

CHAPTER I

Anti-Americanism and National Identity

The worry that America constitutes a challenge to France is a rather recent phenomenon. For over a century after the American colonies declared their independence, the two nations lived in separate worlds on the same globe. The war for independence had generated a brief, but later often celebrated, Franco-American alliance. There was a long early history of intermittent encounter and mutual observation that inspired some acute cross-national studies such as Alexis de Tocqueville's admirable *Democracy in America*. Yet aside from these few connections, some "carriage trade" tourists, and formal diplomatic relations, the two nations had little in common. There was limited trade between them, scant French emigration across the Atlantic, and no diplomatic alignment. For the longest time the French had no need to take the new nation seriously. The two nations' trajectories did not intersect.

All this began to change in the midst of the First World War when France needed to tap America's financial and economic resources. Once the United States intervened militarily in the war it became a major actor in European affairs and briefly, after 1918, participated in the postwar reconstruction of the Old World. Yet by the early 1920s Americans had been chastened by involvement in European affairs, irritated over such issues as the Allies' reluctance to pay war debts, and determined to free themselves of "European entanglements." Nevertheless, even as America in its governmental role retreated across the Atlantic, other links such as foreign investment developed, and curiosity about each other's society

grew. French visitors began to treat America as a lesson in precocious, but deviant, behavior.

By end of the 1920s American economic and technological prowess was beginning to make an impression, though largely a negative one, on French observers. According to the title of one of the most popular (and also one of the most hostile) French commentaries of the interwar years, America represented scenes of a possible European future.¹ If France's future was in the making across the Atlantic, was it a matter for rejoicing or despair? Interwar observers like Georges Duhamel and André Siegfried announced the major themes that succeeding generations of America-watchers elaborated. They contrasted French civilization with the wasteland of American mass culture and Gallic individualism with American conformism. Americans, from this perspective, might be wealthy and powerful, but they were dominated by businessmen like Henry Ford who trained their fellow Americans to be mass producers and consumers—creating a society of comfortable conformists and cultural philistines.

In the 1930s whatever appeal America had as a paragon of prosperity collapsed under the upheaval of the depression. Those French writers who had warned of the “American cancer” seemed vindicated. The American economic model was not only spiritually sick, it also failed to satisfy material needs. American isolationism and French protectionism attenuated relations even further. Now F. Scott Fitzgerald would write of Paris as “Babylon Revisited” and complain that with the disappearance of the tourists and expatriates, the Ritz bar had gone back to the French. When war again seemed imminent, in 1938–39, Washington stood on the sidelines while the French hoped that, at best, one day the United States would become an ally in the defense of democracy and French independence.

It was the Second World War that brought America and Americans into the French landscape. Up to then, the New World had been of marginal interest except to the writers who sketched its negative stereotype. But in the postwar world the French could no longer ignore America because the United States began to exercise a certain hegemony over France. This hegemony has had social, economic, and cultural, as well as political-strategic, features. It is the former dimensions that I wish to examine. Formal state-to-state relations form a background to my investigation and on occasion will occupy the foreground, but they are not at issue here. My focus rather is the French perception of and response to America as a social model.

In general how did this American model appear to the Old World? Postwar America represented prosperity, especially in its elevated standard of living, and technological prowess. Or as the model was commonly conceptualized, America represented the coming “consumer society.” This term suggested not just the mass purchase of standardized products of American origin or design such as Kodak cameras or jeans; it also denoted a style of life that encompassed new patterns of spending, higher wage levels, and greater social mobility. It featured new forms of economic organization including different kinds of industrial relations, business management, and markets. And the new consumerism depended on different cultural values. Consumer society suggested a life oriented around acts of purchase and a materialistic philosophy. It valued the productive and the technical and was accompanied by the products of the new mass culture, from Hollywood films and comic strips to home appliances and fast food.

