

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 13

Pepper D. Culpepper, Peter A. Hall and Bruno Palier, Eds., *Changing France: The Politics that Markets Make* (Houndmills, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 322 pgs. \$74.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-4039-9696-2.

Alistair Cole and Gino Raymond, Eds., *Redefining the French Republic* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 179 pp. \$84.95 ISBN 0-7190-7150-X.

Review by Timothy B. Smith, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

Looking for a synthetic overview of the major forces at play in French politics, society, and economy since 1980? Look no further than *Changing France and Redefining the French Republic*. Constraints of space prevent this reviewer from discussing all twenty-one essays in these two books, but suffice it to say that no student of contemporary France can afford to ignore reading each and every essay. If paperback editions appear, both books will find a home on the required reading lists of advanced undergraduate/graduate courses in contemporary French politics, economics, sociology, and history. Hopefully these books will be read widely despite their high price tags.

As Peter Hall writes in his introductory chapter to *Changing France*, he and his eleven colleagues seek to “chart the most important recent changes in social, economic and political relations in France” (p. 1). They succeed. Some essays break new ground, but most simply provide up-to-date syntheses of important topics—and this is no small feat. At over 300 pages, there is a substantial amount of material for classroom discussion.

Hall's opening essay provides the most succinct account available of recent economic and political history in France. His key point: France has failed to come to terms with the immense changes it has experienced since the early 1980s. French politicians have quietly killed off their *dirigiste* (interventionist) economic model, but they refuse to embrace their new, less statist political economy, and they have never provided the public with an explanation or rationale for their actions. The French state has lost its vision, and is searching for a new role. Politicians send mixed signals to the business community—one day France is open for business, the next it is forcing the thirty-five hour law into place against the *patronat's* wishes. The country is at once moving forward, economically, while being paralyzed, politically (pp. 4-6).

The public has not “accepted” change; it has merely endured it, says Hall (pp. 7-8). Governments promote economic liberalism in *some* sectors at home, but denounce global capitalism when they strut on the world stage. This feeds public cynicism and sends mixed signals to an increasingly disenchanted electorate. In Pepper Culpepper's view, France is a “political economy characterized fundamentally by the uncertainty of expectations of economic actors. This is because there is no organizing principle behind the French economy according to which the principal actors orient their expectations” (p. 46). The government is too weak to control or persuade businesses and unions to get on board and steer the ship of state in a clear direction. But the government is still strong enough to prevent French businesses from liberalizing even more and creating jobs which might avert further social turmoil. Where the issue of job creation is concerned, France is a political economy in gridlock.

According to Culpepper, financial markets are now important in France, but they have no political legitimacy (p. 45). French multinational corporations would be the world's champions if their American

counterparts did not exist. But France takes no pride in its global economic success. Richard Branson is a hero to many people in Britain and in other nations too, but François Pinault is unknown everywhere, except to those French people who dislike him. Business leaders of all ranks, however, enjoy more sway over people's lives than they did twenty-five years ago (pp. 94-95). French managers have been cut loose from the noose of state planners. The watchful eye of the Ministry of Labor is fixed on other things these days. Workers stand alone in their relationship with management. Ironically, the thirty-five hour law was supposed to increase social dialogue (and boost employment) as firms and employees were going to sit down and hammer out new and improved mini social contracts, on a company by company basis. It did not happen. As the newspaper *Libération* demonstrated in a series of articles in 2005, salaried professionals are certainly happier with their shorter work week, but most hourly-paid workers are not: the pace of work has sped up (who could have predicted that?), and industrial workers are now treated even more like cogs, called into shiftwork at unusual times.

Culpepper concludes his excellent essay with the observation that French political economy will remain "somewhat incoherent" over the medium term (p. 47). Markets do not like incoherence and uncertainty. In my view, the implication of this argument is that politicians and voters will continue to dislike markets, but this will not create jobs. Many French firms will remain cautious, afraid to expand, unwilling to invest in human capital for fear of the future. What well-intentioned (but job-killing) law awaits them, they wonder? In my view, the lack of confidence among business leaders is probably an intangible factor in France's long-standing unemployment crisis. This theme is, surprisingly, not discussed in this wide-ranging book.

