

## H-France Forum

Volume 8, Issue 2 (Spring 2013), No. 5

Richard F. Kuisel, *The French Way: How France Embraced and Rejected American Values and Power*. Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. xxii + 487 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-691-15181-6.

Response by Richard Kuisel, Georgetown University

At the outset I want to express my gratitude to the four commentators for their thoughtful and generous observations and recommendations.

One of my principal goals in writing *The French Way* was to raise questions and invite research into the recent French past. It is time to begin writing a history of the century from 1900 to 2000. This forum suggests readers of my book will respond as I intended.

Several of the forum participants, without indicting my analysis, note the current scholarly concern about use of the category “French identity.” This is an issue that deserves a response since I freely employ the term. The problem is national identity may imply a specific, fixed, and coherent consensus where in fact it was, and is, contested territory: there is the danger of essentializing what is an indeterminate, unstable, and debatable construction. I am aware of this conceptual issue and point out debates about the various meanings of identity among the French. Nevertheless I employ it because contemporaries not only based behavior and policies on it, but also because America played an important role in constructing it.

A major thesis of my study is establishing how America functioned as the “other” in configuring French identity. To be French was not to be American. Americans were conformists, materialists, racists, violent, and vulgar. The French were individualists, idealists, tolerant, and civilized. Americans adored wealth; the French worshiped *la douceur de vivre*. This caricature of America, which was already broadly endorsed at the beginning of the century, served to essentialize French national identity. At the end of the twentieth century, the French strategy of using America as a foil, as a way of defining themselves as well as everything from their social policies to their notion of what constituted culture, is a central argument of *The French Way*.

French identity is thought to be exceptional, definable, and virtuous—thus worthy of defense. If some scholars sniff at this notion of collective identity as a fabricated device, they may in so doing underestimate its capacity at stirring hearts and minds. National identity in France has been and is a deeply felt commitment that continues to structure how many inhabitants perceive themselves and others. French political and cultural elites have articulated what constituted national identity and exploited it to mobilize support. If it is a construction, it is a potent one. One of the commentators notes how crucial national identity is to the current financial crisis in the EU, to the debates over immigration, and to American politics. And, I would add, France once again, as in the 1990s, has raised the identity issue framed as the “cultural exception” in order to protect its audio-visual industries in the current negotiations over a US-EU free trade agreement—earning the wrath of the president of the European Commission. When the French raised the defense of national identity, they had to acknowledge that they did not agree on its content or what features were integral. It is these debates that *The French Way* tries to capture. I point out differences between the political Right and Left, to quarrels among intellectuals like the clash over Jack Lang’s invocation of French culture, as well as to disputes over whether or not ideals like linguistic purity, or practices like *haute cuisine*, or industries like a national cinema were vital to national identity. Such debates expose the fragility of what constitutes

national identity, but they do not diminish its importance in explaining French self-perception and behavior.

Helke Rausch raises a specific question about Americanization and identity. She asks “how can it be empirically proved that eating at McDonald’s, or drinking Coca-Cola and going to Disneyland either seriously undermined French culture and identity or was generally perceived to do so?” We admittedly need better evidence about consumer behavior to answer her query. Nevertheless substantial minorities, according to several polls, perceived American popular culture as a serious threat to identity. Most commonly selected as dangers were television, the cinema, and fast food—indeed the most conspicuous American product was the hamburger (McDonald’s). Moreover, anti-American public protests singled out McDonald’s, Disney, and Coca-Cola as targets of their anger. Some examples are the dismantling of a McDonald’s site by José Bové as a symbolic gesture against American *malbouffe* or the efforts by farmers and others to obstruct the opening of Euro Disney. Americanization concerned all Europeans, but it antagonized the French more than others, in part, because it targeted so many markers of their identity like food, wine, literature, the fine arts, language, and the cinema. There is no question that in some quarters certain American products were perceived as dangers to French identity.

