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Tom Sancton, *Sweet Land of Liberty: America in the Mind of the French Left, 1848-1871*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021. xi + 320 pp. Index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8071-7430-2.

Review by Lloyd Kramer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

French political activists and travelers have often defined their political and cultural identities by analyzing how France resembles or differs from the United States. Tom Sancton examines one notable era of such transatlantic comparisons in this engaging new book on French writers who drew on the history and ideas of American republicanism to challenge Napoleon III's Second Empire. As the historian Durand Echeverria noted in a classic study of similar cross-cultural themes, the French fascination with an idealized American culture began well before the United States became an independent republic and then gradually ebbed after France created its own republican government in the late eighteenth century.[1]

Discussions of American society have nevertheless continued to influence French intellectual life from the time of Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy in the 1830s down to the postmodern critiques of American *anomie* by recent French travelers such as Jean Baudrillard and Bernard-Henri Lévy.[2] Although Americans have also written endlessly about France, nineteenth-century French writers and political activists were more inclined to use idealized images of the other republic to argue for major reforms within their own country. The French side of this long-developing cultural exchange thus contributed to critiques of Bonapartism and created historical legacies that shape the organizing themes of *Sweet Land of Liberty: America in the Mind of the French Left, 1848-1871*.

Sancton combines diverse evidence from nineteenth-century sources with the perspectives of a historian who worked for years as *Time* magazine's Paris bureau chief. He later wrote about jazz music in New Orleans before returning to historical work that he had pursued earlier at Oxford University—where he completed a Ph.D. dissertation on the subject of this book in 1978. He does not explain, however, why he originally wanted to study French leftist views of America or why he decided to publish this revised dissertation after his long stint as a historically-trained journalist.[3] There is, of course, nothing wrong about returning to a scholarly project after pursuing other work for several decades, but Sancton could have offered interesting reflections on how the present context differs from the era in which he began his historical research or how his journalistic experiences in Paris altered his understanding of cross-cultural historical analysis.

Did Sancton's work as an American interpreter of events in modern France, for example, give him new insights into how the French interpreted American events in the nineteenth century? Did he find that earlier cross-cultural misperceptions regained importance for him as new misperceptions emerged in both France and the United States during the Iraq War or the Trump-era presidency? Sancton never explores such self-reflexive, contextual questions or explains why he believes the subject of his book remains relevant across the *longue durée*.

In any case, the nineteenth-century French travelers and writers whom he discusses in this book exemplify historical patterns that Sancton may well have observed also as an American journalist in modern Paris. "With their view...clouded by their own preconceptions and ideological beliefs," Sancton writes in his concluding analysis of nineteenth-century, cross-cultural interpreters, "few Frenchmen really grasped the nature of American democracy or learned any enduring political lessons from the example of the United States" (p. 239). Yet this recurring French failure to understand American society was by no means unique, as the history of self-referential, political projections in France points to "a larger phenomenon" that Sancton finds in "the subjective ways by which internal factions in one country have viewed foreign powers throughout history" (p. 239).

Sancton's overarching claim that people view other countries through their own political frameworks or cultural concerns is both persuasive and unsurprising. Few people truly understand the internal complexities of alien societies or break free from their personal and national identities as they describe the institutions, ideologies, languages, and social relations in other national cultures.

Despite the somewhat predictable truisms of his conclusion, Sancton's informative book is filled with interesting stories about ambitious republicans who wanted to change Second Empire France (or their own lives) by urging the emulation or rejection of social and political practices they observed in the United States. Readers will learn, for example, about the strange trajectory of a former French army officer named Gustave Cluseret (1823-1900) who aspired to be a new Lafayette by joining the Union army in 1862. When his haughty behavior led to charges of military insubordination, Cluseret returned to Paris, wrote anti-Bonapartist articles in French newspapers, and then fled again to New York to support the development of American labor unions. Reclaiming his former military identity in 1871, he served briefly as the war minister of the Paris Commune before escaping from France in the disguise of a Belgian priest.

Such stories contribute to Sancton's broader argument about the diversity of French leftists who brought a wide range of personal and political aspirations into their engagement with American society and public events. "Cluseret's progression from republican 'Lafayette' in America to proto-Bolshevik in Paris," Sancton notes in a summary of this peripatetic career, "illustrates the chasm that opened up between radicals like himself and the bourgeois republicans with whom he made a common cause against Napoleon III" (p. 228).

