A Divided Republic: Nation, State, and Citizenship in Contemporary France,
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Against the narrative of decline

Emile Chabal’s book could not be more timely—especially in the light of the terrible events
which have taken place in France since it was written. He quotes at one point the distinguished
Franco-American commentator Stanley Hoffmann remarking in 1997 that the mood of
‘national dissatisfaction and self doubt’ in France reminded him of the last days of the
Fourth Republic just before de Gaulle came back to power. It that was true in 1997, it is
even more so 10 years later. Alarmist books about the current state of France pour out
almost weekly. ‘Declinism’ has become a national obsession. The sense of crisis is reminiscent
not just of 1958 but also of the mid-1930s.

I read this book soon after reading Sudhir Hazareesingh’s How the French Think. Although
the two books are different in many ways, they cover some similar ground, and could be almost
be put in dialogue with each other. One of Hazareesingh’s themes is the French obsession with
national unity and the fear of fragmentation. Rousseau is a kind of tutelary presence through-
out his book, a theme that echoes with Chabal’s book. Another theme is the French proclivity
for abstraction in political debate. This is certainly something that emerges in Chabal—or at
least in the first part of the book ‘Writing the National Narrative’. The second part of his
book ‘Liberal Critics of Contemporary France’ is really about critics not of France but of
the abstractions he identifies in the first part.

The abstract France of Part I is what Chabal calls ‘neo-Republicanism’. At first sight the
phrase seems startling because after all Republicanism has been for decades the dominant pol-
tical discourse in France. I remember that when I started working on the history of homosexu-
ality in modern France I was struck how underdeveloped the French literature seemed to be.
My explanation was the somewhat simplistic one that, despite the richness of much French
historiography, French historians were loath to discuss what they saw as ‘communitarian’
history which elevated particularist ‘identities’ over universal citizenship. I saw this as a
kind of French ‘path dependency’ and an incapacity to think ‘diversity’. But when talking to
the political sociologist Eric Fassin—one of the most illuminating commentators on these sub-
jects who is not, however, mentioned by Chabal—he made the point to me that the invasion of
French political space by ‘Republicanism’ was actually quite new. It had replaced the space pre-
viously occupied by Marxism. In other words, there was a new, more militant and exclusive,
style of republicanism which has a genealogy. This is what Chabal calls neo-Republicanism.

Chabal traces its emergence and development very skillfully. One key date is 1989. Two
events were important in that year. The first was the fall the Berlin Wall, which was the
final nail in the coffin of moribund Communism. The second was the ‘foulard’ affair when
three Muslim girls were sent home from school because they were wearing a headscarf.
This was seen as a challenge to the secular space of the Republican school. One of the most
startling responses to this event was a famous article by the former Marxist Régis Debray—
someone who takes the French propensity to abstraction to almost absurd levels—arguing for a distinction between Democracy and Republic: the former was ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and embodied in the free market and stock exchange; the latter was the French ideal embodied in the Mairie and the state school. Debray argued that to allow the foulard into the school represented the ‘Munich’ of the Republic. This was an assertion of the most militantly exclusive—and Jacobin—view of republicanism. The year 1989 was also the year of the bi-centenary of the Revolution and saw the publication of an important collection of essays by Pierre Rosanvallon, Jacques Julliard and François Furet, *La République du Centre*, which argued that the Revolution was over. It put the case for new centrist and less embattled politics. A middle ground was sought by the distinguished historian Maurice Agulhon arguing that in the nineteenth century Jacobinism had not been as sectarian in practice—for example in its attitude to regional languages—as was often claimed.

The way that these debates played out over the next 25 years is superbly analyzed by Chabal. His reading of certain key figures in the debates is often illuminating and unexpected. For example the case of the historian Gérard Noriel. On the face of it Noriel, who criticized Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de Mémoire* for neglecting the importance of immigration in French history, seems to be producing a counter-narrative to the neo-Republican one. But Chabal shows that because Noriel sees the assimilation of previous waves of immigrants—Italians, Poles, eastern European Jews—as a sign of the integrative potential of the French model, he is unable to see the specificity of the current post-colonial situation. His point—if I understand correctly—is that Noriel is actually in a ‘neo-Republican’ wolf in ‘liberal’ sheep’s clothing.

The tension between these two currents is the key to the book. When I started the book I took it to be a book about neo-Republicanism but in the end I realized it was in reality as much a book about what Chabal calls ‘liberalism’. It starts by setting up what seems like the dominant narrative and then argues that there is in fact really a powerful counter-narrative, a sort of Trojan horse in the land of neo-Republicanism. In that sense the book is quite an optimistic one (unlike Hazareesingh’s). One of the problematic aspects of the book, in my view, is the use of the term ‘liberal’. How can one put Raymond Aron (certainly a liberal), the journal *Esprit* (which comes out of 1930s Catholic and anti-liberal personalism), Michel Rocard (a reformist Socialist) not to mention radical anti-Republican movements like the *Indigènes de la République* under the banner of liberalism? Chabal of course understands this problem this perfectly well and he is only using the term ‘liberalism’ as a loose umbrella term. But the fact that he needs to resort to the term is an inverted testimony to the dominance exerted by the neo-Republicans. They have in some sense created the terms of the debate by stigmatizing their enemies as ‘l自媒体s’.

