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# Coals to Newcastle?

On the Anglo-American Reception of Pierre Rosanvallon<sup>1</sup>

*Samuel Moyn*\*

**Keywords:** Pierre Rosanvallon, Claude Lefort, Mark Lilla, liberalism, democracy

**Abstract:** This essay assesses the reasons for the so far minimal reception of Pierre Rosanvallon's writings in the English-speaking world. Some of the factors suggested include his resistance to a liberal triumphalism that framed the Anglo-American presentation of the larger body of thought to which he contributed and his focus on hexagonal French history, especially in the nineteenth century. The essay closes with a comparison of the reception of his approach with that of Thomas Piketty's recent bestseller on a similar topic.

I first met Pierre Rosanvallon at a conference at Columbia University in April 2004 entitled "Liberalism's Return". At that moment in the United States, Rosanvallon's importance seemed to be part of so-called "New French Thought", to recall the title of a book series founded by Mark Lilla, the Columbia University political theorist, that allowed several hitherto unknown authors an audience in the English language, including Rosanvallon. The first book in his career that appeared in English was *La nouvelle question sociale*, published in Lilla's series only in 2000 (Rosanvallon 2000b).

But by the 2004 conference, Lilla was grim. The series had not succeeded, intellectually or commercially, he reported. And Lilla, who had intended it to offer the message that "new French thought" was liberal and even traditional rather than leftist or postmodernist in nature (contrary to what most people believed French thought is about), knew why. In the end, it was because contemporary French liberals had nothing to teach Anglo-Americans, who hardly needed outside help, especially from French thinkers who had so often proved wayward and unreliable. Hence "Coals to Newcastle", the old saying that Lilla used as the title of his lecture: the attempt to create and import "New French Thought" was akin to trying to sell something to somebody already famous for inventing it (Newcastle is the city in the northeast of England that once had a royal monopoly on

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1 Eine französische Übersetzung des Textes erschien 2015 in der Festschrift für Pierre Rosanvallon bei Editions du Seuil: "De l'eau à la rivière? La réception anglo-américaine de l'oeuvre de P. Rosanvallon", in: Sarah Al-Matary/Florent Guénard (Hg.), *La démocratie à l'oeuvre. Autour de Pierre Rosanvallon*, Paris, S. 65–77. Der Abdruck der englischen Originalversion erfolgt mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Verlages.

coal). Importing Rosanvallon's version of liberalism into the United States, Lilla was suggesting, was the equivalent of selling coal to a city that already had plenty of it.

I already knew, having written with my colleague and friend Andrew Jainchill a long study of Rosanvallon's trajectory, that his thought partook little in the sort of romance of Anglo-American liberalism that was the hallmark of Cold War authors such as Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, or Jacob Talmon (Jainchill/Moyn 2004). In spite of Rosanvallon's early years as the theoretician of *le socialisme autogestionnaire*, however, Jainchill and I emphasized that he incorporated into his own work his mentor and advocate François Furet's Cold War contrast of the Anglo-American defense of the rights and interests of civil society against Jacobin political excess. It was true, of course, that Rosanvallon from the beginning claimed that *economic* liberalism – in Adam Smith and even in Karl Marx – was equally utopian and indeed proto-totalitarian as the sort of political fusion that characterized the politics the revolutionary imaginary. If so, he did not rest content with the invocation of supposedly prepolitical “droits et intérêts” as the hallmark of more anodyne sort of representative democracy than in the Jacobin tradition, as Furet did at the end of *Penser la Révolution française* (Furet 1978). But Rosanvallon also distinguished that very economic liberalism from political liberalism and presented the latter as worth exploring after a long era in which it had been forgotten – including, of course, in its native French versions. I would still insist, for this reason, that there is no way to understand Rosanvallon's early career apart without inserting it into the antitotalitarian moment in French thought of the mid-1970s and its long-term legacy, which created a political thought whose first principles were a negative denunciation of political evil and the reinvention of a left only within terms of that denunciation. Emancipation might still beckon, but only chastened by vivid memory of the disasters of the past.

