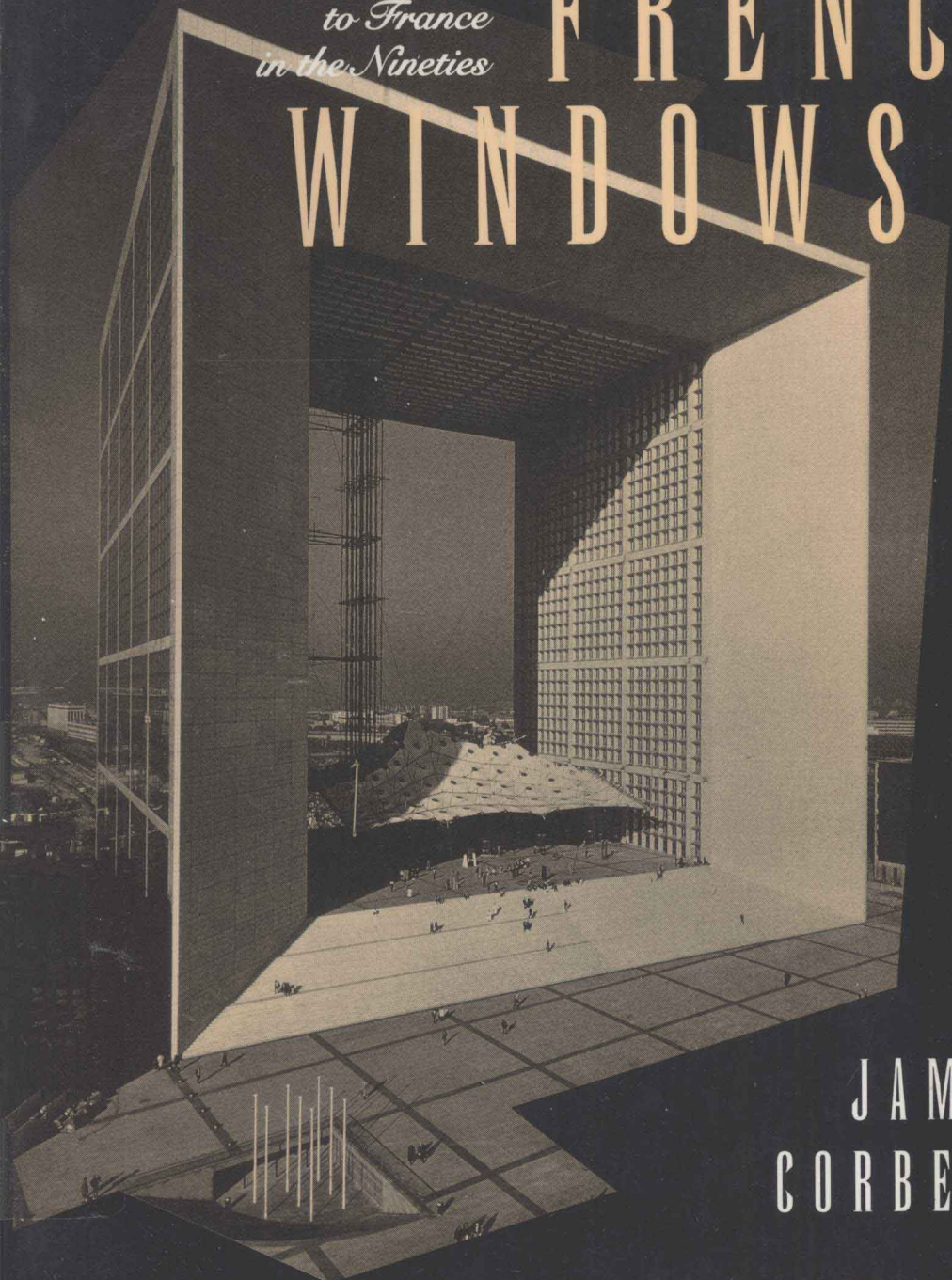
THROUGH FRENCH WINDOWS

An Introduction to France in the Nineties



JAMES CORBETT

MICHIGAN

Through French Windows

An Introduction to France in the Nineties

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Introduction

In an article in the *French Review* in 1988, Eugene F. Gray questioned "the teaching of French civilization in American schools and the image of France generated in the minds of the students as a result of that teaching."

