



HAL
open science

Review Essay

Alain Chatriot

► **To cite this version:**

Alain Chatriot. Review Essay: The Forgotten Years? New Approaches to Post-War French Society and Politics. *French History*, 2010, 24 (3), pp.447 - 458. hal-01630192

HAL Id: hal-01630192

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01630192>

Submitted on 7 Nov 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

REVIEW ESSAY

THE FORGOTTEN YEARS? NEW APPROACHES TO POST-WAR FRENCH SOCIETY AND POLITICS

ALAIN CHATRIOT*

Steven Kaplan's book about a seemingly trivial event that took place in 1951 is subtitled 'Return to the forgotten years in France'.¹ This at first surprising title shows how far removed this period is from our own time; but it also underlines, with good reason, the limited number of studies of the post-war era, and the lack of social and economic investigations of France in the 1950s and early 1960s. The publication two years previously of Alain Dewerpe's study of the deaths at the Charonne demonstration in February 1961 now allows us to take stock of what is emerging as a fresh and rich new perspective on the Fourth and early Fifth Republics.² The last ten years have witnessed important new developments in the field, and a number of works, many based on doctoral dissertations, will be woven into our discussion.³

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that, little by little, we are moving on from the rather caricatured images of this period, in which a supposedly unstable political system somehow gave birth to the 'Trente glorieuses'—the three 'great' decades of development in France's economy. The Fourth Republic, so clearly defined by the need for reconstruction and by the colonial wars, has often suffered at the hands of historians writing from the point of view of the regime that overturned it—the Fifth Republic and the new system advanced by General de Gaulle.⁴ Syntheses and textbooks on this period are nonetheless taking some time to move on from the traditional model, which recent studies have made much more complex.

* The author is Chargé de recherche au CNRS, CRH-AHMOC, and editor of *Cahiers Jaurès*. He may be contacted at chatriot@ehess.fr. This article has been translated by Julian Wright.

¹ S. L. Kaplan, *Le Pain maudit. Retour sur la France des années oubliées 1945-1958* (Paris, 2008).

² A. Dewerpe, *Charonne 8 février 1962. Anthropologie historique d'un massacre d'État* (Paris, 2006).

³ For a detailed bibliography on the Fourth Republic: J.-P. Rioux, *La France de la IV^e République*. 1. *L'Ardeur et la nécessité: 1944-1952* (Paris, 1980), 285-302, and more recently, the bibliography of E. Duhamel in *Historiens et géographes*, 361 (1998), 141-60.

⁴ B. Gaïti, 'Les modernisateurs dans l'administration d'après-guerre: l'écriture d'une histoire héroïque', *Revue française d'administration publique*, 102 (2002) 295-306.

The renewal of contemporary French history is evidently not confined to this period, and other domains such as the history of administration in the nineteenth century or of specific social and economic actors in the twentieth century could usefully be presented alongside this discussion. But the interest of Kaplan and Dewerpe's books lies in their presentation of a type of political and social history that refuses to conform to traditional and ultimately unhelpful categories or sub-disciplines. They oblige the historian to go further, developing their subjects in very different registers, and by using tools drawn from several different social sciences. The essential point of these works is not so much their valorization of a precise event—both authors, as they vary the scale on which they observe these events, place them within different temporalities. Their greatest value lies in the blending of multiple approaches to their subjects, in which a whole series of different historical elements rediscover their political significance.⁵

I

In the summer of 1951, a bout of food poisoning affected a small town on the banks of the Rhône. The origin of the poison was connected to bread, that quintessential symbol of food in France, and this simple connection has allowed Steven L. Kaplan to pursue a wide and original project on post-Second World War France.⁶ By following all the aspects of the affair (medical, scientific, political, judicial, economic), Kaplan presents us with a rare and powerful example of total history.⁷

On 16 August 1951 in a small town of the Gard, Pont-Saint-Esprit, a portion of the local population fell very ill after eating bread. Beyond the initial impression of minor intoxication, the symptoms were startling and serious: mental disturbances were apparent among the victims. The mayor followed up the crisis by calling for medical supplies, appealing in particular to the head of the Faculty of Medicine at Montpellier. During the night of 24–25 August—christened by the press 'night of the apocalypse'—a number of patients suffered hallucinations and several were sectioned. Journalists seized on the affair and for a short while the small community on the banks of the Rhône became notorious throughout the world. The horror of the situation was rapidly exacerbated by five deaths and prolonged hospitalizations; but it was deepened by the mysterious nature of the poisoning. Once they had got over their initial surprise at the appearance of intoxication among some victims, the town's

⁵ The perspective is historiographically distinct, but can be placed alongside the broad definition of political history defended by Pierre Rosanvallon: *Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique: leçon inaugurale au Collège de France faite le 28 mars 2002* (Paris, 2003).

