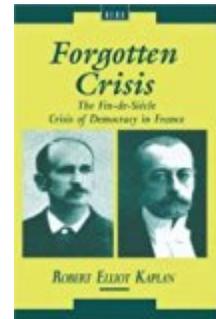


H-Net Reviews

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Robert Elliot Kaplan. *Forgotten Crisis: The Fin-de-Siècle Crisis of Democracy in France*. Oxford, England, and Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995. xii + 211 pp. \$45.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85973-032-4.

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The history of the Third Republic was so dismal after 1918 that the preceding period often appears in contrast as a time of relative growth and stability, when democracy was assured and the nation well defended. How different it seems from the never-ending crises and climactic collapse of the post-World War I Third Republic. Robert Kaplan's book is a useful reminder that the good old days were not so good either.

The "forgotten crisis" of the title refers to the struggle in the mid-1890s between the Panama Scandal and the Dreyfus Affair, which set the forces of progress and social justice against those defending the status quo. We should not let the absence of barricades fool us, Kaplan contends. Class war was raging, and it focused on attempts to institute an *impôt sur le revenu*. According to Kaplan, this was "the chief political issue between 1893 and 1898" (p. 2). In particular, the *haute bourgeoisie*, which saw in the income tax "the very essence of socialist revolution" (p. 3), mobilized all its political, economic, and ideological assets to defeat this frightening, if thoroughly predictable, manifestation of democracy. The crisis ended in 1898 in a tactical victory for Order and Property, with the formation of Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau's so-called coalition of National Defense, which, in the interests of saving the Republic, killed the income tax. Here is a summary of that story.

The author begins with a description of the piece's chief villain, the *haute bourgeoisie*—a distinct but not homogenous *classe dirigeante*. After the fall of the Second Empire, the *haute bourgeoisie* wrestled with the question of how best to protect its interests. The propertied classes soon came to support (or did they create?) the Third Republic as a regime whose weak governments and conser-

vative upper house would guarantee plutocracy against a strong executive or a populist Chamber.

All was well until the early 1890s when there emerged a widespread desire for the reform of France's inefficient, unjust, and inadequate fiscal system. Early proposals for some kind of tax on income were intended as responsible fiscal measures, not a Robin Hood brand of socialism. This must have been the motivation of the tax's chief proponent, Godefroy Cavaignac. Cavaignac was no revolutionary. He was a solid member of the *haute bourgeoisie* and the son of that "great democratic republican", General Eugene Cavaignac. Recall that it was Cavaignac *pere*, who in June 1848 "sav[ed] the democratic republic by suppressing anarchic violence in Paris" (p. 33).

Cavaignac *fils* was also a great patriot and as military reporter for the Chamber Budget Committee he became familiar with the financial demands of rearmament. His conservative instincts for a balanced budget and his patriotic support for military spending led him to support the *impôt sur le revenu*. Unable to convince his Moderate colleagues in the Chamber to support him, Cavaignac found allies among the Radicals, especially Leon Bourgeois and Paul Doumer.

The political breakthrough and the effective onset of the crisis came with the formation of a Radical government in November 1895. This confronted the *haute bourgeoisie* "for the first time since the Revolution of 1789 [with] a government not directed by a sympathetic autocrat or dominated by representatives of the upper class" (p. 44). Conservatives saw Leon Bourgeois, the new premier, as an agent of "Jacobin socialism."

When the Bourgeois government introduced an in-

come tax bill in January 1896, it confirmed the worst fears of the *haute bourgeoisie*. The details of the tax seem modest enough by today's standards and in fact aimed to replace some of the more arcane taxes on personal property (pp. 56-57). But the *impot*'s "bourgeois opponents" mobilized all their resources against it. Conservative politicians attacked it in Parliament. Journalists fulminated against Bourgeois's declaration of class war. The *mur d'argent*, the wall of money, "threaten[ed] the government with bankruptcy" (p. 62).

