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Sudhir Hazareesingh, *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*. New York: Basic Books, 2015. xii + 338 pp. Notes and index. $29.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-465-03249-5.

Review by Edward Berenson, New York University.

On first glance, a book on how "the French" think raises doubt. Can a nation whose people are notorious for their disputatiousness be understood collectively in this way? Sudhir Hazareesingh believes they can and makes a convincing case for a French "collective frame of mind" (p. 10). He does so in a book at once witty and erudite, intellectually stimulating and pleasurable to read.

Even if *How the French Think* did not brim with lively analysis and sharp insight, it would be worth it just for the quotations, at once horrifying and hilarious, Hazareesingh has unearthed. Who knew that Edouard Herriot, the perennial Radical prime minister, was a master of Stalinist apologia--more so than Sartre himself? After traveling to the Ukraine during the Terror Famine of 1932-33, Herriot extolled the Soviet province as a "garden in full bloom" (p. 81).

Speaking of Sartre, Hazareesingh quotes him as saying in 1954, "Freedom of expression in the Soviet Union is total," adding for good measure the philosopher Denis Moreau's *mot:* "I am fond of Sartre but even fonder of the truth" (pp. 83, 194). Ranging farther afield to the 1980s' American vogue for "French theory," Hazareesingh quotes a Camille Paglia harangue. Lacan, Foucault and Derrida, Paglia declared, were "the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality, trapped in verbal formulas" and mired in a "state of resentment, alienation, dithery, passivity and inaction" (p. 174). Hazareesingh doesn't say whether he agrees.

Entertaining as these quotations are, this is a very serious book, based as it is on expansive reading and a deep understanding of the past four centuries of French intellectual life.
Hazareesingh begins by anticipating the question that opened this review. What, he asks, "makes it possible to speak of the collective frame of mind of 'the French'" (p. 10)? The answer, Hazareesingh says, is that "to an extent which is unique in modern Western culture, the nation's major intellectual bodies--from the state to the great educational institutions, academies, publishing houses, and organs of the press--are concentrated in Paris" (p. 10). This "cultural centralization" has produced consistencies of style, outlook and approach that have made "even countercultural groups and movements adopt modes of thinking that often seem to replicate those of their adversaries" (p. 10).

He draws a key example of this consistency from François Furet, who maintained that the Jacobins' notion of popular sovereignty, borrowed from Rousseau, resembled nothing so much as the absolutism of their Bourbon enemy. Jacobins and royalists both understood sovereignty as one and indivisible, only Jacobins saw it as residing in a unified people; royalists, in an absolutist king. Hazareesingh points as well to the French Communist Party's Jacobin nationalism and to its filiation with the Bonapartist nationalism of de Gaulle. "This commonality," Hazareesingh writes, is "the product of shared collective experiences," namely the Second World War, the Resistance, the economic and cultural hegemony of

the United States, and many other things (p. 11). Hazareesingh might also have drawn on Ruth Harris's wonderful book on the Dreyfus Affair, which reveals the extent to which Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards shared cultural assumptions and habits of mind.[1] Even though the antis drew false conclusions about Dreyfus's guilt, both sides turned to the occult, displayed prejudices against Jews, and grounded their ideas in a similar mix of rationalism and emotion.

Generalizing from these and other examples, Hazareesingh maintains that, since the seventeenth century, French thought has coalesced around four widely internalized nodes: "historical character," both in constantly referring to the past and believing in continuities over time; fixation on the nation; "extraordinary intensity;" and the view that intellectuals must communicate their specialized "knowledge to a wider public" (p. 17). Whether the four nodes are unique to France, as Hazareesingh suggests, is open to question, but they allow him to make a strong case that "it is possible to make meaningful generalizations about the shared intellectual habits of a people as diverse and fragmented as the French" (p. 17).

