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# Restocking the Storehouse of Democratic Ideas: Pierre Rosanvallon at the Collège de France (2002-2018)

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## 7 Restocking the Storehouse of Democratic Ideas

Pierre Rosanvallon

at the Collège de France (2002-2018)\*

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*Alain Chatriot*

“I can recognize myself quite well in one of the more famous expressions of this author [Edgar Quinet] of *The Revolution*: ‘French democracy has exhausted its storehouse of ideas, which has to be stocked up again.’ I eagerly adopt Quinet’s program myself, and I feel myself close to his concern to help prepare for the future by rooting reflection on the present in the comprehension of the ordeals of the past.”

*(Rosanvallon 2006a: 34)*

Such were Pierre Rosanvallon’s words on March 28, 2002 during his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. Beyond the reference to a former member of the illustrious institution, he offered a clear summary of his research and teaching program. A program that he largely completed in his almost two decades at the College de France. We propose here to explore this period of Pierre Rosanvallon’s intellectual production, since it is undoubtedly the part which has been the least studied in examinations of his work (Verdo 2002; Jainchill/Moyn 2004; Godmer/Smadja 2011a).

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\* This article was translated from the original French by Stephen W. Sawyer.

Without a doubt, the four volumes (the “tetralogy”) published between 2006 and 2015 (Rosanvallon 2006b, 2008b, 2011b, 2015a) have enjoyed a wide reception, but they have not necessarily been placed within the perspective of the Rosanvallon’s previous work and in particular his “trilogy” on modern French democracy (Rosanvallon 1992, 1998, 2000). Moreover, while they sat at the center of his intellectual production they do not in themselves sufficiently capture the entirety of his engagements during this period. The conference “La démocratie en travail” held at Cerisy in September 2014 (Al Matary/Guénard 2015) provided a moment of reflection on this larger body of work, but it seems to me that one may usefully complement this study by retracing the construction of his oeuvre since his entrance into the Collège de France. Furthermore, it seems that this moment was for Rosanvallon, first, the culmination of a reflection on the history of French democracy; second a period for the development of a new approach to a theory of democracy, which gave rise to the publication of the tetralogy; and, finally, a period of civic engagement pursued in a variety of forms. We seek here to explore this path and thus to provide some insights for interpreting Rosanvallon’s work.

## **THE PERSISTENCE OF AN INTELLECTUAL PROJECT**

Several texts have already been published on the intellectual trajectory of Pierre Rosanvallon before his entry into the Collège de France (Gaubert 2009; Rosanvallon 1995b; Rosanvallon 2015b). Moreover, Pierre Rosanvallon has also provided his own interpretation of his trajectory in the 2017 and 2018 lectures at the Collège de France, where he outlined his perspective on the intellectual history of the period 1968-2018 (Rosanvallon 2018c). This was not an entirely new enterprise for him, for already in 2002, his inaugural lecture testified to the pursuit of a particular form of political history, defined as a “conceptual history of the political,” which he had explained previously and illustrated in his books (Rosanvallon 1986, 1995a, 1996a, 2001b).

Responding to more “traditional” approaches centered on the history of political life, he clarified his method and object of study:

“In speaking of ‘the political’ as a noun, I thus mean as much a modality of existence of life in common as a form of collective action that is implicitly distinct from the functioning of politics. To refer to ‘the political’ rather than to ‘politics’ is to speak of power and law, state and nation, equality and justice, identity and difference, citizenship and civility – in sum, of everything that constitutes political life beyond the immediate field of partisan competition

for political power, everyday governmental action, and the ordinary function of institutions.” (Rosanvallon 2006a: 36)

At the same time, he insisted on the importance of a historical approach for understanding contemporary political questions:

“Such a conception of the political makes a historical approach the condition of its thorough study. [...] It has been my ambition, therefore, to rethink democracy by following the thread of its history as it has been spun. But note that is not simply a matter of saying that democracy *has* a history. More radically, one must see that democracy *is* a history. It has been a work irreducibly involving exploration and experimentation, in its attempts to understand and elaborate itself.” (Ibid: 38, original emphasis)

It would seem, however, that Rosanvallon’s methodological preoccupations nonetheless remained secondary to his ambition to study key political problems. He expressed this idea clearly in an interview in 2011:

