

H-France Forum

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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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For those familiar with Richard Kuisel's earlier works, *The French Way* seems the pinnacle of a scholarly life dedicated to the study of economic modernization in twentieth-century France. A veritable sequel to *Seducing the French*, this magisterial volume considers the 1980s and 1990s with a comparable focus on French-U.S. relations, NATO, trade, and the presumed threat of American consumerism to "French identity." [1]

In early chapters on the popularity of Ronald Reagan and the United States in France, the actions of Minister of Culture Jack Lang, the so-called "retreat of anti-Americanism," the emergence of "Anti-Anti-Americans" [sic—criticism of "America" bashers is not the same as championing the U.S.], and the relations between the Mitterrand and Reagan-Bush administrations, Kuisel portrays a distinctly better relationship between France and the United States in the 1980s as compared to the 1970s or 1960s. The longstanding postwar leftist and Gaullist critiques of the United States receded in importance, and relative world peace created a certain good will on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1980s.

Kuisel then turns to a central chapter entitled "The Adventures of Mickey Mouse, Big Mac, and Coke in the Land of the Gauls." Here Kuisel traces the building of EuroDisney (later renamed Disneyland Paris), the rapid expansion of McDonald's franchises, and the increase in Coca-Cola consumption. The impact of these quintessentially American companies was, for some in France, an onslaught to be fought much as the Gauls had valiantly resisted the Romans. In the end, Kuisel finds all three companies to have been "successful," not because they "went native" (a little alcohol at Euro-Disney and McDo did not fundamental change make) but precisely because they were American. Their organization, their advertising, and their labor practices did not adapt to France so much as they ultimately transformed the sectors of amusement parks, fast-food, and, to lesser extent, beverage sales. Some readers will quibble with this idea of "Americanization" of popular culture and consumption on the basis of personal observation, but Kuisel is persuasive. To give the most obvious of examples: much as I would like to believe that there is little difference between the growth of these three American firms in France and the expansion of Michelin, Honda, and Toyota in the United States in the same period, application of Kuisel's criteria yields a stark difference. Disney, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola did not really alter products for the French market, and they featured their American origins in advertising. By contrast, in the United States, Michelin's SUV tires and the evolution of tiny Hondas and Toyotas into *paquebots américains* constituted a very different phenomenon. In terms of advertising, when did Michelin, Honda or Toyota ever explicitly play on French and Japanese origins, let alone use the French or Japanese language to advertise their products? Do most American tire-buyers even know that Michelin is a French firm? [2]

In later chapters, Kuisel recounts the various conflicts over NATO and trade (specifically the conflicts in the Uruguay Round of the GATT) that dominated the Franco-American relations in the 1990s. Partly as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, the American "hyperpower" flexed its muscles at the expense of the French. In but one example, after France called for NATO intervention in Bosnia, it was then marginalized in the Dayton peace negotiations. At the same time, the U.S. dedication to free markets ("liberalism" in the European sense) and forceful defense of U.S. global business interests under Clinton

exacerbated the sense of French malaise and global powerlessness. The much-discussed “globalization” in France in the 1990s often carried the label “Americanization.” It was to be resisted, even when actually being implemented after Maastricht. The results of U.S. domestic policies under Reagan, Bush, and Clinton (welfare “reform” in this last case seemed as harsh as anything advocated by Reagan) revealed an American nightmare. Few on the right or left in France could find this new version of the “American Dream” appealing. Neither Gaullist intervention in the economy nor social benefits protected by the Left seemed secure in a new era of deregulation and unfettered competition. Debates about a “French way” to modernize featured explicit condemnations of Americanization/globalization, even as French officials systematically deregulated the economy. In the end, French productivity increased, economic growth proceeded apace, while comparatively high unemployment remained an acceptable price to pay for a safety net that remained mostly intact. The French modernized without necessarily “Americanizing,” successfully charting a “French way.” There are wonderfully detailed passages in these chapters, including an excellent account of how French negotiators successfully championed the “cultural exception” that has enriched global filmmaking.

Kuisel’s study ends in the year 2000, and he avoids any mention of the fiasco of French-U.S. relations before and during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Much as readers would like to hear his reflections on later developments, Kuisel’s approach has much value, as he avoids making the book seem like a prelude to events in 2003.

The French Way is a fascinating book that would make an ideal reading in upper-division European history courses and graduate seminars. Clearly written and argued, it will appeal to undergraduates who, unlike most readers of this forum, do not remember the events described. There are funny anecdotes, telling quotations, and much detail about what French and U.S. leaders said about each other, to each other, and to the press. Undergraduate students, like the general public, will appreciate this solidly researched book. Polling data, the press, and memoirs are the primary sources, as archives are not yet accessible, but the work is remarkably well-documented given this constraint.

Graduate students will no doubt raise a series of conceptual concerns. Students will, more or less fairly, criticize Kuisel’s use of “America” for the United States, even though that formulation is widely used in France and thus in Kuisel’s sources. Also, now well-trained not to stop at “the French” as a sufficiently specific category of analysis, they will want to know in what ways dynamics of class, gender, and race influenced how specific groups and individuals within France viewed the United States.

Although Kuisel quite explicitly states that he is not tackling issues of immigration (thus race) and gender, leaving them for others, one cannot help but wonder how such analyses might change, or confirm, Kuisel’s findings. Kuisel notes repeatedly, particularly in the chapter on the “French way,” that French commentators frequently condemned racism and attendant social problems of poverty, violence, and incarceration rates in the United States, as well as, from another tack, U.S.-style multiculturalism.^[3] He also briefly suggests that French “anti-American” defensiveness in the 1990s was inseparable from a sense of French malaise, including concern with “an immigrant Muslim [Arabic] population” (p. 363).^[4] Without doubt, to the extent that there is a “French way” to modernity, it usually includes unspoken assumptions about civic and even racial homogeneity, at least on the part of those who have dominated political discourse. The dynamics of supposed French blindness to the category of race might become more clear in a sustained analysis of French commentary on race, immigration, affirmative action, and multiculturalism in the United States.