Sancton's definition of the French left in the 1860s thus includes everyone from liberal bourgeois entrepreneurs and newspaper writers to far-left socialists and militant labor activists. Although their ideas diverged on many issues, these disparate groups shared a common dislike for Bonapartism, a broad desire for more egalitarian social relations, and a general sympathy for American republicanism.

The United States offered a much-needed model of actually existing republicanism for writers who wanted France to create a post-Bonapartist republican government. Sancton repeatedly emphasizes, however, that French references to American society usually reflected French beliefs rather than accurate portrayals of social or political life in the United States. As he notes in a typical account of how French republicans viewed American government budgets: “On this point, as on many others, the left’s perception and exploitation of the American image were at odds with reality” (p. 145).

Cultural miscomprehensions therefore led to much inaccurate political analysis, but Sancton stresses that French republicans also tried to connect their theoretical speculations to specific events that shaped distinctive French cycles of anti-American critique and pro-American praise during the two decades after 1850. Following a burst of “sister republic” celebrations at the time of the 1848 Revolution, French republicans wrote mostly critical accounts of American political culture throughout the next ten years. America’s theoretical commitment to human rights and democracy was profoundly compromised by the racist system of enslaved labor, which became all the more jarring after the new French republic quickly abolished slavery in all French-controlled territories in April 1848.

The brutal contradictions of a sister republic that continually deferred to its slaveholding social elites pushed French republican writers to become the harshest critics of America’s whole republican political system. Republican critiques linked the blatant hypocrisy of slavery to a new American expansionism after the Mexican-American War and to a pervasive American materialism that made money-making more important than any other kind of social activity or creative work. Sancton also describes the French hostility to the powerful constitutional role of American presidents after Louis Bonaparte used the French presidency as an institutional base for transforming the Second Republic into the Second Empire. By the “eve of the American Civil War,” Sancton writes, “French observers generally felt that the United States was sinking into a moral and political abyss that could prove fatal to its own institutions and weaken the democratic cause worldwide” (p. 47).

The pessimism of French republicans began to change, however, after John Brown’s abolitionist raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. French writers such as Victor Hugo viewed Brown’s violent assault against the slave system as the beginning of a new republican revolution, and French hopes for American republicanism continued to grow after Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency plunged the United States into a protracted civil war. Once the goals of the northern military campaigns expanded from a struggle to save the Union into a struggle to destroy slavery, the former French ambivalence about American political culture quickly vanished. Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation moved most French republicans to see the United States as the new historical center of the global struggle for human rights.

French republicans supported the Union cause even more enthusiastically when they recognized that Napoleon III and his main economic allies favored the secessionist Confederate states. The French imperial desire to reduce the rising national power of the United States merged with an economic desire to restore the robust cotton trade that had long supplied the essential raw material for France’s textile factories.

Sancton thus identifies both political and economic motives in the French elite’s sympathy for the Confederate cause, but he also argues that most French workers accepted their imperial

government's pro-Confederate tilt because unemployment and hunger undermined working-class solidarity with the abolitionist goals of the Union forces. Drawing on both police reports and newspaper articles about worker unrest, Sancton provides strong evidence to show that French workers' concerns about immediate economic needs far outweighed their support for an American war to destroy slavery.[4]

Republican leaders and writers, by contrast, eagerly embraced the Union campaign to abolish slavery. After Lincoln's government also denounced Napoleon III's imperial imposition of Austrian Archduke Maximilian's unpopular regime in Mexico, most French republicans came to view the Northern United States as their key national ally in a global struggle for human rights and republican political institutions.

French republicans thus celebrated the Union's decisive military triumph and deeply mourned the death of Lincoln. A new stream of pro-American commentaries flowed from writers such as Georges Clemenceau, Victor Hugo, and Léon Gambetta, lifting republican praise for the United States to a new high-water mark during the late 1860s. Indeed, according to Sancton, "[t]he French left's view of postwar America bordered on the hagiographic. In their eyes the Union was continuing the progressive course it had embarked on during the Civil War, and the soundness of its republican institutions received new demonstrations with each succeeding year" (p. 132). France's diverse anti-Bonapartist factions therefore strongly endorsed the radical Congressional Republicans during the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, in part because they interpreted the ascendancy of legislative power in the United States as confirmation of their own hostility for presidential systems. Meanwhile, French travelers continued to publish laudatory newspaper articles and books that praised the educational opportunities for American women, the legal separation of church and state, and the political rights of American workers.

