In little less than a year French voters will go to the polls to decide whether to give Emmanuel Macron another five years in the Elysée Palace. So it is time to weigh up his achievements and shortcomings. In What Ails France, Brigitte Granville, a French-born economist, finds few of the former and many of the latter. Her assessment is withering, visceral even. The official photograph of the young Olympian president “with his fixed and icy gaze gives me cold sweats every time I set eyes on it in the mayor’s office of my small village in northern Burgundy”. She has written, she concedes, an “at times indignant tract”.

The Macron story is one of lost illusions. He rose to power promising to be an “antidote to conventional ideological frameworks by championing transparency, openness and optimism”. He represented hope and change. But halfway through his term, when the so-called yellow vest anti-government protesters took to the streets, that hope had all but evaporated. “His non-ideology was, in reality, a meta-ideology, reclothing the country’s legacy system in a new, colourless centrism.”
Much of the blame, she says, lies with Macron’s arrogance and condescension, which has translated into political ineptitude. He in effect scrapped France’s wealth tax and described the French as “shirkers” and memorably told a young horticulturalist struggling to find work to cross the road and get a job in a café. “His grandiose self-image was combined with the technocrat’s characteristic dismissive impatience when confronted with obstacles and objections, and a dramatic lack of empathy for the plight of the working poor.”

Granville forensically picks apart Macron’s landmark economic and welfare reforms, concluding they were either unnecessary (labour market liberalisation), ineffective (business deregulation) or politically counter-productive (pensions, now shelved).

But the real focus of the book is not so much the president but the technocratic system of which Macron is “both exemplar and hostage”: the monarchical state and its high bureaucratic caste whose grip reaches far across business, the media and intellectual life.

Granville, a professor at Queen Mary, University of London, is inspired by a 1976 essay of the same name, Le Mal Francais, by Alain Peyrefitte, a Gaullist minister who bemoaned France’s “blocked society” and ambient pessimism stemming from its failure to shed its absolutist heritage of uncompromising centralisation. It’s the same story nearly 50 years on. The writer maintains her book does not belong to the well-stocked genre of French déclinisme on the basis that it is neither nostalgic for a golden past nor seeks to blame a feckless French population for the country’s woes. But it is damning and fatalistic nonetheless.

Her starting point is the yellow vest protesters or rather those who sympathise with their grievances, herself included, “who are routinely denounced as heretics, fascistically blaspheming against a proven formula for prosperity”. Catalysed by a planned tax rise on diesel, the yellow vests movement was a bottom-up protest by people struggling to get by in suburbs, small towns and rural areas who felt betrayed by the state and ignored or scorned by a Parisian elite. It lacked leadership, ideological boundaries or clear demands.

Drawing widely on economic and sociological research, Granville constructs the intellectual case for their anger. France is under the control of a self-serving bureaucratic oligarchy that professes to work in the interests of a meritocratic state but is in fact protecting its own interests. Reforms are about preserving the status quo. A super-selective education system is failing too many pupils and students. French business is held back by too many senior executives with bureaucratic backgrounds. The pervasive tradition of state intervention has poisoned labour relations inside companies, leaving them ill-equipped to adapt to technological transformation. Technocratic centralisation has destroyed public trust in democracy.
The author, who regards herself as a Eurosceptic dissident, contends that only by abandoning the single currency can France grow fast enough to overcome its structural problems. She blames the technocracy for blindly following European orthodoxy. But France’s problems are surely bigger than a slightly overvalued exchange rate. And the author plays down the political and financial consequences of abandoning the single currency as if it were just a little transitional difficulty. Even Marine Le Pen, France’s far-right leader, has given up that fiction.

This is a richly researched, elegantly written book in a liberal intellectual frame. Her description of the French elite and its motives is at times conspiratorial. But it helps to explain the animus many French people hold towards their president whose political future is hanging in the balance because of it.


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