The System of Francophobia

Jean-Philippe Mathy

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The “Déjà views” theme incites us to reflect on the repetitive nature of American discourses on France, on the fact that they occur and recur in strikingly similar forms during the long history of French-American relations. Moreover, many of the negative perceptions of France are closely interrelated, making up what might be called the “system of Francophobia.” The following remarks are attempts to underline both the systematicity and the historicity of some widespread American representations of French culture and society.

Most of those in America who have expressed opinions on French culture and society have done so from a socially authorized and privileged vantage point. These critics all belong to what we call the “cultivated elites”: they are authors, novelists, politicians, diplomats, professors and journalists. Their production—newspaper articles, editorial pieces, political and philosophical essays, administrative reports, travel narratives, diaries, films, novels, poems, and plays—makes up the material the student of American descriptions of France must rely on. These documents are, as it were, the archive of American views of France.

And yet, although these documents were authored by a multitude of individuals living at different times and often expressing highly personal opinions on the matter, similar clichés, prejudices, obsessions, sensitivities, or allergies, emerge from the archive, uncovering shared cultural patterns, interpretive frameworks and structures of meaning,
some of them two-hundred years old or more. In an article published a few years ago in *The New York Times* and significantly entitled “Where is The Glory that Was France?” Alan Riding ascribed the current decline of French artistic and literary creativity to a familiar complex of cultural shortcomings: an arrogant and snobbish disdain for commercial success in the arts; Cartesian intellectualism, which he calls “death by theory”; a backward-looking elitism fostering a widespread ignorance of popular entertainment and new technologies; a protectionism that encourages a navel-gazing concern with local ways of doing things; excessive state control of the arts, a sure way to discourage initiative, spontaneity and creativity; and last, but not least, “fear and loathing of Americanization.”¹

The catalog of complaints is by no means original and echoes many examples of the standard critique of French culture to be found in today’s American media, as Pierre Verdaguer demonstrates for *The Washington Post*. The point of Riding’s article is that seemingly unrelated aspects of French life, belonging to different domains of the social, from the economy and state policies to psychological dispositions toward technology and popular culture, have come together to bring about the current decline in French cultural influence. In Riding’s view, the trouble with France is global; it is the by-product of a societal model that links state centralization with an aristocratic scorn for mass culture, commerce, and technological innovations applied to the life of the mind.

This model, said to be responsible for the now anachronistic, marginal character of cultural life in contemporary France, is of course easy to identify: a mixture of political centralization and elitism, it was born at the King’s court and later became the guiding principle of the republican state’s *politique culturelle*.² It produced the *Académie Française* and the Ministry of culture, Beaubourg and l’Opéra-Bastille, and has been at
issue in French-American cultural relations since the early days of the American Republic, in large part, because it stands as the antithesis of the political project of American liberalism. Each one of the two major components of the French cultural model, i.e., centralization and elitism, is regarded by American critics as incompatible with the central values of the American enterprise, its profoundly democratic, egalitarian ethos, on the one hand, and its distrust of statism and government control, on the other.

The critique of cultural and political centralization has been the matrix of a series of controversies, old and new, opposing the French and American conceptions of modern democracy, from the Founding Fathers’ horrified recoil from the Revolutionary Terror in the 1790s to current debates on multiculturalism and globalization. In 1794, Alexander Hamilton drew a sharp distinction between the French and American conceptions of democratic politics and revolutionary action.

Would to Heaven,” he wrote, that we would discern in the mirror of French affairs the same humanity, the same decorum, the same gravity, the same order, the same dignity, the same solemnity, which distinguished the cause of the American Revolution . . . When I observe that Marat and Robespierre sit triumphantly at the Convention, I acknowledge that I am glad to believe that there is no real resemblance between what was the cause of America and what is the cause of France - that the difference is no less great than that between Liberty and Licentiousness. 3

In many ways, the terms of the debate have not changed much since the days of Hamilton and Robespierre. Contemporary Anglo-American critics level charges at French cultural and political centralization that often do little more than update the liberal critique of Rousseau's legacy, from Edmund Burke and Benjamin Constant to Isaiah Berlin. Tony
Judt, to give a recent example, describes totalitarianism as “a logical and historical derivative of precisely that universalistic vision of republican democracy that still bedazzles so many French thinkers.” Judt goes on to argue that “of all the enemies of liberalism and rights,” the French Republicans proved to be the most “deadly” because they managed to stay in power for so long, replacing the ideal of liberty with the unfortunate notion of “a universal and undifferentiated democracy” (240). The manner of their success, Judt concludes, “placed the final nail on the coffin of liberal thought in France” (238).