Sancton discusses each of these themes to explain how the French search for alternatives to the Second Empire gave America its "enhanced democratic and egalitarian image" and led utopian French theorists to misrepresent the American Republican party "as the new torchbearer of the revolutionary tradition" (p. 207). Placing French ideas in this cross-cultural framework, Sancton argues that idealistic leftists who held "unrealistic" expectations for France also "developed excessive and unrealistic expectations of America" (p. 209).

Although Sancton offers good reasons to be skeptical about the idealistic projections of French republicans, his own skeptical views of America's Reconstruction-era policies and conflicts seem dated in the context of current historical scholarship. His assessments of Ulysses Grant, for example, depend on Samuel Eliot Morison's 1972 description of Grant as "unfitted for the presidency by temperament, and less equipped for it than any predecessor or successor" (p. 133). Sancton's use of such interpretations ignores the recent scholarship that has significantly revised Grant's older reputation and brought new attention to the ways in which Grant firmly opposed the resurgence of white supremacist groups across the American South.[5]

Sancton's views of Reconstruction mostly reflect an earlier historical scholarship that condemned the black-influenced southern governments of the late 1860s and 1870s as simply corrupt or incompetent. "There is great irony in this French glorification of postwar America," Sancton writes without apparent awareness of limitations in his own historical views. "No one familiar with the history of Reconstruction--especially of Grant's corrupt administration--can suppress a smile upon reading these naïve panegyrics from across the sea" (p. 132). To be sure, the French

republicans did not understand the complexities of American conflicts “from across the sea,” but Sancton’s failure to mention the Grant-era struggles against “Lost Cause” reactionaries and the Ku Klux Klan seems almost as remote from now-recognized historical realities as the alleged naiveté of writers who praised the Reconstruction policies of American republicans from Paris.

The last sections of *Sweet Land of Liberty* turn to French-American interactions during the time of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune. The collapse of the Second Empire quickly destroyed the earlier unity of the anti-Bonapartist French left as the shared hatred for Napoleon III’s imperial government gave way to the struggle over how to organize a new French republic. Amid the violence of this post-Napoleonic moment, however, the opposing liberal and socialist factions of the French left found a final unifying theme in their new anger against American leaders and international actions.

Sancton describes a pervasive French disillusionment that spread among all French republicans after President Grant proclaimed his strong support for the Prussians who entered Paris in early 1871. American leaders were pleased to see Napoleon III fall from power, but most Americans also criticized radical French republicanism; and they became more critical when the Communards seized control of Paris and rejected the new French republic’s humiliating postwar treaty with the Prussians.

A “red commune” in the heart of France revived long-existing American fears of revolutionary France, which French republicans could never understand. Why did America’s republican leaders fail to see that France’s republican struggle *against* Prussian authoritarianism and *for* the ideals of the Paris Commune was an extension of America’s own republican struggle to abolish slavery? This French political question becomes, for Sancton, a good example of how French republicans misunderstood the American Civil War and Reconstruction. As French activists began to recognize that Americans had no interest in a global republican struggle, they set aside their post-Civil War praise of American republicanism and launched a new cycle of anti-American criticisms.

Leftist disillusionment with the United States would thereafter become an enduring theme of French political life, and “never again would European radicals look on the United States with such hope and expectation as they did during the 1860s” (p. 229). A new cross-cultural pessimism now replaced the cross-cultural optimism that had helped to fuel the anti-Bonapartist movements of the later Second Empire. “The stage was thus set,” Sancton concludes, “for the anti-Americanism that would typify the French left—and not only the left—through much of the twentieth century” (p. 233).

*Sweet Land of Liberty* therefore uses the history of cross-cultural exchanges during Napoleon III’s Second Empire to support broader concluding claims about the longer-term history of French-American relations. Although Sancton draws mainly on older scholarship and historical interpretations, he develops a perceptive overall analysis of nineteenth-century French texts and republican activists. He uses good evidence to show how political and national identities evolved in Second Empire France (as today) through dialectical interactions with other cultures, through the reports of traveling writers, through the projections of half-informed cross-cultural interpreters, and through the preconceptions of political activists who described other societies for ideological purposes in their own nation.

