

# JOSEPH PAUL-BONCOUR: REGIONALISM, SYNDICALISM AND THE THIRD REPUBLIC

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*Joseph Paul-Boncour was born in 1873. He was widely regarded as one of the most intelligent and elegant of the Third Republic's lawyer-politicians. Having made a name as a young man for his defence of trades unions, he achieved prominence as private secretary to Waldeck-Rousseau during his presidency of the council between 1899 and 1902. Although he made no secret of his socialist sympathies, Paul-Boncour and the more moderate Waldeck-Rousseau had a fruitful collaboration, which was repeated when he worked for René Viviani in the first years of the ministry of labour from 1906 to 1908. He entered parliament in 1909 and was minister for labour himself in 1911.*

*Paul-Boncour joined the socialist party at the outbreak of the First World War, and took his most important legal brief at the trial of Jaurès' assassin, when his prosecution speeches failed amidst the general atmosphere of revenge. He was always on the right wing of the SFIO, however, and left the party in 1932. He disagreed with Blum on two fundamental issues: the need to defend France; and socialist participation in government. He frequently represented France at the League of Nations. He was prime minister from December 1932 to February 1933 and held the post of foreign minister several times during the 1930s. He voted against Pétain and Laval in the famous debate over constitutional powers for Pétain in July 1940. He died in 1972.*

Lucie Aubrac wrote thus on meeting with Paul-Boncour in 1943:

Je fais un crochet par Saint-Aignan pour saluer Paul-Boncour. Il a bien soixante-dix ans, et vit dans une belle demeure au bord du Cher. Ancien ministre, longtemps représentant de la France à la Société des Nations, député, il a refusé de voter les pleins pouvoirs à Pétain, et s'est retiré sur ses terres. Une retraite coupée de voyages. Il va à Vichy, vient à Lyon. C'est chez nous qu'il est arrivé un jour de l'automne 1941. On lui avait dit que nous étions gaullistes, qu'il pourrait rencontrer dans notre maison des gens intéressants. Ce petit homme, très sourd et tonitruant, à l'abondante crinière blanche, était presque toujours accompagné de son valet de chambre qui portait sa cape. Il effrayait tous nos copains. Difficile de ne pas le remarquer! Il fut décidé que c'est moi qui le rencontrerais. Il me racontait, en parlant fort, les potins de Vichy: une vraie gazette, il savait tout sur les événements et les hommes. Après deux ou trois rendez-vous dans Lyon, je l'ai persuadé qu'il valait mieux que j'aie le voir chez lui. Cet homme délicieux, d'une politesse grand siècle, était tout heureux de recevoir une jeune femme. Il me retenait pour la nuit, après un dîner soigné que j'étais seule à dévorer; lui avait un appétit d'oiseau. En logeant chez lui, je m'étais aperçu que, l'obscurité venue, son parc était un lieu de passage. Les clandestins traversaient là le Cher qui suivait la ligne de démarcation. Je pense qu'il était au courant, mais que sa surdité était sa sauvegarde. D'ailleurs, au moins une fois par semaine, dans cet hiver 1942-3, il se présentait sur le pont, au poste de garde, avec son Ausweis permanent de frontalier, comme un homme à la conscience tranquille.

En cet été 1943, il y a six mois que je ne l'ai vu. Il ne va plus guère à Vichy. L'occupation totale de la France l'a profondément meurtri, il reste chez lui. Comme d'habitude, il m'offre l'hospitalité. Difficile d'accepter, après mon expédition à Valençay, les victuailles, et surtout avec le poulet prêt à cuire, dans mon sac. Comment attendre encore un jour avec le voyage en train en plein été.

'Ce n'est pas un problème, dit-il. Ma cuisinière a sûrement la solution.'

En effet, elle va le faire rôtir, et demain il fera le voyage à Lyon, sans risque.

Dans cette demeure pleine de livres et d'objets, je passe une bonne soirée. Paul-Boncour se souvient de ses rencontres avec les diplomates et les chefs d'Etat de la Société des Nations à Genève. Je ne me lasse pas de le questionner. Il a beaucoup d'idées sur l'après-guerre. 'Il faut, affirme-t-il, que toutes les nations soient fédérées. Ce qui a tué la Société des Nations, c'est l'absence des Etats-Unis et de l'URSS.' À mon tour de l'informer sur les départs clandestins d'un certain nombre de parlementaires, sur le développement et l'organisation de la Résistance, sur les arrestations si graves, connues maintenant de tout le monde. Je lui dis que Raymond est à Londres, je lui dis aussi que j'attends un bébé pour février prochain. Il est tout ému.

'Allez vous reposer, mon enfant. Pour sa naissance, la guerre sera finie et votre mari sera de retour près de vous.'

The deaf old godfather of the resistance, the courteous internationalist, sitting in his park by the banks of the Cher, writing his memoirs and dreaming of the liberation: who was Paul-Boncour? Lucie Aubrac described the meeting of two worlds: the world of the young, energetic resistance heroine; and that of the sedentary old parliamentarian sitting at home, genially encouraging the exploits of young Gaullists. Paul-Boncour had in fact salvaged his reputation as a parliamentarian by voting against Pétain in July 1940, rather than capitulating to Laval like the great mass of his colleagues.

The activity which was occupying him in 1940-42, the writing of his memoirs, is the best introduction to the mindset and intellectual preoccupations of Paul-Boncour. In the first half of this article, passages from those memoirs will be analysed in detail. In the second part of the article, we will turn back to the early twentieth century, when Paul-Boncour's career was at its most interesting and effective. Paul-Boncour's reflections on the Third Republic, written from the vantage point of the 1940s, can be balanced by the incisive contribution he made around 1900. At its two greatest internal crisis points, the Dreyfus Affair and the collapse of the Third Republic's parliament in 1940, he was providing the most astute critical commentary on France's problems. Studying the contribution he made at these points will eventually lead us, therefore, to reflections about the wider nature of the Third Republic.

Before turning to the memoirs themselves, however, Aubrac's account of her meeting with Paul-Boncour draws our attention. There are many codes imbedded within her account that need unpacking.

