

Berghahn Books

Old Tropes in New Bottles

Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization by Richard F. Kuisel

Review by: Victoria de Grazia

French Politics and Society, Vol. 12, No. 2/3 (Spring-Summer 1994), pp. 129-137

Published by: [Berghahn Books](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42844415>

Accessed: 12/11/2014 16:58

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Berghahn Books is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *French Politics and Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Old Tropes in New Bottles

by Victoria de Grazia
Columbia University

Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

The notion of Americanization can have considerable heuristic value if defined rigorously and applied cautiously to studying twentieth-century capitalist trends. Conceived as the analysis of how European societies responded to the pressure of the U.S.'s booming consumer-driven economy, it supplies an important comparative perspective on processes of convergence, but also differentiation among contemporary western societies.

The notion of Americanization can equally lend itself to considerable silliness. The consumerist and cultural dimensions of U.S. influence, by challenging traditional divisions between high and low cultures, have long generated intellectual anxiety. And this anxiety has often found expression in ill-considered judgments about what passes for U.S. influence, e.g., MacDonalds installed on the Champs-Élysée, scruffy European lads in Harvard (sic) sweatshirts, or so-called coca-colonization. Since the study of material culture and related subjects generally falls outside of the purview of mainstream social scientific disciplines, glib comment sometimes passes as profound commentary.

Richard Kuisel's recent book on postwar France's ambivalent responses to Americanization, though never silly, is not either the firmly grounded study one might anticipate from an author so well regarded for punctilious research on French planning traditions. Having leaped bravely into the choppy white-waters where culture merges with politics and economics, he flounders before the symbolic dimensions of consumer society. Unreflective about the nature of the U.S. model itself, Kuisel is little sensitive to how a hegemonic system might subtly influence societal norms elsewhere. Were he an anthropologist, he would surely be accused of condescending ethnocentrism toward the French natives, whose attitudes he characterizes as disruptively ideological, at least until the 1960s, when the majority finally became acculturated to modern consumer capitalism.

Still, *Seducing the French* has worthy ambitions. From the outset, the author recognizes that positions on America framed the way diverse sectors of French society conceptualized processes of renewal and change. His book

French Politics & Society, Vol. 12, Nos. 2 & 3 (Spring-Summer 1994)

French Politics & Society

offers a fuller account than previously available of the various opinions and the publics to whom they may have appealed. The argument is nuanced enough to conclude, safely, that “elite and popular opinion had different concerns, average people making less of the menace of popular culture or consumer products than the upper classes.” Most attention focuses on the outlooks of elites, notably the anxious, if inconclusive, alliances formed against a process—Americanization—that is rather offhandedly defined as “modernization” or “consumer society.” The book hits its stride with a familiar chapter of Atlanticist history, namely, Charles de Gaulle’s failed effort in the 1960s to design a third way in a bipolar world system. In that section, the author ably captures the paradox of a society that on the foreign-policy level was determinedly anti-American, while state planning and business strategies embraced American styles of life by promoting mass consumption. This was the milieu in which the Kennedyesque Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber wrote his *succès de scandale*, challenging the Europeans to Americanize in order to resist America, while out in the streets, de Gaulle’s student foes ran amok burning American flags to protest U.S. imperialism in Vietnam.

The difficulties arise in making sense out of the complex pattern of penetration and response. This requires, first, an adequate definition of Americanization and, second, some determination of what was peculiar about the reaction to it in France. The framework here, unfortunately, is warmed-over modernization theory. Accordingly, the “dilemma” of Americanization was the dilemma of a society going through the final stages of modernization, which in this account is equated with the moment of diffusion of consumer durables. In France, this process was travailed, encountering obstacles that, though not better specified, seem to be those that Stanley Hoffmann identified as “blocking” prewar French society. Candide-like fortune would have it that, in the 1950s and 1960s, France’s rough Malthusian traits would be smoothed away, while its best feature, namely its refined *civilisation*, remained intact. By the 1980s, according to the author, the majority of the French realized that post-industrialism was the result of a common western destiny rather than imperialist design. Reconciled to the modern condition, the French intelligentsia indulged in fewer fits of anti-American spleen, and these had ever less purchase on policymakers and public opinion. France, in sum, had been Americanized, but its basic Frenchness survived.

