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Stefanos Geroulanos. *Transparency in Modern France: A Critical History of the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. xiv + 503 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 (pb.) ISBN 978-1-5036-0459-9.

Review Essay by Emile Chabal, University of Edinburgh

In the not-too-distant future, historians will surely begin to refer to an “East Coast School” of French intellectual history. Fascinated by late twentieth-century thought – and trained at a cluster of universities of the US East Coast – this group of scholars has transformed our understanding of contemporary French political and philosophical ideas. Even though many of them are still only halfway through their careers, even a cursory and incomplete overview of their output shows that they have already left behind a substantial legacy. Take, for instance, Samuel Moyn’s work on Lévinas, Julian Bourg’s research on post-1968 far-left thought, Michael Scott Christofferson’s studies of the anti-totalitarian moment of the 1970s, Camille Robcis’s writing on gender and republicanism, or Michael Behrent’s reinterpretations of Foucault. All of these represent substantial interventions in their respective historiographies. Combined with the fact that many of these scholars have supervised an upcoming cohort of graduate students, we can expect the “East School School” to continue influencing the field for many years to come.

An adequate explanation for this convergence of interests would require an intellectual history of its own, one which would look closely at the themes, mentors, institutions and contexts that influenced these scholars. In the absence of such a history, however, it is enough to observe that the “East Coast School” ranks as one of the most significant recent historiographical trends in French history and probably the most important in the sub-field of modern French intellectual history. In part, this is because British scholars working within the vibrant tradition of the history of political thought have, until recently, mostly ignored twentieth-century French thinkers. And, in France itself, the pre-eminence of philosophy has consistently marginalised both intellectual history and political thought. This has left US scholars free to explore some of the most vital questions in postwar French thought, including the status of the “other”, the definition of revolution, the turn to “rights” and “ethics”, the limits of (post-)Marxist politics, the contours of (neo-)liberalism, and the contradictions of (neo-)republicanism.

Fortunately, as Stefanos Geroulanos amply demonstrates, there is still plenty of scope for originality. If his latest book belongs squarely within the “East Coast School” in its erudition, richness and analytical rigour, it also takes the intellectual history of postwar France in exciting new directions. The most obvious innovation is that the entire book is held together, not by one or two authors, or a specific concept within a thinker’s writing, but by a single master concept: “transparency”. This becomes the guiding thread that gives the arguments their coherence.

Of course, for this to work, “transparency” not only needs to be a clearly-articulated concept, but also speak meaningfully across texts, times and places. This is a tall order. A sceptical reader might well ask whether “transparency” can really help us understand themes as diverse as the post-Liberation black market, the draft manuscripts of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and assorted texts by such luminaries as Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Starobinski, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Claude Lefort. But Geroulanos makes an impressive case. It will perhaps not convince everyone, but it will certainly stand as a penetrating thought experiment. And, for historians of France, it opens novel ways of reading the post-war period in both a methodological and an empirical sense.

First, the question of methodology. Although *Transparency in Modern France* is broadly chronological in its construction, it is not a narrative history. Instead, Geroulanos prefers a collage approach, in which disparate sources and texts are juxtaposed alongside each other. For instance, in part 1 of the book, the reader moves through a series of chapters that deal with the definition of transparency; phenomenology and existentialism in the late 1940s; the meaning of science in the writings of Alexandre Koyré, Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem; the history of “machines”

and “mechanisms” in French thought; and the transformation of French ethnology in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. This is a lot of apparently disconnected material, but the confusion is quite deliberate. As Geroulanos makes clear in his introduction, he wants to offer an “entangled microhistory” of transparency and reconstruct its multiple “webs” of meaning (pp. 22-25) in time and space.

Still, to the untrained reader – and few of us are as well-read as Geroulanos! – it can all be a bit bewildering. The frequent moves between radically different fields of intellectual enquiry is disorientating and it can be hard to situate writers or debates. Throughout the book, I found myself taking a breath to read up about a specific person or reaching for a reference book to untangle a set of concepts. This is probably not a bad thing, but it does raise questions about the coherence of the book’s core concept. Is “transparency” supposed to be understood as a theme within twentieth-century French political thought? Or is it supposed to be a meta-narrative that non-intellectual historians can use to understand social, political and cultural changes in postwar France? I found it easy to believe the former; it was more difficult to see how I might use it to explore, say, the politics of the Fourth Republic.