In addition, given the highly gendered language of characterizations of France deployed within the United States, it is difficult to believe that diplomatic conflict or trade wars were not framed in a language of masculinity on both sides of the Atlantic. As in *Seducing the French*, Kuisel writes here in the preface that “France was seduced by America after the Second World War” (p. xiv) but then seems to avoid dissection of any gendered and sexualized metaphors embedded in political discourse. If they

were not present, how is it “seduction”? Did French critics of the United States implicitly or explicitly assert French manhood in the face of often quite vocal U.S. assertions about France as effeminate? [5] In the introductory note on Anti-Americanism, Kuisel writes that both the right and the left in France “view American society as feminized yet racked by violence” (p. xx). But the gendered language that must have led to Kuisel’s statement disappears from the body of the text. Since both bourgeois consumption and mass consumerism have long been gendered in France as elsewhere, it would be interesting to know to what extent recent debates in France about the presumed threat of the United States were deeply gendered (and much like Georges Duhamel’s famous interwar critique of American moneymaking as emasculating to the point that American women drove cars as furies, thus as uncontrolled consumers, while husbands impotently covered as passengers). [6]

Moreover, some readers will want the class dimensions of French and U.S. perceptions made more explicit. As *The French Way* does make clear, “America” was often seen as petty bourgeois or uncultured in the eyes of many (educated and middle-class) French critics. Kuisel’s careful analysis of abundant polling data reveals no marked class divide in favorable or unfavorable views of the United States. Future scholars need to consider the nuanced reasons that working-class, as opposed to middle-class people, feared or criticized “America.” Kuisel notes that most middle-class, educated folk got their news in the print form of newspapers and reviews, while workers relied heavily on television as a source. That leads to obvious questions for future work: how did portrayals differ by medium? How did reporters and people interviewed on television construe the United States? Kuisel’s exhaustive analysis of published news offers a good sense of changing views in the print medium. But what if we add TV to the mix? Such an approach is easier than it may at first appear. Due to the wonderful (for historians) centralization of France, television programming is readily available and searchable by topic at the Inathèque in the Tolbiac site of the Bibliothèque nationale de France; to oversimplify, the *dépôt légal* that has applied to publications since François Ier now includes French television programming.

Finally, my graduate students will no doubt be uneasy with the frequent references to “French identity” in *The French Way*. Clearly, generalizations are inevitable in a book of this scope, even to the point that Kuisel refers to “the French” as opposed to “us” [Americans]: “The French said that they liked Americans. Large majorities consistently expressed a favorable attitude towards us” (p. 333). But frequent use of the terms “the French” and “French identity,” as if the vantage point is always on this side of the Atlantic (“us”), tends to construct a presumed reality of Frenchness more that it analyzes the constant re-creations of such notions within France. It can lead a historian into then trying to pin down the components of an apparently unchanging essence called “French identity”: “French identity, for hundreds of years, has been defined by literature, the arts, humanism, food, *bon goût*, and the French language itself” (p. 354). Taking only food as an example, it is certainly true that U.S. and French publics associate food with “a” French identity today. But it is not true that there has been a singular idea of French food for centuries, eliding class, gender, and regional differences within France and the empire. In a sense, references to “a” or “the” French identity distract from Kuisel’s very pertinent and beautifully formulated observation that in the 1990s debates in France about “globalization” and “Americanization” were usually not about the United States at all; rather, the U.S. often served as a rhetorical foil in discussions that were all about competing ideas of what France ought to be, according to various social critics. “French identity” was not something that simply existed for centuries so much as it was constantly asserted to exist by advocates for certain competing ideas of France, to abuse de Gaulle’s oft-quoted phrasing.

In the end, despite the specific critiques of this book expected from graduate students and no doubt some scholars, I will find myself strongly defending *The French Way* as a very important contribution. Like most readers of this forum, I remember, albeit in a vague and poorly organized fashion, the events recounted in careful and abundant detail in the book. Kuisel offers a rich, even colorful, narrative of political history, international relations, and—in the case of the chapter on McDonald’s, Coca-Cola and Disney—business and, to some extent cultural, history. That is no small feat. As a quite accomplished

scholar, Richard Kuisel obviously knows that our most important service is boldly to lay down a foundation for future work. Kuisel deserves much praise for taking on a topic and an era that most of the rest of us, slipping back and forth between history and memory, experienced and therefore feel all too qualified to assess.

Notes

[1] *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] Stephen L. Harp, *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), epilogue.

[3] Here Kuisel sends readers to the fascinating Clarisse Fabre and Eric Fassin, *Liberté, égalité, sexualité: Actualité politique des questions sexuelles* (Paris: Editions Belfond/Le Monde, 2003).

[4] On “Muslim” as a racial category in France, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); and idem, “‘Something Notably Erotic’: Politics, ‘Arab Men,’ and Sexual Revolution in Post-decolonization France, 1962-1974,” *Journal of Modern History* 84 (March 2012): 80-115.

[5] Vocal American assertions of French femininity reached a crescendo in 2003: Nina Bernstein, “The World: For Americans, It’s French Sissies Versus German He-Men,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2003.

[6] Georges Duhamel, *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future*, Charles Minor Thompson, trans. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), pp. 67-68. On gender and bourgeois consumption, see the now classic Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). On the gendering of consumption in postwar France, see especially Rebecca J. Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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