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Turn-of-the-Century France

*In societies where modern conditions of production prevail,
all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.*

GUY DEBORD

THE PARIS “UNIVERSAL EXPOSITION,” which opened on 15 April and ran through 12 November 1900, was designed, according to one of its guidebooks, to celebrate the world’s progress over the course of the past hundred years and to serve as a “dawning beacon for the twentieth century.”¹ That progress was defined globally in terms of European or, rather, French domination (and racial superiority) over the rest of the world through what Maurice Talmeyr reported as an “ornamental delirium” of colonial pavilions and native villages spilling over the Trocadéro.² And it was positioned in time through Disneyland-like attractions that nostalgically appealed to past ways of life—for instance, an “Old Paris” of reconstructed medieval streets, and a complete Swiss peasant village surrounded by artificial mountains, forests, and streams. As the principal sign of progress, however, the Exposition’s planners selected their exhibits and events to pay homage, not as before to industrial machinery, but to “the magic of electricity.” The “spectacles of light” on and about the Champs de Mars ranged from Venetian celebrations using illuminated boats on the Seine to Salles des Fêtes projections of Lumière films and photographs on a giant sixty-by-seventy-foot screen. But perhaps the most popular of these was “the sparkling Palace of Electricity whose ornate white facade at night” Charles Rearick has aptly described “as a starry backdrop for a rainbow-brilliant thirty-foot-wide sheet of water cascading ninety-five feet in a Château d’Eau.”³ Such a “fairyland of electricity” seemed a perfectly planned environment to symbolize the “cultural revolution”—at least in the “First World” of advanced capitalist development—that was ushering in a century increasingly devoted to leisure and mass consumption.

The 1900 Exposition that put Paris at “the center of the universe,” however, also masked certain fundamental economic conditions in France. The prolonged economic depression that afflicted the agricultural sectors of the world economy from 1873 to 1896, for instance, proved especially costly in France, with its still largely rural population. According to French historians such as Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Rebérioux,⁴ the decline in agricultural productivity acted as a brake on industrial productivity, and French agriculture continued to lag behind industry as the latter’s production rose rapidly after

1905. Furthermore, the larger French banks tended not to invest in industrial enterprises, which all too well complemented the French firms' own obsession with preserving their independence—outside bank financing, for instance, comprised only 29 percent of total industrial investment. Instead, a good deal of the capital amassed by the banks was exported as direct private investment in allied countries such as Russia, and the government tended to side with banking rather than industrial capital in such matters. In 1904, for instance, the symbol of French metallurgy (and weaponry), Le Creuset, was shut out of negotiations over the French annexation of Morocco.

Consequently, even though it could sustain its position as the second greatest financial power in the world, the French national economy actually slipped, in terms of industrial production, from second to a distant fourth place behind the United States, Germany, and Britain, accounting for only 11 percent of worldwide production just before the war. Large-scale industrialization and its attendant principles of economic concentration in “trusts” and scientific management—which governments throughout the Third Republic actively and consistently discouraged as a violation of the ideal of a “balanced economy”—thus came rather slowly to France. For innovative, high-quality, labor-intensive goods continued to be prized more than the sheer quantity that could result from mass production. In 1896, for instance, whereas 84 percent of industrial firms had just one to four employees, only slightly more than 1 percent had more than fifty. Saint-Gobin, which dominated the new chemical industry, was an exception, with 120,000 workers in twenty-four factories. More typically, whether in the older coal mining or the newer automobile industries, the dominant trend was toward middle-sized or even small-scale companies, none of which felt any compunction to corner a market and eliminate its competitors.⁵ And, as late as 1906, the ready-made clothing trade even continued to rely on “the family as the basic unit of production,” through a “contract system” of put-out work done in the home.⁶

An oppositional labor movement grew up no less slowly, partly because the French working-class population remained relatively small, except in concentrated areas in and around Paris, in the north (iron foundries and coal mining), and in Lyon (textiles). Moreover, the various trade unions that emerged in the 1890s—see especially the National Federation of French Miners—tended to maintain their independence as fiercely as did their industrial and commercial counterparts. This independent attitude rested on a long revolutionary tradition suspicious of any kind of mass organization as well as on the large number of small craftsmen still shoring up the French economy, but it also testified to the persistent influence of anarchism or revolutionary syndicalism. It was anarchists within the *Fédération des Bourses du Travail* and the *Parti Ouvrier Socialiste Révolutionnaire*, for instance, that launched the strategy of the general strike, which was then taken up by the CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) when it assumed a position of dominance in the labor movement around 1902. The general strike strategy essentially refused to acknowledge the state: it attacked employers directly without attempting to go through the mediation of

parliamentary political action. This tactic put some distance between the CGT and the SFIO (the newly renovated Socialist party led by Jean Jaurès), the latter of which was aligned more closely with the parliamentary model of the Social Democratic Party in Germany. Between 1904 and 1908, strikes proliferated throughout France, reaching a peak of more than 1,300 in 1906, which eventually led, despite their strategy, to violent confrontations between the striking workers and the state. Most of the 1906 strikes, for instance, broke out around 1 May and forced passage of a bill, on 13 July, which finally mandated a compulsory weekly day of rest. Four years later, however, the government retaliated with its own strategy—it broke up a general rail strike simply by conscripting 150,000 railway workers into the army.

