Transversal
International Journal for the Historiography of Science

Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science, 2025 (19): 1-9
ISSN 2526-2270
Belo Horizonte – MG / Brazil

Book review

Castel, Jean-Pierre & Simard, Jean-Claude. (2024). *La Mathématisation du Temps : De la Science Hellénistique à la Science Moderne*. Vrin / Presses de l'Université Laval. Collection Zêtêsis. 551 pages.

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2025.i19.17

Our time is not one of "big ideas" in the historiography of science: the huge amount of information concerning each science, the details of their histories, the complexity of sources and methodologies – all of this (fortunately) shows the rich and intricate character of doing history of science in the twentieth first century. As a corollary, history of science has received a lot of contributions for important specific topics. This book is a rare example of a contemporary history of science work with a broad view, and if only for this, it deserves credits. And indeed, this bigger view instigates the reader to think.

A second general remark to be made is on the amazing variety of authors and topics that are discussed here. Indeed, Castel and Simard are impressively well-read, managing to link authors that are rarely found in the same discussion – to have in the same page references to Alfred Whitehead, Étienne Klein and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (p. 368), for instance, or to Marcel Mauss and Ilya Prigogine (p. 369) is, to say the minimum, not common. In this sense, it would be hard for anyone not to learn anything with such a book.

The book is didactic in character, neatly presenting the concepts and references under discussion. In some passages, it could almost be read as an introduction to the history of some scientific concepts and the history of philosophy of science. It is written in an accessible and precise manner, and arguments are presented in a clear way. Thus, the book paves the way for discussion, though it is somewhat long for what it achieves (having too many sections and some internal redundancy), as we will argue below.

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Despite the apparently unique focus suggested by the title "On the mathematization of time", it contains almost two books in one: the first challenges the thesis, fundamentally defended by Alexandre Koyré, that the essence of modern science lies in the mathematization of nature; the second challenges the idea, fundamentally defended by Alexandre Kojève, that modern science has a Christian origin. For the authors, these two theses converge, for in this view Christianity would be the true source of the mathematization of nature. Thus, the main thesis could be reformulated (as it is not completely explicit in the book): because Christianity is not the origin of modern science, the essence of modern science is not either the mathematization of nature, as is more commonly argued. What then is the true essence of modern science? According to the authors, a change in the conceptualization of time has been central to the "scientific revolution", which allowed for its mathematization.

The central hero of the book is Galileo, in opposition to Descartes (who receives a very critical view, as being too metaphysical in some sense). According to the authors, the principle of inertia made possible the mathematization of time, and it would be found in the first place in Galileo (even if in its "complete" form only in Newton). To the modern reader, it could seem to be an evident principle, but this is not so: in an interesting criticism towards Phenomenology (mainly Husserl), the authors declare that "the principle of inertia is completely counterintuitive" (p. 400). Their claim is that the mathematization of nature was already present in Hellenistic science (mainly "divine" Archimedes, as Galileo called him), but the principle of inertia makes it possible to have a new conceptualization of time that allows the birth of modern science.

The authors have an insightful way of presenting scientific problems, in addition to a commendable scientific culture. They pay attention to questions of importance. A good example for this is to be found at page 170, where the authors note that Galileo formulates both the principle of inertia and the concept of isochrony, as if *uniformity* were the obsession, common to both. In particular, they brilliantly remark that Galileo deduced his principle of inertia from the study of the inclined plan, the inertial movement being the one of a ball rolling on a not-inclined plane, a limit-case where the ball has no reason to accelerate nor decelerate. This is an important insight, insofar as the pendulum isochrony and the inclined plane are, in Galileo's studies, completely interrelated (Büttner 2017).

