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Pierre Allorant, Walter Badier, and Jean Garrigues, eds., *Les Dix décisives, 1869-1879*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022. 452 pp. Notes, illustrations, and indices. €28.00 (pb). ISBN 9782753583863; €13.99 (epub). ISBN 9782753587205. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.160732> (open access).

Review by Stephen W. Sawyer, The American University of Paris.

The search for crucial decades has consistently animated nineteenth-century French history. In 1986, David Pinkney chose the 1840s as his “decisive years.”[1] One could not be faulted for giving a similar title to the period 1789-1799 while others have made strong arguments for the 1860s, and the core of the Belle Époque during the last decade of the century would make for a similarly convincing candidate. Based on the *florilège* of chapters gathered in this book, the editors have staked their claim for the period 1869-1879. Given these arguments, one might draw the reasonable conclusion that the long nineteenth century was in fact a decisive century.

This collection, treating the last year of the Second Empire and the first years of the Third Republic, gathers the papers from a conference held at the Conseil d’État, organized by research centers at the Université d’Orléans and the Université de Bordeaux. It makes a strong case for the importance for reading the final, liberal gasp of Napoleon III and the early, eventful moments of the still longest standing republic as a piece.

In five parts, 450 pages, and more than thirty chapters, the book walks us through some of the principal actors, the networks, the territorial scales, institutional designs, and foreign perceptions of this critical period. The core of the argument picks up on a claim first established by Louis Girard and later confirmed by a series of historians who have established the importance of liberal ideas and actors in both pushing Napoleon III’s Caesarism toward reform in 1869 and rounding out the edges of a Jacobin republicanism that dominated much of the post-revolutionary period. The great majority of the chapters seek to show at once the continuities across the divide between the Second Empire and the Third Republic as well as the variety of ways that liberalism helped smooth the passage between the two.

The choice of key actors in a period of this importance is necessarily complex. Outside of Jules Simon, who, as the chapter on him argues, has not had the posterity he merits, the collection opts to focus on a range of lesser-known individuals, who played rather specific roles in the transition to a durable republic. Figures like Étienne Lamy offer a perspective on how the catholic liberal position came around to the republican cause while Auguste Paris provides a more ideal-typical account of a key parliamentarian and minister. Georges Laguerre offers a forward-looking

perspective by showing how republican culture was disseminated among the youth in these years. The networks treated in the second section highlight the diversity of currents that came together around the liberal-republican synthesis. After a chapter that provides a rapid overview of the political cultures that dominated the period, the book turns to different perspectives on legislative and executive power, the place of the assembly, the deep challenges to reestablishing the monarchy, and the ideas of Bonapartists during the liberal phase of the empire and under the young republic. The third section offers perspectives on the scales at which the process of liberalizing the republic took place. Ranging from Bonapartists in Corsica to republicanism in Nice, and political activities in the Lot and the reception of Gambetta in the Isère, the section concludes with a discussion of Paris and its suburbs. Once again, the choice of subjects, outside of the chapter on Paris, drawn from the author's previous work on the Parisian municipality in the Third Republic, showcase the diversity in approaches to political history and trends in the political development of the period. It should be noted that one is surprised not to find more of a discussion of the place of the French overseas empire in the transition from the Second Empire to the Republic in this section.

Understanding the bridge between the institutions of the liberal empire and its republican successor is essential to the volume's overall ambition. While the institutional and juridical history of the Third Republic is now very well-known, as the chapters show, drawing out connections with the previous liberal experiments offers the opportunity for some new perspectives. The discussion of the administration of the parliament for example offers a particularly convincing account of the pathways between the two regimes. Similarly, the discussion of the constitutional design of a "conservative republic," as it was referred to, provides new perspectives on the relationship between the executive and the legislative power, highlighting the range of perspectives on the role of the president that prefigure later institutional design, including the Fifth Republic. Other chapters focus on equally important questions of the foreign ministry, questions of judicial reform and education, which remained an emblematic policy area for the republic. The last section looks beyond the hexagon to some of France's European neighbors. One discovers Bismarck's enthusiasm for the republic(!) as well as the importance of a network of jurists that formed around the burgeoning field of comparative legislation. The view of the republic from Romania and the exploration of the birth of nationalism in the early republic complete this view from the outside looking in.

*Les Dix décisives* offers a plethora of perspectives from a range of historians. As an edited volume of this scope, the book is filled with quite distinct approaches, from a Bourdieusian analysis of the "political field" to a reception study of Gambetta's speeches and an institutional analysis of parliamentary regulation. Nonetheless, if there were still any doubt regarding the thesis that liberalism played an important role in the construction of the Third Republic, this book solidifies the claim once again, providing a series of bricks for completing the edifice of that argument. It also solidifies the claim made by numerous historians that the Second Empire had a complex, in some ways paradoxical, role to play in building a new political culture that birthed a lasting republic in France. This book provides ample material, drawn primarily from historiography in French, for those who would like to revisit those arguments. In doing so, it also pushes us to consider possibilities for new directions in the political history of the second half of the nineteenth century.

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## NOTES

[1] David Pinkney, *The Decisive Years, 1840-1847* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

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