Postwar America was a model France could not ignore. The future was across the Atlantic. America was a challenge. As the French came to understand the challenge, the question they asked themselves was how to attain American prosperity and power and yet keep what they believed was French. In particular, how could the French accept American economic aid and guidance; borrow American technology and economic practice; buy American products; imitate American social policy; even dress, speak, and (perhaps worst of all) eat like Americans and yet not lose their Frenchness? Would the pursuit of American consumerism come at the expense of French national identity and independence? As one journalist plainly put the question, was a bistro any longer French when it served Coca-Cola rather than red wine?

In short, postwar America appeared as both a model and a menace. The issue for the French was to find the way to possess American prosperity and economic power and yet to avoid what appeared to be the accompanying social and cultural costs. The challenge was to become economically and socially “modern” without such American sins as social conformity, economic savagery, and cultural sterility. Cast in its grandest terms the issue was, how could France follow the American lead and yet preserve a French way of life?

France has not been the only country to face the dilemma of the American example. The issues raised by this study bear on a global phenomenon of basic economic, social, and cultural changes that has unfolded during the second half of the twentieth century. Asia, Africa, Latin America, and both Eastern and Western Europe have been

transformed along the lines of some vaguely American model. This process of global change should not be trivialized by such curiosities as teenagers in Bangkok sporting blue jeans and listening to rock music. There is a kind of global imperative that goes by the name Americanization. Although the phenomenon is still described as Americanization, it has become increasingly disconnected from America. Perhaps it would be better described as the coming of consumer society. Whatever the case, the phenomenon to be observed in postwar France has parallels all over the world in recent decades.

Reflecting on the French response to Americanization is especially pertinent today when Gallic self-consciousness, always acute, is unusually intense. The 1990s are likely to keep the question of national identity before the French public. As new, mainly Arab, immigrants refuse assimilation and challenge dominant cultural models, as waves of outside influences wash over the cultural landscape, as an increasingly integrated Europe deprives France of autonomy, and as French political, economic, and social structures come to resemble those of other Western nations, French exceptionalism seems at risk. France seems in danger of losing its uniqueness. The sociologist Alain Touraine, for example, asks, "Does a French society still exist?" And Fernand Braudel, after a lifetime of writing history that avoided national frontiers, at the end of his career wrote wistfully about *The Identity of France*.²

The process of modernization that has swept across postwar France threatens to homogenize the nation and forces the French to try to discover, preserve, or invent what has been, and is, unique about their national community. Understandably the French have become preoccupied with the question of who they are. One scholar, noting the French public's current passion for reading history and nostalgia about the national *patrimoine*, concludes: "What we are currently witnessing is a crisis of national identity."³ Historians, among others, have joined the search for a definition of Frenchness. The last decade has seen a flood of books about French nationalism. These include studies of the origins of the French nation; the formation of historical memory; the assimilation of immigrants; the intercourse between France and its colonial empire; and the development, decline, and diffusion of French culture.⁴

What such studies demonstrate is the fabricated or artificial quality of the notion of a national community. What has defined, and continues to define, Frenchness (fig. 1) is complex, changing, subtle, contested, and arbitrary rather than simple, fixed, distinct, consensual, and given. It is



1. An image of Frenchness. (Courtesy Agency Magnum/Henri Cartier-Bresson)

not a matter of geographical space, history, language, the state, or even culture, though all of these contribute. None of these criteria provide precise, impermeable, or permanent boundaries for the French nation because much of what defines its identity is imagined. France is an

invention, a conceptualization. Like other nations, it is to a large extent a collective subjective perception.⁵

Recent research has also established that a sense of nationalism is usually constructed by a kind of dialectic with “others,” with those outside the collectivity whose difference helps define the singularity of one’s own community or nation. National identity is formed through negation, by establishing a counteridentity, by constructing a “we”/“them” dichotomy.

Examining French responses to America, or more precisely to Americanization, points up how the French conceived of their uniqueness during the middle and late twentieth century. For America functioned as a foil that forced the French, especially after the Second World War, to assert what was distinctively French. Beginning in the interwar years and reaching a climax in the first postwar decades, America served as the other that helped the French to imagine, construct, and refine their collective sense of self.