It should be added, however, that although Hazareesingh's analysis encompasses a wide range of voices over a long span of time, he mostly focuses on France's male secular elites. Aside from quick references to Simone de Beauvoir, Flora Tristan, and a few others, women intellectuals and writers are largely absent from the book. What is more, Hazareesingh neglects what Karen Offen has called the "woman question," the centuries-long French obsession over the place of women in society, their relations to men, the meaning of femininity, the intellectual and moral capacities of women, and the like.[2]

Then there is the issue of religion. Although Hazareesingh doesn't neglect conservatives, especially those who were once on the left, he says little about French Catholic thought, which we know from J.P. Daughton, Elizabeth Foster, and Ruth Harris, among others, to have been extremely rich. [3] But far from invalidating Hazareesingh's argument, the inclusion of Catholicism would have reinforced it. As Daughton shows, French Catholics, like their secular counterparts, became wedded to the nation, were steeped in history, felt intense commitment to their views, and tried, often successfully, to communicate with a broad lay public. Much the same is true of French women writers and intellectuals and of the debate over the woman question.

Beyond the four nodes or categories Hazareesingh mentions, what more specifically was French thought all about? It was grounded, he maintains, in the writings and legacies of Descartes and Rousseau. From Descartes, French thinkers learned six major things: to assign a fixed, unified meaning to concepts and the self; to express themselves in the form of clear, distinct ideas; to argue with precision and elegance; to proceed in their argumentation from the simple to the complex; to cultivate "a sense of moral autonomy and intellectual audacity;" and to privilege rationality over emotion (p. 30). These Cartesian principles, Hazareesingh writes, shaped the intellectual styles of everyone from the Doctrinaires of the July Monarchy (Guizot, Rémusat, Cousin) to Auguste Comte, Alain (Emile Chartier), De Gaulle, Raymond Aron, and Sartre, who called Descartes an "explosive thinker," a "revolutionary who ripped and slashed while leaving to others the task of stitching things up again" (p. 30). Sartre added, in a lecture of 1945, "There can be no other truth, from the outset, than this: *I think therefore I am*" (p. 30). An especially perverse version of French Cartesianism came from the communist novelist Jean-Richard Bloch, whose examination of Stalin's life, actions, and works revealed that "there is no one more 'Cartesian' than Stalin" (p. 35).

Because French Cartesianism represents such a diverse cast of characters, it convincingly buttresses Hazareesingh's argument for a substantial unity and consistency of French thought. He does not say that Cartesianism was unanimous--Barrès, Taine, and other conservatives criticized it--and admits that Cartesianism meant different things at different times. But Hazareesingh insists that "Descartes's method and maxims have been appropriated as a source of legitimation by a range of cultural

sensibilities in the modern era" (p. 36). Cartesian ideas, in other words, strongly shaped how the French think and embody an "irreducible Frenchness" (p. 36).

"Frenchness," in fact, appears to be a key object of Hazareesingh's analysis, appearing repeatedly throughout the book. It refers to a general cultural sensibility, as much as an intellectual one. Frenchness for Hazareesingh represents "a belief in the ideals of duty and public service, a defiance of fate, a contempt for materialism, a cult of heroism, and an attachment to the enabling and civilizing powers of the state" (p. 8).

Hazareesingh doesn't say precisely what is the relationship between the intellectual dispositions and cultural sensibilities he has identified, but they seem to work together to create the collectivity he calls "the French." For even when opposing partisan and religious commitments pull French people apart intellectually, cultural commonalities push them back together. Take, for example, the contempt for materialism, which Hazareesingh traces back to Rousseau's myth of the natural man. Precisely because it was a myth untestable in real life, the idea of the natural man or noble savage inspired admiration "in all political camps" (p. 64).

Other features of Rousseau's utopianism, it seems to me, were more divisive, especially the *Social Contract's* impossible ideal of a polity in which political divisions do not exist because each individual naturally wants for himself what is best for everyone. Certain revolutionaries took this idea all too seriously and produced lasting political strife. The utopians of the nineteenth century were more benign, often seeking to withdraw from society, rather than turn it upside down. But even so, Saint Simonians, and especially Fourierists, evoked a great deal of scorn, as would Marxian utopias later on. Still, certain elements of utopianism drew widespread assent, and as Hazareesingh makes clear, even mainstream republicans hopped on the utopian bandwagon. Godefroy Cavaignac believed in "absolute equality among men," and Jules Ferry in a universal suffrage that was "the guarantee of the disinherited, the reconciliation of classes, and the promise of legality for all" (p. 71).