> Civilization classes stress the cultural heritage of France, because this rich and varied heritage has contributed so much to Western culture. As a result many students derive a totally outmoded image of France. To be sure, France is filled with old churches, crenellated castles, country mansions, and other historical monuments; to be sure one encounters French people on bicycles. But not a few French people now live in modern housing in a suburb and commute to work by automobile. . . . The true France is much more complex, much more modern, than the impression transmitted by many of the illustrations in textbooks on French civilization, generating some surprise on the part of students visiting France for the first time.

After describing a number of French technological breakthroughs, Professor Gray concluded: "A new image of France is in the making. Let us hope that it will be reflected in classes of French civilization."[1]

A survey published in March 1991 by the French-American Foundation in New York would seem to confirm Professor Gray's estimate of the American view of France.[2] The poll showed that Americans rated France high for culture, fine wines, and fashion and low for technology. Only a quarter of the respondents perceived France as a leader in telecommunications, and even fewer saw it as occupying a prominent position

1. Eugene F. Gray, "Technology and the Teaching of French Civilization: La Télématique," *French Review* 61 (1988): 504–8.

2. Gallup-Harris poll published by the French-American Foundation (New York, 7 March 1991). See "Comment Français et Américains se voient," *Le Monde*, 9 March 1991.

in nuclear energy and aerospace. This survey also showed that the French rated the United States high for technology and low for culture. Jacques Portes, professor of American civilization at the University of Lille, noted that such opinions were commonplace one hundred years ago and wondered why they persist, since both French and American societies have changed enormously in the interval. "It is absurd," he said, "to be content with these global, simplifying views, even if there may be some slight truth in them." He concluded pessimistically that mentalities are slow to change and that "understanding between nations is often nothing more than a vain wish."[3]

The United States should not be singled out for the way in which France is portrayed in American classrooms; foreign language education in other parts of the world is not essentially different. Teachers can hardly be blamed for stressing a cultural heritage of France that is part of the image the country has always promoted. However, at a time when an increasing number of programs of study abroad in North America and Europe are addressing—or should be addressing—undergraduates and graduates in the social sciences, as well as those in history and literature, an awareness of issues in contemporary France would permit a better understanding of the French approach to economic, political, and social questions.

Few can deny the importance of familiarity with foreign languages and civilization to world trade today, even if many business schools, particularly in the United States, fail to provide cultural training. It is a commonplace to remark that you can buy in your own language, but you must sell in the language of the buyer. An incalculable number of business deals have been lost and political blunders committed because of a misunderstanding of cultural phenomena in the broad sense.[4]

It is no use proclaiming that the global village has done away with national differences. Even if symbols of American civilization such as blue jeans, fast food, and Coca-Cola can be found worldwide, the values attached to these products vary from one country to another in the same way that Perrier or a baguette has different connotations in New York and in Paris.

Statistical similarities in consumer habits and social trends (e.g., di-

3. Jacques Portes, "France-Etats-Unis: Les idées reçues," *Le Monde*, 22 March 1991.

4. See David A. Ricks, *Big Business Blunders: Mistakes in Multinational Marketing* (Homewood, Ill.: Dow Jones–Irwin, 1983).

vorce rates, contraception, attitudes toward education) often reveal subtle national differences in how issues are perceived, based on the history and shared values of each nation. Why, for example, is the level of environmental consciousness in France one of the lowest in Europe? Why do some countries feel that it is primarily up to the government and industry to concern themselves with environmental protection, while others feel that it is the duty of the average citizen?[5] France, like many countries in Europe, has a high rate of unemployment. Economic considerations apart, why is it so difficult to solve the problem of unemployment in France?[6] These and many other questions may be impossible to appreciate fully without some understanding of national cultural traits.

Further, while English has become something of a lingua franca, the renaissance of cultural and linguistic assertiveness that John Naisbitt predicted in the early 1980s—"The Swedes will become more Swedish, the Chinese more Chinese and the French, God help us, more French"[7]—is very real today (witness the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia into ethnic enclaves or, less tragically, the continuing use of nine official languages by the European Community even though the member countries have never been closer to achieving political and monetary union).

Forty years ago Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux underlined "the extent to which, as ties become worldwide, local awareness is intensified."

> As our political forms and our technology become more uniform, the significance of national cultural styles becomes greater. The differences among the ways in which Frenchmen and Germans, Englishmen and Italians view human relationships in the family, the community, the nation and the world, become differences to be taken into account in predicting whether an international conference will fail or succeed or in gauging the chances which any international plan has for acceptance.[8]

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5. See Rudolf Deitert, "How Green Is Europe?" *Europanel Marketing Bulletin*, 1990, 16-19.

6. See chap. 20.

7. John Naisbitt, *Megatrends* (London: Futura, 1984), 76.

8. Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux, *Themes in French Culture: A Preface to a Study of French Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), xi.

