On July 25, 1878, a banquet in honor of Herbert Spencer was held in a famous Parisian restaurant. During the dinner, Spencer himself proposed a toast expressing his gratitude to the “French scientific audience” who had so favorably received his works. He commented that the natural eagerness of the French for general and methodically combined ideas had probably predisposed them to endorse his synthetic philosophy. At that time, indeed, Spencer was a rising star in France, and contemporaries, such as Gaston Rageot in 1904 for example, could assert that “Spencer’s fame, ultimately, was mainly due to the French.”

Interpreted with all necessary caution, statistics on the mention of Spencer’s name in digitalized corpora show different trends in France and in Britain (Graphs 12.1 and 12.2). On the French side of the Channel, Spencer’s success grew more rapidly, and decreased more quickly. It was also more exclusive: no other British author gained an equal reputation at that time. Not Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, or Thomas Huxley were nearly as famous, or at least as frequently quoted. In French sources, Spencer’s name stood almost alone for all British liberal and evolutionary thought.

The years 1880–1885 marked the peak of Spencer’s reputation in France. The first comments on his philosophy appeared shortly after 1860. Among the French positivists, Emile Littré was the first to review his ideas in *Auguste Comte et la philosophie positive* (1863). He focused on Spencer’s dissent from Comte on the matter of the classification of sciences. The following year, a broader audience learned about Spencer’s philosophy through an article in

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the *Revue des deux mondes*, an influential review among educated elites. Auguste Laugel, a well-known journalist who had a scientific column in the daily *Le Temps*, and who had reviewed Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in the *Revue* in 1860, wrote a paper focused on *First Principles* and hailed the return of metaphysics to Britain, after a long (and in Laugel’s mind unproductive) period of empiricism and utilitarianism, still illustrated by John Stuart Mill and Henry Thomas Buckle.3 Spencer’s major books were translated into French by the end of the 1870s, beginning with *First Principles* in 1871.4 As this chapter will demonstrate, the political context of the time fostered and directed the appropriation of Spencer’s philosophy. This context explains why Spencer’s work was received in broad circles, and discussed in the general press as well as in political assemblies and in philosophical journals. The specific agenda of the founding of a new republican regime also explains why this reception is better understood in terms of ‘appropriation,’ and why the French invented their own ‘Spencer,’ different from the British one. The three sections of this paper are dedicated to the political background, to the academic responses to Spencer, and to the popular interpretations of Spencer in France, different aspects of a cultural importation which are distinguished for the sake of clarity, but which were in fact closely interlinked.

**Spencer in a French Context: The Establishment of the Third Republic**

Spencer’s first translations coincided with the founding of the Third Republic. This new regime was proclaimed in September 1870 under difficult conditions, with the occupation of part of the country by Prussian troops, and the Paris Commune insurrection. The first National Assembly was elected in this troubled climate in February 1871. Voters chose the peace candidates who were for the most part Monarchists. A Monarchist parliament thus took charge of drafting a constitution for the new Republic. The process took a long time, until constitutional laws were finally passed in 1875. Only in 1879 were both
