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Riccardo Brizzi, *Charles De Gaulle and the Media: Leadership, TV and the Birth of the Fifth Republic*. Translated by Jon Kear. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xvi + 309 pp. Figures, tables, notes, author index and subject index. £123.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-3-319-65641-0; £98.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 978-3-319-65642-7.

Review by Raymond Kuhn, Queen Mary, University of London.

This single-authored work, published in Palgrave's French Politics, Society and Culture series, is an English-language translation of a study originally published in Italian by Il Mulino (2010) and later translated into French (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014). Overall it is a very readable and detailed account of key aspects of the relationship between De Gaulle and the media.

The book concentrates on what the author argues is "a single—but crucial—feature of de Gaulle's leadership when he returned to power in 1958: his use of mass communication media, and in particular television" (p. 5). In particular, Brizzi "focuses attention on television and its role in the legitimation of Gaullist leadership in the political and institutional context of the new French Republic" (p. 8). According to the author, this distinguishes his study from that of others on radio and television in the Gaullist period, which, with their emphasis on executive control of news content, have underplayed the relationship between media and leadership legitimation. [1]

Brizzi's overarching argument is spelled out in a short introductory chapter entitled "Politics between communication and personalization," in which he contends that "the decade between the end of the fifties and the end of the sixties" (i.e. the period of de Gaulle's presidency) was a period during which "the dissemination of the medium of television caused a rupture not only of the hierarchical forms of republican political communication—parliamentary eloquence gave way to audiovisual eloquence—but also of the idea of political legitimacy. This legitimacy is informal and yet powerful; it originates from the media, television in particular, and forces political leaders to continuously communicate, if they want to benefit from traditional legitimacy" (p. 10). In short, the arrival and routinization of television as a mass medium of information and communication radically altered the rules of the political game in the French Fifth Republic. In particular, television had a significant impact on the functioning and style of de Gaulle's presidential leadership and, by implication, that of his successors.

The book is organized within a clear chronological structure. The first two chapters focus on the Fourth Republic. Chapter one analyses key features of the development of the media system, notably the reconstruction of the press system after the Liberation in 1944 and the economic and political problems faced by the print media during the 1950s. Chapter two concentrates on the personalization of politics and government communication in the new parliamentary republic, with short case studies devoted to the premierships of Antoine Pinay, Pierre Mendès France and Guy Mollet respectively. There then follows a chapter on President de Gaulle's relationship with the press in which, with the use of detailed tables, Brizzi shows the complexity and changing nature of newspaper support for and opposition to de Gaulle between 1958 and 1969. The Gaullist argument that partisan control of television was designed to counter a press that was overwhelmingly hostile to de Gaulle is not supported by the evidence.

Instead this reveals a much more nuanced picture of differentiated and changing newspaper and magazine allegiances, both across the press system as a whole and within any single title during the eleven years of de Gaulle's presidency. This chapter complements the data and analysis from the detailed study previously undertaken by Jean Chalaby.[2]

The heart of the book consists of six chapters on President de Gaulle's relationship with the broadcast media, notably television. Chapter four is devoted to the theme of political control of news in the early years of de Gaulle's presidency. Here the contribution of the minister of information is reduced to that of a simple intermediary between the political executive and the state broadcasting corporation, while the key roles played by the president and prime minister Michel Debré are foregrounded, including the former's control of key appointments in state television.

Chapter five focuses on de Gaulle's personal appearances on the small screen. These include the press conferences staged as a symbolic expression of France's renewed power and influence under Gaullist rule and the television speeches in which the Head of State addressed the nation and, sometimes, made important policy announcements, notably on matters relating to the conflict in Algeria during the first four years of his presidential tenure. De Gaulle's use of personalized power during this conflict and the contribution of television in providing a direct link between the president and the nation, allowing him to bypass intermediary bodies such as parliament and the parties, is the central theme of chapter six, during which Brizzi quotes Maurice Duverger as arguing as early as 1959 that under de Gaulle France had become "a media-led democracy" (p. 167).

