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Jacob Collins, *The Anthropological Turn: French Political Thought After 1968*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 275 pp. Notes and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812252163.

Review by Emile Chabal, University of Edinburgh.

When I first started working on French intellectual life, in the early 2000s, the field was dominated by nostalgia. In a powerful echo of the discourse surrounding the boom years of the *Trente glorieuses*, the people I spoke to talked longingly about a golden age of postwar intellectual engagement. They waxed lyrical about the titanic ideological struggle between Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron; and they reminisced about the intellectual energy of *les années 68*, when every Parisian student supposedly attended Jacques Derrida's lectures and participated in radical reading groups focused solely on competing interpretations of Louis Althusser's *Pour Marx*. This view reached its most potent expression in a famous two-part essay by Perry Anderson, published in the *London Review of Books* in 2004.[1] Swimming in a miasma of neoliberal groupthink and lacking in ideas, Anderson surveyed a French intellectual scene that was both parochial and unimaginative. In his words, it now belonged to the "rearguard in the international exchange of ideas."

While some people still see late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century France in this way, a small but important body of scholarship has given us more interesting insights into French intellectual life. Among other things, this has involved taking French political thought since the 1970s on its own terms. Rather than compare it incessantly with an earlier period, a younger generation of scholars has tried to explore how contemporary French intellectuals have responded to debates that were often ignored or neglected by their predecessors.[2] By focusing on themes such as the family, citizenship, republicanism, immigration, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism, these scholars have begun to sketch out a fascinating interpretation of the last half-century of French intellectual life. The period since the 1970s no longer appears as a pale imitation of an earlier golden age; it now has a defined identity, as well as its own heroes, villains, controversies, and highlights.

Jacob Collins's book falls firmly within this welcome--and long overdue--scholarly effort to overturn lazy preconceptions about contemporary French intellectual life. He offers both a stimulating new interpretation and an in-depth consideration of a familiar, if often overlooked, cast of characters. Reading his book against the backdrop of a pandemic and a protracted political crisis in France gives us the opportunity to assess not simply the book's intrinsic merits, but also the wider state of the field of contemporary French intellectual history.

Collins anchors his book around the idea of an “anthropological turn” in post-1970s French political thought. This, he contends, was a response to the political instability and socioeconomic transformations of the 1970s and 1980s, many of which damaged previous models of political engagement such as Gaullism, communism, and socialism. It is important to note, however, that the anthropological turn was not primarily led by anthropologists. Rather, Collins is describing a particular way of thinking and writing about politics. This took the form of “grand narratives that sought to give greater definition to ‘the social’ by anchoring its laws and histories in the deep and sometimes archaic past” (p. 4). This, in turn, led many French thinkers to (re)consider the basic questions of European political thought. What is politics? What is a “true” political community (*ibid.*)? How is the “individualized self to be understood in modern society” (*ibid.*)? These questions were by no means new, but the answers to them needed to be reassessed in the light of the atrophy of French communism and the “neoliberal policies” of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and François Mitterrand.

To build his argument for an anthropological turn in this period, Collins looks in detail at the intellectual biographies of four intellectuals: Alain de Benoist, one of the best-known ideologues of the far-right; Marcel Gauchet, a polyglot historian, social scientist, and intellectual entrepreneur of the liberal-left; Emmanuel Todd, a left-leaning geographer and demographer, with a particular penchant for polemical essay-writing; and Régis Debray, a former wannabe Guevarist guerrilla turned philosopher-intellectual. All four of these figures have played prominent roles in contemporary French intellectual life, even if their work is not widely known outside France.

By focusing on four individuals, Collins is able to build a dynamic picture of intellectual and political affiliations over time. We learn about the varied influences on each person, and we follow their transformations. With the exception of de Benoist, it is noteworthy that all the characters discussed in the book shift political allegiances, travelling either towards the far left (Todd) or away from it (Gauchet, Debray). This confirms a widely held perception of this period as one of rapidly changing political ideologies. Indeed, I was left wondering whether the left-right binary to which Collins is evidently attached could really capture what was going on. I have argued elsewhere that the recomposition of the political landscape in France has been reflected in intellectual life, with new clusters of scholarship and intellectual power forming around issues that cross the left-right divide, such as republicanism or a critique of the welfare state.^[3] It may be, as Collins suggests in the conclusion, that the financial crisis of 2008 will again lead to a sharpening of ideological divides; but for the period that forms the bulk of the analysis here, the trajectories of people like Gauchet and Todd indicate a high level of ideological fluidity and an open resistance to ideological categorization.

