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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.

Response by Stefanos Geroulanos, New York University

Audrey Evrard and Emile Chabal have, with inspiring generosity, done the kind of thing in their reviews that I could only dream of when I wrote *Transparency in Postwar France* (2017). They have thought with me and they pushed the argument of the book into terrains that I could only glance at but not quite engage—Evrard on matters of cinema, '68, and current public space, Chabal on corruption and governmental self-presentation. For this I am most grateful, even as it puts me in the odd position of agreeing largely with what they argue, and hence not exactly responding in what follows here. At times they each phrase parts of my argument better than I can, for example when Evrard writes: “Transparency, as examined here, has more to do with mechanisms a society or individuals deploy for self-reassurance, self-justification, and political and moral order.” For these reasons, she continues, and besides taking on the place of “the Enlightenment and Western modernity” in their role in the 1960s, the book engages matters as broad as “governmental opacity and openness, objectivity and subjectivity, identity and alterity, violence, policing and social normativity, alienation and autonomy, to mention only some concepts used as query nodes.” Or, to quote Chabal’s discussion (without endorsing his use of the qualifier “postmodern”):

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.

These are indeed some of the domains to which I would like the book to speak. *Transparency in Postwar France* ties together texts by some of the better-known postwar thinkers (whether in epistemology, anthropology, or psychiatry) with tendencies in cinema, policing, social revolt, and so on, such that the book might make intellectual history useful to historians working “outside” its traditional domains, might make concepts link to everyday practices and to forms of knowledge, might make the most exquisitely designed texts as well as more occasional ones speak to something like a socio-political and linguistic unconscious.

At the same time, to take up Evrard’s handling of the book cover image from Godard’s *Contempt*, the critique of transparency was not merely political or philosophical—but had even to do with matters of intimacy and its representation.[1] How indeed, as Chabal asks, does one write of intimacies while also of philosophy, of cinema but also of state structures, of representation but also of particular turns in political thought? How does one negotiate the distances between such different domains *without* reducing them? Considering this a “tall order” and perhaps “bewildering,” Chabal worries that this project proposes a meta-narrative or a “core concept” whose “coherence” may be wilting away.

1. “Method”

In his review, Chabal is addressing from the inside of intellectual history one of its classic problems. Intellectual historians, using generally simplified versions of Cambridge-style contextualism—the

placing of ideas or intellectuals in context—have regularly restricted the field to a spectrum of possibilities. We often seek (or resist) explanations for particular arguments or positions in their social or cultural context, or we resist that and seek to show the ways a text seems to exceed a specific context. Or the ways a text adds to our understanding of a particular moment.[2] Welding together intellectual biography, philosophical argumentation, cultural history, and political pressures (especially the often-bewildering political failures of intellectuals), many brilliant practitioners of the field work by drafting “metanarratives” or “master” or “core concepts” in this interposition. Seen from that perspective, Chabal’s objection makes complete sense. Transparency in my argument would appear to bring together several core problems, contexts, intellectuals.

But this was not my problem at all, transparency is not the rug that ties this room together, and *Transparency in Postwar France* is not an account of a meta-narrative—it would be the most ridiculous thing to argue that French thought was secretly “about” transparency, or that intellectuals and/or non-intellectuals alike were thinking deeply about it but not usually telling everyone that this was their priority. Instead I was curious about three rather different things.

First, how to represent a marginal concept that is precisely *not* a core concept, one that is used widely and ties well with other figures and values but that is usually left undefined, one that tends to slither away when you grasp at it in a text, one that is experienced or theorized often as intuitive, but does not at any rate declare itself as a center of discussion. How does one discuss a value that usually doesn’t bother to demand a moral theory, an idea that is visible only just enough for us to be influenced by it and yet ignore it? Should this kind of problem remain outside of historical and critical investigation when it is precisely historically determined? Should we go back to a *begriffsgeschichtlich* approach à la Koselleck, whereby however we remain committed to prioritizing, outlining, contextualizing “foundational” or “fundamental” concepts, whatever those may be? (I think not: first, concepts are not fundamental. Second, no concepts are fundamental in the sense that none simply ground or structure others in a clear or strict hierarchy and without being put into question by these others.) Does an *histoire des mentalités* suffice to cover the subject? (Again, not really, it lacks the linguistic and philosophical detail necessary.) What is the role of intellectuals, particularly if like me you simply don’t think that we ought to be operating within the schema most used for “intellectual” in France over the past century, one that has had such self-inflated and exclusionary implications? How do we balance them against the voices of just about anyone who speaks, writes, publishes in the sense that every such voice is that of an intellectual? (This is something I wish I did better here, yet I was also interested in specific philosophers and in making a contribution to interpretations of their work.) My attempt to construct a theoretical/methodological argument around a “webbing” of concepts was much attached to the need to discuss these concepts together, fixed without visible or immutable strings, the way two rackets and a court are attached to a tennis ball. None of them play this game alone.

