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Roger Price, *The French Second Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. x + 507 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. ISBN 0-521-80830-8.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

To many contemporaries—and to historians ever since—the Second Empire has been characterized by its Janus-like image, born of military coup d'état and reliant on political controls and repression on the one hand, yet stabilizing and liberalizing political life on the other.[1] In the dominant republican narratives of French history since 1789, the regime has been stylized or dismissed as a meretricious hiatus in the republican ascendancy between the Revolution of 1848 and the electoral triumphs of 1876-77: this explains why, with the Restoration, it has been the least studied of post-revolutionary regimes.

Economic historians have been far more interested in this period, for the 1850s and 1860s have often been seen as the decades of France's industrial revolution, when a distinctively French political economy of government intervention to speed the development of transport infrastructure while removing controls on free trade spurred rapid growth rates in manufacturing and agricultural output. The combination of private sector initiatives and strong government based on the support of la France profonde explains why Gaullists in particular have claimed Napoleon III as part of their heritage. When mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac in June 1990 inaugurated the Place Napoléon III in Paris, the Emperor was eulogised by the conservative Gaullist Philippe Séguin.[2]

Louis-Napoleon's military seizure of power in December 1851, while President of the Republic, was never forgiven by republicans and explains their hostility to a directly elected presidency for more than a century thereafter. More recently, historians of political culture have emphasized the political paradox of the regime, that it also engrained the practice of manhood suffrage. Other historians have seen in Napoleon III the precursor of the authoritarian and fascist regimes of the twentieth century; however, as Roger Price demonstrates, he never had the political apparatus and party bureaucracy to make such a lineage convincing. Instead, in contrast with previous "monarchies," the Second Empire's importance lies in its development of a mass base for conservatism within an essentially democratic political system. Among the Emperor's papers, Price found the sketch for a novel based on the reactions of a "M. Benoit" who returned to France in 1868 after twenty years in America: first in Napoleon's list of Benoit's reactions was that he would be "amazed by universal suffrage," as well as "no riots; no political prisoners; no exiles" (p. 250).

Napoleon III's greatest political triumph was the outcome of the May 1870 plebiscite, when 7.3 million voters approved "the liberal reforms introduced into the constitution since 1860" against 1.6 million "no" voters. The result was the more impressive coming so soon after the 1869 parliamentary elections when opposition parties, chiefly republican, secured 3.3 million votes. The question put to the plebiscite in 1870 was, however, deliberately ambiguous: only the more militant of republicans were not prepared to approve of liberal reforms, seeing them as window-dressing. Nevertheless, the Emperor chose to interpret the result as a gauge of the level of genuine support for his regime. The secretary to the *Corps Législatif* jotted insightfully in his notebook: "Too many Yes votes. The Emperor will believe that this is

still the France of 1852 and do something stupid."

That act of stupidity, according to Roger Price, was to go to war with Prussia in July 1870; within weeks the Emperor was a prisoner of war, and the Third Republic was proclaimed. The Emperor did not have his uncle's military judgment, nor had the French army been reformed for decades; seriously ill and misled by his self-delusions of popular support and French superiority, his decision to assume personal command of the army was a disaster. "It would be defeat in war," concludes Price, "and not political opposition, which would destroy the Second Empire" (p. 401). At the same time, however, Price avoids imputing the regime's failure to military miscalculation alone: the decision to go to war "represented governmental failure on an unacceptable scale" (p. 251). If there is a criticism to be made of Price's general argument, it is that this key point--how the fatal decision to declare war in order to avenge earlier humiliations by Prussia reveals a fundamental weakness in an ostensibly successful political system--is not as fully elaborated as it might have been.

Roger Price, Professor of History at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, is well known to historians of France for a series of major books on nineteenth-century France, from his innovative *The French Second Republic: A Social History* (1972) to others on economic and social history. This study of the Second Empire bears the same hallmarks of his expertise as a historian: a thorough grounding in manuscript documents in the *Archives Nationales* and a close familiarity with contemporary printed sources and the historiography. Like his other books, it is packed with close detail drawn from archival sources, and his themes are always expressed lucidly. It does not purport to be a general history of the Second Empire: there is little here, for example, on the complex pattern of change and continuity in social practices and gender relations other historians have examined. As an analysis of the "anatomy of political power" under Napoleon III, however, it is a successful and compelling book.

Price's methodology is to juxtapose the regime's political strategies with the mass politics of a society undergoing rapid economic change but with deep ideological cleavages entrenched in French society since 1789. He analyses the machinery of government--the Bonapartist state and its management of elections, its control of public order and "*esprit moral*," and its economic policies--and its interdependence with other political forces, liberalism, Legitimism and, above all, republicanism. A telling example of the regime's "authoritarian democracy" and the limits to its effectiveness concerns its attempt to control the mutual-aid societies which had proliferated under the Second Republic. Ostensibly offering a way for wage-earners and peasants to make voluntary contributions to provide security in emergencies and old age, they had also been a cover for popular politics. Although the number of "approved" mutual-aid societies with official outside appointees to "supervise" them increased to 4,400, with some 900,000 members, by 1869 it was evident that they continued to be a locus of grass-roots opposition politics. A more successful practice, combining monarchical presence with mass politics, was the imperial "*tour*": already as President of the Republic in 1849-52, Louis-Napoleon had made some fifteen closely orchestrated provincial trips, and these continued during the Empire. Despite the dominant opposition politics of Lille, in 1867 up to 300,000 spectators turned out there in heavy rain to see the imperial couple.

By that time, however, the new freedoms of organization were facilitating other mass gatherings, as of 100,000 mourners at the funeral in Paris in January 1870 of the journalist Victor Noir, shot by the Emperor's cousin. The use of troops to disperse demonstrators after Noir's funeral, as against strikers at Carmaux, Le Creusot, La Ricamarie, and Aubin in 1869-70, suggested that there was an iron fist in the velvet glove of the liberal Empire. One of the central themes of Price's analysis is the fundamental paradox of all authoritarian regimes based on the "management" of mass politics: how could Napoleon III's belief that his regime represented the will of all but the malevolent be translated into liberal democratic practices to facilitate the expression of that support without the opposition using the new freedoms to convert more people to their cause? Such was the power of the Bonapartist machine until the mid-1860s that the vote for the "official" candidate for the Tarn was 83.9 per cent of votes cast in

1857 but, when government endorsement was withdrawn from him in 1863, just 25.1 per cent. By the time of the elections of 1869, however, "official" endorsement carried little if any weight; republicans, who won more than 31 per cent and conquered large towns and cities, were convinced that victory would be theirs in the next election.

Price is too judicious a historian to commit himself on whether the republicans were correct or whether Bonapartists could have continued the regime under Louis-Napoleon's son, born in 1856 (and subsequently killed fighting the Zulus with the British army). Instead, he emphasizes the role of the contingent in the context of class relations and economic change. His analysis is a major achievement, going beyond both conventional biography of Louis-Napoleon and political and economic history to construct a detailed, convincing account of an authoritarian political system based on mass politics at a time of unprecedented economic change. It will surely—and deservedly—be regarded as the standard work on the "anatomy" of a political system now receiving its due attention.

NOTES

[1] See the review by Steven Kale of David Baguley, *Napoleon III and his Regime: An Extravaganza*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000, at <http://www3.uakron.edu/hfrance/reviews/kale.html>

[2] This incident is referred to by Price on p. 2. See, too, Philippe Séguin, *Louis-Napoléon le Grand*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1990.

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