
Western Europe

Andrew Moravcsik

Boris Johnson: The Gambler

BY TOM BOWER. WH Allen, 2020, 592 pp.

In today's media-obsessed world, many politicians publicly flaunt narcissistic personal habits, lie openly about important issues, shift their fundamental principles to fit the moment, tailor their actions to build a personal brand rather than a political legacy, and hire subordinates more for loyalty than expertise. This book illustrates these trends by tracing the life of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The author, an investigative journalist, churned out nearly 600 pages within a year, so perhaps it would be unfair to expect the most accurate, scrupulously documented, nuanced, or well-written biography of Johnson in print. It is none of those things. But it is the newest recounting of the prime minister's life, taking the reader all the way up through July 2020—well into the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the book's sometimes compulsive effort to document both sides of every judgment, Johnson emerges as the stereotypical rich boy from a privileged background. He is a compulsive gambler who repeatedly jeopardizes his jobs, marriages, and future prospects through sloppy, lazy, and risky behavior—and each time is saved by his charm, luck, ambition, and connections. His is a life for our times.

Collateral Damage: Britain, America, and Europe in the Age of Trump

BY KIM DARROCH. William Collins, 2020, 400 pp.

Darroch was the most successful British diplomat of his generation. A middling graduate in zoology from a regional university, he entered the Foreign Office with no special promise. Yet he rose to serve as a top adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair, permanent representative to the European Union, national security adviser to Prime Minister David Cameron, and, finally, the British ambassador in Washington. But in 2019, his 40-year career ended abruptly when someone (probably a colleague in London) leaked one of his top-secret reports. It described U.S. President Donald Trump as “dysfunctional . . . clumsy and inept.” Trump responded by tweeting, “We will no longer deal with him,” and the Conservative politician Boris Johnson—at the time in a fight for leadership of his party and likely seeking to distinguish himself from other aspirants—refused to support Darroch. This book confirms what many in the foreign policy community know from personal experience: the author is reasonable, generous, and discreet. These are laudable qualities in a diplomat but lamentable in a writer of memoirs. Beyond a short accounting of his time in Washington, amusing depictions of the demeaning ways in which diplomats scramble for access, and a brief description of how inequality, immigration, and identity fueled the parallel rises of Trump and Johnson, one searches in vain in these pages for fresh insights or inside information about this tumultuous period.

The Neoliberal Republic: Corporate Lawyer, Statecraft, and the Making of Public-Private France

BY ANTOINE VAUCHEZ AND PIERRE FRANCE. Cornell University Press, 2021, 204 pp.

French President Emmanuel Macron rose to prominence in politics quickly by moving back and forth between the public and the private sector. A graduate of the prestigious civil service training school known as the ENA, he worked first in the French Finance Ministry and then for Rothschild & Co., before becoming a government official, a minister, and then president in 2017. The authors argue that this is a career imaginable in France only in the last few decades, as the country has lowered barriers between the state and business. This shift has led to a flourishing of “in-and-outers”: top officials—few in number but high in prestige—who leave state service to work for private companies and corporate law firms as lobbyists, experts, and arbiters. Vauchez and France document who these people are and criticize their role in undermining effective democratic control. Their analysis, however, lacks concrete examples of how exactly in-and-outers have harmed the public interest. The authors nonetheless close by recommending greater transparency and stronger conflict-of-interest laws, as one finds in other advanced democracies faced with the same phenomenon.

Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces

BY LAURA TUNBRIDGE. Yale University Press, 2020, 288 pp.

Were it not for COVID-19, audiences in concert halls across the globe would have spent 2020 celebrating the 250th birthday of Ludwig van Beethoven—the most famous composer in the Western canon. Over the nearly two centuries since his death, many great books on the man and his music have appeared, telling readers nearly everything that can be known. This short, popular introduction takes a fresh approach. It portrays the man’s life through nine of his compositions. They span from his Septet, an early work with engaging and popular tunes, to the gnarly *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet, a late work that lay unrecognized as a masterpiece for a generation. Tunbridge highlights Beethoven’s genius by contrasting it with the prosaic details of an everyday life beset with financial worries, family crises, political squabbles, and loneliness. Her portrait is in no way original or comprehensive, but she succeeds in stripping Beethoven of the romantic exaggerations of him as a penurious, entirely deaf, politically revolutionary, curmudgeonly misanthrope. As a result, this biography leads readers back to Beethoven’s timeless music.