Second (and despite Chabal’s sense that the “method” is unnecessary given that his empirical criteria are satisfied), we have no clear or straightforward path toward hitching together different concepts, intellectuals, public debates, metaphors and figures, practices and so on. As I have been suggesting with reference to opacity, dissimulation, faciality and masks, there is no obvious way of offering a hierarchy of concepts, figures, and metaphors. For this reason, and precisely to avoid prioritizing, I have sought not to present a meta narrative but to compile a bricolage account out of overlapping if often asymptotic, accumulative sub-narratives (eg. anthropology; the rethinking of norms; the emergence of the other, itself a concept built across different approaches; cybernetics). Any one of these, taken on its own, would tell a different story. These link to transparency in its three or four intertwined fields of engagement (ie. regarding the self, the other, the epistemological non-transparency of the world, and politics), but they never do so in a simple causal or correlative fashion. It never stands in for them. If it’s not a metanarrative, Chabal objects, this narrative dissipates! And in part that’s the point: one couldn’t of course tell the whole story of postwar French systems of thought, but in a story like this, we can allow its different figures to come into view and then fade again.

For this reason, third, transparency features both strongly and weakly in the period as in the text: it was indeed of broad purchase, in that within the postwar French constellation or netting of concepts, it was invoked, deliberated, engaged over and over and differently, at times even appearing to be a concept that acts in texts, and yet it is almost nothing. It stands out when you look at things one way, but not another: perhaps the somewhat comparative perspective that asks us to look at the subtler divergences between related and basically similar modern advanced-capitalist societies. (And indeed, part of what prompted my interest was that almost only in France did intellectuals seem systematically to pile contempt on transparency.) So I appreciate too the implicit criticism that I'm the one casting the net, and perhaps casting it still clumsily. But without this casting, and without the recognition of our involvement as historians in the ways in which what was available can be made visible (Foucault writes "to render visible precisely what is visible"), these empirical results would make little sense.

This all in other words to respond to Chabal's objection regarding how to write history: what seems like a problem may also be an inspiration and a promise. We may be able to tell a story—such as that of postwar French thought—across several figures, and here the critique of transparency is one of them.

More fun, for me, however, is that shortly after raising his key objections ("it was more difficult to see how I might use it to explore, say, the politics of the Fourth Republic"), Chabal throws his own caution to the wind and flings a net of his own, even "applying" the argument of the project: it "helps explain why it was so difficult to build a coherent political platform in 1968," it "start[s] to nuance this interpretation" of "the French state as uniquely *dirigiste*, authoritarian and opaque" and "notoriously un-transparent." I am grateful that despite his reservations he offers more to this interpretation.

2. Representations

In Evrard's essay I find nothing to protest, and I would prefer that the reader to read it than proceed over the paragraphs that follow here. I agree broadly as regards the reading of May 68, as involving at most a momentary ideal of self-transparency (akin to Debord's "festival"). I also agree that this ideal and its persistence hid as much as they disclosed, and I would also note that this ideal was then chased in figure after figure, most famously in the Cultural Revolution—where China became a synonym for a self-aware and liberating world-proletariat—and that of *autogestion*. As I argue in chapter 20 and in more detail elsewhere, what is just as interesting is how the ostensible transparency in the streets undercut an entire schema of philosophy and of perceiving the future as both promise and threat, as capable of some post-humanist quasi-cybernetic transparency that seemed triumphant.[3] The very heroes of 1966-67—Foucault, Derrida, Leroi-Gourhan, Lacan—would thus appear terribly out of touch, eclipsed by new understandings of the future. For example Foucault's writing of the early and mid-1970s (*Discipline and Punish* most notably) would in many respects attempt to respond to that shift of terrain.

