

# The Future of French Culture

*Arthur Goldhammer*

[Paper given at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, 11/23/2009]

When it comes to the future of their culture, the French are of two minds. On the one hand a vociferous “declinist” school believes that everything has gone to hell in a handbasket. On the other hand, a plurality holds that although *everything else* has gone to hell in a handbasket, French *culture* remains a beacon to the world.

For proof, one has only to consult a recent CEVIPOF survey (table 1) [slide], which shows that only 8 percent of the French believe that the country is making progress in general, versus 52 percent who believe that it is not. Nevertheless, a full 36 percent believe that France’s *cultural* influence is increasing, as against only 23 percent who believe the opposite. And yet these same French who maintain faith in their culture insist, by a margin of 48 to 19, that their schools and universities are declining in quality, and by a margin of 46 to 19 that their country’s influence in areas *other* than culture is on the wane.<sup>1</sup>

It is as though culture, like religion, serves as consolation for a fall that has engulfed everything else. And as if culture, like religion, somehow survives miraculously in dark times, without institutional support, taking refuge in remote caves and isolated hermitages such as the Abu Dhabi branch of the Louvre and the Romance language and sociology departments of American universities; for these, according to Donald Morrison’s screed entitled (in its original magazine incarnation) “The Death of French Culture,” are among the few places where

---

<sup>1</sup> Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj, “Déclin, modèle français, et mondialisation,” CEVIPOF-Ministry of the Interior, French Political Barometer, 2006-2007, p. 3.

anything identifiable as French cultural influence currently survives outside the Hexagon.<sup>2</sup>

“Culture,” said Édouard Herriot, “is what remains when everything else is forgotten.”<sup>3</sup>

I come neither to bury nor to praise French culture but simply to describe it. This is not as easy to do as one might think. What is “French culture” anyway? The culture of a nation? The culture of a dominant class or influential status group? A system comprising a number of interacting subcultures? A sign of distinction that entices even those who do not possess it? Or, on the contrary, a meretricious signifier of unearned superiority that fosters resentment in the envious uncultivated?

## Gaul Is Divided Into Three Parts [slide]

For today’s purposes I propose to adapt Sartre’s definition of the Jew [slide]. A Jew, Sartre said, is one who is a Jew for the anti-Semite. So let us say that Culture is that which is Culture for the Other. And let us stipulate further that the Other of Culture is Power, with which it is locked in mutual embrace. I will try in what follows to describe a series of configurations of the power-culture couple since roughly the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in order to say a word or two at the end about the possible futures of their relationship.

Think of this lecture, then, as a sort of Kama Sutra [slide] of the mutual interpenetration of power and culture. We will be looking at their coupling from outside, voyeuristically observing relative positions, but for the most part ignoring the innermost thoughts and feelings that either partner brought to the nuptial bed.

---

<sup>2</sup> Donald Morrison and Antoine Compagnon, *Que reste-il de la culture française* (Paris: Denoël, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> I owe this quote to Eloi Laurent.

To that end, I am going to propose that French culture since the turn of the twentieth century can, like Gaul itself according to Julius Caesar, be divided into three parts [slide]. These parts are situated in time rather than in space. Call them configurations rather than regions.

Like the three parts of Gaul, these three cultural configurations “differ from one another in language, customs, and laws,” to borrow Caesar’s famous formulation. First we have what I will call the *literary-philosophical configuration*, which occupies the period from the advent of the Third Republic to the end of World War II. [slide] This was followed by the *organic configuration* (in the Gramscian sense), which came into being in 1945, in response to the need for postwar reconstruction. Finally, around 1984, an *industrial configuration* replaced it. The first two of these cultural configurations served clear state interests, as we shall see. In the third, however, the perverse consequences of the state’s effort to reshape the culture through its control of the educational system cut culture loose from its national social moorings.

These transformations are not peculiar to France. Forces affecting the cultural sphere *everywhere* have, however, been unusually intense and concentrated in France, provoking the various declensions of declinism to which I alluded at the outset. Such symptoms should not be taken as suggesting that French culture is sicker than other cultures. The normal and the pathological are not the appropriate categories for this discussion. Nor is the national. Indeed, in one sense, the root of contemporary anxiety is the separation of the concept of culture from nationality, from language, from community of any sort. Culture has become a tradable good.

## The Literary-Philosophical Configuration [slide]

Our story begins, however, well before this separation occurs, with what I am calling the *literary configuration*. A cultural configuration, as I will use the term here, has three primary characteristics: a hierarchy of values, a method of elite selection and recruitment, and a system of rewards and sanctions. In the last two decades of the nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth century, the literary cultural configuration developed in tandem with two other central institutions from the power side of the culture-power couple, namely, the public schools of the Third Republic and the growing state bureaucracy. [slide] Its hierarchy of values was Platonist, by which I mean that it posited an ideal world in opposition to the actual one. [slide] In this respect it was a substitute for (or competitor of) religion.

The value ideal of the literati can be described as *humanist*, a term best defined, perhaps, by André Gide [slide] in 1934, just as this temporarily stable equilibrium was beginning to come unstuck: the humanist, Gide wrote, is one who believes that “man is more important than men.”<sup>4</sup> To place *man* above *men* was to commit oneself to an abstraction, so that the literary culture was simultaneously a philosophical culture.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Julien Benda remarked, just as the literary configuration reached its apogee, that “France is the revenge of the abstract on the concrete.”<sup>6</sup> Maurice Barrès [slide], a very early apostle of the literary religion, was quick to diagnose this etherealization of the literary. In *Les Déracinés* (*The Uprooted*) he depicts the philosophy course in the terminal year of the *lycée* as a quasi-erotic bonding of disciple with

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Dominique Fernandez, *Ramon* (Paris: Grasset, 2008), p. 444.

