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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 Lindsay Kaplan, Waynflete School

Reading *Chronic Aftershock: How 9/11 Shaped Present-Day France* by Jean-Philippe Mathy was, in some ways, a trip down memory lane for me. I was present in New York City on that sunny Tuesday. After a two-week forced hiatus from work I'd received when my employer, the Délégation Générale du Québec, hired a bus and brought all the Québec nationals home to regroup, I decided I needed a Master's degree, which I was pursuing in Paris when the United States invaded Iraq.

I assumed from the outset that in *Chronic Aftershock* I would be reading a *Syndrome de Vichy*-style mapping of the memorial afterlives of 9/11 in France, complete with the multiple vectors of transmission that Rousso described as the primary influencers of how people make sense of their own history, and how collective memory and *lieux de mémoire* develop.[1] I think we could force that comparison if we were determined to do so, but rather than ask, "How did we get here?" the backward-looking of Rousso's exploration of a cultural phenomenon that was both familiar and contemporary to him, Mathy's mapping begins with a rupture—9/11—and sends its vectors forth to explore the present and future implications of that rupture. While Rousso's text is a historiographical deep dive into twentieth-century France, Mathy's work illustrates just how important the United States is to France's twenty-first century self-conception. *Chronic Aftershock* begins with analyses of the immediate reactions to 9/11 in France, and continues with chapters that move both chronologically and thematically. He briefly explores literature as a mode of processing the trauma of 9/11, but spends more time on the conversations among journalists, pundits, and other thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. These conversations move through the wave of sympathy and solidarity, to the backlash of anti-Americanism, and finally to the phenomenon of anti-anti-Americanism. Mathy also explores the impact of Evangelical Christianity on the foreign policy decisions of both nations, including George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq.

It becomes increasingly apparent through this book that 9/11 provided nothing so much as a rich opportunity for France to reevaluate its political apparatus through the filter of diplomatic and media relations with a wounded United States. Mathy makes this evident from the first chapter by presenting a spectrum of reactions to the event, and by discussing its contested optics. Questions of visibility were front and center during discussions of 9/11 because, as Mathy notes, the act, and the subsequent worldwide redistribution of images of the act, were nearly simultaneous; the visibility and globalization of the event and the responses to it invited commentary from various quarters, and France's contributors to the conversation were picking up a thread from a long-standing conversation. Mathy notes that "French-American relations, and the eternally resurging question of Gallic anti-Americanism, [were] squarely at the centre of the contested afterlives of September 11" (p. 30). France's commentators were not then weighing in on the event itself, but

on the event as filtered through preexisting French critiques of American economic and military hegemony.

Pundits expounded upon the unintelligibility of 9/11 while scrambling to make sense of it; paradoxically, they spoke of 9/11 both as a complete rupture and as the predictable result of failed policy choices. Mathy shows, though, that:

The two options were in some ways incompatible: if 9/11 was wholly unheard of, if it was a radical break with the course of history or the realm of the conceptual, then what was the point of debating its origins, its current representations, and its future consequences?" (p. 30-31)

French journalists, pundits, and academics debated the Americans' debates about the meaning of a senseless act of violence. France's official political position on the U.S. decision to retaliate for the attacks by invading Afghanistan and Iraq was to oppose the U.S. actions while also appropriating the paradigm of intelligibility the U.S. had ultimately chosen. This approach says more about France, though, than about the course of action the U.S. took. Because France's perception of its own moral authority is so closely tied to its relationship with the U.S., pundits inadvertently gave truth to George W. Bush's famous declaration, "You're either with us, or against us."

Mathy notes Bourdieu's view of "an anti-Americanism of resentment and revenge stemming from the growing clash after 1945 between 'an ascending imperialism and an imperialism in decline'" (p. 164). Therefore, France's interpretation of 9/11 was less about geopolitical concerns than about...France. Summarizing Desuin, Mathy notes that at the moment France relinquished its moral authority on the world stage, the United States took its place:

'It is as though Europe, repentant from her horrendous contemporary history [the Shoah and decolonization], is trying to plagiarize the mythical creation of America and to establish itself as a second City upon the Hill [...] to build an ideal reality now that it has gone out of history [...]. Through its excessive dream of being American, Paris has wished to surpass Washington by displaying an absolute intransigence regarding democracy and human rights' (p.164).

Now, the prominence of France as a moralizing body in the world is inseparable from the rise of the United States. Mathy's text enters into a well-established conversation about the long shadow American geopolitical hegemony casts over the French political sphere. 9/11, as scholars of contemporary French history recognize, is not the first time the French have adopted American paradigmatic ways of thinking about their own social problems. For a century now, France has enjoyed comparing itself favorably to the United States in matters of race relations. France became a haven for Black Americans in the teens, 20s, and again in the 50s, and many wrote about learning to live there without the kind of fear that had plagued them in the U.S.[2] For Black Americans, the French claimed to be a nation without racism, a people united under the banner of universalism. However, William Gardner Smith noted in 1963 that what he had first understood as a society without racism was instead a society with racism against someone other than himself.[3] For the

French, notions of racism had been broadly conceived within an American framework: systemic oppression of Black Americans stemming from institutional racism built into the American project and based in the enslavement of Africans.

Instead, French journalists, pundits, and academics working on this topic have tended to focus on assimilation and integration, which boil down to whether non-Western cultures are sufficiently compatible with French values to integrate seamlessly. As Mathy notes:

When the United States invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003, French secularists were in the midst of a fifteen-year struggle to uphold the principles of the *République* in matters of “conscience” against what they denounced as increasing threats to the separation of church and state from fundamentalist Muslim communities (p. 171).