Yet we can now see, ten years later, that the original reception of Rosanvallon in the United States was based on a mistake of its own. In spite of his original inclusion in “New French Thought”, the tensions between Rosanvallon's body of work and that ideological project stand out more. Indeed, in his inaugural volume for the series, called eponymously *New French Thought*, Mark Lilla did not even mention Rosanvallon, preferring to lavish most of his attention in his defense of the “legitimacy of the liberal age” (as he entitled his introduction to the volume) on Marcel Gauchet, Pierre Manent, and others (Lilla 2004). In doing so, Lilla played in tune with a widespread depiction of the recent history of French thought that offered a very simple narrative. From the French Revolution on, French thinkers were beset by the same extremist oscillation as their polity suffered, excluding a liberal moderation and ultimately opening them to the communist temptation in the twentieth century. Belatedly recognized as a hero who guarded the flame of liberal reason in the maelstrom of philo-communist passion, Raymond Aron allowed liberalism to return to France after Alexander Solzhenitsyn finally broke the grip of illusion and irresponsibility over the French mind. This narrative owed much to Furet, though Tony Judt was its great propagator on the Anglo-American scene. It was not altogether false. But this narrative screened out what was more interesting in Rosanvallon's contribution. If it has not yet had the Anglo-American reception that it deserves even today, it was hardly because Rosanvallon's thought merely brought liberalism to a place that invented it.

The stark limits of the attempt to force Rosanvallon into the Procrustean bed of “liberalism” became even clearer to me a year later, when I spent my sabbatical in Paris and began to go backwards, in order to situate his work better in what I came to see as a distinctive tradition of political thinking with no precedent or peer in Anglo-American intel-

lectual history. Originating in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's precocious break with Marxism, it was built above all by Claude Lefort, who emerged over time, I believe, as a much more permanent and durable resource for Rosanvallon than Furet (Moyn 2008). Lefort's reception in the English language had occurred under completely different auspices, namely the left of the generation of 1968 and its leading figures like Jean Cohen and Dick Howard (both of whom were friendly with Rosanvallon for decades without introducing his work to English-language readers). Lilla simply didn't know how to make sense of the fact that the new French thought he celebrated had leftist roots, not to mention a massive debt, through Lefort, to the very Continental philosophy from which he insisted French liberals were breaking.<sup>2</sup> Where in Lilla's hands Gauchet and Manent looked like the natural outcome of Aronian liberalism, on second glance Gauchet seemed the heretical follower of Lefort with Rosanvallon his more faithful heir (Gauchet 2003: 159 ff.). In any case, the best scholarship on all these figures now recognizes the different branches of the tree (Bourg 2004; Chabal 2014), once falsely reduced to a unitary "new French thought" (that promotional phrase having since dropped completely out of use).

I hardly need enumerate the features of the Lefortian tradition that Rosanvallon took to new levels of depth and sophistication, first from a historical and later from a contemporary perspective. To begin with, it centered on the world-historical significance of democracy (rather than liberalism), which it interpreted as a regime in the classical sense of a social ensemble, rather than a formal mechanism of governance alone. The people who rule do so in the symbolic order, and are never localizable in real terms; modern history can be interpreted as a reckoning with this necessary symbolic division. But it was not really the philosophical intricacy of these notions, fecund as they have been in Rosanvallon's historiography, that have accounted for the limited impact of this tradition in Anglo-American thought. Rosanvallon showed peerlessly in comparatively lucid exposition how much work Lefortian theory can do, crafting in a unique synthesis of history and theory that few scholars could match. In many ways, Lefort provided the challenging model and for the past forty years Rosanvallon has explored and deepened it with rigorously historical investigation that also opened it to a much broader audience. If Lefort was discovered only by a discreet circle of Anglo-Americans as the crisis of "French theory" had set in, Rosanvallon made some of his central premises independently and easily accessible. And his own Anglo-American connections, which went far beyond the generation of 1968 to range from figures like Albert Hirschman to Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, might presumably have allowed for a greater impact.

It proved most fateful for his Anglo-American reception, I think, that Rosanvallon's central achievement, certainly until the new millennium, was to vindicate some of these premises on the terrain of specifically French history. Though he began his career highly interested in transnational study, notably in *Le capitalisme utopique* (1979), starting with *Le Moment Guizot* (1985) Rosanvallon explored the unfolding of democracy, like Furet and indeed Lefort himself, by showing how much value a Lefortian framework offers in understanding the specifically but narrowly French national narrative and theoretical canon. Intellectually, the choice of focus on the consequences of the French Revolution made sense – until recently it was considered the pivotal event not merely in French history but also in world history. Internationally, however, it was not a propitious moment to launch this project.

