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Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer, Eds. *The French Exception*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005. 249 pp. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-57181-684-4.

Review by Sophie Meunier, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University.

From its famed *art-de-vivre* to its controversial thirty-five-hour workweek, from the arrogant defense of its culture to its sometimes bold foreign policy, France is often labeled as “exceptional” by inside and outside observers alike. Yet France’s economic, social and cultural exception has been increasingly challenged by the twin processes of European integration and globalization. Has France managed to preserve this distinctiveness? And did such a French exception ever exist in the first place?

The French Exception is a collection of short essays addressing these two questions in a variety of areas where France is traditionally known for its exceptionalism. Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer have assembled a fine array of scholars writing on such diverse topics as *dirigisme*, presidential debates, and sports. The overall picture emerging from these essays, often with nuance and subtlety, is that the notion of French exceptionalism must be used carefully and parsimoniously. Indeed, France may be less exceptional than it claims to be and the “French exception” discourse is often used to political ends, even though specific national distinctions truly remain in areas such as the republican model, the attachment to the state, and the claim to universalism.

The Introduction points to areas in which France is perceived as being different from other countries and it sets to explore the value of French exceptionalism as an analytical framework and/or a political discourse. Godin and Chafer evaluate how these “two different, but related discourses have constructed the notion of the French exception in specific ways, have ascribed certain value(s) to it and have mobilized it for specific reasons” (p. xiv).

As they argue, the notion of a French exception as an analytical framework has permeated an enormous number of academic works. This notion has been defined over the years and across issue—areas as consisting of four core elements: the powerful role of the central state; the high polarization and radicalism of domestic conflicts; the claim to a universalist mission; and the unitary nature of society, with no room for communities and minorities (p. xv). Chafer and Godin are right to point out that academics should treat these as hypotheses rather than as empirical truths. They enjoin the volume contributors to evaluate these hypotheses critically and to show that exceptionalism exists only in opposition to a norm. Indeed, the majority of contributors to the volume are skeptical of the French exception as a heuristic device.

An alternative use of the notion of a French exception has been as a political discourse motivated by a specific agenda, used both for domestic and international purposes. In a similar way to anti-Americanism, this uncontroversial notion can be mobilized domestically to muster support for certain policies, when domestic opinion would otherwise be critical of the government. The notion of a French exception has also been used as a rhetoric masking France’s adaptation to globalization.[1] It is more rhetoric than substance, however, used for domestic consumption as a counterpart to the *pensée unique* (which itself may be more myth than reality).

The book proceeds by first addressing general questions about the notion of a French exception and then looking critically at such a notion in issue-areas as diverse as politics, culture, and sports. In his excellent chapter on "France and Exceptionalism," Nick Hewlett provides a genealogy of this notion and argues that exceptionalism, rather than mere radicalism, can be proven only in comparative perspective. He concludes that what really distinguishes France is the way in which the conflictual characteristics of society are combined with a universal orientation (p. 7). Margaret Majumdar examines the links between exceptionalism and universalism in the development of *Francophonie*, including the interesting evolution from the concept of cultural exception to that of cultural diversity. The chapter on "The elusive French exception," by Sue Collard, also provides readers with a very fine genealogy of the debate on the end of the French exception, with a particular focus on the 1988 publication of the book, *La République du centre*, around which the French identity crisis did crystallize. [2]

The next section of the book tackles the French exception in politics and policies, asking whether the exception is still alive today and whether such an exception ever existed in the first place. The polarization and radicalism of the political debate have traditionally been noted as one of the core elements of the French exception. The chapter by David S. Bell examines the peculiar role of Communism in French political culture, while the chapter by Emmanuel Godin asks whether the National Front really is a French exception. In both cases, the authors conclude that political polarization is long-lived in the French case, even though extremisms have become a feature in other European polities as well. Anne Stevens' chapter examines the French administrative exception and argues that the French civil service is still a highly distinctive system. Nick Parsons explores the pressures of globalization on French industrial relations and argues that, in spite of some convergence towards the practices of other European countries, the chronically weak trade unions and the need for state intervention in industrial relations still make the French case exceptional. The chapter by Ben Clift, which addresses the evolution of *dirigisme* and its impact on employment policy, concludes that there still is an exceptional French social model (one wishes there were a thorough discussion of the thirty-five-hour workweek in this chapter).

The volume's final section is composed of chapters dealing with less politically salient and slightly more esoteric issues, where the topic of a French exceptionalism is also often raised. Sheila Perry studies the history of presidential debates in France and finds that they share fewer similarities with the U.S. than most other countries, thereby suggesting the existence of a French exception. The succinct yet subtle chapter by Raymond Kuhn examines the evolution of television in France and finds that the notion of a French exceptionalism is more myth than reality. Cinema, the area *par excellence* where the French claim an exception, is studied by Brigitte Rollet, who shows how French universalist aspirations have contributed to its exceptionalism. Patrick Mignon devotes his chapter to a study of sport and politics, arguing that the long history of state intervention and political centralization distinguishes France from its European partners. Finally, Michael Kelly, who writes a chapter about the legendary French intellectuals and their striking place in national political debates, finds that the notion of a French exception started to gain ground precisely at the time of its erosion but that intellectuals kept it alive, in spite of the erosion of their own place in society.