But the problem becomes more intricate when addressing motives and the effects of consuming transatlantic imports. My evidence shows that many patrons selected them precisely because they were perceived as “American.” McDonald’s customers in the 1980s, who were predominantly young, frequented the Golden Arches because they thought they were eating like Americans. Visitors to Euro Disney said they wanted to experience Main Street USA or the American West. These consumers thought of themselves, if temporarily and vicariously, acting like Americans. But did this come at the price of French identity? Here is where answers become less certain both because survey data are inadequate and because assessing attitudes, motives, and meaning are elusive. But we do know that millions adopted American-style leisure (Euro Disney), ate Big Macs, and drank Cokes as well as flocked to see Hollywood movies and watched American television programs and that these choices altered conventional modes of consumption. These American imports gained market shares at the expense of French competitors and contributed to changing consumer habits. Liter bottles of Coke were commonplace at restaurant tables. Wine consumption declined precipitously among the younger generation and soft drinks like Coca-Cola functioned as both cause and effect. Cafés closed in droves while McDonald’s franchises expanded to a thousand units by the new millennium. Euro Disney attracted more visitors than the Louvre and became the most popular theme park in France (and Europe), and almost half its customers were French nationals. Moreover, it was during the 1980s that the screen time ratio of French vs. American movies (55%: 35%) reversed in favor of Hollywood. American television programs became so ubiquitous that there is anecdotal evidence French children knew more about the U.S. Civil War than the French Revolution while the French version of *The Wheel of Fortune* attracted more viewers than the more traditional and more cerebral game show *Des Chiffres et des lettres*. These American interlopers were one of several reasons for changing habits closely associated with national identity like dining at fine restaurants, patronizing cafés, drinking wine, or watching locally produced movies. Of course this cultural contest was not simply a zero-sum game in which America’s gain was France’s loss. I am careful to argue that the French exhibited contradictory attitudes and impulses and could appear inconsistent by lining up to see *Jurassic Park* while proclaiming their distaste for American popular culture. *The French Way*, given my small sample of American products and the difficulties in assessing the meaning of consumer choice, does not claim to have answered definitively the question of, whether or not consumers thought they were “betraying their cultural ancestry,” as Rausch phrases it. But I think there is evidence that many perceived a threat and that consumer behavior suggests the expansion of American culture came, to an extent, at the expense of traditional practices identified with French national identity.

Stephen Harp asks how gender, class, and race might have influenced views of the New World? My survey data distinguish between elites and non-elites and contain some information about gender but

nothing about race. Survey findings are, fortunately, precise about political differences, revealing more sympathy on the Right than the Left, and fine enough to draw distinctions among supporters of each political party. Elite/non-elite functions as a crude substitute for class and here there are some surprises like both strata sharing similar assessments of American popular culture. Non-elites, however, censured American social values such as lifestyle more pointedly while elites took aim at Washington's policies especially with respect to issues like trade and the environment. Data for elites can be refined even further so that anti-American attitudes emerge most prominently among politicians and cultural leaders in contrast to business managers. Age surprisingly made little difference. Surveys rarely sorted according to gender but there are some polls showing women expressed sharper criticism than men of certain alleged attributes of Americans like their racism and propensity for violence. How race, religion, and immigration shaped perceptions of America is a question that my surveys omitted: I invite others more expert on this topic to examine this important and complex issue. For example, were there any similarities between tropes about Muslim immigrants and Americans?

The forum would like a wider comparative perspective. Were French responses to America unique? Were changes in consumer habits due to American or global influences? In general much as I would have liked to extend the comparative reach of my study, reliable and consistent empirical data are rare. My principal source for establishing the peculiarities of French attitudes was U.S. State Department surveys that often included several other European (and even some non-European) countries in their samples and posed identical, or at least similar, polling questions over long periods of time. My findings suggest the French shared many attitudes about America and Americans with other Europeans such as the fear of U.S. domination, but that in some respects they were special. In general the French ranked high, along with the Spanish and Greeks, on recording their antipathies, and they singled out different targets. For example, the French led other West European in linking globalization with American domination, in their distrust of Washington's leadership, in their objections to American popular culture, and in perceiving differences between their conception of values like family and work from those held by Americans. And they were conspicuous in taking aim at American trade policy and business practices. Finding more such comparisons constitutes a challenge to scholars and will require some arduous and imaginative research.

Rebecca Pulju wants a wider chronological perspective, and she asks: did America have a different role as a model of consumer society during the *fin de siècle* than it did in the early postwar period when it was the uncontested epitome of mass consumption? What about the recent challenges of other consumer powerhouses like Japan or Germany, she wonders? Surveying the last half century there was at least one major development. Whereas in 1950 American consumer society seemed a possible, but not an inevitable, future and one that for many was undesirable, by 1990 this future had become the present. Most accepted the fact that they had embraced an Americanized version of mass consumption. Therefore it became difficult to criticize America on the basis of rejecting consumerism. Gallic expressions of anti-Americanism changed and policy issues took precedence over attacks on American modernity and consumption. The itineraries of intellectuals like Jean-Marie Domenach illustrate this shift. By the 1980s other models like Japan or Germany were relevant at the macroeconomic level but broadening my scope to move from the transatlantic to the global would have made a long book even longer. I also doubt that either Japan or Germany had the same impact as did America: their respective economic performances may have caught the attention of politicians, economists, and businessmen, but their consumer products and practices probably did not serve as models.