<sup>5</sup> That Gide delivered himself of this definition as he was renouncing *l'humanisme* in favor of *l'engagement* presages an impending transformation that will be consolidated in 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Mona Ozouf, *Composition française: Retour sur une enfance bretonne* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

master that wrenches the young student from home and hearth in order to transplant him into the soil of an alien, cosmopolitan culture without a country.

But only a few young students were in fact so wrenched. Despite the importance of meritocracy as one of *les mythes fondateurs* of the Third Republic, the number of students who rose through the ranks was small. As recently as 1970, no more than 20 percent of each age cohort even attended the *lycée*. During the literary period, roughly the first half of the twentieth century, the percentage of a cohort passing the *bac* never exceeded the single digits. [slide]<sup>7</sup>

This same period was also an era of expanding state bureaucracy. As Pierre Rosanvallon has recently argued, the administrative state came to be seen as an embodiment of the general will alternative to its incarnation by the democratically elected legislature. Indeed, the party of order preferred the state bureaucracy, or *administration*, to the legislature, because the logic of administration imposed the discipline of a certain rationality on an otherwise unruly democracy. The republican elite became increasingly disaffected with the electoral competition between corrupt political parties arbitrated by uninformed citizens. Across the Channel, Matthew Arnold [slide] epitomized this unheroic contest in his poem “Dover Beach”: for Arnold, democratic modernity was like “a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight/Where ignorant armies clash by night.” In France, jurists groping for a way out of Arnold’s “darkling plain” propounded a dualistic conception of the state. By administrative alchemy they hoped that a chaotic and irrational democracy might be

---

<sup>7</sup> According to François Dubet, 2 percent of an age cohort passed the *bac* in 1902; by 1946, the figure had risen no higher than 6 percent. See Dubet in Alain Finkielkraut, ed., *La Querelle de l'école* (Paris: Stock, 2007), p. 133.

transubstantiated into something like the reasoned rule of cultivated Guardians in the ideal Republic as Plato imagined it.<sup>8</sup>

Recruitment to guardianship, or, more prosaically, to the *statut de fonctionnaire*, was supposed to be based on demonstrated competence, but in the absence of anything that might be characterized as a functional administrative science, “general culture” became the real shibboleth distinguishing the washed from the unwashed. Careers were open to talent, but opportunities for talent to be recognized were not uniformly distributed across France and Navarre. To prepare for anointment, it was best to live in a city of some size. There, in a proper lycée, one could absorb passages from an approved digest of the officially sanctioned canon and learn to expound pithy encapsulations of the tradition itself, such as, “Corneille portrays men as they ought to be, Racine as they are” (*dixit* La Bruyère) – as neat a formulation of the underlying dualism of the culture-power system as one could wish.

If bureaucrats were the secular clergy of the literary religion, the literati were the regular clergy. Their cloister was the *Nouvelle Revue Française* [slide], that outpost of eternity in the Sixth Arrondissement (where the French publishing industry is concentrated) [slide]. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, these monks of Saint-Germain des Prés repaired during the summer to an authentic albeit deconsecrated abbey [slide] in the village of Pontigny, where they discoursed on sublimities ranging from the venal in Villon to the categorical imperative in Kant. The *décades* of Pontigny had in fact begun before the First World War, prolonging the Symbolist revolt against Naturalism. Zola’s approach to the marketplace had been as crass as that of the capitalists who peopled his pages. Gallimard’s monks wanted no part of it. The first edition of

---

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *La Légitimité Démocratique* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

Gide's *Immoraliste* numbered only 300 copies. It was an "adventure," he confided to his diary, not a business venture. His only profit would be "amusement," proof of the author's high-mindedness and evidence that, in France at least, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism did *not* coincide.<sup>9</sup> Pontigny was a Cistercian abbey, and its latter-day literary monks had much in common with the original Cistercians: both aimed to purify a prior order of things, to restore respect for a lost ideal.

This division of labor between secular bureaucrats and regular men of letters encouraged a subtle symbiosis: "Parnassus," as Marc Fumaroli [slide] once put it, "is a mountain with gentle slopes," [slide] by which he meant that in his ideal republic the gods and the mortals can indulge a certain intimacy without ever forgetting which occupies the mountaintop.<sup>10</sup> Humanism promised knowledge of man in the abstract. Abstract knowledge of man as he is in himself, independent of his various social incarnations, promised impartiality in administrative decisions. Impartiality bestowed legitimacy on the state administration and the promise of transcending particularist interests and partisan bias. At every level we find duality: dualism of elite and non-elite, of man and men, and of the literary world as transsubstantiation of the real.

## The Organic Configuration [slide]

This dualism would prove to be unstable, however. Its disintegration began with the Depression. Disdain for the material support of high culture was exposed for the delusion it was when that support crumbled in the Crash. Within a few years, *engagement*--meaning

---

<sup>9</sup> Eric Deschodt, *Gide: Le Contemporain capital* (Paris: Perrin, 1991), p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Fumaroli, "L'Académie française," in Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

committed critique of the worldly order – had become the watchword. Gide had already traveled to the Congo in 1925 [slide] and published a book condemning colonialism.<sup>11</sup> Writers enlisted as fellow travelers of both the extreme right and the extreme left. Humanism, the emblem of the literary configuration, fell into utter discredit ten years later when the extreme right adopted it as a battle cry in 1935. Henri Massis of *l'Action Française* launched a manifesto [slide] of “French Intellectuals for the Defense of the West and Peace in Europe,” whose signatories endorsed the notion that to oppose Fascist Italy’s colonial conquest of Ethiopia was to threaten “the very idea of *man*, the legitimacy of his possessions and titles.”<sup>12</sup>