Whether you are a representative of a sister city, a corporate executive, a journalist, a student, or simply a traveler, it is hard to deny that an understanding of the language, mores, and behavior of foreign nations can help temper culture shock and create a positive impression of you or of the organization you represent. It enables you to pick subjects of conversation likely to interest your host, to steer clear of pitfalls, and to decode attitudes correctly. Apart from these practical considerations, a better appreciation of a country's attitudes and values may enhance the pleasure of reading its literature—and vice versa.

The study of national traits is an extremely hazardous undertaking. There is the constant threat of the oversimplification denounced by Jacques Portes as well as, in the case of France, the danger of overlooking the "anthropological diversity" brilliantly described by researchers Hervé le Bras and Emmanuel Todd.

> Each one of the *pays* (regions) of France represents in fact a culture, in the anthropological sense of the term, that is to say, a way of living and dying, a set of rules defining fundamental human relationships, between parents and children, between men and women, between friends and neighbors. . . . From an anthropological point of view, Brittany, Occitanie, Normandy, Lorraine, Picardy, Vendée, Savoy, and many other provinces are still alive.[9]

Although this book will attempt not to overlook diversity, its aim is something different: to describe objectively the functioning of French society today and to highlight some of the underlying values the people share wherever they live. These values, inherited from a long history of centralized administration, are the counterpoint to anthropological diversity. They help to make France unique. As le Bras and Todd remark, "France, which combines administrative unity and anthropological diversity is a historical exception in Europe, and probably in the world."[10]

The book begins with a description of the land and the people. Some knowledge of the geography of France, often neglected in school texts on French civilization, is absolutely essential for any understanding of the economic history and development of a nation whose identity is

9. Hervé le Bras and Emmanuel Todd, *L'invention de la France* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1981), 7.

10. Le Bras and Todd, *L'invention de la France*, 8.

defined by geography rather than by ethnicity. The shift from an agricultural to a high-tech urban society is described along with the change in life-styles and values that reveal important differences from developments in other Western countries. French education, which plays such a vital role in inculcating the secular value system that is specific to France, is analyzed in detail. The burdensome revolutionary heritage of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which the French still cling to, is covered in the chapters devoted to incomes and wealth, health care, and social security. A description of community life as well as detailed study of the problems of immigration and integration help understand the pattern of social relations in France today. The nature of the institutions of the Fifth Republic and the current political scene are explained, as are the specificities of decentralization *à la française.* An overview of the economy illustrates some of the major changes that have taken place in the last decade and outlines the assets and liabilities of industry and the services today. Unemployment and the demise of worker organizations are shown to follow a pattern different from that in other countries. The plight of farmers and the threat to rural France and its values conclude the chapters devoted to the economy. Finally, the French contribution to the European Community and reaction to U.S. pressure, which is giving rise to a form of Europatriotism, show that the future of France for historical, economic, geographical, and cultural reasons lies in a united Europe. This may attenuate somewhat the famous Gallic singularity but is unlikely to wipe out completely a view of issues that is distinctively French.

The book was written with the needs of the nonspecialist in mind and is based on a seminar I have given for a number of years at the Université Pierre Mendès France in Grenoble to a group of U.S. students spending their Spring semester in France. There is nothing in this book about French literature, music, or the arts. These are admirably dealt with in more scholarly works. Indeed, at the risk of shocking the purists, I have made a deliberate attempt to refer to present-day popular culture, such as movies, television, comic strips, and songs. Though I have not been able to explore every aspect of contemporary culture in detail, I hope the wide range of topics covered will provide clues for understanding modern France and French thought processes.

My hope is to provide basic information that will help readers to prepare for and to profit from work, study, or travel in France. At the same time I have tried to avoid the pitfall of oversimplification that

would give a distorted picture. One quickly learns that nothing is simple in France; *Oui, mais* (Yes, but) is a favorite expression.

Through French Windows was inspired by the desire to dispel stereotypes but as work progressed, it became clear to me that to be content with a description of modern France was to replace the old stereotypes with new ones—some of which the French are doing their best to encourage. High-tech France is as limited a description as "France, Mother of Arts." Both tell less than half the story. The traveler who arrives in France with glossy visions of the TGV, Airbus, and Ariane, the wonders of *télécarte*, the miracle of the "green revolution," the new dynamism of corporations, and so on is likely to be bewildered. Modernism and conservatism are the two faces of contemporary France.