What finally doomed the income tax proposal and forced Bourgeois to resign was the Senate's opposition to it. Kaplan contends that the Senate was a bastion of the privileged. The Senate's indirect vote of no confidence in April 1896 was not only the blow leading to the fall of Leon Bourgeois' government, but it was the culmination of the general campaign against the *impot* and an important victory for the *haute bourgeoisie*. Their reward was the Moderate ministry of Jules Meline, which had, according to Kaplan, no policy except to stand in the way of the income tax.

Shaken by such a near miss, the *haute bourgeoisie* began to organize in order "to block dangerous legislation and to enhance the moral legitimacy of the bourgeoisie as a *classe dirigeante*" (p. 103). Men of property held banquets and urged one another to paternalistic activities. They considered corporatist reforms to defuse the crisis threatening their interests. They attempted, through such institutions as the *Ecole libre des sciences politiques*, to infiltrate the bureaucracy to counterbalance their loss of direct control of the government.

It is Kaplan's notion, however, that in the end the "crisis of democracy" was resolved and the *haute bourgeoisie*'s grip on power was preserved by way of the Dreyfus Affair. In this last section of the book, Kaplan offers a radical reinterpretation of the nature and consequences of this most famous *affaire*. It is as follows: the Dreyfus Affair never presented any genuine threat to the Republic. Waldeck-Rousseau was not actually afraid of the anti-Dreyfusard forces. He knew their numbers were limited and their influence did not extend much outside of Paris. Rather, the real objects of his political maneuvering were the proponents of the income tax; that is, the enemies of the *haute bourgeoisie*. By brandishing the threat of anti-Republican reaction, Waldeck-Rousseau succeeded in persuading Dreyfusard socialists, like Jean Jaures, to shift their allegiance to a bourgeois government and to trade in their social agenda for the greater and more pressing cause of Republican defense.

At the same time as he duped the socialists, Waldeck-Rousseau bought off the Radicals with government patronage. Henceforth, they became the party, not of *les petits* but of the public trough.

The energies of Republican Defense were subsequently diverted away from real issues of social reform and into the pseudo-policy of anti-clericalism. Thus Waldeck-Rousseau "contributed to the resolution of the true crisis of the 1890s—the crisis of democracy—which stemmed from the upper bourgeoisie's nightmare that the democratic masses threatened to overwhelm and destroy it by gaining political hegemony and confiscating its wealth by taxation" (p. 157). It was, in Kaplan's presentation, altogether a brilliant and successful strategy.

Yet there is more, for Kaplan's tale has another theme that also reaches its climax in the Dreyfus Affair. Here, the author's interest shifts from the income tax as class war to the income tax as fiscal necessity. Recall Cavaignac's initial support for the *impot*. He was driven by the recognition that France's military effort to confront Germany required sounder public finances. More particularly—although he certainly could say nothing about it in any public forum—Cavaignac wanted to fund the development of a rapid-fire artillery piece: what eventually became the celebrated "75" of the First World War. It is in the secret efforts to develop an effective rapid-fire artillery capability—and, as a critical corollary, to deceive the Germans about these operations—that the stories of the income tax and the Dreyfus Affair meet.

The author's appendix makes the argument that not only did Waldeck-Rousseau succeed in fooling his contemporaries, but he has also got the better of historians—even of such giants as Alfred Cobban, Pierre Sorlin, Francois Goguel, Maurice Duverger—who have swallowed the story of a paranoid military's prosecution of an innocent man and of a country brought to the brink of civil war over questions of justice and national defense.

Kaplan offers a different scenario. General Auguste Mercier, the Minister of War, who organized Dreyfus's conviction, was motivated by the eminently admirable desire to protect the French disinformation campaign, which was running through Major Ferdinand Walzin-Esterhazy, who was of course the real author of the original *bordereau*, the file of evidence against Captain Alfred Dreyfus (p. 183). In Kaplan's version, as in the conventional one, an innocent man, Dreyfus, was sacrificed by the military. But Kaplan has him sacrificed to an admirable cause, national security, not, as is usually the case, to the ambition and bigotry of the military com-

mand.

