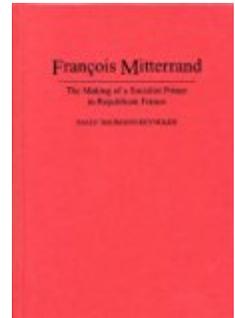


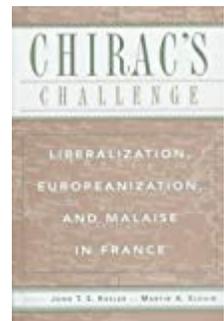


Sally Baumann-Reynolds. *François Mitterrand: The Making of a Socialist Prince in Republican France.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995. xiii + 200 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-94887-0.

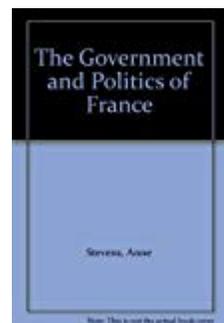


Robert Elgie, ed.. *Electing the French President: the 1995 Presidential Election.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xii + 221 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-16340-2.

John T. S. Keeller, eds., Martin A. Schain. *Chirac's Challenge: Liberalization, Europeanization, and Malaise in France.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. x + 406 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-12270-6.



Anne Stevens. *The Government and Politics of France (Comparative Government and Politics (St. Martin's Press)).* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xvi + 368 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-312-16247-4.



Reviewed by David R. Watson

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This review article deals with four books on contemporary or near contemporary France. One is a study of Mitterrand's career down to 1981, the other three are works of political science pro-

duced in 1995-6. I will begin with the Mitterrand book, which stands apart in not being written from a political science standpoint, and in being less contemporary, ending as it does in 1981. Its

author has a background in French language and literature, not in history or politics.

Let me say at once that historians will be surprised by the elementary errors which hit them in the first chapter. Its first words, setting the scene for the year of Mitterand's birth are: "In 1916 the Bolsheviks were preparing to seize power in Moscow"! Does it need to be pointed out that in 1916 the place to take power in the Tsarist Empire was Petrograd, not Moscow, and that the few Bolsheviks then in existence were not in their wildest dreams expecting power in the near future, as Lenin was to say a little later in an address to a handful of members of a Socialist youth organisation in the back room of a Swiss tavern. "We of the older generation," said Lenin, "cannot expect to see the Revolution in our lifetime." Two pages later we are told that when Mitterand arrived as a student in Paris in 1934, "Hitler had just taken power, and Mussolini was preparing to do so in Italy." However remote these egregious errors are from Mitterand himself, they certainly destroy one's confidence in the author's knowledge of the basic outlines of modern European history. In earlier days they would surely have been picked up by publishers' readers or editors.

Fortunately nothing on the same scale occurs in the rest of the book which follows Mitterand's career down to the electoral victory of 1981. The early years are passed over very rapidly indeed, two pages on his student years, two on the POW period, and four on his work for the Vichy government. Although a few references to Pierre Pean's *Une jeunesse française* (Paris, 1994) have been shoe-horned in, the author states that it came out after her book went into production. Certainly, after the publication of Pean's book, this part of the work under review seems naive and inadequate in light of what it revealed about Mitterand's extreme-Right stance before the war, and about the depth and extent of his commitment to Vichy's National Revolution. The claim that his work for the Vichy government was merely a cover for re-

sistance activity no longer stands up. Although still fairly brief, the next three chapters on the Fourth Republic are not quite so thin and provide a reasonable outline of Mitterand's activities during that time.

It is only from his challenge to de Gaulle in the 1965 Presidential elections that the story is given in any depth. Clearly it is Mitterand as the leader of the Left, and as the creator of the new Socialist party which interests the author. These events are covered in a reliable narrative without major errors. The book ends with the triumph of 1981, which is characterised as "a new Socialist experiment in the West—one more attempt to reconcile democracy, Socialism and prosperity" (p. 185). A brief conclusion notes simply that Mitterand won a second Presidential term in 1988, without any mention of the 1983-4 U-turn in policy, or of the defeats of the Left in the Parliamentary elections of 1986 and 1993, nor of the rising tide of public disapprobation of Mitterand and of the Socialist party. Instead, we are told that he ended his life as "a respected, if enigmatic European figure" (p. 185).

This book is based on Mitterand's own writings, on biographies by French journalists, and on standard accounts of the political history of France under the Fifth Republic. While it offers an accurate account of Mitterand's role in French political life from 1965 to 1981, it provides no new information, nor does it offer interesting analysis either of him as a person, or as a politician. There is a strange naivete in the brief attempts at such analysis, e.g., "the amount of 'glory' that Mitterand has achieved as France's Socialist 'Redeemer' has yet to be determined" (p. 188). In short, there would seem to be little reason to recommend this short and partial study over Alistair Cole's recent full biography *Francois Mitterand: a Study in Political Leadership* (London, 1994).

