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Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Chronic Aftershock: How 9/11 Shaped Present-Day France*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. 276 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 CAN (hb). ISBN 978022800865.

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The September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. are among the contemporary historical events that have been the subject of particularly virulent conflicts of interpretations as to their origin, meaning and historical significance. The almost immediate symbolic shift from specific historical facts to the general expression “September 11” have made it an event in the sense of a “rupture of intelligibility.”[1] If a global history of the reception of 9/11 remains to be written, Jean-Philippe Mathy's book certainly contributes to it. Thanks to a brilliant internal and contextualized analysis of a reasoned selection of French discourses on 9/11, *Chronic Aftershock* studies the interpretation of the event by the French intellectual field, especially in Paris, and proposes a very enlightening cartography of the contours of the conflict of interpretations and of the different positions taken by famous journalists, writers and academics, ranging from the director of *Le Monde*, Jean-Marie Colombani, to the specialist of Islamism, Olivier Roy, including the writer Fanny Taillandier or the philosopher Jacques Derrida. The author shows well that after the unanimity of *Le Monde*'s “We are all Americans,” there followed a double contradictory movement with, on the one hand, a broad opposition to George W. Bush's war in Iraq and a criticism of American imperialism and, on the other hand, the crystallization of a French neo-conservative intellectual current, the “anti-anti-Americans,” embodied by Pascal Bruckner, Alain Glucksman, and Alexandre Adler, among others. This French neo-conservative current played a decisive role in the mainstreaming of far-right ideas in the French intellectual field, not only after the attacks of 2001 but also after those of 2012 (Toulouse), 2015 (Paris region) and 2016 (Nice).[2]

After outlining the contours of the intellectual controversy in the immediate post-September 11 era (chapter 1), the author analyzes significant examples of French literature dealing with the event (Frédéric Beigbeder and Fanny Taillandier) and Thierry Meyssan's conspiratorial book, *L'effroyable imposture* (chapter 2). The sequence of the war in Iraq is studied under the prism of the construction of a new European identity (“Old Europe”) opposed to the bellicose project of the American neoconservatives (chapter 3), which makes all the more interesting the emergence of French neoconservative intellectual figures who unreservedly supported the war (chapter 4), but also, and this has not been much explored, the existence of a political alliance between the American right and certain French evangelical groups (chapter 5). The book concludes with a reflection on the 2015 attacks as a form of “French 9/11” and the conflict of interpretations of the events that is not unlike that which occurred in 2001 (chapter 6).

In general, the book provides a clear and convincing analysis of the French interpretation of 9/11, and it raises certain questions that deserve to be explored in greater depth. The first is the question

of “who talks about 9/11 in France?” Of course, it would have been impossible to study all French public discourse on the event, but the principles of selection of the publications analyzed in the book could have been made more explicit. Indeed, it is clear that the selected professionals of public discourse are almost exclusively white Parisian men, with the exception of Fanny Taillandier. However, a certain number of female intellectuals have also taken a stand, causing a split between a “femonationalism” (Elisabeth Badinter, Caroline Fourest, etc.) and an anti-racist feminism that still structures the French public debate today (Christine Delphy, Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, etc) [3]. Some Muslim intellectual figures (Ghaleb Bencheikh, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Tariq Obrou, Tariq Ramadan, etc.) and/or of North African origin (Boualam Sansal, etc.) also played a determining role in the construction of the opposition between an Islamophobic neo-conservative current and an anti-racist anti-Islamophobia current. How did gender and race influence the conflict of interpretations of 9/11? Is it insignificant that a media intellectual such as Pascal Bruckner is at the same time the author of *Le sanglot de l’homme blanc, La tyrannie de la pénitence* and *Un racisme imaginaire*, denying the very existence of Islamophobia?[4] How is the conflict of interpretations shaped by Islamophobia and the process of racialization of Muslims?[5]