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2 Of Lefort, Lilla commented simply: "After leaving 'Socialisme ou barbarie' he then slowly drifted closer to the liberal tradition" (Lilla 2004: 29).

The 1990s and since have been the age of the great crisis of French historiography in the Anglo-American academy. It is worth dwelling on the reasons for this, for it was certainly bad timing to vindicate a general theory of democracy on the grounds of a national history that now interests the world less and less, for better or worse. The historiography of France had been a consensual laboratory of reflection for all fields under a specific set of assumptions that are now no longer taken for granted. Its story of cascading regimes – liberal and right, with an occasional promise or threat of left-wing breakthrough – remains compelling. But the disappearance of strong working class projects that made French history the glory of Marxist historiography struck a major blow against Franco-centrism. One way to read the classics of the middle of Rosanvallon's career during the 1990s – from *Le sacre du citoyen* to *La démocratie inachevée* – is indeed as an attempt to substitute for such a narrative, retaining the importance of French political history on completely new footing. Yet other forces proved too strong for such a substitution to find the audience that French history once did outside of France, and especially for Anglo-American audiences. With the Cold War over, France's geopolitical importance declined swiftly. Perhaps above all, the loss of any emancipatory leftist project has decentered the French Revolution in world history, and even though its radicalism and the democratic experimentalism it introduced traveled the globe, few think it is crucial to explore it as the foundation of modernity in quite the same way many did for many decades. Simply put, if the French experience was merely local and not also universal, then its status as a global testing ground became increasingly unbelievable.

We can add to this analysis of why a particular geographical forum for global historiographical interests suddenly seemed uninteresting to many who had once studied it that an entire era suffered the same fate: the nineteenth century. Alon Confino has recently argued that the central event of world history was once the French Revolution, but with the crisis of emancipation the Holocaust of European Jewry has taken its place (Confino 2012); and it is a shift with wide-ranging ramifications. It altered not solely the place but also the time of historiographical absorption – from the heritage of the French Revolution's emancipation in one century to the making of catastrophic political evil in the next. Further and perhaps above all, this change of perspective both reflected and abetted a widespread sense of what is ultimately at stake in politics: from hope for liberty, equality, and fraternity to fear of blood, soil, and slaughter (Snyder 2012). Even the history of human rights, a topic on which I have personally worked recently, looks very different depending on whether one chooses to anchor them in the visionary claim to liberate human beings from oppression for the sake of autonomy, or in the horrified response to barbarity and genocide for the sake of preservation of bare life.<sup>3</sup> Alas, the latter view has generally prevailed both intellectually and mobilizationally – and one can understand why in view of historical experience. One can even argue that by so doggedly reading the French Revolution in the light of twentieth-century totalitarianism, Furet and his epigones – though intending to renovate the study of the meaning of progress – hastened not simply the loss of historiographical interest in France but in the country's revolutionary tradition and its accoutrements. Instead, a historiography about twentieth-century dictatorship and its overcoming became much more exigent. If emancipation mattered primarily for leading to horror, then the climactic twentieth-century with its bloodlands and terror might matter more – especially if its study seemed to bolster the credentials of a “liberalism of fear”

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3 See for example Moyn (2010).

primarily valuable because it starts with insight into how easily politics can decline into calamity for all concerned.