Our first and most immediate reflection is prompted by the style of the passage quoted here. It is a classic resistance narrative: it is energetic and impulsive; it eschews classic narrative time for a more impulsive and unpredictable account. The narrator strides backwards and forwards between different points in time. The time-scale shifts as rapidly

1. Entry for 15 July 1943 in Lucie Aubrac, *Ils partiront dans l'ivresse*, (Paris, 1984), 109 ff.

as Lucie herself shifted location in her expeditions across France. Set against this is Paul-Boncour, stuck in his park, no longer coming and going to Vichy and elsewhere, but sitting quietly at home, pretending to be blind to the passage through his estate of clandestine travellers. The contrast between her impulsive narrative style and the character she is describing shows she wants us to be surprised by the encounter between her world and that of Paul-Boncour.

In Aubrac's imagery, this contrast is developed. The fertile but poorly fed young woman is placed alongside the grand old man, with his valet and his cook. Behind the obvious contrast in generation and gender, however, there is a more important reason for pointing up the contrast between the old parliamentarian and the young resistance heroine. The young Gaullists and communists hated Vichy and all it stood for; but beyond that they despised the general sense of corruption in public life which had led to the downfall of the Third Republic. The idea of the 'strange defeat', as it was envisaged by Marc Bloch, was already affecting the way in which young resisters viewed the end of the Third Republic, even before the publication of Bloch's famous account.<sup>2</sup> So what did Aubrac want her readers to make, then, of Paul-Boncour, who was a paladin of that regime? Of course he belonged to the small minority, the exception that proved the rule: he was the leader of the eighty parliamentarians that refused to grant Pétain constitutional powers in July 1940. Was that enough to salvage his reputation in the eyes of the young, however?

This connection with the old damned régime was vital for politics and for political activists. If they were not to adopt the communist stance, rejecting Vichy, the Third Republic and the whole system of bourgeois democracy, they would have at some point to compromise with the old in order to advance following the liberation. It was important to believe that something could come out of the old regime. Indeed, these 80 politicians have totemic status, even today. At the museum of the French parliament in Versailles, their portraits hang in a little lobby, the only reference the museum makes to the whole episode. Parliament was not convened during the Vichy period, thus allowing the museum to leave the episode out of its narrative. Of course the visitor to the museum of Parliament cannot escape the fact that the story being told is as much that of French *politics* as it is the *parliament*, and in that respect the lacuna is deliberate and deceptive. The 80 parliamentarians enter the vacuum as middle-ranking men who had vision and confidence in democratic principles, and thus fill the gap, however awkwardly. In the *Dictionnaire des parlementaires français*, being one of the eighty is constantly referred to as an essential distinguishing feature. Paul-Boncour had been accepted as nominal head of this little band of 'good' parliamentarians.<sup>3</sup>

Paul-Boncour himself had favoured the granting of extensive powers to Pétain in the summer of 1940. He had seen the powerful effect Laval's argument was having on his fellow senators and deputies, and attempted to take some of the wind out of Laval's sails with a proposal to give Pétain a considerable role in the constitution. Where he drew the line was at the idea that the Marshal would have the power to move outside the

2. Marc Bloch, *L'Étrange défaite*, (Paris, 1946).

3. Jean Joly, J. (ed.), *Dictionnaire des parlementaires français* (Paris, 1960).

constitution. This was in fact a point of great importance for Paul-Boncour.<sup>4</sup> He attempted to persuade parliamentary opinion that strengthening the role of Pétain was possible without changing the Constitution – and he lined up the influential *Ligue of ancien combattants* in support (Paul-Boncour was good at playing on his status as a First World War veteran).<sup>5</sup> Just as he had in 1924, Paul-Boncour in 1940 sought to defend the Republic's institutions by safeguarding the parliamentary nature of the regime. Constitutional changes had to be ratified by the Nation as it met in parliament, not imposed by Pétain or his acolytes. Thus Paul-Boncour distinguished between the idea of a strong leader at the head of a democracy, and one who would have power to change the constitution outside the representative bodies of the nation.

Later, this fine distinction made by Paul-Boncour was sometimes lost on politicians who could remember the episode. Some uncharitable socialists muttered that one who had after all been calling for greater powers for Pétain could not be such a great resister. But the last chapters of his three-volume memoirs make it clear that the distinction was absolutely crucial for Paul-Boncour. It forms the basis of his prognosis on the whole nature of the Third Republic. And from Lucie Aubrac's point of view, the fact of Paul-Boncour's being a leader of the 80 *protestataires* of July 1940 was enough to make him a part of the acceptable minority of the old regime, not just in 1943, but later in the twentieth century, when such labels continued to matter.

Paul-Boncour's memoirs themselves emphasize just how crucial his view of parliamentary politics was to his understanding of how the Republic could evolve. Moreover, with a close reading, many other apparent inconsistencies in his thought can be understood afresh.

The passages we will examine come largely from the beginning of Paul-Boncour's book *Entre Deux Guerres*. He shunned the term 'memoirs', preferring the word 'souvenirs', recollections. By 'recollecting' he meant 'bringing back', or 'retrieving', and the connotations were positive. He wanted to get away from the common denunciations of the Third Republic. He used the process of recollection as a way of explaining how it was that he could remain faithful to the regime even after its 'immolation on the altar of defeat'. The early part of these 'souvenirs' is interesting, then, because in taking us back to his childhood Paul-Boncour wanted us to examine with him the roots of defeat; but in a different way to many of his contemporaries. He sought to avoid the attributing to individuals or groups of any specific responsibility for France's collapse. He did not subscribe to the 'inevitable decline' school, that had begun to see 1940 as an all-too-predictable outcome of years of stagnation. His concern was more positive: to show the potentially fruitful strains of political life in the Third Republic, and thus to stress the strength of the regime which had been overturned in 1940. The Third Republic had become unstable in spite of these potential strengths. By understanding the sources of this instability and holding them alongside more promising strains, Paul-Boncour wanted to offer some sort of prognosis for the future, on Republicanism in France.

4. He attacked the idea of ruling by decree in 1924, and often during the interim. Joseph Paul-Boncour, *Contre les décrets-lois, discours prononcé à la séance de la Chambre des Députés du 4 février 1924*, (Paris, 1924).

