

# **A divided Republic: nation, state and citizenship in contemporary France**

## **Summary**

The political history of Western Europe since the 1970s has stubbornly resisted analysis. We are familiar with some of the most important turning points – the ‘oil shock’ of the 1970s, the rise of the European project, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the precipitous decline of Marxism, the tensions of postcolonial immigration... – and yet there have been very few attempts to bring these together into a coherent and sophisticated historical narrative. Sociologists have examined the rise of ‘new social movements’; philosophers and political theorists have explored the foundations of ‘neo-liberalism’; but historians such as Tony Judt and Richard Vinen have preferred to limit their discussions of the past forty years to the final pages of large-scale synthetic works on twentieth-century Europe. I believe that the time has come to reassess this period and explore the fundamental transformations that have taken place in European politics. Starting from the premise that existing frameworks are unable to account for the ideological changes of the past four decades, I will use the example of France to suggest that we need to look beyond traditional categories of right and left in order to identify contemporary political allegiances.

France is an exceptionally rich case study since it has been transformed by the turning-points that have marked the recent past. It has struggled to deal with the end of postwar prosperity after the oil crisis, it has been intimately involved in the construction of Europe and it has been deeply affected both by the collapse of Marxism and the rise of the ‘immigration problem’. These changes have led to a significant reshaping of French political culture around two powerful ideologies: republicanism and liberalism. The former reflects France’s continuing obsession with citizenship, national integration and the writing of its national narrative. The latter captures the ideas of those who have encouraged France to reform its institutions, liberalise its economy and accept ethnic diversity.

I will argue that the tension between these two political ideologies has become the central battleground of contemporary French politics. Rather than cast republicanism and liberalism as abstract entities to be denounced or praised, I will use a detailed study of France’s intellectual and political life to show that contemporary politics has not descended into bland centrism or apolitical consensus. On the contrary, there have been passionate debates over multiculturalism, citizenship, the reform of the state and the historiography of modern France. In isolation, many of these debates have received significant coverage in the press but the analysis here will demonstrate that they have all been part of an important reconfiguration of French political culture. Seen in a comparative perspective, a study of republicanism and liberalism in France thus gives us a radically different view of French and European politics at a time of ideological uncertainty and a renewed sense of global insecurity.

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