

Kreuzer, Marcus

Institutions and Innovation:

Voters, Parties, and Interest Groups in the Consolidation of Democracy—France and Germany, 1870–1939

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

167 pp., \$52.50, ISBN-0-472-11186-8

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There is much to be said for *Institutions and Innovation*. By going back into the mid to late nineteenth century, Marcus Kreuzer shows that political leaders such as Bismarck in the new Reich, as well as Napoleon III and General Georges Boulanger in France, realized the necessity of creating mass political parties to win and hold power. This task was much harder for conservatives (with the brief exception of Boulanger in France of the late 1880s) than for either liberals or socialists (who were the first to organize in such a way), because of a deep-seated distrust of the masses.

Because of the much larger size (geographic as well as demographic) of German electoral districts than their French counterparts (66 times larger, Kreuzer demonstrates), it was much more difficult for party leaders to enforce party discipline, and the expense of running parties was much greater in Germany than in France. As a consequence, German political parties became nothing more than parliamentary mouthpieces for special interests. Thus, in a typical French electoral district, a candidate could not only easily get to know on a first-name basis virtually all of the voters in a given district, but he could easily—and cheaply—reach and influence them by “standing a round or two of drinks” at a local café run by a sympathetic proprietor.

I have two objections, albeit of a relatively minor nature, to the book. First, Kreuzer devotes only one chapter (out of six, plus the conclusion) to the period prior to 1914. The remaining five chapters are devoted to the period from 1919 to 1939, so that I think that the subtitle, *Voters, Parties, and Interest Groups in the Consolidation of Democracy—France and Germany, 1870–1939*, is somewhat misleading.

Second, I would argue that with the advent of the Depression—if not earlier with the virtual judicial praise of Hitler following the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923—German democracy was, at the very least, on shaky ground. Kreuzer could have been clearer on this important point, as it has impact on Weimar democracy. One might argue that French democracy was also tested in the early 1930s—witness the two Paris riots of February 1934 (the first, neofascist, the second pro-Republic)—but French democracy survived this crisis, and German democracy did not.

Kreuzer concludes with the trenchant observation that “the principal training ground for democracy was electoral politics. . . . Germany’s bureaucratic, risk-averse parties weakened [and ultimately destroyed] the Weimar Republic whereas France’s more centripetal parties helped preserve the Third

Republic” (169). That was so at least until the tragic military defeat and humiliation of May/June 1940 at the hands of a resurgent Nazi Germany.

For students of comparative interwar politics, *Institutions and Innovation* is a must, and it should be included in any library that deals with that subject and the histories of France and Germany. Both political scientists and historians will find it useful and interesting.

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Birnbaum, Pierre

The Idea of France

Trans. M. B. DeBevoise

New York: Hill and Wang

370 pp., \$32.00, ISBN 0-8090-4650-4

Publication Date: September 2001

Pierre Birnbaum is a well-known authority on French political history and a professor of politics and philosophy at the Sorbonne. He is perhaps best known for his research on the history of Jews in France. In *The Idea of France*, Birnbaum turns his attention to the history of the competition to assign the proper cultural grounding for the nation of France. His purpose is to examine the socioeconomic conflicts that cut through French society “in an attempt to retrace the main forms of symbolic significance that presided over the nation’s conception” (11).

Birnbaum presents the conflict over the definition of the French nation from absolutist monarchy to present democracy. He explains that national unity was forged from above, was insistent on religious conformity, and did not allow for political or religious diversity, thus excluding Protestants and Jews. National identity was also dependent on a strong state. The 1789 Revolution created a competing model of the national concept based on republican unity, and the Catholic counterrevolution reasserted the older conceptualization of national identity based in a common faith. Those conflicting visions of the nation, both of which excluded any type of difference, and the legacy of a strong state retarded the development of liberalism and pluralism in French national culture and shaped French political life and culture until recently.

Change began in the Fourth Republic with the creation of a Christian democratic party, a sign that Catholics had at last accepted and rallied to the state. The struggle over meaning ended with François Mitterrand’s death and the Republic’s first Catholic state funeral services. With the renunciation of its view of a France unified in Catholicism, and by embracing cultural diversity, the Catholic Church became the spokesman for French multiculturalism. The France released from the tyranny of utopian myths was determined to show respect for the cultural memories of all its citizens and to give them a sense of

shared civic values. It was determined, too, to encourage all its citizens to work on behalf of the public good (282).

Birnbaum’s analysis provides a broader and more fundamental framework for understanding the unique realities of the history of modern France. Periods in French history such as Vichy and phenomena such as the National Front are, in this analysis, no longer peculiar French reactions to current events; they are instead part of an ongoing debate about French national identity.

Previous works on French nationalism have tended to study the forging of national identity in the modern era, and particularly the Third Republic’s use of national identity to create unity. Birnbaum’s work emphasizes not only that national identity predates the modern era, but that the issue of identity has been but a modern incarnation of older tensions.

The Idea of France is intended for professional historians and advanced graduate students who are already familiar with the history of modern France.

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Asprey, Robert B.

The Reign of Napoleon Bonaparte

New York: Basic Books

462 pp., \$35.00, ISBN: 0-465-00481-4

Publication Date: October 2001

For approximately fifty years Robert B. Asprey, a retired U.S. Marine officer and veteran of two wars, has been a noted military historian. Recently, he has written two military-related biographies: *Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma* (1986) and, since then, two volumes on Napoleon Bonaparte, *The Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte* (2000) and its sequel, *The Reign of Napoleon Bonaparte*, herein considered.

Asprey sets out to portray Napoleon as neither a “demi-god” nor “devil incarnate” (xvii), and here he largely succeeds. However, he also attempts to show that “[a]lmost constant warfare was a legacy of the revolutionary chaos, a series of wars invoked by European and English rulers determined to topple the dangerous interloper and restore Bourbon and feudalistic rule to France” (xviii).

Some would definitely disagree with Asprey’s contention that Napoleon was completely blameless for the wars that troubled the period. One has only to consider any one of the many treaties that Napoleon imposed on his defeated adversaries—to see the one-sidedness and humiliation of them—to understand that in those treaties lay the seeds of future wars. Whatever he may have claimed on St. Helena, in practice between 1800 and 1815, Napoleon did not believe in a lasting peace of reconciliation.

Asprey demonstrates a thorough understanding of Napoleon’s published correspondence (he has not made use of any archival