5. The full account of this episode is related in Joseph Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, (Paris, 1945), Vol. III, 260-75.

[Mes souvenirs] sont, en effet, de nature à jeter quelque lumière sur l'in vraisemblable aventure, qui, en un mois, a conduit la France à la capitulation, la République au tombeau, et fait accepter trop facilement à trop de Français, l'un et l'autre événement... l'espoir des résurrections ... Je pense à ces arbres, qui se dressent, robustes d'apparence, mais atteints dans leur sève, et que la première tempête suffit à coucher par terre.

Comprendre ce qu'il nous faut faire pour le rétablir et le rendre plus fort...<sup>6</sup>

In this passage from the introduction, we are not only presented with an original way into the problem of 1940. At a more subtle level, we are also introduced to a complex use of imagery that leads us to an important aspect of Paul-Boncour's politics, its connection with a particular aesthetic. The image of a tree is a vital one with many resonances. It was made famous by Maurice Barrès in his novel of 1897 *Les Déracinés*, published at a time when Paul-Boncour was an impressionable student. He would almost certainly have read this novel. It made a strong impact in his own student milieu, dominated as this was by Barrès. In *Les Déracinés*, Barrès attacked centralisation, which had led to the youth of the day becoming 'dissociés et décérébrés'. The roots of France, according to Barrès, were its small towns and regional cultures. The tree of Hippolyte Taine is introduced towards the end of the novel – in an episode which reconstructs an encounter between Barrès's friend Charles Maurras and the determinist philosopher Taine – at a point where Barrès wants to offer some sort of solution to the problems of young Frenchmen. Uprooting, we are encouraged to think, is what happens when young men leave the provinces and, following the inevitable progress to Paris in the centralized education system, become corrupted. Barrès and his friend Maurras had by 1897 spent several years in a joint campaign for regional decentralisation and the revival of local life. Thus the tree is not just the obvious symbol of a régime and its stability which anyone might associate with it; it is also a nod to the time in the late 1890s when Barrès and Maurras had propagated an ideology of localism and national regeneration following traditionalist, determinist theories.

Barrès and Maurras were in the process, in late 1897, of espousing a particularly noxious variety of anti-Dreyfusism; and Maurras himself was, from 1902 onwards, the author of much polemic against the reform socialism of Paul-Boncour. Forty years later they were further apart than ever. So the evocation of the 'Tree of M. Taine' is not designed to line up Paul-Boncour's analysis of the Republic with that of Maurras, quite the contrary. This is only the first of a number of startling references in the first section of Paul-Boncour's memoirs. Startling these metaphors may be; but placed alongside the other characteristics of Paul-Boncour they become a little more transparent. He was acknowledged as one of the most talented intellectuals of his generation. The souvenirs are written in the most high literary style. Certainly, these are carefully chosen allusions.

To take these images as a fundamental part of the literary enterprise of his three-volume souvenirs is to understand the subtlety and complexity of Paul-Boncour's ideas about the Third Republic. They can almost make it seem as though Paul-Boncour was evoking a conservative, regionalist, 'enraciné' idea of France. This regionalist idea attacked the Jacobinism at the heart of much republicanism, with its ideas of unitarism, centralisation and a strong adherence to the process of universal suffrage. Moreover, in

6. Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, Vol. I, ii-iv.

the early 1940s a conservative and *soi-disant* regionalist regime had been installed in France, with the aim of reviving national pride through the glorification of the 'roots' of France, its small towns and countryside. Of course, Vichy was not starting something new: the left-wing Popular Front itself gloried in the diversities championed by regionalists. France's pavilion at the 1937 international exposition was devised according to regionalist principles. Nevertheless, to the casual reader, Paul-Boncour's championing of regionalism in the early 1940s would seem at best puzzling. Was the old socialist turning into a Pétainist after all?

Paul-Boncour's politics were so clearly of the left that it seems at first difficult to reconcile this with conservative regionalism. My main purpose in this article is to show that the apparent conservatism of parts of *Entre deux guerres* is in fact tied to the brand of socialism Paul-Boncour espoused. Moreover, as I argued at length in my monograph *The Regionalist Movement in France*, to label the regionalism of the Third Republic as inveterately 'conservative' is not only to misunderstand the regionalist movement and the thought of its leading activists, but to oversimplify all of politics and political thought in the Third Republic.<sup>7</sup> After Vichy appropriated regionalist iconography and rhetoric, it seemed easy to label such things as naturally opposed to Republicanism; before 1940, this logic simply had no place in the debate over regionalism. Paul-Boncour's adherence to regionalism was in fact a natural compliment to the sort of socialism he advocated.

That said, there are still many other passages early in Paul-Boncour's souvenirs that merit more detailed attention, for their tendency to cast in a favourable light aspects of Third Republic political life that are undeniably conservative. Paul-Boncour mourned the lack of any real conservative party in France, fundamentally tied to the regime, and playing a constructive role in politics. He mentioned his friendship with conservative English politicians whom he had met at the League of Nations, and bemoaned the lack of any such party within the French Republican mainstream (would he have approved of today's Gaullist party?) Almost the first encounter he narrates at the beginning of the souvenirs, is the relationship between his father, a local GP in the Loir-et-Cher, and the local notable, the prince de Chalais. Paul-Boncour himself remembered seeing his father hold the old émigré's body when he died. Why had France not been able to keep such men together, he asks? What was it about the French system that had been unable to prevent violence breaking out between the classes and the parties?

The underlying problem was the lack of political consensus: the failure of the different political parties to agree on a basic minimum of points. Without this consensus the regime was inherently unstable. There was no solid

parti conservateur, acceptant franchement les institutions, que la Nation s'était librement données, menant sa bataille pour son propre compte, jouant sa partie, et qui serait arrivé au pouvoir...

