

## Book Review

*France's Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic.* By Herrick Chapman. London: Harvard University Press. 2018. x + 405 pp. £32.95. ISBN: 978-0-974-9 7 6 4 1-2.

To study modern Europe is, for better or for worse, to study the history of state formation. The story of how states emerged as unitary administrative entities and expanded into vast repositories of people, ideas and political power lies at the heart of modern European history. There was nothing inevitable about this process. Until at least the end of the nineteenth century, alternative models of sovereignty existed to compete with the national state. But two world wars and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 cast the state as the pre-eminent actor of European politics by the 1950s. Even the tidal wave of neo-liberal and anti-statist ideology that has buffeted Europe in the past four decades has failed to dislodge the state from its perch. European states today are larger, more complex and more unwieldy than ever before.

One of the consequences of this triumph of the state has been a tendency, particularly in the social sciences, to take its form for granted. But, in fact, there is very little consistency in the contours and foundational myths of European states. The histories of the Spanish, Italian, British, Czech, Polish and Russian states have little in common, except a desire to bring order to fragmented societies and economies. Even France, which has been celebrating its statist credentials since the days of Colbert and Louis XIV, was not predestined to become a unitary state.

The development of the French state after World War Two, then, needs to be explained, rather than assumed. As Herrick Chapman makes abundantly clear, France's transformation from battlefield to leading Western economy was a colossal feat of political engineering and social restructuring, which was even more remarkable given the context. Only in France did 'the politics of reconstruction and the rhetoric of national renewal get bound up so tightly to *two* rounds of regime change (1944 and 1958) and two large colonial wars'.

The chaos of France's post-war decades is a problem for anyone writing about the state in this period. Focussing too closely on the minutiae of policy debates risks not seeing the wood for the trees, whereas taking too literally the hyperbolic language of renewal and *grandeur* obscures the complex dynamics at play. It is one of the great merits of Chapman's book that he succeeds in holding both the macro and the micro in tension throughout his narrative. He does this by focussing on the way the French state dealt with specific 'problems' (labour, industry, the family, immigration, Algeria etc.), and how it managed an array of competing interests.

In particular, Chapman does an outstanding job of reconciling individual stories and collective forces. He is sensitive to the dreams of some of France's most famous politicians and planners, but he also restores trade unions to their starring role in the 1940s and 1950s. He gives due consideration to the role of specific personalities—including a whole chapter on the overlapping trajectories of Michel Debré and Pierre

Mendès-France—while also recognizing the disruptive power of broader social processes, such as decolonization and labour unrest. This is unashamedly a political history of the French state, but it never feels top-heavy.

One of Chapman's innovations is his emphasis on the length of France's post-war reconstruction—from the D-Day Landings in 1944 to the end of the Algerian War in 1962. He argues persuasively for this extremely long period on the grounds that, while the immediate task of physical reconstruction was largely complete by the mid-1950s, the impact of France's colonial conflicts repeatedly raised questions about the state's political, administrative and territorial legitimacy. Only with the painful evacuation of the colonial question was the country's reconstruction truly complete.

And, yet, the end of reconstruction did not mean the end of the state's problems. On the contrary, Chapman stresses again and again the central dynamic at work during the whole period, namely a perpetual conflict between an expanding state, stretching into new domains of public and private life, and a restless citizenry. As the state tried to soothe a war-torn and weary nation, striking workers demanded higher pay, disgruntled shopkeepers called for lower taxes and bitter Algerians denounced police brutality. These multiple contestations posed a continuous threat to the post-war consensus. In some cases, the state used its monopoly of violence to quell the unrest, as in the case of the miners in 1947 and Algerians in 1961. In other cases, it tried to negotiate its way out of the impasse, as with its calculated climbdown in the face of the taxpayer revolt led by Pierre Poujade in the 1950s.

This dialectical relationship between state and citizen has since become one of the defining features of contemporary French politics. From the protests of 1968 to the *gilets jaunes*, the French have always looked to the state for redress. As Chapman suggests, this is a direct result of the twists and turns of post-war reconstruction, which created a powerful state, but often consigned 'an important measure of democracy to the streets'. In this sense, one of the key protagonists of the book—Mendès-France—was right when he warned that the construction of a strong Gaullist state after 1958 would inevitably sow the seeds of its own opposition.

Chapman's book does not provide any easy way out of this predicament, but it does give one of the best available accounts of how it came about—one that should be essential reading for European historians and social scientists interested in the origins of the modern social-democratic state. It goes without saying that students, too, will benefit from this beautifully written, engaging, meticulously researched and methodologically sophisticated book. Along with Philip Nord's *France's New Deal*, it is likely to have a lasting impact on the way we interpret the immediate post-war decades. I expect it will quickly find a place at the top of every good bibliography on modern France.

*University of Edinburgh*

EMILE CHABAL  
doi:10.1093/fh/crz027