The idea that probably suggested the title of the book, the special character of the measure of time in the Galilean tradition, is presented with a crucial remark about the identity between the measure of time based on purely terrestrial (and even laboratory) tools and the principle of energy conservation. The pendulum, which is indeed a new object for scientific studies by Galileo's age, illustrates both, since its movement is regular because of the conservation of energy. Of course, the coupling of this practice and this theory, the degree it reaches and its explanation remains an open question deserving much longer developments. However, the authors rightly highlight the importance of the study of the pendulum for the understanding of classical science, and one could add for classical culture. The physical insights are unfortunately not always accompanied by a historiographical work of the same level. It was noted above that the book brings together unexpected sources, which is interesting in a certain sense. On the other hand, the lack of historiographical standard (and even of historiographical rigor in some sense) presents some problems.

The authors do not seem to be conscious of the bias brought by the use of more or less reliable sources and the imbalance between second hand literature and original sources. One cannot criticize them for not being exhaustive and not having studied the details on the issues discussed. However, believing that important matters can be judged without giving a thought to the original historical question which gives them their meaning is misleading.

In general, historical arguments are not sufficiently established, giving the impression, perhaps mistakenly, of a certain arbitrariness. Thus, in the beginning of the discussion on the relations between Christianity and mathematization, one reads: "Let's recall that theology, a discipline initiated by Plato, was among the Greeks 'one of the three fundamental theoretical sciences with physics and mathematics'" (p. 338). What is the meaning here of "theology", that could authorize the very strange idea that Plato has *initiated* it? How can an isolated sentence found in Aristotle's *Physics*, about the three Aristotelian theoretical sciences, suddenly become a fair *representative* of the Greek culture as a whole? In what way are these two very arbitrary ideas a mere "*recall*" for the reader? Examples like this are countless. More generally, Castel and Simard do not act as historians when they appeal to very heterogeneous sources without distinguishing between them: classics, modern literature of relevant topics and course notes are quoted several times without differentiating the kind of respect they deserve.

Some other issues that the book raises regarding historiography deserve our attention here. First, if, following Lucio Russo (1965), the authors emphasize the importance of Hellenistic science, a lot remains to be said on this topic. Certainly, the reader's curiosity will be piqued by the few examples given of achievements mentioned in the corresponding section (VI.2). For instance, one will discover that scholars of Antiquity studied phenomena like the path of a drop in a waterfall. It is also justified to insist on Hellenistic science in opposition to Greek science before Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, it is surprising not to find any mention of the confluence of non-Greek practices in Hellenistic science. Would not the cuneiform tradition, which introduced equal measures of time deserve more care, in a book centered around the question of the mathematization of time? Furthermore, Hellenistic science is not envisaged in its originality and variety, but rather in how much it preluded the development of Galilean science. The authors insist on the Lyceum's tradition, which is better able to provide what they are looking for, but even there, it is doubtful that the extensive lost treatise *On motion* by Theophrastus, or Strato's *On the void*, would have the mechanistic tone that they imagine to have been spread in Hellenistic science. In fact, Hellenistic science followed different directions, all of which do not satisfy the general pattern the authors ascribe to this period. Thus, the rich and impressive stoic physics studied by Samuel Sambursky (1959) is not strictly mechanical, the *pneuma* being simultaneously a principle of harmonic tension and of rhythmic order. It is also striking that the scientific conceptions of Antiquity most similar to the Galilean view are found in Christian authors like Augustinus, for whom all bodies were somewhat heavy, and John Philoponus, who defended the conservation of movement in mobiles. Indeed, these authors also paid attention, in different ways, to either time as such or to time in its relation to movement.

In general, it is reasonable to harbor some doubt about the interpretation of history underlying the general argumentation of the book. For instance, is it really the case that in the late Middle Ages secular time measurement based on mechanical clocks was in complete opposition to monastic and religious time measurement, supposedly following celestial phenomena and thus not completely regular? After all, the oldest known mechanical clock was designed by Richard of Wallingford for his abbey of St Albans, and built in the mid fourteenth century (North 2005). In fact, it was not unusual for natural philosophers of this period to take time as an independent variable for the descriptions of abstract movements. The authors do not seem to be aware of the fact that Nicole Oresme proved mathematically that, for a mobile accelerating or decelerating at constant rate, the distance travelled is like the square of the time (Busard 2010, p. 150 and p. 152-153, Debroise 2019, p. 126-127).

