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Gino Raymond, *France Since the Liberation: Between Exceptionalism and Convergence*. Abingdon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2024. viii + 255 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$190.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781032637433; \$35.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781032637495.

Review by Emile Chabal, University of Edinburgh.

Anyone unwise enough to take on the task of producing a general history of twentieth-century France has to contend with the question of originality. When I was asked--in 2017--whether I wanted to write such a thing, my first response was absolutely not. I did not believe I had anything to say that had not already been said, and I could not imagine that anyone would take me seriously if I did. I was ultimately persuaded otherwise, but my doubts persisted right up until my book went to press.[1] Even now, I am not sure that my attempt to be innovative and interesting was anything more than a clever exercise in paraphrasing others. Still, the experience of writing a general history did at least give me an insight into how one goes about it. I was, therefore, curious to see exactly what kind of book Gino Raymond had written, not least because he is one of the doyens of French studies in the UK whose insightful publications on contemporary French politics often appear on reading lists.

The book's subtitle provides some clues: the two master narratives are "exceptionalism" and "convergence." These form the spine of each chapter, and they are woven throughout the book, which is organised in a broadly chronological fashion, starting with the end of the war in 1944 and ending in 2023. The claim that France is exceptional is hardly new, but Raymond argues--not without reason--that "in no other leading liberal democracy has the issue of exceptionalism been such a self-conscious preoccupation" (p. 1). At the same time, he recognises the obvious and growing convergences between France and its neighbours. Whether in the realm of foreign or economic policy, France has become ever more mainstream by European standards.

For Raymond, it is this tension between an "aspiration" to exceptionality and a "reality" of convergence that has "shaped" contemporary France (p. 7). Such an approach builds on a rich vein of English-language--and specifically British--writing about France that emphasises contradiction, from Theodore Zeldin's famous five-volume history of French "passions," published in the 1970s, to more recent works by scholars such as Jack Hayward or Sudhir Hazareesingh.[2] For those steeped in this British tradition, it is a familiar way of interpreting French history. Indeed, I myself used the idea of "paradox" as a structuring device for my book.

One of the consequences of this approach is that it places politics front and centre. Raymond's book is no exception. The analysis is unashamedly top-heavy, even more so than Zeldin, Hayward, or Hazareesingh, all of whom share a similar interest in politics, political culture, and political movements. Importantly, though, *France Since the Liberation* is not overly preoccupied with institutions or organisations. Rather, the thrust of the book relies on individual presidents to give it its forward momentum. The figure of the president anchors the narrative chronologically but also illuminates the core tension of the book at specific historical junctures. Thus, the reader encounters Charles de Gaulle, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande, and Emmanuel Macron again and again. With the exception of the first two chapters of the book, which are devoted to the politics of the liberation and the immediate postwar years, these larger-than-life personalities jostle for attention in every chapter, and their struggles seem to shine a light on France as a whole.

To a North American scholarly audience, such an obviously top-heavy account of postwar France might seem to belong to another age. Recent surveys and textbooks by North American scholars--one thinks of Tyler Stovall and Darcie Fontaine's excellent books--have emphasised France's "global" history.[3] There has been, in these volumes, a conscious effort to tell the story of contemporary France from the outside or from the "margins." By contrast, Raymond's account of the same period is firmly centrifugal, beginning in the centre (Paris) and at the top (the presidency). It is not that he neglects the impact of decolonisation, the Algerian War, or post-war immigration. Each of these is covered in some detail in the relevant chapters. But they are peripheral to the book's main focus. They do not shift the balance between exceptionalism and convergence; they merely provide the necessary backdrop to it.

Not surprisingly, then, Raymond is at his best when talking about presidents and presidencies. He is sensitive and even-handed in his treatment of each of them--and, unusually, he takes Sarkozy, Hollande, and Macron as seriously as their predecessors. This gives the book a welcome balance. If de Gaulle necessarily set the parameters of what contemporary French politics is about, those who came after him were not simply cheap knock-offs. Raymond gives each of them a fair hearing. He even manages to restore the much-maligned Hollande to some kind of respectability, by showing how he tried (and failed) to navigate the emergence of "hyper-presidentialism" and how he stabilised France within the changing European alliances of the 2010s (p. 131).[4] Similarly, he has a nuanced interpretation of Sarkozy as someone with a real feel for the contingency of politics (in his response to the 2008 financial crisis and the Arab Spring) but also a fatal tendency to succumb to his own hubris and vanity. For anyone looking for an original discussion of presidents and presidencies under the Fifth Republic, this book has much to offer.

In the domain of foreign policy, too, Raymond excels. In the first three chapters, he moves easily between the complexity of allied geopolitical jostling in 1944 and the tensions between France's postwar colonial aspirations and the realities of decolonisation. Later in the book, he devotes a lot of space--two full chapters out of eight--to Europe and European integration, about which he writes with confidence and verve. Echoing the work of a previous generation of scholars such as Philip Cerny and Stanley Hoffmann, he takes the European question as the pre-eminent site of struggle over France's global aspirations.[5] This stands in contrast to much of the recent scholarship on this period, which sees France's imperial entanglements as the key to

understanding its postwar mission. Those steeped in the latter would do well to read this book. Raymond does not neglect the end of empire as a critical juncture, but his overall argument is an eloquent and powerful restatement of France's fundamentally European destiny.