Another surprise in the book is the neglect of the Front National (FN): there is nothing, for example, about the Nouvelle Droite or about reactionary thinkers like Alain de Benoist. Chabal explains that this was a conscious decision to avoid the extremes. But is the FN not indeed part of the mainstream? Or perhaps they have moved to the mainstream since the book was written. One interesting recent development has been the abandonment of laissez-faire liberalism by the FN under the influence of Florian Philippot. It has taken up a more statist and souverainiste position. This has created a curious bridge to elements of the left. One can think of examples like the economist Jacques Sapir (economists are rather absent in this book) or the public intellectual Michel Onfray who would have seemed as far from the neo-Republicans as it is possible to imagine. But last year he too suggested that there were possible points of convergence with the FN around the defense of the ‘people’ who were being neglected by the political elites in favor of what he called ‘des micro-peuples de substitution: les marges célèbres par la pensée d’après mai 68, les Palestiniens et les schizophrènes de Deleuze, les homosexuels et les hermaphrodites, les fous et les prisonniers de Foucault … les sans papiers de Badiou’. In the
outrage aroused by Onfray’s provocations the classically neo-Republican magazine Marianne—to which Chabal rightly devotes much attention—rushed to his defense. It should be noted also that Jacques Julliard, an epitome of the Second Left—so a ‘liberal’ in Chabal’s terms—now also writes for Marianne. All this suggests that re-inventing itself under the umbrella of ‘souverainisme’, neo-Republicanism is not in any way on the run despite what (I think) Chabal suggests.

In the first part of his book Chabal remarks that ‘for all its strength neo-republicanism has flourished without a party political base… No one today, even on the extreme far right, would make ‘Republicanism’ their primary political identity’ (p. 780). Since those words were written, the main party of the French right, Nicolas Sarkozy’s UMP, has in fact adopted a new name: they now call themselves Les Republicains. Sarkozy’s personal evolution shows how much ground the ‘liberals’ have lost. When he first stood for President in 2007 Sarkozy, quite apart from his laissez-faire economic ideas, had adopted a number of interesting and positions on such issues as institutional representation for Muslims which put him very much at odds with dominant neo-Republican thinking. All that is now in the past. Neo-Republicanism in its new guise of souverainisme seems to hold the floor.

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Reclaiming the Republic
Emile Chabal’s incisive and insightful book is an important contribution to the study of contemporary French politics; above all, it is a brilliant combination of political and intellectual history. Especially striking, among other things, are the treatment of the political context and implications of historiography, which, unusually in Europe (and in striking contrast with Britain or the United States) is in France a politically significant branch of literature, and the methodological combination of individual biographical trajectories and trends in the recent history of ideas with a wide-ranging and high-level analysis of the changing institutional frameworks of public life, bringing both together to provide a compelling analysis of the changing air du temps since the end of the Trente Glorieuses.

Among the many suggestive ideas that emerge from the book’s focus on the different languages of politics in contemporary France, there remains to this reader a slight uncertainty about the way in which French public space—the shared context within which these languages are moulded, spoken, heard and (mis)understood—is conceived. The central contention in the book is that a distinctively French liberalism has, since the mid-1970s, emerged to contend with a reinvigorated (neo-)Republicanism for dominance in the public sphere. This liberalism, Chabal shows, is not simply the ideological flag of a particular tendency in opinion, still less the creed of a clearly defined party or portion of the political spectrum whose poles of left and right, as formerly constituted by the old post-Revolutionary divisions of nineteenth-century politics that persisted, one way or another, through to 1945 or 1958, have now very largely dissolved. Rather, like its neo-Republican rival, it is an idiom available for adoption by a variety of actors, who can also adopt others as occasion demands, in a highly fluid political landscape shaped by the mass media and (as was the case elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s—though perhaps much less since 2008) a rush to the centre ground and a search for consensus. In place of the old, familiar left–right division, Chabal suggests in the conclusion,
it is above all the creative interaction between a resurgent republican language and a powerful liberal critique of this language that has structured contemporary French politics. It is around these two poles that the search for consensus in twenty-first-century France has been articulated. (p. 263)

This is an original and stimulating argument, and it very much deserves to be widely discussed and applied as a framework for examining French politics and the French polity: in particular, one hopes that it will be tested further in relation not only to the political language of the mass media and the discourse fashioned by intellectual and political elites and prominent civil society activists, but also with regard to political claims and perhaps even more importantly, the terms of political disengagement, of broader and less ‘politically relevant’ (as political sociologists would term it) social groups. To do so, further thought might need to be given to the metaphor of ‘twin poles’, or a continuum of political language in flux between a revived neo-Républicanism that is, indeed, as likely to be the language of the extreme right as of a more traditional left and an eclectic critical liberalism shared, very differently, by the offspring of the nouveaux philosophes, the historiographical inheritors of Furet and Rosanvallon, and the late postcolonialism of those who see France’s contemporary malaise as bound up in a fracture coloniale. While enabling us to grasp the shape and the significance of these competing languages of recent history and political life, what is less obvious from this rather ‘flat’ image of flux and bipolarity—which perhaps suggests political life as taking place on a plane, across which political languages and the actors who articulate them slip and glide, not without friction but, in what Chabal usefully terms France’s ‘age of uncertainty’, without reference either to a fixed centre or to a clear horizon of expectation—is the shape and the constraints of the public space itself which these languages seek to describe and shape, but which itself contains and fashions them.