J'ai toujours regretté, précisément parce que je les ai connues, estimées, aimées, que ces forces saines et d'une solide tradition française, aient pratiqué une politique, qui devait les écarter systématiquement des affaires et les lancer dans des aventures, d'où la République est toujours

7. Julian Wright, *The Regionalist Movement in France, 1890-1914: Jean Charles-Brun and French Political Thought* (Oxford, 2003), esp. ch.1.

sortie victorieuse, mais atteinte par contrecoup et détournée par ses luttes mêmes de certaines des réformes constitutionnelles, qui lui eussent été salutaires.<sup>8</sup>

Why could these traditional forces not support the regime? The answer he offered is remarkably frank. It was not entirely their own fault. The Third Republic had, until the end, always managed to survive the various plots against the regime. But as it did so, the republican party had rejected conservative forces so insistently that in the end any balance or correction that the conservatives might have exercised was negated, and conservatism had in fact become reaction. He explained how the Boulanger affair of the 1880s had brought about just such a trend:

Séparée des républicains, nécessairement rejetée à droite, la Ligue des Patriotes et son chef cessèrent d'exercer sur les événements une influence appréciable. Mais ils cessèrent aussi d'en exercer une sur les républicains eux-mêmes... Celle-ci avait-elle été tout à fait inutile? Depuis que j'en ai tant vu se ruer à la servitude, je suis tenté de croire que non.<sup>9</sup>

Even to hint that the Ligue des Patriotes, often seen as a proto-fascist precursor of the ligues of the 1930s, might have had a purpose in the overall political debate was shocking. Of course we might question the use of the term 'proto-fascist' when describing such organisations. The term encourages the making of anachronistic comparisons. Nevertheless the passage is a good example of the height to which Paul-Boncour had developed his own independence of mind. It is part of the discourse of a despairing survivor of the flood: after the deluge, all prognoses could be discussed openly given the irrelevance of the old political correctness. And after all, Paul-Boncour was writing as a leader of the *quatrevingt*. Those who might have shouted him down had themselves rushed into the arms of Laval and Pétain.

So Paul-Boncour's *souvenirs* offer some deliberately provocative discussions of the nature of French society and politics. He was always, however, scrupulous in distinguishing between an openly right-wing movement such as the Ligue des Patriotes and a potentially constructive idea such as the movement for a stronger prime minister, or the regionalist movement. When he did examine these, he would make an important rhetorical gesture. He sought out elements of older movements or political campaigns which might, to a reader in the 1940s, seem like the purest Pétain-ism; then, twisting the narrative, he would conclude 'and how poorly does the current regime echo this desire of republicans for (e.g.) a genuinely decentralized state'. When he first introduced the idea of regionalism, mourning the failure of the Republic to harness fully the power of local life, he made this gesture neatly:

Jusqu'à l'extrémité des provinces, la République disposait de cadres excellents, dont, à travers les images qu'il gardait de cette époque, le régionaliste, que je devais devenir, s'est dit qu'il était dommage qu'une décentralisation plus complète n'ait pas permis de les utiliser davantage pour l'épanouissement de notre vie locale, ce qui eût été tout profit pour elle et pour le pays.

N'oublions pas tout de même que cette République fit la loi de 1871 et celle de 1884, qu'elle desserra les liens qui comprimaient sous l'Empire départements et communes, rendit au choix

8. Paul-Boncour, *Entre deux guerres*, Vol.I, 10-11.

9. *Ibid*, 42.

des citoyens la désignation de leurs magistrats municipaux. Il a fallu les mesures actuelles pour qu'on revienne en deçà, et que tout en parlant de régionalisme, on imagine qu'il puisse surgir des choix arbitraires d'un pouvoir central sans contrôle.<sup>10</sup>

Paul-Boncour advocated a democratic regionalism, which would rejuvenate the Republic through a regenerated local life. And this regionalism need not be deprived of the sort of mystique so beloved of the Vichy regime. When describing his time in Brittany at naval college, he invoked the revival of Breton regionalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century. His account, far from shying away from the 'irrational' or 'mystical' aspects of this revival, positively revels in them:

Je les retrouvais [the pleasures of Brittany] avec cette poésie, ce mysticisme, cet accord du paysage et de l'âme, qui font de la Bretagne un tout homogène, dont je comprends si bien qu'elle veuille garder l'originalité ... une renaissance littéraire et régionale, telle qu'on n'en avait pas vue depuis Brizeux, l'emportait alors. Louis Tiercelin venait de fonder le *Parnasse breton* et *l'Hermine*, groupant autour de lui des écrivains, des poètes bretons, d'une réelle valeur, Édouard Beaufils, Charles Bernard, Le Goffic et ce Le Braz ... ces proses et ces poèmes, venaient jusqu'à nous et exaltaient l'âme bretonne de mes camarades, et par contre-coup la mienne.<sup>11</sup>

Paul-Boncour made his name with his thesis on 'economic federalism'. He was an advocate of a highly developed network of syndicates. But for him, regionalism was the right hand of the larger syndicalist movement. The last passage from *Entre deux guerres* to be examined here explains neatly how he saw the two intertwined. It describes the logic behind a debate over regionalism he initiated in 1902. He emphasizes the academic basis for his ideas on regionalism:

Les études auxquelles je m'étais livré, les réflexions qu'elles m'avaient suggérées, avaient établi en moi cette conviction qui ne m'a plus quitté, que, pour être solide, un État, qu'il soit républicain ou monarchiste, devait s'édifier sur des groupements sociaux, qui le soient également.<sup>12</sup> Ceux-ci ne pouvaient l'être que s'ils disposaient d'une assez large autonomie... Un conglomerat d'individus n'est pas une société; c'est leur groupement qui vaut; et, à côté des groupements volontaires, auxquels la loi des associations de Waldeck-Rousseau venait de donner son statut dans la liberté, il y en avait de naturels et d'obligatoires, déterminés par la famille à laquelle on appartient, par le lieu où on vit, par la profession dans laquelle on travaille. J'avais doctriné le syndicat obligatoire. J'étais donc tout préparé à concevoir la nécessité d'élargir en régionalisme la revendication décentralisatrice, trop oubliée, des vieux républicains. Je retrouvais d'ailleurs là mes souvenirs bretons.<sup>13</sup>

Paul-Boncour's conception of the State, and thus his outlook on political reform, was based on the conjuncture of economic federalism and regionalism. This was not new; but he framed it in a modern way, which not all Republicans could understand. Regional reform was even slower in coming than the development of trades unions which Paul-

10. *Ibid*, 7.

11. *Ibid*, 46.

