Ideas associated with pluralism were at the front of many intelligent political minds in the Third Republic. Republicans of different stripes kept up a constant reflection on the problems of French political history; when they did so, and regardless of whether they were influenced more by Proudhon or by Taine, politicians of a more philosophical mindset found their thoughts straying more and more towards the problem of the centralized or ‘Jacobin’ State and how it might best be adapted. The question that preoccupied some of these thinkers around 1900 was one of how to unlock the centralized administrative framework inherited from previous regimes, thus reawakening more traditional forces in society such as corporations or provinces (the term ‘region’ was designed for less conservative believers in a provincial renewal for France). For others, the economic demands of modern society, and the grave challenge posed to Republican institutions by the social question, demanded a more rigorous approach, overhauling the economic framework in which the middle-class Republic operated, and giving life to trades unions and workers’ associations as the new building blocks of the social Republic. Both these strands could be seen as advancing a pluralist critique of the existing system; but these strands had a powerful place within mainstream republican debate. Unlike the royalist Charles Maurras, many regionalists or federalists did not attack the very idea of the Republic, but rather sought to adapt it, using pluralism as a tool for republican regeneration. Regionalists and syndicalists were active on the fringes of the republican political arena, making strong connections to pressure groups or intellectual circles that welcomed mainstream republican politicians. Indeed, the question for historians of the Third Republic and
pluralism is not ‘did such ideas have a role in the Third Republic’, but rather, ‘given the wide discussion of ideas of state reform during this period, why was so little achieved?’

Of course understanding what could be defined as the ‘achievement’ of state reform is not straightforward. Many state-reformers saw that it was not just reform that was needed, but a new way of thinking about the process of reform: how could political reform adapt to a different rhythm? how might it connect to democratically-expressed opinion? Many state reformers believed in a slow, gradual or ‘experimented’ transition from one state-model to another; the ‘parliamentary wand’ was not their chosen instrument.¹ A healthy scepticism about the appropriateness of rapid legislative change took hold. The pluralists of the Third Republic did not all want pluralism to be ‘introduced’ by parliament. For these republicans, pluralism was about a renewal of the processes of republican democracy and republican administration. If it was to be true to itself, it would need to emerge more steadily; and thus in a sense it is wrong to look too closely for ‘pluralist failures’ in this period.²

Pluralism was thus both a rich source of new ideas within Republicanism, and a thwarted political goal for many practical reformers. This chapter examines the intellectual context in which a distinctive centre-left variety of pluralism emerged and started to influence political reform plans within the French republican leadership; but it also considers this development as an important contribution to wider reflections in European political thought. French regionalist and syndicalist pluralism inspired a later generation of English political scientists between the wars; important insights about the French example can be drawn from the way in which the ideas of the moderate socialist Joseph Paul-Boncour or the regionalist Jean Charles-Brun were discussed by eminent commentators like Harold Laski or Roger Soltau. We will also consider the conversations that developed, sometimes tenuously, between a centre-left reformer such as Paul-Boncour and other French state-reformers like André Tardieu. The final sections of this chapter will offer a more extended discussion of Paul-Boncour’s own work on pluralist ideas, in a context where a propitious meeting of ideas and political reform seemed possible: the immediate aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair, at the turn of the century.³ This discussion, weaving republican intellectual activity with practical reform agendas, will ultimately aim to cast some fresh light on the perennial question for French state-reformers: how ideas can infiltrate the political sphere, and on what level we could judge them to have succeeded or failed in inspiring reform. Paul-Boncour’s vision of pluralism may not have become