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Nicolas Mariot, *C'est en marchant qu'on devient président: la république et ses chefs de l'Etat, 1848-2007*. Montreuil: Aux lieux d'être, 2007. 362 pp. Maps, tables, and photographs. €24.50 (pb). ISBN 978-2-916063-42-3.

Review by Nick Parsons, Cardiff University.

Over and above his vertiginous decline in popularity since his election in May 2007, the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy has given rise to a significant debate in France over what the function of the president is, or should be, and how the president should behave. This is not just a question of the well-publicised celebrity-style display of his private life in the French and foreign media, but also of what the president is supposed to do and how he is supposed to go about doing it. As Jérôme Jaffré pointed out in *Le Monde*,^[1] Sarkozy is effectively attempting to redefine the French presidency through what is seen as his excessive interventionism in virtually all policy-making domains and his maintenance of close relations with the UMP, and this has not been welcomed by the majority of French public opinion. It is not only his activity in the political sphere, however, that is causing concern. As the incarnation of the French people, elected by universal suffrage, the French president is supposed to put aside personal feelings and prejudices in order to unite the French people, not to respond to a refusal to shake his hand with, '*Alors, casse-toi pauvre con*', as Sarkozy did at the *Salon de l'agriculture* on 23 February.^[2]

By a fortunate coincidence, the behaviour of Sarkozy has transformed a book on the history of the construction of the French presidency and its function into one of great contemporary relevance, as many of the themes and questions addressed by Mariot are precisely those discussed in the French media today. Running through the text is the argument that the institution of the presidency was constructed in opposition to the notion of personal power, indeed that successive presidents have been able to use this criticism of the presidency to define the institution and carve out a role for it. How this has been achieved is examined through the prism of presidential visits in France as such contact with the people was, until the age of mass media, the only weapon available to the president to gain recognition for and acceptance of his status in public life. Essentially, argues Mariot, the presidency was paradoxically built up through the personal effacement of the holder of the post. In this respect, the acclamations of crowds turning out to greet the president were systematically deflected away from the incumbent to the post itself to avoid any accusations of a personalisation of power, while the protocol of such visits was designed to portray the president as physically close to the people (and increasingly so after World War II when grand orations gave way to more informal handshaking in such visits) but institutionally distant. Thus, successive presidents of the Third and Fourth Republics refused to enter into party political conflicts, but used tours around France to affirm their role as defender and guarantor of the constitution, arbiter above party politics and representative of all French people.

The discourse and actions identifying the presidency were thus routinised through official visits and had their origins in the memory of Napoleon—the solitary, military man who served as an anti-model. This dichotomy between the president as servant of the people and the republic on the one hand and the *homme providentiel* on the other was to resurface on several occasions, such as the MacMahon crisis of 1877-1879, from 1888 to 1894 when Carnot confronted Boulanger, and in 1946 when de Gaulle challenged Auriol for the presidency. On each occasion, the parliamentary republican view of the president as above politics was victorious, reaffirming the institution as one arbitrating between political forces and upholding the republican constitution. Placed in this long-term perspective, argues Mariot,

the 1958 Constitution is not so much a rupture with the past, but a continuation of it. Certainly, the presidency gained powers, and since 1962 the incumbent has been elected by universal suffrage, but he remains weak when faced with a hostile parliament. Indeed, increases in presidential power after 1958 depend upon the interpretation of *arbitre* in Article 5, a term chosen by those drawing up the 1958 Constitution as a compromise between parliamentarians and presidentialists. The previous systematic reference to the concept during presidential visits, had in Mariot's analysis, emptied the term of meaning, with the result that a function designed to keep the president out of politics in order to ensure parliamentary supremacy could be re-appropriated by de Gaulle and his successors to increase the power of the presidency.

