

Stavisky: A Confidence Man in the Republic of Virtue. *By Paul F. Jankowski*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. xiv + 326 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-801-43959-0.

Reviewed by Donald Reid

The crisis created by the collapse of Serge Stavisky's financial house of cards appears in French history texts because it elicited chaotic right-wing demonstrations at the Palais Bourbon, where the Chamber of Deputies met, on February 6, 1934. Parties on the left responded by taking steps that led to the creation of the Popular Front. However, in *Stavisky: A Confidence Man in the Republic of Virtue*, Paul Jankowski tells Stavisky's story not to forward the narrative of French politics in the 1930s but instead to explore structural elements of the Third Republic: the relations of politicians to enterprises dependent on state attention or inattention, and those of parliamentarians to civil servants. Jankowski did extensive research in previously closed judicial archives, and he has written an engrossing account of Stavisky's exploits. The tale has been told before, but never so well. As in Honoré de Balzac's novels about the world of confidence men, the reader comes to know the myriad characters in Stavisky's circles through telling details of their behavior and to recognize their haunts in the ninth arrondissement of Paris. Stavisky's story represents an important business history of enterprises that do not sell the bouillon, refrigerators, or real estate they ostensibly market, but exist in an economy premised on nurturing influence and dreams, investing in appearances and connections, and granting and calling in favors. For Stavisky the Third Republic was not only a regulator to be evaded; it was an opportunity to exploit.

Jankowski plots the ascent of Stavisky, a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant, beginning with projects that drew on his gifts as a grifter. Stavisky moved on to scams dependent both on lawyers' willing deployment of their skills to give the appearance of legality to his enterprises and on inclusion on company boards of prominent figures like retired generals and ambassadors, whose reputations protected questionable projects from close examination. Stavisky's swindles reached fruition and sustained themselves by taking advantage of the fissures and contradictions of the Third Republic. The heart of Jankowski's account is his examination of elected officials of the quintessential late Third Republic institution, the Radical Party, who were compromised by their efforts to reward their districts and themselves. Yet if earlier Third Republic scams had also tarred prominent individuals, Stavisky's projects were more clearly rooted in the workings of the Third Republic itself. He seized the opportunity offered when state-monitored, but poorly

supervised, municipal pawnshops were allowed to take on attributes of banks in the 1920s. Parliamentarians' powers with respect to the nominally independent civil servants tilted the putative balance of power toward elected officials. Taking the reader through the story of the scandal, Jankowski shows that civil servants were often dependent on a good word from a deputy or senator for a promotion and that the putative independence of the civil service, including the judiciary, was always in doubt. Stavisky frequently profited from interministerial turf conflicts as well as the promotion or retirement of state officials who sought to shed light on the murky world of his business dealings.

For historians of business, Jankowski's account of the press is of particular interest. Newspapers' search for corruption among public figures and the papers' own corruption were mutually reinforcing. For public figures dependent on the votes or investments of the public, a good reputation was essential. Numerous scandal sheets with quite small circulations survived by printing a little dirt on businessmen or prominent elected officials with a promise of more to come and then accepting hush money, often in the form of large advertisement purchases. On occasion Stavisky paid handsomely for the contract to handle all advertising for a scandal rag—or simply bought the paper. Large circulation dailies were enmeshed in a different set of economic constraints. To garner the audience needed to stay afloat, these papers fostered long-running stories of scandals like the Stavisky Affair with colorful personae and ever more new details in order to lure readers back each day.

Jankowski was a student of the great historian of the French Revolution, Richard Cobb, and his account shares with those of Cobb the fascination with figures operating on the fringes, whose marginality reveals the hidden elements of the larger society. Jankowski's introductory credo resonates with Cobb's ethos: "Show rather than judge, describe rather than explain, convey living detail rather than desiccated abstraction" (p. ix). He is aware that both what was said and what was not said is revealing. Surprisingly little was made of Stavisky's religion. Critics saw the affair as evidence not so much of a virtuous republic taken in by an alien, but of a corrupt republic revealing itself. The recent history of the Fifth Republic suggests that study of political scandal has not lost its relevance. Republics, and not just those in France, cling to an ideology of virtue, but confidence, reputation, and connections are at the core of the republican experience.

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