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Emile Chabal

Excerpt

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## Introduction: French politics after the deluge

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Almost every observer of French politics agrees that something very significant happened between 1975 and 1985. For those focused on economics, it was the end of the ‘Trente Glorieuses’ – a period of uninterrupted economic growth since the end of the Second World War that saw France fully enter the industrial, consumer and nuclear age.<sup>1</sup> The closing of this cycle, punctuated by the oil shocks of the 1970s, marked a profound rupture in the country’s perception of its economic and political certainties. For those interested in the development of France’s intellectual life, it was the sudden collapse of a Marxist consensus that had developed alongside the Trente Glorieuses. With the emergence of the *nouveaux philosophes* and the subsequent success of a wide-ranging ‘anti-totalitarian’ critique of Marxism in 1977–8, the French intelligentsia rapidly became more fragmented and less ideological than at any point in the previous half-century. For those who looked to party politics, it was the implosion of Gaullism and the election in 1981 of the first Socialist and Communist coalition since the Popular Front that signalled the arrival of a new era. When, a few years later, the new government abandoned its commitment to an orthodox socialism *à la française* and ushered in a new form of consensus politics, complete with periods of ‘cohabitation’ between right-wing governments and a left-wing president, there was further bemusement. What little certainty that remained in French politics was finally put to rest as the Parti communiste français (PCF) – one of the largest parties in post-war France – entered terminal decline and, in 1984, a resurgent extreme-right made unexpected electoral gains. By 1985, French politics was in a profound state of flux that resembled neither the messy politics of the Third and Fourth Republics nor the convulsions and *grandeur* of the early Fifth Republic.

<sup>1</sup> Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

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For the most part, the realisation that French politics had changed beyond all recognition led to a wave of nostalgia in the 1980s. The apparent irrelevance of right and left meant that politicians struggled to manufacture ‘causes’ with which to galvanise disaffected voters, while France’s intellectual classes yearned for 1968 or the days of Sartrean engagement, when they were beholden to higher principles rather than struggling to make themselves heard in the mass media. Even those who might otherwise have been sympathetic to the appeasement of France’s fractious political battles bemoaned the rise of a ‘centrist Republic’ that seemed to be little more than an apolitical struggle for better ‘management’ of the country.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this did not mean that pressing social problems disappeared along with partisan disagreement. On the contrary, almost everyone could agree that France faced rising unemployment, difficulties in integrating ethnic minorities, the resurgence of colonial memory, a reinvigorated extreme-right, voter apathy. . . It was simply that there seemed now to be no framework within which to understand these problems and no principles that could be used to offer solutions. Indeed, for a political culture that had, for so long, chosen ideology over pragmatism, the prospect of consensus was positively frightening: could France still be France without its *guerres franco-françaises*?

It is this concern that provides the backdrop for this study. Throughout the next ten chapters, I shall examine how it is possible to make sense of French political life in a new age of uncertainty. I shall show, on the one hand, how French politics reclaimed a grand ideology and mobilised nostalgia in order to rewrite its national narrative in firmly republican terms; and, on the other, how this new narrative was challenged by an increasingly present liberal critique that sought to embrace the positive consequences of France’s more peaceful political life. The aim will not be to provide a comprehensive narrative of French political life since the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I shall suggest a new interpretation that can be used to understand the ways in which a wide range of actors in French politics have conceptualised politics and the political.<sup>4</sup> For this, it will be

