

*H-France Forum*

Volume 18 (2023), Issue 1, #5

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.

Response essay by Jean-Philippe Mathy, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

I am grateful to the colleagues who have read *Chronic Aftershock* and provided insightful comments. In many ways, their remarks do not solely respond to the book, but respond to each other, in accordance to what a productive *forum* format should be. I will focus my own response on the following points raised in the reviews: the principles of the selection of the authors discussed in the book, the nature of the impact of 9/11 on French culture and society, and the legacy of 9/11 as yet another chapter in the contentious relationship between France and the United States.

Abdellali Hajjat's essay brings up a number of important points related to the question of "who talks about 9/11 in France," whose voices are represented in public debates, who is legitimized to speak to the issues, and who is marginalized, excluded or disqualified from doing so, both on scientific and political grounds. The space of the production of ideas is indeed not a level-playing field, and the unequal access to the mainstream media, where influential opinions are circulated and dominant views manufactured, has led in some cases to what Hajjat describes as "the disqualification of the social sciences in the interpretation of political violence articulated in terms of Islam." Discussions of gender, race and sexuality in France in the past fifteen years have increasingly pitted social scientists, radical and militant activists, and right-wing ideologues against one another regarding the relative merit of their competing views of the issues. Most recently, Max Weber's notion of "axiological neutrality" and his classic distinction between "science as vocation" and "politics as vocation" found their way into the controversies surrounding the import of "American" paradigms (gender theory, decolonial studies, critical race theory, cancel culture, wokism, etc.).[1] The reference to Weberian categories underscores both the intent of social scientists to play an active role in the construction of the public sphere and the refusal of their critics on the left and the right to grant any kind of epistemological privilege to their work, viewed as just another form of partisan ideology disguised as objective knowledge.[2]

Hajjat's related comment that "the principles of selection of the publications analyzed in the book could have been made more explicit" is well taken. I conceived of the book in large part as a continuation of my previous work on the intellectual history of French-American relations with a focus on literature, philosophy, and cultural criticism.[3] As a result, I privileged written texts from an elite of influential journalists, novelists, scholars, essayists, and public intellectuals. I briefly described the reasons for the specific nature of this corpus in the introduction, but I agree that the rationale could have been made more explicit. The authors I discussed were mostly men in positions of power at the intersection of the academic, media, and publishing fields. The social and cultural capital these positions afforded them in turn accounts for the wide coverage of their views on the major struggles dividing French society, more often than not in areas outside of their respective areas of professional or scholarly expertise. Some of the authors mentioned in the book

are social scientists, but I chose to focus on the ideological uses of their interventions as contributions to the cultural politics of 9/11, rather than on the scientific quality of their work.

The highly visible presence of these ubiquitous actors does not imply that their views are equally valuable when it comes to understanding the issues about which they are ritually consulted in the printed or electronic media. For example, the writings of sociologists Gilles Kepel and Bernard Rougier, on the one hand, and political scientist Olivier Roy on the other, have come to represent two of the major positions at odds regarding the “Muslim question” in France [4]: the Jacobin defense of the universalist principles of the republican tradition and the “liberal” advocacy of (American-style) multiculturalism. Kepel and Rougier’s views are indeed highly contested in their field, including on epistemological grounds, and I referred to some of their critics in the final chapter of the book, notably François Burgat, Farhad Khosrokhavar, and Fabien Truong.[5] in addition to participants in the disputes opposing various feminist positions on the Islamic veil, such as Caroline Fourest and Joan Wallach Scott.[6] The discursive map I attempted to draw in the book did not pretend to exhaustivity. There is room in any account of the legacy of 9/11 in France or elsewhere for approaches based on visual arts and filmic material, popular culture, and non-elite (counter-)publics, including a new generation of critics and activists on social media situated outside of well-established academic circles and mainstream political parties.

While acknowledging “the various ways in which 9/11 inflected, accelerated, or transformed a variety of cultural and intellectual developments,” Emile Chabal argues for his part that the event did not constitute a “major catalyst” of the social, political, and cultural developments in France. Both statements (9/11 led to a wide-ranging conflict of interpretations but did not affect major structural changes in French culture and society) are only incompatible if one posits a strict equivalence between the actual event as it took place on American soil and its reception in a foreign context. The distinct social, political and cultural environments that informed these two parallel treatments of 9/11 were profoundly different. To use Chabal’s words, my approach to the legacy of the event in France was not meant to explain “key trends in contemporary French politics and society” (at least directly), although it did inflect them through a process of discursive appropriation, nationalization, and to a large extent re-elaboration.

As mentioned in Lindsay Kaplan’s response, I stated in *Chronic Aftershock* that there was no linear cause-and-effect relation, for example, between 9/11 and the ban on ostentatious signs of religious affiliation in French public schools because they occurred in different places. The book intended to underscore, however, that the ban took place in the context of heightened concern with Islamist violence in Europe and the Muslim world, a concern not unrelated to the way the aftermath of September 11 had previously shaped the public sphere in France. What had happened on the other side of the Atlantic was inserted in the French national conversation, not so much in terms of the empirical occurrence of 9/11 (whose ontological reality had been in any case contested from the start), but as the signifier of something else, a symbolic place-holder for what it meant for France, how it challenged the country’s response in areas as diverse as philosophical considerations on the evil of totalitarianism, the management of religious extremism, or American foreign policy. Some of the interpretive frameworks in which 9/11 found its place preceded the new millennium: France’s place in Europe, post-Cold War geopolitics, or even anti-Americanism, were somewhat related to the event itself. Others were more closely connected to it, including, as highlighted in the reviewers’ responses, immigration, Islamophobia, uprisings in urban areas, the ideological

radicalization of some of the Muslim youth at home, and the compatibility of French Islam with republican values, principles and institutions.