Rather than a flat, bipolar and fluid landscape, might we not—as Chabal also occasionally suggests, in describing the way in which politics and opinion-forming has tended to coalesce in ‘contests around the [empty?] centre’—perhaps better imagine a concentric and fragmented one? Whether defending republican laïcité or a liberal-multicultural conception of les droits de l’homme, after all, speakers of these liberal and republican languages tend to speak within and with regard to the shared space of the Republic itself, however it should be conceived. This seems to me to be the main limitation of Chabal’s account: in engaging so carefully and closely with neo-Republicanism as an especially powerful idiom, the neo-Republicans’ conception of, and claim to speak for, the Republic is allowed to define the Republic itself in the terms of the neo-Republicans’ choosing. This in itself is an important indication of something that Chabal shows especially clearly: that Republicanism is (or at least, before 2015 had recently been) less a monolithic, hegemonic norm only weakly contested from the peripheral, liberal and postcolonial margins than an especially powerful and deeply rooted, vital and malleable language that had been consciously revived and deployed in new ways and with new meanings by a range of political actors especially on the right who, in earlier generations, would not have expressed themselves in it.

But the Republic is more than the empty referent of (neo-)republicans’ sentences, and more than one pole of a discursive field in tension with a liberal pole that has emerged in contrast to it; it is itself the social and institutional space, the legal armature and the coercive apparatus, within which both of these languages play and control over which they seek to assert, for the advancement of the political aims of those who speak them. Republicanism may be a political philosophy, but the Republic is a political community, a social space with people in it. And in this respect, however fluid neo-Republicanism and its somewhat estranged liberal twin might be in political actors’ communicative strategies, the Republic as a real locus of power remains the central point of reference, around which public life, political claims, intellectual debate and
social contests play out; and as a real community bounded by a regime of citizenship and structured by law and political economy, and thus by unequal and conflictual social relations, it is also the overarching superstructure (to revert for a moment to the Marxian language of an earlier generation) within which they play out.

In this sense, and again as Chabal suggests from the outset, we ought perhaps to see the Republic less as a single object of ideology—one as coherent and firmly bounded as an analytical category as the partisans of certain conceptions of it themselves plainly believe—and republicanism(s) less as the languages that define it, than as a broader, national symbolic repertoire, less a single language of French politics (or a single register of that language) than a space, the socio-legal space that is also a universe of discourse in which discursive communities (in Wuthnow’s terms) are constituted, and within which they engage in sometimes sharp disputes both about the boundaries of the community and the meaning(s) of the terms that they hold, and that hold them, together in common: the unequally occupied but shared ‘consensual space’ that frames contemporary French debates over nation, state and citizenship. For example, how ‘silent’ (p. 67) on the headscarf issue, after all, have Muslims really been? Infractions of the law on the ‘wearing of ostentatious religious signs’ by school students were indeed minimal (reportedly 639 cases at the 2004 rentrée; only 3 in 2005), but the young women who demonstrated against the law in Lille and Marseille in June 2004, some of them carrying the tricolour and wearing tricolour headscarves or Republican cockades in their hijabs, were taking their own claim to appropriation of and belonging in the Republic as a space, as both symbolic and physical ground. (As, indeed, Algerian nationalists who argued for the emancipation of an Algerian nation within the French Republic did in the 1920s and 1930s.) The distinctively French postcolonial critique of ACHAC or the Indigènes de la République are equally all about France, and equality of access to the opportunities and liberties that the Republic is supposed to offer. In this respect, the continuing tension between ‘high-minded’ or rhetorical principle and more muddy empirical reality betrays less a ‘failure’ of French politics (pp. 261–262) than one of its great strengths: its (properly revolutionary) quality of having created political space for legitimate popular claims on sovereignty—whether or not, or however unevenly, those claims can actually be realized. Relocating the languages of French politics within the contested space of the Republic might help give this book even greater purchase.

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France in a neoliberal age

I am commenting on Divided Republic not as a specialist on French history, but as a comparativist interested in the history of global ideologies, and the politics and political cultures associated with them—first communism, and now market liberalism (or ‘neoliberalism’) since the 1970s. And firstly, like the other commentators, I would like to praise the book: I cannot think of many works on the political culture of the period which situate the history of ideas so successfully within a broader political and cultural context; it is of equivalent interest and range to Daniel Rodgers’s deservedly influential Age of Fracture on the equivalent period in the United States. And for the historian of the global politics of this period, Emile Chabal’s ambitious and incisive analysis raises a number of fascinating questions and casts
light on global political and intellectual developments and dynamics, as well as specifically French ones.