<sup>2</sup> François Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon, *La République du Centre: la fin de l’exception française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> This has already been attempted successfully by a wide range of historians and political scientists. See for instance David Howarth and Giorgios Varouxakis, *Contemporary France* (London: Arnold, 2003); Serge Bernstein and Pierre Milza, *Histoire du XXe siècle: Tome 3, de 1973 à nos jours: vers la mondialisation et le XXIe siècle* (Paris: Hatier, 2006); Jean-François Sirinelli, *Comprendre le XXe siècle français* (Paris: Fayard, 2005); and John Ardagh, *France in the New Century: Portrait of a Changing Society* (London: Viking, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> On the difference between ‘politics’ (*la politique*) and ‘the political’ (*le politique*), see the discussion in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique. Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France faite le jeudi 28 mars 2002* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

necessary to go beyond traditional categories of 'right' and 'left' – not because these are irrelevant, but because they alone cannot capture the complexity of contemporary politics. It will also be necessary to look at a much wider range of actors than is customary in many studies of politics. Again, the reason for this is to restore to French political life its many layers, particularly given that the development of mass democracy and new communications has made it possible for an ever greater number of people to participate in political discussion. Finally, it will be necessary to emphasise themes over chronology; it is only by asking new questions that we can begin to re-examine a period of recent history that is still open.

### **The boundaries of politics: actors, sources and methods**

This is, first and foremost, a study in political history. It looks at three decades of French history and attempts to build an analysis based on credible sources and multiple voices. It takes into account the importance of specific historical 'moments' and personalities, as well as the deep contexts of French politics. Its purpose is to offer a new interpretation that satisfies the most basic criteria of plausibility and fairly reflects the reasons political actors did or said particular things at a given time. However, this kind of study also raises a number of methodological questions that are specific to the study of the recent past. Of these, three are of particular importance: the range of actors involved; the nature of the sources used; and the importance of related disciplines. I discuss each one in turn.

The question of *who* features in the following chapters is also a question about the conceptual limits of this study. My criteria are (at least in theory) relatively simple: this study confines itself to those actors who form part of a broad consensual middle ground in French politics. This means that I have deliberately left aside those who have mostly been involved in the politics of the extreme left or extreme right. Inevitably there are frequent references to these extremes, since many of those I deal with began their careers as activists, militants or fellow-travellers of radical movements; but these movements are only dealt with insofar as they are relevant to the search for political consensus in France. Thus, while there are some chapters that look at the 'conversion' away from communism or the journey from extreme right to neo-liberal, there are no chapters that deal with these extremes in detail. In the same way, I have mostly chosen to look at the mainstream print and audiovisual media (such as *Le Monde*, *L'Express* or France Télévision) rather than more obviously partisan or radical publications and broadcasts.

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Of course, the limits of this consensual space are open for debate: in the conclusion I examine briefly what the notion of consensus in the French context might mean, but I recognise that there can be no easy definition. Nevertheless, my emphasis on the tension between the writing of the national narrative – perhaps the most perfect embodiment of the search for consensus – and a liberal critique of contemporary France should give a fairly clear idea of what I believe has constituted a consensual space in contemporary French politics.

Inside this space, I concentrate above all on four sets of elite actors: political and civil society activists, career politicians, intellectuals and academics, and journalists. Again, the distinction between these different groups is rarely clear-cut: indeed, it is a peculiarity of French politics that there is a great deal of movement between each one. Many of the intellectuals who appear in the following pages have been ‘political advisers’ and the division between journalist and academic is often virtually non-existent. But, if the reality is that all these actors can easily change their identities, there is still a useful conceptual distinction to be made between them. It is for this reason that, in the majority of my chapters, the focus is on only one set of actors at a time. In some cases, I shine a spotlight on academic historians and the development of historiography; in other cases, I examine networks of intellectuals in think tanks; elsewhere, I turn my attention to party politics and policy decisions. All these spheres are intimately linked, but treating them separately allows us to do justice to the rather different exigencies of each profession.