⁶ On this subject, Kaplan has published very widely, both for the eighteenth century and for the more recent past. For an overview: S. L. Kaplan, *La France et son pain. Histoire d'une passion. Entretiens avec Jean-Philippe de Tonnac* (Paris, 2010).

⁷ Among the few reviews of Kaplan's book: K. W. Clafin, *H-France Review*, 9 (2009), 543–7; G. Galvez-Béhar, *Revue française de science politique*, 60 (2010), 187–90.

doctors, supported by their colleagues from Montpellier, rapidly concluded that they were dealing with a possible resurgence of ergotism. They went so far as to publish on the subject in prestigious international medical reviews.⁸

For the historian, reconstructing the events as they unfolded is not easy: without even considering the deforming prism of memory, the testimonies that were gathered for the inquiry were often vague. Even today, it is difficult to draw a precise figure for the number of cases of sickness from sources that are contradictory. At the outset, the inquiry was conducted rapidly. A batch of bread, a bakery, flour—the inspector who was on the lookout for flour polluted by the ergot fungus easily connected these elements. The police accused a mill in the Vienne, the supposed source of the flour used in the Gard, and they denounced the practices of a miller and a baker from Poitou, as well as the decrepit state of the mill. However, the inquest seemed to come to its conclusions rather rapidly, perhaps because of the weight of public concern in the press. In particular, the police seemed to have difficulty understanding the complex French system by which flour was assessed and distributed. The Poitevin miller and baker were imprisoned for two months but the case against them was weak and they were soon freed; their return to the Vienne was actually *fêted*. The elites of the two departments concerned had fallen out—the lawyers on each side of the case were important local politicians.

The initial burst of public enthusiasm surrounding the inquest, and its first setbacks after the Vienne hypothesis, called into question the expertise that had advanced the ergot theory. Ergot is a fungus that grows on rye and led to a notorious sickness in the Middle Ages, depicted in paintings of Bosch, Bruegel and Grünewald. Nicknamed St Antony's fire or, in French, *mal des ardents*, there have been very few cases in the modern era (barring outbreaks in nineteenth-century Russia and in India in 1958 and 1975). The world's specialists on the subject were, in the 1950s, to be found in Switzerland, notably Albert Hofmann who worked on a synthetic derivative of ergot: lysergic acid diethylamide or LSD, the well-known hallucinogen. Solicited for their opinion by the French medical profession, the scientists of Basel refuted the ergot hypothesis, however: the symptoms did not match the time frame required for the development of ergotism; and LSD can only be created artificially. Steven Kaplan shows admirably the weight of the 1950s' French medical hierarchy in this story, with all the academic struggles that it contained.⁹ He insists equally on the role played by the public, who shared many doctors' fascination with what they saw as the resurgence of a medieval disease. Today, the affair of Pont-Saint-Esprit remains associated with ergot poisoning, in spite of proof to the contrary.

⁸ As early as 15 Sept. 1951 in the *British Medical Journal* and 1952 in the *Bulletin de l'Académie nationale de médecine* among others.

⁹ The world of scientific research was then undergoing a series of mutations: A. Chatriot and V. Duclert (eds), *Le Gouvernement de la recherche. Histoire d'un engagement politique de Pierre Mendès France au général de Gaulle (1953-1969)* (Paris, 2006).

The flour trade rapidly asserted its firm opposition to this hypothesis: the probability of having a sufficient concentration of ergot in flour was unlikely; moreover, bread that had been baked with flour contaminated by ergot would have been evidently unfit for consumption. The second important hypothesis was based on the idea of mercury poisoning. Drawing on a problem that had occurred in Sweden, some experts argued that the fungicide Panogen, a mercury-based alkaloid, could have contaminated the bread by being spilled on a sack of flour. For want of other credible hypotheses, the law came down on this official conclusion over the affair: it was a deplorable accident, but, as Steven Kaplan puts it, 'le Panogen arrange tout le monde, tous les intérêts économiques et politiques, voire juridiques et scientifiques'.¹⁰ During the 1960s, mercury poisoning in Japan and Iraq drew international attention. The flour trade remained reticent on the mercury option and they commissioned a pharmacological thesis on the subject: defended in 1965, it clearly refuted this possibility.

