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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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On the surface, the career of historian Richard Kuisel has followed a familiar trajectory. He appears to be an economic historian who gives way, later in his career, to the temptations of cultural studies. His triumphant *Capitalism and the State in Modern France* was, indeed, a rigorous exploration of the origins of economic planning. Published in 1981 by Cambridge University Press, his was one of the very first works in what is now a historiographical sub-field—the Vichy origins of the modern state. Because his later work is more concerned with Coca Cola, Disneyland Paris, and cinema, it is natural that he might be regarded as one of those who moved from structures to culture.

This assessment, however, is incorrect. At the heart of all of Richard Kuisel's investigations is an overriding cultural question—how has France, in becoming so thoroughly modern, still remained French? Behind the façade of modernity, Kuisel suggests, remain certain ideas about France and Frenchness that influence even the most hard-headed economic policies. Rather than France being engaged in a hopeless struggle against America and modernization, Kuisel has always seen the French as having their own path to modernity. While France and the United States have had their differences, they are differences born of their similarities—most especially the two nations' claims on “universal values.” For Richard Kuisel, then, explorations of economics are always, largely, explorations of culture. This was true even in his first book, a study of France's most determined modernizer, Ernest Mercier.[1]

I know this about Kuisel from his work, but also from personal experience. More than twenty years ago, when I first met him, I was a new graduate student whose sketchy knowledge of French history included nothing at all about economics, modernization or, for that matter, De Gaulle, Algeria, or even Vichy. I did know a little about Jaurès and fin-de-siècle syndicalism, I think. In the days and years that followed, Richard Kuisel would become my advisor and mentor. He made sure that I learned about economics, but he also greatly encouraged my pursuits in the direction of French cultural history. My own work, which has dealt largely with the convergence of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism in French discourse, may not have been precisely his cup of tea, but he fiercely supported and defended it—a defense that was, in the Euro-drenched, post-national identity 1990s, sometimes necessary.

Kuisel's own work was already moving in the direction of more interest in the cultural consequences of modernization. Readers of his 1993 book *Seducing the French* learned how France adopted and adapted to the Marshall Plan and the temptations of the postwar. His somewhat cheerful conclusion was that France pulled it off beautifully—a part of the brilliance of *les trente glorieuses* is that, somehow, “France remained France and the French remained French.”[2] But much of that success seemed like a product of the elevated place the nation found itself in during the Cold War. Was it not merely just a matter of time before globalization and modernization, if not outright Americanization, undermined the *génie* of French Civilization?

In *The French Way* he takes this concern into, to paraphrase a certain French Foreign Minister, the “hyper-modern,” namely the 1980s and 1990s. He catalogs, with intense focus, how France interacted with the United States in the era of European unification and renewed American military hegemony. The result is a delightful foray into an era that should be familiar but, perhaps because it predates our current obsessions, seems strangely remote. By examining in compelling detail every crisis (indeed, every hiccup) in Franco-American relations within the frame of the *longue durée*, Kuisel achieves something remarkable—sober historical reflections on the very recent past.

Kuisel’s conclusion, by the way, is that France is still, at least partially, succeeding. Having used America as a “measure,” the French (both average citizens and elites) have monitored what they like and dislike about their ally and continue to carve out a special place for their civilization. But this tendency to define the nation negatively comes at a price. French defensiveness can give the impression of a persistent hostility. From the other side of the Atlantic, Americans (and most especially those associated with the State Department) are primed to expect this from France and thus discount the potential legitimacy of any French resistance. The paradox here is that France is so at ease with America that America inhabits a large place in French discourse. For Kuisel, then, the constant presence of the American referent is not so much a sign of France’s negative obsession with the United States as it is one of comfort.

In *The French Way*, Kuisel concentrates equally on diplomatic, economic, and cultural matters. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by the increasing presence of American multinationals, and with them Hollywood, the English language, and very bad food. He shows how French business continued to be generally well-disposed toward the American model (p. 299). Disneyland Paris, the subject of an excellent stand-alone chapter, embodies the America-in-Paris problem. French business hoped its arrival would open up the French market for similar exploitation, but in the event Disney created a minor revolt (p. 159). Both American corporations and French businesses seem to have misjudged the degree to which they could impose their styles on each other. While the campaigns of Ministers of Culture Jack Lang and Jacques Toubon might suggest that cultural resistance was elitist (and largely pointless), the era also saw the campaign of the “peasant” José Bové. Silly though he was, Bové’s popularity shows that a populist dislike of America persisted. Disneyland Paris succeeded, but the French were not its best customers.