At the same time, a discussion of different political actors necessarily entails a discussion about the nature of the source material. One unusual aspect of this study is that it often makes use of texts that are very widely available, such as popular essays, government reports or newspaper articles. In part, this is a result of the subject matter: any analysis of the search for political consensus in contemporary France must rest on documents that are freely accessible and can therefore contribute to the formation of this consensus. Moreover, with the exception of personal interviews and short biographical introductions, I am less concerned with the private lives of political actors than their public pronouncements and, most importantly, the ways in which the latter have been interpreted. This is a study of the importance of ideas and language in contemporary politics, but also an investigation into reception and (mis)interpretation. I look at the instrumentalisation of texts, ideas, words, concepts and languages. This automatically means creating what we might call an ‘impure’ genealogy that acknowledges the source of particular ideas while simultaneously recognising that these can be transformed as they

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circulate around the political space. It is for this reason that I have made extensive use of audiovisual sources in an attempt to reconstruct debates that otherwise risk appearing rather one-sided on paper. By confronting different sources – textual, audiovisual, spoken – the aim is to give a much wider account of French political history than would be possible using the methods of intellectual or cultural history alone.

This is not to say that this study ignores the relevance of methodological insights from related disciplines. Quite the opposite: although it is a political history of contemporary France, it has been strongly influenced by developments in political thought, anthropology and political sociology. In common with other imaginative and original approaches to contemporary political history – such as Daniel Rodgers’s *Age of Fracture* or David Priestland’s *Merchant, Soldier, Sage* – the aim is to juxtapose ideas and individuals with their contexts in order to capture a wider range of political participation.<sup>5</sup> This is apparent especially in my focus on meaning and language.<sup>6</sup> Rather than talk about political ideologies or traditions I have mostly made reference to political ‘languages’.<sup>7</sup> This reflects the fragmentation and fluidity of contemporary political life in France.<sup>8</sup> Many political actors today resist being defined according to ‘ideological’ criteria – particularly if these are stigmatised (as in the case of the term ‘liberal’). By contrast the concept of language suggests a repertoire of words, concepts, ideas and symbols on which actors can draw in order to justify their opinions.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the concept of language makes it possible for actors to speak several languages

<sup>5</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011). David Priestland, *Merchant, Soldier, Sage: A New History of Power* (London: Penguin, 2013)

<sup>6</sup> I have been particularly influenced by the anthropological work of scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Charles Taylor and Michael Herzfeld, and by attempts to conceptualise the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences. See for instance Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Hutchinson, 1975); Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Philosophical Papers 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 2005); Malcolm Crick, *Explorations in Language and Meaning: Towards a Semantic Anthropology* (New York: Wiley, 1976); Marshall Sahlins, *Culture in Practice* (New York: Zone Books, 2000); and Manuel Cabrera, *Postsocial History: An Introduction* (Oxford: Lexington, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, I differ from Hazareesingh’s attempts to document France’s ‘political traditions’ in Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Political Traditions in Modern France* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> This fluidity – and the age of uncertainty more generally – has been theorised in Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Polity, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> On the use of ‘language’ as a concept in the study of class, see for instance Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1932–1982* (Cambridge University Press, 1983); and D. Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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simultaneously. Thus, despite making a sustained conceptual distinction between a ‘republican’ and ‘liberal’ language of politics in France, I show that it is perfectly possible for political actors to use both languages at different times or for different audiences. Finally, the emphasis on language raises the issue of translation.<sup>10</sup> It is well known that modern French politics bequeathed to the world a vast political vocabulary – starting with the words ‘right’ and ‘left’ – but this legacy has often obscured the ways in which this vocabulary was originally used in France. The same is true today. I argue that there is an inadequate attempt to understand and translate the meaning of specific French words in their French context. In order to rectify this, I examine the use of common words in contemporary French politics such as ‘integration’, ‘crisis’, ‘liberalism’ or *fracture sociale*. In so doing, I hope to give a clearer account of their multiple meanings, as well as assess the varied circumstances in which they have been deployed.