This argument rests on three contestable premises. The first is that the U.S. was not just the leading economic and military power of the postwar era, but the one and only path to consumerist modernity which other nations to a greater or lesser degree were bound to recapitulate. That view should now be laid to rest, along with the well-bunked view that, in the nineteenth century, continental nations were bound to recapitulate British development of the first industrial revolution. Kuisel's analysis also hinges on the notion that French responses to the U.S. were freely chosen. Absent here is any image of the vast structure of constraint within which French, and European development generally, occurred from the 1940s to the 1960s: either in its mega-frame, the Cold War and the competitive open international economy established in the west under the reign of the dollar, or the micro-pressures that worked to define mass consumption society as the sum of myriad individual acquisitiveness through the "free market," as opposed to some other balance between state and market and between social and individual consumption. Finally, the argument hinges on presenting French resistances as basically ideological rather than as operating on a cultural or structural plane, their major manifestation being the anti-American fulminations of certain French intellectuals.

That there is something peculiar about the French response to the challenge of U.S. consumer capitalism most observers would agree—one need only think of the recent French opposition to the GATT clauses on the movie industry or the renewed crackdown on the spread of *franglais*. Yet other societies too have had important experiences of Americanization: Weimar's modernist yearnings or the early USSR's red-hot obsession with U.S. efficiency come to mind. For decades, thinking about the U.S. provided a way for Europeans to sort out disorders in their own cultural identity. As America's position as the standard bearer of western civilization visibly rose after World War I, while Europe's declined, and as widespread demands for redistribution and democratic politics challenged the class and consumption-stratified basis of European bourgeois society, major intellectuals of various political persuasions, from Ortega y Gasset to F. R. Leavis to Antonio Gramsci, engaged in the so-called "Americanism debate," along with hosts of minor thinkers. If rhetoric alone is considered, France seems not so different from other societies.

Nevertheless, France does stand out in the persistence and intensity of its claim to present an alternative model of modernity, a claim that has

French Politics & Society

resonated widely since World War II not only within France's cultural establishment but also among the French political elites and within the Marxist-influenced political opposition.

If we are to understand this claim, however, we need to distinguish carefully between at least two levels of societal response to the United States, one rhetorical or discursive, the other structural. It is of course easier to document opinion about the U.S., and most studies of Americanization, including this one, make that their focus. For decades, the U.S. has supplied European, especially French, intellectuals with a powerful trope, one that has served unendingly to spin out antinomies (civilization/culture, matter/spirit, quantity/quality) in keeping with venerable western traditions of binary thinking. Given that this is an intellectual legacy, we should expect that historians bring to its study the critical categories of intellectual historians.

Yet even if a rigorous intellectual history were to establish the textual patterns, we still could not grasp why the "American debate" should have reverberated as strongly as it did in France without examining the institutional context. In other words, the French cultural elite may have stood its ground on France's claim to be the repository of the enlightened humanistic cultural values going under the name of *civilisation*. But this position acquired the status of a founding myth because it resonated with and was reinforced by structures, institutions and, finally, policies that encouraged numerous sectors of French society to conceive of consumerist modernity in terms different from the American model.

From several recent studies, we can begin to piece together what this institutional context was. I would emphasize three features in particular: the first, a legacy of taste and style that was deeply embedded in craft structures, stratified codes of class conduct, and persistent ruralness; second, the strong neomercantilist bias in French statism; and, last, the peculiarly centralized and hierarchical structures of the nation's cultural capital, wedded to a notion of citizenship defined as cultural belonging.

The first structural legacy regards the conception and sources of French industrial wealth. As early as the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, as Whitney Walton shows,¹ out of fear of being upstaged by British mass manufacture, French manufacturers backed by government support argued on behalf of a French path of industrialization that stressed the connection between bourgeois class structure, refined taste, craft, and nationhood.