I turn now to the three remaining books, one being a textbook for students of politics; the others, collections of essays on the 1995 Presidential

elections. Although dealing with the contemporary French situation, or as near to it as the process of publication allows, it is inevitable that some historical depth is assumed, alluded to, or explicitly outlined in these works by political scientists. In fact, Anne Stevens' textbook provides a discussion of the political system in France since 1958, while *Chirac's Challenge* also has articles looking back over the whole history of the Fifth Republic. Only *Electing the French President* is narrowly focussed on 1995.

Let me begin with the general textbook, first published in 1992, but revised and brought up to date in 1996. Its author had experience as a civil servant, and she is especially interested in European integration. These characteristics set the tone of the book which concentrates on government and administration, although the wider forces which make up the political life of the nation are included. Its four sections are: 1) historical and constitutional framework--a very brief historical introduction, followed by a more detailed exposition of the 1958 constitution and of later constitutional changes; 2) the governmental system--the presidency, the governmental machine, the administrative system, and local government; 3) democratic politics--Parliament, the nature of party politics, parties, voters and elections, pressure and interest groups; 4) France and Europe. The text is supported by tables, graphs, and "exhibits"--sections marked off typographically which provide information about specific topics in the manner of an encyclopedia. It admirably fulfills the function for which it was designed, to provide students of comparative government with a clear account of the French system. As I said above, it is government and administration which are stressed, rather than politics as the expression of wider social and cultural forces. Thus it is at the furthest remove from the sort of study which would come from the pen of a historian. Speaking as a historian, I have to say that I found it more than a little dry and inhuman. Nevertheless it can be recommended as a clear and accurate account

of the political system of the Fifth Republic. The extensive reference apparatus, and the bibliography provide a lead into the very extensive literature produced in English and French on the topic.

I turn now to the two studies of the 1995 Presidential election. They contain between them 22 chapters by 22 different authors, mainly Anglo-Saxon, as the French call us. *Chirac's Challenge* is a mainly American production, while *Electing the President* is predominantly a British effort. This latter is more narrowly focussed on the election, with an introductory chapter by David Hanley on the Mitterand years, that is, on the period since 1981. Although it is clearly impossible to discuss the 1995 election without much reference to previous history, in the main these references are to the last few years only, and are of a type that requires considerable previous knowledge. At the least students would need to have mastered a textbook like the volume by Anne Stevens before embarking on this account. For those armed with such knowledge, the studies in this book tell them everything they could want to know about the election. Among the topics discussed are the campaign, the approach of the different parties, and the results. Tables provide the results of both ballots, by *departement* and by region; another table summarises the voting as a whole, and sets them against the results of all previous elections under the Fifth Republic. In short this is a book which can be referred to with confidence to provide factual information in great depth. It does not, however, offer very much by way of analysis of the causes or the significance of this election.

Such analysis was the ambition of the final book to be considered, *Chirac's Challenge*, which has a much broader focus. In this collection the actual election is not discussed in such detail, but the various chapters discuss different aspects of political life in France over the last thirty years in such a way as to provide a background to the problems facing the new President. There are four sections: 1) Institutions and the Policy mak-

ing Process; 2) Business, Labour and the Economy; 3) Social Policy; 4) the Challenge of Europe and the World. The first section includes an interesting analysis of the different ways in which the system has worked, defined as the hyper-Presidential mode (from 1962-1986, and since 1995, we can now close that with 1997), the tempered Presidential mode, 1974-81, and 1998-93, and the Premier-Presidential mode, 1986-1988 and 1993-5). In section two Vivien Schmidt discusses relations between the State and the economy, that is, the nationalisations of 1981, and the subsequent de-nationalisations, as well as the wider questions of the dominant role of the State in the French economy whether firms are publicly owned or not. Mark Kesselman discusses the weakness of the French trade unions. In the third section there is an important article on immigration and the National Front by one of the editors, Martin Schain, and articles on education and health policy. In the fourth section there are pieces on the Maastricht referendum, and on French attitudes to European integration, where the point is made that public opinion has moved from being strongly pro-European to being anti-European.