“I am often asked to more thoroughly formalize ‘my method.’ This would no doubt be an important thing to do if I wanted to serve as the head of a school. It seems to me that the real problem in the social sciences is writing books about social facts. Of course, there are methodological requirements that I try to adhere to. But each book to be written requires a new research investment and not just a recipe that must be applied. It is clear that researchers who are content to ‘apply’ a given conceptualization are not those who are rebuilding a field of research.” (Gauger/Smadja 2011b: 193-194)

Within this framework, the first two years of courses were dedicated to an exploration of the role of intermediary bodies in democracy. It must be noted that the book that emerged from these lectures *The Demands of Liberty/Le Modèle politique français* (Rosanvallon 2004) constituted the companion volume to the history of the state in France that he had published more than a decade earlier (Rosanvallon 1990). Moreover, the two books had the same “open-ended” character (Rosanvallon 2007: 9). At the end of his introduction – which was not translated in the English edition – the author explains how the volume completed his previous work:

“In undertaking this research, the results of which are presented here, I have tried to give an answer to questions that I have been asking since the publication of *Pour une nouvelle culture politique* [Rosanvallon/Viveret 1977] and with which I was confronted anew while writing *L’État en France*. A reflection on the relevance of the notion of a ‘French exception’

also underpinned the two volumes dedicated to the singularity of French liberalism: *Le Moment Guizot* and *La Monarchie impossible*. With the trilogy more recently dedicated to the history of French democracy (*Le Sacre du citoyen*; *Le Peuple introuvable*; *La Démocratie inachevée*), this volume completes a whole series of works that had the ambition of presenting an overall framework for understanding the French model, situating it in a more general history of democratic modernity.” (Rosanvallon 2004: 19)

*The Demands of Liberty* could also be situated in the continuation of subjects that had been previously explored: the place of trade unionism in France (Rosanvallon 1988), the relationship to old regime corporations (Rosanvallon 1989) and the complex and difficult path toward the recognition of political parties (Rosanvallon 1996b). More generally, the book developed an idea that was already clearly expressed in his more erudite work on the French constitutional monarchies from 1814-1848. As he explained:

“it is possible to write two diametrically opposed histories of French politics. On the one hand, a story that emphasizes the Jacobin tradition and centralization, and that emphasizes the permanence of the illiberal temptation related to the absolutization of the sovereignty of the people. On the other, there is a more peaceful history, that of the extension of the freedoms and progress of representative government. [...] The two approaches are not a mere opposition between distinct partisan assumptions. They correspond mainly to a separation between the history of representations and political cultures and the history of institutions. It is urgent to bring out the second story, too often neglected. [...] The examination of the Charters of 1814 and 1830 constitutes an ideal ground to explore the hidden side of the hexagonal political history. They embody in a way the ‘English moment’ that must be confronted with the ‘Jacobin moment’.” (Rosanvallon 1994: 7-8)

It has rarely been noted that it was during this period in the late 1990s that Rosanvallon began his explorations of “illiberalism,” in particular though his interest in reexamining the Second Empire (Rosanvallon 2001a).

The volume resulting from these first two years of lectures ends with an observation which is important for understanding his later research: the ambition was not just to understand the specificity of the French context but to explore the broader question of democracy:

“The issue now is no longer one of an absolute or relative ‘French exception’ that must somehow be eliminated. Instead, what we see everywhere is a crisis of politics and a questioning of the real nature of democracy. [...] Fresh thinking about the overall architecture of democracy is urgently needed. People everywhere are searching for new definitions of

sovereignty and legitimacy, new procedures of representation, and new forms of public expression. At issue is the very nature of the political. To be sure, the question is too vast even to be posed properly in the brief space of a conclusion. Hence a more thorough examination will have to be deferred to another work.” (Rosanvallon 2007: 265)

Seminars at the Collège de France accompanied the evolution of this work on the history of political and democratic theory. Taking the opportunity to invite fellow scholars, the subjects discussed were oftentimes directly related to the subject of that year’s lectures (“Intermediary bodies within democracy: case studies” in 2003; “Recent research on the question of inequality” in 2011; “Governing and Authority” in 2015), and in some cases they focused on specific themes (“The Culture of Political Will in France, 19th-20th centuries” in 2004; “The Notion of Political Responsibility” in 2006; “Elections and the Vote” in 2012; “Cosmopolitan Democracy” in 2013; “Democracy and Referendums” in 2014). And on some occasions they offered the opportunity to present work on political theory (2008, 2010, 2017).