The emergence in 2015 of what Derek W. Vaillant calls the “trope” and the “news peg” of “the French 9/11,” illustrates how the memory of 9/11 remained operative in the decade and a half following the strikes in New York City and Washington D.C. If the original event was gradually eclipsed by the inevitable rush of subsequent domestic and foreign “media events” (as defined by Vaillant), it was not forgotten, as demonstrated by the explicit reference to September 11. One can certainly challenge the merits of a label such as “the French 9/11,” given, as Vaillant reminds us, “the qualitatively different nature of the attacks...and their diachronic nature.” The attacks in Paris and Nice nevertheless prompted comparable public statements from Presidents Bush and Hollande about not surrendering to fear, never forgetting the victims, and defending the open society against its enemies. Both 2001 and 2015 mobilized the law enforcement and judiciary arms of the state against the threat, led to measures limiting civil liberties in France compared to the U.S. Patriot Act, and prompted military operations against jihadists and allied governments (in sub-Saharan Africa in the case of the French). 9/11 as a media event had also been a contested trope (Jacques Derrida had called its moniker “the telegram of a metonymy”),[7] and it served as a substitute, first for the threat of mass violence on French soil, and later for its actual occurrence. Vaillant’s mention of the 9/11 Report is quite relevant in this respect: “In the post-9/11 world,” the Report stated, “threats are defined more by the fault lines within societies than by the territorial boundaries between them.”[8]

This distinction between fault lines within societies and territorial boundaries between them ties in with Lindsay Kaplan’s response when she claims that 9/11 in France was more about France than about the event itself, since the latter had been filtered through preexisting critiques of American economic and military dominance, as a result of the process of contextualization I mentioned above. But she also proposes that in this case, the boundaries between the two countries were quite porous because of the specific nature of France’s rapport with the United States. In addition to addressing the contingent geopolitical rationale behind the French resistance to the second Iraq war, Kaplan’s analysis ventures into time-honored matters of national identity and self-definition. She argues that France’s peculiar relationship with the U.S. among Western democracies is closely tied to the country’s “self-conception” and its efforts to promote and defend “its moral authority” as a worthier alternative to the American way of dealing with challenges at home and abroad. In this view, 9/11 provided many among the French with another opportunity to “re/evaluate” their country’s political values, cultural heritage, and national institutions as against those of a “wounded” United States. In other words, if the reception of 9/11 in France was mainly about France, its rhetoric had a lot to do with the fact that it was an American event. This allowed, for example, the Chirac administration to reassert in 2003 the oppositional stance of a middling power with long-held historical claims to exceptionalism in order, once again, to compare itself favorably to the U.S., as Kaplan puts it. The irony, of course, is that the French government’s heavy-handed response to the 2015 attacks (both in its curtailing of civil rights at home and its military involvement abroad) elicited the same criticisms from the American liberal media as the French had directed to George Bush’s neoconservative management of the post 9/11 era. Kaplan’s analysis of some of the sources, and limits, of the French critique of America’s standing in the world reminds us that anti-Americanism is not solely a defensive posture. When it comes to France’s relation to the United States, the latter does not only function negatively as a threatening

counter-model (the “American bogeyman,” to quote Eric Fassin),[9] but also affirmatively and reassuringly, as evidence of the superiority of the French difference.

## NOTES

[1] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004).

[2] See for example Natalie Heinich, “La militantisantion de la recherche et ses ravages,” *Observatoire du décolonialisme et des idéologies identitaires*, March 4, 2021, <https://decolonialisme.fr/?p=3077>.

[3] Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[4] Gilles Kepel, *Terror in France. The Rise of Jihad in the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Bernard Rougier, *Les territoires conquis de l’islamisme* (Paris: PUF, 2020); Olivier Roy, *Les illusions du 11 septembre. Le débat stratégique face au terrorisme* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

[5] François Burgat, “Réponse à Olivier Roy: les non-dits de ‘l’islamisation de la radicalité’,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 21 November 2016; Farhat Khosrokhavar and Jérôme Ferret, “La fausse alternative: la radicalisation de l’islam ou l’islamisation de la radicalité,” *Tribune France*, vol.3, 11 February 2020; Fabien Truong, *Radicalized Loyalties: Becoming Muslim in the West* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

[6] Caroline Fourest, *La tentation obscurantiste* (Paris: Grasset, 2005); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[7] Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 86.

[8] The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), p. 361, <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>.

[9] Eric Fassin and Clarisse Fabre, *Liberté, égalité, sexualités. Actualité politique des questions sexuelles* (Paris: Belfond, 2003), p. 21.

Jean-Philippe Mathy  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
[jmathy@illinois.edu](mailto:jmathy@illinois.edu)

*H-France Forum*  
Volume 18 (2023), Issue 1, #5

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.