French industry, to recall the well-known work-in-progress of Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, was the natural home of flexible specialization, an alternative *ante-litteram* to the twin pillars of American productivism, namely Fordism and Sloanism.² In the interwar period, this vision of flexible production was echoed in a distinctively French notion of segmented consumption; both operated within a neomercantilist outlook and according to notions of quality and style inherited from a sharply stratified social order that resisted the leveling of consumption habits and precluded the development of a mass market as conceived along the lines of the U.S.'s "one-class" market. Arguably, post-World War II French governments appropriated the consumption side of this outlook. The plans specified the desirability of mass consumption with a qualitative dimension as opposed to the U.S.'s standardized mass consumption, in addition to promoting industries such as couture that preserved specialized French industrial traditions, while reinscribing them within a global economy. This orientation was consistent with a vision of consumer abundance, with roots in bourgeois opulence, and it combined sustained investment in luxury *articles de Paris* with high rates of investment in consumer durables and, later, prestige military-related projects like the Concorde.

The second tradition regards a legacy of thinking about social consumption that, in time, became bound up with a statist interest in guiding taste and style. With the cooperativist movement at the turn of the century, as Ellen Furlough and Rosalind Williams have pointed out, French social reformers theorized a form of consumer sovereignty.³ With the resurgence of mercantilist thinking in the interwar period, experts on consumerism gave this thinking a *dirigiste* twist, arguing for legislation to shape consumer habits in keeping with national resources (as well as according to class boundaries). Though postwar French planning could not be said to have embraced this vision at all fully, the rapid advance of consumer society in France cannot be understood without taking into account massive state support for infrastructure and especially housing.⁴ This went hand in hand with the articulation on a mass scale of norms of modern French tastefulness, style, and hygiene.

The third feature that lends resonance to the Americanism debate is related to the structure of French cultural capital, with its exceptional centralization in Paris. The hierarchical yet also meritocratic structure of French academic life has left French intellectuals—from Edmond Goblot to Pierre

French Politics & Society

Bourdieu—unusually aware of the role of cultural barriers and levels and of the role of “cultural” and “symbolic” capital in the reproduction of complex societies. At least since the late eighteenth century, citizenship has been defined as participating in the national culture, as Rogers Brubaker and others have recently emphasized.⁵ It follows that not only the cultural establishment, but also all of those who more or less self-consciously partake in the organization of the culture—from schoolteachers to trade union leaders—would be exceptionally sensitive to any cultural movement, foreign or not, that overrode conventional boundaries of taste, class, and nationality. In that sense, Americanization in the form of alien mass cultural artifacts and consumer models has presented a particularly disruptive challenge.

If these structural underpinnings are not taken into account, anti-Americanism can seem like just another ideological distraction. All too predictably, Kuisel asserts that critics of the U.S. “lack intellectual rigor,” and that the worst offenders were left-wing intellectuals, especially the influential “denizens of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.” He excoriates the latter not only for misinterpreting American capitalism, but also for their social snobbery, evidence of which is their haughty skepticism about the desirability of closing the “productivity gap” (which ostensibly would have released vast consumer riches to the masses), a condescension toward *hoi polloi* who wanted nothing so much as to live affluently and quaff carbonated drinks.

To sustain that anti-Americanism was ideological, hence mistaken and manipulative, is terribly reductive, leaving aside any judgment on the author’s own centrist political bias. Arguably, any reference to the U.S. during the Cold War was a political act, whether it yielded positions pro- or anti-, acute observations or irritatingly dumb ones. In any case, the Americanism debate was much more than an ideological dispute. In postwar France, it clearly reflected and shaped a subtle repatterning of “material life,” in the sense that Fernand Braudel uses the term in *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism* (1977) to highlight new processes of commoditization and production of meaning under global regimes of capital.

Kuisel’s engaging account of the “strange affair of Coca Cola” acquires an altogether different meaning if, instead of being narrated as a Cold War morality tale, it is thickly described as a conflictual encounter between two cultures. The affair was precipitated in 1950 when well-placed intellectuals, diverse interest groups, the Communist Left, and cabinet members of the Fourth Republic rallied to ban Coca Cola imports. The author treats some of

the opposition as legitimate though shortsighted, motivated by the dollar deficit and the fear of local soft drink vendors and vintners of business losses. He regards as other claims as mere pretexts, in particular that which accused Coke of being a public health menace, though this was the issue that eventually rallied broad opposition in Parliament.