While it would be a lengthy and tedious process to discuss in detail these different areas, it can be said that, just as in the case of the previous collection, the authors provide an impressively erudite coverage of their subjects. Although there is no bibliography, the reference notes provide access to the enormous professional literature which has been produced by the combined forces of the political scientists of France, Britain, and the United States. This would also only be accessible to advanced students, but for them and for academic colleagues this volume offers a mine of useful information and intelligent analysis.

Having said that, however, I feel that as a historian writing for H-France, I can take the opportunity to stand back and offer a few general reflections. These come to mind partly as a historian, thinking about the activities of political sci-

ence, and in a wider way as someone confronted with the work of an academic discipline different from my own. In a nutshell, what I want to say is that there is something lacking in all of these three books, however admirable they are as examples of the work of some of the leading academics in the field. One way of putting it is to say that I am unable to see the forest for the trees. The textbook by Stevens tells me all I could want to know about the French political system, and the other two works provide an enormous amount of detail about the political life of the country before and during the 1995 elections. But there is little reflection on the significance of these events. This is especially disappointing in the case of *Chirac's Challenge*, which includes in its subtitle the word 'malaise,' only to offer a chapter which claims that the idea of malaise is exaggerated and to be discounted. Although some aspects of the malaise, which is surely very real, are touched on, they are invariably minimized, and as they are not brought together the total picture is missing. My attempt at a brief outline of the malaise would include the following elements: the very high rate of unemployment, especially youth unemployment; the financial scandals of the last ten years, on a scale surpassing the worst of those of the Third Republic; the problem of the immigrant community and the rise of the National Front in response.

I am not saying that these questions are not raised, far from it, but they are not drawn together in a way that would explain some specific political effects which are also minimised or ignored. One cannot expect books dealing with government and politics to explain the broader social and cultural aspects of this situation; indeed some aspects of it are not specifically French at all, but rather part of a general social-cultural crisis of the Western world. There do seem to be features of French political culture which mean that this malaise has taken a specific form, a particularly virulent one. One reason for this must be that French political culture has assumed that the

State could solve all the problems facing society. This was obviously the Socialist agenda, exemplified in an extreme form in the Utopian aspirations of 1981, themselves an echo of the wilder ones of 1968. But in a more mundane form this was also the claim of the Right. Chirac's "Thatcherism" of 1986-8 was only skin deep, and the interpenetration of State and economy is an aspect of the French system that has remained under governments of both Right and Left since the Second World War. The contradictions of Chirac's electoral promises in 1995 simply reflected this ambivalence. Yet the success of the November-December 1995 strikes showed already that even a President with a huge Parliamentary majority lacked the power to force through the solutions he had seen to be required.

After losing control of Parliament in the elections of May 1997 Chirac is now in a far weaker position. It is true that this defeat was envisaged in the introductory chapter by the two editors of *Chirac's Challenge*. The point which needs to be made is that ever since 1981 the French electorate has rejected those in power at every consultation. What this means, given the different timetables of the Presidential and the Parliamentary elections, is that the constitution of the Fifth Republic is now very far from providing that over-preponderance of executive power that seemed to be a danger during its first twenty-five years. On the contrary it might well now normally produce the stalemate system of cohabitation. For this, and for other reasons, notably the impact of the European Community, the French State is more and more expected to solve problems without being able to do so.

This fits into another expression of French political malaise, the renewed weakness of the political parties. While it is true that in some ways this is an old problem, it seems to have returned with a vengeance. In a broader way this is part of a widening gulf between the elites and the mass of ordinary people, seen in the high levels of abstention

from voting in recent elections, and in the high degree of support for protest parties outside the system. In the recent elections support for the National Front, the Communists and the ecologists taken together comes to a formidable figure. Analysis of the voting in the referendum on the Maastricht treaty also reveals the gulf between establishment opinion--almost all in favour--and that of the masses, the less well educated and less well-off, who were opposed and almost amounted to half of the electorate.

Taken all together, these things seem to me to amount to a very serious 'malaise,' which could easily turn into a major crisis at some time in the future. Of course one cannot expect predictions of the future from academic analysis, but in all of the works under review there seemed to be a complacency about the French polity which might not be warranted in present circumstances. This complacency came across clearly in the study of Mitterand which took no account of the different perspective given to his pre-1981 career by the events of his two terms of office. It is also present in all three of the political science volumes. No doubt nothing else could be expected; the rules of the discipline mean that presentation of facts takes precedence over speculation about their significance. It is inherent in the study of contemporary politics that much of what is said in detail is ephemeral in nature; it is, of course, very difficult to see the shape of the forest when one is still in the middle of it, surrounded by all the trees. If this review is read by colleagues from the field of political science, I hope that they will not take too much amiss these observations of an historian who has strayed from his own area.

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