Defining national identity, however, is a continuous process. It evolves rather than being natural or sustained as a fixed conceptualization. Thus what worked to define collective identity prior to 1970 functioned less well afterwards. Once Americanization became a global process rather than a foreign invasion and once other cultural and economic dangers or alternatives arose—for example, Arab immigration, Japanese products, or the European community—the dialectic of forming identity by negating Americans no longer articulated French uniqueness. As this American other began to fade, the American way lost its power to oppose and formulate Frenchness. Thus before 1970 Frenchness, as measured by the American other, had featured attributes like individualism, *la douceur de vivre*, and humanistic *civilisation*. Once a certain level of Americanization occurred, however, the French found more and more reason to look elsewhere than across the Atlantic for contrast to the French “we.” This shift in focus helps to explain why during the 1980s the French turned inward, examining their past, to define what the French nation was and is.

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The phenomenon of French anti-Americanism has long filled the editorial pages of newspapers, inspired vituperation and humor, and formed the subject matter for scholarly treatises. Even when commentary transcends the character of banter, it rarely extends beyond intellectual curiosity about contrasting national images. Compendiums of what French visitors said about their travels in the New World or of what the

literati trumpeted from the Left Bank about America can be intriguing. But they can advance our understanding of the phenomenon only if we view them as historical problems. We must do more than find pithy observations, catalog cohorts, or detect shifts of how America was perceived if we wish to explain either the causes or the significance of perceptions concerning the new continent. For behind the flow of words and emotive outbursts about America lay the most serious issues confronting contemporary France.

At the outset we must attend to some definitional problems and provide some background to French thinking about America. Measuring the potency of French anti-Americanism depends on its definition. If mere criticism of America or Americans qualifies as anti-American, then the net is so wide that we might catch an unexpected fish. Who, for example, wrote: "I don't know any country where, in general, there is less spirit of independence and true freedom than in America"? Answer: Alexis de Tocqueville.⁶ Perhaps we should be more restrictive in applying the label if the Frenchman most closely associated with America is guilty of such an observation. But we could go to the other extreme in narrowing the definition. As one scholar observes, if anti-American means "a full-blown contempt for anything American or a systematic and permanent opposition to everything American," then anti-Americanism does not exist!⁷ Even Jean-Paul Sartre, who in the wake of the Rosenberg trial likened America to a mad dog suffering from rabies and urged Europeans to sever relations, also admired American literature, films, and jazz. According to this restrictive definition, one of the most celebrated "anti-Americans" escapes the label, which Sartre himself did not think he deserved. He wrote in 1946: "I am not at all anti-American, neither do I understand what 'anti-American' means."⁸ Another scholar argues that Charles de Gaulle should not be classified as anti-American because he did not base his policy toward the United States on a rejection of American values. De Gaulle was merely a realist in international affairs. If Sartre and de Gaulle do not fit the category, then either Gallic anti-Americanism is a mirage or we need a better definition of anti-Americanism.

Classification in this instance is not an exercise in the scientific method. Most discourse about America is difficult to classify as either "for" or "against," and extreme stances are extremely rare—though they exist. Affirmative and critical postures are not rigid categories and often overlap or merge into one another. And the same person may express conflicting attitudes or even alter his or her views—this shift is invariably

from negative to positive rather than vice versa. Perhaps most perplexing is that admirers and adversaries often use the same images but attribute opposing values to them. The historian can be conceptually precise and consistent if not rigorously scientific.

First, anti- and pro- (or philo-) Americanism are descriptive categories signifying sets of attitudes that are predominantly, if not systematically or permanently, admiring or critical. Second, the nature or significance of the indictment or praise and the intensity and range of an individual's feelings or attitudes about America are the determining features. Third, the phenomenon is mixed in a normative sense. Individuals frequently express contradictory attitudes. And when the sample is a social group, discord is the rule. The mix of normative attitudes must be conceived as a duality (pro- and anti-) and dealt with as an analytical unit. Fourth, neither broad nor narrow definitions are useful. A single critical comment does not make the speaker "anti-American." Or, in an opposing vein, the individual does not need to challenge basic American values to qualify. Fifth, the transitory nature of attitudes is irrelevant. Once expressed, no matter how fleetingly, they can be categorized. A lifelong commitment to contempt is not required in order to merit the label "anti-American." Finally, for historical analysis the significance of such attitudes does not depend on whether or not the speaker was well informed about America. No matter how irrational, emotional, self-serving, or "false" the images may be, they form part of the phenomenon.