All of this had direct implications for Rosanvallon's potential Anglo-American audience. Generations of American and British historians once made an education in the vicissitudes of France's long nineteenth century central to what it meant to be a professional in the discipline, and of course many chose to contribute to the field directly through their own research and writing (Downs/Gerson 2007). Now almost no one is trained in it, or even cares about it. Anyone who, like me, has ever tried to teach Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* will find the students lost before the opacity of the events, before even Marx's interpretation of them is debated. Obviously, much more could be said about these developments, which seem to me symptoms of a much greater political reorientation, and not simply an intellectual fad. Even a new and much celebrated work that purports to give readers a new reason to care about the nineteenth century, Jürgen Osterhammel's (2009) mammoth *Die Verwandlung der Welt* (recently translated into English as *The Transformation of the World*), succeeds only partway in restoring attention to the century, and then only by viewing it as a laboratory not for democracy but for globalization. But focusing overwhelmingly on France's experience between the first revolution and the Great War, Rosanvallon's work was out of step with the Anglo-American trend of global history. In fact, it broadly excluded a now almost obligatory focus on empire that has done much to provide French historians in the Anglo-American world with a potential response to decline of broader interest in their materials. I cannot think of any section in Rosanvallon's writings all the way along the course of his career that has made France's imperial incursions even tangentially relevant to "the experience of democracy", whereas for better or worse today students of French history writing in English, like those who write British history, risk the obverse emphasis, making their field nothing but imperial (and in the latter part of the twentieth century post-imperial) history (Rosanvallon 2003: 27).

Alongside these factors concerning the marginality of France's democratic experiment is the related but distinct and overwhelming shipwreck of its intellectual nobility. Abruptly, Paris lost its centrality to intellectual life in general that it enjoyed from the Enlightenment (if not before) to the era of the *Annales* and throughout the once prestigious series of existentialism, structuralism, and deconstruction. As a consequence, its leading figures became ciphers rather than saints. Suddenly, it did not go without saying that a professor at the Collège de France commanded worldwide attention. The few used bookstores that remain throughout the English-speaking world make the dusty volumes of Roland Barthes, Henri Bergson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, or even Pierre Bourdieu or Maurice Merleau-Ponty widely available, for they were celebrities and *maîtres à penser* for diverse fields of inquiry and even the general public, far beyond their Parisian homes. By contrast, shockingly, no book of Rosanvallon's was even favored to appear in the *New York Review of Books* until 2014 (Starr 2014); as for the *London Review of Books*, with its vestigial nostalgia for academic Marxism, the sole mention of him to date comes in Perry Anderson's notorious diagnosis of French thought, later published in French in *La pensée tiède*, which adopted Lilla's original dichotomy of liberalism versus Marxism, with the sympathies reversed (Anderson 2005). The results of Rosanvallon's exploration of the vicissitudes of French democracy did not rise to the attention of an Anglo-American public – including when I tried to showcase them in *Democracy Past and Future*, which offered selections of some of the principal themes of Rosanvallon's still untranslated major works of the 1980s and 1990s (Rosanvallon 2006).

I should add that Rosanvallon has been perfectly lucid and persuasive in rejecting – or is it transforming? – the model of the *intellectuel français* precisely when it was coming to grief worldwide. Some of his loveliest pages concern how scholarship and citizenship most plausibly interact, precisely to avoid the imperious model of the great thinker (Rosanvallon 2003: 46). While his personal writings are obviously prodigious, and he has made many individual political interventions, he has preferred to operate in the public realm in a new way, by thinking of the scholar as providing long- and medium-term social intelligibility rather than short-term programs. His own institutional ventures, from the Fondation Saint-Simon to the La Vie des Idées<sup>4</sup>, have had their participatory *équipes* rather than singular figures and their indeterminate duration rather than episodic sloganeering. Perhaps the best analogy for what he has done in this regard is the American think tank, but saving it from its typically American pathologies of crude ideological conformism and propagandistic mobilization – the terrible form of “counterdemocracy”, in his own term, that has sapped so much confidence or interest in electoral affairs in my country.

It is true that Rosanvallon’s election to the Collège de France in 2001 coincided with a series of events that seemed as if they might change the equation to that date and escape the confining dynamics of the factors I have mentioned so far. For one thing, the antitotalitarian moment definitively passed. Even if it remained popular for longer in Anglo-American intellectual life to celebrate the so-called legitimacy of the liberal age, and perhaps always will, more and more began to agree with Rosanvallon’s perpetual starting point that liberal democracy is more problem than solution. The events of 1989 did not end history but, in a way, restored the possibility of viewing the drama in the history of democracy from its inception. Arguably, Rosanvallon departed from the limitations of a simply antitotalitarian consensus, after Furet’s death. The *affaire* around the publication of Daniel Lindenberg’s *Le rappel à l’ordre*, which showed the strains between the left-wing and centrist (or even right) components in the old “consensus”, marked an important shift of priorities (Lindenberg 2002). There was no way, after this point, to believe that Rosanvallon was one more confused merchant of coal importing it to a land already transformed by its energy and effluents alike.