Sancton examines all of these historical patterns in a well-written book that explains how America's radical, abolitionist republicanism contributed in the 1860s to the republican critiques of the Second French Empire and to the construction of republican visions for a post-Bonapartist France. Finally, he also argues persuasively that this pro-American moment in French republicanism disappeared almost as quickly as the second Napoleonic regime collapsed, because French radicals never really understood American political culture and because the need for a validating "other" republic vanished as soon as the French were able to launch their own republican government in the 1870s.

Sancton might have better explained the rationale for his book by offering analytical reflections on why the subject of cross-cultural exchanges remains important to him long after he first explored this history in the 1970s. His themes might also have been strengthened through more engagement with the recent scholarship on Reconstruction-era America, the transnational history of ideas, and the cultural influence of travel narratives. *Sweet Land of Liberty* nevertheless shows the significance of American events for anti-Bonapartist French writers and provides a well-organized narrative journey through republican aspirations and cross-cultural exchanges that left an enduring legacy in French-American relations.

## NOTES

[1] Durand Echeverria described the early, idealized French views in *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815*, foreword by Gilbert Chinard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), though he noted that much of the "American dream" disappeared after the French launched their own republic and after French émigrés wrote critical reports from the United States in the 1790s. Sancton discusses Echeverria's work, but he argues that it does not explain how French writers engaged with the actual historical "situation of American politics and society" (p. 236). Historical discussions of an "American mirage" emerged in the early twentieth-century publications of Gilbert Chinard (one of Echeverria's teachers at Princeton). See, for example, the introductory essay in Gilbert Chinard, *Les Réfugiés Huguenots en Amérique, avec une introduction sur Le Mirage Américain* (Paris: Société d'Édition 'Les Belles-Lettres,' 1925), pp. v-xxxvii. New interest in American views of France also generated other important historical scholarship in this same era, including the wide-ranging book by Howard Mumford Jones, *America and French Culture, 1750-1848* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1927). Sancton thus joins a long and constantly expanding historiographical tradition of analyzing French-American cross-cultural perceptions.

[2] A carefully translated, modern English-language edition of Tocqueville's famous book is available in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, distributed by Penguin Putnam Inc., 2004). Provocative examples of more recent postmodern interpretations of American society appear in Jean Baudrillard, *America*, translated by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1989) and in Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (New York: Random House, 2006). These perspectives come from a much later period than Sancton discusses, but the broader history of French critiques--to which Sancton refers in his conclusion--is analyzed in the notable book by Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: A Story of French anti-Americanism*, translated by Sharon Bowman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[3] In addition to his many articles for *Time* and other magazines, Sancton has written popular books on controversial recent events in France, including Tom Sancton and Scott Macleod, *Death of a Princess: The True Story Behind Diana's Tragic End* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) and Tom Sancton, *The Bettencourt Affair: The World's Richest Woman the Scandal that Rocked Paris* (New York: Dutton, 2017). He has also written a memoir about his youthful encounters with jazz musicians while he was growing up in New Orleans during the 1950s and 1960s: Tom Sancton, *Song for My Fathers: A New Orleans Story in Black and White* (New York: Other Press, 2006 and 2010); and he published a political novel about a contemporary American president who supports mysterious political and religious plans in Iraq: Tom Sancton, *The Armageddon Project* (New York: Other Press, 2007). These books display the range of Sancton's journalistic, autobiographical, and fictional writing, but they also suggest why it would be interesting to read his perspectives on (or reasons for) the transition back to his 1978 dissertation on nineteenth-century French republican views of the United States.

[4] Sancton's discussion of how French workers responded to the economic disruptions of the Civil War uses the evidence and reiterates the argument from an article he published after completing his dissertation. See Thomas A. Sancton, "The Myth of French Worker Support for the North in the American Civil War," *French Historical Studies* 11 (1979): 58-80.

[5] For examples of how historical interpretations of Grant's presidency have evolved far beyond Sancton's now-dated views, see Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2016) and Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017). Grant's Reconstruction-era campaigns against the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacists are discussed, among other places, in White's *American Ulysses*, pp. 519-528 and in Chernow's *Grant*, pp. 701-711. Other recent interpretations of American ideas and actions during the Reconstruction era (which Sancton also does not cite), can be found in Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

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