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Edward Berenson, Vincent Duclert and Christophe Prochasson, eds., *The French Republic: History, Values, Debates*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011. vii + 378 pp. References and lists of contributors. \$65 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8014-4901-7.

Review by Julian Wright, Durham University.

As Patrice Gueniffey puts it, in an essay which sits at the very heart of this fascinating and thought-provoking volume, “The republic... is nowadays *contained within democracy*, as one of its modes of organization. For a long time, democracy had been *contained within the republic*, as one of its forms” (p. 124). Untangling the skeins of French republican ideology and mythology is the task which Berenson, Duclert and Prochasson have set out to achieve in this revisiting of an earlier project, the *Dictionnaire critique de la République*, first published in 2002. Here, we are plunged into a trenchant series of debates and arguments about the republic, its values and ideas, its political legends and cultural practices. The new volume is a very different beast, in spite of the fact that half of the essays are republished either in the original English, where they had been translated for the French volume, or in a new English translation, often involving the indefatigable Arthur Goldhammer, whom it is surely right to acknowledge as a *chaînon indispensable* for the wider dissemination of so much important French scholarship.

The original volume was very much a “critical dictionary,” with an original scholarly approach, but nonetheless something of the monumentality of many other dictionaries which French publishers seemed so keen on a decade ago. The very weightiness of their own Dictionary of the Republic, with its several hundred contributions, might have given it a feeling of the rather commemorative style to be found in other multi-volume, multi-author works from the 1990s. Their academic purpose of course has always been to open debate, to criticize and peel away layers of official and scholarly memory to restore a more controversial and more vital perspective in modern French political and intellectual history. But this volume—far slimmer, with its forty short essays—develops much further the questioning and critical nature of their approach. It is the more indispensable, indeed, for being lighter, brisker and more plural in its deliberate attempt to solicit a range of often contradictory perspectives.

In making this shift, the project has taken on new dynamism by deliberately setting out to offer a trans-Atlantic *regard croisé*, with Edward Berenson joining the editorial team and a range of American scholars, many of them among the most eminent in their fields, writing reflections as scholars of France (in some cases) or as scholars of Western social, political or intellectual history more generally. It is excellent to have, right at the heart of the book, Joan Wallach Scott’s focused, uncompromising summary of recent attempts to develop *parité* within the Republican constitution. As the editors suggest, the effect of this infusion of intellectual and cultural history by American authors is to underline what I think they had always sought to do: to provide a critical discussion of French republics, republicanism and republican culture. So the controversy over the veil is alluded to in many places, and we have much more of a sense of the limitations and uncertainties of the French republican tradition.

Maybe this has something to do with our present uncertainties and uneasiness as students of France. Certainly, present concerns begin to weigh heavily in the later sections of the volume. Because of this, it is probably worth emphasizing those scholars who have sought to take a strictly historical way into this

project of critical redefinition. Jean Baubérot's translated piece on "Laicity" has gone straight into my final-year special subject class. His insights into the actual thinking behind the 1905 law, which introduced the separation of Church and State, are precisely those of a historian contributing to contemporary debates and misapprehensions rather than a cultural commentator on those debates. He is absolutely right to point out how rarely the great republican narrative allows us to notice how Jaurès and others pushed for this law to be based on a principle of engagement between the state and intermediary bodies, rather than the state and individual citizens. It is certainly one of the best-kept secrets of the French Republic, and some of the more contemporary pieces in this volume would have benefited from the spicy edge that a properly historical point such as this can provide (p. 133). Where is Jaurès, and for that matter Briand today? Who on the left is pushing the government to think of its dealings with ethnic communities in terms of the state sanctioning and working in harness with cultural and religious groups with this level of pragmatism and compromise? This is why this is such an important book: critical history of this sort, in the vein of Pierre Rosanvallon's *Le modèle politique français* or, in another way, Mona Ozouf's beautiful *Composition française*, reminds us of the fact that it is as much in the stories that the French republican tradition has told, as it is in the French republican past itself, that the left keeps religious communities at arm's length and worries about the nefarious consequences of communitarianism.

Among the original essays now published in English for the first time, the summary reflections on different republican episodes are chosen well, and the essays by Patrice Gueniffey, Sudhir Hazareesingh, Philip Nord, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Julian Jackson in a sense stand even prouder than they did originally. Their awareness of different narratives of republicanism and the historiographical subtlety they show makes these chapters essential for students of modern France. That of Nord is particularly punchy: he lays out two competing narratives of the Third Republic as a regime, and sets the story of decline and collapse against a different story of steady social progress based on growth, the belated but nonetheless impressive development of welfarism, the relatively insistent determination to provide some sort of defence against Nazism, the often unseen but entirely genuine flexibility of the Republic's institutions, and finally, in spite of the defeat of 1940, the real support for the fight against Hitler. This historiographical reappraisal, distilled so neatly, will inspire many. In a similar vein, Audoin-Rouzeau indicates clearly how the Great War at one level represented a victory for the Republic. He also draws out, however, the way in which it prepared deep-seated cultural challenges that, within twenty years, would coalesce under Vichy, however uncertainly as Jackson correctly insists.

It is an Englishman, however, who provides the meat of the second section of this book. Jeremy Jennings, whose erudition is worn as lightly as ever, is able to sketch fascinatingly different perspectives on several of the essential republican values. His *longue durée* accounts of Liberty, Equality and Universalism carry real weight because they tell powerful stories about the search for a balance of ideas within republican ideology, with the story of that search drawn from detailed discussion of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual debate. Like many of the American cultural historians represented here, the plea for greater pluralism is made firmly by Jennings, as it is by his London-based colleague Cécile Laborde in her article on citizenship. She emphasizes a "new citizenship" based on "substantive practices and engagement in social and economic life...expressed through local associations; egalitarian demands couched in ethnic, religious or cultural terms; and efforts to obtain for foreigners the right to vote in local elections" (p. 143).