Evrard tracks the New Wave in far greater detail, partly because of my attention to certain quasi-theatrical modes of cinema, especially because of the emergence of *cinéma-vérité*. This I was especially interested in because of the way that it reflected a key epistemological problem of the 1930s and the postwar that is key to my argument. This is the idea of world's divergence and gradual detachment from human representations of it—or what Gaston Bachelard recognized as "the primary dynamic existence of the world that resists" our understanding.[4] *Cinéma-vérité* is generally cast, *malgré tout*, as overcoming such a resistance. And Evrard agrees: "Unlike American direct cinema, which maintained its faith in the transparency of the cinematic image and apparatus, French *cinéma-vérité* relocated its truth in its very apparent, not transparent, materiality and artificiality." I should have liked to extend this discussion to other filmmakers: for example, the cinema of Robert Bresson, for his own refusal of most cinema *as theater*, his attempt to produce this inward dive into a quasi-Catholic purity of soul, and his attempt to convey that; the later cinema of Jean Renoir, which was explicitly theatrical; the ethnographic works of Jean Rouch, especially *Les maîtres fous* or *Moi un noir* (I only got to discuss

Chronicle of a Summer “properly”); or the cinema of Chris Marker, which flirted with cinéma-vérité in the early 1960s (*Le joli mai*) but otherwise committed to a construction of essayistic narratives (most significantly in *Le fond de l'air est rouge* and then the epistolary *Sans soleil*, with its desire to commune with things through “what Lévi-Strauss called the poignancy of things,” and its recognition of that impossibility except in a Proustian involuntary memory aided by images. (The first three of the above filmmakers were all also famously the subjects of close examination by André Bazin for his own phenomenology of realism, as well as by the *Cahiers du cinema* in the journal’s early years: they inform the New Wave’s and the tendency to first stage narratives and later, in militant cinema, to show the way these narratives were built.)

In each of these cases, as in those that Evrard highlights—notably of militant cinema—at stake in part was the construction of realism and the staging of cinematic representation. These were matters about which French cinema obsessed, and with respect to which it retained a quite distinct style and character among postwar filmmaking practices. I do not say that this is because of the critique of transparency, but I’m obviously pleased that Evrard thinks that my argument contributes to this discussion.

Evrard also plays in her argument with the book’s cover from Godard’s *Le mépris* (Contempt, 1965). The original intention was to use a shot from the opening scene—the one famously added by Godard in response to the producer’s demands—in which Bardot’s character asks/demands of Piccoli’s to state whether he loves each of her body parts, one after the other, only to then confirm to herself and/or us that he loves her “totally,” in a half-question half-statement that he outdoes, with “yes, I love you totally, tenderly, tragically.” Perhaps even more bluntly than the bewigged and blurred cover we ended up using, that sentence, delivered right as the characters come out of a red filter and into a more naturalistic one, should cue us, I’d like to argue, to the difference between our easy immediate pleasure, and the (for this book) quite obvious consequence: the ugly collapse that will follow is not held in abeyance here, but is asserted in the ostensible intimate transparency of “totally, tenderly, tragically.”

3. Today

Both reviewers ask me to extend this analysis directly to contemporary matters—from Sarkozy’s and Macron’s mocked attempts to present themselves as transparent to the contestation of institutional hierarchies in public space (Evrard writes: “In recent weeks, social space has once again been turned into a contested zone, where students, protesters, activists face police forces in riot gear.”) My reticence to comment on contemporary matters is due partly to the approach I followed—both in that I do not feel I can adequately balance the contemporary “web” of concepts and in that the point of a “history of the present” is to be first contrastive first and only subsequently an argument. One would have to consider questions of information and privacy; the transformation of the banlieues since the 1970s, indeed, as Chabal suggests, the star system and 24/7 news cycle; the integration of new media into education and elsewhere; problems and failures of racial integration (a subject on which I should have done more as well); conceptions of law and the French state; of the status of democracy in France as elsewhere. If some intellectuals have insisted on related themes—of participative democracy for example, or the renewals of a critical left—these do not of their own suffice to indicate the continuing purchase of the critique transparency in the transformations of contemporary France.[5]

So before we commit to individual relevant examples, or relevant anecdotes, we need to see what shifts to prioritize. In the postwar period, intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike simply did not believe that government would ever be transparent, so they concentrated on depriving it of the intellectual tools it needed to peer into private life and to carve up the population into normal and abnormal groups. It was less the communists or Catholics that insisted on this than the young 1960s philosophers who distrusted the PCF almost as fervently as they hated de Gaulle. Across the political spectrum, they feared a government—whether rightwing or socialist—that would inflict transparency on a society that would exist only in name. Even the most committed democratic theorists until the early 1980s worried that to be transparent meant not to be pure but to be see-through, to become incapable of changing the world.