From a comparative perspective, parts of the French experience discussed by Emile are not very surprising, while others are much more so. The French political system, like many others, has had major difficulties in adapting to a post-1970s world in which global markets (both in capital and labour) have become more powerful and neoliberal ideas more influential at a global and elite level. And like most other wealthy countries, its political system has had to respond to a crisis of Social Democracy and the emergence of a cultural liberalism, especially on the left, in the form of movements for equality of gender, ethnicity and sexuality. It has also had to deal with the rise of an ‘identity politics’ of the right, in the form of cultural and ethnic nationalism.

However, the responses of both political and intellectual elites and of popular opinion are very different to that of many other countries. For as Emile shows so well, the period has seen the rise of ‘neo-republicanism’ as a broadly hegemonic ideology, which binds both centre-left and centre-right in a commitment firstly to market-scepticism, class inclusion and broad economic egalitarianism, and secondly to cultural integration on the basis of secularism (laïcité). As he argues, this was a new phenomenon, albeit one with historical roots, which superseded both Gaullism and the old Marxist-influenced left. And it helps to explain why the neoliberalism and cultural liberalism present within parts of the elite—whether Alain Juppé’s efforts at neoliberal economic reform in the mid-1990s, or the anti-statism of the Deuxième Gauche and the ‘multi-culturalism’ of early Mitterand era—have been so unsuccessful in challenging that ideology and mobilizing broader support.

From a global perspective, this looks deeply peculiar, for almost everywhere neo-republican-type ideologies flourished during the post-war era, and have been in profound crisis since at least the 1970s. Firstly, the market-sceptical, class-inclusive and ‘progressive’ nationalist elements of neo-republicanism have been undermined by the end of the Keynesian consensus. And while several wealthy countries have maintained their commitment to welfare states and ‘co-ordinated’ capitalism, neoliberalism has had a serious impact on mainstream political culture and popular opinion (for instance in Scandinavia and Germany), while faith in the developmental welfare state has waned, in a way that makes France seem unusual. Meanwhile, the secularist aspect of neo-republicanism seems unusually strong in France. Though anti-Islamism may have empowered secularism globally, a southern European communism combining leftist statism with an anti-clerical secularism has declined, and elsewhere projects of cultural integration on the basis of secular modernization are under assault from both the ethnicist right and a culturally liberal left which values the free expression of individually chosen identities.

The presence of powerful ideologies and political forces that combine secularism and statist modernization has been much more common in middle-income or poorer countries—for instance in the Middle East (in Turkey, Ataturk’s descendants, following the French tradition, call themselves ‘Republicans’ and advocate laiklik), and in South Asia (though the Indian Congress Party’s view of secularism is rather different to the French neo-republican one). Yet there also they have been seriously challenged, mainly by religious nationalists on the right, but also by neoliberals and less powerfully by cultural liberals. Modernizing, secularist ideologies have probably been preserved most effectively in the communist and former communist worlds, most notably China. But even there, the Communist Party has given a ‘traditionalist’ inflection to its ideology by linking Marxism-Leninism to Confucianism; and in Russia, Putin’s efforts to achieve a balance between multi-ethnic statism and ethnic Russian nationalism have come

under strain, as he has increasingly moved towards the latter (including an association with Russian Orthodoxy). Also, throughout the middle-income and low-income world, serious concessions have been made to neoliberalism.

So why is France so different? Emile’s book, of course, is not a comparative study, so understandably does not address this question directly, but his analysis does provide some clues. When it comes to attitudes to markets, Emile’s interesting discussion of the discourse of ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ is clearly important, for as scholars of neoliberalism have argued, it is much more likely to become embedded in a political culture if it can be linked with nationalist discourses. Hence the nationalist discourses contrasting a supposedly deeply-rooted culture of Colbertian planning and Enlightened Saint-Simonian reason combined with national solidarité, with the cynical and philistine mercantile English and Americans, are probably important in undermining neoliberalism. Even so, there are other possible approaches and explanations for neoliberalism’s weakness in France. For instance, political economists have argued that the structure of the French private sector, with its large firms and well-protected employees, provides a much less friendly environment for neoliberal reforms than those economies with a large number of small, independent businesspeople—the Italian, for instance.2

When it comes to the cultural aspects of neo-republicanism and the question of secularism, the history of conflict between the Catholic Church and the state clearly has had a major impact on long-established political cleavages. For instance, the greater support for secularist restrictions on Muslim religious expression among the French left compared with its British counterpart (for instance on the veil controversy) is clearly related to the parallels it draws between Muslim and still-influential Catholic attitudes to sexual morality and gender; these issues are much less important in Britain, where culturally conservative Christians are much weaker.