Another question concerns the disqualification of the social sciences in the interpretation of political violence that is articulated in terms of Islam. The author is surely aware that there are dozens of brilliant researchers in French academia who study the Muslim question and political Islam, notably in laboratories such as the Institut d’études de l’Islam et des sociétés du monde musulman (IISMM) and the Institut de recherches et d’études sur les mondes arabes et musulmans (IREMAM). However, mainstream media tend to select academics who are often the most contested in the academic field, in particular Gilles Kepel and Bernard Rougier. The primacy of contested experts on Islam is indicative of how media (and political) elites challenge French research insofar as it was not able to predict the attacks of September 11. The comparison with the media coverage of the Iranian revolution of 1979 by *Le Monde*, which solicited the orientalist Maxime Rodinson [6], with the media coverage of 9/11 shows the gap that has opened between the journalistic field and academia, which has only widened as political violence by perpetrators using Islam as their justification has grown in power on French territory. Thus, what does the conflict of interpretations of 9/11 mean when specialists on the subject are largely ousted from the public debate, while armchair academics and journalists have a near-monopoly on interpretation? What role can the social sciences play in such a political-media controversy?

While the author clearly demonstrates the tension between, on the one hand, the solidarity with the United States and, on the other, the French state’s refusal, supported by public opinion, to refuse to participate in the war in Iraq, it would have been interesting to study the tensions that occurred within the editorial staff of far-left newspapers, in particular *Charlie Hebdo*. Indeed, the famous “Cartoon Affair” of 2005, at the origin of the focus of Islamist movements against the weekly paper, would not have been possible without the neoconservative turn of the then-director, Philippe Val, in opposition to part of the editorial staff, notably Charb, assassinated on January 8, 2015. The conflict of interpretations of 9/11 fractured this far-left newspaper deeply and contributed to the departure of some journalists who publicly denounced the racism of some articles and cartoons.[7] Beyond editorials in *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*, what forms did the controversy take in newspapers less central to the media field? How did the intellectuals of the

extreme left interpret the event? Why were the publications of *Le Monde diplomatique* not taken into account?

Finally, the author demonstrates the different forms of conspiracy at work in the conflict of interpretations, whether it be “ordinary conspiracy,” which seems to be strong in France and Germany according to opinion polls, “professional conspiracy,” exemplified by Thierry Meyssan’s Voltaire Network, or “state conspiracy theorizing” (p. 88), embodied by the institutionalized lie of the U.S. government concerning weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The pages analyzing Meyssan’s argumentative structures are particularly enlightening. One may wonder, however, where the line between conspiracy and skepticism towards the U.S. government’s version of 9/11 lies. Is there not an intermediate position? How can skepticism about certain inconsistencies in the government’s version of the events tip over into conspiracy theory, or not?

These questions do not, of course, call into question the high quality of the book. *Chronic Aftershock* offers a hard-hitting analysis of the post-9/11 French public debate and provides valuable keys to the conflict of interpretations opened by this event.

NOTES

[1] Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin, “Les Sciences Sociales Face à l’événement,” *Terrain. Anthropologie & Sciences Humaines* 38 (2002): 5-20.

[2] Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, “Articulations of Islamophobia: From the Extreme to the Mainstream?” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40/13(2017): 2151-2179.

[3] Christine Delphy, “Antisexisme ou antiracisme ? Un faux dilemme” *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 25/1 (2006): 59-83; Eric Fassin, “La Démocratie sexuelle et le conflit des civilisations.” *Multitudes* 26 (2006): 123–31; Nacira Guénif-Souilamas et Eric Macé, *Les féministes et le garçon arabe* (La Tour d’Aigues: Editions de l’Aube, 2005); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[4] Pascal Bruckner, *Le sanglot de l’homme: Tiers monde, culpabilité, haine de soi* (Paris: Seuil, 1983). See also Bruckner, *La tyrannie de la pénitence: Essai sur le masochisme occidental* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 2008); “L’invention de l’islamophobie,” *Libération*, November 23, 2010; and, *Un racisme imaginaire: islamophobie et culpabilité* (Paris: Grasset, 2017).

[5] Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobia in France: The Construction of the “Muslim Problem”* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2023).

[6] Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

[7] Olivier Cyran, “‘Charlie Hebdo’, pas raciste ? Si vous le dites.” *Article 11*,

December 5, 2013, <https://www.article11.info/?Charlie-Hebdo-pas-raciste-Si-vous>.

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