In response to his critics, principally readers of an article he submitted for publication, Kaplan admits that his theory rests on circumstantial evidence. He fires back that "... the traditional explanation by irrational motivation of the actions of Mercier and the chiefs of the General Staff are 'just theories' supported by no evidence at all" [emphasis added] (p. 194). To be honest, I am not in a position to judge the merits of Kaplan's revisionist interpretation of Dreyfus' conviction. Like most people, I have believed what I was so authoritatively told. In any case, Kaplan's challenge to orthodoxy is cleverly done and makes compelling reading.

That being said, I am instinctively suspicious of his cavalier dismissal of the work of important historians and his claims to have discovered such a big, bright new nugget in a well-worked mine. This pertains not only to his rereading of the Dreyfus Affair and the government of "Republican Defense," but to his discovery of the whole "fin-de-siecle crisis of democracy" played out in the struggle over the income tax. Pierre Sorlin, Waldeck-Rousseau's biographer, "omits any discussion of the Radical ministry and the *impot sur le revenu...*" (pp. 164-65). Francois Goguel does not even include the Bourgeois ministry in his category of "extreme left," although it pursued "the most 'socialist' legislation imaginable at that time..." (p. 165). Maurice Duverger similarly fails to include the Radicals of 1895-1896 in his list of "Left governments" from 1789 to 1940.

How to explain this professional misfeasance? Kaplan suggests only that historians "have not stepped back from the powerful and oft-told story of the Dreyfus Affair and read the basic sources of the 1890s ... with fresh eyes" (p. 165). Sorlin, et al. have therefore been misled not by ideology or method, but by laziness or credulity. I remain suspicious. Perhaps the "crisis" has been "forgotten" because it was not so seminal after all.

The book also contains some more essential and serious problems. Above all there is the author's use of the term and concept of the *haute bourgeoisie* in a manner reminiscent of the work of Emmanuel Beau de Lomenie and Jean Lhomme. *Haute bourgeoisie* is for Kaplan an *a priori* category, not only "in-itself," as a group of substantial property owners, but "for-itself," as a coherent

and self-conscious political force. The author provides no real discussion of this latter proposition. At the same time, he makes of various politicians and newspapers the voice of the *haute bourgeoisie*. We are willing to grant that men like Leon Say and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu came from upper-class milieux and that the *Nouvelle revue* and the *Journal des debats* represented opinions widespread among the upper middle class. Yet the existence of pundits and newspapers acting in defense of the interests of a group does not constitute *prima facie* evidence that the group exists as a self-conscious and historically efficacious entity or that they are its designated agents.

Kaplan's deployment of the *haute bourgeoisie* is problematical as a method and distorting in historical practice. Above all, it leads him away from the messiness of real politics and into the much neater, but to my mind deceptive, world of class conspiracies. It has the great virtue of a clean, almost literary resolution, where rearmament, the income tax, the Dreyfus Affair, and the anti-clerical campaign all fit together like the finale of *Great Expectations*. But does history really operate this way? Were the upper classes the only opponents of the income tax in France? What about the great mass of smaller property owners? The work of Philip Nord, among others, suggests that one did not need to be a banker to oppose "socialism." That is, the model where history is made by "Big Guys" doing bad things to "Little Guys" is not always tenable. Sure, the well-off did not want their property redistributed among the vile and undeserving multitude. They never do. But that does not amount to historical explanation.

It is too bad because Kaplan seems to have found a very important and largely unexplored element of French politics, attached to the political imperatives of rearmament. Aside from the author's tendentious portrayal of the history of the Cavaignacs, his focus on Godefroy Cavaignac's anomalous support for "socialist" legislation poses some fascinating questions about the complexities and contradictions of French politics in the 1890s. Unfortunately, Kaplan's version of politics leaves most of the complexity out.

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