REVIEW ESSAY

Intersecting Traditions: Recent Contributions to French Political History
Geoffrey Read—Huron University College


Waltraud Maierhofer, Gertrud Maria Roesch, and Caroline Bland, eds., Women against Napoleon: Historical and Fictional Responses to his Rise and Legacy (New York: Campus Verlag, 2007).


No national history has a richer mosaic of political traditions than France’s. Anyone studying modern France encounters a broad spectrum of political ideologies including monarchism – of both legitimist and Orléanist strains – Bonapartism, Gaullism, fascism, republicanism, liberalism, socialism, communism, and anarchism. In turn, each tradition possesses its own wealth of political symbols, conventions, and beliefs. Moreover, in France today many of these traditions continue to bear considerable weight. On the far left, the French Communist Party, though diminished, remains a force to be reckoned with, while the right-wing extremist Front National still has a lamentable impact on political discourse. Gaullism, meanwhile, continues to dominate French conservatism, as Gaullists
join forces with the Socialist Party to decry the influence of “Anglo” liberalism against the backdrop of the global recession.

Unsurprisingly, given the vibrancy of contemporary French politics, there is a voluminous historiography on the country’s political history in both English and French (not to mention other European languages). Equally predictable is that much of this historiography is itself influenced by the aforementioned political traditions. Historians of France have often written within particular political schools and for specific political purposes. For instance, recall Jules Michelet, the great historian of the revolution, who wrote within a republican tradition with the express purpose of discrediting first the July Monarchy and then the Second Empire; or Marc Bloch, whose call for historians to remain politically engaged was written during the German occupation (the book was published posthumously as Bloch was executed for his resistance activities) or the monarchist Jacques Bainville whose work was dominated by two obsessions he shared with much of the far right during the interwar period: a hatred of the Third Republic and an intense Germanophobia. In short, French historians of all persuasions have a longstanding habit of writing as intellectuel engagé, and have to some degree eschewed the German and Anglo pursuit of apolitical objectivity accordingly.

Recent contributions to French political history confirm this remains the case. Though the works surveyed here are chiefly authored by Anglophone scholars, each tackles politicized material from particular political and historiographical positions. In so doing, they enliven French historiography and make it politically relevant in the present.

It seems appropriate to begin with the French Revolution. In addition to the Revolution spawning a vast literature exploring its origins, course, and effects, the traditions it inspired have also received their due attention. In The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815, Henry Heller tackles the Revolution anew. This book has received some truly unflattering reviews in large part because of its historiographical position, which is determined by Heller's politics. Heller is an unrepentant Marxist in a field he correctly identifies as dominated by, in his words, “so-called revisionist historians” (Heller, 2). These scholars, the departed François Furet chief among them, adopt an approach that we might broadly term post-structuralist, but in truth they are a much more diverse bunch than Heller allows. His dismissive tone towards revisionist historiography is unwarranted and derives from Heller’s conviction that their position is “a form of historical irrationality that is rooted in political and social conservatism” (Heller, 150). As a Marxist, Heller wants to return the interpretive emphasis to social and economic factors. In particular, he resurrects the classic Marxist argument that the Revolution resulted from France’s transition to industrial capitalism. In so doing, he traces the emergence of capitalism in the eighteenth century French countryside, as well as the development of a French middle class (Heller, 27-64), and argues thereafter that
the middle class abandoned the *ancien régime* because the monarchy no longer adequately promoted or protected its interests. (Heller, 83-108)

The book’s injudicious tone is unfortunate and helps explain its hostile reception. Heller seems determined to set up revisionist historians as straw men in order to knock them down. In so doing he overstates both his own case, and the degree to which revisionism has become the new orthodoxy. Heller writes as though structural changes to the economy are now completely ignored in the wider literature. Surely, the majority of undergraduate lectures on the French Revolution, the truest measure of an orthodoxy’s sway, discuss the rise of peasant unrest and proto-capitalist relations in both town and country. Indeed, in this respect, the Marxist interpretation of Albert Soboul and others has shown remarkable resiliency. Perhaps Heller need not fret quite so much.