The 1900 Paris Exposition also deflected attention from the political crises that continually threatened and yet never quite toppled the Third Republic. As the conservative opposition waned, through the defeat of the Bonapartists and Orleanists in 1877 and then the failure of Boulangerism in 1889, the republican locus of power gradually shifted, repeatedly reconstituting itself, from a moderate to a radical majority. Perhaps the most potentially disruptive of these crises was the Dreyfus Affair of 1898–1899, in which the “two nations” of France came sharply into focus: once more the clash between the Enlightenment or Revolutionary tradition of justice and reason and the Absolutist or Royalist tradition of order and authority divided the country, this time into hostile Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard camps. Sparked especially by Emile Zola’s famous letter, “*J’Accuse*”—which was printed on the front page of 300,000 copies of the daily *L’Aurore* (13 January 1898)—the vehement debate between these camps quickly turned into what Emile Duclaux described as “two tragic choruses insulting one another.” Finally, after nearly two years of vacillation, in September 1899, now that Dreyfus had been tried and not surprisingly condemned a second time (due to apparent collusion between army and court), the newly elected “Government of Republican Concentration” ordered him pardoned. This politically expedient compromise reasserted the Republic’s uneasy balance of power, which soon led to the formation of the Radical and Radical-Socialist republican parties, whose coalition bloc won control of the government in the 1902 elections.

Behind the political crises throughout this period, the “real cement which kept the republican majority together,” Mayeur and Rebérioux argue, “was the common desire to secularize the State and social life.”⁷ Whatever their differences, political parties of both the left and center shared an anticlericalism that fueled a steady “de-sacralization” of French society, which had begun as early as the French Revolution and eventually culminated in the legislated separation of church and state in December 1905. Most significantly, in a series of laws the republicans succeeded in wresting control of schooling from the Catholic Church and in establishing secular institutions of primary, secondary, and higher education. This even included the creation of secondary *lycées* and *collèges* for girls, although the education they received still tended to prepare them for “careers” as moral exemplars within the restricted domestic space of a good bourgeois

marriage.⁸ Moreover, these state institutions were paralleled, especially in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair, by the *Ligue d'enseignement's* network of *universités populaires* throughout the country, in which intellectuals established, by means of lecture series and educational fairs, a limited dialogue with local officials, shopkeepers, clerical workers, craftsmen, and laborers.⁹ However, it was the state primary schools that were most crucial, particularly after attendance was made compulsory in 1882, for they would 1) ensure that a new generation—particularly those making up Gambetta's "new strata" of petit-bourgeoisie, white-collar workers, and civil servants—was taught how to be good subjects and citizens of the Republic and 2) strengthen *la patrie* by affirming a single, united conception of the national community, not least of all through an imposed common language.

This policy of secularization or laicization, however, also coincided with and was partly undermined by the imperialist policies of the Third Republic—through the shared goal of emancipating, enlightening, and civilizing the world's people. Initially, it was the political left and center that championed the drive for French colonies as a means of restoring national pride following the 1871 military defeat at the hands of Germany. Despite former Prime Minister Jules Ferry's argument, in 1890, that colonial policy was an offshoot of industrial policy, the French colonial empire never came to constitute a significant sector of the country's overall economy; rather, its chief function continued to be political and ideological. By the time of the Dreyfus Affair, in fact, the policies of colonial expansion were giving the parties of the right as well as groups such as the *Ligue des patriotes* (revived and transformed by Paul Déroulade) and *Action française* (led by Charles Maurras) an opportunity to begin to redefine the very concept of French nationhood, particularly through the "cult of the army" as an instrument of unity and a rampart against foreigners (as well as "bad Frenchmen" such as striking workers), all of which would culminate in a "nationalist revival" just prior to the war. The myth of French superiority through its colonial empire not only disguised the country's real economic (and military) inferiority, vis-à-vis the other advanced capitalist powers, but also constructed a sense of collective identity which could compensate for the social inferiority of the new intermediate class of "little people" within France, particularly those for whom the Republic's educational system did not provide social mobility.

