévy, Bouglé, and their entire generation was of course the Dreyfus Affair, in which both men were heavily involved. Halévy helped draw Bouglé in and had a number of family connections to the Dreyfusard movement, including his brother Daniel, who had been one of Dreyfus' earliest and most ardent defenders. In his later years, Halévy would define his entire political outlook around the Affair, calling himself "not a socialist, but a liberal, in the anti-clerical, democratic, republican sense; to put it in a single word which was laden with meaning to me then, I was a Dreyfusard." Although there is much to say about Halévy's response to the Affair, little of it is relevant here. There is no question, however, that he and his predominantly Jewish circle were profoundly disturbed by the capacity of the anti-Semitic right to rally large segments of the population to their side under the banner of patriotism. The obvious bulwark against anti-republican forces, the growing socialist movement caused Halévy further concern because of its initial vacillations in the face of a conflict that could be construed as pitting the middle classes against French Jews, a group easily equated with international capitalism.

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12 Ibid., 350. Original emphasis.
13 It is telling that Halévy's liberalism is here expressed not as an ideology or a political party position but as a mode of action in pursuit of social justice. The refrain of "I am not a socialist" was longstanding with Halévy, indicative of the fact that his political positions were often far enough left to require clarification. Ibid., 176, 333, 372.
14 A concern that took on a disturbingly prescient tone when he foresaw a fusion of Christian and aristocratic dislike of Jews with socialist anti-
Jaurès, of course, led the socialists to the defense of the Republic, but Halévy remained restless at the idea that the Republic might rely on a party he thought untrustworthy and a man whose mind he respected but whom he increasingly came to see as a demagogue. Even when Jaurès defended the Republic, Halévy complained to Bouglé, he did so in an ambivalent idiom that always left open the possibility of socialist revolution. Yet, as Halévy recognized, republicans had relied upon the support of the socialists at the height of the Affair and might still need their help. In 1907 he wrote to Bouglé, wondering whether the radicals could afford to "throw Jaurès overboard without perishing." If Bouglé's utopian solidarism provided a negative model for socialism and the Dreyfus Affair exposed the Janus face of the French Socialist Party – as a defender of the Republic suffused with anti-democratic, revolutionary rhetoric – central Europe presented Halévy with a model for real existing social planning, and it was not one that he admired. Halévy traveled to Germany in 1895, where he paid particular attention to the expansion of the state into society that had begun under Bismarck. Four decades before he expressed his "bitterness of disappointed expectations," Halévy wrote to his father describing depressingly authoritarian politics in Germany: "René Berthelot . . . [hopes] that the German youth is entirely socialist, but I have a hard time seeing where he is coming from. The youth here is, for the most part, realist, Bismarckian, Christian socialist (cristlich-sozial), and anti-Semitic." The government's organization of industry and society paralleled, to Halévy's mind, the lack of a progressive socialist youth movement in Germany. In a series of

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capitalism. It is hard not to hear echoes of both Wilhelmine Germany and Karl Lueger's Vienna in Halévy's refrain. Ibid., 240.

Ibid., 373.

Ibid., 372-3. Halévy showed particular concern over Jaurès' failure to distance himself from Gustave Hervé, a pacifist who advocated soldiers' strikes.

Ibid., 390.

Ibid., 163.

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letters to Bouglé written ten years after his trip in February 1904, Halévy charted the growing socialization of Germany, arguing that "from all points of view, of the bosses, the workers, and the bureaucracy, Germany is visibly socializing, in that from each of these points of view, her institutions are tending to become, preponderantly, socialist." Comparing Germany to France, he claimed that "the French are only good at two things, being governed and arguing over doctrines . . . but for true socialization, for practical and methodical organization, one has to admire Germany and the extraordinary military, bureaucratic, and corporate edifice she is in the process of building."19 Drawing on his German experience in his Ecole des sciences politiques course, Halévy would identify the Prussian army and its attendant bureaucracy as the origin of the interventionist German state, tightly linking Germany's social planning to the prevalent French image of authoritarian and militaristic Prussian culture.20 He saw Bismarck's social legislation, then, as a further expansion of the bureaucracy – in a sense, a militarization of society – at the expense of any fundamental redistribution of power or expansion of liberties.

The difficult lesson that Halévy learned from his rejection of Bouglé's utopian solidarism, from his role in the Dreyfus Affair, and most of all from his observation of Germany was the strength of nationalism. Although he recognized the unsavory potential for nationalist socialism from his time in Germany, it took Halévy several years entirely to reject the normative model of state socialism. This was, I suspect, because his ultimate vision of a European socialism divided into two great currents – anarchist utopian socialism and potentially authoritarian state-sponsored socialism – took time to develop. He thought that socialism was likely to end up fused with authoritarianism but hoped otherwise. Unwilling to give up on what he saw as the positive aspects of the socialist project, Halévy wondered if state

19 Ibid., 351-2.
20 Halévy, Histoire du socialisme européen, 163.
socialism could be grafted onto the republican project. In the earlier years of his intellectual engagement with socialism just after the Dreyfus Affair, Halévy sounded optimistic about the chances that republicans could guide popular patriotism into productive channels:

Patriotism is a sentiment analogous to family bonds, more abstract in its object and thus more amenable to reasoned use. I don't want to praise or denigrate patriotism, the problem is simply to control its usage. If the Catholics, who have no country on this earth, and who all share one country in the sky, can succeed in using patriotism, who can't follow their lead? . . . It will take perhaps ten more years before socialism will become nationalist against an international coalition of soldiers and priests.

