

The Age of Fracture

French politics since the 1970s

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For France the 1970s marked a shift in political attitudes and intellectual trends. Surveying political changes over four decades, a new collection of essays seeks to find the proper vocabulary to capture France’s contemporary situation. From this collective work, readers may conclude that fracture could in fact be the first step to building something new.

Reviewed: Emile Chabal (ed.), *France Since the 1970s: History, Politics and Memory in an Age of Uncertainty*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

There is a growing international consensus that, amongst western countries, the 1970s were a watershed decade. Whether they represented the beginnings of a new neoliberal order, a conservative political turn, or in more recent interpretations an “age of Fracture,” the 1970s are the years where we need to look to find answers about our current situation.¹

For some, this new focus is about unraveling the beginning of contemporary problems. The crises of today either began in the 70s, or at least some aspects of them did. For France in particular, the 1970s seemed to mark a shift in political attitudes, demographics, and intellectual trends. The power of the extreme left began to wane in the face of globalized economics and an ever-more-centrist Socialist Party. More and more French persons came from now-independent former colonies in a process sometimes clumsily referred to as reverse colonialism. The hey-day of postwar Existentialism and 60s and 70s Maoism gave way to the New Philosophers and mediaphile pundits. The orientation of the hexagon had seemingly shifted under everyone’s feet and left them searching for the right angles to regain their bearings.

A Crisis in Thinking France, not a French Crisis

But according to Emile Chabal, the editor of a new collection of essays on the subject, we would be wrong to simply accept the notion that France is in crisis. Rather, the real problem is finding

¹ The most well-known fracture narrative, dealing with the United States, is Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2011. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello also point to the 1970s as the decade in which the seeds of grand structural changes that emerged in the 1980s and 90s in France took root. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Gregory Elliott, London: Verso, 2005.

the proper vocabulary to capture France's contemporary situation. Talk of crisis unwittingly positions "the good ole days" against a lackluster present. Such nostalgia ignores the perpetual position of politics to adapt to new circumstances in an ever-changing world. When voiced by outsiders, this rhetoric often assumes French political culture to be defective when compared to seemingly more stable Anglophone liberal alternatives. According to this logic, the English and the Americans are masters of reform; the French only know protest and revolution.

The essays presented here demand we think of French politics as different and often opaque, but resist the defective label. Liberalism and republicanism, political positions that gained prominence since the 1970s and which are relevant for contemporary France, did not emerge as Anglophone imports. Michael Behrent and Iain Stewart show the ways in which the radicalism of 1968 provoked a liberal renewal in the Association for Economic Liberty and Social Progress (ALEPS) and the political journals *Contrepoint* and *Commentaire*.² The political sources these liberal institutions drew from were often out of French political traditions that had been neglected since the nineteenth century. Likewise, Camille Robcis' analysis of the ways Frédéric Martel and Irène Théry appropriated Marcel Gauchet's republican political theory to combat gay rights and civil unions shows a longstanding worry about the nature of the French Republic. The sort of social fracture posited as beginning in the 1970s was exactly the sort of worry these republicans held over increased recourse to human rights claims. This is a republicanism born not in the eighteenth century, but the late twentieth.³

Which Time?

All of the essays contribute to the recent history of France, but despite the volume's title, many of them point to the importance of developments not bound by the post-1970s era. Nicholas Hewitt, for instance, sees the current state of French politics as not part of a crisis of liberty or identity, but rather as a return to a deep-seated tradition of popular mobilization. Even though France has been mired in issues of identity politics and social fragmentation that first surfaced in the decades since 1968, the shape of these manifestations is familiarly French.

Indeed, one may wonder whether the struggle over the primacy of individual and group social identities in a universal Republic is another such continuity. One of the first Republic's goals was to remove any barrier separating the individual from the state. Later nineteenth-century social theorists worried that too much focus on individual desires rather than group identity would destabilize the nation. Fears of social fragmentation may in fact be constitutive of the French Republic and therefore nothing particular to our recent moment. Sophie Guérard de Latour points to the fact that two major contemporary figures of French Republican political theory, Jean-Fabian Spitz and Dominique Schnapper, both draw from the work of Émile Durkheim, a luminary of the Third Republic. On another scale, essays in the volume suggest that many of the issues surrounding French identity politics have their roots not in the aftermath of 1968, but rather in the loss of French empire since the late 1950s. Even after the end of empire, memories, migrants from the former empire, museum exhibits, and fights over reparations

² Both authors as well as editor Emile Chabal are contributors to a forthcoming volume on the liberal turn in French thought scheduled to appear in 2016. (<http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/in-search-of-the-liberal-moment-stephen-w-sawyer/?sfl=barcode&st1=9781137581266>).