Pursuing his inquiry, Kaplan attempts to understand what took place and follows up other logical possibilities. He refutes the question of pollution in the local water supply, and finds no trace of any machination or plot, nor any possibility of other chemical contamination. Two hypotheses seem nonetheless to have held his attention: mycotoxins, then little known; or an accident following from the artificial whitening of the bread. At a time when the desire to have bread that was perfectly white responded to the continuing poverty and the general poor quality of flour and bread, some bakers used proscribed machinery to whiten bread by using a pathogenic chemical, Agene or nitrogen trichloride, as is demonstrated by several inquiries into frauds during this period. Kaplan leaves the question open, while regretting that the path has not been pursued more seriously.¹¹

The debate over the causes of the poisoning is much more than simply a scientific search for the truth; with its connection to the judicial inquiry, it illustrates the delicate question of professional expertise in the affair.¹² The 1950s in France was a difficult time for judicial and scientific expertise: it was generally more professionalized, but had come up against complex cases such as the affair of Marie Besnard, accused of multiple poisonings in Loudun. Above all, professional expertise is an area where confrontation can develop between different actors; thus a series of inquests were set up alongside those of the justice ministry—one was set up by the health ministry, and others called on prestigious chemists. In this context, the miller from the Vienne who had been accused and imprisoned as a result of the ergot hypothesis decided to confront

¹⁰ Kaplan, *Le Pain maudit*, 656.

¹¹ He concludes: 'Impossible de prouver que le blanchiment est la cause directe et efficiente du drame spiripontain. Mais inconcevable de ne pas prendre en compte cette hypothèse si riche' (ibid., 755).

¹² For a new approach to the history of expertise, which uses the history of science, political history and economic history: C. Rabier (ed.), *Fields of Expertise: A Comparative History of Expert Procedures in Paris and London, 1600 to the Present* (Newcastle, 2007).

the judicial expert who had initially upheld this conclusion. A first judgment condemned the expert, but the appeal went in his favour, the expert benefiting from the support of his administrative hierarchy.

The second judicial platform where experts clashed was the confrontation of the victims and the baker of Pont-Saint-Esprit and the flour trade. One of the original features of the affair was that an association of victims was set up very rapidly, in order to help the families to organize material support for themselves and for dealing with the judicial process. Kaplan introduces all of the victims' families and the process by which aid was granted from the Préfecture, the Conseil général and the mayor. The victims eventually referred their case against the baker to the law, who himself turned on the Union meunière, his flour supplier. A civil process thus opened at Uzès in 1957, and the flour trade mobilized itself heavily against the baker so as to avoid being held liable for damages. The juridical question was particularly complex. Some of the great professors of law of the 1950s were consulted, demonstrating the financial power of the flour trade; but they received a very unfavourable first judgment in April 1958. The appeal, which took place at Nîmes in April 1960, was, however, a victory for the flour trade. The baker then hesitated over which path to follow and seemed lost in an affair that would shatter his life and that of his family. Procedures for overturning the judgment took a long time; the cour de cassation did not overturn the appeal court's decision at its first hearing in January 1965. A final decision delivered in March 1975—nearly twenty-four years after the drama, and after the death of the baker himself—represented the final victory for the flour trade.

The episodes concerning professional experts and the justice system demonstrate that, in order to understand the Pont-Saint-Esprit affair, the ways in which the flour trade and bakeries operated in post-Second World War France need to be grasped in all their complexity. Kaplan naturally puts into place elements of the *longue durée* which recall both the crises of the eighteenth century and the 'Flour war', or the 'maximum' of the revolutionary period, as well as more theoretical reflections on the paradox of state policy over bread: 'une quadrature du cercle, un cocktail de Sully et de Colbert, de Turgot et de Necker, de Roland et de Robespierre: le bon (plutôt haut) prix du blé *et* le bas prix du pain'.¹³ The twentieth century saw changes but the search for an impossible solution to this equation continued. Important debates before the First World War were followed in the 1920s and 1930s by a considerable destabilization of the world wheat market. Under the Popular Front, the government in August 1936 managed to create an Office national interprofessionnel du blé (ONIB) which became in due course the Office des céréales (ONIC).¹⁴ This interprofessional body was charged with the regulation

¹³ Kaplan, *Le Pain maudit*, 89.

