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Emile Chabal, *France*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020. xxi + 202 pp. Maps, timeline, and index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781509530014; \$14.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781509530021; \$12.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781509530045.

Review by Alice L. Conklin, Ohio State University.

For a “pocket history,” Emile Chabal’s *France* packs a big punch. A survey of French politics and society since 1940, it is part of a series launched by Polity Press in 2019 that so far includes five other titles—*Russia, China, Japan, Israel* and *Syria*. The compact size and attractive print face make each volume a pleasure to read. But the real pleasure of *France* comes from Chabal’s mastery of his subject. The series’ blurb promises “smart and vibrant” content that explores the major forces and developments “shaping the contemporary politics of countries across the world.”[1] Chabal has chosen the defeat of 1940 as his jumping off point and carries the narrative through to the *gilets jaunes* protests. Organized into six thematic chapters bookended by an introduction and conclusion, uncluttered by notes but with a timeline and maps up front and further reading at the back, *France* manages the rare feat of combining sparkling prose with in-depth and lucid analysis of French history in the eighty years since the fall of France stunned the world.

Perhaps best known for his innovative work on French political culture and colonial legacies since the 1970s, Chabal is also an historian of Franco-British relations and a publicly engaged intellectual who frequently writes for the broader public. Not surprisingly then, *France* has a great deal to say about the causes of the puzzling divisions, tensions, and contradictions—in a word, the “paradoxes” of contemporary France—that haunt today’s headlines and that even the most ardent Francophiles have trouble understanding. Each chapter works as a stand-alone exploration of a particular paradox, but the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is because Chabal builds a persuasive case for the continuity of certain structures, core values, and lines of fracture that reinvent themselves politically in new guises as generations shift and global circumstances change. Synthesizing a broad swathe of recent scholarship, *France* is a sophisticated and timely update of the time-honored notion of the Two Frances.

Chapter one, “Defeat and Resistance,” begins with the humiliating debacle of 1940. The scars of defeat led postwar elites to prosecute—and lose—wars in Indochina and Algeria, and then to pursue a largely illusory great power status by other means. But defeat in 1940 also produced another response and legacy, which Chabal tracks with equal clarity: resistance to oppression. Sure, de Gaulle later mythologized the Resistance of the war years as the act of a single unified nation when it was anything but. Chabal, however, is most interested in the persistence in France since the Liberation of “the spirit of resistance” with a small “r.” He sees such resistance in the

wave of anti-colonialism that accompanied the escalating horror of the Algerian conflict, the revolts of 1968, and the constant street protests that show no sign of abating. For him, this continuing French impulse to resist is a sign of hope—an alternative to “the gnawing pessimism” that defeat might have invited (p. 34).

The anchoring themes of defeat and resistance allow Chabal to pivot in chapter two, “Colonialism and Anti-Colonialism,” to the postwar struggles over France’s empire and its afterlives. Here he provides a succinct overview of almost two centuries of colonialism, leaving no doubt that the empire’s formal unraveling (like its conquest in the first place) is an integral part of the nation’s history; placing this chapter second in the book usefully reinforces this message. Like France in 1940, the empire “falls” in ways so humiliating that the memory of another divisive defeat is promptly buried only to return later. Meanwhile, fragments of empire persist down to the present in the overseas departments and territories. Anti-colonial resistance, however, is as much a part of this story as the “humiliation” of defeat at the hands of the colonized. From the Haitian Revolution through the Left Bank’s opposition to torture during the Algerian War to today’s demand for the right to be recognized as Muslim and French, Chabal provides a multi-pronged genealogy of the “extraordinary transnational [Francophone] community” that has repeatedly mobilized in different combinations to challenge colonialism’s continued violence (p. 35).

