

France since the 1970s: history, politics and memory in an age of uncertainty

Summary

Since the late 1960s, French politics has lost many of its most powerful reference points. Marxism and Communism were pushed out of mainstream politics in the wave of antitotalitarian thought that swept across the French left in the period 1975-85. Gaullism struggled to retain its identity after the right's defeat in 1981 and the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s. Colonial and postcolonial memories – that had been held in check by economic growth – started to surface as the Trentes Glorieuses came to an end. Even at a European level, a French vision of politics – so ardently championed by figures such as the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors – appeared inadequate to a post-Communist and enlarged Europe.

The result of these new uncertainties was, by the 1990s, a proliferation of negative political analyses. Depending on one's point of view, France had become a bland "République du centre", a polity torn apart by a "fracture sociale", a country paralysed by a "pensée unique" or simply "la France qui tombe". In such a climate, Le Pen's success in the first round of the presidential election in 2002 merely seemed to confirm what everyone had been saying for a long time, namely that French politics had entered a period of terminal decline.

Unfortunately, one of the consequences of this growing pessimism has been to obscure the fundamental changes that have taken place in political affiliations, language and thought since the mid-1970s. It will be the aim of this book to examine this changing landscape of French politics in more detail. Calling upon both early-career and established scholars, it will endeavour to bring together French political history's acute sense of its own past, with the rise of new structures, ideas, movements and personalities.

The book will be structured along the following three themes, each of which will seek to address a number of thematic questions:

1) French politics: beyond right and left?

How useful are the categories of 'right' and 'left'? What effect has the rise of the extreme-right had on French politics? Has there been a radicalization of French politics since the 1970s?

2) The politics of postcolonialism in contemporary France

What has been the impact of mass immigration on French politics? How have immigrants and second-generation ethnic minorities been mobilized and politicized? What kinds of colonial and imperial nostalgia exist today?

3) Republicanism, liberalism and the changing contours of French intellectual life

How have French intellectuals responded to the decline of Marxism? In what ways has French intellectual life been affected by contemporary events (legacy of 1968, fall of the Berlin Wall, 'headscarf affair'...)? How has France responded to the neo-liberal wave of the 1980s?

Ultimately, the goal will be to develop a more nuanced and historical appreciation of contemporary French politics that contextualises its so-called "decline" and demonstrates the various ways in which it has developed its own distinct form of liberal democracy.

Table of contents

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Introduction: French politics in an age of uncertainty

French politics: beyond right and left?

- 1) Pascal Perrineau, [Professeur des universités à Sciences Po, Paris](#)
The great upheaval: left and right in contemporary French politics
- 2) Jim Shields, [Professor of French Politics and Modern History, Aston University](#)
The Front National since the 1970s: electoral impact and party system change
- 3) Nick Hewlett, [Professor of French Studies, University of Warwick](#)
Class, class conflict and the left: the place of the people in French politics
- 4) Christophe Prochasson, [Directeur d'études à l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris](#)
The melancholy of post-Communism: François Furet and the 'passions'

The politics of postcolonialism in contemporary France

- 5) Yann Scioldo-Zürcher, [Historien, chargé de recherche au CNRS, Laboratoire MIGRINTER, Université de Poitiers](#)
The cost of decolonisation: compensating the pieds-noirs
- 6) Daniel A. Gordon, [Senior Lecturer in European History, Edge Hill University](#)
From militancy to history: Sans Frontière and immigrant memory at the dawn of the 1980s
- 7) Isabel Hollis, [Research Fellow, Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities, Queen's University, Belfast](#)
Algeria in Paris: 50 years on
- 8) Patricia M. E. Lorcin, [Professor of History, University of Minnesota](#)
France's nostalgias for empire

Republicanism, liberalism and the changing contours of French intellectual life

- 9) Michael C. Behrent, [Assistant Professor of History, Appalachian State University](#)
Justifying capitalism in an age of uncertainty: L'Association pour la Liberté Économique et le Progrès Social, 1969-1973
- 10) Iain Stewart, [Lecturer in Modern European History, Queen Mary, University of London](#)
France's anti-68 liberal revival
- 11) Camille Robcis, [Assistant Professor of History, Cornell University](#)
Republicanism and the critique of human rights
- 12) Sophie Guérard de Latour, [Maître de conférences en philosophie, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne](#)
Cultural insecurity and political solidarity: French republicanism reconsidered

Sudhir Hazareesingh, [University Lecturer in Politics and Tutorial Fellow, Balliol College, Oxford](#)
France: the eternal crisis?