Just as important, Rosanvallon impressively chose to write a new style of book that would engage frequently with American history, in contraposition to the French experience, a valuable step in the direction of transnational or at least comparative history. And given his new visibility, these works – beginning with *Le modèle politique français* – finally appeared in English (Rosanvallon 2007; Rosanvallon 2011; Rosanvallon 2013). It is also worth noting that *La contre-démocratie* was given as the highly prestigious Seeley lectures at the University of Cambridge (Rosanvallon 2008); and even though Rosanvallon criticized it in his own theoretical writings, the so-called Cambridge school of John Dunn, Quentin Skinner and others could recognize in Rosanvallon a peer who was testing the border between history and political theory just as they had been doing. And Rosanvallon strayed further into the twentieth century (and even beyond) than he had done in the 1980s and 1990s. A native’s interest in revolutionary France and the once obsessive but currently unfashionable interest in the nineteenth century might no longer hinder his reception.

But these reorientations have faced new obstacles. Grievously, not liberalism but a series of academic trends in Anglo-American historiography and political theory have gen-

erally excluded the specific model that Rosanvallon's newer investigations allowed – at least so far. As far as I can tell, the inveterate nationalism of American historians of their own country continues to immunize them against work by outsiders or comparativists, of the sort Rosanvallon began offering them in the new millennium. A few great figures since Friedrich von Gentz and Alexis de Tocqueville have organized their thought around a comparison of French and American experiences – but in our time, as I will mention in a moment, it was not Rosanvallon but another figure who has been celebrated for doing so. The most glaring tendency, however, is not one that took place among historians at all, but a dedicated normative approach in political theory and philosophy which, when allied to the formal and empiricist bent of Anglo-American thought, made little space for the conceptual, experiential, and historicist vision of democracy that Rosanvallon has continued to offer in his recent studies of legitimacy and equality. It was not just the Cold War liberals whom Rosanvallon resembled little, but also the normative democrats, like John Rawls and his heirs, to say nothing of the reigning sort of political “scientist” in thrall to science-envy and its data and models.

It is in part the very proximity of the historically novel Anglo-American interest in the theme of democratic order that makes our immunity to foreign ways of conceptualizing it so disappointing. After all, so-called “democratic theory” has risen far and fast in Anglo-American thought, yet primarily in ways that repeated the country's generally formalistic bent and more recently as an ahistorical or antihistorical quest for democracy's true or proper normative principles. This situation made for exceptional hospitality only for external figures like Jürgen Habermas, but not for Rosanvallon, and in part because they were so close to the way people already knew how to think in the English-speaking world. It is almost as if Anglo-America were condemned to receive only those who come close to its own style of liberalism or else those – like the Alain Badiou and Slavóž Žižeks – who reject it root and branch. More hopefully, however, there are also signs that the sort of political theory that has remained dominant is not likely to last, if recent so-called “realist” assaults on the reigning commitment to neo-Kantian normativity in Anglo-American thought are indicative of future trends. But even this is a hazardous prediction.

Let me close with a different illustration of both the immunity of Anglo-American thought to Rosanvallon's brand of inquiry and the new opening it may now permit. For Rosanvallon's work was never merely in dialogue and competition with other political theories. As his French career shows, Rosanvallon's method stood out as a prominent attempt to offer academic synthesis and public dialogue on matters of burning civic concern, whether these were the fate of the welfare-state, the transformation of trade-unionism, or the role of government in the face of the explosion of civil society. And even if this role is broadly unavailable in American and English intellectual life, we have been witness to a recent debate in which academic insight was injected into popular consciousness, on the very topic of inequality that Rosanvallon has most recently made his own. I refer, of course, to the spectacular reception of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twentieth Century* – an excellent point of comparison (Piketty 2014).