Despite my occasional unease with the methodology, I have few complaints about the empirical arguments. The most important of these is that “during the three decades after World War II, French philosophers, psychoanalysts, filmmakers, anthropologists, poets, historians of science, and politically engaged intellectuals...consigned the hopes associated with transparency to an armory of destructive modern illusions” (p. 8). As far as I am aware, no one has made this claim as powerfully and as intelligently. Geroulanos argues convincingly for a deep-rooted scepticism towards all forms of transparency in post-war France, whether this pertained to the physicality of the face/*visage* or to theoretical discussion of the “totalitarian” state. There was, as this book clearly shows, a distinctly French approach to the concept of transparency in the period from 1945 to 1975.

Geroulanos’s remarkable reach across intellectual and cultural history reinforces his central argument. To take only one example, I enjoyed immensely the excursions into anthropology and cinematic theory, including an excellent exploration of “masking” and the contradictions of *cinéma-vérité* in part 3. The choice of a conceptual framework – transparency – that is commonly associated with “sight” makes the theme especially apposite. On the basis of this book, one can only hope that other intellectual historians will be encouraged to use the visual and performing arts as a way of exploring political debates. It is high time that, say, histories of French neo-liberalism paid as much attention to film as they do to essays in learned journals.

Another insight that emerges from the book concerns 1968. The way Geroulanos weaves together the critical writings of Lefort on totalitarianism and Jean-François Lyotard’s reflections on the “postmodern condition” in the final chapters of the book is masterful. By reading *les années 68* through the prism of transparency, we get a different view of the period. Rather than replay tired left-right debates about whether 1968 was good or bad, Geroulanos invites us to see it as a moment when the “movement toward desubjectivation and release of human control over language, information, and communication came face to face with a concrete revolutionary agent that pursued ‘real’ social transformation” (p. 337). This tension between a postwar intellectual movement that sought to problematise subjectivity, and a political moment that celebrated the agency of students and workers, helps explain why it was so difficult to build a coherent political platform in 1968. It also gives us some insight into why the *événements* of that year were (and remain) so divisive.

More generally, and moving beyond the realm of intellectual history, the focus on transparency might have interesting ramifications for historians of the state. The post-war French state – both its institutions and the people who populate it – has been notoriously un-transparent. Corruption of all kinds has been endemic in public life and, until recently, it was widely accepted by the French electorate as a side-effect of politics. This stood in contrast to other Western states such as the United States, the UK and (West) Germany, which loudly proclaimed their commitment to transparency (while not always practicing it very assiduously). This long-standing contrast has given rise to a popular and scholarly view of the French state as uniquely *dirigiste*, authoritarian and opaque.

With the help of Geroulanos’s analysis, we can perhaps start to nuance this interpretation. If the post-war critique of transparency went beyond France’s intellectual class – and we can reasonably assume that it did – then this would go some way towards explaining why many French people have remained comfortable with their less-than-transparent political institutions. Yes, the French far-left have spent decades denouncing the violence of the state, and the French far-right have made it their job to expose the shady, corrupt world of the *énarques* who rule the country. But the truth is that much of the French electorate remain surprisingly uncomfortable with postmodern expressions of transparency like the 24-hour news cycle, the cult of political celebrity, and the relentless personalisation of ideas.

Thus, when Nicolas Sarkozy tried to make his presidency as “transparent” as possible by having the media cover his every private and public move, he was harshly sanctioned by voters. They did not want to know, much less see, what he was doing. And, only the other day, a violent polemic erupted over whether, in a televised interview with Emmanuel Macron, the journalists Jean-Jacques Bourdin and Edwy Plenel should have addressed the president as “Emmanuel Macron” or “M. Le Président”.^[1] Bourdin and Plenel opted for the former on the grounds that it was more egalitarian, but many viewers disagreed. They preferred the “transparency” of institutional hierarchy to the “transparency” of performative equality.

These small examples demonstrate the great value of Geroulanos’s analysis. Personally, I still need to be convinced about the collage approach, and I would like more evidence of the relationship between the concept of “transparency” and everyday practice (eg. policing). But what is immediately obvious about this book is how it has changed the way I look at post-war France. I am starting to see new connections, debates, ideas and images. I am also beginning to reflect much more seriously about whether “transparency” is a value I should celebrate or decry. To put it simply: anyone who would like to have their perspectives on post-war France challenged should put this outstanding representative of the already notable (if not yet fully identified) “East Coast School” right at the top of their reading list.

NOTES

[1] Emilie Geffray, ‘Pourquoi Jean-Jacques Bourdin et Edwy Plenel n’ont pas appelé Emmanuel Macron «Monsieur le président»’ in *Le Figaro* (16 April 2018); “Insolents”, “donneurs de leçon”, “leaders d’opinion”... Plenel et Bourdin répondent aux critiques après leur interview de Macron’ in *franceinfo* (16 April 2018), https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/interview-d-emmanuel-macron-edwy-plenel-et-jean-jacques-bourdin-critiques-par-leurs-confreres_2708508.html

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