

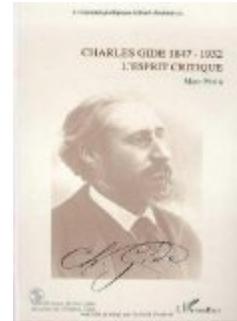
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marc Penin. *Charles Gide 1847-1932: L'esprit critique*. Paris: l'Harmattan, 1998. 347 pp. 150 FF (cloth), ISBN 978-2-7384-6072-1.

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Inside the Reformers Galaxy

Why on earth am I reviewing Marc Penin's book for a list devoted to urban history, and whose audience is mainly across the water from France? What does this biography of Charles Gide have to do with the urban sphere? It is definitely not because Charles Gide is the uncle of the writer Andre Gide, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1947. So why?

Is it because Charles Gide, who taught political economy in the Law Faculties of Bordeaux, Montpellier and Paris, was the famous author of the *Principes d'economie politique*, which were re-edited twenty-six times while he was alive? Or because he was among the few French economists who wished to introduce more mathematics in the field of economy, when the view of economy as a branch of moral philosophy was overwhelmingly dominant? Or because he was fighting against the liberal school, especially in the columns of *Revue d'economie politique* he created in 1887? Is it because Charles Gide was a driving force in the cooperative movement, in which he took part from 1885 onwards? Gide was indeed one of the major figures of that movement from 1900, not as a leader or thinker, but as an untiring proselytizer, writing hundreds of pieces to spread and celebrate the ideal of co-ops. After 1900, Gide also gave much energy to the Alliance Cooperative Internationale (International cooperative League) Is it because, since the moment he arrived in Paris in 1898, he took part in some of the major events of the intellectual sphere, such as the movement for Universites Populaires born in the aftermath of the Affaire Dreyfus (People Universities), the establishment

of the School for Advanced Social Studies (1900) or the Union pour la Verite (League for Truth) that Paul Desjardins had created in 1892? Gide also was interested in major reformer enterprises like the Alliance d'Hygiene Sociale (Social Hygiene League, created in 1905), and was the reporter of the social economy exhibition of the Paris World Fair of 1900. Is it because Charles Gide was vice-president of the French garden city association that the ubiquitous George Benoit-Levy created in 1904? Charles Gide did write some pieces on the garden city, where he found a possible illustration of his cooperative ideals, and a reflection of his fundamental belief in association as THE means for mankind to act on its destiny. Is it because Gide had strong links with the Social Christian movement, and turned his protestant education to devote many other writings to the journals of the movement? Is it because of his growing involvement and interest in expertise, with his participation to several parliamentary or governmental committees at the turn of the century, then with his post-World War I interest for standardisation or management?

It is for all those reasons, though none of these would be enough for H-Urban readers. It is because this biography of Charles Gide is a way to dive into all the commitments and links of one of these men who were at the crossroads of progressive movements in France at the turn of last century. Some of these movements were important for urban reform, as the Alliance d'Hygiene Sociale, but it is most important not to cut this urban side from all the other activities of these reformers. I would

like to suggest that the study of this sphere of reformers is especially alive in France now, especially from its urban side. Donatella Calabi recently gave us a portrait of one reformer, the urban historian Marcel Poete[1] Susanna Magri depicted the networks of the housing movement,[2] the last issue of the journal *Geneses* (N. 28, Sept., 1997) contained many papers on philanthropic societies of the nineteenth century, and Christian Topalov should soon publish his *Laboratoires du nouveau siecle* that will gather many papers on different societies and institutions.

However, Marc Penin's book is much more a book about Charles Gide than about the reformers' sphere. Thus, when Penin alludes to the interest Gide pays to the Musée Social, he does not even mention Janet Horne's works or other bibliographical pieces. This prevents him from bringing more acuteness to his portrait of Gide. This book would surely have been enhanced, if Gide were compared to the values and behaviours of some other reformer figures. Nevertheless, the piece is still a necessary reading for all those who want to dive into the networks or reform in France, precisely because Gide was a member of so many of them.

Last but not least, some of the last words of Gide de-

serve our admiration. Or at least mine. A few days before he died, Charles Gide wrote to a friend "The burial will take place in Nîmes. There will be no reception, no visitors book at rue Descamps in Paris. In Nîmes as well, flowers, speeches, delegations and messages are excluded. Of course, I can't prevent from coming those people who think it is their duty to assist. But I must say I won't be more or less grateful to those who won't be there. I don't place any value on those external manifestations of friendship." No flowers, no festschrift. Any academic who can write this sure does appeal to me.

Notes:

[1]. *Parigi anni venti. Marcel Poete e le origini della storia urbana*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1997.

[2]. *Les laboratoires de la reforme de l'habitation populaire en France. De la societe francaise des habitations a bon marche a la section d'hygiene urbaine et rurale du Musée Social 1889-1909*, Ministère de l'Équipement, 1995.

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