The puzzle of Piketty's success is interesting on its own, of course, but doubly so when compared to Rosanvallon's very different readership, in general and for *The Society of Equals* in particular. That the two authors share much is self-evident, from their affiliation with a certain sort of socialism, to their favored Franco-American comparison, to their common translator, Arthur Goldhammer. But if Piketty's breakthrough account of the history of inequality became an unexpected bestseller in my country, the comparison



helps show that it was in part because it shared so much with dominant styles of thought there. Piketty's project is empirical demonstration, at least in the first place, as well as deciphering the laws of capital that explain the data. Rosanvallon, by contrast, cites the data of Piketty and his colleagues, as a point of departure in a very different exploration. Much has been made of Piketty's contempt for disciplinary economics, but his departure from it is hardly very pronounced in the scheme of things. Creditably, Piketty observes that his discipline became a site for mathematical virtuosity, rather than civic commitment, and his book surely demonstrates how to remedy that defect. But his much celebrated turn to historical analysis or even "political economy" seems much less pronounced at second glance than at the start. Its rigor played to the pseudo-scientificity of the social disciplines (not to mention a popular culture enamored of economics), while criticizing it too. In revenge, it lacked many of the historical commitments it claimed. Above all, the account of the now clearly exceptional period when inequality was moderated relies on vague allusions to unspecified events that, as others have observed, enter Piketty's picture nearly as external forces to capitalism – "akin to natural disasters" (an expression from Knox Peden; see Moyn 2014: 54). Redistributive politics are illustrated but not themselves explained. One is forced to conclude that Piketty's success is due not only to an obvious intellectual brilliance and favorable ideological conjuncture but an interesting proximity to analytical frameworks that it purports to challenge.

Rosanvallon's *The Society of Equals* is, on the other hand, a radically different kind of exercise on the same topic – much more of an alternative in intellectual style to what we know in Anglo-America, complementary in spirit to Piketty's venture though Rosanvallon's book is. Yet it may be no accident that *The Society of Equals* is Rosanvallon's first book to receive broader attention, often in explicit relation to the current political debate on inequality that preceded and hopefully will outlast the Piketty phenomenon. The *New York Review of Books* ran its long review, as I mentioned earlier, the first of any of Rosanvallon's books, accompanied by a photograph of actor Leonardo DiCaprio standing on his yacht from his title role in "The Wolf of Wall Street". Unlike Piketty, who focuses on a very specific sort of inequality (essentially, in income and wealth), Rosanvallon opens up a broad taxonomy of different modes of similarity and difference as they have been perceived and pursued in sequence across modern history. Recalling the one time radicalism of political equality that made the pursuit of other sorts of equality unimaginable, while saving us from Tocqueville's mistaken belief that Christianity paved the way for it, Rosanvallon insists if anything on a story of inequality that has an even longer *durée* than Piketty's (fortunately Rosanvallon is not limited by the availability of state-collected population data).

More important, when it comes to the rise of industrial capitalism that ruined the optimism of the early nineteenth century that political equality might translate naturally into rough social equality, Rosanvallon gives a much more plausible historical account – even a political economy – of the origins of redistributive politics. Unlike others who pine somewhat nostalgically for a return to the social-democratic state, Rosanvallon shows that redistribution from Otto von Bismarck on depended on what he insightfully calls a "reformism of fear" (Rosanvallon 2011a: 240). It occurred, that is, only in the presence of an active working class and, ultimately, a frightening communist enemy. From this analysis, there emerges for our times not the prospects of a global wealth tax but the great challenge of discovering a functional replacement for the fear – not to mention mass carnage around the world – that created a moment of comparative strength for the social bond that

recent generations no longer know how to experience. In a long-term theme in Rosanvallon's work, owing to his reading of Louis Dumont in the 1970s, a new solidaristic politics would have to work compatibly with, rather than wish away, the contemporary zest for singularity. All this seems far beyond where the reception of Piketty's book has taken Anglo-American discussion, notwithstanding the importance of having the rise of inequality empirically proven and the laws of capital made once again a topic of permissible speculation.

The frontiers of Rosanvallon's work and those of our own political moment thus coincide. One thing seems clear: in the reception of Pierre Rosanvallon's thought, it was most definitely not a matter of bringing coal to Newcastle. Instead, it was to offer fuel for a future and necessary politics, as befits his exemplary demonstration of how to synthesize the roles of scholar and citizen, and – among the many other imperatives he has offered so far – to rethink more deeply present inequalities and their alternatives in light of the longer histories of both.

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