In this stimulating and original study, Regenia Gagnier analyzes a distinctive feature of fin-de-siècle intellectual history that has probably been neglected because, to a scholar trained in twentieth-century political paradigms, it seems so counterintuitive: the coincidence of extreme professions of individualism with devotion to socialism. In his 1891 essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” for instance, Oscar Wilde asserts that only under the coming socialism will the full development of the personality become possible. Rather than seeing this constellation merely as less politically prescient than Wilde’s sexual radicalism, Gagnier finds in this era’s fluid politics an inspiring interest in relation rather than identity, in cosmopolitan social formations rather than nationalism, and in performative rituals rather than fixed ideologies. Gagnier’s reevaluation of nineteenth-century liberalism reflects the new tone in recent scholarship about Victorian politics, which is now more inclined to take liberalism’s aspirations to many-sidedness seriously (as in David Wayne Thomas’s 2004 Cultivating Victorians) than to dismiss it as a fiction of Western imperialism. It also contrasts interestingly with Gagnier’s own critique of the hidden economic selfishness of aestheticism in her 2000 The Insatiability
of Human Wants, which pointed out how the connoisseur’s discourse of exquisitely-chosen commodities mirrored the rise of marginal utility theory.

Another change from this earlier volume is a shift in Gagnier’s organizing interdisciplinary paradigm from economics to biology. One of the great pleasures of reading Gagnier’s work is its openness to so many different intellectual models, from feminist business ethics to the economic history of pre-imperial Asia to recent work on the cellular biology of altruism. Gagnier’s work is a model of engaged scholarship, with historical studies arranged to illuminate our own globalized era as well as the past. Her juxtaposition of forgotten movements like Charles Godfrey Leland’s defense of the gypsies or John Davidson’s poetic anthropology with reflections on Giorgio Agamben or systems analysis can at times be a little rhetorically disorienting, but it is also brilliantly consilient, creating an exciting sense of connection between facets of the past and present. Gagnier sees the bohemian political movements of the 1890s, like William Morris’s, not as historical dead ends but as creative attempts to think about collective social life in ways that might help overcome some of our current political blockages.

Gagnier draws her central theme of part versus whole from Havelock Ellis’s remarkable 1889 argument that the “individual is the social cell” and should thus remain “subordinate” to the social organism; “but if the energy of the cells becomes independent, the lesser organisms will likewise cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy and the anarchy which is established constitutes the decadence of the whole” (2: italics in original). Ellis’s definition of decadence neatly links biology to aesthetics by denoting the “decadent style” as “one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page … and the phrase to give place to the independence of
the word” (2). Though this biological concept of decadence typically relies on certain moralizing assumptions about the value of social totality, Gagnier presents decadence less as a cultural apocalypse to be feared or celebrated than as a spectrum of alternate communities ranging from the monastic ideal of Joris-Karl Huysmans to the utopian Fellowship of the New Life. Her decadent individuals share appealing traits of tolerance and hospitality, resisting the statist concepts of nation or empire in favor of microcosms like the extended family or macrocosms like a cosmopolitan ideal of European identity, as referenced both in Friedrich Nietzsche’s “good European” in 1886 and Etienne Balibar’s vision of Europeanness, more than a century later, as a kind of borderland defined by its actions rather than its essences.

However, Gagnier also attends to the dark side of these experimental holisms by alluding in almost every chapter to the origins of European fascism. The risk of anachronism here is well worth taking, since I think our perfect hindsight about the dangers of fascist politics represents our most significant barrier to understanding the yearning idealism of fin-de-siècle politics. Gagnier shows how desire to counteract the mob, expel “unruly marginals” (27), build up a firm national will, and assimilate asocial elements into an ideal community ultimately were incorporated into fascist politics as well as the utopias of the 1890s. She thus preserves a sense of the era’s alienness and tragedy as well as trying to recuperate its most progressive elements.