Disapproval of another country and its people sometimes amounts to nothing more than a compilation of petty complaints. In that case the category of anti- is inappropriate. In the 1950s the journalist Art Buchwald decided to "investigate" the sources of rising British antagonism toward the United States. He solicited responses by running an ad in the London *Times* asking the public to tell him why they disliked Americans. His "analysis" of the replies led Buchwald to conclude that "if Americans would stop spending money, talking loudly in public places, telling the British who won the war, adopt a pro-colonial policy, back future British expeditions to Suez . . . stop chewing gum, dress properly, throw away their cameras, move their air bases out of England . . . turn over the hydrogen bomb to Great Britain . . . not export Rock'n Roll, and speak correct English," why then the two peoples might like each other again.⁹

What is essential in determining anti-Americanism is the nature and range of grievances and the intensity of feeling. Distaste for chewing gum or Hollywood does not qualify. Contempt for Americans or American

foreign policy or consumer society as “the American way of life” does. Anti-Americanism, despite its lack of intellectual rigor, can illuminate trends and issues in social, economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural affairs—making it a phenomenon of considerable historical importance.

The Gallic response to America, as discussed earlier, was heavily marked by the French thinking about themselves, their identity, and their future. To a degree, their construction of the American way came from a common belief in a French way. But there is another distinction that we must make as we analyze attitudes about America. At one level responses were determined by national stereotypes. At a second level the French were reacting to circumstances.

French perceptions of America have been and continue to be highly patterned. There is a certain repetition associated with stereotypes even if the same images are evaluated in contradictory ways. America is a “young” country. This may mean either that Americans are open, curious, and lively or else that Americans are immature and naive. In general Americans are supposed to be youthful, dynamic, wealthy, pragmatic, optimistic, and friendly, but they are also seen as materialistic, puritanical, vulgar, and even racist and violent. They are *les grands enfants*. Such Gallic perceptions were already evident during the late nineteenth century and seem virtually unchanged today as contemporary opinion polls verify a consistent sociocultural image of Americans.¹⁰

At this level the historian is faced with fixed or perhaps slowly evolving attitudes. This kind of thinking about America is both cognitive and emotive and tends toward simplification to the point of caricature. It also seems immune to contrary information or experience. When Harvard students made a comprehensive sociological study of a village in Anjou in the 1960s, they encountered the familiar stereotype: Americans were rich, materialistic, and rather undisciplined. Despite intensive intercourse between the students and villagers who became familiar and friendly with them, the older disagreeable image of “other” Americans endured.¹¹ The sources of such stereotypes are complex and even a bit mysterious, but they probably arise from a combination of conventional wisdom about Americans; certain written sources, especially the press and those influential best-sellers that capture a generation’s imagination (like Georges Duhamel’s caustic *America the Menace* during the 1930s); the mass media, increasingly the cinema, television, and music; formal education (for example, the image of America conveyed in textbooks); and travel and contact with Americans (soldiers, tourists, students) or those who claim to know Americans.¹²

In contrast to the substratum of virtually fixed stereotypes that pass from generation to generation are what might be termed contingent attitudes—more temporal, even ephemeral, attitudes that derive from specific historical circumstances, often from foreign policy and trade relations. A historian might, in this vein, explain the anti-Americanism of the early postwar period as a result of Cold War politics. In this instance militant anticommunism made Washington champion the cause of European defense and German rearmament, which in turn incited the Communists to accuse the United States of warmongering and write “Yankee Go Home” on the walls of French towns. But political circumstances, as we shall see, are insufficient explanations for a phenomenon that had far deeper roots. Situational factors, moreover, can sharpen or blunt stereotypical attitudes but they seldom transform them.