Most of the important questions regarding the French exception and its potential demise are raised, in one way or another, in various chapters. Is convergence inevitable in the face of globalization? Are national cultures resilient? Are some specific institutional arrangements particularly strong and able to withstand external pressures? Is France more averse to change than its European counterparts? Has French society managed to keep its exceptional characteristics while acquiring a European identity? Has French exceptionalism come to an end, or is it that it was exaggerated in the first place? Not all of these questions can be answered, obviously, but this book has the merit of at least trying to address them.

In sum, Chafer and Godin's edited volume is a thorough cut at the notion of French exceptionalism, and it should be useful for French specialists as well as scholars of other areas who wish to study France in comparative perspective. Given the breadth of topics covered in the chapters, one can regret, however, the lack of focus on at least two questions: the relations between Church and State, and the European dimension of contemporary France.

First, nowhere has the notion of a French exception been brandished more in recent years than in the controversy surrounding the wearing of Islamic head scarves. With respect to this issue, the French exception was noted both inside and outside France. Inside, the distinctive republican model with its Jacobin streak was the main rationale employed to justify the adoption of the law banning religious symbols in French schools. Outside, observers commented on the oddness and singularity of a democratic country like France which could so blatantly infringe upon such a basic human right as freedom of religion. The inclusion of a chapter dealing with this issue would have strengthened the volume and bolstered the main arguments of exceptionalism as both an explanatory framework and a political discourse.

A chapter analyzing France's tortuous participation in the European Union would have similarly reinforced the volume and enhanced its usefulness to readers. France has tried to use the European enterprise to project its exceptionalism on a grander scale. At the same time, France's involvement in the European Union has presented a formidable challenge to its exceptionalism. Over the years, successive French governments have tried to make the European Community, and then the European Union, in the image of France, and they rejected reforms pushing Europe towards a more federal model. Through policies such as the common commercial policy and the common agricultural policy and through concepts such as managed globalization and cultural exception, they tried to superimpose France's exceptional features onto their European partners.^[3] Moreover, Europe has given France the platform and resources that it needs to project its views on the international scene, since common policies give the voice of individual countries larger international resonance.^[4] But Europe has also resulted in the taming, demoting of many of these exceptional features. Because France has to operate within the constraints of its membership in the European Union, it has been forced to tone down some of its *dirigiste* characteristics and to adapt to the requirements of a liberal, globalized world economy. Similarly, its ambition of autonomy and *grandeur* in foreign policy has been gradually tamed by the reality of being one of six, and now twenty-five E.U. members.

One can also regret the absence of a specific analysis of the "dark side" of French exceptionalism. The missing conclusion would have been a logical place to consider the potentially negative implications of such a French exception. Has it hindered progress? Has it prevented necessary reforms, letting the French instead cling to the idea that their social model could be immune from outside pressures because of its distinctiveness? Has it reduced the role of France in the world, instead of enhancing it?

In spite of these important omissions and the unevenness of the chapters, I recommend reading this volume. The essays are short, to the point, and most chapters stick to their initial task: assess whether France is, indeed, exceptional. The overall assessment is mixed. In the end, it remains up to the reader to make up his or her own mind.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chager, "Introduction"
- Nick Hewlett, "France and Exceptionalism"
- Margaret A. Majumdar, "Exceptionalism and Universalism: The Uneasy Alliance in the French-Speaking World"

- Sue Collard, “The Elusive French Exception”
- David S. Bell, “French Communism: An Exceptional Orthodoxy”
- Emmanuel Godin, “Does It Make Sense to Treat the Front National as a ‘French Exception?’”
- Anne Stevens, “The French Administrative Exception: Change and Resistance”
- Nick Parson, “French Industrial Relations--Still Exceptional?”
- Benn Clift, “The French Socialists, *Dirigisme* and the Troubled Europeanisation of Employment Policy”
- Janet Bryant, “French Foreign and Defence Policy: Exceptional in Methods and Rhetoric?”
- Sheila Perry, “Presidential Debates in France: An Example of Americanisation?”
- Raymond Kuhn, “The Myth of Exceptionalism? French Television in a West European Context”
- Brigitte Rollet, “Cultural Exception(s) in French Cinema”
- Patrick Mignon, “Sport and Politics: Another French Exception”
- Michael Kelly, “French Intellectuals: The Legendary Exception”

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Philip H. Gordon and Sophie Meunier, *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); Vivien Schmidt, *From State to Market? The Transformation of French Business and Government* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Timothy B. Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality, and Globalization since 1980* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2] Francois Furet, *Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon La République du centre: La fin de l'exception française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1988).

[3] See Philip H. Gordon and Sophie Meunier, *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); Michel Gueldry, *France and European Integration: Towards a Transnational Polity?* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001).

[4] See Pascal Lamy, *L'Europe en première ligne*. (Paris: Seuil, 2003); Sophie Meunier, *Trading Voices: The European Union in International Commercial Negotiations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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