¹⁴ A. Chatriot, 'Les Offices en France sous la Troisième République. Une réforme incertaine de l'Administration', *Revue française d'administration publique* (120), 2006, 635-50.

of the market and grew considerably in the harsh economic climate of the Second World War. The ONIC was maintained under the Liberation for the same reason, the need to manage an urgent situation, in spite of strong opposition. The period was then marked by repeated crises within the ministère du Ravitaillement. For Kaplan, one of the principal problems was the distribution of wheat and flour between different areas of France. He underlines the idea of a breakdown in the Republican contract wherever departments that needed to receive a boost in supply were given lower-quality flour. His presentation of the ONIC thus recapitulates a number of criticisms: 'Usine à gaz à l'ajustement des intérêts forts disparates des cultivateurs, des meuniers, des boulangers, des consommateurs et des politiques, l'ONIC fonctionne selon un modèle de péréquation tant providentialiste que technocratique.'¹⁵ His analyses thus develop important recent work on the history of economic and financial administration in this period and on certain key figures responsible for applying public policy.¹⁶

The second major collective actor in the regulation of this market was of course the flour trade itself. The profession has traditionally had a rather poor reputation. It was involved in projects to reorganize during the 1930s, attempting to restructure the production of flour by the imposition of quotas on individual flour mills. The openly corporatist policies of Vichy reinforced this phenomenon—particularly with the administrative order of 7 February 1943 which was maintained for a long time after the end of the Occupation.¹⁷ The flour trade was dominated by a powerful syndicate: the Association nationale de la Meunerie française, which took in hand this dirigiste policy in partnership with the state. The third actor, finally, was the bakery trade. At the Liberation, its position was very uncertain. The debate over the quality of bread was highly charged: it touched on the question of the state's impositions through the ONIC, on the question of white bread, and on the problem of the decline in bread consumption in France. Prices remained in the hands of the state, but they were rarely uniform across the whole country, and were more frequently set at a departmental level, with major distinctions between the types of bread sold in towns and in rural communities. The bakery trade also had to subsume a number of technical changes that followed the modernization of its methods and the development of an institution that sought to study its functioning, the Centre national de Coordination des Études et Recherches sur la Nutrition et l'Alimentation

¹⁵ Kaplan, *Le Pain maudit*, 90.

¹⁶ F. Tristram, *Une Fiscalité pour la croissance. La direction générale des Impôts et la politique fiscale en France de 1948 à la fin des années 1960* (Paris, 2005); M. Margairaz (ed.), *François Bloch-Lainé, fonctionnaire, financier, citoyen, journée d'études tenue à Bercy le 25 février 2003* (Paris, 2005); O. Feiertag, *Wilfried Baumgartner: un grand commis des Finances à la croisée des pouvoirs (1902-1978)* (Paris, 2006); R. Boulat, *Jean Fourastié, un expert en productivité. La modernisation de la France (années trente-années cinquante)* (Besançon, 2008); C. Sardais, *Patron de Renault. Pierre Lefaucheur (1944-1955)* (Paris, 2009).

¹⁷ On another profession, equally implicated in the question of corporatism: F. Le Bot, *La Fabrique réactionnaire. Antisémisme, spoliations et corporatisme dans le cuir (1930-1950)*, (Paris, 2007).

