FRENCH

cultural studies

an introduction

Edited by
Jill Forbes
and Michael Kelly

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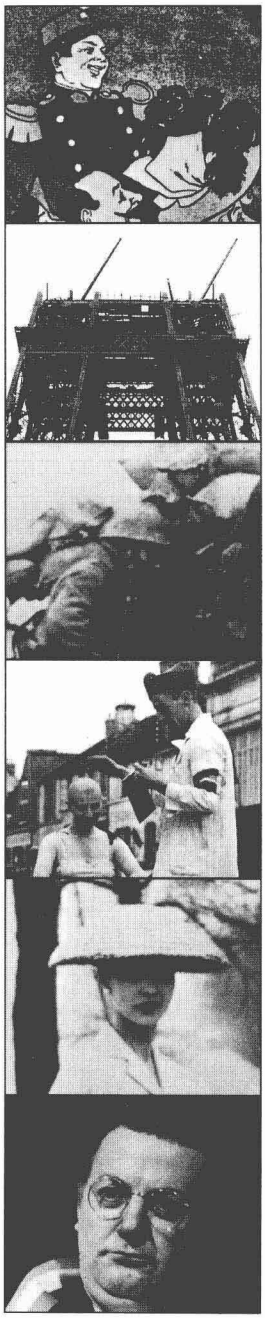

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French Cultural Studies

Preface

THIS is an introduction to French cultural studies. It therefore offers a wide-ranging, but selective, view of French culture from 1870 to the present day, and also seeks to exemplify a range of approaches which draw connections between different aspects of that culture, and between culture and its contexts.

The book is divided into three parts based on the chronological divisions 1870–1944, 1945–67, and 1968–95, paying more detailed attention to the period after the Second World War. Each part is introduced with an outline of the historical and social background, and presupposes little prior knowledge of France or French history. Each chapter contains essays on those aspects of French culture which are of particular interest and significance for the period discussed. At the end of each part are to be found suggestions for further reading which have been selected for ease of access, and with an English-speaking readership in mind. An appendix contains an extensive chronology which juxtaposes social and political events, developments in the world of science and technology as well as those in the arts, leisure, and entertainment. The annotated illustrations, which are distributed through the book, serve to elaborate on questions raised in the section in which they appear, though these are also linked together thematically in various ways. The book concludes with a detailed index of names, works cited, genres, and cultural forms.

The reader may therefore read the book sequentially as an extended analysis of French culture, which explores the themes and issues outlined in the general introduction. Alternatively, the book can be dipped into, or browsed through. With the help of the index and the chronology, it will not be difficult for a reader to focus on a particular period, a particular cultural form, or a particular theme. Throughout, the authors have sought to acquaint the reader with the debates that animate French cultural studies today and to suggest interesting avenues of further exploration.

J. F.
M. K.

Bristol and Southampton
September 1994

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Notes on Contributors

Margaret Atack is Professor of French at the University of Leeds. She is the author of *Literature and the French Resistance: Cultural Politics and Narrative Forms* (1989), and co-editor of *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives* (1991).

Rodney Ball is a Lecturer in French at the University of Southampton. Currently his main research field is the sociology of the French language, with particular reference to recent developments and the conflicting reactions to which they give rise.

Elizabeth Fallaize is a Fellow of St John's College, Oxford. Her books on twentieth-century literature include *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (1988) and *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction* (1994). She is currently working on French literature of the 1980s.

Jill Forbes is Ashley Watkins Professor of French at the University of Bristol and author of *INA French for Innovation* (1984), *The Cinema in France After the New Wave* (1992), *Contemporary France: Politics, Economics, Society* with Nick Hewlett and François Nectoux (1994), and the forthcoming study *Les Enfants du paradis*.

Alec Hargreaves is Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Loughborough University of Technology and author of *The Colonial Experience in French Fiction* (1981), *Immigration in Postwar France* (1987), *Voices from the North African Community in France: Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction* (1991), and the forthcoming *Immigration, 'Race' and Ethnicity in Contemporary France*.

Nicholas Hewitt is Professor of French at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of *The Golden Age of Louis-Ferdinand Céline* (1987) and *Les Maladies du siècle* (1988), editor of *The Culture of Reconstruction: European Literature, Thought and Film 1945–1950* (1989), and co-editor of *France and the Mass Media* (1991) and *Popular Culture and Mass Communications in Twentieth-Century France* (1992).

Tony Jones is Lecturer in French at the University of Southampton. His principal teaching interests are twentieth-century French fiction and theatre, and he has written on Samuel Beckett and Annie Ernaux.

Michael Kelly is Professor of French at the University of Southampton. He is the author of *The Ideas and Influence of Emmanuel Mounier* (1979), *Modern French Marxism* (1982), and *Hegel in France* (1992), and co-editor of *French in the 90s* (1992) and *France: Nation and Regions* (1993). He is currently working on French cultural history of the 1930s and 1940s.

Bill Marshall is Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Southampton. He is the author of *Victor Serge: The Uses of Dissent* (1993), and of articles on French film and television. He is currently working on a book on narrative and national identity in Quebec cinema.