12. 'Les Études': Paul-Boncour is referring to his doctoral thesis, *Le Fédéralisme Économique: étude sur les rapports de l'individu et des groupements professionnels* (Paris, 1900).

13. *Ibid*, 147.



Boncour advocated. He explained the republicans' failure to decentralize as a result of their obsession with clericalism, which took over parliament and press at the very moment when Paul-Boncour and others were debating regionalism, early in the 1902 legislature.

In the closing pages of *Entre deux guerres*, Paul-Boncour responded to the temptation to answer the question, 'what next?' after the war. He insisted that the federal principle must be incarnated in the new State. The State should be built up in blocks from (on the one hand) trades-unions and professional organizations, and (on the other) from communes, and regions. Underpinning both was the fundamentally democratic nature of Paul-Boncour's federalism. Neither system, economic or territorial, would have any vitality if the individual were unable freely to express his wishes through them. Thus Pétain's regime had merely adopted the trappings of economic federalism and regionalism: under Vichy, regions were ruled by an appointee of the marshal, and professional associations were answerable to the national council, not their members. This was anathema to Paul-Boncour's federalism.

This is why Paul-Boncour's *souvenirs* are so riddled with allusions which would, particularly in the early 1940s, have seemed so close to the ideology of the right-wing regime then in power. There need be nothing right-wing about a mystical regionalism if it rests on the principle of democratic representation, the essence for him of any federalist system. This text was an attempt to reclaim for democracy certain features of Vichy-ism, by showing that regionalist discourse was in fact germane to republicanism and that, for all the propaganda, regionalism and syndicalism were poorly served by the National Revolution.

It is important to hold this text, written late in Paul-Boncour's life, against his experiences and activities at the time he was making arguably his greatest impact on the intellectual and political life of the Third Republic. This is because the connection between a left-wing syndicalist/regionalist model in 1900 and that of the arch-resister in 1942 should be re-established. Many other syndicalist/regionalists of later years have been misrepresented. If we can understand the connections in Paul-Boncour's thought, these might offer some clues as to the activity of others.

The last part of this article will, then, dwell on four aspects of Paul-Boncour's early career. First, the moment of 1900. Paul-Boncour's thesis was published in 1900, he was connected to the government of Waldeck-Rousseau, and around him there was a conjuncture of young intellectuals of divergent views, a meeting of minds of considerable importance. Secondly, from 1900 to 1909, Paul-Boncour was part of a reform constituency, made up from some members of this group, which tried up until the First World War to influence left-wing politics in a constructive and realist manner. Thirdly, we shall see how the ideas of this reform constituency influenced Paul-Boncour himself when he began his formal political activity on entering parliament in 1909 and when he accepted his first ministerial appointment in 1911. From the outbreak of war, Paul-Boncour's political activity was bound up, for better or worse, with the socialist party; and this large area needs a separate article to unpack it properly. This brief survey of Paul-Boncour's early activity ends, therefore, by examining the wider intellectual concerns of Paul-Boncour as expressed in the weekly articles he wrote for *Le Figaro* from 1902 to 1906.<sup>14</sup> In these

14. A full political survey may be found in Joly, *op.cit.*, 2618-22.

articles we see the eclecticism of Paul-Boncour's interests laid out clearly. The breadth of his intellectual focus casts an important light on those political ideas which we discussed in the first half of this article, and underscore the main point raised here: that Paul-Boncour's intelligent apprehension of the Third Republic was based not in a narrow Jacobinism, but in a wider, eclectic reading of France's aesthetic, cultural, regional and democratic values.

Paul-Boncour became a socialist as a young law student – he discovered the Navy was not for him after all – in the 1890s. It was the socialism of Eugène Fournière and the *Revue socialiste* that appealed to him; that is, a reform socialism that distanced itself from doctrinaire Marxism. When Paul-Boncour attempted to develop his ideas in an academic framework, he concluded that economic federalism provided the key to any serious reform of the State. His thesis, *Le fédéralisme économique*, was published in 1900 with the help of a subscription list headed by the socialist minister Alexandre Millerand.<sup>15</sup> It gave him a considerable degree of clout in left-wing republican circles.

He had already made a name for himself, however, as a brilliant young lawyer who had taken up the cause of left-wing trades unions. He had set up a consultancy that represented unions in industrial disputes. This clearly socialist engagement did not stop him from becoming private secretary to the moderate republican Waldeck-Rousseau. Waldeck-Rousseau was on the contrary impressed with the intellectual rigour that underpinned Paul-Boncour's political position. The Waldeck-Rousseau government of 1899 to 1902 had as one of its most important tasks a project permitting the development of free associations, passed in 1901. This was a natural extension of Waldeck-Rousseau's earlier law, passed in 1884 when he himself was one of the bright young lawyer-politicians of an older generation, permitting the establishment of trades unions. The 1901 law on associations marked, for Paul-Boncour, a decisive step away from the unitary State and towards a federative State where economic and social organizations would fill the void between State and the individual. In a sense his doctorate provided the theoretical background for this law, and perhaps a wider reform of the State, of which the 1901 law would be just the beginning. The rest of Paul-Boncour's career could be seen as a largely frustrated attempt to develop the 1901 law's full implications.

Paul-Boncour worked in the ministry of the interior, alongside André Tardieu, like him a notable 'young intellectual' and future leader of the Republic, albeit one whose political sympathies were more to the right. They were part of a little *pléiade* of young intellectuals known as the 'Génération'. The other members included Henry de Jouvenel, future ambassador to the League of Nations and (sometime) husband of Colette, along with other journalists and political activists.<sup>16</sup> After the Second World War, the memoirs of one of the minor members of the Génération were written up by Louis Guitard.<sup>17</sup> He remarked on this gathering of intellectuals that most of them were 'petits maîtres' of the Republic.<sup>18</sup> For them, politics was a diversion, a fascinating past-time: they were brilliant through

15. Documents pertaining to this subscription are in the private papers of Paul-Boncour at the AN 424-AP: 1 (doctorat).

16. Christine Manigand, *Henry de Jouvenel* (Limoges, 2000).

17. Louis Guitard, *La Petite histoire de la IIIe République. Souvenirs de Maurice Colrat*, (Paris, 1959).

18. *Ibid.*, 26.

their dilettantism. But he insisted that Paul-Boncour and Tardieu were the 'grands maîtres' of their generation, in that their superior intellectual powers were combined with a serious engagement with social and political problems. Guitard concluded that, for the good of the Third Republic, this *pléiade* ought to have formed an intellectual core around which, when they were in their maturity in the 1920s and 30s, a more constructive politics might have evolved. As it was, they soon went their various ways, and Tardieu never came as close to Paul-Boncour again. The brilliant but pessimistic analyses of the problems of the French State which Tardieu published in his retirement from public life, after 1934, are in a sense the other side of the coin whose more optimistic face we have already seen in the souvenirs of Paul-Boncour. Both were concerned with State-reform throughout their intellectual careers, and it is indeed a matter for regret that two such innovative and respected men could not between them forge an alliance.