However, if we are to explain the peculiar revival of this ‘out-of-step’ ideology that combines both market-scepticism and ‘modernizing’ secularism, it helps to think about historical learning. In many wealthy countries, the economic and political crises of the 1970s and 1980s discredited the hegemonic alliance of Keynesianism and ‘modernized’ soft nationalism, and paved the way for alternatives, just as the Depression of the 1930s and the lessons of a war that legitimized a great deal of technocratic power discredited previously dominant economic liberalisms for the post-war generation. And in both wealthy and poorer countries, technocrats who had presented themselves as both economically successful and culturally ‘modern’ were seen as elitist and culturally arrogant. However, as Emile’s narrative in Chapter 1 shows, French politics was in a different phase of ideological development. For unusually the hegemonic modernizing ideology—republicanism—was discredited by the association of some republican institutions and discourses with both Vichy and the failed Fourth Republic. Meanwhile Gaullism, while including significant elements of republicanism, did not use explicitly republican language, and the sharp division between the Gaullist right and the communist left dominated the political field. Therefore when the dominant statist model underwent crisis in the 1970s and early 1980s, an updated republicanism could be seen as fresh and blameless—an ideology that could appeal to the post-communist left and to a centre-right that wanted to distance itself from a rising ethno-nationalism. It could also be seen an ideology of national unity, legitimizing elites which (at least after 1983) realized they needed to integrate France into the new market-oriented world in a pragmatic way, without endorsing an unpopular neoliberalism which would create a large number of economic losers.

An interesting parallel can be drawn with China, where an anti-laissez-faire, state capitalist, culturally homogenizing and modernizing ideology still reigns, and where the ideological

trajectory was similarly out of step with global trends. Unlike communist eastern Europe, which was ruled by communist modernizing technocrats in the 1980s and had abandoned the discredited class-struggle policies of the Stalinist era, China had to adapt to the new world of global markets as it was emerging from a discredited anti-technocratic Maoism. In these circumstances, Deng Xiaoping and his successors were able to revive a pre-Cultural Revolution technocratic communism, adapting it to the new market-driven world (helped by a number of other political-economic factors, including the trading privileges granted by the United States).

If, as this suggests, the disposition of political forces at the time of major global crises is crucial in shaping the ideological landscape for years thereafter, the question arises whether the 2008 crisis and its aftermath will have a similarly decisive effect on neo-republicanism. So far, it seems, the financial collapse has only strengthened the ideology as it has damaged neoliberal confidence, while the (largely unrelated) crises in the Middle East have reinforced demands for cultural homogeneity (while also fuelling a so far unsuccessful challenge from the ethno-nationalist Front National). It seems that L’exception Française will continue for some time to come.

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A Creative Interaction

A Divided Republic is a book about how the French, or perhaps more particularly, how French elites have conceptualized and engaged with politics over the past three decades (6). At first glance, it seems to tread some well-worn territory—debates over parité laws, citizenship and national identity, the headscarf affair, la fracture sociale, and the ever-present dangers of multiculturalism. These are all familiar topics to those of us who teach, research or just generally take an interest in contemporary France. The strength of this book, however, lies in the way it seeks to place these issues within new frameworks. Specifically, A Divided Republic argues that recent French political history should be seen in terms of the struggle for influence between the ideologies of neo-republicanism and liberalism. While the former appears to dominate contemporary readings of the French national narrative, the latter has tenaciously and with increasing impact sought to chip away at key elements of this discourse. The ‘creative interaction’ (263) between these two camps is traced through the key personalities and events that have shaped them. The biographies of figures like Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, François Furet and Pierre Rosanvallon in particular provide a striking illustration of the fact that divisions in contemporary French politics transcend notions of left and right, underscoring author Emile Chabal’s point that these terms, while not irrelevant, are also not sufficient to encapsulate the complexities of such debates.

The case for neo-republicanism having established itself as a dominant political language and one that has fundamentally shaped policy practice in France since the 1980s is, for me at least, convincingly demonstrated. But the more interesting arguments lie in the second half of the book which explores the ways that liberal counter-narratives emanating from a variety of quarters have challenged this discourse, offering in the process alternative conceptualizations of the Republic and the French nation. Through these—admittedly unequal—interactions we are given an original insight into the ways in which the tension between individualism and unity that has always been at the heart of the Republic is currently playing itself out.
As with all bold and innovative academic interventions, *A Divided Republic* raises a number of important questions and areas for further exploration. The remainder of this commentary will focus on two in particular: where is this all leading and how might the picture differ if one were to look at the local rather than the national level?

Reading *A Divided Republic* I was struck by the question of whether this is a history of inertia at the national level. The political debates that are traced have certainly been vibrant, and the book gives a wonderful sense of the tone and character of exchanges between the intellectuals concerned. Yet the extent to which the Republic has actually changed seems minimal. Liberalism is there, gamely chipping away at the neo-republican hegemony and making some headway, for example through the widespread acceptance and adoption of the language of crisis. But, overall, the dominance of neo-republicanism feels like the triumph of resistance to change. Even the notable (and arguably exceptional) success of the parité campaign has had mixed results in practice. Towards the end of the book, Chabal writes that ‘a liberal view has become, if not dominant then certainly a prominent part of the debate’ (260). Yet it remains to be seen whether prominence in debate can be translated into more concrete forms of influence.