(CNERNA). In this situation, the profession, which was strongly divided, depended constantly on the flour trade and could only dream of having a professional organization as strictly developed as that of the millers.¹⁸

Relationships between millers and bakers were channelled through the Unions meunières who organized the distribution of flour at the departmental level. Thus it was clearly the Union meunière du Gard that was implicated in the judicial process of the Pont-Saint-Esprit affair. The affair took place at a time when the professional organization of the flour trade was in crisis. Criticized by the Cour des comptes, the flour trade found itself opposed by Antoine Pinay, the very liberal Président du Conseil in 1952.¹⁹ The profession nonetheless managed to slow down the return to competitive pricing, which only took place in the early 1960s. In spite of the scandal of the deaths in the Gard, the system of flour distribution was left unchanged. Kaplan explains clearly:

Personne n'ose pourtant mettre en question la pièce maîtresse du système entier, la garantie du prix du blé. Le marché du blé demeure sanctuarisé, protégé par des pesanteurs sociologiques et politiques, qui l'emportent sur un calcul strictement économique. Il s'agit donc d'un libéralisme sélectif et pragmatique, fondé sur une finalité paradoxale sinon contradictoire: le maintien du couple blé cher et pain bon marché, l'utopie rêvée de l'économie politique (et de la science sociale) depuis l'âge des physiocrates.²⁰

Implicit in the regulation of this market were the farmers, especially cereal farmers and their extremely powerful organization, the Association générale des producteurs de blé—although this aspect is not at the heart of Kaplan's analysis.

This book's great interest and importance lie in its author's ability to start with a precise event, and with a particular product—bread—and develop a broad history that touches the food industry, economic policy, the evolution of society, the workings of the justice system, scientific expertise and the role of the press. Among these different elements, several are worth underlining. While successive governments remained silent on the affair, local political authorities were themselves very active. Kaplan draws a fascinating portrait of this little town so harshly treated under the German Occupation, and marked in previous generations by religious divides that had been revived in the context of the Cold War. He demonstrates on a number of occasions the enormous interest to be gained from examining institutions at different levels and in their diverse relationships with the rest of society. His reflection on the food industry, the

¹⁸ For a good discussion of state policy towards artisan trades: C. Perrin, *Entre Glorification et abandon. L'État et les artisans en France (1938-1970)* (Paris, 2007); this work builds on S. M. Zdatny, *The Politics of Survival: Artisans in Twentieth-Century France* (New York, 1990).

¹⁹ On the reconstruction of liberal ideology in this period: F. Denord, *Néo-libéralisme version française. Histoire d'une idéologie politique* (Paris, 2007); O. Dard, *Bertrand de Jouvenel* (Paris, 2008).

²⁰ Kaplan, *Le Pain maudit*, 970-1.

quality of food products, the theme of scandal and fear that can surround issues of food consumption, opens up connections to several fresh perspectives presently being developed by historians in France and elsewhere. Finally, taking up again the question of the place of corporatism as a recurring theme in French history, he offers, with the flour trade, an excellent case study of a profession that shares with the state the management of an important market. This history of the 'pain maudit' certainly illustrates the value of a history of the food industry and consumerism, and keeps alive the ambition of writing a total history on the basis of one event by developing the rich variety of its multiple consequences.²¹

II

How to write the history of an event is a reflection that lies at the heart of Alain Dewerpe's study, which has been praised by historians and social scientists alike.²² One of his most important historiographical problems was no doubt that of studying the representations of the event (emotional, discursive, commemorative) without renouncing the challenge of restoring the facts by examining testimonies and archives. In this particular case, the task is all the more important because of the falsehoods that continue to be purveyed about the events of 8 February 1962. The study is organized in three parts: 'un massacre d'État', 'le scandale civique' and 'sortir du meurtre'.²³

Dewerpe begins with a precise description of the demonstration of 8 February. Building on numerous studies of the demonstration by historians and political scientists, he puts together its preparation, its legal status and the actual demonstration itself. Born from a trade union initiative (on the part of the Confédération générale des travailleurs, the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens and Union nationale des étudiants de France as well as the Communist and Socialist Parties), the demonstration was a reaction against attacks launched by the far-right Organisation armée secrète (OAS). The Interior Minister (Roger Frey) and the Prefect of Police (Maurice Papon) decided to ban the demonstration, thus preventing a gathering at the place de la Bastille, and resulting in several columns of marchers meeting in different parts of working-class Paris. Police baton-charges led to the deaths of nine people at the entrance to the Charonne metro station on boulevard Voltaire. Contrary to a tenacious legend that has grown up exonerating the forces of the state, Dewerpe reminds us that the gates of the station were open until a quarter past eight in the evening and that the deaths were not simply caused by a crush.