This reflects a larger problem which was at once apparent to Paul-Boncour when he left Waldeck-Rousseau's cabinet and began to develop a campaign for regional decentralisation. How could the political mainstream, in particular the bulk of the radical and socialist parties, be persuaded of the urgency of State-reform? Tardieu was himself of the opinion that such political forces were incapable of apprehending the task. Indeed, after Waldeck-Rousseau resigned in 1902, the agenda set by republicanism was negative: the defence of the Republic against the forces of reaction. In 1903 Paul-Boncour published his article 'La République et la décentralisation', opening a debate on regionalism in which he argued that only a Republic could properly decentralize, against Charles Maurras' assertion that only a Monarchy could do so.<sup>19</sup> But the Separation crisis was in full swing, and Paul-Boncour's debate took place on a largely intellectual rather than political level. Maurras was allowed to claim, in spite of Paul-Boncour, that radicalism was inveterately opposed to regionalism. He could not, though, stop luminaries such as Clemenceau and Eugène Fournière as well as Tardieu responding to Paul-Boncour's challenge and developing a thesis of republican decentralisation. One important aspect of the argument was that it was the men who were out of office that produced the most interesting remarks on the subject. Clemenceau became prime minister shortly after; but decentralisation positively retreated during his tenure of office, between 1906 and 1909. Paul-Boncour remarked 'tu sais vaincre, Annibal, mais tu ne sais pas profiter de la victoire' in his memoirs, as he recalled how Clemenceau's overtures in 1903 had come to nothing.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, a constituency of State-reformers had been born. To understand how the reform constituency operated, we need to go back again to 1900.

The *pléiade*, or 'Génération' were but one of a plethora of young intellectual groups that met in a Congrès de Jeunesse in December 1900.<sup>21</sup> Paul-Boncour himself chaired one of the sessions of this noisy gathering, in the *mairie* of the sixth *arrondissement*. Alongside his own friends were the closely related group of writers and dramatists who called themselves 'naturists' in order to distinguish themselves from the 'naturalists' inspired

19. Article first published in *La Renaissance Latine*, 15 July 1903. The collection of articles that Paul-Boncour and Maurras inspired during their debate was published as *Un débat nouveau sur la république et la décentralisation*, (Toulouse, 1905).

20. The phrase was made into the title of chapter 5 of *Entre deux guerres*.

21. Accounts of this congress were published in several journals, notably *Le Figaro*, 27 novembre and 3 décembre 1900, and *Le Sillon*, 10 décembre 1900.

by Zola twenty years before. Paul-Boncour was invited to write in the *Revue naturiste* in early 1901, as both groups believed passionately that the times they lived in taught that it was crucial for the intellectual to be engaged with social and economic realities. The naturists wrote novels and plays that had shown them coming down rapidly and noisily from the heights of the ivory tower, slamming the door behind them on the remnants of the symbolist movement.<sup>22</sup> Paul-Boncour had a strong affinity with their agenda: if they wanted literature to engage with social problems, he insisted that this also applied to politics. Another group at the congress with a similar philosophy was the social Catholic organization *Le Sillon*. Other groups represented included the newly founded Federation of regionalists, the neo-monarchist *Action française*, radical feminists, and nationalists.

Later the next year, the instigator of the congress, Eugène Montfort, drew together all these diverse strands and attempted to synthesize what 'the young of today' were talking about.<sup>23</sup> The strongest uniting factor was the belief of all these intellectuals that both their politics and their literature had to engage with the social question. Secondly, and because of this, many of the members of the congress had called for an end to the old party distinctions. The concepts of Jacobin Republic or Catholic Monarchy were outdated. Instead, debate should centre on the realities of French social life, and how to reform the State to make it better able to take account of these realities. Many of the new movements of 1900 were set up on strictly non-partisan lines. In so doing, such associations claimed they were being closer to the 'reality' of the social question. 'Realism' was indeed a common catch-phrase across the youth movement, regardless of the political divisions that existed between them. Keeping party divisions out of their debates was another mantra. 'Youth' itself was also essential, and the call for a 'rejuvenated' Republic would re-echo, not only in Paul-Boncour's writing, but in that of many others across the spectrum.

By 1906, this reform constituency had grown, although its most important protagonists had coalesced around a political position on the fringe of the radical-socialist and independent socialist parties. A new gathering of left-wing intellectuals was born, the *Comité de la démocratie sociale*, founded by some associates of Paul-Boncour who had been pressing for constructive reform since 1900. Just as the young of 1900 were trying to provide ways forward after the divides of the Dreyfus Affair, so in 1906, Paul-Boncour and his allies wanted to develop a concrete and positive agenda for the new legislature, following as it did the great crisis over Separation of Church and State. Their hopes were pinned on Aristide Briand, moderate socialist, and René Viviani, who was minister of labour under Clemenceau, trying to introduce practical social measures within the republican system.<sup>24</sup> Paul-Boncour became Viviani's chef de cabinet in the new ministry.

The reform constituency was still generating debate four years later in 1909-10. The *Comité de la démocratie sociale* re-invented itself to push left-wing republicanism on from the difficult period of Clemenceau's first premiership. A general sense of disappointment in the radical party prevailed. Thus, by 1909, when Paul-Boncour himself

22. One of their leading members, the playwright Saint-Georges de Bouhélier, recounted the story of this youthful literary movement in *Le Printemps d'une génération*, (Paris, 1946), 280 ff. See also, Maurice Le Blond, *Saint-Georges de Bouhélier*, (Paris, 1909), 13-18.