Changing France seeks to explain France's "widespread feelings of malaise" (p. 1). The authors each do his or her part in contributing a piece to the puzzle. The chief contribution of this book is to highlight the enormous gap between the profound changes on the ground--on the shopfloor, in the cubicles, in the boardrooms, in daily social relations--and the official rhetoric emanating from high political places. Or, rather, the book underscores the lack of a legitimizing discourse for the changes which have shaken the nation. As France privatized state firms, lifted capital controls and loosened up the rules limiting foreign ownership of French firms' stock, a new corporate world was born. Yet again, as Michel Goyer reminds us in an excellent essay, this new world was never explained or justified to the public, and the public has responded with a "profound level of dissatisfaction" (p. 102).

France is far richer today, in real terms, than it was in 1980. But new wealth has not been shared with aspiring workers, rising taxes have eaten away at many workers' wallets, and technological change has decimated the blue collar class. The service sector has not risen quickly enough to absorb job losses in industry. The result is a generation of unemployed youth and a generation of men on early retirement. As Louis Chauvel concludes in a sobering, poignant article on the awful economic plight of French youth, intergenerational inequality is so very pronounced that "conflicts" between the generations "could easily emerge in the twenty-first century" (p. 173). Chauvel is alluding to the potential for the French "social contract" to unravel under the weight of its middle-class, golden-aged beneficiaries who take out far more from the welfare state than they put in--he is not alluding to the type of revolts we saw in November 2005.

As Virginie Guiraudon reminds us in a hard-hitting essay on immigration and discrimination, France's allergy to statistics-gathering based on race and ethnicity prevents the nation from grasping the extent of the problem of discrimination (pp. 132-33). She shows that France's efforts to curb racially-motivated job discrimination have been weak by European standards. She argues that the French deliberately avoided implementing an EU anti-discrimination Action Plan of 2000. "Elected officials, bureaucrats, and experts have been loath to acknowledge that groups are structurally disadvantaged, to name these groups and track their position in society" (p. 144).

There was never a Right vs. Left debate over the massive wave of privatizations undertaken during the

1980s and 1990s (culminating under the Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who was, after Margaret Thatcher, the rich world's all-time privatizer).^[1] But was not Jospin also the rich world's key opponent of "jungle capitalism" and rampant globalization? Indeed he was. His reforms were introduced by stealth. Culpepper concludes: "markets and market power now set expectations in a wide array of fields, while French governments on the left and the right continue to assert their distaste for the market society. This uneasy tension between market reality and state discourse may partially account for the well of public discontent in the contemporary French polity" (p. 29).

As Suzanne Berger reminds us in her essay, levels of trust in politicians are among the lowest in Europe (p. 281). The French spearheaded the drive for European union but the electorate rejected the EU's new constitution in 2005, a document drafted in large part by a former French president. In the six sets of legislative elections held since 1980, the incumbent party has never been returned. Only 30 percent of French people trust the government and just 50 percent are happy with the state of democracy in France. The breakdown of old class identities—40 percent of French now say they do not consider themselves the member of any particular "class"—has dissolved the old political allegiances. By 2002, two-thirds of voters considered the concepts of left and right irrelevant to politics. (pp. 16, 281) The peculiar political structures of France are responsible as well: for nine of the past twenty years, the two rival political camps (the Socialists and the center right) have "cohabited," meaning that one party has held the presidency and the other has held the legislature and cabinet. So the electorate sees little to distinguish the mainstream "left" from the mainstream "right." Tweedle dee and tweedle dum are shunned in favor of "parties at the extremes of the political spectrum, as voters turn to them to express dissatisfaction with existing policy" (p. 17).

Protest movements and strikers are typically supported by two-thirds of the public. For Berger, this unusually high (by European standards) level of support for protest groups "seems to be a kind of counterweight to the growing discrediting of the parties" (p. 283). More and more people refuse to vote. The electorate is more dispersed and volatile than it was thirty years ago.