If humanism could now be invoked as warrant for the brutal treatment of indigenous peoples that Gide had witnessed in the Congo, the humanist cultural configuration could no longer stand. Rather than a hierarchy of values in which *man* trumped *men*, a new hierarchy emerged in which *men*, now rebaptized *the masses* or *das Volk*, took precedence on both right and left. Writers ceased to be content if they reached only the happy few. They gladly sacrificed aesthetic fastidiousness on the altar of topical relevance: when Ramon Fernandez [slide], the leading *NRF* critic in the interwar period, underwent a rapid evolution that took him within a few years from the otherworldliness of Pontigny to left-wing militancy to an official post in Doriot’s extreme-right French Popular Party, he explained the change in his writing style by

---

<sup>11</sup> André Gide, *Voyage au Congo* (Paris, 1925).

<sup>12</sup> Fernandez, *Ramon*, p. 452. Thierry Maulnier attempted to redefine humanism as an aesthetic not of “man” but of “European man” or of a “constructed and ordered figure of man” that was at once “national and social,” that is, compatible with fascism. See David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 225.

noting that “you don’t write for 300,000 readers in the same way you write for the 300 *lettered*” subscribers of the *NRF*.<sup>13</sup>

Tocqueville believed that religion suffers when the church mixes in temporal affairs. Only by remaining apart can it preserve its integrity and independence. Julien Benda [slide] had made a similar point about the cultural clerisy in his *Trahison des clercs* (1927): ill-judged commitment would undermine the authority of the committed. This pessimistic prediction was borne out by the postwar damage to the reputations of numerous literary collaborators: in addition to Fernandez the names of Céline, Drieu la Rochelle, Chardonne, Morand, Montherlant, Jouhandeau, Brasillach, Rebatet, Bardèche, Maulnier, Carcopino, and Bonnard spring to mind.<sup>14</sup> The literary religion suffered as grievously as the prerevolutionary Church from its fatal mingling in temporal affairs.

Meanwhile, the structure of the administrative state itself was changing. The postwar state had new functional requirements, and it developed new institutions to satisfy them. The premium was on analytic skills. The emblematic figure of the Trente Glorieuses was not the writer but the high civil servant. He was trained by the new National School of Administration, founded in 1945 [slide]. His intellectual formation was likely to draw on economics, sociology, and the new history rather than literature and philosophy, even if these subjects retained for a time their importance as signals of a certain competence. The concern of government shifted from *man* to *society*, a new abstraction to be approached by rigorous analysis rather than empathetic intuition.

---

<sup>13</sup> Fernandez, *Ramon*, p. 584. In fact, Fernandez was exaggerating. By this time the *NRF* had 1,400 subscribers; cf. Deschodt, *Gide*.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*.

Now, one might object to this line of argument by noting that, contrary to what I claim, the postwar years were a period in which the prestige of literature and philosophy attained its apogee. Didn't Sartre and Camus become international celebrities? Didn't the sales of contemporary as well as classic literary works increase enormously owing to the advent of the paperback? Didn't Malraux democratize the theater with his Maisons de la Culture? Didn't art museums become recreational destinations for hundreds of thousands of visitors?

Yes, indeed, all these changes occurred in the postwar years, but I see them as precursors of later developments. I am interpreting Culture as the Other of Power, and in the Trente Glorieuses the priorities of Power were clear: economic growth was the imperative, and all the country's resources had to be diverted to that end. In the power-culture couple, in other words, power was now on top.

The pre-eminent historian of French education in this period, Antoine Prost, is categorical: "There was a Gaullian education policy. It can be summed up in one central principle: to recruit elites democratically."<sup>15</sup> Until the end of World War II, the prestige hierarchy in France had remained essentially medieval. The literary-philosophical configuration had been modeled on the *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric, logic. The *quadrivium*, comprising the more pragmatic and numerate branches of knowledge, was honored but less esteemed. Recognized for their *practical* importance, these were the disciplines of *homo faber*. Rulers ruled with tongue and pen, with verbal invention rather than "mechanical" labor. The disciplines of the *quadrivium* enhanced physical power and thus made domination possible but could not legitimate it. Legitimation required language.

---

<sup>15</sup> Antoine Prost, *Éducation, société et politiques: Une histoire de l'enseignement de 1945 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 115.

The Langevin-Wallon Plan of 1947 [slide] deliberately set out to change this status hierarchy. De Gaulle entrusted reform of the nation's educational system to a psychologist, Henri Wallon, and a physicist, Paul Langevin, both members of the Communist Party. They were joined on the commission by Lucien Febvre, historian and co-founder of the *Annales*, the journal of the new historiography, and Roger Gal, grammarian. An explicit goal of the reformers was to alter "ancient priorities."<sup>16</sup> "Equity," they insisted, "demands recognition of the equal dignity of all social tasks, of the high material and moral value of manual labor, and of technical value."

Reform in this direction continued under Mendès France, whose priorities were shaped by the Cold War. Close to Mendès were the biologist Jacques Monod and the mathematician André Lichnerowicz [slide], who founded the Association for the Study and Expansion of Scientific Research. This organization sounded the alarm over a supposed "engineering gap" between the Soviet Union and Western Europe.<sup>17</sup>

High civil servants at the Commissariat au Plan answered the call [slide]. For the five-year plan covering 1956-1961, it was projected that France would need 51,000 engineers and scientists, but its educational system was set to produce only 24,000.<sup>18</sup> It was thus in the mid-50s that we begin to see the curricular changes demanded by the functional reorientation of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Langevin-Wallon, *Rapport Langevin-Wallon*, (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2002), new edition with commentary by Claude Allègre, François Dubet et Philippe Meirieu. See also Julia Resnik, "The Democratization of the Educational System in France after World War II: A Neo-Weberian Glocal Approach to Education Reforms," *British Journal of Sociology* 55(2)2007:155-81.