23. *La Revue*, 37 12 (15 juin 1901).

24. On the *Comité de la démocratie sociale*, see Wright, Julian, 'Social reform, state reform and Aristide Briand's moment of hope in France, 1909-10', *French Historical Studies* 28 1 (January 2005).

entered the Chamber and became a political force in his own right, the reform constituency had given him a solid grounding, not only in the reforms to be pursued, but in the methods which these reforms demanded, and in the underlying need for reconciliation which these reforms aimed to develop.

Paul-Boncour had been solicited by friends in the Loir-et-Cher to run for parliament on a previous occasion, but had refused to push forward his candidature because he was nervous of the political tensions in the area and how they might affect his own standing. He therefore presented his candidature only when his two principal rivals in the republican party had withdrawn their opposition, allowing him to unite his constituency with 88% of the votes.<sup>25</sup> His platform was a manifesto for republican unity, and although his constituents were alerted to his socialism by his insisting that he would take up his seat alongside his old boss at the ministry of labour, Viviani, the phrasing of his manifesto was such that any moderate republican could feel confident in supporting him. 'L'union républicaine', he declared, 'sans distinctions et sans épithète, tel est le caractère essentiel de ma candidature. Quoiqu'on ait pu vous dire, je suis un homme d'ordre, de progrès réfléchi, de réformes méthodiques.'<sup>26</sup> His manifesto laid out his support for social reform, for an income tax, for the application of pensions reform, for the introduction of better legal status for state employees, for schemes of public works in order to reduce unemployment, and for electoral reform on the basis of proportional representation. Such were the essential points of many 'reform socialist' programmes in this period. The *Comité de la démocratie sociale* supported all these points. It largely followed the lead given by Aristide Briand, who became prime minister in 1909 with a raft of social reforms tied to state-reform, including electoral and regional reforms. Above all, however, these reforms were to be seen within the overall framework of republican 'appeasement' – the idea that, after several years of grave divisions, over the Separation of Church and State and during the social unrest of Clemenceau's ministry, the sons of the Revolution needed to be reunited if the Republic was to move on. Paul-Boncour used the word 'fraternité' to good effect in his campaign.

Once in parliament, Paul-Boncour might have been expected to support the prime minister Aristide Briand. Like many independent socialists, however, he hesitated. Briand had, it was argued, built too many bridges to the right with his call for appeasement, and Paul-Boncour wanted to see the more left-wing parts of his agenda, notably income tax, pushed more energetically. Briand had failed to shore up his own natural supporters on the left before developing his new agenda of State-reform, and his appeasement campaign fizzled out disappointingly. Meanwhile, Paul-Boncour dropped out of the debate in 1910 suffering from a grave throat infection.

In March 1911, however, he was appointed minister of labour in a cabinet motivated by Briand's arch-rival on the left, Caillaux. If Paul-Boncour's election to the Chamber was marked by his insistence on Republican unity, his arrival at the ministry of labour was marked by an equally important insistence on practical utility. Maurice Le Blond, who was an old friend from the days of the *Revue naturiste* and the Congrès de Jeunesse, published a brochure about his ideas and his mission, and described the remarkable fact

25. Papers relating to this election are in AN 424-AP: 1 (elections).

26. *Ibid.*

that Paul-Boncour had no grand vision or vast ideological programme to advance.<sup>27</sup> The preface was written by Henry de Jouvenel. He reiterated the rather disarming claim of Paul-Boncour, that the only thing he planned to do during his first few months as minister of labour was to put the pensions law into practice.

C'est parce que Paul-Boncour, ministre, se propose un idéal humble et utile, que les hommes de sa génération se reconnaissent en lui. Les Français de trente à quarante ans, pour qui commence à sonner l'heure des responsabilités, ne se targuent point de faire descendre le ciel sur la terre. Ils ont pris les utopies dans une singulière horreur. Détrompés sans doute de la vie future, ils ne le sont pas moins de la cité future. Ils n'ont point des âmes de prophète; une solution modeste leur paraît plus belle que le plus magnifique idéal, s'il est lointain.<sup>28</sup>

To Paul-Boncour, the politician must have a practical, realistic mission. The slogans of the older generation, hurled magnificently from one side of the chamber to the other, were not for him. This was the age of the famous gladiatorial combats between, amongst others, Clemenceau and Jaurès. Paul-Boncour and the younger republican left might have been impressed by these, but in his *souvenirs* he claimed to prefer the speeches of Waldeck-Rousseau and Viviani, two fine orators but who were more concerned with the introduction of practical reforms. Thus he criticized the ideologues and orators and reiterated the call for realism and reconciliation which had swept his generation in the late 1890s. We could in fact make Paul-Boncour into the archetype of the left-wing anti-Jacobin. (His nickname happened to be Robespierre; but this, I think, probably referred more to his neat appearance and bewitching manner in the Chamber, and perhaps to his combining of a republican social programme with a robust agenda of national defence.) The impetus of his political activity was to make the Republic practical, to help it to achieve reforms of real benefit to society, and to prevent it descending into a shouting match.

This political activity was but the most public side of Paul-Boncour. At every stage of his career, his considerable intelligence associated the profound reflections he made on politics with other concerns, particularly those of the aesthetic movements with which he came into contact. As a critic, he cast his net even wider. He wrote for *Le Figaro* in the early 1900s, under the rubric 'mouvement social', covering a range of intellectual literature. His pieces were even-handed, and he never condemned writers with whom he disagreed. He brought out aspects of anti-clerical, nationalist, Catholic or socialist literature with which he suggested the moderate readership of the newspaper might agree. His own interests led him to report frequently on the issue of decentralisation, but also on the creation of a social art movement, on the problems of poor working class housing, on the connections between science and democracy. These articles are really an account of the overlapping worlds of social science, politics, religion and art in the modern era.