It also seems worth asking from which strand of the liberal critique such change is most likely to come. The book posits the post-colonial critique offered by bodies such as Indigènes de la République and the Association pour la connaissance de l’histoire de l’Afrique contemporaine (ACHAC) as the ‘most explicit recent challenge to a neo-republican national narrative’ (187). I would tend to agree, certainly when they first appeared, although I equally take James McDougall’s point that ACHAC seems increasingly to be joining the ranks of the establishment. But groups like ACHAC and Indigènes are not just proposing simply tinkering about at the edges of republicanism to make it more accommodating of diversity. They are calling for a fundamental re-working the whole concept from the bottom up. Therefore in one sense these are the critiques that contain the most potential for a concrete impact. Yet at the same time because their agenda is so radical does this mean they also stand the least chance of success?

The second point to raise concerns the extent to which the national picture presented in *A Divided Republic* maps onto local politics. At this level are we witnessing a similar set of interactions between neo-republicanism and liberalism and with a similar balance of power? My own perception is that the sphere of local politics has been more accommodating of movements away from centralizing neo-republican discourses, especially when it comes to recognizing minority groups. This is something that Chabal has previously touched on in his study of George Frêche’s careful courtship of a variety of communities in Montpellier—pieds-noirs and harkis, but also the local Jewish and LGBT communities—during his lengthy tenure as mayor (1977–2004).1 The boundaries drawn in *A Divided Republic* between neo-republicanism and liberalism therefore seem to be largely dissolved at the level of civil society where groups will borrow from, manipulate and deploy whatever political language they see as strategically useful. An obvious demonstration of this is provided by the memory mobilization undertaken by the former settlers from French Algeria, the pieds-noirs. Activists from within this community have been staunch advocates of neo-republican narratives as a way to deny space to other post-colonial minorities within the national commemorative narrative. For example, by warning, in highly apocalyptic language, of the dangers of any form of concession to cultural expressions of Muslim identity. They have also used republican language to frame their own

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demands, particularly by pressing for moral and material recognition not as exceptional measures for a discernible group within society, but as simply the kind of support that would be due to any citizen and that should, therefore, be extended to them so as to ensure equality of treatment. Yet in reality they are engaged in advocating for their specificity as a community to be recognized and to be given concessions on that basis. In appealing for the Republic to acknowledge their particular brand of diversity they are arguably encouraging exactly the kind of communautarisme they like to criticize others for practicing. Their strategies therefore stand on one hand as testament to the dominance of the neo-republican discourse in that they feel compelled to dress up their particularist claims in that language because they view this as the surest path to success. But, on the other hand, they offer proof of the impact of liberalism—even if they would never define themselves or their actions in such terms—because over the years they have succeeded in gaining a series of financial, social and cultural concessions. This has been particularly visible at the local level from the creation of monuments and museums dedicated to their history to the granting of municipal space for their meetings and commemorative ceremonies secured through positive relationships with sympathetic local authorities. But there has also been accommodation at the national level, for example via the provisions of the 23 February 2005 law where the controversies surrounding ultimately abrogated article 4—which stipulated that French schools should teach the ‘positive aspects’ of colonialism, especially in relation to North Africa—obscured the numerous measures granting monetary and symbolic recognition to the pieds-noirs that were retained.

The elite actors dealt with in A Divided Republic have been crucial in setting the terms of recent political debates and the book does an excellent job of revealing the tenets of that discussion. But, more than that, Chabal’s book opens the way for further fruitful work to be done exploring how different groups in civil society have taken these discourses and adapted them to suit their own agendas and to what effect. Taking Chabal’s paradigm and looking at how it maps onto civil society and grassroots activism is a way to extend the discussion begun here regarding the reception of neo-republicanism and liberalism. By providing the intellectual framework for just such a study, A Divided Republic makes a significant and highly valuable contribution towards its self-professed goal to ‘restore to French political life its many layers’ (3).

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For further discussion of this see Claire Eldridge, From Empire to Exile: History and Memory within the Pied-Noir and Harki Communities, 1962–2012 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2016).
Response To Critics

Whose France?

If there is one thing I have learnt from working on French politics, it is that an idea is not really an idea until it has been properly (and publicly) criticized. It is therefore a special honour to be judged by a jury of my peers. I am delighted that they all found food for thought in my book and that they have been so generous in their comments. Even more importantly, I am thrilled that they chose to engage with my ideas, my analysis and my examples in such detail. I will try here to respond to some of their criticisms and queries in a way that will be of interest to those within my field and hopefully to those outside it as well.

