

H-France Forum

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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.

Review by Emile Chabal, The University of Edinburgh

For many years now, I have been teaching my students that 9/11 was not a major event in France. Of course, it was a moment of world-historical importance—and the French were not immune to its impact. But it had little of the power and intensity that it did for Americans. France, after all, had struggled with Islamic terrorism since the 1990s, and Jacques Chirac's decision to place the country at the forefront of the opposition to the Second Iraq War in 2003 meant that the tragic dénouement of the conflict did not have the same devastating effect as it did on Tony Blair and his Labour government in the UK. In a narrative of France at the turn of the century, 9/11 appeared to be far less important than the public sector strikes of 1995, the seismic shock of Jean-Marie Le Pen's success in the 2002 presidential election, the referendum on the European constitution in 2005, the widespread urban unrest in the same year, or even France's leading role in the ill-fated Libyan civil war in 2011.

The premise of Jean-Philippe Mathy's book is that I have been wrong in interpreting 9/11 as a mere footnote to French political life. Over the course of six richly documented chapters, he lays out the various ways in which 9/11 inflected, accelerated, or transformed a variety of cultural and intellectual developments. Ranging across the "high intelligentsia"—which, in France, means the rarefied world of senior academics, authors, publishers, top journalists and intellectuals—he explores how 9/11 (re)activated French anti-Americanism, gave credence to conspiracy theories, stimulated the rise of a peculiar kind of French neo-conservatism, and triggered responses from groups as diverse as French evangelicals and Parisian policy wonks. The book ends with a chapter on the terrorist attacks in France in 2015, which were widely seen as France's version of 9/11.

The volume of material addressed in Mathy's study is impressive. It seems to offer strong proof of the impact of 9/11 in France, although it is worth noting that some chapters also devote considerable space to how Americans used French references in their own debates. This is particularly the case in the enlightening discussion in chapter 3 of the deployment of "Bonapartism" and "(neo-)Jacobinism" by American conservatives who opposed George W. Bush's rush to war. In this sense, the book is as much about transatlantic conversations as it is about France alone.

Nevertheless, 9/11 undeniably provoked reactions amongst the French elite. For example, the open debate around Jean-Marie Colombani's famous editorial on 13 September 2001 in *Le Monde* "Nous sommes tous Américains" raised vital questions about transnational solidarity and France's place in a new post-Cold War geopolitical configuration. Likewise, the formation of a group of "anti-anti-Americans" composed of high-profile intellectuals like Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann signalled a shift in the political configuration of the French intelligentsia and the

disintegration of the traditional right-left axis around which it had functioned for so many decades. I also thoroughly enjoyed the discussion of conspiracy theories in chapter 2. It is significant that one of the earliest and best-known conspiracy theories about 9/11 originated in a book called *L'Effroyable imposture* (2002), which was written by French journalist Thierry Meyssan. There has always been a market for this kind of conspiracy theory amongst French intellectuals—from Holocaust denial in the 1970s to anti-Covid polemics in 2021.

Beyond this, however, there is a question mark over the wider significance of 9/11 in French politics and culture. For Mathy's argument to hit home, he would have needed to offer, not simply an account of the reactions to 9/11, but an interpretation of them. On this, Mathy is oddly silent. His meticulous reconstruction of transatlantic debates surrounding 9/11 has certainly given me cause to revise my own position somewhat, but the individual chapters of the book rarely go beyond a description of what was said and by whom. Mathy is attentive to the political trajectory of intellectuals, and he offers compelling evidence that 9/11 permeated public debate for years after 2001, but the reader will reach the end of the book without a clear sense of how (or, indeed, whether) 9/11 can be used to explain key trends in contemporary French politics and society. This is especially surprising given that some of his earlier work provided compelling analytical and interpretative frameworks for understanding the structures of French anti-Americanism in the twentieth century.

The case of the “anti-anti-Americans” discussed in the book is a good example of this problem. The conversion of figures like Lévy and Glucksmann from youthful, usually far-left, activism to pro-American (neo-)conservatism has been widely discussed in both scholarly literature and more polemical journalistic accounts of intellectual life in France.[1] In what ways does Mathy's reading support or undermine some of these theories about this “reactionary” drift? We do not really find out, nor is it obvious that 9/11 was a major catalyst in this process. It was merely a validation of an existing movement.

The same would seem to be true of French evangelicals. The chapter on this was interesting, but it did not tell us much more than the fact that French evangelicals were largely disconnected from (and suspicious of) their American peers, both before and after 9/11. I had hoped to learn more about how French evangelicals interpreted, not just 9/11, but the new world order that it announced. To what extent did French evangelicals attempt to fit 9/11 into an emerging “clash of civilisations” thesis? How did they respond to the idea of a “war on terror”? Given some of the exciting scholarship that has appeared recently on Christian reactions to decolonisation and the Algerian War, there would have been great potential to explore the same themes in a post-imperial world.[2]

Of all the chapters, the final one on Paris 2015 was the ideal place to tie the threads of Mathy's analysis together. But, despite the repeated references to *le 11 septembre français*, he ultimately fails to drive home the importance of 9/11 to the way the French state and elites responded to the terrorist attacks that took place that year. Rather, Mathy shows how other long-standing debates about secularism, the school, and the place of Islam in public life came to the fore. These predated and were largely disconnected from 9/11. It is true that the public spat between Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel on the origins of radical Islam in the twenty-first century had its origins in an analysis of global politics after 9/11. And there was a connection between the aftereffects of 9/11 and the

growing securitisation of the French state in 2015, as it closed in on “terrorists,” “separatists,” and *intégrisme*. But 9/11 itself—as a reference-point and even as a metonym—quickly fades from view in the chapter, to be replaced by a host of other issues.

If Mathy has persuaded me that 9/11 had a greater impact on France than I once thought, I remain unsure as to its long-term significance. There is certainly nothing as coherent as a *pensée 11 septembre* as there was a *pensée 68*.^[3] And, looking at French politics today, it is hard to detect the traces of 9/11 in the speeches, positioning, or ideas of any of the major actors. 9/11 may have brought France closer to America’s fractious “culture wars”—which are now very much part of French public life—but that is not an area that Mathy examines in detail. In the end, 9/11 seems to have had a roughly similar significance as, say, the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. They were both vital historical moments, recognised as such, but their impact in France was ultimately eclipsed by the country’s own divisions and anxieties.

NOTES

[1] Examples, in addition to those cited in the text itself, include Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, “The Neoconservative Moment in France: Raymond Aron, The United States, and the 1970s,” *The Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville*, 41/1(2020) : 183-204; Daniel Lindenberg, *Le Rappel à l'ordre : Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); Perry Anderson, *La Pensée tiède. Un regard critique sur la culture française* (Paris: Seuil, 2005); Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Vers l'extrême: Extension des domaines de la droite* (Paris: Dehors, 2014); and, Emile Chabal, ‘Les intellectuels et la crise de la démocratie’ in *Pouvoirs* 161/2 (2017) : 109-120.

[2] For instance, Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (London: Harvard University Press, 2021); and, Rachel M Johnston-White, “The Christian Anti-Torture Movement and the Politics of Conscience in France” *Past & Present* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtab025>

[3] Luc Ferry & Alain Renaut, *La pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). See also, Serge Audier, *La pensée anti-68: Essai sur une restauration intellectuelle* (Paris : La Découverte, 2008).

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