One piece which stands out in Paul-Boncour's eclectic survey of the intellectual world is a survey of an exhibition of primitive art displayed at the Musée Marsan in 1904.<sup>29</sup> To conclude with a brief examination of this piece is not merely to indicate the breadth of

27. Maurice Le Blond, *Les Idées de M. J. Paul-Boncour*, (Paris, 1911). The MS of this pamphlet is in the papers of Paul-Boncour (AN 424-AP: 1).

28. Henry de Jouvenel, preface to *Ibid.*, 9-10.

29. *Le Figaro*, 25 avril 1904.

Paul-Boncour's interests; it sheds some particularly interesting light on the issues discussed throughout.

Why do we appreciate the painters of the fourteenth century so much, Paul-Boncour asked? Is it because of their *gaucherie* and their *raideur*, or indeed in spite of these things? No, he replied: we appreciate them because they consist of the beginnings of an art form, full of freshness and vigour.

Cette vie est entière, directe, immédiate chez les Primitifs, et c'est justement là la cause profonde et essentielle de notre amour... Jamais art ne fut plus populaire par les origines de ses artistes, par leur éducation, par leur genre de vie, par les commandes dont ils vivaient; et s'ils nous ont traduit de manière aussi saisissante la face visible de leur milieu social, c'est parce qu'ils furent de bons ouvriers copiant scrupuleusement les êtres et les choses.

De plus, membres d'une corporation, habitants d'une commune, ces artistes participaient nécessairement à la vie morale et civique des collectivités prospères dont ils faisaient partie et pour lesquelles ils travaillaient. Ils partageaient une croyance unanime; ils n'étaient point tourmentés d'aspirations individuelles; leur rêve était conforme à l'idéal collectif de leur confrérie, de leur cité, de leur pays et de leur race. Sans effort donc, et sans programme préconçu, l'art était pleinement social, car il traduisait des sentiments dans lesquels tous alors communiaient.

There are points to be elucidated here: Paul-Boncour was not, for example, advocating a return to the Middle Ages in France's social organization. What this article tells us is how Paul-Boncour conceived the role of the artist in a future society based on decentralized, thriving local life. The analysis was borrowed in part from the regionalist movement of the period. Regionalists such as Charles-Brun insisted that art must be social, that it must revel in the intimate connection between artisan and high artist. The participation of the artist in a community of craftsmen that drew its inspiration from the living tissues of society, in the town and the region, was something that had struck Paul-Boncour powerfully in this exhibition. It was also the recipe for a revival of regionalist art and architecture promoted by regionalists throughout the Third Republic. Here then is the connection between the social and the regionalist aspects of Paul-Boncour's thought. In order to understand his social politics, it is vital to appreciate his literary and artistic commentaries. Social art was an art that expressed the desires of all, in a happy and balanced society. What could make that society achieve this essential balance? The freedom to build up associations within the family, the profession, the village, the region, and the race. Paul-Boncour was no Taine-ite determinist. Family and race were not constricting categories, but rather the loose and open frameworks within which a medieval artist might discover a richer meaning in his work. Paul-Boncour believed that these categories, in the twentieth century, might be of benefit for those who were permitted to participate freely in them, on their own terms. This was the part of his argument that he inherited directly from Proudhon. The participation of the individual within such groups as the race or the region was essential to the full achieving of that individual's potential; but only if this participation was free and democratic. When such an association worked, we might see happy results: as with the work of the 'primitifs' at the Musée Marsan.

For Paul-Boncour, the health of the nation consisted in an adaptation of its political system to embrace social reality. Intellectual discussion must, whether it concentrates on art, religion or politics, have its ears attuned to the exigencies of society. The lesson for

the Third Republic was as clear in 1900 as it would be in the 1930s: political discourse must move away from sterile sloganeering; reform must follow wherever possible, within the broad parameters of democracy; and no one party could ever claim a monopoly of the representation of social reality. Thus the need for all parties to develop consensus. Indeed, Paul-Boncour was one of a significant minority of political thinkers in the Third Republic who had really understood what it was to be involved in a modern political democracy. Modern politics must be about what is real – and not just the gritty realism of working-class conditions, essential though those were to this advocate of pensions and compulsory trades unions, but the reality of cultural differences between regions, and of economic differences between professions.

Paul-Boncour embraced a modern conception of the State, where politics reflected culture and society rather than ideology. This conception introduces new perspectives on the thought of the Third Republic as a whole. It means, in fact, that large areas of research are opened up by the example of men such as Paul-Boncour. The Third Republic has been mined heavily by historians of national and republican identity; but a different concern emerges from this study. The early twentieth century was the time in France when the idea of the modern State groaned its way into existence little by little. This introduces a quite different set of problems and questions for political and intellectual historians.

Those which this study of Paul-Boncour throws up as being paramount are the following: how did the idea of the modern State emerge in the thought of politicians and intellectuals after the Dreyfus Affair? Why and with what consequences did such characters come to believe that, *as politicians*, they had a duty to engage with the reality of social experience? What significance can we attribute to the fact that engagement with social reality was often seen as more important than establishing a specific party position – as the young journalists of the Congrès de Jeunesse had agreed?

Paul-Boncour saw the State not as a given but as a plastic model where daily modifications were necessary. His political discourse could thus be both more mundane (applying pensions laws by the 3rd of July 1911) – and more colourful (Breton regionalism). Paul-Boncour was his father's son, practising politics with the day-to-day, small-scale concern of the general practitioner. There were many others who concurred with Paul-Boncour that it was the steady process of adapting French politics to such small-scale concerns that constituted, in fact, the inauguration of the modern Republican State. So, at a time when French history continues to be dominated by the question of 'what went wrong in the 1930s', it would seem that an intellectual study of men such as Paul-Boncour is very necessary. There are many less dramatic, but more important, agendas to be studied – such as the building of the Welfare State, recently examined in high detail.<sup>30</sup>

With his vast appetite for literature and social commentary, Paul-Boncour, erudite doctor of law and subtlest of political orators, was able to build up a picture of France as a whole, what conservatives called 'la France profonde'; by tying this in with a Proudhonian sense of social federalism, he turned ideas which were apparently conservative into the elements of an intelligent, idiosyncratic, but genuinely democratic socialism. Above all, he was an advocate of the beauty of what was real and practical in France; and he understood how this reality could be at one with democracy.

30. Paul V. Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914-1947*, (Cambridge 2002).