In other respects, however, Raymond's top-heavy history of postwar France--or, more accurately, postwar French politics--feels unsatisfactory. This is largely because it too easily accepts the assumptions and blindspots of the Fifth Republic. To take only the most obvious example of this, presidents are given disproportionate coverage, while political parties and the political cultures they represent are almost entirely neglected. Raymond started his career by writing about the socialist and communist movements in France, but there is precious little on the culture of the left in this book. The same is true of the far-right. Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen, and the Front National make only very brief appearances, despite their emergence--in the twenty-first century--as major poles of political opposition. It is impossible to give a full account of the Chirac, Sarkozy, Hollande, and especially Macron presidencies without integrating the far-right into a wider narrative of the atrophy of presidential authority.

And what of France's legendary culture of protest? There is no better symbol of the "French exception" than angry protestors, whether these take the form of radicalised *gauchistes*, grumpy trade unionists, or the tens of thousands of right-wing activists who lined the streets to protest the loi Savary in 1984 or the *mariage pour tous* in 2013. Yet their aspirations and contradictions find almost no place in the book, and the most famous moment of protest in postwar France--May 1968--is not discussed at all. The result is a lopsided account of power. As most scholars of French politics would agree, including some of the key representatives of the British tradition mentioned above, the postwar period has been characterised by a dynamic, sometimes violent, clash between the French state and its citizens. But that relationship is truncated here, reduced instead to the Jupiterian perspective of successive presidents looking down over an increasingly dissatisfied population.

The focus on presidents also needlessly narrows the ideological frame of the analysis. Raymond's account of geopolitical and institutional change is underpinned by a belief in the primacy of presidential authority, which is entirely justifiable within the framework of his analysis. But all political actors are influenced by--and themselves manipulate--the ideas around them. Mitterrand's successes and failures can only really be understood in relation to his contradictory views on socialism and Marxism. In a similar vein, very little of Giscard d'Estaing and Macron's political platform makes sense without first considering the specificities of the French liberal tradition and the emergence of neo-liberalism in the 1970s. Even France's institutional structures have been buffeted by changing ideological winds: the meaning of democracy in France in the 1950s is not the same as the meaning of democracy today, so we should not be surprised when Macron's Gaullist rhetoric falls flat.

Raymond, of course, knows that the context surrounding French presidents has changed, and does address this in the final chapter. By the twenty-first century, he suggests, "the electorate was less willing to believe that the challenges facing French society could be susceptible to the actions of a providential leader" (p. 226). But his account of postwar France does not give enough of a sense of why this has happened. The French people--the "electorate"--fade into the background, despite the wealth of scholarship on them, from sociological studies of far-right

voters to macro-historical work on protest cultures. Not to mention the extremely rich literature on the history of the postwar French state, which has exposed its networks of influence, cultural capital, and fundamentally multi-layered quality, starting with the exercise of power in small local *municipalités* all the way up to powerful regional offices and the central government.

I know from hard experience that any broad overview of a historical period is bound to involve controversial choices. Inevitably, there are entire subfields that are missing from Raymond's account, including the dynamics of French capitalism, struggles over the environment, the rise and fall of French culture, and the vital role of France's overseas territories. Absence alone is not adequate grounds for criticism. Even so, it is not entirely clear that this book pushes forward our understanding of its own subfield, namely the political and geopolitical history of France. Yes, it is a stimulating and elegantly written reworking of a classic interpretation of French history from above, which brings the story right up to date. It also serves to introduce the concept of presidential power in contemporary France through a careful consideration of the interaction between political crises and political authority. But it is missing something essential: the rough-and-tumble of everyday political life. We are still waiting for an account of contemporary French politics that brings together the rarefied world of the Élysée Palace with the hyperbolic *polémiques*, culture wars, social movements, and institutional resistance that define popular practices of political participation. It is here that the tension between exceptionalism and convergence is most visible--and it is here, too, that the future of the Republic will be decided.

NOTES

[1] The book in question was Emile Chabal, *France* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), soon to appear in French as *Le paradoxe français: une nouvelle histoire de la France contemporaine* (Geneva: Markus Haller, 2025).

[2] Theodore Zeldin, *A History of French Passions*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-1981); Jack Hayward, *Fragmented France: Two Centuries of Disputed Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People* (London: Penguin, 2016). It is worth noting that "British" in this context actually means "Oxford" since a large proportion of French politics specialists since the 1970s have studied or worked at Oxford, including Hazareesingh, Hayward, and Zeldin, as well as other well-known figures such as Vincent Wright and Alastair Cole. There would be a worthwhile intellectual history to be written about the centrality of Oxford to the historiography on modern French politics. As for Raymond, he completed his PhD on André Malraux at Cambridge in 1988.

[3] Tyler Stovall, *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation*, 2nd edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Darcie Fontaine, *Modern France and the World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

[4] Raymond here is drawing on Alastair Cole's notion of "hyper-presidentialism." Alastair Cole, "Sarkozy's Political Leadership and the Institutions of the Fifth Republic," in Gino G. Raymond, ed., *The Sarkozy Presidency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 56-78.

[5] Philip Cerny, *The politics of Grandeur: Ideological Aspects of De Gaulle's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Stanley Hoffmann, *Decline or Renewal? France since the 1930s* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1974).

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