Taken together, this eclectic methodology has the potential to offer many new insights. It allows us to see how the French have conceptualised and engaged with politics in the past three decades. It exposes the multi-layered intellectual, institutional and political networks that have developed in the same period. And it makes possible the incorporation of France’s post-colonial narrative into its recent political history; as I shall show, this post-colonial story belongs not at the margins of French politics but at its very heart. Most of all, a diverse methodology makes it possible to answer the question at the centre of this study: namely, how French politics has coped with the disappearance or transformation of its most important reference points. In the brief prologues to each part, I outline the historiographical context and exactly how this study is structured, but it is enough to say here that this new age of uncertainty demands closer examination, for it has represented the unavoidable horizon of contemporary French politics. I recognise that any conclusions must necessarily be tentative, given that many of the actors who appear in the following chapters have many years of their careers ahead of them. But I nonetheless contend that it is possible to write an original history of the contexts from which they emerged – and that any such history can make an important contribution to our understanding of contemporary French politics.

<sup>10</sup> Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman (eds.), *Translating Cultures: Perspective on Translation and Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); and Keith Basso and Henry A. Selby (eds.), *Meaning in Anthropology* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1977).

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in contemporary France**The return of republicanism**

Since the eighteenth century, the French have been deeply concerned with the problem of the nation.<sup>1</sup> The writing of France's national narrative has been a source of impassioned – and sometimes violent – disagreement. One's interpretation of the nation has usually determined one's political orientation, conception of history and view of human progress. The French Revolution, which, for many in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was seen to have given birth to the nation and restarted human history, divided France's political establishment.<sup>2</sup> These divisions remained embedded in French politics at least until the end of the Second World War but, even as they withered away under the Fifth Republic, the questions raised by the Revolution remained at the heart of French political life. When did the nation truly take shape? How? Who should it represent and who should remain excluded? What does it mean to 'be' French? What sort of national history can (and should) be written?

These questions – and the answers given to them – lie at the heart of my investigation into the writing of the French national narrative since the late 1970s. It is certainly true that, as France has put aside its so-called *guerres franco-françaises*, many traditional fault lines of French politics have lost their potency.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the question of the national narrative and the nation has retained all its potential for controversy. The resurgence of republicanism since the 1980s – often described as a neo-republican revival – has brought with it a widespread and public

<sup>1</sup> David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1900* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> On this see the overview in R. Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799–1914* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, it was traditionally the case that the more Catholic a constituency, the greater the strength of the right. For an overview of some of these disputes, see J. Hayward, *Fragmented France: Two Centuries of Disputed Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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## 8 Writing the national narrative in contemporary France

interrogation of France's history and values. These debates have frequently been articulated around key moments such as the *affaire du foulard* or the debate surrounding 'ethnic' statistics. But behind these specific events lie other contexts: namely, a wide range of (sometimes colourful) personalities, sociological questions, party-political affiliations, historiographies, and philosophical *prises de positions*. Put simply, neo-republicanism has become one of France's most significant languages of politics, replete with evocative and highly charged words and vivid political symbolism. It has built on a rich French political tradition, and has contributed to the reinterpretation of French history in a variety of imaginative ways.

This should not lead us to believe that neo-republicanism is a unified political philosophy. Over the past three decades, the Republic and republicanism have meant different things to different people, and, while most public figures have been determined to demonstrate their 'republican' credentials, few of them have agreed on what these are. This eclecticism makes it hard to isolate a single 'type' of neo-republicanism. Instead, I want to understand the emergence of a new language of republicanism in its intellectual and political context in order to demonstrate its wide effect on French politics. So, for example, this first part of the book will examine the roots of the republican revival in French philosophy, history, political thought and party politics. It will look at how republicanism has influenced the writing of modern French history, and how it has affected the French state's response to immigration from outside Europe. Finally, it will suggest that neo-republicanism has been intimately tied up with France's post-colonial identities. This juxtaposition of contexts makes it possible to explore in more detail neo-republicanism's multi-faceted language and symbolic repertoire. By examining the issues and ideas that have been at the heart of the republican revival, we gain a better appreciation, not simply of the many meanings of republicanism, but also of the ways in which it has been deployed. This makes it possible to connect the immediate political and socio-economic contexts of French politics with the language of republicanism, which itself has a long history. Inevitably, this multi-layered analysis requires a diverse approach. Hence some chapters deal with political events, while others look at political thought and philosophy or historiography and academic discourse. Ultimately, however, the aim is the same: to explore how, why and with what consequences France's national narrative has been rewritten since the 1970s.