Such an increase in power cannot be wholly accounted for by the routinisation of presidential words and actions during official visits, of course, and this is recognised by Mariot. Indeed, his detailed analysis of presidential visits illuminates several trends perceptible after World War II which provide a backdrop to the changing nature of presidential visits since the inauguration of the Fifth Republic. In particular, the growing technocratisation of the function - which helps explain why visits are now carried out with a specific aim in mind and are of a shorter duration, targeting one particular locality rather than being a review of the sights of a particular area as they were in the past. Also important are the growing personalisation and mediatisation of politics; party discipline and the *fait majoritaire*. The 2002 reforms, reducing the presidential term of office to five years and placing the presidential election before parliamentary elections in order to ensure, as far as possible, the support of a stable majority in parliament for the president, mark the final institutional step in reinforcing presidential power. In this sense, although Sarkozy still uses the same language as his predecessors (*'président de tous les français', 'au-dessus des parties'*) to justify his reforms, his style could represent the logical culmination of a long-term trend towards presidential government.

This long-term process of the construction, consolidation and mutation of the presidential function in France is admirably illuminated by Mariot's detailed observation and analysis of presidential visits. The approach taken is very much an interdisciplinary one, using not only political science and historiography, but also discourse analysis and iconography to examine how speeches and protocol reflected both continuity and change in the presidential function over the long term. Thematically rather than chronologically organised, it should be emphasized that this is not a history of French presidents, but of the presidential function. This is at once one of the strengths and weaknesses of the book. It is a weakness, however, only in the sense that it will restrict readership to the initiated—the lack of chronology will make this a difficult read for those without some knowledge of French history, particularly French political history and republicanism.

For those interested in French political history and institutions, on the other hand, this is a fascinating and at times very entertaining read, dealing with the grand themes outlined above, while inserting into them (apparently) more prosaic questions such as why the president always refuses use an umbrella, even when it is pouring down with rain. The answer to this is that such a refusal marks the president out as an exceptional being, indifferent to adverse meteorological conditions, while placing him on an equal footing with those who have braved the elements to greet him.

As stated at the start of this review, however, the interest of this book is not purely historical. It also sheds light on contemporary debates and the current unpopularity of Nicolas Sarkozy. His political interventionism is seen as overstepping the line between *président-arbitre* and *président-gouverneur*, leaving him in charge not only of the essential but of everything else as well, while his maintenance of close links with the UMP compromises his role of *rassembleur au-dessus des partis*. His recent conflict with the Constitutional Council over the continued detention of criminals deemed too dangerous to release once they have served their sentence has also led to questions over his role as guarantor of the Constitution.^[3] The continuing and increasing popularity of the Prime Minister, François Fillon, suggests that it is not Sarkozy's policies in themselves that are at the root of his problems, but his

presidential style, and in particular his challenge to the presidential function as it has evolved since the mid-nineteenth century.

Mariot's argument that the presidential function was carefully constructed in opposition to, and as a limit to, the personal power of the incumbent over the course of a century and a half is therefore illuminating in the context of modern French political debate. In the light of this history, Sarkozy appears to have taken an immense gamble. The question is one of whether he can transform the presidential function into one where the president is effectively the head of government or whether he will have to succumb to the weight of history and French republican fears of personalised power and 'presidentialise' himself. Certainly, Sarkozy has made no secret of his wish to break the mould of the French presidency through his activism and populism. He should, however, take time out to read Nicolas Mariot's book, as it could enlighten him on his present unpopularity and serve as a warning. Thus, 'Le système protocolaire est au principe d'un balancement entre raideur et humilité dont il faut montrer qu'il est nécessaire à la fonction de chef de l'Etat en terres républicaines.... Ainsi, les rares tentatives de rompre avec les rangs se sont-elles toujours soldées, à terme, par des échecs' (p. 191).

NOTES

[1] Jérôme Jaffré, "Pourquoi Sarkozy n'est plus populaire" *Le Monde*, Feb. 28, 2008, 2.

[2] Philippe Ridet, "L'homme qui voulait 'être' président" *Le Monde*, Feb. 26, 2008, 12.

[3] Jean-Michel Normand, "Le parti socialiste ne veut pas se laisser enfermer dans la problématique sécuritaire" *Le Monde*, Feb. 26, 2008, 12.

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