Andy Smith argues in his chapter "The Government of the European Union and a Changing France," that the EU challenges the very heart of French Republicanism. As Smith argues persuasively, the EU "transforms and often dilutes intersectoral political exchange." It "reflects and encourages a shift in the balances between public authority, markets and societal influences towards proponents of market-based forms of regulation," and its goals and legitimacy have been "largely unintelligible to the general public" (p. 185).

Smith's essay is probably the most original and thought-provoking of the book. It is a must-read—well-written, empirically rich, and conceptually sophisticated. To me, his most interesting point is that a great deal of time and energy is now spent trying to align French policies, sector by sector, with EU laws and directives. Since the French parliament is so weak to begin with (in relation to the cabinet, the executive and the civil service), the EU parliament's sway over French law further diminishes the power of the National Assembly. Take environmental policy: over 200 EU directives are in play (p. 187). More so than the French parliament, the EU parliament is writing French law. (And, I might add, perhaps for the better). Public health and agriculture are two other key realms in which Europe has enormous influence. But this is, quite naturally, resented by many people. Smith argues that the EU leads to disorder, conflict and negotiated compromise between states, between states and the EU, and between economic sectors and actors within states. Smith argues that these challenges are particularly difficult for the French to accept. But every European nation has had to adapt. The problem may be that France complains more than others about adapting.

Alistair Cole and Gino Raymond's edited collection, *Redefining the French Republic* is, like *Changing France*, an excellent book. Before I accentuate the positive, a bit of minor criticism, in the same vein as the paragraph above deserves exploration. Most of the contributors to *Redefining the French Republic*

present Europe and globalization as threats “to the core” of the republican French model (the quote is from the back dust jacket), not as opportunities. Of course, immigration, the EU and globalization do *challenge* France to adapt in certain ways. *Redefining the French Republic* is very good at showing this, and it is one of the book’s many strengths. The question is: just *how much* does it challenge the republican model? My view is: not quite as much as this book suggests. Even if my criticism is valid, it does not detract fundamentally from the overall importance of this book.

Redefining the French Republic makes as strong a case as can be made for the “EU/globalization threatens the French model” argument. The book is buttressed with facts instead of the hyperbolic statements we see from French political parties. If this book is strong at showing the very real challenges facing France, it is somewhat weaker in showing precisely how individual national-level politicians have failed to rise to the challenge of meeting them (the same is true for the first book under review).

Redefining the French Republic contains several path-breaking articles. It deserves to be read widely. The essays are theoretically rich and thought-provoking. Beginning with Gino Raymond's essay, we see how the republican ideal of a homogeneous, centralizing state stands on shaky ground. Voter abstention is on the rise. France’s social heterogeneity is stretching the limits of the republican model, but Raymond is optimistic that France has the strength to adapt. The second chapter, co-authored by Alistair Cole and David Hanley, provides a useful, sweeping discussion of the current state of French politics. This essay will work very well in the classroom.

In an original and fascinating essay, “Politics on the Periphery: Brittany and Republican France,” Alistair Cole argues that a region long known for a tense relationship with the central state managed to capitalize on the opportunities presented by decentralization in such a way that Bretons seem to enjoy the best of both worlds: continued pride in place, effective defense of regional interests at the highest levels, alongside a successful integration into the national economy. Cole concludes that the Breton example shows that “the French government ought to be able to devolve more responsibilities to localities and regions with a clear conscience.... If it is to survive and prosper, French republicanism needs to recognise post-republican realities, one of the most important of which relates to accommodating varying forms of territorial distinctiveness” (p. 62).

Susan Milner shows just how much things have changed at the local level due to the process of decentralization launched by Mitterrand twenty-five years ago. With a focus on Lille, Milner shows how local democracy is alive and kicking. Local civil society has blossomed to such an extent that she can speak of a “post-republican France” (p. 78). Gone are the days of Jacobin top-downism. Cities are far freer than they were 120 years ago, or even just twenty years ago (p. 65).