³ Samuel Moyn argues that human rights themselves are largely a product of 1970s politics. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Cambridge (Mass.), Belknap Press, 2010.

payments have served as constant reminders of the empire's legacy. (See the contributions of Patricia Lorcin, Isabel Hollis, Daniel Gordon, and Yann Scioldo-Zurcher.) The perceived fragmentation of French society since the 1970s appears as an accretion of multiple overlapping historical trajectories beyond the last four and a half decades.

Beyond the Hexagon

The very format of essay collections usually defies any coherent or unified argument. Each author reveals a different perspective on their own subject. Any synthetic interpretation will therefore risk extracting an imagined unity out of accidental relationships. So rather than think of these contributions as explanations of *why* France has changed, it is perhaps better to see them as descriptions of *how* some of the contours of modern France have changed.

Still, looking solely within the hexagon to offer even a multifaceted descriptive account of change in France overall feels unsatisfactory in at least one respect. At least since 1789, France has claimed a universalist place in world history that became increasingly global under its nineteenth-century imperial expansion.⁴ While this universalism that projected outwards from the hexagon may no longer exist, France still remains part of larger global forces. It is then important to tether the question “Whither France?” to greater global contexts and structural processes.⁵ The chapters covering decolonization suggest as much by showing the myriad other worlds—remembered, misremembered, forgotten, idealized, mourned—tied to France in the aftermath of decolonization. At the same time France negotiated the loss of its colonies it was also in the initial stages of negotiating greater-European integration. Under the 1957 Rome Treaty that integration was initially economic, and by the end of the 1970s there was scarcely any part of the world's economy that was not connected. With the European Union populations, too, became connected on a larger scale. The 13 November terrorist attacks in Paris, for instance, have prompted commentators to tie their concerns for the safety of the French state to the ease of travel across borders via the 1995 Schengen Agreement. Many of the authors in this volume successfully demonstrate the particularly French vocabulary applied to contemporary debates, but the global dimensions of these debates is often absent.

Toward an Uncertain Future

Pascal Perrineau, however, does point to some of these global dynamics affecting the French economy and its connections to shifts in the French electorate. Globalization, the decrease in heavy industry, and the rise in both managerial classes and the French service industry drove the working classes further to the right and many on the left closer to the center. Where Perrineau sees growing fragmentation in these changes, James Shields provocatively claims that French politics have moved to a new bipolar system torn between the Socialist Party (PS) and the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP). This latter analysis comes as a comfort, since it means the apparent rise of the far right Front National has only reinforced the hegemonic division between the PS and UMP. But if Perrineau is right about the importance of extra-national forces, then one

⁴ This is clearly articulated in Tyler Stovall's recent textbook on the history of modern France. Tyler Stovall, *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation*, Boulder (Colorado), Westview Press, 2015.

⁵ Gary Wilder, “From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns,” *American Historical Review* 117, n° 3, 2012, pp. 723-745.

has to wonder if this new bipolar system is simply a way station on the path to a new, even more conservative status quo in France. Those global forces are, after all, only intensifying.

Of course, no collaborative project like this—the sum of individual research agendas and interests—can ever claim to exhaust the greater topic, and Emile Chabal is up front about the topics not covered in this collection. Curious readers will certainly want to follow up this volume with studies of France’s relationship to greater European integration and cooperation, its continued military interventions in former colonial zones like West Africa, as well as France’s place in the world economy from the 1970s onward.

The overall conclusion that France since 1970 has gone through precipitous transformations will likely not change. If anything, the extent to which France’s political and social futures remain uncertain will only be reinforced. However, uncertainty should not necessarily mean despair, as Sudhir Hazareesingh suggests at the book’s conclusion—an alarm he has been sounding a great deal of late. Nor should it mean passive acquiescence, as Michel Houellebecq’s recent novel illustrates.⁶ Rather, the France of tomorrow will be open to new possibilities hitherto unforeseen and unavailable. Fracture may simply be the first step toward building something new.

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⁶ For example, <http://aeon.co/magazine/philosophy/how-did-french-thought-end-up-in-crisis/>. Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission*, Paris, Flammarion, 2015.