



## France's Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic

by Herrick Chapman.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2018. Pp. x, 405. ISBN 978-0-674-97641-2.

Review by Carl Cavanagh Hodge, University of British Columbia (carl.hodge@ubc.ca).

---

Historian Herrick Chapman (NYU) specializes in twentieth-century French social, economic, and political history.<sup>1</sup> *France's Long Reconstruction* concerns the period from the devastation of World War II to the establishment of the Fifth Republic under President Charles de Gaulle in 1962. This era was marked by tensions between the restoration of democratic republicanism on the one hand, and the emerging “technocratic” elite serving a centralized executive on the other (4–5). Rather than undertaking a comprehensive social and political history of the times, Chapman concentrates on the relations among governing elites, political parties, special interest lobbies, and citizens’ movements. He identifies several key policy domains: manpower and immigration, tax reform and small enterprise regulations, family policy and the welfare state, and the nationalization of industry and banking.

Chapman reminds us that, among European nations rebuilding after the Great Depression and the Second World War, only in France was reconstruction bound up with two reconstitutions (the Fourth and Fifth Republics) and two colonial wars—in Indochina and Algeria. Hence, “it took until 1962 to work through what had become the conjoined efforts of consolidating executive authority in the Fifth Republic, solidifying France’s own ‘economic miracle’ and negotiating an end to the Algerian war” (15). De Gaulle adeptly squared the imperative of a democratic constitution with the French public’s desire for “heroic” leadership. Like Napoleon, he strengthened the coercive capacity of the state while seeking popular legitimation through referenda. During France’s struggle with the assassins of *Organisation armée secrète* (OAS) following Algerian independence, he pressed his secret service into domestic surveillance (291–92).<sup>2</sup>

The author gives welcome attention to Michel Debré, a member of Pierre Mendès France’s Radical Party, who became de Gaulle’s right-hand man after 1944 and ultimately helped draft the constitution of the Fifth Republic. For his part, Mendès France opposed the Gaullist agenda and allied with Socialists in a decentralized associationalist left. Both men were convinced that “At the heart of their differences lay their answers to the question of how to transcend the conflict between top-down, expert-led rule and democratic participation” (211).

In a superb discussion of the Poujadist tax revolt of the mid-1950s, Chapman explains how

For all of its grotesque features—its demagoguery, rowdy thuggery, anti-Semitism, and anti-parliamentarism—the Poujadist movement had the ironic effect of making tax reform experts more responsive to the pressures of a democratic polity. Shopkeepers and artisans did what hard-pressed

---

1. His many previous publications include *State Capitalism and Working-Class Radicalism in the French Aircraft Industry* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1991), *L’Aéronautique: Salariés et patrons d’une industrie française, 1928–1950* (Rennes: Pr U de Rennes, 2011), and a half dozen co-authored and co-edited books.

2. See, further, Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta, 2004) 265, and Douglas Porch, *The French Secret Services: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Gulf War* (NY: FSG, 1995) 404–21.

interest groups had long done in France: they turned to the state for relief, and the state responded. Revolt reminded government leaders they needed to make tax reform more palatable to the retailers and artisans, even as conciliation made it harder afterward to imagine a radical restructuring of the tax system away from indirect taxes. The lesson would not be lost on Gaullists, who in continuing to renovate the economy worked within the basic tax framework of the Fourth Republic and built in new protections for shopkeeper France. (102)

State family policies, meanwhile, fostered social stability and acted as an agent of change: the provision of prenatal and maternity benefits, tax breaks, and housing subsidies were meant to boost the national fertility rate and promote the ideal of the family. It became common to sneer that couples had children purely to profit from the associated benefits. But who in fact was being cynical here? The couple having the child for financial advantage or the government providing the largess in the first place? No matter. Family policy opened up paths “that made possible another wave of innovation in the 1970s and 1980s” and indirectly nurtured a new generation of activists, experts, and politicians who “negotiated a distinctive blend of natalism, productivism, and feminism to make some of the most robust commitments in Europe to child care, preschool, part-time work and parental leave” (163).

The Fifth Republic was a major beneficiary of the Fourth Republic’s political leaders’ fight for needed reforms. De Gaulle’s new constitution bolstered the executive ministries and empowered the state bureaucracy. The state could now orchestrate the economic outcomes of major state and private enterprises. De Gaulle and Debré envisioned a France made more competitive within a European economy increasingly fueled by mass consumption. These priorities and the administrative practices used to further them extended well beyond France’s own borders. From its inception, the European Common Market bore the imprint of French statist elitism<sup>3</sup> (207, 301). Making French industry more profitable would, of course, necessitate opening the country to economic competition from, among others, France’s old foe across the Rhine. I would point out that, while a European Common Market was the brain-child of French planners in the 1950s, and a Single European Market was bruited by Margaret Thatcher’s government in the 1980s, it was Germany that became both more democratic and more prosperous than either France or Great Britain.

France’s search for a modern republic had consequences beyond Europe, above all because de Gaulle was determined that such a republic would be post-imperial. After the defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu (1954), Mendès France opened negotiations for a withdrawal from Indochina, a key move in transforming France’s foreign policy burden into an American quagmire. The impact of De Gaulle’s next step—withdrawing from another overseas possession—had a profound impact on many of his countrymen who remained emotionally attached to Algeria. When, in the 1950s, France experienced a rapid migration of Algerians to the metropole, it had the solution to its national labor shortage, which made the migration “work as an antidote to anticolonial nationalism” even in the context of a tumultuous war (74). When de Gaulle put down a mutiny in the French army and moved toward granting independence for Algeria in order to “finish with this box of sorrows,”<sup>4</sup> French settlers in Algeria revolted and the OAS launched a terrorist campaign inside France itself. His response, emergency powers vested in the executive, had a lasting legacy for the governing culture and institutions of the Fifth Republic:

---

3. See John Gillingham, *European Integration, 1950–2003: Superstate or New Market Economy* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2003) 3–77.

4. Cited in Martin Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012) 304.

The Algerian war helped to make the Gaullist state the epitome in Western Europe of not just economic dirigisme, but social dirigisme as well, and it concentrated authority even more than the most ambitious of all the state Jacobins, Michel Debré himself, had imagined possible in 1944. It would be incorrect to say that the Algerian conflict gave de Gaulle, Debré, and their predecessors in the latter years of the Fourth Republic, who were state builders in their own right, a war they wanted. But it gave them circumstances they exploited: the emergency conditions that wars often provide leaders to expand state functions and exercise authority. (298)

In his conclusion, Chapman asserts that the Fifth Republic's program of recovery and reconstitution was incontestably successful. But a system that weakened parliament and entrusted public policy to a powerful executive and elite bureaucracy risked displacing French democracy to the streets in times of trouble. What goes around, comes around. Even today, as President Emmanuel Macron pledges to come to terms with the final dark days of French Algeria, *gilets jaunes* demonstrators<sup>5</sup> have taken to the streets to protest against rising fuel prices and taxes that oppress ordinary working people.

Anyone seeking a thoroughly readable and well informed study of post-World War II French history will not be disappointed by *France's Long Reconstruction*.

---

5. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Yellow vests movement."