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## 1 Writing histories: two republican narratives

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La République se confond pratiquement avec sa mémoire, elle est comme le sujet dans le sujet. Pierre Nora in *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984)<sup>1</sup>

For a long time it was not at all clear that republicanism would become France's dominant political ideal. Indeed, it was not until the beginning of our period – the 1970s – that republican institutions and ideas truly triumphed. With the decline of the Communist Party and the disappearance of a virulently anti-republican extreme right, the Republic could finally spread its wings, even if the calamitous loss of the French colonial empire cast a long shadow. Seen in retrospect, it makes sense that a period of relative security for the republican political system should have been accompanied by a concomitant resurgence of interest in republican ideas. This had also been the case a century earlier in the 1880s, when the Third Republic looked for myths, symbols and histories that it could use to buttress its new-found strength. The problem for historians is that, during both of these periods of ideological reorientation in the 1880s and the 1970s, new narratives of republicanism were created that sought to fix and unify its meaning. Over time, these have made it difficult to disentangle history from mythology. We must therefore begin by identifying the underlying teleologies and narratives of French republicanism so that we can build a nuanced picture of the neo-republicanism that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.

As I shall suggest in this chapter, what has often appeared to be a unified neo-republican consensus has in fact contained within it two overlapping but distinct narratives. I have called these the 'transformative' and 'institutional' narratives of republicanism. The former emphasises republican 'values' and how they can be used to transform French politics. It is a critical teleology usually (though not always) deployed by the left to ensure that the state continues to uphold 'republican' values, and it often looks back to the French Revolution. The latter, by contrast,

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire, Tome 1, La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. viii.

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## 10 Writing histories: two republican narratives

focuses on the Republic as an institution and as the incarnation of consensual stability in French politics since the late nineteenth century. Its model is the Third Republic, and the various symbols to which it gave birth, including the republican school, *laïcité* (secularism) and a unified state. This institutional republicanism has been invoked widely on the left and the right, sometimes in conjunction with its transformative counterpart. Nevertheless, they both imply different meanings of republicanism and rest on different readings of modern French history.<sup>2</sup>

As should be clear by now, to make a distinction between different republican narratives is not an exercise in political labelling: the two teleologies overlap and are often invoked simultaneously. However, it is important to separate them as a way of moving beyond fixed models of ‘left’ and ‘right’, or ‘reactionary’ and ‘progressive’. Republicanism has always been a unifying political language, which has consistently sought to underplay difference in its efforts to promote national unity, but it has also been ecumenical in its choice of narratives. In recent years, neo-republicanism has had to absorb the divergent languages of Gaullism and socialism – and it has done so by allowing the coexistence of these transformative and institutional narratives.

These two narratives are not a recent invention; the tension between them has been an integral part of French republicanism since the late eighteenth century. Later in this chapter, I shall turn my attention to the construction of the transformative and institutional narratives in contemporary historiography. First, though, I should like to examine these narratives in a longer historical context. This serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it provides an introduction to French republican historiography since the nineteenth century; on the other, it reminds us that contemporary debates have built on historical divisions, disagreements and tensions. My intention is not to write another exhaustive history of the Republic. Nor do I want to suggest that republicanism is the only lens through which modern French history can be read – a simplification that has become commonplace in neo-republican historiography. Rather, my aim here is to provide a rough sketch of republicanism in modern French history so that we can better understand the background and historical reference points of a neo-republicanism that has become the dominant reading of the French national narrative in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

<sup>2</sup> A number of the arguments in this chapter were initially elaborated in Emile Chabal, ‘Memories of the *République* in late-twentieth-century France’, in Carolina Armenteros et al. (eds.), *Historicising the French Revolution* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008).