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**Rod Kedward**, *France and the French: La Vie en Bleu since 1900*. Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 2005. xx + 741 pp. Tables, notes, maps, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-58567-733-7.

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In recent decades, historians have increasingly attempted to uncover the unique combination of attributes that precisely defines France. They variously study the national “passions”, realms of memory, or socio-political characteristics in order to define that most elusive of elixirs: Frenchness.[1] Some authors champion a specific set of characteristics, arguing that the key can be found in immigration, diverse social traditions, or cultural identity.[2] All share a common quest to determine what makes France tick, and how its unique path formed the national consciousness and institutions. This is not merely an antiquarian exercise. In an age of urban rioting by the children of excluded immigrants, ongoing debates about the legacy of Vichy and Algeria, and strident anti-Americanism, these studies have a striking contemporary relevance.

The latest such effort is Rod Kedward’s *France and the French: La Vie en Bleu since 1900*, and it ranks among the most ambitious of its kind. Already acclaimed for his now-standard studies of collaboration and resistance during the Vichy years, Kedward here offers an examination of “French political cultures and their chequered narratives, in which the meanings of the past reverberate through every action of the present” (p. xiii). Simply put, he wishes to eliminate the traditional boundaries between modes of historical inquiry, arguing that political history cannot be adequately addressed without the inclusion of society, culture, memory, and even behavioural studies. Only a proper examination of these “multiple narratives” offers a genuine *aperçu* into French history and its contemporary resonances. Hence the title, which refers to both Zinedine Zidane and company (*les bleus*), but also serves as a metaphor for the diverse strands of Frenchness discussed within this book’s chapters. If this is not an entirely novel approach, as Kedward acknowledges in his introduction, it is a remarkably effective one, illuminating *la vie en bleu* in both past and present terms.[3]

The structure of Kedward’s book is far more original, and the work reveals a great deal about how France moved from self-confident *fin-de-siècle* republicanism, basking in the glow of post-Dreyfus success, to doubt and dissension a century later. His central contention is that the history of France since 1900 can be divided into three periods, the subject of the book’s sections, each dominated by one central theme. From the turn of the century onwards, population and government were obsessed with the idea of the Republic, a neo-Jacobin conceptual framework perceived to be universal in its application. Kedward contends that this uniformity dissipated after 1930, inaugurating an era of ideological conflict, in which the nation evolved from elitist party politics towards multiple strands that encompassed “the margins, the outsiders, the subjugated and the minorities” (p. 3). The period culminated in the *événements* of 1968, pitting Gaullism against a variety of left-wing alternatives. Yet the experience of that year both confirmed the existence of ideological pluralism and simultaneously denied it, yielding to a third duration in 1970, the age of identity, when notions of gender, race, sexual orientation, region, and even ecological commitment all trumped allegiances to political parties and doctrines. Although various tropes re-emerge in each section--the fight between economic modernization and tradition, the proponents and detractors of *dirigisme*, struggles for gender equality--Kedward deftly demonstrates the evolution of the various arguments, shifting through the paradigms of unity, diversity, and difference that characterize each historical period.

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These themes are omnipresent within a truly exhaustive narrative, in which few stones are left unturned. Yet quite unlike the majority of textbooks and monographs concerning the French twentieth century, Kedward rejects any master narrative, emphasizing the broad pluralism present in France—the unifying theme of the book. The first section details the great hopes of republican universalism, and the diverse expectations accompanying such claims. Although this discourse spoke of rights and citizenship, women, workers, and colonial subjects each contested the existing economic and social parameters of political participation. Bourgeois and business interests responded with a rigorous policy of “social defence”, including industrial modernization and centrist politics associated first with the Bloc des Gauches and subsequently Raymond Poincaré. In this regard, Kedward refers to the 1911 Moroccan crisis as a “watershed in French politics”, encouraging consensus in the name of security and foreshadowing the wartime *Union Sacrée*, that apotheosis of Republican unity (p. 51). The chapters about the Great War and its aftermath provide a highlight, avoiding standard clichés and themes, instead detailing the surprise of the government at how effectively anti-German sentiments brought together the diverse strands of French socio-political discourse, and a discussion of the memorialization of the conflict, wherein these same interests attempted to appropriate the sites of mourning. By the 1920s, the *Union Sacrée* crumbled, and vociferous debates again predominated, pitting agricultural interests against budding technocrats and the high priests of cultural modernity against staunchly Catholic and conservative interests. The fight between the Bloc National and the Cartel des Gauches only deepened the fissure.

But despite the “unity in diversity” of the postwar era, wherein all sides at least agreed on the primacy of the Republic, Kedward writes that the internal cohesion could not last. Thus part two describes the “spiral of ideology”, the irrevocable split of Republican forces into mutually antagonistic camps in the 1930s, fuelled by “the primacy of the Republic-state and Franco-French ideological violence” (pp. 149-150). Of course, this subject has been visited on numerous occasions by a plethora of authors. This weakens the initial chapters in this section. It is not that the author omits any significant events or themes, but rather that the analysis often reflects previous scholarship. The events of 6 February 1934 seem to be directly drawn from the work of Serge Bernstein, while interpretations of Blum’s government and French fascism owe a large debt to Julian Jackson, Robert Soucy and Kevin Passmore, among others.[4] In some cases, the narrative strays into more improbable territory. The notion that the million-strong Parti Social Francais resembled the Republican Federation, drawing its support primarily from small business and rural denizens while supporting parliamentary politics rejects current research trends. Nonetheless, on the whole Kedward introduces a more nuanced discussion of the decade than many previous authors, for example emphasizing the critical role played by female ministers in the Popular Front government.