Finally, is it justified to restrain the source of modern scientific spirit to the Galilean tradition of mechanics and dynamics? This seems to be far-fetched for at least two reasons:

firstly, the authors associate the scientific spirit with a relativistic view for which no absolute and overwhelming certainty can be reached. But if such is the case, the Galilean tradition is not in accordance with their definition of scientific spirit, since, at least from Galileo to Newton, this tradition looks for unilateral and absolute truth in cosmological matters. Second, is it really sound to exclusively assign sources to the modern scientific mindset? For example, it is clear that the demand for a new kind of experimentation was not limited to Galileo's circle, but owed a lot to the Paracelsian tradition. But there is no doubt that the Paracelsians, like Van Helmond, deliberately and purposefully attempted to replace pagan science with Christian science.

This being said, the analysis of the "religious" thesis is, as it were, less precise than that of the mathematization of time. The main problem is that things get mixed up. It is one thing to defend the thesis of the "Christian origin of modern science", and it is another to say that Christianity is *compatible* with, or *one of the conditions of possibility*, of modern science. Among various points of the authors' argument (regarding topics such as the conception of "natural laws" or the conception of infinity) is the question of the place of rationality in Christianity. But there is a huge difference in stating that modern science originated *because* of rationality as existing in Christianity and in stating that there is a mutual *compatibility* between both. Kojève's thesis represents the first position, but several of the authors quoted in the book seem to simply claim something among the lines of the second position in this thesis.

In fact, Castel and Simard *do* touch on this issue – but only at page 476, in an "annex" dedicated to Kojève's text. There, the authors quote Jean-Michel Maldamé (2017) about the fact that "all historians agree that modern science was born in Europe within a context of monotheistic, and even specifically Christian, thought, as A. Kojève demonstrates" (Maldamé 2017, p. 138). As the authors correctly declare in a footnote, this phrase is obvious for its first part, and it would be accepted by a number of historians. The problem, according to the authors themselves, is that it is wrong to associate Kojève's thesis to this, as he would argue for a *decisive factor* of Christianity, that is to say, causation, and not just a correlation. This would imply not taking into account economic, political and philosophical reasons for the development of modern science besides the religious influence, which would be absurd (p. 479). We do agree with the authors on this, and it is an important point – but here we can ask why this is so, and *against whom* they are really writing their book. They give the impression that Kojève's thesis is widely shared, but is this the case?

Indeed, this "annex" would have fit very well earlier in the book. Although in the first part of the book the authors summarize Kojève's thesis, the annex presents a *critical* discussion with Kojève, which would have had a decisive impact had it been held earlier. Kojève's thesis is indeed quite polemical: according to him, the Incarnation would be what made possible the mathematization of the world, mathematics being restricted to divine bodies in Ancient (Greek) science. Kojève (quoted by the authors at p. 482) writes that Incarnation is the possibility for the eternal God to be present in the temporal world without losing its perfection.

> But if the presence in the sensible world does not deteriorate this perfection, it is because this world is (or has been, or will be) itself perfect, at least in a certain measure (a measure which, besides, nothing prevents us from establishing precisely). (Kojève 2021 [1964], p. 94)

As the authors correctly claim, this constitutes a quite bizarre thesis (with its origin in Hegel):

> If the Incarnation identifies something of the human with the divine, it does not erase the irreducible difference between divine perfection and human imperfection, and, a fortiori, between divine perfection and the non-human world, as Kojève nevertheless supposes. (p. 483)

This kind of problematization of Kojève's text is indeed quite suitable, and the authors agree with Jean-François Stoffel (2021), who writes: "We will be very reserved regarding this instrumentalization of the dogma of the Incarnation". The problem with the argumentation of the book as a whole is that (i) it is not clear *who exactly* would agree precisely with Kojève's thesis (perhaps not as much of a group as the book leads the reader to suspect); (ii) Kojève *has been criticized*, both recently (for example Stoffel 2021) and in the past (for instance Russo 1965); in this sense, what is the original contribution of authors? Besides, the reader would like to know precisely what already appears in each of these criticisms, even if in short, in order to better evaluate what *new* criticisms the book offers. Stoffel (2021), for instance, is less quoted than would have been appropriate.