²¹ M. Ferrières, *Histoire des peurs alimentaires. Du Moyen Age à l'aube du XX^e siècle* (Paris, 2002); A. Stanziani, *Histoire de la qualité alimentaire XIX^e-XX^e siècle* (Paris, 2005); A. Chatriot, M. Chessel and M. Hilton (eds), *The Consumer Expert: Associations and Professionals in Consumer Society* (London, 2006).

²² The most interesting reviews include: A. Spire, *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 54 (2007), 178-90; M.-O. Baruch, *Annales HSS* (2007), 839-52; E. Ollion, *Genèses*, 69 (2007), 128-39; M. Naepels, *Genèses*, 69 (2007), 140-6.

²³ The book was published immediately in the Folio 'pocket' edition, and is 900 pages long, of which 200 are devoted to Dewerpe's important and interesting footnotes.

To understand this ‘state violence’, Alain Dewerpe has focused on the police work, insisting that ‘Charonne est aussi un massacre de bureau et de papier’.²⁴ He presents the way in which the police attempted to control the Parisian demonstrations in order to show that orders explicitly required police leaders to ‘faire preuve d’énergie’ in dispersing banned demonstrations. Although they were present, neither gendarmes nor Compagnie républicaine de sécurité intervened directly; it was, rather, the municipality’s ‘compagnies d’intervention’ that charged with ‘bidules’ (strong clubs that had been adopted after the Second World War). Analysing previous uses of violence in earlier demonstrations, Dewerpe describes how a ‘violence exacerbée’ erupted at Charonne metro station. Using the archives of the Prefecture of Police (especially notes from radio traffic and minute books), he delivers a precise and impressive account of the charge that was launched against a procession that was in the process of breaking up, the beatings and the piling up of bodies. He shows that the interpretation that has sometimes been advanced, that the police authorities had lost control of their agents on the ground, does not stand up; he underlines the fact that if the demonstrators had resorted to violence themselves this was purely in response to the police violence and was totally improvised—here, once more, the legend that lets off the hook the armed groups who were more or less linked to the OAS is dismissed.

Having established the facts, Dewerpe focuses on what he calls the ‘politiques de la police’, and situates much of his analysis within the recent renewal of historical interest in the political history of administration.²⁵ He analyses both the rightward-leaning culture of the Parisian police and the type of doctrine woven into their official textbooks. He reminds us, too, of the crisis that shook this police force in the winter of 1961–62 when it was mobilized against the Front de Libération nationale (FLN) and the OAS, focusing especially on the different grades in the police force, from commissaires to ministerial advisers.

At the end of the first part of his book, Dewerpe offers a page of French political history. Far from the commemorations of the Gaullists or a classic parliamentary history, he studies the politics of the final phase of the Algerian war.²⁶ His discussion of the tensions that existed within the syndicates’ alliance

²⁴ Dewerpe, *Charonne*, 86.

²⁵ M. O. Baruch and V. Duclert (eds), *Serviteurs de l’Etat. Une histoire politique de l’administration française 1875–1945* (Paris, 2000); M. O. Baruch and V. Duclert, ‘Administrateurs et administrations sous la IV^e République: une histoire politique’, *Revue française d’administration publique*, 108 (2003), 501–19; M. O. Baruch (ed.), *Une poignée de misérables: l’épuration de la société française après la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Paris, 2003).

²⁶ Sudhir Hazareesingh puts these into perspective in *Le Mythe gaullien* (Paris, 2010). Political history has nonetheless seen several recent publications that help to bring a relatively new light to this period: C. Andrieu, *Pour l’Amour de la République: le club Jean Moulin 1958–1970* (Paris, 2002); N. Castagnez, *Socialistes en République: les parlementaires SFIO de la IV^e République* (Rennes, 2004); C. Andrieu, P. Braud and G. Piketty (eds), *Dictionnaire Charles de Gaulle* (Paris, 2006); G. Richard and J. Sainclivier (eds), *Les Partis et la République. La recomposition du système partisan 1956–1967* (Rennes, 2007); R. Souillac, *Le Mouvement Poujade: de la défense professionnelle au populisme nationaliste (1953–1962)* (Paris, 2007); F. Conord, *Rendez-vous manqués. La gauche non communiste et la modernisation des campagnes françaises* (Pessac, 2010).