When one examines the list of scholars invited to Rosanvallon’s seminars, one notices a disciplinary eclecticism drawn from a variety of fields such as History, Law, Political Science, Sociology, Philosophy, Economics, Management and a diversity of profiles (from doctoral students to emeritus professors). Far from limiting his focus to modern history, Rosanvallon also invited specialists of the ancient world (Paul Demont on election by lots in ancient Greece; Virginie Hollard on the vote in ancient Rome; Clément Bur on infamy and citizenship in Rome, etc.) as well as the medieval and early periods (Olivier Christin on development of majoritarian decision-making; Patrick Boucheron on the fresco “The Allegory of Good and Bad Government”; Marie Dejoux on the investigations into the reparations of Louis IX; Antoine Lilti on celebrity in the Enlightenment, etc.). Some of the sessions were particularly memorable such as the dialogue with Bernard Manin (April 7, 2004) and the invitation of Claude Lefort (April 16, 2008).

On occasion, the seminar took place on one or two days. A symposium was co-organized with the Chair held by Mireille Delmas-Marty with the title “Law and Politics in the Construction of an International Order: The Current State of the Debate” in June 2006; a conference entitled “Challenges to Democratic Universalism: A New Paradigm?” took place in June 2007; and a conference on “Democracy in the Age of Post-Truth” closed the series in February 2018.

## AND THE SECOND TRILOGY BECOMES A TETRALOGY

“Teaching at the Collège de France does not consist in descending a long calm river whose course has been traced in advance. First of all, because it is the rule that one must present each year the results of new research, or at least explain the objectives, the hypotheses and the first lineaments, with all that this implies in terms of prior documentation and conceptualization. But also because any research project can lead to a dead end, be less successful than expected or involve additional research that runs further afield than expected, and which necessarily requires one to pause, turn back, or take a new direction.” (Annuaire du Collège de France 2015: 789)

Thus opened the course synopsis [*résumé de cours*] for 2014 that developed the beginning of his lecture on January 22 of that year.

This declaration provides a relatively clear picture of the progressive development of his work at the Collège de France, which emerged in the form of four volumes on the history of democracy. If we look back on the chronology of the lectures, one sees that this oeuvre did not develop in a linear fashion. It advanced instead piece by piece. In 2004, the lectures explored “the disenchantment of democracy: history and forms of a sentiment.” While these lectures remained relatively focused on the history of nineteenth-century France, the course was never published as a book, even if it informed later publications. In 2005, the lecture entitled “Democratic Dilemmas” was given in Cambridge Massachusetts, offering a comparison between the history of democracy in France and the United States. In 2006, the lectures focused on “new paths of popular sovereignty” and led to the publication of *La contre-démocratie* (Rosanvallon 2006b). There are a number of elements in this book that develop points he had already explored, for example, his analysis of the political thought of Pierre Mendès France on “generalized democracy” (Rosanvallon 2005). The 2007 lectures (“Institutions of General Interest”) and of 2008 (“Metamorphoses of Legitimacy”) laid the foundation for the volume *La légitimité démocratique* (Rosanvallon 2008b). After a sabbatical leave in 2009, the courses of 2010 and 2011 entitled “What is a Democratic Society? I and II” provided the cornerstone for *La société des égaux* (Rosanvallon 2011b).

At the moment of its publication, Rosanvallon presented *The Society of Equals* as the completion of a second trilogy and announced his future ambition to offer a more theoretical approach to democracy (Rosanvallon 2011c). The 2012 and 2013 lectures under the title “Democracy: Outline of a General Theory, I and II” continued in this direction. The first year he focused in particular on the question of “democratic indetermination” (drawn from Claude Lefort, but developed in a different direction). In 2013, he insisted upon the variation of the definitions of

democracy, the fragility of such regimes, their disenchantment and finally their pathologies, which he attempted to bring together into a “general theory.” If these courses did not lead to a specific publication, it is in part because Rosanvallon decided to take a detour by studying the question of executive power.

“Indeed, I realized that there was a dimension of democratic life that I had never addressed in my work and that it was essential to attempt to do so before providing a synthesis: that of executive power. I had only touched upon the latter in my analysis of counter-democracy. But without digging into it thoroughly, even though it has become for all citizens and all individuals the central figure of ‘power’ as they experience, confront or challenge it daily.” (Annuaire du Collège de France 2015: 790)

The book that came out of these lectures, *Le bon gouvernement* (Rosanvallon 2015a), is indicative of an approach that privileges a longer analytical timeframe – one that spreads beyond the chronology of the first trilogy that began with the eighteenth century and the French and American Revolutions – and an ambition to compare relatively distant historical experiences (Rosanvallon 2003b).