Gagnier’s five chapters should be seen, she suggests, less as a sequence than as a set of “networks,” since authors were linked together like “macrobe[s]” in “multi-directional causal chains” (20, 19). Individualism, the theme of the first chapter, reveals itself as a rather slippery topic since almost all intellectuals of the time considered
themselves individualists. But Gagnier discriminates usefully between several of these schools, including the individualist followers of Herbert Spencer who championed the division of human labor in analogy to the differentiated organism, Matthew Arnold’s pursuit of cultural “interestingness” (38), Clive Bell’s and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s celebrations of English privacy, Sigmund Freud’s reconsideration of the biological drive to individuation, and economic individualism as analyzed by Ian Watt and Colin Campbell. As a coda she compares Walter Pater’s model of isolated hedonism in his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, written in 1868, with his attempt to model stoic and altruistic individualisms in *Marius the Epicurean*, published in 1885.

The following chapter addresses the New Women’s distinctive search for balance between egotism and selflessness, suggesting that their aspirations were less “rigidly independent” than male intellectuals: “They wanted autonomy, individual development, but they wanted it through *relationship*” (63). Gagnier analyzes the dynamic between sensitive self-consciousness and intense altruism that she sees in the works of George Egerton and Theodora Cross. Though this process can be seen as a distinctly feminized, psychologized path to civilized progress, Gagnier also points out some overlaps between Cross’s occasional imagery of violent female erasure and what Klaus Theweleit has seen as the fascist fear of messy female autonomy. Gagnier ends the chapter with welcome appreciations of Alice Meynell, an aesthete and professional writer who celebrated maternity and Catholicism, and the socialist Edith Lees, whose 1909 novel *Attainment* reflects on her utopian lifestyle experiments with husband Havelock Ellis.

In her next chapter, on “Decadent Interiority and the Will,” Gagnier expands on the scientific vision of Decadence drawn from Havelock Ellis to depict the dandiacal idea
of those who heroically or tragically fail to subordinate their individuality to the social whole. The most extended analysis in this chapter is that of John Davidson, an influential exponent of the urban Literature of the Pavement whose poetic epics, now mostly forgotten, came increasingly to represent a materialistic metaphysics of the entire cosmos.

The next two chapters, on philanthropy toward the “unclassed” and on European cosmopolitanism, offer particularly coherent political analyses, working toward a secular ethics of charitable and tolerant engagement with strangers. The story of folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland, an American who left Princeton for German universities and then associated with revolutionaries and became accepted by the gypsies, is especially fascinating. Leland learned the gypsy language Romany, noting its similarities to Hindi and Persian, and recorded the ancient Tinkers’ language of Shelta Thari, returning eventually to Philadelphia to start a craft school and associate with Walt Whitman. Expanding our image of Victorian charity beyond its paternalistic or Christian models, Gagnier suggests that “Victorian philanthropists, particularly those of the fin de siècle, were stranger and more adventurous than our Weberian, Smilesian, or Fabian models, and the late Victorian springs of action were more occult” (126). Leland’s immersion among the “unclassed” and his easy familiarity with those in all levels of society are posited as a model for a less hierarchical kind of charity—although, as she notes, he did not entirely escape the romanticization of their primitive nature (123).

Gagnier’s final chapter turns to William Morris as a model for a cosmopolitan political practice that recognizes (in a wry admission of the limits of political literary criticism) the importance of ritual, beauty, and communal life as well as critical ideas.
She suggests the word “oikeiosis” (the domestic instinct, natural affinity) as a way of thinking the “embodied affect” exemplified by these creative experiments in whole living (149). A certain melancholy lingers about the tale of these foreclosed political possibilities, though Gagnier’s focus on bohemian and individualist socialists perhaps leads her to understate the influence of the less lovely bureaucrats who transformed British society by means of New Liberalism, the Fabian Society and the Labour Party. And yet with her imaginative approach to political theory and fluid interdisciplinary references, Gagnier has performed a work of delicate reclamation, restoring to our attention a distinctive quality of fin de siècle humanism.

Biographical Notice:

Eleanor Courtemanche is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her book The ‘Invisible Hand’ and British Fiction, 1818-1860: Adam Smith, Political Economy, and the Genre of Realism, was published in 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan.