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Anthropology, Empire, and the Structure of Political Debate

When Jacques Soustelle took on the position of Algerian governor-general in 1955 he brought with him a deep commitment to anthropological theory and method. Faced with a growing insurrection of uncertain origins, the trained ethnologist turned to his fieldwork experience in an effort to discover the origins of discontent. He failed miserably. After only a year, Soustelle found his techniques discredited as anthropology simply did not lend itself to effective governance over so complex an area, if at all.[1] In spite of this colossal public failure, French political intellectuals of all positions on the spectrum continued to seek answers to societal problems in anthropological theory through the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Jacob Collins's new work, *The Anthropological Turn: French Political Thought after 1968*, investigates this connection in great depth through the work of four prominent thinkers of the generation that followed the tumult of 1968. From the New Right ideas of Alain de Benoist through the center-left concepts of Marcel Gauchet and Emmanuel Todd and culminating in the non-Marxist leftist principles of Régis Debray, Collins offers a detailed and compelling portrait of the explicit and implicit incorporation of French structuralist ideas into visions of French sociopolitical identity. He thus succeeds in his effort to expand our understanding of the impact of theory outside of the “elite” thinkers, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, though his uncritical approach requires an educated reader to situate the argument appropriately in the shadow of colonialism (p. 9).

Collins is quite clear in his intent to decenter the dominant post-structural and post-modern narratives of French intellectual production in the more than fifty years since the 1968 upheaval altered the European political landscape. Scanning the political horizon, Collins found “structuralism politicized” in influential forms that searched for a specifically French national identity, one that rejected the unnecessarily abstract and seemingly nihilist theories of such Germans as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and their French heirs (p. 11). Instead, Collins's extended introduction lays out a nonpartisan uniformity among his subject thinkers in searching for basic French social forms as the foundation for a new identitarian politics from both left and right. Claude Lévi-
Strauss and his fellow structural anthropologists play a particularly important role in the new political alignments proposed by public intellectuals, in the process generating an “intellectual configuration” that crossed ideological boundaries (p. 33). Far from perceiving this as simple, Collins instead finds that this similarity indicates great complexity in French political and intellectual engagement, a messy discursive environment that exceeded simple conflicts between the French Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and the rightist Gaullist groups. He thus organizes the book into four biographical chapters working from political right to left across his four theorists of interest, allowing “their contradictions and tensions to develop immanently through the presentation of their work” (p. 36). The reader thus confronts the contradictions and incongruities of each thinker’s production, a key feature of the very best intellectual history.

The first chapter, focused on Benoist, traces the rise of New Right counterrevolutionary thought centered on the recreation of a hypermasculine, muscular French identity to eliminate the dual threats of neoliberal globalism and communism. Such a conception required, in Benoist’s own reckoning, a combination of “Weimar Conservatism and French structural anthropology” in a manner which, in Collins’s helpful description, “held equality to be synonymous with a coercive sameness” (pp. 51, 52). Benoist thus sought the cultural origins of France in a broad and imprecise rendering of a shared Indo-European heritage. Clearly focused on the exaltation of difference as the basis of identity, Benoist marshaled support from the prewar theories of Arnold Gehlen, the linguistic concepts of Georges Dumézil, and the anthropological investigations of Louis Dumont in India. Citing ancient communal links to this imagined past, Benoist called for an understanding of collective Frenchness opposed to the splintering tendencies of neoliberal capitalist encroachment or, even worse, the faceless anonymity of international communism. Collins thus does an admirable job of tracing the origins of Benoist’s ideas and their rooting in culture, broadly construed.

The succeeding three chapters on Gauchet, Todd, and Debray, respectively, offer a more complete linkage of anthropological ideas and sources with their expression in political writing. Gauchet, focused like the others on arresting the disintegration of France, found great potential in Lévi-Strauss’s proposed religio-mythic structures that lay at the base of all human organization. In Gauchet’s mind, the modern secular state had destroyed religion so as to fill that mythic space with political domination. Reversing the trend required the restoral of religious understanding to the state with a deep appreciation for the power of the family. Todd took that analysis a step further, basing his entire approach on the family as a “social and psychological unit” (p. 124). Political difference came from the fundamental conflict between the idea of “liberty” as generated by the father-son relationship and the notion of “equality” stemming from the sibling rivalry tied to inheritance (p. 126). The centrality of that family, when taken alongside the growth of literacy through the mother’s control of education, generated the “cultural and regional particularities” that set France apart (p. 149). France, as a place of crossing with a powerful reliance on family structures, could thus resist the xenophobia and racial distrust that seemed to grow in the late twentieth century across Europe. Collins does some of his best work in this section as he unravels the inversion by these thinkers of French structural anthropology, originally intended to reveal universal truths about humanity, into a force describing the differences that formed nations. The linkage of Todd and Gauchet to French structural thought is clear and compelling even as the political theorists adapt it for more immediate use.

Debray, even with deep roots in Marxist political philosophy, also fit neatly into this structural understanding. Accepting the primacy of the family, he extended his analysis in a sociologically op-
positional manner, proposing that the fundamental shortcoming of Marxist thought was the loss of the “nation.” For Debray, all sociopolitical groups required an internally coherent ideology and the creation and maintenance of an external “sacred,” an “other” that stood in contrast to the nation itself (pp. 181, 193). Operating in a new domain of thought that he termed “mediology,” Debray feared the natural neoliberal “entropy” represented in a broadly defined “democracy” that threatened the notion of a French “republic” (pp. 210, 213, 217). Collins does well to unpack these theories, particularly through their links to the ideas of Louis Althusser. The genealogy of Debray’s thought remains clear as, at least in part, a product of contemporary French anthropology.

Internal coherence thus stands as the greatest strength of Collins’s work. The reader finishes the book with a strong understanding of the contemporary French political landscape. The deep investigation of the anthropological sources of the politics of this generation of French thinkers is innovative, interesting, and effective in its original aims. Collins achieves exactly what he set out to accomplish at the start, offering an alternative possibility for the effects of anthropology on a much wider scale while broadening the potential sources of political concepts of all shades.

The limitation of this direct approach, however, is that very same internal coherence. As present-day political debate in the United States and Europe demonstrates, political candidates and their media teams routinely twist and politicize anthropological and sociological theory, removing it from its deep empirical grounding in the service of racist, nationalist, and sexist purposes. Collins’s intricate and methodical tracing of the sources of ideas is enormously useful but would be even more effective if contextualized in the anthropological and imperial discourses that surrounded and informed the original process of structuralist production.

Michel Foucault has said that “everyone knows that ethnology was born of colonization,” but Collins pays virtually no attention to the nature of the social scientific practice at the heart of his political study.[2] A reader of this book could walk away thinking there was no empire, there were no colonial wars, there were no larger debates about the place or practice of anthropology. Instead, the ideas in this book move and shift directly from the pens of social scientists to the mouths and keyboards of political theorists with no consideration for the circumstances or contestation that led to such notions. If these thinkers were committed to a problematization of what it meant to be French, some analytical application of that methodology to the work itself would have made for a richer set of findings. Indeed, outside of the discussion of immigration through the superb work of the demographic historian Gérard Noiriel in chapter 3, the analysis is curiously detached from the vitally important influence of the French imperial exit and initiation of neocolonial policies. Chapter 1, for example, does not consider the deeply colonial nature of anthropological production in and on India. Collins’s analysis would have been stronger with a more critical approach to the findings of the core social scientists in question, particularly Dumont, along the lines of the detailed work on India from C. A. Bayly (Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communications in India, 1780-1870 [1996]) or the more controversial findings of Nicholas B. Dirks (Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India [2001]) on the imperial invention of caste. Instead, the reader is left with an unexamined, mystical India represented only through the twentieth-century surface-level adaptations of a political theorist in western Europe.

Along the same lines, chapter 3 includes discussion on concepts of progress and development as seen through Todd’s writing but without any contextual understanding of the theoretical developments in that field generated by James C. Scott (Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Im-
prove the Human Condition Have Failed [1999]); Ilan Kapoor (Confronting Desire: Psychoanalysis and International Development [2020]); Bruno Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow (The Logic of Political Survival [2003]); James Ferguson (The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho [1994]); and a host of others. At the same time, the internal contradictions of anthropological practice in the construction of the “other” under circumstances of colonial domination, so crucial to the argument of both Gauchet and Debray, do not factor into the analysis here in terms of race, conceptions of time, or even the fundamental debates between structural-functionalists and practitioners of participant observation.[3] A similar lack of contextual scaffolding abounds in the discussion of the family, including the hypermasculine use of archaeology and linguistics by Benoist or the largely patriarchal notions of Gauchet and Todd presented without comment from prominent gender and feminist thinkers, such as Joan Scott, Ann Laura Stoler, and Judith Butler.[4] The poetical and literary transmission of these ideas into political discourse is enormously important and powerful and would have been more so if offered a counterpoint, analyses that considered gender as a social form with deep political implications, not simply grist for the political mill.

Ultimately, Collins’s work offers important insight on the sources of influential French political thought, but the lack of a full contextual framing of anthropological practice will leave inexperienced readers with too simple a portrait of the process of postcolonial ideological transmission and contestation. Specialized readers, such as advanced graduate students and professional academics, who are interested in post-1968 French political thought will find much of interest here. Undergraduates or nonspecialists in anthropological and postcolonial theory will struggle to understand the full implications of the uncritical assumption of such ideas by disconnected French thinkers. Indeed, it is that disconnection that is important here, as Collins has demonstrated the lengths to which pundits can take social scientific practice for their own political ends. When read alongside the works above as well as the anticolonial and postcolonial concepts of Frantz Fanon and Pierre Bourdieu as a history of contested memory, the work provides powerful insight into the array of forces shaping the French political landscape from the 1960s onward.[5] Collins is right to muddy the waters of the dominant political discourse that focuses on elite thinkers, but in doing so it is important to place all of those works in their full context and in conversation with each other. It is only through such a continuous triangulation of ideas that we can hope to grow a more complete understanding of the complex sociopolitical forces that have shaped and continue to shape European lives as well as those caught in the vestiges and debris of colonial occupation and science.

Notes


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