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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.

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While the question of French-American relations in the twentieth century is not entirely new in international historiography, Richard Kuisel clearly belongs to the most prominent American authors who are responsible for our current state of historical knowledge. In contrast to most previous historical analyses that have taken us up to roughly the 1970s,^[1] Kuisel's ambitious new study takes the 1980s and 1990s within its purview. Kuisel's book, which is conceptually challenging, methodologically sound, and empirically reliable, has much to offer.

At roughly 400 pages, Kuisel's book is a fascinating intellectual *tour de force*. He argues that if the French had a fixation with the Americans, it was mainly due to the fact that they were seeking their own quintessentially "French path" to modernity in contrast to that of the American way" (p. xiii). More precisely: "[T]he French at the fin de siècle [of the 20th century] used America as a foil for change, as a way to chart their own path toward modernity and to assert their independence" (p. xvi). To make his case, Kuisel offers a highly cogent account of the French preoccupation with the United States, encompassing a broad range of issues from "international affairs/international relations" and "economics/economic policy" to "popular culture" (pp. xiii; xv).

Kuisel's remarkable claim is balanced by important qualifications; unsurprisingly, French perceptions of the United States are and have always been essentially embedded in "an asymmetrical rivalry" (p. xi). Whereas France has insisted on genuinely French modes of "national identity, independence and prestige" (p. xi) to stand her ground against the American hegemon, the US, for its part, has only paid attention to France "when it got in the way" (p. xi). Taking into account these substantial power asymmetries, Kuisel does not aim to trace a bilateral history of mutual exchange, but rather clearly focuses on French concerns about the United States under considerably unequal conditions.

The potential of Kuisel's general hypothesis about discourses on modernity to generate a wealth of important findings for the ways in which the French dealt with the United States in the 1980s and 1990s is not least due to his careful historical assessments. Kuisel's recognition that modern historiography usually refrains from arguing in decades does not prevent him from turning the potential weakness of this mode of argument into an analytical strength. Arguing in decades does not attenuate his narrative, but rather helps to underscore the curious simultaneity of complex and, at times, contradictory phenomena in the political, economic and cultural spheres. The 1980s and the 1990s thus show highly sophisticated constellations of French affinities to the United States in some sectors and concomitant deep rifts in others. Where there was harmonious appreciation, there was also outspoken resentment. The popularity of the United States in France coincided with a "mutual distrust;" indeed, friendly transatlantic relations went hand in hand with a fundamental "Franco-American rivalry" (p. 100).

While Kuisel's book is highly commendable in many respects, it may also invite some critical questions. One minor point is his discussion in chapter three dealing with political transatlantic constellations in the late 1980s. Kuisel's exploration of the impact of the Peaceful German Revolution of 1989 and the German unification of 1990 on French foreign policy is not entirely convincing. In accordance with Frédéric Bozo, Kuisel suggests that Mitterrand ultimately aimed at mediating between the "autodétermination allemande" and the "nécessité de la stabilisation européenne."^[2] He thus shares Bozo's major assumption that, next to the United States, Russia, and West Germany, France was a "central" (p. 144) player in the German unification process—a political shock to the post-Cold War order that Mitterrand hoped to mitigate by extensively deepening the process of economic and monetary European integration.

This narrative, however, has drawn substantial criticism because it greatly underestimates two of Mitterrand's overtly false predictions: first that a majority of Germans would be opposed to unification; and, second, that the USSR would impede unification by hindering free elections in the former GDR.[3] Most notably, Mitterrand's trip to the politically and economically stricken GDR and his consultations with Gorbachev have been invoked quite convincingly to illustrate that Mitterrand's political instincts led him to try to stabilize the East German state and openly back its battered elites. While it is true that Mitterrand soon had to acknowledge that German unification was inevitable and that he instinctively resorted to "encadrer internationalement le processus allemand"[4] via European integration strategies, his initial political reaction was essentially retrograde, which made him more of a secondary player than parts of Kuisel's narrative suggest (especially pp. 137–138).

Overall, however, Kuisel offers a historically balanced account of French and American agency over the course of German unification. He identifies the US-American Bush administration, which he frames in terms of the Atlantic Alliance, as a key actor in the German unification process (pp. 146–7). He further points out that Mitterrand's vision of an "alternative European encadrement" that would marginalize the US ultimately failed (pp. 145–46).