In this sense, it is an oversimplification to declare that "the thesis of the Christian, or Judeo-Christian origin of modern science is adopted by an impressive number of authors, from diverse backgrounds" (p. 21), among which Blondel, Hegel, Nietzsche, Collingwood, Jaspers, Heidegger, Löwith, Merleau-Ponty, Régis Debray and Rémi Brague, Weber, Merton, Rodney Stark, René Girard, Paul Jorion, Diederik Raven, Mircea Eliade, Pierre Chaunu, Marcel Gauchet, Duhem, Reijer Hooykaas, Alistair Crombie, Michel Serres, Michel Blay, Gennady Gorelik, Jung, Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Valéry, Sombart, Schumpeter, Whitehead, Oppenheimer, Prigogine, Monod, Françoise Balibar, John Lennox, Freeman Dyson, John D. Barrow and Jean-Marc Lévy-Leblond (p. 21-23). What exactly would be *the thesis* in question? The authors reduce the discussion to either *pro* or *contra* the "thesis of the Christian origin of modern science", named by Kojève's essay, as though it was not crucial to consider the approach under which the thesis is formulated, and the meaning of "origin" in this context. As mentioned above, the authors themselves claim that it is one thing to defend a *causal* relationship between Christianity and modern science, and quite another one to approach the issue as a question of context – this being only, of course, the first distinction to be made between the different positions in question. As a rich analysis of the book correctly states, "it would be unwise to lose sight of the fact that there is a whole spectrum between antipodal pairs, [Christianity as] a decisive factor and a negligible factor" for modern science (Morneau-Guérin, 2024): one thing can be a cause of another, without being its sole cause. In general, the authors completely oversimplify Christian tradition, and this oversimplification can also be said of the crux of their argumentation, their criticism of Kojève's thesis.

One of the greatest merits of the book is undoubtedly that it draws attention back to Kojève, a major figure of twentieth century intellectual life. Unfortunately, the criticism of Kojève's thesis is also one of its worst flaws. Kojève was not a professional historian of science, but essentially a philosopher whose short essay on the origin of "modern science" is only about ten pages long. Written seven years before his death, it is the work of a mature thinker, well trained, if not immersed, in Russian philosophy of religion. To fully understand Kojève's short essay, one obviously needs to understand this Russian context, and to sincerely engage with the writings of the author. In particular, many obscure assertions could have been clarified by a methodic reading of Kojève's *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*, in three volumes published between 1968 and 1973, and whose present essay is somehow a very abridged version (Bibard 2016). Doing otherwise would be like starting the ascent of Mount Everest with a bottle of water and a good pair of sneakers: it would be presumptuous. Obviously, the authors did not think that the true understanding of

the essay really mattered: between the long path of critical thinking and the short path of quibbles, they chose the second path.

In particular, their critical strategy in the Annex consists of selecting some sentences from the essay, and adding comments – being by no means an analysis. But what about the parts of the essay that are not quoted? Thus, by the end of his essay, Kojève suggests that a new trend has emerged in contemporary science: the world seems "to be doomed once again to utter chaos" (Kojève 2021 [1964], p. 97). No doubt Kojève had quantum mechanics in mind, about which he wrote, as early as 1932, an essay called *L'idée du déterminisme dans la physique moderne et dans la physique classique*. He attributes this innovation to the *atheism* of contemporary scholars, not without humor. To be clear, this atheist science is not a corruption of the true Christian science, but "physics properly speaking" (Kojève 1968, p. 303). Thus, if, for Kojève, mathematical physics has a Christian origin, he also thinks this science is surpassed by an *atheist* science, quantum mechanics. In this sense, Castel and Simard oversimplified Kojève's idea.