It is in diplomatic relations that we have another compelling enigma. Between widespread support for Communism and Gaullism (along with ever-present, softer *marxisant* sympathies), the France of the 1970s and 1980s had a ready-made base of anti-Americanism. But the election of the Socialist François Mitterrand coincided with an improvement in relations—indeed, the era of Mitterrand-Reagan was actually smoother than that of Chirac-Clinton. This seeming puzzle is not at all puzzling for Kuisel, who sees the end of the Cold War as precisely the problem. A unipolar world was too much power for America to manage and too much America for France to bear. But the blame must be shared—Mitterrand’s attempts at being an “Atlanticist” eventually failed, and a lesson for the future was learned. As Kuisel puts it [by cozying up to the US] “the French discovered they had lost, not gained, leverage” (p. 149).

My own work has emphasized the essentially irrational nature of much French anti-Americanism. Spurred on by fears of cultural decadence in the 1930s or wartime guilt in the postwar era, anti-Americanism seems to persist without reference to the real America. A central theme of my book is the way in which intellectuals of the 1930s Right could become postwar Marxists (after having been, as often as not, *vichysois*) without ever altering the terms of their anti-Americanism.[3] In *The French Way*, Richard Kuisel disagrees. While he appreciates the complexity of the relationship, and its tendency to be over-determined by its history, he is

convinced that French suspicions about the United States rest on rational ground. The complex ebb and flow of pro- and anti-American sentiment in France, something that has proven a very tricky subject for political scientists, appears to Kuisel to have very much to do with the interplay between American prominence and French insecurity. While the recurrence of anti-Americanism at surprising moments may indeed be spurred by mere jealousy and human nature, Kuisel is convinced that “Mounting American assertiveness in international affairs along with the accompanying celebration of the American way of life” [encounters a] “Gallic reaction to chide and belittle the Americans as well as defend indigenous French traditions”(p. 352). I actually find Kuisel convincing on this point, even if it is somewhat at odds with my own work, as well as the later work of Philippe Roger and Jean-François Revel.[4] Although their two books are very different—Revel’s is a frustrated polemic, while Roger’s is an encyclopedic narrative—both authors see something deep and ideological about French anti-Americanism.

I did not appreciate until after I finished this book how well it completes a kind of accidental trilogy on modern France. *Capitalism and the State in Modern France* was a subtle and powerful exploration of the relationship between the state and modernization, and Kuisel was in the vanguard of Vichy scholarship. A decade later, *Seducing the French*, a lighter book, dealt with the aftermath. France, having made its choice, struggled to internalize Americanization without surrendering. Although both books were celebrated, some critics thought *Seducing the French* overstated the importance of America. Published, as it was, in that post-Communist moment of unlimited optimism, there were those who thought concern about America was passé and even the category “Frenchness” smacked of “essentialism” to the *bien pensants* of the 1990s. These were tough years for traditional historians, or, rather, for historians who took seriously the idea of culture and national identity as being something more than the most frivolous of constructs.

With *The French Way*, we have, among other things, poignant confirmation that Kuisel was correct—the problem of “America” and the problems of globalization and national identity remain central in France. The end of the Cold War has not yet resulted in anything like an end to the nation, and even the briefest of all public opinion surveys would confirm a number of stubborn facts—among them, that the gap between Brussels and the European street is enormous, especially on matters of culture and nation, and that average French men and women consider threats to their national integrity (whether from the European Union, immigration, or America) to be of paramount importance.

Notes

[1] Richard Kuisel, *Ernest Mercier: French Technocrat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

[2] Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 237.

[3] Seth Armus, *French Anti-Americanism, 1930-1948: Critical Moments in a Complex History* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007).

[4] Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*, translated by Sharon Rowman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), and Jean-François Revel, *L'obsession anti-américaine: son fonctionnement, ses causes, ses conséquences* (Paris: Plon, 2002).

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