Despite its flaws, however, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France* is a worthwhile read. It would work very well in a seminar on the causes of the French Revolution opposite, for example, Sarah Maza’s *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie.* At 150 pages of text, Heller’s work succinctly reiterates the Marxist interpretation while incorporating some of the insights of revisionism. Moreover, his argumentative tone would encourage spirited discussion in the classroom. Certainly, his book is a stellar example of the influence of political traditions on historical writing.

Another well-known Marxist historian of France is Herman Lebovics. He is the author of such works as *The Alliance of Iron and Wheat in the Third French Republic* and *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity,* and is widely regarded as one of the premier scholars of the Third Republican period. Indeed, Lebovics is sufficiently well-respected that he has been able to publish a book of essays, *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* with Duke University Press. In this book, which encompasses British as well as French imperial history, Lebovics’ Marxism is not as front and centre as Heller’s. His didactic purpose in writing the book, however, is obvious: to oppose the neo-imperialism of the Bush administration in the United States, in power at the time of his publication. Lebovics draws on diverse material including the films of Jean Renoir and the political philosophy of John Locke to argue that imperialism necessarily corrupts the imperialist just as it subjugates its victims (Lebovics, 24-59; 87-99). This, Lebovics maintains, is particularly harmful to democracies, for, “[th]e inevitable inequalities of empire destroy the integrative spirit on which democracies are founded” (Lebovics, 117).

Feminists might quibble with Lebovics’ claim about the integrative spirit of democracies given the frequent and deliberate exclusion of women (among others) from the franchise, but his argument is appealing nonetheless. The best essays in the collection are those where Lebovics is on familiar ground, dealing with modern French cultural and colonial history. Perhaps the essay that most effectively makes his point about the corrupting influence of imperialism is the
first one, entitled, “Not the Right Stuff: Shrinking Colonial Administrators.” Examining George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” Raymond Gauthereau’s bastardization of Orwell's piece, and the Director of France’s École Coloniale, Robert Delavignette’s theorizing on effective colonial rule, Lebovics explores how colonial rulers must show mastery and strength above all else, leading them to commit acts they know are unjust like shooting Orwell’s elephant (was Harry Whittington the elephant to Dick Cheney’s Orwell?). Moreover, good colonial administrators, according to Delavignette, were those who followed orders unquestioningly and enforced colonial policy without empathy for colonial subjects. As Lebovics implies, such people did not make conscientious citizens or particularly convinced democrats (Lebovics, 1-21). This is a lesson he clearly feels that US policymakers need to absorb.

There is no arguing with Lebovics’ sentiment. Yet, his thesis raises a question he leaves unanswered: if imperialism is so corrosive to democracies, then why were Europe’s two democratic stalwarts, Britain and France, also its greatest imperial powers? Indeed, one could argue that imperialism accompanied the democratization of both Britain and France, particularly during the age of the New Imperialism. The Third Republic, still France’s most enduring democratic regime, came to life in 1870; the Second Reform Act in Britain, which enfranchised working-class males, was passed in 1867; the New Imperialism including the Scramble for Africa followed in the late-1870s through to World War One. Perhaps imperialism was integral to or even a product of democracy, corrupting though it may have been?

If all agree that France has a robust imperial tradition, there is less consensus regarding the strength of its fascist inclinations. Crudely put, within France the historiography has been dominated by the “immunity thesis”, which contends that France had no significant indigenous fascist movements. The logic follows, therefore, that Vichy and its crimes were an aberration, wrought by foreign conquest and the alien influence of Nazism. This position has been forwarded most forcefully by René Rémond. Anglophone scholars have long been the chief opponents of this view, beginning with Robert Paxton’s seminal examination of Vichy. Such studies emphasize that while Vichy was certainly the product of the German invasion and therefore by no means inevitable, it did have significant roots in France, most notably in interwar French politics.10 Sean Kennedy’s new book, based on his doctoral dissertation (though the additions to the book manuscript are impressive), Reconciling France against Democracy: The Croix de Feu and the Parti Social Français, 1927-1945 stands firmly in this tradition. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Kennedy’s dissertation supervisor, William D. Irvine, has published widely on the interwar right and indeed, has produced an influential article on the Croix de Feu itself.11 The Croix de Feu, which was forced to change its name to the Parti Social Français in 1936 when the French government declared it an illegal organization, lies at the crux of the debate on the interwar French far
right because of its size – 1 to 1.2 million members by 1938 – and relative longevity (Kennedy, 194). In other words, if the Croix de Feu was a fascist or authoritarian movement, then Vichy was less of an aberration than Rémont and others would have us believe. Accordingly, Rémont characterized the movement as conservative and republican, a finding recently echoed by Albert Kéchichian (though with some significant provisos).12

