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**Judith F. Stone**. *Sons of the Revolution: Radical Democrats in France, 1862-1914.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. xii + 434 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2020-0.

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**Dilemmas of Radical Democracy**

Quotable cliches about the French Radical Socialist Party abound; "neither radical or socialist," the party had its "heart on the left and its pocketbook on the right." Such quips conceal serious issues requiring careful analysis. Pre-World War I Europeans rightly regarded the Radical Socialist-led French Republic as a bold experiment in democracy. Witty squibs minimize Radical Socialists' efforts to establish a democratic consensus–and so the magnitude of their failure. France was the most democratic country in Europe, yet in 1914 French democrats were profoundly dissatisfied with their democracy. Why? Judith Stone shows how biography can be used to address large issues of political culture and identity and contributes to answering this question.

Concentrating on the radical democratic current within French Radical Socialism, Stone focuses her important study of the pre-war Radical Socialists on Camille Pelletan, the most prominent member of the party's left wing, a true "son of the revolution." His father, Eugene, was a genuine "forty-eighter." In the 1860s Eugene was charged with violating imperial press laws and served a short time in prison. In the 1870s Eugene was a founder of the moderate republic and supported his son's rise in republican ranks, although Camille moved quickly to his father's left, providing sympathetic criticism to a Communard rising his father condemned. Through his father's influence Camille became a member of Victor Hugo's sizeable coterie and there made his lifelong friendships.

For Camille Pelletan, the 1860s and 1870s remained the heroic period when issues were clear and the enemy well defined. Like other leading Radical Socialists, such as his friend and patron, Georges Clemenceau, Pelletan emerged from these decades of struggle a thoroughgoing anti-clerical, a staunch constitutional revisionist, and an opponent of special privilege. Pelletan sought to install loyal republicans in every branch of the state apparatus from the post office to the admiralty. By 1881, again like other prominent Radical Socialists, he had become a successful journalist with an electoral stronghold in the south, in the second circonscription of Aix-en-Provence, a rural region dotted with small towns caught between inland decline and coastal development. Although more Parisian than Provencal, Pelletan's fondness for liquor and bar-room conversation, his disheveled appearance, and his unshakable republicanism made him the favorite of an electorate of fishermen, wine growers, and industrial workers. Despite his carousing, he was a hard worker whose informed and witty reports from the Budget Committee of the Chamber of Deputies attracted an audience. His strengths and weaknesses were those of the radical democracy originating in the French Revolution, an emphasis on individual and nation and a suspicion of all intermediaries between them.

In the age of Cecil Rhodes, Eugene Schneider, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Pelletan's ideal of citizenship was Jacobin. The democracy that he and Clemenceau had envisioned in the 1860s and 1870s was more than a procedure for settling political disputes and pronouncing authoritatively on state policy, it was a full-blown social identity. Democracy, its French advocates argued, would intensify feelings of national identity and moral solidarity and generate a sense of shared human destiny and common enterprise. From this assumption sprang French workers' perennial belief that a republic necessarily would be "democratic and social." No republic would tolerate grave disparities between rich and poor, religious bigotry, or unequal access to education. In such a public arena, men of irreproachable character inspired by a commitment to the common good, true republicans, would arise. In power, republicans would create institutions to foster a shared identity. To this end, radicals promoted the celebration of Bastille Day and the commemoration of the Centennial of the French Revolution.

Such a perspective explains the Radical Socialists' concentration on education and the centrality of their

anti-clericalism. Universal secular public education would instill a sense of national identity and republican solidarity. Catholicism was the major enemy not only because it rejected the republic, but because it championed a moral identity that undermined the centrality of the nation. Socialism could be tolerated, but not internationalism. To construct a democratic identity, Radical Socialists used dangerous materials. For radical democrats such as Michelet and Hugo, so for Pelletan, France was not just one member of a world of nations but *la grande nation*, the redeemer nation whose precedence was unquestioned. In school, republican teachers taught that French national identity was based on the inevitable working out of long-term geographic and cultural processes. In their textbooks, French students would find that, already in the early fifteenth century, Joan of Arc: "knew that France had existed for a long time."[1] To the extent that French identity was attributed to processes other than democratic involvement and shared rights, it was possible to justify the imposition of a standardized French culture on Alsatians, Basques, and Bretons and to demand the annexation of the Rhineland, as well as to question whether some groups, such as French Jews could ever be truly assimilated. Radical Socialists did not follow the path the whole way, but, as Stone points out, they bear great responsibility for its general direction.

The turning point in Pelletan's political evolution and, arguably, in the history of Radical Socialism, was the Boulanger crisis of 1887-89. Those Radicals most attracted by General Georges Boulanger's demand for revisions of an undemocratic constitution and his appeal to the streets, joined his cause. Pelletan, along with the majority of Radical Socialists, resisted the call and became permanently sceptical of anything smacking of direct democracy and street action. The Boulanger crisis, for Camille Pelletan's generation of radicals, like Louis-Napoleon's presidential victory in 1848 for his father's generation, revealed the disenchanting truth that democracies do not always support democracy. The Radical Socialists' failing trust in popular action was transmuted into a fierce determination to construct a republic oriented exclusively towards elections and parliamentary debates. Where the Jacobins had cooperated in the mobilization of the Parisian masses in the streets to pressure elected assemblies, in the post-Boulanger world, the Radicals would use assemblies against popular tribunes. Ironically, the Radical Socialists, the earliest critics of parliamentarianism, became its most skilled practitioners.