Before we investigate postwar encounters, it is important to introduce evidence from a rich body of writing about America from the 1920s and 1930s that drew the lines for the postwar discussion. In many ways the image of America as a society suffering from standardization and materialism is a legacy of the interwar years.

Interwar literature about America—largely impressions drawn from cross-Atlantic visits and from the works of America’s own critics such as Sinclair Lewis, Faulkner, Dreiser, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck—praised the New World for its vigor and wealth yet, taken as a whole, conveyed a negative impression of American civilization. The American people rarely appeared as more than a caricature. French travelers described America as an urbanized and mechanized society whose principal cultural attraction was Hollywood.¹³ This literature conjured images of a New York City teeming with people and adorned with skyscrapers. It described in graphic detail the mechanized slaughter of livestock in the Chicago stockyards. *Américanisme*, defined as the quest for abundance through standardized mass production and consumption, evoked Henry Ford’s assembly line, ubiquitous billboards, rows of simple wood houses, packaged foods, and tractors plying vast farms. In a play of 1924 entitled *Les Américains chez nous*, Parisians learned how mechanized American farming threatened the pastoral idyll of the French countryside.¹⁴ Food was subjected to ridicule. A celebrated French chef found American food “doctored, thermochemical, and dreadful” and surmised that jazz bands played loudly in restaurants in order to stifle “the cries of despair emitted by the unfortunate diners.”¹⁵ Even admirers of the New World, like André Maurois and André Siegfried, whose books translated America to the French between

the wars, were anxious about the rigidities of standardization. Maurois expressed his annoyance at his inability to order black coffee in a New York restaurant because the norm was coffee with cream.¹⁶ And Siegfried worried that Americans were becoming “Fordized.”

Hollywood appeared to be the quintessential expression of American culture. The French tended to attack American film-making as an “industry” that produced meters of banal celluloid escapism for profit. Gallic reservations about mass culture were already apparent: Hollywood threatened true culture because it subordinated quality to box office receipts. And the cinema was but one of many forces that “standardized” people. Just look, these French visitors noted, at how women in Los Angeles imitated the appearance of movie stars.

A smug tone of French cultural superiority marked this reporting about the New World. In its most extreme form America was denied a civilization of its own.

There is no American civilization . . . there is still no American civilization. . . . The only civilization in America is the old civilization of Europe which is still the theoretical basis of institutions and customs. But for the rest . . . the box-like skyscrapers, the vile speakeasies, the over-sized cities spoiled by racketeering, the government of gangsters . . . the hundred-page newspapers full of inanities higher than the Chrysler building . . . the splendid laboratories without scientists, the to and fro of divorces, the king-cinema, the empty churches? Civilization?¹⁷

Or as one commentator noted, whereas Americans showed tourists the Chicago stockyards, the French instinctively escorted visitors to the Louvre and Notre Dame.

The classic summary of this Gallic indictment, which for many years tickled the palates of the Parisian literati and informed provincial schoolchildren about the New World, was Duhamel’s *America the Menace* (its original title, *Scènes de la vie future*, was far more discreet). For Duhamel the machine set the rhythm of American life, whose goals were production and profit. As one historian notes, Duhamel saw future citizens becoming “happy slaves, comfortable brutes, ignorant manipulators of an antiseptic, technicized horror of inhuman efficiency.” In exchange for their comfortable bondage Americans received new appetites, wrote Duhamel:

They yearn desperately for phonographs, radios, illustrated magazines, “movies,” elevators, electric refrigerators, and automobiles, automobiles, and, once again, automobiles. They want to own at the earliest possible moment all the articles mentioned, which are so wonderfully convenient, and of which, by an odd reversal of things, they immediately become the anxious slaves.¹⁸

American culture, in Duhamel's corrosive prose, was vapid escapism: Sunday drives in the new car, mindless Hollywood movies, and mass spectator sports. He observed:

What strikes the European traveler is the progressive approximation of human life to what we know of the way of life of insects—the same effacement of the individual, the same progressive reduction and unification of social types . . . the same submission of every one to those obscure exigencies . . . of the hive or of the anthill.¹⁹