Kennedy’s book is impressive and, for Anglophone historians at least, should prove the definitive word on the Croix de Feu for some time. His meticulous research leaves no stone unturned, as he painstakingly reconstructs machinations among the league’s leadership in combination with developments in the local sections, including in Algeria. Kennedy’s conclusion that the movement was “determined to endow France with an authoritarian nationalist state,” seems incontrovertible given the weight of his evidence (Kennedy, 158). He pays particular attention to the multitude of ancillary organizations that the Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français generated, arguing that the organization was constructing a “counter-society” meant to embody the true, exclusionary France (Kennedy, 13). Kennedy concludes, moreover, that the party went on to play an ambiguous role at best in Vichy France, essentially hoping to outdo the Vichyites in their enthusiasm for Marshal Philippe Pétain’s “National Revolution” (Kennedy, 225-258). Particularly damaging to the Croix de Feu’s defenders are Kennedy’s remarks on anti-Semitism. He unearths new material showing even the movement’s leader, Colonel François De La Rocque, an erstwhile opponent of biological racism, making vilely anti-Semitic remarks and approving of Vichy’s anti-Semitic legislation (See, for example: Kennedy, 238-239). In combination with Samuel Kalman’s recent work on anti-Semitism in the Croix de Feu and Faisseau, particularly in Algeria, it seems more than fair to label the movement an anti-Semitic one.13

While Kennedy forcefully maintains the Croix de Feu’s authoritarian character, he argues that the movement is best understood as “nationalist authoritarian” rather than fascist. In so doing, he departs from Irvine and takes a position closer to that of the most prominent French opponent of the immunity thesis, Michel Dobry.14 Without offering his own definition of fascism, Kennedy outlines his reasons for defining the Croix de Feu as non-fascist in chapter 3. He makes the salient observation that while the movement was certainly militaristic, it did not promote imperial expansion or have the radicalizing elements of Nazism and, to a lesser degree, Italian Fascism typically fueled by such expansion (Kennedy, 115). Less convincing is Kennedy’s point that the Croix de Feu did not set out to construct a “new man” as did other fascist movements. To support this contention, Kennedy points to the general, though not total, absence of discussions of the new man in the party’s rhetoric and among the movement’s leaders (Kennedy, 117). As I have argued elsewhere, however, the militarization of politics and leisure that the Croix de Feu promoted combined with its clear interest in sculpting robust masculine physiques suggests a project to construct a new man.
Indeed, the Croix de Feu’s actions spoke louder than its words.19 But whether one identifies the movement as fascist or not really depends on one’s definition of fascism. And Kennedy suggests arguing over the fascist label is beside the point: “Arguing that the Croix de Feu is better understood as authoritarian than as fascist should not be equated with implying that it was somehow moderate” (Kennedy, 119).

Kennedy observes that Bonapartism was crucial to the far right’s evolution in the late nineteenth century (Kennedy, 17). This particular political tradition began, obviously, with Napoleon Bonaparte, the subject of a new edited collection from Campus/Verlag entitled, Women against Napoleon: Historical and Fictional Responses to his Rise and Legacy. This volume offers fourteen essays exploring how different women opposed the little Emperor in one way or another. The women examined range from conservative monarchs, such as Naples’ Maria Carolina, to nationalist poets such as Gertrud Kolmar (Maierhofer et al., 58-78, 281-299). Some of these contributions are very good and enjoyable reads. For instance, Dorothy Potter’s essay on Désirée Clary, a middle-class woman from Marseille who was betrothed to Napoleon before he abandoned her for the widely-despised Josephine de Beauharnais, displays a remarkable woman who used her charms, intelligence, and continuing influence over the Emperor to not only survive tumultuous times but to finagle her way onto the Swedish throne (Maierhofer et al., 79-92). Clary, in essence, was able to manipulate her gendered position to her advantage.

