

Rethinking the Role of Politics in French Intellectual History

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Biography

Isabel is a Research Fellow at Wolfson College, Cambridge, where she is investigating the intellectual exchanges between France and Brazil in the 19th century, particularly in reference to the uses of Comtean positivism in Brazil. She holds two doctorates, one from the University of Manchester, and one from the University of Cambridge. Her research has focused on French intellectual history in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and on the development of French academia and historical studies.

Description of the Paper

French academic and intellectual history in the nineteenth century has been a field characterized by two approaches. The first, put forward by historians, has sought to link the development of ideas of freedom and equality in French republicanism to the rise of academic studies (especially human sciences) in mid to late 19th century France. Historians who have endeavored to understand the relationship between republicanism and the rise of history as an academic discipline (the scientific rigor it demanded, the concern for certain periods of history and for certain types of sources and facts) have often associated the rise of history in French academia with the rise of a group of Protestant, republican historians in the Parisian milieu. A second strand of scholars who have investigated the development of French academia has focused on the “ancillary sciences” (philology, linguistics, literary criticism) and have mostly approached the subject from mono-disciplinary viewpoints to understand the history of their own disciplines. What this paper aims to do, using Ernest Lavisse as a case study, is to reassess the role of politics in the development of historical studies in France, to show that far from being guided by political inclinations, historical studies were, in late 19th century France as they are today, motivated by a myriad of considerations which do not necessarily derive from political attitudes, but rather come hand in hand with them. The conclusion the paper aims to extrapolate is that when it comes to intellectual history, mono-causal explanations are just as problematic as they are when other fields of history aim to understand the “whys” and “hows” of things.

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