<sup>17</sup> Resnik, "The Democratization." Lelièvre and Nique, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> Prost, p. 97.

educational system. Among the first of these was a sharper and earlier differentiation of “classic” and “modern” sections at the middle school level.<sup>19</sup>

For a decade or more the wider cultural implications of this internal reconfiguration of the schools were not clearly perceived even by those responsible for them. This blindness stemmed from the fact that numbers were increasing on both the humanistic and scientific sides, in part because of the increases mandated by the planners, in part simply because generational cohorts were larger in the Baby Boom years and the demand from below for education was increasing, as the economic and status rewards of advanced schooling became increasingly apparent. Indeed, if the number of university professors in the sciences tripled between 1950 and 1971, the number in letters and human sciences more than quadrupled.<sup>20</sup> But “letters and human sciences” no longer described the same cultural field as literature and philosophy.

By the 1970s, the relative standing of *trivium* and *quadrivium* had been reversed. Georges Pompidou [slide], though a *littérateur* himself, had already put the point quite bluntly as early as 1963: “The economy lacks a great number of technicians, technical managers and engineers. In order to overcome that problem, critical to social and economic life, a large number of pupils should be attracted to the technical section.” The goal of the new school guidance program, he continued, “was to link the democratization of the education system to the economic, technical and scientific needs of the nation.” A senior education bureaucrat, Jean Capelle, exhorted the state to invest “like an industrialist ... according to its own interest, and ... aid students who orient themselves *toward professions the nation requires.*”<sup>21</sup> Graduates in the numerate disciplines

---

<sup>19</sup> Prost, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Prost, *Éducation*, p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Resnik, “Democratization,” p. 170. Emphasis added.

increasingly dominated the upper ranks of the civil service, banking, and high-tech industry. Statistical agencies such as the Institut National des Etudes Démographiques, founded in 1945, and the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, established in 1946, developed into important public policy institutions. Statistical methods also infiltrated the business world through new schools such as INSEAD, founded in 1957, and HEC, which dated from the nineteenth century but began adopting the methods of American business schools in the early 1950s. Functional changes in government and industry thus reinforced the changes in the educational system that had made them possible.

Even on the “humanistic” side, the status hierarchy was disrupted by the university’s enlistment in the postwar growth campaign. New disciplines vied for leadership, progressively relegating literature and philosophy to a position of venerated irrelevance. We have already noted Lucien Febvre’s presence among the postwar “modernizers.” When Fernand Braudel “sold” the new *Annales* historiography to the Ford Foundation, which financed the creation of the famous Sixth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (the forerunner of today’s EHESS) [slide], he did so by pretending to believe, perhaps even believing, that the study of European development in the Middle Ages could be made to shed light on the development of Third World countries in the Cold War.<sup>22</sup>

It is no accident, moreover, that the ensuing period, 1965 to 1980, was marked by a series of *querelles* in which the relative status of rival disciplines was a central issue. Lévi-Strauss’s substitution of *structure* for *situation* challenged Sartre’s subjectivist philosophy. Roland Barthes clashed with Raymond Picard about the essence of the literary text. Michel Foucault’s

---

<sup>22</sup> Georges Duby, *L'Histoire Continue*.

archeological epistemology interrogated the hegemonic pretensions of *Annales* historiography, which was simultaneously challenged from within by François Furet's refusal to admit that socioeconomic structure should trump political culture. These surface tremors signaled deep subterranean shifts.

To concentrate on these particular seismic signals is quite misleading, however. In fact, the main tectonic action was elsewhere, far from what Luc Ferry [slide] and Alain Renaut retrospectively (and pejoratively, and misleadingly) dubbed *la pensée '68*.<sup>23</sup> They were not wrong to see an "anti-humanist" eruption, but they were wrong to think that henceforth anti-humanists would dominate the landscape. The sixty-eighters were actually the last outcroppings of the subsiding literary continent. The organic cultural configuration had supplanted the literary: those most adept at figuring out how the world was supposed to work were selected to partake of the benefits that accrued from seeing to it that the world did in fact work as they thought it should.

The post-1968 changes in the French educational system merely ratified existing trends. Responding to the student movement, education minister Edgar Faure, himself *un vieux littéraire* in a long line of political men of letters from Herriot to Blum to Daladier to de Gaulle and Pompidou, introduced a new system of *filières*, or tracks, labeled A, B, C, D, etc. *Filière C*, the scientific-mathematical track, became the preferred route to scholarly success and prestige, permanently dethroning the literary-philosophical, including its anthropological-structural-historical offshoots.

---

<sup>23</sup> Alain Ferry and Luc Renaut, *La Pensée '68* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

Further educational reform in 1992 only reinforced these tendencies. The new tracks, S, ES, and L, exhibit an even clearer prestige hierarchy than the A, B, C system. [slide] In the 2009 bac, 51 percent of the candidates were registered in the S, or scientific track, and only 17 percent in the literary. Literary enrollment has decreased 20 percent over the past 15 years, and the S track now enrolls not only the best science students but also the best literature students, because it is “deemed to be more generalist and to lead to more socially prestigious careers.” Indeed, “50 percent of students who study Latin and Greek now choose the S track.”<sup>24</sup> Another significant feature of the present system is substantial gender bias: literary sections are 80 percent female.<sup>25</sup>

Call it Gramsci’s revenge [slide]: it had become impossible to conceive of a state without what he was the first to call organic intellectuals.<sup>26</sup> And these, which the reformed schools now produced in ever greater abundance, were not merely *ronds-de-cuir* with a literary veneer; they were authentic specialists in sciences that treated not man as such but classes and categories of men, counted, sorted, and encompassed by a system supposed to be amenable to general laws of the sort no modern welfare state can do without: demographic projections, actuarial tables, national economic accounts, trade statistics, etc.