Kojève himself was not merely an atheist: he was a *convinced* atheist (Nicolas 2025). His atheism is almost apostasy: he rejects God after having followed the whole path of one who achieves God. He is a Russian nihilist. For him, Christianity is an alienation. A true, communist society must rise from the ashes of Christianity. Man will only be free when he renounces the illusion of God. Let's quote Kojève himself:

> Eliminating the inadequacy of Christian ideology, freeing oneself from the absolute Master and the Hereafter, achieving Freedom and living in the World as an autonomous and free human being – all this is possible only on condition that one accepts the idea of death and, consequently, atheism. (Kojève 2017 [1947], p. 214, quoted in Nicolas 2025, p. 76)

If Kojève thinks at the same time that Christianity is alienation, and that mathematical physics has a Christian origin, what does that mean? That means that there is some alienation in classical and mechanical physics.

Once again, let's be clear: mathematical physics *is* a progress. According to Kojève, the very idea of Physics comes from Democritus, but there is no mathematical physics in Democritus' work. This could only happen with the spirituality of Christian Incarnation, exacerbated in the XVIth century. However, Christian Incarnation is not the only kind of "incarnation" Kojève identified: according to him, for example, Aristotle's cosmology also implies a kind of "incarnation", because Aristotle also "incarnated" his God. However, his Incarnation is celestial, whereas the Christian Incarnation is also terrestrial (Kojève 1972, p. 291-292). For Kojève, Incarnation is a concept, not a dogma, and this extension of a Christian idea to Aristotle, whether one agrees or not with it, should have made the authors more cautious when discussing Kojève's interpretation of religious notions.

Kojève has a complex use of the notion of *incarnation*. Basically, he uses it to refer to the actual presence of an *eternal* ideal in the "sensible world", an essence, only waiting for human intelligence to be disclosed. He argues in his essay on Paganism already mentioned that the Christian Incarnation, and more generally Christianity, is the overcoming, in a dialectical and historical process, of the Greek or Pagan idea of rationality and the Jewish idea of revelation. Thus, in this view, there is no *contradiction* between Paganism and Christianity, but a dialectical *overcoming*. Thus, once again, the relation between "paganism" and "christianity", in Kojève's idea, is much more complex than suggested by the authors.

In fact, Kojève would probably label Castel and Simard's own idea of science as "classical" and "christian" – and in, their own term, a "secularization", that is, a Christian

science without the Christian God. Indeed, they seem to take it for granted that science is essentially the search for "invariants":

> Since Thales, the very essence of science has been to seek out natural principles, or in other words, invariants. (...) The search for permanence has characterized Western thought since at least the time of the Greeks. (p. 484)

But this is what, in his general philosophy, Kojève rejected as Christian and "alienated": according to him, man can only become a true human being when he frees himself from the idea that he is the incarnation of an essence already existing and created by a God, that is, when he understands he *is* nothing, but something to be created by himself. Thus, Kojève's idea of the "Christian origin of modern science" also implies the necessity to overcome this alienating origin in order for science to become true and *truly* rational, that is, to abandon its ideal of necessary natural laws.

Thus, the authors don't seem to be aware that Kojève is, in fact, opposing his friend Koyré. To the famous Koyré's idea that modern science is "Plato's revenge", Kojève explicitly opposed that the true "Plato's revenge" was *contemporary* science, because randomness was back in the spotlight:

> The atheist scholars *of our time* would thus witness a kind of revenge of the ancient and pagan Plato… (Kojeve 2021 [1964], p. 97, emphasize is ours)

The problem with all this section on Kojève is not that the authors misunderstood his ideas, and thus the very idea of a "Christian origin of modern science", but that they do not seem to take this idea seriously enough: they merely dismiss it as against their own idea of science as an essentially "desacralising" process, and as threatening the scientific progress by submitting science to religious court. By doing so, they are creating some historical confusions, giving the illusion that Koyré, a convinced atheist, is some kind of Christian bigot. The authors may be right in their "crusade" (Stoffel 2021, p. 368) against a naïve apology of Christian faith, and maybe one could argue that, today, science is threatened by a revival of fanaticism. That could be the basis for a *political* and polemical essay about contemporary society, but not for a *historical* essay about the origin of modern science: between "crushing the infamy" and doing history, one has to choose.