It is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter to present this work in greater detail, but it is important to highlight that all of these works found their *raison d’être* in what is presented as a certain crisis of the present. Two passages, written 10 years apart reveal this constant concern: “The democratic ideal now reigns unchallenged, but regimes claiming to be democratic come in for vigorous criticism almost everywhere. In this paradox resides the major political problem of our time,” wrote Rosanvallon in 2008 (2008a: 1). And then, again in 2018:

“There are many more books yet to be written if we are to understand the history of democracy and how it has changed. But I may at least hope to have provided others scholars with a set of tools they will find useful in carrying on with the whole that remains to be done. History is now breathing down our necks. Perhaps never before has it been a more urgent necessity that we try to make sense of it. Rushing headlong into the future, the present is in danger of losing its balance. Beneath lies the abyss.” (Rosanvallon 2018a: 18-19)

This political preoccupation is overwhelmingly present in *The Society of Equals*. He expresses this idea in the opening lines of the book:

“Democracy is manifesting its vitality as a regime even as it withers as a social form. The sovereign citizenry has steadily increased its ability to intervene in government and magnify its presence. [...] But the ‘people’, understood in a political sense as a collective entity that ever more powerfully imposes its will, is less and less a ‘social body’. Political citizenship



has progressed, while social citizenship has regressed. This rending of democracy is the major phenomenon of our time, and an ominous threat to our well-being. If it continues, the democratic regime itself might ultimately be in danger.” (Rosanvallon 2013a: 1-2)

These volumes also provided opportunities for Rosanvallon to take stock of his role as a public intellectual. At the end of the first volume of the tetralogy, Rosanvallon allowed himself to define his role as an intellectual by comparing himself to two of his predecessors:

“This book was written in 2005, the centenary of the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron. Sartre was the apostle of the twentieth century’s culpable utopian dreams, the headstrong fellow traveler of a radical adventure that remained beyond the pale of his critique. Aron was a professor of disillusionment, a model of melancholy lucidity. Expressing the contrary logics of their generation to perfection, each embodied a form of intellectual grandeur. Yet each succumbed to an unfortunate temptation, that of icy reason on the one hand and blind commitment on the other, and in their opposite ways each thus fostered a form of impotence. The author of these lines has sought to escape this impasse by formulating a theory of democracy that is no longer cut off from the action intended to breathe new life into democracy.” (Rosanvallon 2008a: 318)

As a result, Rosanvallon has consistently attempted to explore the multi-dimensional character of democracy. In the conclusion to *Democratic Legitimacy*, he explains:

“Indeed, both the abuse of the term and the confusion about its meaning stem from the diversity of approaches to the subject. For example, it is common to see a contrast between democracy defined as an exercise of collective power and democracy defined in terms of guaranteed individual freedoms. If we are to overcome this kind of ambiguity, we must grasp democracy in all its complexity. It can be separately, concurrently, simultaneously a civic activity, a regime, a form of society, and a mode of government.” (Rosanvallon 2011a: 225)

## **A CONSISTENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Reading the entry on the Chair of the Modern and Contemporary History of the Political in the yearbooks of the College of France provides a better perspective on Pierre Rosanvallon’s activity, which was not limited to his courses, seminars and books across these seventeen years. The juries of dissertation and habilitation

defenses on which he served as well as the book prefaces are mentioned in these documents. Two other specific areas of intellectual engagement also merit mention: the editorial activity around the *Republic of Ideas* as well as the online journal *Books and Ideas* (*La vie des idées*) and the participation in numerous scientific, media and political forums.

Created in 2002, the *Republic of Ideas* was an essential part of Pierre Rosanvallon's intellectual ambition. A collection of books presenting social science research to a wider audience, some volumes have been very successful (Castel 2003) while others have been controversial (Lindenberg 2002). With no clear disciplinary boundaries (from Geography to Sociology, Economics, Political Science and History), the works have sometimes accompanied broader public debates (on the middle classes, tax havens, solidarity, etc.). The *Republic of Ideas* also participated in two large public conferences in Grenoble in May 2006 on "the new social criticism" and in May 2009 in the context of the forum "reinventing democracy."