I will begin with the problem of methodology. To my surprise, all four readers were satisfied with the hybrid political and intellectual history methodology I chose to employ in the book. I had wanted to give an account of the emergence of certain key ideas in contemporary French politics while simultaneously situating these ideas in a fluid and developing constellation of political actors. But this raised the question of how I would square the coherence of specific ideas with the instability of their reception and circulation. My answer to this problem was to build my entire analysis around two ‘poles’: neo-republicanism and liberalism. I had hoped that this rather schematic framework would allow me to make much broader conclusions about French politics and French history.

In many ways I think it does, but my framework has also created problems of its own. Not only are two ‘poles’ not enough to capture the complexity of shifting opinions—a point that Julian Jackson makes in his comment—but my analysis also has a tendency to draw all debate into a dialectical binary opposition that renders France’s political landscape ‘flat’ and ‘bipolar’. Worse still, James McDougall suggests that I ignore or obscure the fact that republicanism is more than simply a political language; it is the institutional framework that structures public debate in France. Rather than insist on an equal tension between a neo-republican language and a liberal language of politics, I ought instead to have emphasized that the Republic itself creates a contested space in which political debate plays out.

Methodologically, McDougall’s critique is arresting. The problem is how to respond to it in practice. One would first have to propose a solid definition of French republicanism and/or the French Republic—a notoriously difficult task and one I studiously wanted to avoid in the book—before exploring how political debates take republicanism as their necessary starting point. Yet it seems to me that this would give republicanism a hegemonic quality, thereby flattening out the political landscape even more. I certainly accept the lessons of those scholars inspired by the postcolonial turn who argue that French republicanism is a ‘Western’, ‘enlightenment’ and ‘dominating’ ideology with clearly imperial overtones, but I wanted to show how this has been challenged, overturned and (occasionally) mocked by political activists and intellectuals. If this gives the impression of a needlessly binary political debate, then that is a function of the debate itself—which, as any observer of contemporary France knows, is obsessively dialectical.

Nevertheless, one is entitled to have doubts about the terms I use to describe my binary opposites. None of the commentators fundamentally disagree about my use of the word ‘neo-republicanism’—even if they might argue about its scope—but several wonder at my use of the word ‘liberalism’. Can the Indigènes de la République honestly be described as ‘liberals’? Were Furet and Rosanvallon really ‘liberal’ thinkers? Was Sarkozy’s ‘liberalism’ ever anything more than a strategic move to differentiate himself from Jacques Chirac? Taken
individually, I would probably agree with my critics that ‘liberalism’ is the wrong way to describe these particular ideas, narratives and arguments—and, indeed, I try hard to account for individual trajectories throughout the book. Liberalism, in any case, is a fraught term in the French context and one I might well abandon if the book is ever translated into French.

But that does not mean I am willing to jettison it entirely. For a start, there is the question of what other term I might have used. To call my disparate ‘liberal critics’ merely ‘critics of neorepublicanism’ would be to make them—and the entire second half of the book—entirely derivative of neo-republicanism, as if neo-republicanism were the equivalent of Marxist–Leninist ideology in a Communist regime. Such a comparison is patently inaccurate when we look at the sheer diversity of discussions in the public sphere in France. At the same time, to use any other description—such as ‘defenders of diversity’, ‘anti-Jacobins’ or ‘individualists’—would be just as problematic as calling them ‘liberals’. At least the term ‘liberalism’ has the benefit of giving my liberal critics a distinct genealogy and a relatively coherent set of ideas. Most importantly, it makes it possible for us to compare them with liberals elsewhere in Europe and the world.

This is relevant because part of my aim in the book is to show that French political elites have been grappling with many of the same issues as other global elites. Yes, if we zoom into the level of specific individuals and movements, my definition of liberalism breaks down. But the strength of my argument rests on the collective coherence of my category. And here, as David Priestland suggests, I am on firmer ground. The liberals I describe do share commonalities with liberals elsewhere, not to mention the fact that their detractors explicitly identify them as liberals within the discursive sphere of French politics. So, while the Indigènes de la République movement may, in practice, have emerged from a mélange of Trotskyist, pro-Palestinian and anti-colonial left-wing activism, its function within the context of French politics in 2005 was similar to other liberal movements that attacked the Jacobin, unifying and homogenizing power of neo-republicanism.

To talk about French liberalism as an influential and at least partially coherent force within French politics is also to give a strong identity to what international relations theorists would call ‘non-’ or ‘sub-state actors’. Claire Eldridge rightly criticizes me for focusing too much on the elites and, although I have tried to address this in more recent work on Montpellier, there is much left to do. I disagree with Eldridge, however, when she says that liberal reform in France has fallen victim to a deadening ‘inertia’. At the level of discourse, this may appear to be the case (but what, then, of the widespread penetration of a language of ‘diversity’ and ‘crisis’ in contemporary France?), but at the level of structures, it certainly is not. In this respect, the explosion of civil society groups since the 1970s—known as ‘associations’ in French—represents an astonishing transformation of the political landscape.