This insight captures much of the thrust of the later essays, whether they focus on gender, the creation of the museum of immigration in Paris (a fascinating microcosm of many wider themes in the book), the suburbs, or, in Hermann Lebovics' elegant essay, a sweeping *tour d'horizon* of cultural policy. Equally important, as the editors emphasize, is the significance of discussions of empire, decolonization and foreigners. The analysis of Todd Shepard is timely and provocative: Algerian independence, now such an important feature of left-wing republican ideology, must nonetheless be credited with making the Fifth Republic one of the most Euro-centric, ethnically narrow of the republics, replacing the discredited

mission civilisatrice with a discourse of Frenchness that has now been deeply ingrained within modern republicanism. After all, as he points out, Michel Debré only began to think a directly-elected president was a good idea once the problem of defining “the body of electors” had been made simpler—that is, once the electoral body had been shorn of “the African peoples and Muslims of Algeria” (pp. 260–261).

As Lebovics’ essay on the development of republican cultural policy reminds us, there is a real question over who the republicans have thought the republic was for. André Malraux, Alain Finkielkraut and Marc Fumaroli may have attempted to define republican culture policy as narrowly as their own republicanism; but is Lebovics not speaking with his tongue in his cheek when he suggests that “since a common culture remains central to French republican ideals, we can hope, in the future to see rich, imaginative, democratic, and even pluralist initiatives for revitalizing the unity of a French people”? Many of the commentators in this volume would have shared what I suspect is his scepticism of this hope being realised any time soon, especially given the evidence marshalled by so many of the contributors to show that the anxious worrying of republican politicians in the intellectual cul-de-sacs of French exceptionalism and French cultural defensiveness remains a major problem, not just in politics, but in society and culture.

On the other hand, we have Duclert and Prochasson and their friend Berenson...so perhaps the opening of this fertile and incisive transatlantic dialogue, which would have seemed unthinkable even a few years ago, indicates that the wheel is turning. Perhaps, as scholars from two venerable sister-republics ask new, critical and self-examining questions of each other, so we might see signs of a new intellectual approach to the French Republic developing more widely in public debate, spear-headed by historians who see international intellectual exchange as essential. Far from the didactic postures of successive generations of *clercs* described so thoughtfully by Jerrold Seigel, Prochasson, Duclert et al seem readier both to smile at the tradition which has nourished their own intellectual development and to assume its habit of raising pertinent questions at just the right time. If this has required a general disenchantment with the traditional intellectual type, then it is all to the good that projects such as this are now emerging, full of inspiration not just to philosophize but to do some proper historical research, or as Duclert puts it, to write a “genuine history, a history with all its messy reality” (p. 371). And so, long live a shared enthusiasm for French history itself, not to draw simplistic lessons for the future, but to remind us all, as Walter Benjamin once did, that our passion in politics and society is better enflamed by a re-engagement with the real struggles of our forefathers, rather than with a commemorative narrative of the Republican past, suspended, like the constitution of the First Republic, in a glass case for the edification of politicians who had other things on their minds.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Edward Berenson and Vincent Duclert, “Introduction: Transatlantic Histories of France”

Part I: Time and History

Johnson Kent Wright, “The Enlightenment”

Patrice Gueniffey, “The First Republic”

Edward Berenson, “The Second Republic”

Sudhir Hazareesingh, “The Republicans of the Second Empire”

Philip Nord, "The Third Republic"

Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "War and the Republic"

Julian Jackson, "The Republic and Vichy"

Rosemary Wakeman, "The Fourth Republic"

Martin Schain, "The Fifth Republic"

Part II. Principles and Values

Jeremy Jennings, "Liberty"

Jeremy Jennings, "Equality"

Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu, "Fraternity"

Patrice Gueniffey, "Democracy"

Jean Baubérot, "Laicity"

Cécile Laborde, "Citizenship"

Jeremy Jennings, "Universalism"

Paul Jankowski, "The Republic and Justice"

Herrick Chapman, "The State"

Alice L. Conklin, "The Civilizing Mission"

Joan Wallach Scott, "Parité"

Dominique Kalifa, "The Press", translated by Renée Champion and Edward Berenson

Lloyd Kramer, "Times of Exile and Immigration"

François Weil, "The USA, Sister Republic", translated by Arthur Goldhammer

Stéphane Gerson, "The Local"

Part III. Dilemmas and Debates

Emmanuelle Saada, "The Republic and the Indigènes"

Mary Dewhurst Lewis, "Immigration"

Nancy L. Green, "The Immigration History Museum"

Todd Shepard, "Decolonization and the Republic"

Frédéric Viguier, "The Suburbs"

John R. Bowen, "The Republic and the Veil"

Steven Englund, "Antisemitism, Judeophobia, and the Republic"

Karen Offen, "Feminism and the Republic"

Bonnie G. Smith, "Gender and the Republic"

Éric Fassin, "Order and Disorder in the Family"

Ivan Jablonka, "Children and the State"

Daniel J. Sherman, "Commemoration"

Jerrold Seigel, "Intellectuals and the Republic"

Herman Lebovics, "Cultural Policy"

Conclusions

Edward Berenson, "American Perspectives on the French Republic"

Vincent Duclert, "Beyond the "Republican Model"

Julian Wright

Durham University

Julian.wright@dur.ac.uk

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