Gordon Millan is Professor of French at the University of Strathclyde, author of *Pierre Louÿs ou le culte de l'amitié* (1979) and of *A Throw of the Dice: The Life of Stéphane Mallarmé* (1994), and editor of Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes* (1983).

Keith Reader is Professor of French at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and author of *Intellectuals and the Left in France since 1968* (1987), *The May 1968 Events in France* (1993), and a forthcoming monograph *Régis Debray*.

Anna Ridehalgh lectures in French at the University of Southampton and researches on African literature in French. She is currently working on political themes in Senegalese literature.

Brian Rigby is Professor of French at the University of Hull, and managing editor of the journal *French Cultural Studies*. He is the author of *Popular Culture in Modern France* (1991), and has edited *French Literature, Thought and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (1992) and co-edited *France and the Mass Media* (1991).

Michael Scriven is Professor of French Studies at the University of Bath. He is author of *Sartre's Existential Biographies* (1984), *Paul Nizan Communist Novelist* (1988), and *Sartre and the Media* (1993), and co-editor of *European Socialist Realism* (1988) and *War and Society in Twentieth Century France* (1991).

Michael Worton is Professor of French at UCL, University of London, author of *Michel Tournier: 'La Goutte d'or'* (1992), translator of René Char, *The Dawnbreakers* (1992), and co-editor of *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (1993) and of *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (1993).

Contents

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Introduction: French Cultural Identities

THE diversity of French-speaking culture is intrinsically resistant to simple classification and summary. For almost any generalization a dozen exceptions can readily be adduced. And yet there are patterns. Underneath the apparent chaos of voices and images lies a basic question which cultural events and activities are called on to answer, and which acts somewhat like the 'strange attractors' of the new science, giving to the totality a shape and texture which cannot easily be discerned in individual constituents. This basic question is that of identity: who am I? The question also widens to include who was I? who will I be? who are we? who are they? The answers are diverse and often contradictory, sometimes a paradox, sometimes a refusal, sometimes another question. And because of the passion and intelligence with which the quest has been conducted within it, French culture has been taken very seriously, both in the French-speaking world and in a broader international context.

One of culture's primary purposes is to negotiate the insertion of the individual into society, and it does so by exploring a multiplicity of identities, past, present, and potential, which people (whether as producers or consumers) can recognize and relate themselves to. These identities are the carriers of norms and values, embodied in social structures and relationships of power, and represented in high and popular culture, in symbols, stories, myths, rituals, routines, and exemplary figures. The ways in which they are embodied and represented are complex and infinitely varied over time and place. But in French culture over the last century and a quarter, there are three dominant zones of social identity around which cultural exploration has turned, summarized in the Republic's motto, 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité', but also in the Vichy alternative to it, 'Travail, famille, patrie'.

The first is national identity, asking what it is to be French, who is included in the nation, on what criterion of ethnicity, territory, or culture, and what relations are possible within the nation, and with other nations or nationalities. The second is class identity, probing the divisions within and between socio-economic groups, and asking what power, privilege, or disadvantage attaches to groups by virtue of their property or birth, and what might be done to maintain or change their relationship. The third is gender identity, exploring the respective condition of men and women, asking what the basis is in nature, society, or consciousness for the manifest inequality between them in the family and the community, and what relations are possible between them. The three social identities of nation, class, and gender intersect with one another, and with other subordinate identities based on region, language, religion, generation, education, and other divisions. They also intersect with preoccupations of personal identity, exploring the relationship of an individual to his or her body, desires, and memories and to the communities to which he or she belongs.

The foreigner, looking at French culture, is likely to ask first what makes it distinctively French. The same question has been a major preoccupation of that culture, echoing the historical struggles in which France has constructed and maintained its national identity. If a nation is, in Benedict Anderson's expression, an 'imagined community', then it is not surprising that the nation should be present in culture, inscribed in the images and stories in which the community imagines itself most vividly. The noticeable prominence of Frenchness is perhaps one of the distinguishing features of French culture, just as conversely an attachment to culture is a distinctive signal of Frenchness. Paradoxically, national identity is most strongly asserted when it is most sharply challenged, and the internal and external challenges to the French have been substantial in the century and a quarter encompassed by this study.

Underlying modern France is *la guerre franco-française*, the internecine struggle inaugurated by the Revolution of 1789, which overthrew the Catholic monarchy and founded the secular Republic. The Revolution confirmed a fault-line in French society which reappeared in different guises for most of the following two centuries. At several moments in recent history it erupted into virtual civil war: in 1871 with the bloody repression of the Paris Commune; in 1940–4 with the battle for France between *la France combattante* and the collaborationist Vichy regime; in 1958–62 with the attempted army *putsches* from Algeria, and in 1968 with the *événements* of May–June. In each of these crises, the form of the state was in question, and with it, the nature of the French nation. Outside these moments, preparing them or consequent on them, the undeclared civil war has simmered and sputtered, pervading all the images and stories.