Although the Third Republic survived and prospered in part because its secular system of schools encouraged aspirations to "middle-class respectability," formal education also proved to be the principal sign of an individual's admission into or exclusion from social membership in the ruling class of bourgeoisie. Ideology (in the Marxist, post-Althusserian sense) just as much as economics determined one's class position within turn-of-the-century French society. Mayeur and Rebérioux put it bluntly: "The [free] primary school was the school of the people; the *lycées* and *collèges*, with their fee-paying elementary classes, were the schools of the bourgeoisie." Indeed, by 1910, less than 3 percent of French children attended the secondary *lycées* or *collèges*, and only one-third of those passed the *baccalauréat*, which then gave them access to university study. If edu-

cation served as the key marker of class position, it was also strongly enforced by more or less distinctive forms of lifestyle, culture, and leisure activity. The French bourgeoisie was indeed becoming a “leisure class” devoted to consumption, with increasing numbers of *rentier* families living off their investments or land and more and more youth between adolescence and marriage with money to spend. French families rising socially set themselves off from their “inferiors” by engaging at least one domestic servant (usually female), which then allowed a further display of social exclusivity through the conspicuous idleness of the married woman. Generally, the bourgeoisie took over the traditional cultural pursuits of the aristocracy and its canons of official taste—for instance, in their preferences for horse racing, the most academic historical paintings at the Salons, and spectacular theatrical performances at the Opéra and Comédie-Française, such as Edmond Rostand’s *L’Aiglon* (1900), starring Sarah Bernhardt.¹⁰ But they also engaged in practices of their own more recent invention, such as automobile club tours and holiday excursions to the fast-developing spas and resorts—the latter of which became showcases for the new fashions in urban living, gradually reorienting interior decoration from heavy furniture and dark wallpaper to light colors (especially white) and more spacious rooms.

To some extent, a common “popular culture” still survived in the villages, *bourgs*, and small towns of the French provinces, whose fairs and cafés or bars brought together a community of peasants, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and local officials. A distinct working-class culture also had grown up in the cities, as evidenced in the annual May Day celebrations inaugurated in 1890, the participatory entertainment of *faubourg* café-concerts, spectator sports such as soccer and bicycle racing, and particular features of dress such as the worker’s peaked cap. And a separate avant-garde culture began to flourish in Paris, more strikingly in painting (from the Post-Impressionists to the Cubists) and music (see, for instance, the scandals of Claude Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* [1902] and Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* [1913]) than in the literary arts where representational verisimilitude and the “classical” power of the word held sway. If the Paris avant-garde deliberately challenged and overturned the aesthetic conventions accepted by the Institutes and Salons of the bourgeoisie, however, it also had little in common with a leftist political or social “avant-garde.” Many Socialists like Jaurès, for instance, actually shared the traditional artistic tastes of the bourgeoisie, but much of the avant-garde also tended to see itself as a kind of secular priesthood of independent creators, whose concept of art still often assumed a “metaphysics of subjectivity” based on the “data” of sense perception, which had been devalued and marginalized in industrialized society. Here, too, was testimony to the influence of anarchism, for a whole literary generation in the 1890s, wrote Léon Blum, “was affected or at least tinged by anarchist propaganda.”¹¹ And that influence eventually would even lead writers such as the poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire—who wrote for *L’Intransigeant* and admired Action française—to associate with the neonationalism of the political right, in which the *culte du moi* was not inconsistent with the *culte de la patrie*.

None of these more or less separate cultures, of course, could match the de-

velopment of a mass-produced culture that steadily penetrated French society and “colonized everyday life” during this period. Eric Hobsbawm suggests that the reinvention of tradition and ritual within a network of new mass cultural practices was almost as significant in “cementing” the Third Republic as was its reconstitution of education. Dependent on consumer price levels that closely coincided with wage levels (both of which, during a period of relative monetary stability, actually decreased slightly between 1899 and 1913), these practices took advantage of as well as spurred technological innovations in recording and printing and mass market dissemination. Perhaps foremost among them was the cheap daily newspaper, which, after an 1881 law freed the press from government control, quickly rose to mass circulation levels radiating out along the railway lines from Paris and other regional capitals far into the provinces—the first to reach a circulation of one million was *Le Petit Journal* in 1887, which was then overtaken by *Le Petit Parisien*, the “Holy Scripture of the Countryside.” Through these papers, illustrated magazines such as Lafitte’s *L’Illustration* and Hachette’s *Lectures pour tous*, large color posters, and postcards, advertising then spread through the countryside as a corollary to the catalogs issuing from the big city department stores (a major French innovation in the theatrical display and distribution of consumer goods). These, along with the serialized novels appearing weekly in the papers, were the principal components of the mass culture supplanting the older “popular culture,” even among the working class by the century’s end. And they were more than complemented by urban-oriented spectacle entertainments of all kinds, from fairgrounds, wax museums, and even the Paris morgue to automobile trade shows and world expositions, the latter of which constituted, to use Guy Debord’s language, representations of “accumulated capital [condensed into a spectacular] image.”¹² The most consistently popular of these spectacles were the melodrama theater and the café-concert—now transformed into what Jules Claretie called the “democratized theater” of the music hall, with its richly varied programs and showy interiors¹³—which, in turn, would give way to the cinema. That the use of electricity in private French homes was hampered by unreliable distribution and a high tax placed on electrical consumption only added to the allure of such dazzling “light show” entertainments, as the “magic of electricity” extended the hours of their public performance far into the night.