These days, every village, neighbourhood, political cause, protest movement and historical memory campaign gives birth to at least one association. Some of them are perfectly benign—a campaign for the improvement of roadside verges in a village, for instance—but many of them are explicitly political. These political associations almost always fight back against the centralizing administrative tendencies of the state and the unifying language of neo-republicanism by making particularist claims on local, regional or national government. The pieds-noirs (to whom Eldridge refers in her comment) are an excellent example of this, although one might also mention the regionalist movement, the anti-globalization movement, the heritage movement and the identity politics of other postcolonial minority communities.

Thus, while liberalism may be a much-maligned ideology in French public debate, I would argue that France has steadily developed into a de facto liberal polity since the 1970s. It is true that many associations seek funding from the state in some form or another, but few could argue—as Tocqueville once did—that the French are congenitally incapable of sustaining
intermediary bodies between citizens and the state. In fact, I would go further and say that it is 
this wave of associative life that has given the liberal critique such power in recent years. 
Almost all of those whose ideas I discuss in the second half of the book have attacked neo-
republicanism on the grounds that it is ‘utopian’ and ‘poorly adapted’ to the reality of 
French politics. Their claims are overwhelmingly supported by the plethora of intermediary 
bodies that now exist in France. If I were to write my book again, I would emphasize much 
more clearly the importance of this bottom-up process in the book. Liberalism as an ideology 
has come from the top, but liberal practices have come from the bottom. The result is that 
liberal reform is not just being talked about; it is also happening.

Does this mean that I am, as Jackson suggests, ‘optimistic’ about the future of France? And 
where, as Eldridge asks, does my argument lead? To be honest, I am not entirely sure what it 
means for a historian to be ‘optimistic’. I have resisted as much as possible the temptation of 
declinism that seems to come to every scholar of contemporary France sooner or later. Given 
that I analyse critically the discourse of crisis in the book, it would be rather surprising if I were 
then to subscribe to the notion that France is in imminent danger of social and political col-
lapse. But this does not mean I am blind to the very deep political divisions and corrosive social 
fragmentation that characterize contemporary France. In particular, I have been rather taken 
aback by the remarkable proliferation of neo-republican language in France. When I first 
started working on this subject around 2005, I was repeatedly told that the whole ‘republican’ 
debate had little intellectual depth and would blow over fairly quickly. This partly explains why 
I left to one side the far left and the far right in the book. As far as I was concerned, these 
groups fell outside the scope of my research since their primary function was as protest move-
ments excluded from—and systematically hostile to—the discursive world of French 
republicanism.

Imagine my surprise, then, to discover that neo-republicanism began to penetrate every 
corner of the French political spectrum over the course of my research. From around 2010, 
it became an obligatory reference point, not only for the political centre, but also for the pol-
itical extremes. Suddenly, members of the ex-Trotskyist Nouveau parti anticapitaliste were 
fighting openly about the legitimacy of campaigning while wearing the headscarf and 
Marine Le Pen was using laïcité as an essential component in her project to rejuvenate the 
Front National’s image. Things have become even more confusing in recent years, with 
Nicolas Sarkozy’s successful attempt in 2015 to rebaptize the country’s largest centre-right 
party Les Républicains, and François Hollande invoking ‘republican values’ as part of his 
response to France’s terror attacks.

In a way, these developments are a compliment since they show unambiguously that the 
republican turn I discuss in the book is real and long-lasting. At the same time, the ubiquity 
of neo-republicanism today could lead people to forget one of the main points of the book, 
namely that there is much more debate, disagreement and divergence in French politics 
than is immediately apparent. I do not think, for instance, that the spread of neo-republican-
ism to the outer edges of the French political spectrum means that the liberal critiques I discuss 
in the second half of the book have necessarily ‘lost’. On the contrary, I think more and more 
people in France are dissatisfied with neo-republicanism, which explains why it has become a 
legitimate language of protest for disgruntled Trotskyists and Front National supporters who 
would previously have ignored it altogether. If neo-republicanism continues to become 
increasingly associated with the extremes, I expect that centrist voters will be drawn back 
towards candidates and parties who propose soft, consensual liberal reforms of the kind 
endorsed by a (still relatively popular) figure like Alain Juppé.

Or perhaps not? The radicalization of neo-republicanism could pave the way for the further 
rise of ethno-nationalist or protectionist parties like the Front National. In this scenario,
France would experience a return to authoritarianism akin to what happened in countries which moved from Communist to non-Communist rule—a point Priestland makes in his striking comparison of France and China. But this would be to reckon against the lessons of French history. The disproportionate scholarly interest in French radical politics—from Jacobins and anarchists to Maoists and the Nuit Debout—has made it look as if the country is perpetually on the verge of revolution, but this is to forget that the vast majority of French citizens since 1800 have feared social conflict and collapse. If there is one lesson I want readers to take away from my book, it is that these people who form the consensual ‘centre’ of French politics also talk about ideas and that their disagreements matter. In fact, they probably matter more than all of France’s radical politics put together since these are the people who vote in elections. And, while I am not ‘optimistic’ about their ability to come up with solutions to France’s problems, I am fairly confident that they will do all they can to resist another revolution.

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