Partly but not entirely overlapping the undeclared civil war are the ethnic divisions which make France such a diverse nation. Many versions of the north–south divide continue, sharply focused by the two German occupations of 1870 and 1940, and more recently by French and European regional policies. Important

regions have quite different experiences of their place in the nation: the eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were not part of France from the Franco-Prussian War until the end of the Great War, and were again separated during the Occupation years; Brittany and Corsica have at different times produced their own nationalist movements, demanding some degree of autonomy from France. Waves of immigration have left their traces: the earlier part of the period was marked by political refugees from eastern and central Europe, and economic migrants from Mediterranean Europe, while the post-war period saw the growth of immigration from North Africa and from other former colonial territories. In culture perhaps more than any other area, the hegemony of Paris over the rest of the country has generated tensions. Added to these factors is the increasingly acknowledged importance of the international French-speaking community spread through neighbouring countries (especially Belgium and Switzerland), and as far afield as North America, Africa, and Asia. With striking frequency, the expression of Frenchness is inflected by the specific experience of groups who perceive their own place within the nation as distinctly problematic.

Finally, the most emphatic challenge to, and confirmation of, French identity has arisen from its external Others, the palpably non-French nations, partners and enemies, against whom the French assert their distinct existence. Several countries have played important roles in providing France with an external figure on which to project her self-questioning, including Britain, Russia, China, and Japan, but none more than Germany and the United States, who in both cases exercise a major economic influence on contemporary France. For much of the period the primary Other was Germany, France's enemy in three devastating wars, but especially since 1945, the dominant Other has increasingly been the United States, whose economic and cultural presence in Europe has become so pre-eminent. The relationship has been of both repulsion and attraction, in which, at almost every level, France has both vigorously rejected and enthusiastically welcomed the social and cultural models which its German and American partner-enemies have offered.

The second major identity articulated in French culture is that of class. The industrial revolution which gathered momentum throughout the nineteenth century accelerated the division of society between the modernizing industrialists and entrepreneurs on the one hand, and the wage-labourers whom they employed, on the other. It aggravated the growing rift between town and country and the precariousness of the intermediate strata of tradespeople and small farmers. For much of the period, the changes were expressed in two polarized figures: the bourgeois and the worker. Originally applied to town-dwellers of the *bourg*, 'bourgeois' first came to mean the urban middle classes before centring on the wealthy upper strata who controlled industry, commerce, the professions, and the state. From the 1930s, bourgeois became a catch-all moral and political category used by writers of both Left and Right to castigate the decadence and complacency of the ruling classes, and to dismiss the ideas associated with them. Among the

intellectual and artistic Left who dominated for thirty years after the Liberation, the bourgeoisie became the archetypal demon, though in these and other circles the bourgeois also exercised the relentless fascination of the rich and powerful.

A similar conflict of attitudes surrounds the figure of the worker. For most of the period, the urban proletariat accounted for a growing proportion of the French population. From the end of the nineteenth century, the trade unions and the communist and socialist parties associated with them became central actors in political life, mainly identified with the struggle, often violent, to defend or improve their living and working conditions. As a result, depiction of workers in culture is typically distributed between three main figures. First, the hero of class struggle is depicted by left-wing writers as the doughty fighter for justice and social progress against the predatory capitalist classes and their agents. Second, the unwashed barbarian is depicted on the Right as a dangerous subversive, probably a paid agent of Moscow, seeking to wreck social order and progress. Third, the long-suffering labourer is depicted from a centrist viewpoint as a downtrodden work-horse, poor but probably honest if rather limited, and a hapless victim of the heartless but inevitable march of progress.

Since the 1950s, the representation of these issues has tended to concentrate less on classes and their individual representatives, and more on the nature and effects of the social structure viewed as a system. The processes of social alienation have been shown through the fragmentation of experience and the internalization of conflicts and contradictions within individuals. The effects of modern social development are seen to be distributed throughout the social hierarchy, with the rich perhaps even being the most alienated, prisoners of their possessions and obligations. The dispossessed, in various guises, are often in contrast presented as having kept contact with authentic values and realities which the pace and abstraction of modern life tend to obscure. The moral and political climate of class has also shifted. The polarized representations of the earlier period often carried clear imperatives, ranging from the violent overthrow of the capitalist order to the unmasking and rooting out of disruptive elements. Common to both ends of the spectrum was the acceptance of stern social discipline. More recently, it is social discipline itself which has come under attack, as culture probes strategies for personal survival in the social system. Means are explored of evading and disrupting established structures, and salvation is sought in transgression.

The third major identity is that of gender. In some respects, it has always been a key dimension of culture, because personal relations have always been a preoccupation of images and narratives in any culture. However, the characteristic of French culture has been to probe the nature of these relations with increasing sharpness, and to relate the problems to broader social questions of wealth and power. Undoubtedly the main impetus for this has been the changing place of women in French society, and in the recent period the growing opposition of women to inequalities which they have traditionally endured.

In the late nineteenth century, women's education was accepted and promoted