---

<sup>24</sup> Christian Baudelot, [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article\\_interactif/2009/09/01/douze-idees-recues-sur-l-ecole\\_1234471\\_3224\\_8.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article_interactif/2009/09/01/douze-idees-recues-sur-l-ecole_1234471_3224_8.html)

<sup>25</sup> Richard Descoings, “Préconisations sur la réforme du lycée,” report to the Ministry of Education, June 2, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> These changes were not unique to France. Indeed, as Nicholas Lemann has shown, the development of the SAT in the United States, promoted by another science-and-technology-oriented reformer, Harvard president James Conant, was similarly directed toward a functional democratization and expansion of the educated elite. And the Frankfurt School established its American outpost, the Institute for Social Research, by selling Robert MacIver, the head of Columbia’s sociology department, on the idea that it would function as a sort of research bureau offering practical policy advice to social planners. Thomas Wheatland, *The Frankfurt School in Exile*. <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/frankfurt-the-hudson>

Legitimation, I said earlier, requires language. By 1975, at the close of *Les Trente Glorieuses*, this assertion was no longer true. Legitimacy, formerly rationalized in terms of justice, had increasingly become a matter of efficiency, and the evaluation of efficiency depended on the ability to count and measure. In this connection, it is interesting to note that in post-'68 France, the delegitimation of communism took two forms: the literary-philosophical version, pressed by so-called *néo-philosophe* students of anti-humanists such as Louis Althusser, attacked the systematic, scientific cruelty of the Gulag, but a more durable as well as flexible line of attack, useful at home as well as abroad, targeted the inefficiencies of planned economies, especially in the wake of the Socialists' difficulties with nationalizations after 1981 and the challenge posed by the growing influence of neoliberal economic ideas in the developed and developing worlds. We can savor the irony that the enhancement of the *quadrivium*, urged by the Communists Wallon and Langevin in order to rehabilitate "manual labor and technical value," ultimately served to accredit belief in the rationality of the neoliberal market.

Even on the left, the old rhetoric of justice succumbed to the new gospel of efficiency. One of the most important social developments of the period was the emergence of the *autogestion* movement. The name in itself speaks volumes: liberation was to come no longer from conquering the commanding heights of state power but from "managing" the myriad decentralized sites among which power was disseminated. When this movement failed, the Left slid into an impasse from which it has yet to extricate itself.<sup>27</sup>

Massification and specialization are ugly but indispensable descriptive terms for this period, in which literate bureaucrats saw themselves supplanted by organic intellectuals. The portion of

---

<sup>27</sup> See Pierre Grémion, *Modernisation et progressisme: Fin d'une époque, 1968-1981* (Paris: Esprit, 2006).

each age cohort earning the baccalaureate degree increased from 20 to 64 percent. Massification meant that the audience for higher education could no longer be assumed to come from relatively homogeneous cultural strata. In 1964, when Bourdieu and Passeron published *Les Héritiers*, only one percent of children of working class parentage entered the sphere of higher education. Today the figure is thirty-eight percent.<sup>28</sup>

Specialization, however, meant that one could acquire an education without acquiring a general culture.<sup>29</sup> Technique is easier to transmit to a highly disparate student body than sensibility. The “slopes of Parnassus,” to return to Fumaroli’s metaphor, ceased to be gentle. Indeed, the single sacred mount diversified into a whole range of disciplinary peaks guarded by steep escarpments of conceptual apparatus and technical jargon. Barriers to entry were high. The curriculum stiffened into disciplines. If education perpetually rebuilds the house of culture, postwar educational reform had ended by converting the ample prewar mansion into a warren of non-communicating apartments. More residents were squeezed into the château, but their view of the park was limited, and the fountains had been shut off in the name of efficiency.

## **The Industrial Configuration: An Age of Anxiety [slide]**

In the two cultural configurations we have examined thus far, the state’s interest was in part pragmatic: humanist culture was a signal of generalized competence; technical-scientific culture was a generator of needed skills and a hothouse for organic intellectuals. But the state also had another interest in shaping the culture, a symbolic interest: to integrate the nation. France’s rich

---

<sup>28</sup> Baudelot interview. Resnik reports a deputy’s comment that only 8 percent of students at the collège and lycée level were of working-class parentage.

<sup>29</sup> Baudelot interview.

literary heritage became, in effect, a symbol of national unity. After that unity fractured in the 1940s, a new myth was propounded: with recognition of “the equal dignity of all social tasks,” integration was supposed to flow from participation in a common project of national reconstruction.

But just as the humanistic ideal had been shattered by ugly realities – colonialism, class conflict, nationalism, and war – so, too, did the postwar rhetoric of integration by participation begin to unravel as the exigencies of recovery waned. Students were severed – not quite as Barrès had imagined, however – from previously integrative institutions such as family, community, and even political party. The solidarities that formed among coworkers and colleagues were different from those that had forged bonds among *concitoyens*. At the state level, the bureaucrat had matured into a specialist in some particular domain of public management, most at home among his professional peers and increasingly distant from the rest.