A more general critical remark concerns Kuisel's repeated comparative assessments of the French case. He stresses, for instance, that it is France's highly ambivalent posture toward the United States that has made it "peculiar, if not unique." (p. xiv) At the same time, however, the author stresses that the country's contradictory affinity/repulsion modes of response to the growing superpower status of the United States was a common feature in Europe (pp. xiii–xiv). Kuisel is indeed quite clear about what makes France so peculiar: its resistance to American political economic and cultural superiority was more dogged and self-assured than anywhere else in Europe. This resistance was the result of a strong desire to assume a leadership role internationally and wide-spread anxiety about cultural constriction under the influence of American mass culture (pp. 381–382). Despite the argument's plausibility, the book itself does not offer sufficient proof, apart from some comparative remarks scattered in some of its chapters. Without a straightforward comparative analysis of the "ways" of other countries like "Germany" and "Italy," for example, Kuisel has to resort to speculation. Thus, whether the French thought more than other Europeans that their identity was a "potential victim of Americanization" (p. 382) is still very much open to debate.[5]

Finally, another major issue for debate appears in chapter four, which analyzes the successful expansion of American corporations in France in the 1980s. Kuisel makes a convincing case for integrating private business actors and consumerism into his multifaceted Franco-American narrative. In his chapter on the presence of Disney, McDonald's, and Coca Cola in France, Kuisel follows up on his pioneering study on American firms in France since 1945 in his *Seducing the French*. [6] While in *The French Way*, he ultimately finds that "the French were seduced by these iconographic American products" (p. 152), much like during major periods of the preceding decades, Kuisel does not fall into the trap of adopting simplistic foregone conclusions. His analysis does not prematurely conclude that an all-encompassing Americanization imposed on the French what they basically abhorred (both in the United States and even more so at home). Intimately familiar with current research on methodological issues of cultural transfer, Kuisel operates with a sensitive set of key questions (pp. 152; 199). He focuses on the more elusive gray areas between unidimensional American "exports" and more subtle forms of American "modification" and "adaption" of businesses and products to a whole range of French localities and needs. In addition, he also stresses that US products on the French market did not, in fact, have the impact on the French in the way that American producers might have wanted, but depended on a variety of "reception" strategies that co-defined what the consumption of American products in France actually meant (p. 152).

In relation to this set of questions, Kuisel's findings are far from cut and dry. The demand he places on the reader, however, may appear somewhat exaggerated: Kuisel ultimately wants us to find extensive "Americanization" at work (pp. 207–8), as millions of French got caught up in the maelstrom of all things American. He resolutely rejects the "appropriation thesis—that local cultures have prevailed in transforming American imports" (p. 200), stating that American business tactics showed only "cosmetic" modifications, while the transformative effect of American products

fundamentally altered French consumer practices and aesthetic culture to the point of subverting “French tradition” (pp. 200, 208).

At least four critical questions seem unavoidable. First, how is it that American managers “insensitively” dismissed any notion of “French cultural anxieties” (p. 202) and underestimated both the cultural meaning of their products and Gallic conventions about merchandising” (p. 203) in the 1980s? Leaving aside the fact that United States businesses operated in France long before 1945 and were, in certain political opinion camps, publicly criticized for trying to flood the French market, Kuisel’s point might have been slightly more plausible for the 1950s and 1960s. Kuisel himself found in *Seducing the French* (especially in chapter seven) that United States business tactics had aroused widespread public concern in France even then, manifest not the least in the upsurge of flaming anti-American journalism that American observers could simply not ignore. Thus, if United States managers adhered to the strategy of ignoring French critique in the 1980s, they must have done so quite deliberately. Learning from economic survival strategies in the highly adverse environment they encountered in France, they effectively chose willful ignorance. We therefore need a much clearer long-term periodization of both the American “impact” strategies and French reactions to them in order to find out more about exactly when and why American businesses switched from an “unintended” to an intentional impact strategy when congesting the French market.

Second, how can we be sure that changing consumer habits in France in the 1980s and 1990s were attributable to any such thing as “Americanization”[7] when business by that time was an essentially global endeavor? How many and, more specifically, which European and Asian businesses and products existed during this period in France, and how many French companies at the same time globalized their agendas, distributing their products to the United States, Europe, and Asia, competing for additional market shares and changing global consumer habits? It seems necessary to part with neatly described national and bilateral perspectives to generate a more precise picture about worldwide cross-national product and consumption flows as a background for assessing the leverage of United States companies and products on the French market.