Why not take seriously the idea that commodities, especially brand-new ones, can be used to construct thinking about the rights and wrongs of the social order? Kuisel is perfectly willing to see Coke being manipulated against America, as a negative movement. However, public opinion that regarded Coca Cola as a "pollutant" could equally be regarded as a positive movement to organize the French environment? Coca Cola, with its highly touted secret ingredient X7, lent itself perfectly to such magical thinking, not only on the part of French boycotters but especially by the U.S. entrepreneurs involved in the affair, all die-hard anti-communists, keenly aware of the symbolic dimensions of their product. It was they, not the French Left, who invented the nostrum that people who drank Coke were impervious to communism. In order to beat the boycotters, they marshaled marketing specialists, scientific advisers, legal staff, lobbyists with the French government, and State Department officials, in addition to the pliant U.S. domestic press that whipped up home opinion against French ingratitude. In sum, to rephrase Mary Douglas, one man's magic potion (not to mention profit source) was another man's poison.

What bears emphasis, as this episode suggests, is the fragility of cultural defenses against Americanization, especially those advanced by Marxists. The Left could make political arguments against strategies to increase productivity, charging that it occurred at the expense of the workers and that prevailing low level of output were the result of inferiority of French equipment, Malthusian attitudes, and weak industrial structure. But on a cultural plane, they shared with American elites a common vision of modernity, admiring of growth, productivity, and rationality. Being themselves productivist, they put up little firm resistance to the seemingly unimpeachable prescriptions provided by the U.S., much as in the 1920s European leftists embraced the doctrines of Fordism and Taylorism. Whether French workers were as enthusiastic about productivist ideologies as the elites seems more dubious. We can imagine that they resisted efficiency measures as much as their laboring brethren in the U.S. before them, halting their opposition only

French Politics & Society

when they saw that their slowly increasing pay checks delivered consumer goods.

Ultimately, hegemony is the power to produce not just effects but also the categories used to analyze them. If Kuisel is to be believed, the Americanism debate became less ideological in the course of the 1960s as French social scientists took over the American debate from the literary establishment, appropriating from American social science the categories to analyze the transformations French society was undergoing. Surely histories of the development of U.S. social science should lay to rest the notion that these disciplines were value-free. The more important point here is that the appropriation within U.S. academic culture of the most prominent European thinkers—Max Weber, but also Emile Durkheim—and their re-export to Europe post-1945 to analyze postwar European society—truly marked the acme of U.S. cultural hegemony. In France as elsewhere these new intellectual compounds proved as powerful an antidote to “ideological” leftists as Coke-drinking was to the *marxisant* temptations of the masses. Whether this export also improved social forecasting is another question; certainly the end of ideology, as reinterpreted by Raymond Aron, did not contemplate the events of 1968.

In the last analysis, Professor Kuisel’s narrative is the old Franco-American love saga updated to encompass the television era. Abiding by an American soap-operatic version of the canon, the author has scripted a happy ending. The seduced France, with its civilizing wiles, survives its lost virginity, while the precociously developed seducer, the United States, turns out to have been equally victimized by a new social-psychic syndrome that the author diagnoses as the drive or “universal imperative” toward the “pursuit of abundance.” Surely more could be said about the gendered consciousness of social scientists who habitually feminize France’s subject position in this relationship. In any case, the past behind them, France decked out in her *articles de Paris* is joined with the prodigiously endowed America, and the two make merry in their Atlanticist bower. Happily resolving the “dilemma,” the author is as quixotic as those conservative admirers of America of the 1930s who, to recall Gramsci’s phrase, wanted their barrels full and their wives drunken or, better, to marry new world productive efficiency to the old world’s “civilized” class order and cultural hierarchies. We find ourselves before an old trope decanted in a new bottle.

¹Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²Charles F. Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, eds., *Worlds of Possibility: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization* (Cambridge University Press and the Maison des sciences de l'homme, forthcoming). See too Paul Hirst and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Flexible Specialization versus Post-Fordism: Theory, Evidence and Policy Implications," *Economy and Society* 20,1 (February 1991): 1-56, and Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization," *Past and Present* 108: 133-176.

³Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

⁴Michelle Ruffat, "L'Introduction des intérêts diffus dans le plan: le cas des consommateurs," in *La Planification en crise* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1987), pp. 115-133.

⁵Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).