Shorn of mass mobilizations and popular pressure, however, French democracy was unable to rejuvenate itself. Decades of discussion had not persuaded even a foremost democrat like Pelletan to fight vigorously for women's suffrage. Stone ably captures the ambivalence of a position that allowed Pelletan to vote for women's suffrage, but never generated the moral conviction necessary to fight for it. He acknowledged that, once educated in public schools and freed from clerical influence, women as individuals possessed the rationality necessary for citizenship, but women, as mothers, necessarily played a limited role in public life. Publicly supporting women's suffrage, Pelletan also complained that feminine devotion to their priests prevented women from fully following their husband's guidance. Just as important, negotiations were unsuccessful in maintaining harmonious industrial relations between the government and its workers. During his time as navy minister in the Combes government between 1902 and 1904, Pelletan instituted the eight-hour day and encouraged workers to unionize while insisting that strike activity was a threat to the republic.

Frightened by the demagoguery of the Boulanger era and determined to confine democratic debate to electoral contests and parliamentary sessions, Radical Socialists failed to see that public protest was an intrinsic part of democratic politics, gestures equivalent to raising the voice or rapping the table on the part of those sections of the population too poor or uneducated to participate in public discussions. Focused on constructing the institutions of national consensus, they slighted the primary democratic task of integrating emergent social and political groups into the democratic state. Radical Socialists' efforts at tying workers to the state foundered on their failure to extend concrete benefits of state membership to white-collar and blue-collar workers. In 1914, French democracy lagged behind the German Empire, the UK, and even Austria-Hungary in the social services provided to its working classes. A weakness of the book is its failure to discuss the old age insurance bill, the linchpin of Radical Socialist reforms. Since this was the topic of Stone's first book such an omission is perhaps understandable, but a discussion of their ineffective record of social reforms still seems necessary for a fair assessment of the Radical Socialist's accomplishments–or rather their lack of accomplishments. The insurance plan is symbolic: Radical Socialists had enough resolution to pass an old age insurance plan in 1911, but too little to prevent it from being emasculated by bureaucrats and judges.

Stone portrays the Radical Socialists as falling before an onslaught of conservative cultural criticism launched in the new music halls and leisure institutions catering

to the new class of white-collar workers. Here Stone is not entirely persuasive. True, late nineteenth- century conservatives did seize control of popular cultural institutions and used them to discredit the democratic vision of the artisanal and agricultural world whose hero was Camille Pelletan. But truly to understand the effectiveness of the conservative cultural offensive, more attention must be paid to its content than to its location. The reactionary cultural offensive of the late nineteenth-century was a European-wide phenomenon whose influence persists. Elite audiences knew that reason and science were under attack and that the mystical, the irrational, the unconscious, were all the rage and that these trends were penetrating slowly and indirectly to popular audiences. The conservative cultural offensive of the turn of the century was potent, not because it was launched from music halls and cafes, but because it effectively criticized the central intellectual tenets of a French democracy which failed to deliver on its promises. Its vaunted universalism failed when confronted with women's issues, sectarian squabbling, and class differences. Rationalist efforts to build a democratic identity promoted a chauvinistic nationalism with anti-democratic implications.

By their concentration on parliamentarianism and national identity, Radical Socialists allowed other groups to represent the interests of new political constituencies, using the tactics of mass movements. By the 1900s devoted young middle-class recruits, men like the young Camille Pelletan, no longer flocked to the Radical Socialist standard, but to the ranks of either the socialists or the nationalists. Both nationalists and socialists claimed to champion the public good, but proclaimed boldly that this goal could only be reached by mobilizing particular groups and special interests to win concessions from the state. Socialists who preached working-class unity at least based their doctrine on the very real social solidarity of small workshops and cohesive working class neighborhoods. Nationalists based their appeal on identity with an experience in the army shared by many Frenchmen, with membership in the Catholic community, and with hard-pressed neighborhood shopkeepers. The Catholic Church made a greater effort to recruit women to political causes than either secular nationalists or socialists.

Of course, the claims of nationalism and socialism were extravagant. French workers did not form a coherent group that marked off the world of work from everything else. French workers' leisure time was spent among fellow artisans, shop-floor friends, or neighbors; and they remained suspicious of white-collar workers, as well as of outsiders, such as rural or foreign laborers. And the links between the French Catholic church and conservative agricultural regions and the army were newly forged; many in both communities remembered that the nation and its army had been the historic enemies of Catholic universalism and regional identity. Nonetheless, nationalism and socialism appealed to artisanal cliques, parishes, and military cadres based on ongoing loyalties which, striving to obtain recognition from the French state to insure their vital interests, could be co-opted for larger political purposes.

The contentious maneuverings and communal struggles in pre-1914 France were not the democratic regime for which Radical Socialists had hoped. In the person of Camille Pelletan, Judith Stone masterfully captures their growing despair. As their urban constituents departed to the socialists and nationalists, Radical Socialists found themselves rapidly becoming themselves a representative of the only constituency remaining loyal to them, the hard-pressed southern peasantry. Although Stone's study does not give us a panoramic view of the Radical Socialist dilemma, by examining a single important case, she gives us extremely valuable evidence about many of its aspects. Towards the end of his life, in 1913, Camille Pelletan bared his soul to the Radical Socialist Congress: "Did we struggle so long to arrive here? ... How great our lassitude ... our disgrace ... our humiliation ... our treason, if ... we ... permit [our cause] to be destroyed by a sort of unconsciousness, by a weakness ... by the habits of government domestication ... by a deadly inability to act ... by the failure to remain true to ourselves ... by a paralysis of human will!" (p. 384). His crisis represented the failure of a particular vision of democracy. Unfortunately, like the majority of Radical Socialists, Pelletan believed passionately that it was the only one.

Notes:

[1]. Cited in Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945*. (Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 3.

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