

Koenig on Rignol (2014)

Rignol, Loïc. *Les Hiéroglyphes de la Nature: le socialisme scientifique en France dans le premier XIXe siècle*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2014. Pp. 1141. ISBN: 978-2-84066-622-6

Raphael Koenig, Harvard University

Loïc Rignol's comprehensive study of French socialist thinkers from the first half of the nineteenth century is a monumental work of scholarship, by its sheer size (763 pages of text and 269 pages of notes) and the impressive range of topics, authors, and primary texts it covers. The premises of this book are simple, but convincing: the rich and complex thought of the likes of Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Hugues-Félicité Robert de Lamennais, among many others, is too often brushed aside as "utopian," along the lines of Friedrich Engels's distinction between "scientific socialism" (Karl Marx's historical materialism) and their so-called "utopian socialism." However, according to Rignol our perception of these authors labors under a fundamental misconception since these thinkers tried to achieve the exact opposite of what Engels described, and did not self-identify as utopian. For them, only a totalizing philosophical system based on sound *scientific* principles would be in a position to improve durably the structures of human societies, hence the crucial importance of epistemological reflection as a necessary first step towards the implementation of large-scale sociopolitical changes. Polemically reclaiming the term of "scientific socialism" to describe this phenomenon, Rignol attempts to set the record straight by providing insights into the multiple links between the respective philosophical systems of these authors and the relevant branches of nineteenth-century scientific thought.

The first part of the book, entitled "Un nouvel ordre du temps," examines the way in which these French socialist thinkers' understanding of historical "progress" dictated their respective programs of political and religious change. The second part, entitled "Archéologie de la science sociale," which focuses on Fourier, Saint-Simon, and their followers, revolves around what Rignol describes as "bio-socialisme" (a notion based on Foucault's "biopolitique"), a form of socialist holism based on the perceived interdependence of the human body, the political body, and the "cosmological" body of the universe. The third part focuses more specifically on questions related to the rise of the nineteenth-century "sciences de l'Homme": anthropology, phrenology, and history. Even though this leads to a certain number of repetitions, this thematic structure is generally extremely useful to delineate the various areas of scientific inquiry that informed these thinkers' epistemological thought.

As thoroughly researched as this study might be, *Les Hiéroglyphes de la Nature* also contains methodological flaws. First of all, the lack of historical contextualization is surprising for a work stemming from a doctoral thesis in History. With some rare exceptions, none of the authors quoted by Rignol are historically situated: we are told virtually nothing about who they were, what their social background was, with what political movement(s) they were affiliated, in what journal(s) they were publishing their works, or the sociological makeup of their readership or followers. The relative scarcity of historiographical reflection is equally surprising. Even though Rignol mentions a number of other scholars of nineteenth-century France in the notes, he generally abstains from discussing their work, even when their conclusions might confirm some of his own. Moreover, as Rignol rarely resorts to analyses borrowed from the field of the history of science, nineteenth-century French socialists' claims at scientificity often tend to be taken at face value rather than critically examined.

These points notwithstanding, Rignol's comprehensive study remains an excellent point of reference thanks to its impressive erudition, clear and balanced thematic structure, and extremely useful index, not to mention Rignol's elegant writing style, which avoids the pitfalls of dry academic jargon and makes for an enjoyable reading experience. Any scholar working on French nineteenth-century thought, from literature, medicine, biology, and astronomy to political or historical science will benefit from reading the relevant chapters of this book, whose fresh insights into major (Fourier, Saint-Simon, Proudhon) or lesser-known (Ernest Cœruderoy, Alphonse Esquiros, l'abbé Chatel) French socialist thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century could also shed new light on the thought of much more "mainstream" figures such as Jules Michelet, Victor Hugo, or even Honoré de Balzac. The range and originality of primary sources studied by Rignol, including rare printed documents and manuscripts from the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, is remarkable, and one can only hope that this study will help attract more attention to these materials.

Volume: 44.3-4

Year:

- 2016