If utopianism is not quite as pervasive as Hazareesingh suggests, other of the phenomena he sees as common to the French work exceedingly well. The "yearning for universality" can be found in a broad spectrum of French thought, as can a love of history and a reverence for the past--the French Revolution retained its towering importance for two centuries, even for those who rejected it (p. 223). Suspicion of the United States and the "Anglo-Saxon" world has also pervaded French public discourse from right to left, and the French have long idealized the countryside and itched to escape the city (at least for the month of August). I am less convinced by Hazareesingh's claims about the widespread belief in the supernatural and the occult, although François Mitterrand's apparent attachment to the astrologer, Elizabeth Teissier, gives me pause.

If these intellectual and cultural commonalities held the French people together for nearly four centuries, do they still hold them today? A wide variety of contemporary French public figures seem exceedingly pessimistic, and that pessimism, as Hazareesingh makes clear, contradicts many of the common patterns of French thought he has identified--especially its expansive universalism, with France as the great model for the rest of the world.

The ur-example of this French pessimism is Alain Peyrefitte's *Le mal français*, originally published in 1976 and regularly revised and reprinted since then. Peyrefitte, a former Gaullist minister, maintained that France was ungovernable, caught as it was in an unresolvable conflict between alienated citizens and an invasive, overly powerful state. When a new, thirtieth-anniversary edition of the book came out in 2006, Jean d'Ormessan of the Académie française wrote that the work "shows not the slightest sign of ageing" ("*n'a pas pris une ride*"). In fact, the *mal* "has gotten worse" thanks to persistent unemployment, economic stagnation, immigration, the loss of French standing in the world, and the failure of France's "famous social model."[4]

At first, such ideas mainly resided on the right, but by the late 1980s, the French left had joined in the chorus of lamentation composed by Peyrefitte. In *La France et le déclin* (1988), the socialist writer Michel Charzat declared, "nous sommes tous malades" (p. 246). The French, he said, had lost their longstanding confidence in the nation's destiny and were wallowing in a pit of "postmodern nihilism" (p. 246). As the left's "declinism" intensified, the left-leaning political scientists Gérard Grunberg and Zaki Laidi diagnosed the phenomenon as grounded in the rise of the Front national and the frustrations of a globalized world increasingly beyond France's control (p. 248). Meanwhile, the leftist sociologist, Pierre-André Taguieff, announced, "the prophets of doom were, in certain situations, the true voices of wisdom" (as cited in *How the French Think*, p. 248). And as if to bring the discussion of France's decline full circle, Jacques Julliard, the longtime contributor to the *Nouvel observateur*, published not *Le Mal français* but *Le Malheur français*, which argued, among other things, that the French left had been corrupted by the xenophobia of the right.

So, is there nothing left of the expansive, optimistic--even utopian--categories of French thought that originated, Hazareesingh says, in the seventeenth century? Should *How the French Think* be changed to *How the France Thought?* Hazareesingh thinks not, but suggests nonetheless that the categories through which the French have long perceived the world have become increasingly divorced from the realities they now must confront: globalization, economic liberalization, the dominance of the English language, the impotence of the state, and perhaps above all, the challenges to French universalism levelled by members of increasingly confident particularistic groups. Can an undivided Cartesian French self persist in the face of demands for recognition, even special treatment, by racial, ethnic, feminist, and LGBT groups? Clearly it cannot, but the troublesome question is: what will take its place?

NOTES

[1] Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

[2] Karen M. Offen, "Is the 'Woman Question' Really the 'Man Problem'?" in Christopher E. Forth & Elinor Accampo, ed., *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010), pp. 43-62. See also: Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* and *Debating the Woman Question in France, 1870-1920* (2 vols, forthcoming, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[3] James P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Elizabeth Foster, "'Entirely Christian and Entirely African': Catholic African Students in France in the Era of Independence," *The Journal of African History* 56/2(2015): 239-259 and "'Theologies of Colonization': The Catholic Church and the Future of the French Empire in the 1950s," *The Journal of Modern History* 87/2(2015): 281-315; Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

[4] *Le Figaro*, July 8, 2006.

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