Finally, to quote another example of how some issues are oversimplified, the authors claim that, with the advent of Christianity, a unique vision has replaced science (*episteme*), and talk about "Saint Paul's diatribes against science" (p. 437). An example among others would be the verse "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Corinthians 3:19, King James Bible). But taking Saint Paul's wisdom (*sofia*) of this world as equivalent to *episteme* – and even more to modern science – is simply false. Of course, simple curiosity can be condemned from a Christian perspective, but at the same time the image and likeness of God is reflected in human reason, and science is a commendable activity. Someone can certainly support – as does Pascal, discussed at chapter eight of the book – that science cannot solve the meaning of life or to reach true wisdom, even though it has its own relative value in its order.

Returning to the issue of time, we should consider the following sentence: "For the ancients, geometry was a purely static science [...] *modern science must be defined above all by its aspiration to take time as an independent variable*". This phrase summarizes quite well the main thesis of the book; it is not however written by the authors (p. 407), but a quote of Henri Bergson (2009 [1907], p. 334-335). Of course, it is important to acknowledge the

sources, and almost every page of the book has quotations. But one ends up by asking what exactly the original thesis of the book would be.

Perhaps the originality of the book should be found in its "double" aspect – however, the role of the conceptualization (and the mathematization) of time is not well affined in any suitable depth to the alleged irrelevance of Christianity to modern science. Some sections are dedicated to the passage of a "religious" time (based on rituals, following seasons and daylight) to a "regular" civil time (with a standard independent of natural phenomena, and which is furthermore comparable and divisible). However, no further analysis of the relationship between the two theses is carried out. Perhaps their logical connection should be found *in absentia*. As the authors write:

> This essay characterizes modern science by considering time as a fundamental variable. Generally speaking, it is remarkable that all the arguments in favor of the Christian thesis completely disregard this break with Archimedes' science – a scholar whom this thesis, moreover, superbly ignores. Neither the infinitely large, nor the disenchantment of the world, nor the reunification of Heaven and Earth, nor the dogma of Creation, nor the supposed rationality of Christianity have any direct connection with this mathematization not of nature, but of time. (p. 387)

Of course, it is interesting to note that the thesis of the mathematization of time as distinctive of modern science is absent from the thesis of the "Christian origin" of modern science; if this is the case, however, more should be drawn in *why* this is so, in order to explicitly articulate both views. If absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the question is *why* time finds no place in the Christian sources of modern science for those who defend this position. The authors recall that the infinity of time was always a problem for Christian conceptions, the very notion of creation *ex nihilo* implying a beginning. But would this be sufficient to explain the issue?

More broadly, the implicit argument of the authors, as said above, could be reformulated as the fact that, (i) contrary to Kojève (and (ii) to those who supposedly defend the same view), (iii) there is no Christian origin of modern science, (iv) and there is no revolution taking place with the supposed new mathematization of nature, (v) because the true revolution is a new conceptualization of time. As we tried to indicate here, the book falls short in reaching the conclusion of (ii), (iii) and (iv) – and does not give the right context and understanding for (i), even if a lot of good questions are raised. That being said, one can learn a lot regarding (v), that is to say, on the mathematization of time, a thesis on its own that gives the title of the book and that perhaps could have been its only focus, in order to make the argument around its richly illustrated thesis more sound.

In conclusion, we strongly recommend the reading of this book which, despite all its weaknesses, encourages its reader to clarify and develop his or her own understanding of scientific content and of the history of science. The book aroused our interest and occasionally ignited our curiosity: in this sense, read with a grain of salt in regard to its apologetic purpose, it can be profitable and enjoyable for all kinds of readers.

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