While there is no denying the changes in or the achievements of France one has to admit that many things, some good, some bad, have not changed and may never change, so anchored are they in the collective psychology of the nation. Some knowledge of the *pourquoi*, the French questioning of things that are often accepted without discussion in other societies, is essential to an understanding of the country. Readers will find plenty of facts and figures in this book, but insofar as possible, I have also attempted to present objectively the questioning modern developments provoke.

In a beautiful article entitled "What Is a Frenchman?" the journalist Jean-Maurice de Montrémy suggests that perhaps what characterizes most this "odd, democratic, secular animal" is the tendency to have an opinion about everything.[11] The French intellectual, of course, is highly qualified for this task, but others are equally ready to speak—such as the *énarque* (technocrat) of popular anecdote—"I'm afraid I haven't understood your question, *monsieur*, but I shall answer it anyway!" Citizens of adamant conviction can be found in the *café du commerce* of the tiniest village "exposing admirable plans," as André Maurois ironically wrote.[12]

My bibiliographical sources, like my informants, are almost exclusively French for three reasons. The first is that despite the almost masochistic pleasure the French derive from reading foreigners' views of France,[13] there is hardly a more penetrating glance than their own. Few

11. Jean-Maurice de Montrémy, "Qu'est-ce qu'un Français?" *L'Histoire*, January 1987, 20–25.

12. André Maurois, *Un art de vivre* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1939), 37.

13. See Yves Daudu, *Les Français à la une: La presse étrangère juge les Français* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1987) and Dominique Frischer, *La France*

nations are ready to bare their souls to the same degree. Of course this does not mean that the French are without chauvinism—after all, the word is of French origin—but it would be hard to find a country more inclined to self-mockery. If the views of foreigners sometimes carry more weight in France than elsewhere, it may be because the French put such a high price on objectivity—unless it is because they never listen to their compatriots!

My second reason is that some of the most interesting remarks on contemporary France are to be found in books, newspapers, periodicals, and specialized reviews that are unlikely to be familiar to nonspecialist readers in English. Last but not least, a nation is not only what outsiders perceive but what its population sees, the self-image derived from collective memory and cultural myths. Only by looking at France with French eyes—through French windows—can one appreciate this dimension of Frenchness.

A final feature of the book is frequent comparisons with U.S. society, with which the French maintain a love-hate relationship. To them, the United States symbolizes the modernity that they adore and detest; therefore, the United States is also seen here through French windows in an attempt to reveal more about France itself.

Unpretentious as the goal of *Through French Windows* is, it required extensive documentation. I am deeply indebted to the numerous writers, journalists, and researchers who helped me gain an understanding of the wide variety of themes that had to be covered. While I have taken pains to reproduce as faithfully as possible the views of these experts, this book necessarily gives a very partial view of their work, and I am entirely responsible for any unintentional misrepresentation of their opinions. Finally, I would particularly like to thank the journalists and staff writers of *Le Monde* (and its numerous supplements), whose in-depth coverage of current events has been a constant source of information for me. *L'Expansion, L'Evénement du Jeudi, Le Nouvel Observateur, L'Express, Le Point,* and *L'Histoire* have also been helpful. I am grateful to the generations of students at the Ecole supérieure des affaires and, especially, to my family and all my friends, from every walk of life, who have given me a more earthy and more intimate view of France with inimitable Gallic irony.

I would like to express thanks to Chantal Euzeby, an economic adviser

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vue d'en face: L'image de la France analysée et jugée par des étrangers (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990).

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PART 1

From Soap to Smart Cards

They hug and kiss in January
To usher in the New Year
But France from all eternity
Has hardly changed I swear.

—Renaud Séchan, *Hexagone*. Copyright. © Mino Music.

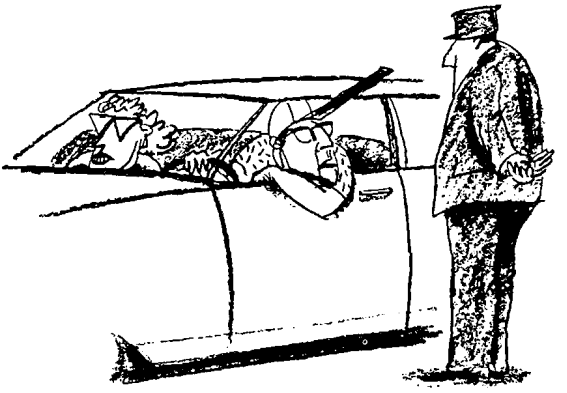

FIG. 1. "Say, where's France?" (© 1985, Editions Bernard Barrault et Eugénie S.A.)