Chapter seven covers the period of the institutionalization of Gaullist power between 1962 and 1965. This includes the constitutional amendment to introduce direct election of the president and the victory of the Gaullist party in the subsequent parliamentary election following the referendum—a double victory for de Gaulle in what Brizzi terms an "electronic coup d'état". The following chapter covers the 1965 presidential election, in which the established political notable François Mitterrand and the relative newcomer Jean Lecanuet benefited from campaign rules that guaranteed them access to television to challenge de Gaulle's apparently entrenched dominance of political communication. De Gaulle himself initially eschewed campaigning, as if he believed that he should be re-elected as of right. However, when opinion polls revealed a sharp decline in voting preferences for him, he used television to shore up his support and secure victory in the second-round run-off against Mitterrand. The final chapter focuses on the 1968 events, charting de Gaulle's loss of political control over the unfolding disturbances in France and the emergence of Georges Pompidou, his prime minister, as a credible presidential successor for the post-Gaullian era thanks to his primordial role in the resolution of the crisis.

In the book's conclusion Brizzi offers some reflections on the power of television to make or break the careers of political leaders, citing the contrasting use of the medium by de Gaulle and Pompidou in 1968 as evidence of television's power to "determine the rise or fall of political personalities" (p. 293). Some readers might consider that such an assertion requires qualification with due attention having to be paid to the significance of the rules of the political system (institutional variable), the electoral system (electoral variable) and pre-existing strength of voters' partisan preferences (voter variable) in influencing the success of presidential candidates in winning elections and of presidents in providing substantive and symbolic leadership. The role of the media in general and television in particular undoubtedly forms part of the mix in explaining the "personalization of power" in the Fifth Republic, but it is not the only factor. One way in which the author could have addressed this concern would have been to make more use of the growing political science literature on political leadership, building on the references to the work of Weber and others, that are included in the book's introductory chapter.[3] Some reference to recent work on the interdependence between the media and political leadership in advanced democracies might also have been usefully included in the introduction as part of the author's coverage of the media's role in leadership legitimation.[4]

In terms of presentation, the book suffers from three unfortunate defects. First is the quality of the translation from the original Italian version. Two examples from among many will suffice: the use of the phrase “first turn” to refer to the first round of the 1965 presidential election (pp. 227, 240 and 282) and a reference to Vendée in its Italian form of “Vandea” (p. 203). Second, this English-language version also suffers from typos that should have been picked up at the copy editing stage. These include among others: the misspelling of Walter Bagehot as “Walter Begehot” (p. 6); “to reign in” instead of “to rein in” (p. 34); the use of “Head of Government” rather than Head of State in reference to the presidential office in the Fifth Republic (p. 216); and a reference to a UK prime minister as “Head of State” rather than Head of Government (p. 219). Finally, while the book has bibliographical references at the end of each chapter, it does not have a separate integrated bibliography, which is a disappointing omission on the part of the publishers.

Despite these presentational infelicities, Brizzi’s book has much to recommend it. It will appeal to anyone interested in de Gaulle’s presidency, political communication in France during the Fifth Republic and, more generally, the exercise of executive leadership in western democratic political systems. It contains original research by the author (for instance on newspaper partisanship), draws significantly on archival data and interview material, and demonstrates a high level of scholarship. In highlighting a crucial aspect of de Gaulle’s presidential rule and complementing other studies of de Gaulle’s relationship with the media, Brizzi makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of de Gaulle’s presidency and the legacy bequeathed to his successors by the founding father of the Fifth Republic.

NOTES

[1] A notable example of an excellent work on executive control of television news during the de Gaulle presidency is Jérôme Bourdon, *Histoire de la télévision sous de Gaulle* (Paris: Anthropos/INA, 1990).

[2] Jean Chalaby, *The de Gaulle Presidency and the Media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

[3] Robert Elgie, *Studying Political Leadership* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[4] Ludger Helms, “Governing in the media age: The impact of the mass media on executive leadership in contemporary democracies,” *Government and Opposition* 43 (2008): 26-54.

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