Although hardly centrally coordinated like the Third Republic’s school system, mass culture functioned, in one sense, to construct a space as well as provide models of identity and integration for the “little people” within French society, especially white-collar employees who, according to Lenard Berlanstein, “were all too eager to build their lives around their leisurely pastimes.”¹⁴ This was even reflected in the choice of newspaper titles—*Le Petit Journal*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *La Petite République Française*. Yet, as a social site or “heterotopia,” to invoke Michel Foucault’s neologism,¹⁵ mass culture also served—along with city parks, railway stations, and public transport (both street car and subway)—to break down or blur class, gender, and ethnic or regional distinctions as well as the resistance to homogenization which made France somewhat different from

the United States.¹⁶ This went well beyond the habit of mixing or “slumming” at popular spectacles, in which the well-to-do and socially prominent “men about town” indulged, for people of different classes, according to Rearick, “increasingly shared a common consciousness of amusements” on a regular basis, especially in Paris.¹⁷ Astute observers such as Charles d’Avenal, who were enthusiastic about “the relative luxury” of the lower middle class, for instance, specifically praised the Paris metro (which opened in 1900), where “duchesses and millionaires [could now] rub shoulders with cooks and clerks.”¹⁸ Others, however, foresaw in this “era of various publics,” all of which seemed so transitory and fluctuating, a disruption of stable hierarchical boundaries which was potentially dangerous.¹⁹ Spectacles such as the music hall and cinema were perceived as particularly threatening, as Jean-Paul Sartre witnesses, in 1912:

[The cinema] had popular ways that shocked serious people. It was an amusement for women and children. My mother and I loved it. . . . The social hierarchy of the theater had given my grandfather and late father, who were accustomed to second balconies a taste for ceremonial. When many people are together, they must be separated by rites. . . . The movies proved the opposite. . . . I developed a dislike for ceremonies, I loved crowds.²⁰

Mass culture thus seemed, through the common consciousness and new ritual of festivity it created, to open up the possibility of unexpected, unwanted change. That ranged from inadvertently undermining the “woman by the hearth” ideal (shared by Catholic conservatives, anticlerical republicans, and working-class trade unionists alike) to encouraging the energetic, independent figure of the “new woman,” which was sometimes linked with deviance—whether defined in terms of French “female criminality” or of American culture.²¹ But such threats were also consistently overridden by the degree to which any standardized spectacle produced by the mass culture “image factories” tended to reinforce representations of entrenched behavior, to constitute the family (with the woman in charge of its domestic space) as the principal unit of recreation and leisure, and to encourage the desire of everyone, everywhere, to consume—and be consumed.

Into this structural matrix of interrelated economic, political, and cultural practices, in 1895, came the *cinématographe* or cinema. By 1902, short films were major attractions in the fairgrounds and on the café-concert or music hall programs throughout France. By 1907, permanent cinemas were being constructed, and not only in Paris, to project programs of a dozen or more films on an exclusive basis, and French films, particularly those produced by Pathé-Frères, were being exhibited around the world in numbers greater than those of any other country. By 1911, when the eleven-year cycle of Paris world expositions came to an end without a new world fair, the renovated Gaumont-Palace, as a kind of symbolic replacement, opened its doors to seat up to 3,400 spectators and quickly became the premier cinema in France. What place did the young French cinema industry occupy in the economic arena of the late Third Repub-

lic, and how did established economic forces shape the various stages of its development? How was the spectacle of the cinema defined in legal terms, and how did government policies of investment and censorship affect its circulation and consumption? How did earlier as well as concurrent cultural practices determine the development of specific film formats or genres, particular features of a system of representation and narration, and perhaps even hierarchies of film art? And what ideological function did the cinema's circulation of images have within the contradictory, contested site of French mass culture? The attempt to address such questions constitutes the principal subject of this book and largely determines its organizational framework.