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.
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