

Sweet Land of Liberty: America in the Mind of the French Left, 1848–1871. Tom Sancton. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2021. 336 pages. \$50.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780807174302.

Titles of books about the historical relationship between the United States and France can often express ambivalence: fascination mixed with misgivings and aversion, hopes balanced against fears, dreams contending with nightmares, an uncertain friendship.¹ Although the two countries have been characterized as “sister republics,” each boasting a heritage of revolutionary action in pursuit of liberal ideals, France sometimes gets depicted instead as America’s “oldest enemy,” while the French—with minimal self-reflection—pour scorn on the United States for its racism, obsession with wealth, and hegemonic tendencies.² As these citations attest, the dynamics of this relationship between transatlantic “frenemies” spanning all periods of the past two and a half centuries have received plentiful attention from scholars (not to mention less scholarly commentators). Inexorably changing global circumstances continually affect how French and Americans view and engage with each other, however, prompting new efforts to reassess the twists and turns, peaks and valleys that might illuminate and contextualize the current disposition of the one society and its people towards the other. In *Sweet Land of Liberty: America in the Mind of the French Left, 1848–1871*, Tom Sancton, former Paris bureau chief for *Time* and, at present, research professor at Tulane University, focuses on a relatively brief but eventful and consequential era in the history of both countries that demonstrates how closely the several political traditions identified broadly as “the French left” referred to the American system of republicanism and its incomplete democracy—alternately inspired and disgusted by various features of it—during the most transformative crisis faced by that system since its founding. Even though the American republic and the French revolutionary heritage shared important ideals and drew them from some common sources, Sancton shows how political traditions may not translate well from one national experience to another, as the contingency of events within the specific context of national frameworks transforms a shared ideological language into distinct dialects that become less and less comprehensible, engendering frustration, disappointment, and incoherence among partisans of transnational concepts like republicanism and democracy.

Sancton’s treatment of his subject is itself far from incoherent, although the title references a patriotic hymn appropriated by Americans from a British rather than a French source, and a

¹ Jacques Portes, *Fascination and Misgivings: The United States in French Opinion, 1870–1914*, translated by Elborg Forster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)—original title: *Une fascination réticente. Les États-Unis devant l’opinion française 1870-1914*, (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1990); Denis Lacorne, Jacques Rupnik, et Marie-France Toinet, dirs., *L’Amérique dans les têtes. Un siècle de fascinations et d’aversions*, (Paris: Hachette, 1986); Charles Brooks, *America in France’s Hopes and Fears: 1890-1920*, 2 vols., (New York: Garland, 1987); Philippe Roger, *Rêves et cauchemars américains: les États-Unis au miroir de l’opinion publique française (1945-1953)*, (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1996); Marvin Zahniser, *Uncertain Friendship: American-French Diplomatic Relations Through the Cold War*, (Boston: Wiley, 1975).

² Patrice Higonnet, *Sister Republics: The Origin of French and American Republicanism*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); John J. Miller and Mark Molesky, *Our Oldest Enemy: A History of America’s Disastrous Relationship with France*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004)—translated into French as *Maudits Français! Trois siècles de relations tumultueuses entre la France et l’Amérique*, (Paris: Éditions Saint-Simon, 2005).

picture appears on the front cover of the Statue of Liberty under construction in Paris in 1884, past the book's chronological scope (even if mentioned briefly towards the end), cause some confusion. Beyond that, the book blends competent scholarship and deft storytelling with a lucid writing style punctuated by pithy phrases and allusions. Sancton organizes the book in four parts that each concentrate on episodes of crisis that transformed France and the United States in ways directly relevant to the visions of freedom and justice that inspired the aspirations of the French left. Each section is preceded by an abstract summarizing its salient points, and effectively chosen quotations from French and American commentators accompany those abstracts and head each chapter, alerting the reader about what to expect. Part I opens in the revolutionary year 1848 that established the short-lived Second Republic, then proceeds through its usurpation by its president, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, in 1851, to the eve of the American Civil War at the end of that decade. Part II covers the years of that bloody conflict between 1861 and 1865, then turns in Part III to the early period of American Reconstruction through 1870, the same time that the Second Empire in France underwent a limited but not inconsiderable degree of liberalization that whetted the political appetites of the French left. The *année terrible* of 1870–71 that brought France's military debacle against Prussia and the brutal civil conflict of the Commune and its suppression frames a very short Part IV, lengthened slightly by a chapter that takes the reader through an "aftermath" stretching into the 1880s, before closing with a brief conclusion.