These essays’ authors write within their own traditions, of course, most notably feminism and deconstructionism. One suspects they are hostile to the infamously sexist Napoleon, and to the political legacy he inspired. Gertrud Maierhofer, one of the editors, remarks that the objectives of collection are to broaden the scholarship on literary representation and to contribute to the growing research on gender and military history (Maierhofer et al, 14). In the first, the volume is an unequivocal success as most if its essays focus on women writers attacking Napoleon or seeking to undermine his rule or legacy in their work. The essays are generally engaging, cogent, and insightful, and certainly demonstrate their subjects’ agency while remaining attentive to the restrictions imposed on them by predominating conceptions of gender. Less clear, is how this work contributes to the gendering of military history. There are some observations offered, as in Caroline Bland’s essay about the author Louise François, on how gender shaped authors’ telling and understanding of Napoleonic history, but no discussion of military history per se (Maierhofer et al, 223-245). Historians searching for scholarship gendering the Napoleonic wars should consult the work of Karen Hagemann, whom Maierhofer cites in her introduction” (Maierhofer et al, 14).

Laura Frader writes in a tradition somewhat similar to the authors in Women against Napoleon. Like them, she is a feminist and a deconstructionist, but she is also a well-published historian of the French labour movement.” Her new
book, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model*, builds on her existing expertise and points to the centrality of the breadwinner ideal to French unionists, employers, and politicians, and ultimately to the French welfare state. Gender scholarship, while now common in the Anglophone world’s national histories, remains underexplored in the French case, and thus, this work is a welcome and timely addition. Frader’s knowledge of her subject is encyclopedic, even intimidating. She has a sophisticated understanding of gender, and seems entirely at ease discussing the politics of France’s many unions, governments, and pro-natalist lobby groups. Frader’s treatment on the impact of scientific management in the workplace and the many ways in which it was gendered is especially enlightening (Frader, 139-168). Additionally, throughout the book she pays creditable attention to the intersection of race and gender, illustrating how and why women and immigrant workers usually came to be ghettoized in reputedly “unskilled” jobs and denied the full benefits of “economic citizenship” (see for example: Frader, 109-111, 169).

If there is anything to criticize about this outstanding book, it is its neglect of the burden of gender for men. Although, it is true that white French men benefited economically from the breadwinner ideal while women were simultaneously disadvantaged, the breadwinner ideal also imposed unrealistic expectations on men. Men were expected to work, to provide for their families, and accordingly, to be “responsible.” Those men, particularly working-class men, who failed to live up to these expectations, as they frequently did given their wages generally failed to keep pace with inflation in the interwar period (Frader, 196), must have been plagued by feelings of inadequacy. Frader hints at this on occasion, but does not extrapolate (Frader, 185). What of those men who did not conform to the heterosexual trope of the male breadwinner? What ramifications did this social model have for homosexuals?

Much like Frader, Paul Jankowski is another Anglophone scholar of early twentieth-century France. His book on the political boss of Marseille, for example, explores the strange paths that pragmatists and opportunists took en route to collaboration under Vichy.16 Perhaps it was this earlier work on such cynical characters that led Jankowski to his interest in political scandals, beginning with his masterful book on the “Stavisky Affair” of 1933-1934.17 France has a long history of “affairs”, as the French call them, and it is this tradition that Jankowski makes the subject of his new book, *Shades of Indignation: Political Scandals in France, Past and Present*. The book’s range is impressive, stretching from early modern France to the present. Its material is hugely promising, inviting comparisons between historical contexts, mentalities, regimes, and political traditions. Moreover, given his Stavisky book, Jankowski seems the perfect historian for such an ambitious undertaking.