is especially important. His examination of Gaullist policy is remorseless, concluding that ‘dans cette “crise profonde de l’Etat”, il n’y a nul besoin de volonté meurtrière ni d’ordres explicites pour que le massacre se produise, qu’il “arrive” . . . Il suffit [aux gouvernants] en effet pour faire faire de laisser faire.’²⁷

But the event did not end with the massacre. The following days saw a powerful mobilization of the trades-unionist and political left, with a well supported strike and new demonstrations. Rapidly, denunciations from both sides clouded the actual event itself. The debate focused on the causes of the deaths, the precise nomination of the officers responsible, their actions and conduct, and Dewerpe demonstrates how government wove a new discourse around ‘la faute du mort’. Two antithetical hypotheses, from the demonstrators and the police, contradicted each other on the very account of the demonstration. Building on new analyses of testimony from the social sciences, Dewerpe provides a fresh discussion of the accounts in the press. Here, as elsewhere, his demonstration is a real lesson in method, from the attention he gives to the way in which journalists worked, to the political balance within the French press and the importance of photographs. He further shows how the demonstrators quickly drew together their testimonies, showing how they were public, coherent and direct. Against these, he rightly opposes the instability of the government and the police account which led to the construction of a ‘state lie’. He follows both the specifics of the police’s self-justification and the elisions or displacements introduced into the story by politicians. With many long citations, Dewerpe deconstructs the permutations in the chronology and in the attribution of responsibility that can be read in the official narrative.

The third part of the book remains faithful to this use of multiple dimensions of the event. Dewerpe first interrogates the extraordinary ‘funeral theatre’ that was set up for the victim-martyrs. A procession was permitted and this drew together one of the most important demonstrations of twentieth-century Paris. The silent cortège marched to the Père Lachaise cemetery, where a number of the victims were buried in the 97th division, near the mur des Fédérés.²⁸ Dominated by communists—the party of most of the dead—these funerals were nonetheless a demonstration of unanimity, with a strong presence from syndicates and a sense of left-wing unity. But Dewerpe does not just focus on the social and political history, he also follows, in all its complexity, the judicial process that followed the deaths.²⁹ Here, too, Dewerpe’s work is very new in historiographical terms: with the opening of new archives and building on his precise understanding of the workings of the law, he has been able to deconstruct the process by which, within seven years, a ‘massacre litigation’ entered all the orders of the French

²⁷ Dewerpe, *Charonne*, 282–3.

²⁸ M. Rebérioux, ‘Le Mur des Fédérés. Rouge, “sang craché”’, in *Les lieux de mémoire*, I, *La République*, ed. P. Nora (Paris, 1984), 619–49.

²⁹ The fine analysis of this procedure is woven together with the conclusions of the study of the judicial corps during the Algerian war: S. Thénault, *Une Drôle de justice: les magistrats dans la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris, 2001).

judiciary (penal, civil and administrative), resulting in a triple judicial sanction: penal amnesty, incompetence of the state and shared civil responsibility. He reconstructs the remarkable preliminary inquiry by the Procureur de Paris Langlois, and the strong political arbitration that led to impunity, the witnesses never having been brought face to face with the perpetrators of the massacre. The implication of the Conseil d'État, the highest jurisdiction in the French administrative order, in the Algerian war is already known.³⁰

The final two chapters of the book examine the construction of the memory of the event and of its victims. Dewerpe analyses the evolution of the practice of commemorating Charonne, marking changes brought about by the Left's accession to power. He insists on the lasting state censorship that has for long been imposed on the media. His conclusion is that 'le souvenir du 8 février est, et a été, dans une entre-deux—à la fois établi et censuré, familier et confiné, général et particulier'.³¹ The reflection on the construction of a martyrology of Charonne does not shy away from the question of the continuing political denial of responsibility. Finally, he picks up the connections between Charonne and the repression of the Algerian demonstration of 17 October 1961. Recalling precisely the language used at the time (17 October has not been so occluded), Dewerpe demonstrates that rather than a 'competition of the victims', we could thus connect and solidify the memory of all victims of police repression in 1960s France.