The French left that populates this volume encompassed a broad constituency that included upright bourgeois liberals like Alexis de Tocqueville and Edouard Laboulaye, Romantic radicals like Victor Hugo and George Sand, socialists of differing stripes like Victor Considérant and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, incorrigible upstarts like Georges Cluseret and Adolphe Blanqui, plus a mostly anonymous mass of workers and *misérables*, among others. Sancton cites from an abundant corpus of published primary sources—articles, memoirs, travel accounts, novels, poems, etc.—and manuscript material found in archives on either side of the Atlantic that covers fourteen pages in the bibliography to represent the varied and evolving impressions that this diverse group had of the United States. He deploys these sources in tracing a pattern that begins in 1848 with admiration for the United States by those across the spectrum of the French left at its peak, then descends to a nadir of discouragement and scorn through the troubled 1850s. The struggle to emancipate four million from slavery and to ensure that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" during the American Civil War rehabilitated the reputation of the United States among the French left, a sentiment that reached "apotheosis" amid the reforms undertaken during Reconstruction before fading from relevance in the wake of the violent upheavals that gave birth to the French Third Republic. In fact, differing and nuanced views about what the United States meant to the French left were evident at any given time in those years, and commentators could often praise the United States in one breath and criticize it in the other. Even Proudhon, whose dislike for the United States comes across as downright curmudgeonly, had the occasional word of praise to offer. The French left found consensus unattainable on any issue, not least what the United States represented and should represent.

The chapters address various topics, and some could be read alone as glimpses into the thinking about the United States by the French left at different times without losing much of their coherence. One of these, Chapter 4, analyzes accounts of French visitors, emigrants, exiles, and utopian settlers in the United States during the 1850s. In Chapter 10, Sancton disputes, with only partial success, the commonly accepted idea that French workers supported the Union during the American Civil War and opposed their country's intervention on the side of the Confederacy. Also interesting is Chapter 12 that describes the subscription campaigns to create medals honoring Abraham Lincoln and John Brown that were presented to their respective widows, a strategy that served as a proxy for critiquing Napoleon III's regime by unflattering comparison. This chapter is immediately followed by one recounting the interesting escapades of Georges Cluseret, a graduate of Saint-Cyr military academy and veteran of the Crimean War who offered his services to the Union cause during the American Civil War—only halfway through a peripatetic career of radical politics and revolutionary intrigue that concludes in Chapters 18 and 19 in the ill-fated Commune.

The chapters in Part III are robust but conventional and not as lively as some of the moments found in the first two sections. The brief chapters in Part IV are disappointingly thin, given the dramatic intensity of the events that occurred at that time, and leave the reader with a sense that the book has been stopped short of its completion. Other parts of the book are marked by this uneven presentation. Some chapters are so short and narrowly focused that they might well have been combined: Chapters 7 through 9, for instance, each deal with a specific issue that complicated Franco-American relations during the American Civil War and seem more appropriate as subsections of Chapter 6 than separate chapters. Others stand apart in terms of their purpose, such as Chapter 10, which addresses the historiographical debate mentioned above, and Chapter 13 on Cluseret, the only one devoted to a particular individual rather than to a chorus of voices on the French left.

Nevertheless, in reviving and contextualizing those voices, *Sweet Land of Liberty* contributes to the ongoing conversation about the mutual interest the United States and France have had with each other. The book is best suited for upper-level undergraduates and scholars interested in comparative political cultures of the era. Instructors might select individual chapters to assign in their courses rather than the whole book.

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