Alas, despite its enormous promise the book is largely disappointing. Jankowski chooses to organize it thematically around three axes: treason, corrup-
tion, and injustice. This does allow him to offer some interesting insights into the evolution of these concepts across centuries. He notes, in particular, that the most scandalizing crimes prior to 1789 were those against the monarch, while in the pre-World War Two era crimes against the nation or group drew the greatest outrage, and now, beginning in the 1960s, it is crimes against the individual committed by the state that most inflame French public opinion. In a sense then, the book is about the rise of the nation state and its subsequent retreat “from grandeur to humility” (Jankowski, 182). These are provocative observations, but unfortunately they are not well packaged. The author presumes a great degree of knowledge on the part of his readers and buries through scandal after scandal with limited explanation. Even the Dreyfus Affair, the most infamous example of the arbitrariness of justice in French history, is referenced many times but never explained (See for example: Jankowski, 141-143). The book, in short, would have benefited from fewer examples and more in depth discussion of individual cases. The general lack of clarity is only partly rectified by an appendix of the scandals the author references at the back of the book, particularly as the annotations are rather Spartan. The Dreyfus Affair, for instance, is explained in a short paragraph. A reader who did not already understand the nuances of Dreyfusardism and anti-Dreyfusardism would remain hopelessly confused (Jankowski, 185-204).

To this point, this essay has concentrated on Anglophone historians of France. It seems fitting, therefore, to give the last word to a French national, Pierre Rosanvallon. Rosanvallon’s book, The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France since the Revolution is itself, in some respects, an examination of political traditions. Rosanvallon is a scholar who invites reflection on political traditions. He holds a Chair at the Collège de France, one of France’s most prestigious institutions, which boasts such luminaries as Roland Barthes, Henri Bergson, and Michel Foucault among its former faculty. He is a former collaborator of François Furet’s, and is no doubt influenced by the historiographical tradition he inspired. Rosanvallon is, in other words, very much part of the French intellectual elite, the kind of person the French take seriously in a way North Americans simply do not.

If Jankowski sees French society as increasingly polarized, Rosanvallon is interested in the development of a “political culture of generality” (Rosanvallon, 4). In this book he seeks to examine the tensions between “civil democracy” and “political democracy” since the French Revolution. Rosanvallon also draws on the long tradition of politically engaged French academics when he expresses the hope that his study will prove applicable to the present and foster better relations between civil society and the state (Rosanvallon, 1-3). Few Anglophone historians would be so explicit. Rosanvallon’s argument is that as French Revolutionaries proclaimed the Republic the expression of the general will, they could not tolerate competing associations in civil society that suggested a fragmentation of the nation. To allow such organized dissent would be to admit the imaginary character of the revolutionaries’ “utopian generality” (Rosanvallon, 11-76). Thus,
Rosanvallon maintains, political associations were routinely suppressed following the revolution. The turning point came on 21 March 1884 when the Third Republic granted legal recognition to unions, thereby both allowing competition with the state for workers’ loyalties, and admitting the existence of an alternate vision of the country (Rosanvallon, 168-185). Although this legislation opened the door somewhat, the virulent anti-clericalism of radical republicans towards the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth was evidence, Rosanvallon maintains, of republicans’ continuing intolerance for deviance from their understanding of the general will. The author concludes, however, that the postwar period witnessed a growing acceptance of associational life and increasing state involvement in it. By 1995, 58% of associations’ funding came from the public purse (Rosanvallon, 257). Rosanvallon’s story is thus diametrically opposed to Jankowski’s. He emphasizes a growing inclusivity that in fact fosters group unity as opposed to the atomization that Jankowski appears to lament. This is a thought-provoking and sweeping analysis, which, if it makes some missteps along the way, like misidentifying Georges Valois as a backward-looking anti-modernist (Rosanvallon, 251) when by the most recent account he was, in fact, a modernist who foresaw the consumerist society, than this is forgivable.

In conclusion, the works surveyed here are lively and engaging. This is a result, in no small part, of the intersection of the political and historiographical traditions they uncover and perpetuate. Writing from Marxist, feminist, and other vantage points, these historians expose the dynamism of French political history, which remains capable of sparking curiosity, passion, and vigorous debate.

NOTES


11 William D. Irvine, “Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu,” *Journal of Modern History* 63 (1991): 271-295. It should be noted that the present author is also a former student of Irvine’s and that he is very generously acknowledged for a truly minute contribution to Kennedy’s manuscript. (Kennedy, x)


20 A French edition was published in 2004.


23 Kalman, *The Extreme Right in Interwar France.*