The legacies of defeat and resistance continue to structure the narrative as Chabal turns to the theme of “Grandeur and Decline” in chapter three. Here, he analyzes the Gaullist obsession with recovering France’s great power status and the shifting divisions between left and right that coincided with the General’s death in 1969; but as in all chapters, Chabal works both forward and backwards in time. When de Gaulle strode confidently back onto the world stage in 1958, he was riding the coattails of the Fourth Republic’s successful reconstruction of the nation’s shattered economy and its revolutionary expansion of the safety net. Yet this same revolution dramatically expanded the role of the state in the lives of ordinary citizens in ways that they both loved and hated, a paradox that the top-heavy new Fifth Republic only intensified. The first to lash out was France’s exploding youth population. They had no memory of the unified Resistance that de Gaulle was peddling, only questions about what had really happened during the Occupation, including the role of Vichy in the deportations. In tandem with workers, many felt humiliated by the paternalism, sexism, racism and structural inequalities at home and abroad that persisted in the context of affluence. Mass unemployment and deindustrialization since the 1970s further exacerbated these grievances, but also gave them new forms. Chabal places France’s most recent political realignments in long-term historical perspective in chapter four, “Right and Left,” only to conclude that ideas of left and right are not about to disappear in the next few years: “the pull of bipolarity is too great” (p. 112). The left, after all “is accustomed to failure,” although this has never discouraged it from fighting for progress (p. 98). And the right, quite simply, defines itself over and over again against the progressivism of the left—however the latter reinvents itself.

Left and right are familiar political languages to most outsiders, but how to explain republicanism and its supposed antithesis, *communautarisme*, “which since the 1990s have become the dominant way in the which the French talk about their country, their past and their society” (p. 115)? To answer this question Chabal’s last two chapters take up more recent struggles over neo-liberalism, French-led European integration, and the meaning of republican citizenship in an increasingly diverse and unequal society. Chapter five, “The Republic and Its Discontents,” traces how and why the language of republican values that was once the monopoly of the left today

appeals equally to the right and far right. The collapse of Marxism and the atrophy of Gaullist ideas created an ideological void that republicanism rushed to fill. That parties and citizens on both sides of the aisle are fighting over republicanism's meaning is a sign of the continuing relevance of its core values--albeit with no consensus in sight. The current upsurge in claims to a right to racial and gender difference is a case in point. Far from challenging republicanism, those resisting the status quo in the name of difference are insisting that the Republic fulfill its foundational promise of freedom and equality to all by becoming more inclusive. Those resisting such claims respond by defining republican values in essentialist terms anchored in a different reading of the past. France remains "an intensely historical place," where the past bleeds constantly into the present (p. 170).

As chapter six, "Local Citizens in a Global State," reminds us, conflicts over republican citizenship are also contests between citizens and a notoriously powerful and globally ambitious state that certain groups of ordinary French periodically reject. It is easily forgotten that a devolution of government in the 1970s "downwards to regions and localities, outward to the European Union and the overseas territories" initially produced a vibrant and novel growth of citizen associations throughout France (pp. 126-127). But a relentless cutting of state services in the geographically and socially isolated parts of the nation, coupled with continued investment in the European project, have alienated France's most vulnerable citizens. Typically they express their anger against Paris and Brussels through the time-honored tradition of direct protest--resistance with a little "r." The *gilets jaunes*--"in their scope and longevity...the largest wave of protest since those of 1968"--are part of a long history of movements that are neither left nor right, but anti-state (p. 142).

As this totally inadequate summary suggests, Chabal's *France* is that precious short book that can and should be read on many levels. Pitched to "midlevel" students but also the curious tourist and enlightened news junkie, *France* renders that nation's postwar paradoxes remarkably intelligible to the uninitiated and initiated alike. It would be a superb book for classroom use, providing essential scaffolding and debating points while leaving teachers free to supplement the chapters with their own favorite texts and topics. I detected only a few places where I would have preferred a slightly different wording. I'm not sure that my undergraduate students would even know who Brigitte Bardot was. That the British had a more "orderly" withdrawal from India and Palestine than the French in Indochina seems an odd claim in light of Britain's counter insurgencies waged in Kenya, Cyprus, and Malaysia. Chabal expertly explores "the constitutive racial tension within republicanism" with respect to non-white people in colonial and post-colonial France (p. 131), but I wish he had been more explicit about Vichy's racial laws and antisemitism in general, a term which does not appear in the index. As these points suggest, there is as much to engage with in this polished volume as there is to learn from it. Finally, although Chabal leaves no doubt about the current impasse, he ends on a note of cautious optimism. In the imaginative spirit of 1968, people in post-pandemic France must avoid--at least politically--*un retour à la normale* and once again "demand the impossible" (p. 179).

## NOTE

[1] See the webpage of the series Polity Histories, [https://politybooks.com/serieslanding/?subject\\_id=5&series\\_id=59](https://politybooks.com/serieslanding/?subject_id=5&series_id=59) Accessed May 23, 2021. Compared to Oxford University Press's popular series "Very Short Introductions," the Polity pocket Histories have much bigger print.

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