Flush from the success of Dreyfusard forces who rallied workers and intellectuals to the side of the Republic, Halévy looked forward to a day when moderate, reformist, parliamentary socialism would merge with left-liberalism. Given his continuing discussions with Bouglé on the topic of solidarism and Bouglé's intentions to run for office, in his most upbeat moments, he may have seen his friend as a model for the patriotic socialists of the future. Halévy's hopes for the future proved, in any event, to be a placid interstice sandwiched between his fears of statist social organization.

The onset of the First World War triggered Halévy's return to the gloomy assessment of socialism's prospects that had typified his days in Germany. The massive expansion of wartime

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21 Cheryl Welch rightly points out that Halévy's interest in economic redistribution emerged more from his republican heritage than from his liberalism and that he never came to a fully satisfying fusion of economic equality and political liberty.


23 Although Halévy himself saw his positive evaluation of reformist socialism during the belle époque as emerging around 1910 from his observations of England, he was clearly well disposed toward reformist socialism for much of the first decade of the twentieth century. See Myrna Chase, *Elie Halévy, an Intellectual Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 130-1.
governments and, in particular, government intervention in the economy and the labor market reminded Halévy of Wilhelmine Germany, and he suggested to his co-editor at the Revue de métaphysique et de morale, Xavier Léon, as early as 1915, that "the influence that the war could have on the future of socialism merits study. Probably unfavorable to the progress of liberal forms of socialism (syndicalism etc.) it considerably re-enforces, on the contrary, state socialism." A year into the war, Halévy's hopeful vision of a patriotically grounded socialism was skewered on the horns of his classic dilemma, torn between the need for state planning and the desire for individual liberties. His fear that military conflict would lead to the regimentation of society also brought him to the pessimistic, though accurate, prediction that the war would last twenty-five years, interrupted only by false peaces. In both France and Germany, Halévy saw a return to the xenophobic nationalism of the Dreyfus Affair, and though he had no patience for pacifists, he decried the "overexcitement" of anti-German propaganda and laid heavy emphasis on the internationalism of scholarship in a time of growing nationalism. Over and over in his letters, he describes himself as increasingly opposed to nationalism, scandalized by the "narrow" nationalism of the postwar government, and committed to the rapid reestablishment of normal intellectual relations with Germany.

Despite Halévy's newfound appreciation for the virtues of internationalism, he did not turn to socialism for political solace, as one might have expected. Although he had once critically foregrounded the internationalist impulse in Jaurès's politics, 1918 was a different world from 1905, and for Halévy, socialism now meant massive state intervention in the economic, intellectual, and social spheres; no longer could it lead to the internationalism of Jaurès or even of Marx. Describing a continent-wide tendency toward corporatism, propaganda, and censorship during the war, Halévy argued that "postwar

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24 Halévy, Elie Halévy Correspondance, (1891-1937), 487.
25 Ibid., 593, 597, 600.
socialism derives much more from this wartime regime than from Marxist doctrine. The paradox of postwar socialism is that its recruits often come to it out of hatred and disgust for war, while it offers them a program consisting in the prolongation of the wartime regime in time of peace. If socialism had been born with the split personalities of reformism and authoritarianism, anarchism and statism, it seemed clear in the interwar period which face had won out. In his "The World Crisis of 1914-1918," Halévy claimed that "the Russian Revolution acted as a solvent of imperialism for the benefit not so much of communism . . . as of nationality," a disturbing vision for a scholar increasingly angered by the rising tide of nationalist sentiment.

Halévy's vision of interwar Europe was dystopian: Bismarck's Prussia writ large, filled with politically complacent, nationalist, and anti-Semitic populations governed by authoritarian, paternalist states. It was "socialist" in the special sense of expanding state power, but it was illiberal, nationalist, and authoritarian. Europe was typified, as he put it, by "a new philosophy bursting forth; the philosophy of race war – of nationalism (to employ a fashionable word, even though it is etymologically inadequate to the idea). And modern Germany is particularly responsible for this philosophy." Little in the interwar period filled with Stalins, Mussolinis, and Hitlers would have given Halévy reason to think otherwise, and he certainly does not seem to have altered his views significantly by the 1934 speech that opened this paper.

This is hardly an upbeat note on which to conclude, especially when my subject is a thinker whom I find not only congenial but, taken as a whole, hardly an inveterate pessimist. In fact, the war and the Russian Revolution did not spell the end of Halévy's vision of a fusion of reformist social planning with liberal principles. Keeping in mind that, for him, socialism was

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26 Elie Halévy, "Era of Tyrannies," in Era of Tyrannies, 266. See also Halévy, Elie Halévy Correspondance, (1891-1937), 564.
27 Quoted in Chase, 193.
28 Halévy, Elie Halévy Correspondance, (1891-1937), 593.
any significant state planning of the economy, especially when it
was directed toward increasing equality of distribution or of life-
chances, I suspect that Halévy would have found the postwar
European social-democratic consensus to have been an
acceptable, if imperfect, fusion of his liberal commitments and
his socialist sympathies had he lived long enough to see it.