
H-France Review Vol. 17 (August 2017), No. 125

Hugh McDonnell, *Europeanising Spaces in Paris, c. 1947-1962*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016. 289 pp. Bibliography and index. £85.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8302-5

Review by Kolleen M. Guy, University of Texas at San Antonio.

It would seem that, since the British vote to exit the European Union, questions about the future of Europe have taken center stage. The invasion of Ukraine, the American election of Donald Trump, and the continued challenges in Turkey have only made those questions appear more urgent. Earlier this year, attention was keenly focused on the French elections in what sometimes felt like a referendum on European unity. The victory of Emmanuel Macron, the unapologetically pro-European President of the Fifth Republic, seemed to signal a “re-Europeanization” of the French. And Macron’s white-knuckle handshake with Trump, who is known to use a handshake to discomfit others (as he infamously did by refusing to shake the hand of German chancellor Angela Merkel), projected an authority and confidence on the international scene that suggested that France remained a powerful and central force behind the European project. Macron, it would seem, has an opportunity to “re-Europeanise” not only French citizens but many citizens of the European Union whose faith in the project, particularly with its overwhelming German leadership, seemed shaky, at best, in recent years.

Hugh McDonnell’s book suggests that we shouldn’t be at all surprised at the enduring centrality of France in the on-going political development of Europe or the expression of a deeper European identity. What he chronicles here, in a series of vignettes covering the years from roughly the end of the war until 1962, is “how discourses about Europe were produced in other spaces” besides the institutional or political spaces of the nascent EEC (p. 8). Paris was one such space. If France was to play a central role in any future European project, then Paris, in particular, would serve as the de facto capital of whatever that final “Europe” might entail. There have been, of course, many “Europes,” as the author acknowledges, but France has long claimed “to be the apotheosis of the European tradition” with Paris as the epitome of what was valuable in that tradition (p. 3). With its claims to art and culture as well as being the center of the 1789 Revolution that championed the universal values of liberty and justice, Paris served, as the author argues, as a space “in which ideas about Europe and Europeaness were formulated, implied, or implicated” (p. 7). The meaning and course of this Europe, as the vignettes of Parisian space attest, were contested and contentious in the immediate post-war years. The current contestation is, in many ways, a continuation.

What did the contestation over Europe look like in between 1947 and 1962 (many years before the current French president was born)? Here, the author offers a series of vignettes that provide a snapshot of the challenges, confrontations, and consensus of these years. Each vignette could be read on its own since this is not a book that is chronicling change over time as much as documenting contestation and exchange of ideas about Europe within the short period between the escalations of the Cold War to the end of France’s war of decolonization in Algeria. Of the themes that emerge, violence is one of the most intriguing. We are accustomed to thinking of the European economic and political project as a response to the violence and devastation of World War II. Yet, these were years when physical spaces, such as

the Parisian café, became a forum for intellectual combat bringing together everyone from Surrealists to black American intellectuals to trailblazing European philosophers for a radical reconsideration of ideas of Europe.

Words could become deeds as heated debates spilled into the Paris streets. Parisian streets were, according to the author, “seen to be the locus of negative reaction and raising supporters and perpetrators of violence, which was carried out in part with a certain underlying understanding and advocacy of Europe” (p. 77). One has only to look at the Parisian street disturbances that followed the 1956 invasion of Hungary to see how events, such as the clashes on the streets of Budapest, could reconfigure “the street into a kind of trans-European space” (p. 87). Conversely, the brutal killing of Algerians on the night of October 17, 1961 had a European importance, provoking uncomfortable comparisons between Paris and Little Rock, Arkansas and raising broader questions about Europe’s identity, values, and place in the world. Whether the politics of the Parisian streets featured in chapter three or the revolutionary violence in Asia chronicled in the Parisian photo exhibition by Cartier-Bresson featured in chapter eight, the author raises important questions about how violence forced Europeans to both look forward and back in creating their self-understanding of Europe.

Spaces, such as the café and street, were implicated in the process of formulating and contesting a post-war Europe. Within those spaces, however, there were actors and organizations that mobilized for and around differing visions of Europe. The author chooses to focus on two particular Paris-based political movements: the left-wing Movement socialiste des états-unis d’Europe (The Socialist Movement for the United States of Europe or MSEUE) and the far-right wing Fédération des étudiants nationalistes (The Federation of Nationalist Students or FEN). The MSEUE was formed in Montrouge, near Paris, in June 1946 with the objective of creating a Europe that was firmly socialist and independent of either the USA or the USSR. The initial goal was to renew the former internationalist tradition of European socialists with the goal of creating a new equilibrium and equality. The realities of the Cold War saw the organization gradually reconciling itself to a capitalist Europe with a continued insistence on “a Europe based on equality of rights” although, as the author points out, the organization never managed to “resolve the problem of who counted as European in the first place” (p. 253). By raising fundamental questions about rights and belonging in Europe, the MSEUE offers a powerful example of the different European identities considered and advocated in these years. The far-right FEN, by contrast, gets very little mention in post-war histories and had comparatively little influence in the immediate post-war years. Yet, as recent elections have shown us, the alternative vision of Europe that they articulated when they seemed to be on the losing side of history—a vision defined by hierarchy, nationalism, and superiority over a non-European world—remains not only viable but growing in strength and significance. The emergence of Marine Le Pen as the main challenger to Macron is evidence of the enduring relevance of the FEN’s ideas. What the author brilliantly illuminates with these examples is how Europe was and, in many ways, remains, “an on-going project, as something to be made” (p. 256).

As someone who teaches a course on the idea of Europe, I appreciate how the author chronicles the formulation and contestation of ideas about identity and place with well-researched concrete examples. I look forward to adding the book to the required reading for the course. Perhaps with the help of my students, I will be able to parse what holds together the final section of the book, with which I admittedly struggled. The vignettes are intriguing: the story of exiles from Franco’s Spain in Paris; the work of the scholar of the Arab world Jacques Berques; and the work of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose photos of Paris are iconic. Each vignette clearly shows how cultural spaces in Paris were implicated in aspects of Europeanism and raised issues about who constituted an insider and outsider. Yet, I struggled to find a larger theme to hold Berque’s Mediterranean vision together with Cartier-Bresson’s aesthetic representation of Europe in photographs. Yet, if the mark of a successful study is the ability of the author to raise questions and stimulate discussion, then these chapters like the others in this well-written volume indicate a very successful book that will only increase in relevance as the question of what it means to be European or a part of Europe continues to unfold.

Kolleen M. Guy
University of Texas at San Antonio
kolleen.guy@utsa.edu

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172