The after-hours culture of the organic intellectuals became increasingly cosmopolitan. Specialization created a demand for compensatory diversity. Product variety on the cultural market increased. Cultural goods, once scarce and expensive, became abundant and cheap, so abundant that even in the pursuit of pleasure one had no choice but to specialize. Choice no longer expressed simple taste but also a real budget constraint: time was in scarce supply. The old literary culture, a culture of self-fashioning in the sense of Stephen Greenblatt, had been a lifelong project; by contrast, leisure-time consumption is but one of many line items in the consumer’s time budget. Informational inequalities created a new role for mediators of one kind or another, and hence for the media that employed them – now often mass media rather than limited-circulation literary-intellectual reviews. Culture had been industrialized.

The increased volume and variety of cultural goods placed a premium on services of filtering and selection. The creator who succeeded in becoming a mediator thus stood a good chance of profiting from his position, because mediation implied an ability to filter access to rivals and partition the available demand among a relatively small number of suppliers. It would be possible to analyze the *masscult* market [slide] in terms of oligopolistic competition: the analysis would hinge on increasing returns to scale, transaction costs, asymmetric information, reputational intermediaries, optimal size, and winner-take-all markets. Indeed, to be too deeply steeped in a national culture may have become a disadvantage in a globalized age.

Cultural conservatives decry this variety, this deracination, and this scale. Instead of a cornucopia, they see a supermarket filled with ersatz and adulterated goods. The humanist canon may have limited choice, they argue, but such limitation was healthy, the expression of a collective value judgment. To gratify all desires with cheap, tawdry cultural merchandise is to sanction a “new hedonism,” Alain Finkielkraut [slide] fulminated in an essay entitled “A Pair of Boots Is As Good As Shakespeare.”<sup>30</sup> [slide] Weber had already denounced “specialists without spirit” who “mistake this nullity for the greatest civilization the world has ever known.” For Finkielkraut, the mass production of cultural wares had created something even worse. People now craved “cultural snacks, bits of culture which they can try out ... and then discard. ... They do not conserve but rather consume the available traditions.” Even the school had been corrupted, conservatives alleged, as teachers uninterested in defending their own tradition

---

<sup>30</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, “A Pair of Boots Is As Good As Shakespeare,” in Corbett and Moon, *Education in France: Continuity and Change in the Mitterrand Years* (Routledge, 1996), pp. 335-348. The quotes are from p. 335.

sought to ingratiate themselves with students rather than initiate them. Hence the schools could no longer fulfill their key function: to integrate the disparate elements of society into a common culture.

Listeners of *France Culture* in the summer of 2008 may have been startled to hear this battle joined on the normally placid wavelength of France's cultural radio network. Finkielkraut had invited as a guest on his program a fellow cultural conservative, Renaud Camus [slide], a writer of elaborately filigreed style but mildly sulfurous reputation. The bad odor stemmed from a passage in a volume of Camus's journals in which he opined that one of the network's cultural programs suffered from a surfeit of Jewish contributors and a consequent overemphasis on "Jewish culture ... and Jewish life in France and in the world."<sup>31</sup>

The volume in which this passage appears was withdrawn from circulation by its publisher in the wake of the ensuing polemic. Nevertheless, Finkielkraut, himself a Jewish contributor to *France Culture* but an admirer of Camus, had invited the writer to discuss another of his books, *La grande déculturation*, on the allegedly deplorable state of French culture and education.<sup>32</sup>

Now, Finkielkraut's program was preceded at the time by Frédéric Martel's *Masse Critique* [slide], subtitled a "magazine of the cultural industries." A starker contrast between two culture brokers cannot be imagined. Martel chose to end his broadcast by informing his listeners that Finkielkraut was about to join Camus in "debate" but that he, Martel, saw nothing that could be

---

<sup>31</sup> Renaud Camus wrote that the "*collaborateurs juifs du Panorama de France Culture*" sont en "*nette surreprésentation d'un groupe ethnique ou religieux donné ; d'autre part, ils font en sorte qu'une émission par semaine au moins soit consacrée à la culture juive, à la religion juive, à des écrivains juifs, à l'Etat d'Israël et à sa politique, à la vie des juifs en France et de par le monde, aujourd'hui ou à travers les siècles. C'est quelquefois très intéressant, quelquefois non ; mais c'est surtout un peu agaçant, à la longue, par défaut d'équilibre.*" For more on this polemic, see <http://www.renaud-camus.org/articles/lire.php3?article=13>.

<sup>32</sup> A somewhat jaundiced account of the polemic by Elisabeth Lévy can be found at <http://www.causeur.fr/ma-france-culture,450>.

“debated with Camus, especially after the book he recently published.” He then added, “So I propose to leave you with a good, a generous, antidote, a hymn to diversity.” Whereupon he played a song by the rapper Diam’s [slide], entitled *Ma France à moi* [slide]. A week later, Finkielkraut responded in terms that matched Martel’s insolence.

A tempest in a teapot to be sure, yet it provides an answer to the question I raised at the beginning: Why are French declinists so vociferous in their insistence that everything, and especially culture, is going to hell in a handbasket, while others are persuaded that culture has resisted better than other aspects of France’s collective existence? The answer is that the commodification of culture and diversification of the market have made it possible to satisfy the cultural demands of a larger proportion of the population than ever before. The market can supply everyone with everything *except* the power to determine what other people should value; hence cultural homogeneity can no longer be enforced.