Two of my respondents raise another "big question" about Americanization: why did American consumer goods become so attractive to Europeans (and others)? I can only sketch a response here. It would be foolish to think there is one answer for all the products and services Americans exported. What might explain the success of Coca-Cola may have had little to do with the popularity of Rock 'n' Roll. Nevertheless, a generic explanation would include the following: American products often carried a representational or symbolic quality. They encoded messages like modernity, youthfulness, rebellion,

transgression, status, and freedom. The Solidarity movement in Poland, for example publicized its political dissent with images of Gary Cooper from the film *High Noon*. Or recall the musing of Régis Debray, no enthusiast of American culture, saying “America makes us all dream.” Second, Americans learned early on how to design and market products that crossed ethnic and class lines so that they could be readily exported; Hollywood films are an example. Third, we attracted talent and ideas from the world and then re-exported them; Disney’s borrowings of Pinocchio or Cinderella are a case in point. Then there was the linkage with political and economic power: historically culture has followed power. Thus Europeans learned English because it is a necessary skill in a globalized environment featuring American technology, education, and business. Similarly the size and power of U.S. multinationals, like that of the global giant Coca-Cola, helped American products win market shares. Finally, it must be acknowledged, that there has been something inherently appealing about what we make and sell. Europeans liked Broadway musicals, TV shows, and fashions. We know how to make and market what others want. A recent French study affirms the continuing global dominance of American popular culture.[1]

Professor Rausch wonders about the strategies of corporate America. She observes that American businesses seemed to choose “willful ignorance” in entering an environment known to be adverse to them. My sample of business enterprises is too small and probably untypical for me to generalize about the strategies of American firms. But I would not characterize Disney, Coca-Cola, and McDonald’s as acting out of willful ignorance. Rather they carefully assessed the French situation and deliberately chose to employ American marketing and operating practices. Michael Eisner, for example, the CEO of Disney, decided the French wanted a replica of Florida’s Disney World not some hybrid theme park, and McDonald’s, assuming the architectural style of its American franchises enjoyed universal appeal, built its first French restaurants accordingly. In many respects this was the correct strategy. But American managers went too far in imposing their operating and marketing practices: they failed to consider what tactics might be considered intrusive or excessive. McDonald’s misguided effort at installing an outlet on a barge at the foot of the Eiffel tower is one example; others are Disney’s strict disciplinary labor codes and Coca-Cola’s muscular approach to controlling retailers.

The irrational and rational in anti-Americanism concerns Seth Armus. What constitutes rational and irrational here is often open to question, but in most cases both elements were present. I distinguish between two basic types of anti-Americans: the dystopian and mass attitudes. The latter refers to the volatile expressions of antipathy voiced by large numbers, and, on a few occasions, by the majority of the populace, who reacted mainly to evolving circumstances. These criticisms, which were usually based on negative responses to American policies, domestic or foreign, could thus be construed as tilting toward the rational. In contrast, among the small but persistent minority of dystopians who responded in a reflexive, predictable, and absolutist way and were impervious to what might be construed as rational, such as new information or experience, or exposure to the diversity of Americans, or to obvious changes in American behavior, the charge of irrational seems fitting. Thus the rants of Alain de Benoist and the New Right or Jean Baudrillard were irrational in contrast to the popular disapproval of U.S. policy in the former Yugoslavia that qualifies as rational. I hope my readers will find this distinction among anti-Americans persuasive and that they will also approve of my effort at explaining the continual ebb and flow of anti-Americanism over the course of the century, which I argue was based on both latent elements like stereotypes or an inherited discourse and on contingencies like Washington’s leadership.

Turning finally to foreign affairs, Helke Rausch expresses reservations about François Mitterrand’s role in German reunification. She does not rank him as a central figure in the events and thinks he misread the situation. The French president was surely not a player at the same level as Helmut Kohl, George H.W. Bush, or Mikhail Gorbachev, but he was important. Mitterrand could have tried to block or at least retard the process: he elected not to do so. And he shaped the outcome, for example, by embedding Germany in the emerging European monetary union and confirming Polish-German boundaries.

Mitterrand, as Rausch rightly contends, at least initially, did not accurately assess the dynamics of the situation in 1989.

I am pleased that all four participants in the forum seem to endorse my central thesis—that America served as a foil for the French to define their own way whether it was in international affairs, social-economic policy, or culture. My study thus confirms the phenomenon of multiple modernities by treating America as an alternative modernity rather than a model to be imitated.

If *The French Way* opens the 1980s and 1990s for scrutiny so that we can begin writing about the entire arc of the twentieth century and it stimulates further research into issues raised, but not fully resolved, I would consider my study a success. Some transnational issues that deserve further research are phenomena like multiple modernities, globalization, and transatlantic relations. Historians could also advance our understanding of more restricted national topics like the development of consumer society in France and the evolving debates over national identity. As for the French fascination with America, scholars could expand the scope of how America functioned as a foil for other topics like science and technology, immigration, education, high culture, and feminism. In short, it is time to chart the new French revolution or the transformation of twentieth-century France and place it in a multidimensional frame of the Atlantic, the EU, and globalization.

#### Note

[1] Frédéric Martel, *Mainstream: Enquête sur la guerre globale de la culture et des médias* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

Richard Kuisel  
rfk@georgetown.edu  
Georgetown University

#### *H-France Forum*

Volume 8, Issue 2 (Spring 2013), No. 5

ISSN 1553-9172

Copyright © 2013 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.