From the winter of 2002 to the summer of 2007, 24 issues of *La Vie des Idées* appeared, a paper journal intended to serve as a newsletter for the *Republic of Ideas*. Moving to a digital format in autumn 2007, the site was organized under Rosanvallon's Chair at the Collège de France the following year. From then on Rosanvallon's team of successive assistants at the Collège de France were directly involved in the development and success of this project – such was the case for Florent Guénard, Ivan Jablonka, Nicolas Delalande, Pauline Peretz, Thomas Grillot, Emilie Frenkiel, Sarah Al-Matary, Lucie Campos, Cristelle Terroni, Marieke Louis, Ariel Suhamy, Ophelia Simeon; while it was not the case for first two assistants Alain Chatriot (2002-2004) and Geneviève Verdo (2004-2006).

Two other editorial activities also merit mention. The project *Raconter la vie* (*Life Stories*), which was launched in 2014 and came to an end in 2017. Rosanvallon introduced the project in a volume *Le Parlement des invisibles* in which he wrote: "the country does not feel represented" (Rosanvallon 2014a: 10). He then returned to the long history of attempts to correct this lack of representation that has plagued modern democratic societies. The second editorial project was the book series *Les livres du nouveau monde* (*Books of the New World*) that Rosanvallon directs at Seuil and where he has published a variety of works, including those of several of his colleagues at the Collège de France. It was also in this collection that he published the book by economist Thomas Piketty, which proved to be a huge best-seller (Piketty 2013).

He also participated in a series of conferences in France and abroad. At the Collège de France, Rosanvallon took part in the Ernest Renan fall symposium – delivering a text on Renan's ambiguous relationship to democracy (Rosanvallon 2013b) – and then organized a second one in 2013 on "science and democracy"

(Rosanvallon 2014b), which provided him with an opportunity to reflect on democratic institutions in the face of climate change and other scientific issues, in particular the management of long-term public problems. A recent conference held in Toulouse in December 2017 demonstrates his constant desire to present his thoughts to a wide audience and to engage in a pedagogical dialogue with the public (Rosanvallon 2018b). In addition to numerous conferences (in Argentina in 2001, China in 2003, Japan in 2004, Great Britain in 2006 – and the pace has increased in recent years), Rosanvallon on occasion gave his annual lectures abroad, for example in 2004-2005 when the course on “The Dilemmas of Democracy” was held at MIT and the seminar on “The Interpretation of the French Political Model” that took place at Harvard. He also gave lectures in French universities (Nantes and Sciences Po Grenoble in 2017, IEP Lille in 2016 to take the most recent examples). His lectures are widely available from the Collège de France website and via diffusion on the French public radio station, France Culture. Similarly, his books have been widely re-edited and are easily accessible. He also regularly publishes articles exploring the progress of his work in such journals as *Esprit* and accepts media requests on the radio, the press and news outlets.

Following upon his years of training in social scientific research at the EHESS with Claude Lefort and François Furet, the era of the Centre Raymond Aron (Sawyer/Stewart 2016) and his “trilogy,” the years at the Collège de France have been for Pierre Rosanvallon a moment that has mixed the completion of some projects as well as the launching of new ones. Rosanvallon, it would seem, accomplished a rare feat in fulfilling the announcement he made in his inaugural lecture:

“It is an opportunity, at a time I hope to be the midpoint of my career, to invigorate my research with a new energy, by relocating them in a intellectual milieu unique thanks to the radical freedom it provides – shielded, as one is at the College of France, from the pressures of any agenda, freed from any obligation to evaluate and train students, and liberated from the need to present one’s credentials in the face of the usual disciplinary barriers.” (Rosanvallon 2006a: 31)

This distance from the disciplines, clearly expressed in the choice of his guests for his seminar, the content of his books and editorial projects and the wide-ranging institutional freedom of the Collège de France allowed him to pursue both his individual and collective work.

No doubt, the intellectual projects will continue beyond these honors. The last course at the Collège de France, on February 7, 2018 was thus an opportunity for Rosanvallon to announce “a future work program” around two main axes: the definition of “post-electoral democracy” – and in particular an analysis of populism

– and a “reconceptualization of the social question.” In short, a new set of books that will respond as always to the challenges of the present and concerns about the future of democracies as intellectual lucidity refuses to give way to political pessimism.

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