And the same goes for French businesses. In one of the best essays of the collection, Mairi Maclean shows, like Culpepper in the other book under review, just how much has changed in France. But she also reminds us just how much has stayed the same: “dirigisme survives, albeit in attenuated form” (p. 150). Maclean’s essay stand apart from the others in that she seems far less pessimistic about the pressures of Europeanization on the French economic model: “Skilful economic management in the defence and promotion of French economic and business interests, which rest on the continuing reflex of national sovereignty, has served France well in the past. It will doubtless continue to do so in the future” (p. 150). Maclean predicts that the CAP (EU farm subsidies) will survive due to French lobbying. She reminds us that France has been very successful in flouting those EU policies it deems counter to the national interest, from the 1996 energy sector directive to the 3 percent of GDP cap on annual deficits. EDF provides energy distribution in London but the French state prevents foreign firms from entering the French market (pp. 147-49). This is a richly detailed, provocative essay.

And the same is true of Gordon Cumming’s balanced, but at times damning essay on French foreign policy. “Exporting the Republican Model?” is a spirited discussion of France’s historic “mission” in

Africa. If you're looking for just one essay to assign on France's recent relations with some of its ex-colonies, this is it. Until very recently, very little of French aid was devoted to basic health care, primary education and poverty reduction. Most French aid has been squandered on showcase projects or else used to subsidize the products of uncompetitive French exporters. Certainly French policy in Africa was rooted in France's interests, but these rarely coincided with the interests of everyday people in West Africa. Cumming shows how, very recently, French aid has been redirected away from *dirigiste*, central-state projects toward NGOs. He argues that as the EU expands to the east and as French power over general EU foreign policy (such as it exists) is diluted, French policy toward Africa may well become less selfish and be guided less by national economic interests than by genuine humanitarian ones. France may even, finally, be true to its republican ideals when it ventures abroad (p. 171). This is a thoughtful, provocative essay.

With the publication of these two fine books, teachers of contemporary French politics and society are faced with an embarrassment of riches.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Changing France: The Politics that Markets Make

Peter A. Hall, "Introduction: The Politics of Social Change in France," Peter A. Hall

Pepper D. Culpepper, "Capitalism, Coordination, and Economic Change: The French Political Economy since 1945"

Michael Lallement, "New Patterns of Industrial Relations and Political Action since the 1980s"

Michel Goyer, "The Transformation of Corporate Governance in France"

Bruno Palier, "The Long Good Bye to Bismarck? Changes in the French Welfare State"

Virginie Guiraudon, "Different Nation, Same Nationhood: The Challenges of Immigrant Policy"

Louis Chauvel, "Social Generations, Life Chances and Welfare Regime Sustainability"

Andy Smith, "The Government of the European Union and a Changing France"

Patrick Le Galès, "The Ongoing March of Decentralisation within the Post-Jacobin State"

Gérard Grunberg, "The French Party System and the Crisis of Representation"

Richard Balme, "Convergence, Fragmentation and Majority-Cycling in French Public Opinion"

Suzanne Berger, "Representation in Trouble"

LIST OF ESSAYS

Redefining the French Republic

Alistair Cole and Gino Raymond, "Introduction"

Gino Raymond, "The Republican Ideal and the Reality of the Republic"

Alistair Cole and David Hanley, "French Politics in the Twenty-First Century"

Alaistair Cole, "Politics on the Periphery: Brittany and Republican France"

Susan Milner, "Urban Governance and Local Democracy in France"

Steve Wharton, "From Margin to Mainstream? Establishing a Community of Gay Citizens"

Nadia Kiwan, "The Citizen and the Subject"

Jean-Paul Révauger, "Social Policy and the Challenge to the 'Republican Model'"

Mairi Maclean, "The Interventionist State: Demise or Transformation?"

Gordon Cumming, "Exporting the Republican Model? A Critique of France's Historic Mission in Africa"

NOTES

[1] Timothy B. Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality and Globalization since 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 3. See also Philip Gordon and Sophie Meunier, *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

Timothy B. Smith Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario tbs@post.queensu.ca

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (February 2007), No. 13

ISSN 1553-9172