Now, this lamented cultural homogeneity was always something of an elite illusion. In the literary-philosophical age, as we have seen, only a tiny percentage of the population was exposed in any serious way to the great literary tradition that was supposed to found France’s cultural unity. True, the schools of the Third Republic did succeed in imposing standard French as the language of the Republic, yet even here, radio and television completed the job of unification that the republican school had merely begun.<sup>33</sup>

Under the organic regime of the postwar years, the pretense of “equal dignity of all social tasks” masked the continuing existence of a deep cultural divide. Multiculturalism was not yet an issue, so at this stage we see in its pure form the reality of educational mobility in an

---

<sup>33</sup> Michel Braudeau and Pierre Encrevé, *Conversations sur la langue française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

advanced industrial society: even in the eras of greatest mobility, opportunity was strictly limited. For even with the significant expansion of secondary and higher education in the second half of the twentieth century, the elite grew rather modestly in proportion to the total population. I deliberately misled you earlier when I indicated that 51 percent of the students taking the *bac* this year were in S, the most rigorous track. The correct figure is 51 percent *of those who took le bac général*. In the Byzantine complexity of the French educational system, there are in fact three *lycées* and three *bacs* (*général*, *technologique*, and *professionnel*).

When we look at the numbers more carefully, we find that the *lycée général* now serves roughly 60 percent of each age cohort, and 51 percent of its students are in track S [slide]. That works out to about 30 percent of each age cohort in the “upper” level of the educational system (table 2). In other words, after forty years of reform and expansion of secondary and higher education post-1968, the “elite” group of students has grown from 20 percent of an age cohort to 25 or 30. Fully 70 percent of the population still cannot aspire to the level of culture that the conservatives feel called upon to defend.<sup>34</sup> Most people never acquire the tools [slide].

Immigration has altered the complexion of the problem – literally – but not the substance. The failure of the reformed school system to fulfill its promise of “equal dignity for all social tasks” has been blamed on the supposed “inassimilability” of the newcomers. The gift of a rich cultural tradition is laid at their door, we are told, but they refuse to accept it. They prefer to cling to their culture of origin, even though it leaves them ill-equipped to meet the demands of the host society. But to say this is to mistake the root of the problem. The gift of elite republican culture, transmitted gratis by the schools in conformity with the dictates of republican

---

<sup>34</sup> Descoings, “Préconisations,” p. 22.

egalitarianism, was always left largely untouched by the majority of students, most of whom never laid eyes on it. In the industrial era of culture, the emblematic figure is not the schoolteacher or the organic intellectual but the culture broker. [slide] The state continues to shape the culture, but with a less free hand. It is rivaled by corporate “content providers,” [slide] and its role is twofold: to maintain the infrastructure [slide] and regulate competition, as with the recently passed HADOPI law [slide], which provides harsh penalties for illegal downloading.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion [slide]

So what is the future of French culture? In sketching France’s cultural evolution, I have deliberately avoided drawing up lists of great works, artists, and intellectuals. *De gustibus non disputandum*. I have preferred to eschew the heights and dwell on the foothills of Parnassus, for I am a humanist of a particular kind: I believe that men make the gods in their own image. The Muses must periodically descend from the mountaintop. They cannot remain perpetually aloof from where man lives and still hope to inspire his dreams.

Art will therefore avail itself increasingly of new technologies, simply because the invention and application of new technologies is what absorbs much of the energy of today’s educated classes. Architecture is in some respects paradigmatic. It has long been at ease with an International Style. A handful of consecrated practitioners deposit their creations around the globe. Their works are functional and enjoy the high patronage of contemporary potentates:

---

<sup>35</sup> HADOPI: Haute autorité pour la diffusion des œuvres et la protection des droits sur Internet. The law in question prohibits unauthorized downloading of music and videos.

Jean Nouvel is comfortable celebrating, under the auspices of Jacques Chirac, what is delicately referred to in the official prospectus as “the dialogue of cultures” at the Quai Branly [slide]; and he is equally at home sophisticating the American Midwest with the Guthrie Theater [slide] or translating classical Middle Eastern motifs into high-tech window treatments at the Institut du Monde Arabe [slide]. There is immense profit in tailoring cultural “products” to travel, as Hollywood abundantly proved long before architects joined the jet set: a German character in one Wim Wenders film tells an American, “You Yanks have colonized our subconscious.”

But empire, even cultural empire, breeds resistance, so that American success in defining common denominators in a variety of arts has had its obverse in the continual search for distinction by differentiation. Culture being a game of mirrors, one must also beware of strange reversals. France, too, once colonized the world’s subconscious: it was civilization itself, the “capital of the nineteenth century” to which one looked to sophisticate the “barbaric yawp” of less refined places. But sophistication exacts a price, as Henry James [slide] recognized long ago: French, he wrote, “is a language in which everything has been said and re-said.” Others were free to work “in a field and a language where the white snow has as yet so few footprints. In French ... it is all one trampled slosh.”<sup>36</sup> One hundred years later, the signs have been reversed, to the point where *The New York Times* was able to write recently of “that peculiar French manner that combines bad taste with deep sophistication.”<sup>37</sup> [slide] For the *Times* reviewer, sophistication has become the enemy of taste precisely because it creates local loyalties,

---

<sup>36</sup> See my introduction to Emile Zola, *The Kill*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Modern Library, 2004), p. xxi.

<sup>37</sup> <http://events.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/dining/reviews/04rest.html?ref=dining>

ingraining habits that impede the necessary readiness to give unstintingly if ephemerally to the ever-changing here and now.

I therefore reiterate what I said earlier about culture's increasing independence from language and community, from rootedness in all its senses. This is one source of the anxiety about the state of today's culture. The wielders of words worry more than others, perhaps because the market is glutted with them. The new technologies have cheapened words more than other cultural goods. The books that filled the library of Alexandria can be stored in a space smaller than the period at the end of this sentence and distributed gratis. The production of images and sound, the marshaling of the large numbers of people needed to produce a film or a disk, is a more expensive and complex undertaking.