Ridiculing Americans' penchant for conformity, he sarcastically proposed a League for the Creation of Public Scandals whose members would breach social norms with such modest infractions as refusing to ride the elevator, attend the cinema, or buy a highly advertised soap. Or these nonconformists would smile, sing, or promenade aimlessly.²⁰

America the Menace may have gone too far in its anti-Americanism for many French critics, but it conveyed the nature of the indictment. Even a far more friendly, and much better traveled, visitor to the New World like André Siegfried, who admired Yankee idealism, still noted that Americans believed that the dignity of human beings resides in their standard of living.²¹ The source of Duhamel's and Siegfried's reservations was a humanistic and aesthetic revulsion at a mechanized and monotonous society. Other intellectuals in the 1930s, following in Duhamel's footsteps, were to add a philosophical and moral dimension to his visceral attack.

These intellectuals, most of whom were young, issued an unequivocal antimodernist critique that portrayed America as a negative model for France. They were indignant about reducing human beings to the function of producer-consumers and saw in mass society, materialism, and standardization the end of *civilisation*. They were also expressing an internal French debate about the merits of advancing capitalist production. The late 1920s, after all, had seen a great surge forward in France of what was then termed industrial *rationalisation*, which seemed to threaten old ways.

Emmanuel Mounier, the founder-editor of the review *Esprit*, identified industrial capitalism and economic liberalism with bourgeois decadence and denounced the notion that human progress should be measured by the accumulation of material goods. Possessions and comfort—the ideals of the bourgeoisie—destroyed the will for sacrifice and effort. Money was economically sterile and led to avarice. Machines and factories degraded work and the worker. The economy should be in the

service of human beings, not the other way round. American society—materialistic, impersonal, and dehumanized—was this bourgeois “utopia” made real. Mounier feared that France would lose its soul by imitating the United States.²² His alternative was a philosophy called “personalism” that mixed humanist, Christian, and communitarian ideals. *Esprit* proposed a Christian precapitalist rejection of the modern.

On the right, other young intellectuals such as Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu published essays like *Le Cancer américain* that also denounced the American way for France. The pursuit of production and the use of reason as an adjunct to technology placed France on a material and quantitative terrain where it could not compete. The “American conquest” of the globe represented adoration of the gods of credit, production, and technical intelligence. For Aron and Dandieu the alternative to the modernists’ equation of human progress with materialism and dessicated Cartesianism was a vague “spiritual revolution” that reasserted the moral essence of human beings. Other intellectuals of this generation, some of whom flirted with fascism, joined the chorus of anti-Americans. Thierry Maulnier, who many years later became a member of the Académie française, construed America as the “new barbarism” reducing human beings to animalistic needs, enslaving them to an economic monster, and defining them by their functions. It was the writer’s duty, according to Maulnier, to denounce this barbarism and renounce making the intellectual a hawk of happiness. And Robert Brasillach equated modernization with the victory of the masses and their base instincts. He too preferred a premodern economy and exhorted the French to buy artisanal products in preference to manufactured ones.

All these young theorists of the 1930s rejected an Americanized version of modernity. To the functional anthill of the New World they preferred the small pleasures of mischief, exuberance, uniqueness, and spontaneity as well as the sterner values of frugality, camaraderie, and heroism. Their opposition was distinctly premodern, its roots in Christian asceticism and fellowship as well as traditional humanism; they combined aesthetic and intellectual elitism with a strong sense of regret about the nation’s decadence. All agreed that modernity, as embodied by America, was the wrong path for France. Echoes of this interwar anti-Americanism, sounded first by the right, reverberated during the Cold War among the left.

The post-1945 stereotype had been established by 1930. Americans were adolescents, materialists, conformists, and puritans. And perhaps

racists to boot. But America was still a remote threat in the 1930s. Trouble loomed in the East, not in the West. As one traveler observed: "The immediate danger for us is not being Americanized, but being Germanized."²³

With this background and these distinctions in mind we can now turn to Franco-American relations during the early years of the Cold War and the political-ideological debate.