Discussions over the incompatibility of Islam and French Republican values were certainly not new when 9/11 occurred. However, the newly critical view of the United States on Islam provided the French with a paradigm that legitimized their preexisting prejudices and justified new and ever broader sanctions against Islam in France. A society that embraces its *communautarisme* like the U.S. expressing anti-Muslim views more openly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, anchored and amplified the conversation about the possible incompatibility of Islam with French values. The fact that French people of African and Middle Eastern heritage remain visually distinct from other members of *le creuset français*, even after multiple generations of citizenship, underscores the impossibility of complete assimilation.[4]

In 2004, when France once again took measures to remove ostensible signs of religion from schools, it was in a context primed by Western discussions around 9/11:

Although there was no direct connection between 9/11 and the ban, the latter took place in a context of heightened concern with the threat of Islamic terrorism and the growth of Salafism and Wahhabism in the Muslim world *and* in Europe. Unsurprisingly, in the most extreme descriptions of religious dress worn by middle-school girls, the headscarf became a weapon and its wearing a criminal activity. Jacques Chirac declared in Tunisia that “Wearing the veil, whether it is intended or not, is a kind of aggression,” while André Glucksmann proclaimed that the veil was “stained in blood” (p. 177, italics in the text).

The head scarf ban thus took place not only in the context of the “return of assimilationism in France,” as noted by Trica Keaton,[5] but also within the post 9/11 context of intensifying scrutiny of Islam within democratic societies. This turn from *le droit à la différence* popular in the ‘90s was due in part to the stunning rise of the Front National, and the divisive rhetoric of its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen. But the problem predates 2002. For Keaton, “Youth of immigration expose fundamental contradictions between France’s notion of universalism as a national interest and the lived reality of ethnic distinction and racial discrimination.”[5] N. M. Thomas observes that “in many of the accounts of the *affaires*, Muslim and French are used as mutually exclusive categories, despite the efforts of the “second generation” to construct an identity that balances the two.”[6]

France came under international fire for banning the Islamic head scarf. However, this was not only for choosing to scrutinize the behavior and symbolism of a relatively powerless demographic—young Muslim girls—but also because, despite protests to the contrary, the principles could not be applied evenly across religions. As noted by Dominique Custos has noted, “Concretely, neither Catholicism nor Christianity, at least in their contemporary mainstream teachings, instructs the faithful to wear conspicuous religious signs.”[7] It is also difficult to argue that the rhythm of life in France is based on anything other than the Christian calendar. Thus, French law places the burden of maintaining and living up to both universalist standards and *laïcité* on non-Christians broadly and Muslim women and girls in particular. This is further evidenced by a suite of laws targeting Muslim women in the subsequent years: in 2010 the burqa is banned from public spaces; in 2011 the niqab; 2016, the burkini is banned, and French soldiers are photographed forcibly disrobing women on the beach; and finally, in 2021, France imposes a total ban on the *foulard* for women under eighteen. Mathy notes that these measures:

...went far beyond the visible presence of religion in public education. They were, as Joan Wallach Scott put it in *The Politics of the Veil*, symptoms of a much broader, and seemingly intractable, *Muslim question*, ‘a French problem...a post-colonial French problem, not a foreign import’.... Far from being anti-communitarian, the myth of universalism only valued one type of communal belonging, that of the national compact (p. 177).

Mathy examines who, exactly, can claim to be heir to the Jacobins; however, it is not clear to whom he awards that distinction. What is clear is that at some point, the myth of French universalism stopped being believable for many French citizens. As Thomas pointed out in 2005, “The issue will not go away, regardless of the French government’s official position. In the midst of all this controversy, one thing is clear: young Muslims are trying to carve a place for themselves in French society.”[8] France’s substantial Muslim minority will tire of going on the defensive whenever there is a terrorist attack like what happened with *Charlie Hebdo*, the Bataclan, or Samuel Paty. It is time for France to rebuild the framework upon which Frenchness hangs, and part of that work will be for France to tear itself free of its orbit around the United States. American sociopolitical paradigms will not suffice to solve social problems in France or to create a logical French foreign policy in the twenty-first century. With *Chronic Aftershock*, Mathy has created an extension of the phenomenon he so minutely documents: French responses to and analyses of 9/11 and its aftermath in France being conditioned by and filtered through American responses to American problems.

NOTES

[1] Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy: de 1944 à nos Jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

[2] Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); and, Tyler Stovall, “The Fire This Time: Black American Expatriates and the Algerian War,” *Yale French Studies* 98 (2000): 182-200.

[3] William Gardner Smith, *The Stone Face* (New York: Farrar, 1963).

[4] Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration, XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

[5] Trica Keaton, "Arrogant Assimilationism: National Identity Politics and African-Origin Muslim Girls in the Other France," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 36/4 (2005): 407.

[6] N. M. Thomas, "On Headscarves and Heterogeneity: Reflections on the French Foulard Affair," *Dialectical Anthropology* 29/3-4 (2005): 385.

[7] Dominique Custos, "Secularism in French Public Schools: Back to War? The French Statute of March 15, 2004," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 54/2 (2006): 381.

[8] Thomas, 385.

Lindsay Kaplan
Waynflete School
lkaplan@waynflete.org

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