This does not, of course, mean that the left-right divide is dead. One of the great merits of Collins’s book is that it deals with the entire political spectrum and offers an interpretation that makes as much sense for a right-wing figure like de Benoist as it does for a left-wing figure like Debray. This eclecticism is an undoubted strength, and it helps to solidify the idea of a broad, cross-party anthropological turn. Collins’s book is much more than just another diagnosis of how the political culture of the left has lost its way in recent decades; it is a real attempt to make sense of how the interconnected worlds of politics and ideas have reflected each other in contemporary France, from far-left to far-right. Anyone who has kept in touch with French intellectual debates in the pages of a journal like *Le Débat*, a newspaper like *Le Monde* or a magazine like *L’Obs* will recognize Collins’s claim that recent French political thought has been preoccupied by “grand

narrative, structure, native social-scientific frameworks” and a “holist approach to the study of society ... as a pre-given organic unity” (p. 13). The tendency towards abstraction, the frequent references to macro-level models, the reification of national characteristics, and a marked penchant for all-encompassing metanarratives feature prominently in contemporary French writing about politics. By tracing the origins of this way of conceptualizing the political in the work of four intellectuals, Collins opens a window onto a much wider form of discursive engagement across the French public sphere.

Collins also has much to say about the role of religion in contemporary French political thought. The sheer density of scholarly and polemical writing on *laïcité* has obscured this crucial development. Substantial analysis of religious thought, religious practice, and religious communities is no longer confined to the work of intellectuals within a religious tradition. As Collins clearly demonstrates, the anthropological turn entailed a sustained engagement with religion as one of the most important deep structures of politics. This explains why Gauchet, de Benoist, and Debray have devoted significant chunks of their career to discussing religion, religious institutions, and secularization. It is a shame that Collins did not also consider contemporary Jewish--and, more recently, Muslim--thought as well. The work of figures such as Benny Lévy, Pierre-André Taguieff, Alain Finkielkraut, and Tariq Ramadan would have provided a useful counterpoint to the overwhelming focus on Christianity, and reinforced Collins's basic argument that religion has become an increasingly important way of conceptualizing the community and the *lien social* (social bond) in contemporary French political thought.

Inevitably, Collins's approach and arguments leave a number of blind spots. His decision to organize the book around individual intellectual biographies is enormously helpful as a way of introducing his key protagonists to unfamiliar audiences, but it naturally privileges the internal coherence of their thought over the context in which they operated. This manifests itself in several ways. For example, Collins attributes the tendency towards holism and a lack of interest in economic ideas to the anthropological turn. This makes sense within the narrow framework of the four intellectuals in question. But these two characteristics are also long-standing features of French republicanism. The resurgence of interest in republicanism in the 1980s--of which Debray was a prominent part--does much to explain the emphasis on total political solutions that neglect economic considerations. A greater focus on republicanism would also have provided an additional explanation as to why these four intellectuals' myriad attempts to reenchant politics have often referred to the nation, the nation-state, and the national community. This has made their ideas immediately understandable to a wider French public, which has become very concerned with the parameters of republican citizenship in recent years.

Similarly, there would be more to say about the role of prestigious educational institutions and the circulation of common ideas within the small world of the French intellectual elite. All four of the intellectuals under discussion were active intellectual entrepreneurs, launching thinktanks and journals, as well as courting a variety of media outlets in their quest for airtime. Their position at the apex of this intellectual system not only gave them periodic access to the corridors of power and resources to pursue their interests--one is struck, for instance, by the sheer number of books they published--but also made it much more likely that their ideas would converge. Their political inclinations may have differed sharply, but it is hard to avoid the feeling that they could all have met at a seminar in Sciences Po or appeared one after another in the pages of a major national magazine. More than in many other parts of the world, there is a clubbiness to

French intellectual life such that the anthropological turn could be read as much as a collective reaction on the part of a narrow intellectual elite to their loss of status as a coherent theoretical response to the emergence of neoliberalism.

Still, Collins has clearly hit on something important. Alongside Bourg's idea of a post-1968 "ethical turn" on the French left, the anthropological turn could be one of the most important contributions to contemporary French intellectual history in recent years.[4] In this respect, the book seems more like the beginning of a conversation than the last word. In particular, the conclusion, which returns to the question of neoliberalism by way of an introduction to the far-left economist and activist Frédéric Lordon, feels incomplete. And there are several places in the book where the individual biographies threaten to dilute the analytical power of Collins's key argument. Even so, the author has done an impressive job of synthesizing a vast amount of scholarship, wading through thousands of pages of dense (and not always interesting) writing by his four chosen intellectuals, and weaving them together into a single story. Almost twenty years after Perry Anderson's terminal diagnosis, Collins's thoughtful book shows us that French intellectual life is alive and well—and perhaps even more interesting than we thought.

NOTES

[1] Perry Anderson, "Dégringolade," in *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 17 (2 September 2004); and Anderson, "Union Sucrée," in *London Review of Books*, vol. 26, no. 18 (23 September 2004) < <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v26/n18/perry-anderson/union-sucree> > (consulted 21 April 2021).

[2] Collins is explicitly in dialogue with many of these books and cites them in his introduction. They include Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Stefanos Geroulanos, *Transparency in Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Michael C. Behrent & Daniel Zamora, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); and my own *A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[3] I make these arguments in Chabal, *A Divided Republic*.

[4] Bourg develops this idea in Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*.

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