Third, how plausible is an analysis that ties changing consumer habits to a transformation of how the French perceived their “own” identities? How can it be empirically proved that eating at McDonald’s, drinking Coca Cola and going to Disneyland Paris either seriously undermined French culture and identity or was generally perceived to do so? Why would new consumer habits aggravate millions of French about their “Frenchness”? Having a Coke, for instance, did not preclude having wine and cheese; the French could still enjoy a burger while watching French films, reading anti-American pamphlets, or criticizing Reagan. Should cultural aggravation be restricted to those (few?) who refused such mass-consumption products? Moreover, would French businesses and consumers hesitate to subvert consumer habits in the United States, Europe or Asia when selling their own products abroad? While Kuisel’s focus hardly allows for more subtle analysis on these points, if the “waning of the French tradition” thesis based on French consumer habits is meant to be historically credible, we still need to discuss the empirical reliability of certain aggregated data, rather than engaging in speculative “mythmaking,” which is clearly not what Kuisel intended in his important study.

Fourth, and last, is the inevitable, often discussed and still remarkably open question of how American consumer goods became ever so attractive to a majority of the French in the first place—as well as in a majority of other European countries. While valid hypotheses, of course, exist about the compellingly multiethnic, classless appeal of American products that led to their impressive worldwide popularity, we would still need to know more about French consumers (in the 1980s and 1990s to start with) who might not have felt that they were betraying their cultural ancestry when they freely chose to purchase American products.

These four questions seem to be a vital starting point for verifying Kuisel’s conjecture about the “French Way.” “Cultural Americanization” was an inflationary phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s, as it was in the preceding years in France and beyond, simultaneously annoying critical observers while being embraced by overwhelming majorities in at least larger parts of the Western world. Only by inserting the French case into a bigger picture of cross-national “Americanization” can

historians refine the “French way” thesis and define its alleged specificities against the backdrop of comparative analyses.

Obviously, neither the author’s assumption about Mitterrand’s attitude toward German unification nor the two more general objections raised here on comparative issues and France’s cultural “Americanization” in any way curtail the impressive accomplishments of Kuisel’s elaborate study. Moreover, Kuisel’s reflections on the French engagement and conflict with the United States as a mode of coming to terms with modernity and defining its specifically French character even transcend the time frame and subject of the book. If French or European political, economic, and cultural dealings with the United States also entail an attempt to define “modernity” in the light of a compelling and insistent American model, such French or European contemporary discourses on “modernity” must gain priority on the agenda of future “Americanization” research. In that sense, Kuisel’s “path toward modernity” perspective offers an important and paradigmatic benchmark for further research on real or feared “Americanization” throughout the world.

Notes

[1] Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Barnett Singer, *The Americanization of France: Searching for Happiness after the Algerian War* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013); For accounts on the pre-1970s see Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); and Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

[2] Frédéric Bozo, *Mitterrand, la fin de la guerre froide et l’unification, De Yalta à Maastricht* (Paris: Jacob, 2005), 167.

[3] Ulrich Lappenküper, *Mitterrand und Deutschland. Die enträtselte Sphinx* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2011), 12, 278, 301.

[4] Bozo, 23.

[5] David W. Ellwood, *The Shock of America: Europe and the Challenge of the Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Helke Rausch „Wie europäisch ist die kulturelle Amerikanisierung?“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 58 (2008, 5–6): 27–32; Victoria DeGrazia, *Irresistible empire: America's advance through twentieth-century Europe*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006); Jessica Gienow-Hecht, “Always blame the Americans: Anti-Americanism in Europe in the Twentieth Century” *American Historical Review* 111.4 (2006): 1067–1091; and Helke Rausch (ed.), *Transatlantischer Kulturtransfer im „Kalten Krieg“. Perspektiven für eine historisch vergleichende Transferforschung* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2006).

[6] Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[7] One of the best methodological reflections still is Jonathan Zeitlin, “Introduction: Americanization and its Limits: Reworking US Technology and Management in Post-War Europe and Japan”, in: Jonathan Zeitlin, Gary Herrigel (eds.), *Americanization and its limits. Reworking US Technology and Management in Post-War Europe and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 1–50.

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