Some of the author's conclusions insist thus on the question of *raison d'état* in democratic regimes, developing arguments he has advanced in an earlier work.³² This detailed study is also motivated by a very powerful personal dimension on the author's part, as he states explicitly at the end of his introduction—the whole of the work is a masterly demonstration of the rigour of his proposal: 'Le lecteur ne doit enfin pas ignorer que ce projet de piété filiale relève aussi de la commémoration savante. Si être le fils d'une martyre de Charonne ne donne aucune lucidité, il n'interdit pas de faire son métier d'historien'.³³

These two important works illustrate the richness of new avenues for the political, social and economic history of post-war France. Other paths, more specialized, have also recently been opened up, such as the study of the welfare state and the world of labour.³⁴ Colonial history, with its multiple debates, is

³⁰ A. Chatriot, 'La Difficile écriture de l'histoire du Conseil d'Etat', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 26 (2008), 23–42.

³¹ Dewerpe, *Charonne*, 613.

³² A. Dewerpe, *Espion. Une anthropologie historique du secret d'Etat contemporain* (Paris, 1994).

³³ Dewerpe, *Charonne*, 19.

³⁴ B. Valat, *Histoire de la Sécurité sociale (1945-1967). L'État, l'institution et la santé* (Paris, 2001); P.-A. Rosental, *L'Intelligence démographique. Sciences et politiques des populations en France (1930-1960)* (Paris, 2003); A. Brodriez-Dolino, *Emmaüs et l'abbé Pierre* (Paris, 2009); C. Capuano, *Vichy et la Famille. Réalités et faux-semblants d'une politique publique* (Rennes, 2009); O. Join-Lambert, *Le Receveur des Postes, entre l'État et l'usager (1944-1973)* (Paris, 2001); N. Hatzfeld, *Les Gens d'usine. 50 ans d'histoire à Peugeot-Sochaux* (Paris, 2002); N. Marty, *Perrier c'est nous ! Histoire de la source Perrier et de son personnel* (Paris, 2005); A. Chatriot, O. Join-Lambert and V. Viet (eds), *Les Politiques du Travail (1906-2006). Acteurs, institutions, réseaux* (Rennes, 2006).

also being revived, though perhaps the most important work here is not confined to the period of the beginnings of decolonization.³⁵

With Kaplan and Dewerpe, the state and its administrative functions are examined through their interaction with society. Through the episode of Pont-Saint-Esprit or the deaths at Charonne, the history they offer is at once political and social. We could certainly add that it is also cultural, given the subtle consideration of the representation of the actors involved, and the fine analysis of the media and of intellectual debates. Nonetheless, both books are a long way from the kind of cultural history that is concerned primarily with the study of memory. This dimension is certainly not absent from their studies, but neither historian has wanted to dwell on it exclusively. Through their dissection of precise events, which at first sight appear limited within time, both historical inquiries have opened up a new and refreshing understanding of the history of the French Republic in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Alongside these works, we should add that wider perspectives offered in several other collectively- and individually-authored volumes are promoting a better understanding of the political issues at stake in this period.³⁶ The constitutional questions surrounding this period are now well illuminated by legal historians and, in particular for the Fifth Republic, benefit from the publication of documents on the preparation and development of the new institutions promoted by General de Gaulle.³⁷ Certainly, these important new works should nourish a new generation of syntheses designed to draw a more complete portrait of France after the Second World War.

³⁵ C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Enjeux politiques de l'histoire coloniale* (Marseille, 2009).

³⁶ V. Duclert and C. Prochasson (eds), *Dictionnaire critique de la République* (Paris, 2002); J.-J. Becker, G. Candar (eds), *Histoire des gauches en France*, ii. *XX^e siècle : à l'épreuve de l'histoire*, (Paris, 2004); P. Rosanvallon, *Le Modèle politique français. La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 2004).

³⁷ J. Bougrab, *Aux Origines de la constitution de la IV^e République* (Paris, 2002); E. Cartier, *La Transition constitutionnelle (1940-1945), la reconstruction révolutionnaire d'un ordre juridique 'républicain'* (Paris, 2005). Commission des Archives constitutionnelles de la V^e République, *Archives constitutionnelles de la V^e République*, i. 4 oct. 1958-30 nov. 1958, ii. 1^{er} déc. 1958-7 jan. 1959, iii. 8 jan. 1959-27 avril 1959 (Paris, 2008, 2010); these three volumes follow the four already published by the Comité national chargé de la publication des travaux préparatoires des institutions de la V^e République, *Documents pour servir à l'histoire de l'élaboration de la constitution du 4 octobre 1958* (Paris, 1987, 1988, 1991 and 2001).