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Martin S. Staum, *Nature and Nurture in French Social Sciences, 1859-1914 and Beyond*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi+261, illus. CDN\$95 (cloth). ISBN 9780773538924.

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The matter of nature versus nurture — heredity versus environment — remains an important feature of Western thought. It involves a comprehensive debate that tackles race, ethnicity, gender, even religion, and delves into matters as philosophical as free will versus (pre)determination and as prosaic as social demographics. In this book, Staum makes a valuable contribution to the debate by skilfully placing the issue of nurture versus nature in the context of mid- to late nineteenth-century French social thought, extending that central debate to its long-lasting echoes in the twentieth century.

The choice of France was neither random nor solely case-study related. France was, in fact, a nation that pioneered some of the “scientific” studies which sought to give attention to either environment or heredity. It was surprising to find a few errors in Staum’s book — he claimed, for example, that “sociology” was created by Auguste Comte, when in fact the good Emmanuel Sieyès coined the term before the positivist master, and made important strides, alongside others like Condorcet, in considering nature versus nurture. But of course the focus of Staum’s book is 1859-1914 (and beyond) and as such he can be perceived to have given due attention to the Comtean tradition and the later sociologists of the Durkheimian school (and the non-Durkheimians as well). The reader may also be surprised to read a few seemingly out-dated assumptions such as “the Second empire being oppressive intellectually” (19) which no doubt served, in Staum’s argument, as grounds to help explain why nurture versus nature became a debate exactly at the time when it did. For those of us who have studied the Second French Empire, the assertion of intellection oppression seems a bit odd, and one could conceivably argue that it was the atmosphere of scientific pursuit during Napoleon III’s period that led many of the key figures in Staum’s book to become devoted to the matters of environment and social bonds in influencing human thought and action.

Quite aside from these minor issues which are no doubt a result of Staum’s own reading and interpretation of the period, the book offers excellent nuances into the scientific mindset of the time. It is of course not unusual for studies on nature and nurture, heredity or environment, to consider nineteenth-century social theory. So much was going on intellectually at the time, especially, as Staum aptly puts it, with imperialism and the new wave of European expansion, that the mind immediately focuses on the intellectual justifications — the rationalizations concocted by Europeans — for the new wave of conquest. And in the debate over nurture versus nature, a scholar today can find — much like an European savant in the nineteenth century did find — quite a solid basis for defence of the appropriateness of European expansion. Staum’s book is remarkable for tackling the debate with great care, examining some well-known theorists like Durkheim but also a great deal of less well-known luminaries of French social

science whose names have long disappeared from history books. So his work is not only welcome, but important and relevant to future generations of students and scholars alike.

That said, that Staum did not push the boundaries of the debate further is a pity. He considered the “beyond” and brought the nature versus nurture debate to Vichy and even to today’s assumptions about how much we carry on because of our genes, and how much our background determines who we are. But he failed — as countless others before him — to consider the nature versus nurture in the context of the nascent state. So much of the theorizations of sociologists related directly to the State (with a capital “S”) and with its relationship to the “rest” of the world that it is surprising that the ideas forwarded by these same people about gender and race, ideas which dwelled for the most part on the scientific paradigms at the time, have not yet considered the higher political focus. While Staum clearly approaches this, and his conclusion confronts the matter head on, he, too, comes short of making a strong and persuasive link between the political mindset and the creation and pursuit of science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps that could be interesting matter for a volume 2.