But the converse of this is that the production of what is expensive to produce tends to become concentrated in the hands of the most efficient producers. The range of expression therefore narrows to maximize the potential audience and increase returns to the successful few. Where production is cheap, the barriers to entry are lower, but the producer has no market power. Hence she must often toil in obscurity and satisfy herself with what her scanty marginal product yields in an indiscriminating marketplace. This may not be enough to sustain life. But why should we be surprised if "culture" in the loftiest, most elitist, most transcendent sense is obliged to live at the margin? Stendhal was content to write for the happy few.

And in trying to imagine the future, it may not be so farfetched to invoke the name of Stendhal [slide]. He was an early Romantic, who could look back on the collapse of two previous cultural regimes: a high-flown Renaissance-classical era, in which a rarefied literary production had been the byproduct of expanding church and state bureaucracies, and a more

pragmatic and analytic Enlightenment, in which the organic intellectuals of a modernizing state had attempted to re-center the culture of their time on the evolving exigencies of life here and now. By Stendhal's day, these two earlier cultural configurations had run their course, and banished subjectivity had begun to reclaim its rights. If he were with us today, he might not feel entirely *dépaysé*.-- [end]

	En progrès	En déclin	Ni l'un ni l'autre	Total	Différentiel progrès – déclin
La France en général	8	52	40	100	-44
Le pouvoir d'achat	7	74	19	100	-67
L'école et l'université	19	48	33	100	-29
Le système de santé	31	47	22	100	-16
Son influence dans le monde	19	46	35	100	-27
La solidarité dans la société	24	45	31	100	-21
La compétitivité des entreprises	22	42	36	100	-20
La recherche et l'innovation	40	32	28	100	8
Le rayonnement culturel	36	23	41	100	13

Table 1: French attitudes toward decline (Source: CEVIPOF Political Barometer 2006-7)

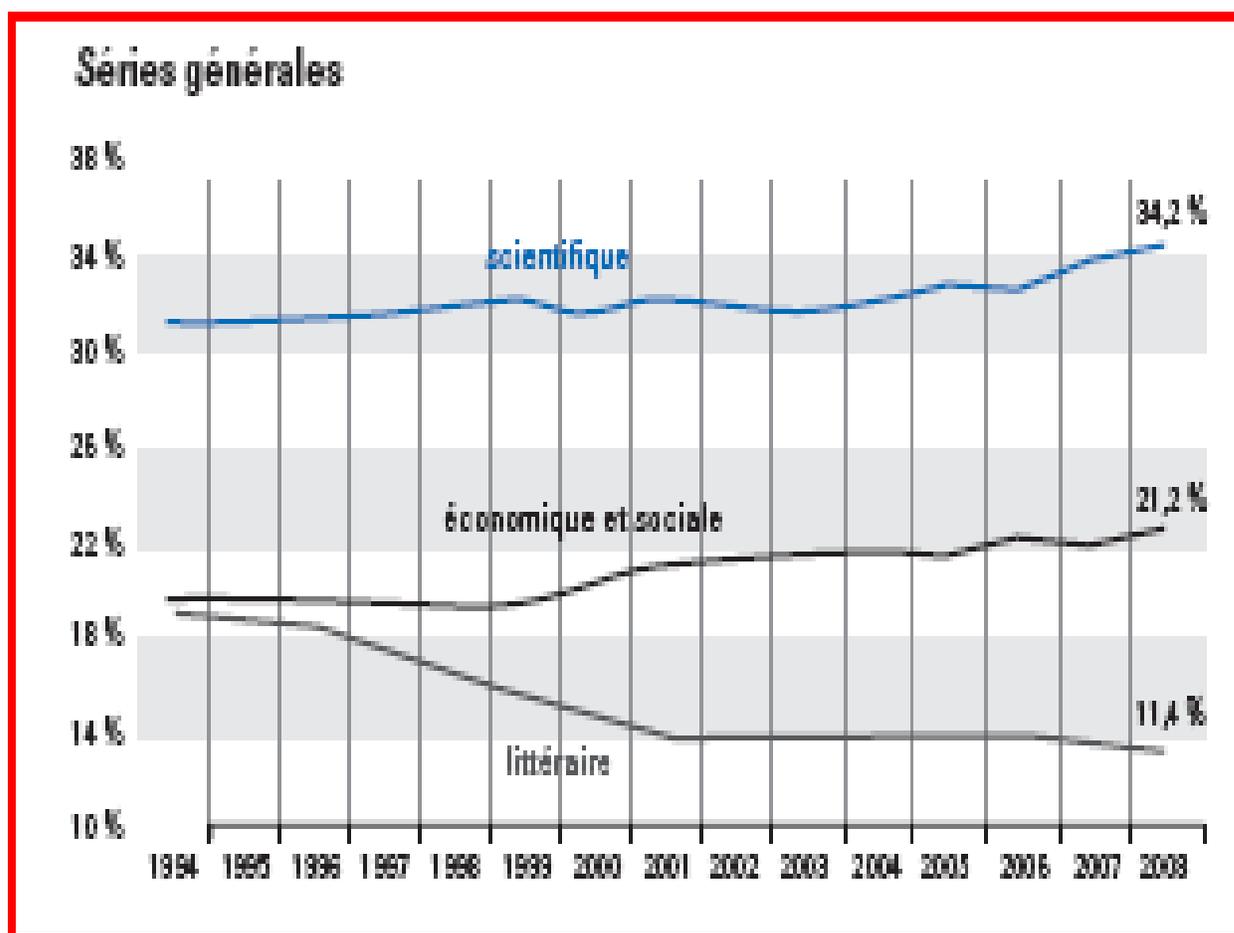


Table 2: Enrollment in tracks S, ES, L