Naturally, subsequent discussions of the road to war and its denouement at Vichy reveal the author’s evident mastery of these topics. French diplomatic and strategic follies receive extensive treatment, including the debate over Charles de Gaulle’s plea for mechanized units and modernized tactics rather than the Maginot Line. The use of local histories in the chapters about the occupation is of particular interest. That the Nord and Pas-de Calais were pro-British due to their experience during the Great War, for instance, is a detail rarely found in standard accounts, and such tidbits greatly enhance the standard narrative account of collaboration and resistance. Both the pluralism of Vichy first noted by Robert Paxton in his landmark 1972 work *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, and the deeply fractured resistance both serve as templates for the ideological diversity of the era, even during wartime. But the most interesting twist appears in the concluding chapters of the second section: that the greatest ideological divide did not emerge during the era of the Popular Front, but after the Liberation. This is a far more unique proposition, and certainly contentious. Although convincingly argued, it detracts from the book’s claim that the years 1930-1970 represent a single era. Nevertheless, Kedward adroitly asserts that despite De Gaulle’s attempted suppression of the memory of Vichy and the occupation in the “unifying narrative of national suffering”, the fragmented nature of the resistance and

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divergent French responses to the Algerian War effectively rekindled ideological debates: “Its innovation was to challenge the dominant belief in a unitary Frenchness and its civilizing mission...a landmark in the discovery and defence of cultural and ethnic difference” (p. 347). More than any other battle in the postwar era, the fight over decolonization epitomized this ideological diversity, Kedward claims, exposing the hypocrisy of Jacobin patriotism and republican universalism, splitting the Republic and leading inexorably to De Gaulle’s Presidency. The latter only produced further problems, principally the paradox of “a society which was highly differentiated and full of independent ideas and actions, yet one in which difference and self-management (*autogestion*) were suspect and denied” (p. 406).

The most pertinent section is undoubtedly the third one, for its discussion of identity politics and racial animus mirrors the headlines of today’s newspapers. It also most clearly fulfills the author’s promise to examine society and culture in addition to more standard discussions of politics and the economy. The list of post-May 1968 participants is daunting: abortion rights, technology and consumerism, immigrant housing and the *Foulard* controversy, the emergence of *Beur* culture, the rise of the neo-fascist National Front, issues of memory and guilt (concerning both Vichy and the Algerian War), and the debates over multiculturalism are all impressively examined, skillfully twinned with the emergence of centrist politics and free-market liberal economics. The scandals, from the grime-ridden HLMs to the Touvier and Papon trials (and concomitant revelations about Francois Mitterand’s past) simultaneously evoke current events and echo the book’s central theme, that “it is the resilience of a unitary state within a multiform and multilayered society that constitutes the singularity of France since 1900” (p. 644). If French exceptionalism has been challenged, Kedward asserts, it has not disappeared, and in fact is subjected to greater scrutiny than ever before by both French and foreign academics, reporters, workers, bureaucrats, and politicians.

Despite its tremendous size and ambitious structure, *France and the French* never feels laboured. Its prose possesses a distinctive flair, and Kedward manages an unlikely feat, providing a historical overview at once accessible to students and the general reading public, but also fascinating to specialists in the field. To be sure, it does not always successfully fulfill its stated ambition, to examine politics through a more socio-cultural lens. The latter disappears at times in the first two sections, most notably absent in discussions of the Popular Front and the events of 1968, both of which are probed in less strictly political terms in recent scholarship.[5] Prominent cultural movements such as the *nouvelle vague* receive only one page, and literature and the arts are often given similar treatment. However, the rigorous analysis and breadth of material covered in this text easily counter such omissions. After all, this is first and foremost an examination of the search for a uniquely Gallic political identity, and not a textbook for a university survey course. Judged in this fashion, *France and the French* will surely become a standard political history of the French twentieth century for some time to come.

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## NOTES

[1] The earliest such postwar effort is Stanley Hoffmann et al, *In Search of France* (New York: Harper, 1963). More recent attempts include Theodore Zeldin’s monumental *History of French Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de memoire* series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996-98).

[2] Fernand Braudel, *L’Identité de la France* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986); Gerard Noiriel, *Population, immigration et identité nationale en France: XIXe et XXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1992); Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars Over National Identity 1900-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

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[3] Kedward particularly notes a debt to Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[4] Serge Bernstein, *Le 6 Fevrier 1934* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-38* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-39* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Kevin Passmore, *From Liberalism to Fascism: The Right in a French Province* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[5] On the Popular Front, see Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Cinema Engagé: Film and the Popular Front* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and Pascal Ory, *La Belle illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994). For socio-cultural analyses of 1968, see Andrew Feenberg and Jim Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) and Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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