Some from that earlier generation repeat the point: on the very day this book was published, Régis Debray mocked Emmanuel Macron and the idealism of his supporters: “There was a time when we would get angry at being accused of being transparent, that is, of being insignificant... [But] the insults of one day are flatteries of the next. Personally, the only person full of ‘ingenuity, transparency, whiteness and candor’ that I have ever encountered is the orphan girl of *Les Misérables*. And I could not imagine Cosette as a future deputy, minister or president.”[6] It matters that Cosette is a literary figure and Debray refers to an earlier age.

But now? Still today, a transparent society would be a totalitarian one, where the state intrudes into everyone’s business—and yet the critical tools offered by this earlier period have not necessarily been extended, except very occasionally. Nor do they offer a satisfactory politics, especially for the left, now that the threat is less government than that loose agglomeration of corporations (with Facebook as the prime offender) in what Bernard Harcourt calls an “expository society.”[7] And more to the point, it is by no means evident that the conceptual web is the same, nor that a fear of transparency has been present in epistemological and ethical realms.

I do not close on this note in order to disavow the relevance of my analysis for the present time—on the contrary. If anything, as these examples suggest, I think the critique resonates and is all the more urgent. But this is why the book ends in the 80s—regarding the present time, my appeal is one to critique, not to pursue the extension of a directly conceptual-historical analysis. The possible dissolution or transformation of certain approaches to “transparency” over the past three decades should not *a priori* color the critical promise of the discussions included here, just as the distance between French discussions and the contemporary obsession with transparency as an ideal (one constantly verging on self-delusion) does not. This “conceptual-historical analysis,” the work that I propose be pursued along historical and interdisciplinary axes, with attention as much to thought as to practices, can open up the worlds of concepts that belong to human lives, concepts to which human lives also belong. The more we expand our understanding of these concepts and their embeddedness, the better we can develop an anthropology of conceptual subjects and the ways they mirror one another and refract social, political, and other concerns, and the clearer, more effective, more radical, and more promising critique may become.

NOTES

[1] Consider, for example, Jean-François Lyotard’s epigraph to *Libidinal Economy* (1974), a rather bland adage: “he who knows not how to hide, knows not how to love.”

[2] Chabal writes of an East-Coast “school” and includes me in very flattering manner among scholars whose work, despite its differences in method, approaches, habits, from my own, I deeply admire. He leaves out many others, partly because of this odd geographical designation (itself somewhat Cantabridgian in tenor and inspiration) and partly because of the stages of their career. I add this note here only to suggest that some of the scholars he notes (like many others) have indeed been moving far from these correlation or correspondence of argument and context. I propose particular approaches in chapter 1 of *Transparency in Postwar France* and chapter 1 of my book with Todd Meyers, *The Human Body in the Age of Catastrophe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), and discuss some of these problems in a discussion with Sarah Dunstan available [here](#) and as a podcast [here](#).

[3] “Transparency, Humanism, and the Politics of the Future Before and After May ‘68,” in Emmanuel Alloa and Dieter Thomä, eds., *Transparency, Subjectivity, Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 155–176.

[4] Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (1947; Paris: Corti, 2004), 23.

[5] On participative democracy, see e.g. the works of Marc Crépon and Bernard Stiegler, including *De la démocratie participative. Fondements et limites* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2007).

[6] “Régis Debray et la France de Macron” in *Le Monde* (29.08.2017). Online (last accessed Sept.4, 2018) at http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/08/29/pour-regis-debray-l-evenement-macron-prefigure-le-passage-versun-neoprotestantisme-mondialise_5177860_3232.html#udZRASX3gwvuTiu5.99

[7] Bernard E Harcourt, *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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