



# Le French-bashing

The latest in national self-flagellation

**EMILE CHABAL**

**FIXING FRANCE**

How to repair a broken republic

**NABILA RAMDANI**

352pp. Hurst. £22.

**PARIS ISN'T DEAD YET**

Surviving gentrification in the city of light

**COLE STANGLER**

260pp. Westbourne Press. £16.99.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WRITING on contemporary France often has a voyeuristic quality to it. Some of it borrows from utopian fantasy, with the French zipping around in high-speed trains and enjoying first-rate public healthcare. Much of it, however, borders on the dystopian, pointing out the economic stagnation, civil unrest, racism and failed universalism of a country supposedly in perpetual crisis.

To some extent the French have only themselves to blame for these clichés. Already in the 1970s the sociologist Michel Crozier was describing France as a “blocked society”. New catchphrases have since been coined to describe the country’s problems. The country has been branded as a depoliticized “centrist Republic”, in thrall to neoliberal “one-track thinking” or riven by a “social fracture”. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s opinion polls showed that the French were the most “depressed” people in Europe, the most “hostile” to capitalism and the least likely to believe that the “future will be better”. Still today, bookshops and chat shows brim over with dissections of France’s malaise, and commentators enthusiastically deploy medical metaphors to explain what’s wrong (the country is “ill”, “schizophrenic”, “cancer-ridden”). The journalist and former presidential candidate Éric Zemmour’s apocalyptic declinism – notably in *Le Suicide français* – provides the best-known recent example of this discourse of national self-flagellation.

Such pessimism has affected France’s image abroad. In the 2000s the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* began running stories and op-eds about how incorrigibly racist the French were, while problematic books such as Andrew Hussey’s *The French Intifada* (2014) portrayed France as being in the vanguard of a clash of civilizations. There is an apparently insatiable appetite for what home-grown intellectuals derisively refer to as “le French-bashing”.

Nabila Ramdani would probably reject claims that she is “French-bashing”, yet her book *Fixing France* epitomizes the genre. Over the course of ten chapters she attempts to tackle the biggest issues in contemporary France: politics, society, the far right, protest, terrorism, education, identity, feminism, economics and foreign policy. Each one, she contends, is undergoing its own mini crisis. This has fed into the macro crisis of a “broken Republic” that entertains a “perpetual illusion” about itself.

As a distillation of everything the French have been saying is wrong with their country for the past half-century, it certainly fits the bill. Unfortunately, while the issues Ramdani identifies are all too real, she does not do them justice. Almost all of the chapters feature potted histories of people or events such as Brigitte Bardot, the Liberation of France, Jean-Marie Le Pen or the terrorist attacks of 2015, but these are too thin to support her analysis of the present.

For instance, she mentions several times that France’s main far-right party, the Rassemblement National, has a historic link to the Waffen-SS in the form of Léon Gaultier, one of its founding members, but this fact does little to explain the party’s popularity in the twenty-first century. Nor does it clarify the current strategy of its leadership. Elsewhere she bemoans the high levels of corruption inside France, and in its dealings with its former African colonies, without taking the time to understand why corruption might be central to the political architecture of the Fifth Republic, or how French neocolonialism has evolved.

Ramdani also frequently invokes the Algerian War (1954–62) – about which the French are allegedly “in denial” – and uses it as a blanket explanation for a

A migrant tent protest, Paris, 2023

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whole variety of social ills, from racism to social exclusion. This flattens out the complexity of urban renewal initiatives in postwar France and their relationship to race, class and power. It is also incorrect to say that “the French” are in denial about the legacies of empire: civil society in France was torn apart by the consequences of the Algerian War during the conflict, then again from the late 1990s onwards. The afterlife of empire is omnipresent in France – and a vast range of polemical essays and nuanced scholarship proves it.

More surprising is the absence of either ordinary or exceptional voices in Ramdani’s book. If there is one thing that journalistic accounts usually provide, it is moving testimony about everyday life or striking portraits of political leaders. But *Fixing France* does not allow the French people to speak through its pages. It moves from subject to subject, with a few sentences here and there about Ramdani’s parents or her encounters with politicians and sportspeople. Her proposed solutions are slight: rather than consider the proposals of economists and policymakers, she exhorts France to shed its attachment to “high-minded ideals” and engage in a “period of action” as vague as the political sloganeering she denounces elsewhere.

A more helpful reflection on contemporary France is provided by Cole Stangler’s account of the contemporary housing crisis in the French capital. *Paris Isn’t Dead Yet* avoids conceptual confusion by focusing clearly on one city and one set of issues, related to access to housing, urban planning and the real-estate market. His critique of gentrification might be familiar, but he uses this to his advantage by comparing Paris to other cities. Where Ramdani makes France sound exceptional, Stangler makes it sound like any other advanced capitalist economy struggling to regulate a financialized and globalized property market.

The value of *Paris Isn’t Dead Yet* lies in the voices of his interlocutors. They are real people – renters, estate agents, activists, squatters, politicians and local officials – who live in a messy, inconsistent reality. What are we to think of the hard-pressed renter who, after years of waiting, turns down the offer of social housing because they would rather live in squalid conditions in a neighbourhood in central Paris than move to an unfamiliar place? More broadly, should we celebrate urban renewal initiatives or condemn them for their tendency to promote gentrification? Stangler’s interviewees rarely have clear-cut answers, and the author wisely keeps a low profile, preferring to let contradictions hang in the air.

The book has a chapter on the history of Paris – but history does not weigh too heavily on the text. Stangler prefers to take us on a journey through the capital to see the city for ourselves. He walks the streets of La Goutte d’Or as a way of highlighting the contribution of immigrants to the fabric of the city, and he uses his visit to a squat in Montreuil to reflect on the material conditions in which the creative arts can flourish. The prose does not have the emotional impact of, say, Rana Dasgupta’s brilliant descriptions of contemporary Delhi or the narrative power of *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990), François Maspéro’s famous account of his journey along the RER B, but it has a plausible and welcome humility.

Stangler’s conclusions, too, are valuable. Apart from the familiar call for more social housing and proper rent control, his argument that central Paris and its vast *banlieues* should be more effectively integrated into a single political and administrative entity is convincing. The gestural politics of Le Grand Paris and the media frenzy surrounding the upcoming Olympic Games are inadequate answers to the city’s pathologies, not the least of which is the gigantic influx of workers into central Paris every morning.

One imagines that Nabila Ramdani would agree with many aspects of Cole Stangler’s diagnosis. They share a common vision of a country in crisis, tied down by the weight of history and locked in an ideological straitjacket. Yet there is no doubt which of these is the better book. ■