Today, the Jacobin legacy is alive and well in the stubborn French attachment to the post-war welfare state, which in the eyes of many Americans is responsible for the sorry state of the French economy, plagued by an endemic two-digit unemployment. Roger Cohen, a frequent critic of things French who writes in the New York Times, acknowledges the many instances of successful modernization and technological achievement in Mitterandian France. He argues, however, that the “very public French stand against the harsh capitalism of America’s boom and the dangers of a world driven by the American quest for profit” is hypocritical, allowing the political elites to soften the blow of economic and cultural globalization while deluding the French into thinking that they can both reap the benefits of modernization and preserve the traditions of their imagined community. As Cohen puts it:

France has become America’s favorite European basket case. With its socialist government trying to create state-sector jobs by the hundreds of thousands, its record unemployment, its diatribes against globalization, its quaint plans for 32-hour work weeks and its defense of an apparently unaffordable welfare state,
France has taken over Britain's role as the faintly risible archetype of the failed European economy. It is the Titanic-with-piano-still-tinkling adrift on a sea of global competition.5

There is a sense, when one reads the American mainstream press, that the French are getting what they deserve, unaware as they seem to be of the limitations of their national idea (obsolete in a post-imperial world order) and of their snobbish, bookish conception of the life of the mind (doomed by the triumph of electronic culture). The central opposition here is between a modernist, innovative, forward-looking, risk-taking America and a conservative, risk-averse, technophobic, backward-looking France. A Los Angeles Times article dated January 7, 1997, for example, explored the various reasons “Why the French Hate the Internet” and concluded, quite predictably, that they “are wary of being wired because of fears of cultural pollution and a strong tradition of centralization.”

The general implication is that the Jacobin legacy renders France unfit to face the challenges of postmodernity, of a global economy and a postcolonial planet that are part and parcel of the New World order under American leadership. In the words of Lawrence Kritzman, France-bashing campaigns in the media and in academia “characterize France (and French Studies) as politically retrograde, opposed to the discourse of empowerment and liberation.”6

In the eyes of American multiculturalists, French culture, because it is still dominated by antiquated notions of assimilation and homogeneity, is profoundly hostile to minority rights and ethnic diversity.7 In a critical analysis of François Mitterrand's universalistic vision of a postcolonial “New France,” Panivong Norindr writes that
Mitterrand’s cultural project wants to cement and unify the peoples of France. But it also means absorbing and neutralizing difference by coercing the immigrants into assuming the identity and values of the French, by forcing them to become fully integrated and productive members of the French community of citizens, in short by exerting considerable cultural pressure. It is therefore ‘democratic’ only if we believe that immigrants willingly reject their own native customs and traditions in order to become full-fledged citizens, and wait enthusiastically to be incorporated and transformed into acquiescing members of the French body politic.  

Insufficiently receptive to free-market ideas, France is also insufficiently open to ethnic pluralism and cultural democracy. Although himself a critic of the most radical forms of multiculturalism in the United States, Michael Walzer nevertheless argues that American-style “liberal citizenship is more relaxed that that of a republican national-state.” France obviously belongs to the second category: while in an immigrant society such as the United States there is “no group whose culture is the official culture, whose language has special pride of place,” in France, Walzer writes, “everybody but the dominant group is treated as a minority [and] the only publicly celebrated identity is that of the dominant culture: tolerance and full civic rights may be extended to minority groups but the national history is the history of the majority.”

While Walzer concedes that France “is one of the world’s leading immigrant societies”, he contends that “it isn’t a pluralist society or at least it doesn’t think of itself, and isn’t thought of, as a pluralist society” (38). Walzer does not tell the reader who it is that doesn’t think of France as a pluralist society, but the many examples in our colloquium papers provide an easy answer.
The other component of the discredited French model one often finds at the core of American Francophobia, i.e. high-culture elitism, has played a central role in recent debates about the influence on American campuses of what has come to be known as “French Theory.” French intellectuals are natural villains in the narrative of Francophobia since they have traditionally benefited both from state centralization in education and cultural policies and from the privileged, revered position writers, artists and philosophers have held in France as self-appointed mouthpieces for the greatest Good of the national community.

In the introduction to his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter wrote almost forty years ago that “anti-intellectualism, though it has its own universality, may be considered a part of our English cultural inheritance, and it is notably strong in the Anglo-American experience.” Hofstadter’s comment suggests that some of the most prominent features of the American critique of French intellectualism have a long history, going back to the early days of the American republic, and even further back to the birth of the English national idea, to the extent that the Britons who removed to America in the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries brought with them the most radical components of English self-understanding.

In his *Epistle on the Excellency of the English Tongue* (1595-96), Richard Carew criticized the language of the French as “delicate but ouer nice, as a woman scarce daring to open her lipps for fear of marring her countenance.” This gendered description of French preciosity is reminiscent of later considerations on French romantic excess as a mixture of hysterical passion and whimpering sentimentality as well as contemporary views that the French “postructuralist” thinkers are nothing but ninnies masking the nullity
of their thought behind a veil of esoteric jargon. Echoing early modern English depictions of French preciosity, David Lehman described a decade ago the influence of French thought on easily fooled American academics in the following terms: “The American lit-crit profession slowly but steadily shed its tweedy English image in favor of foppish French fashion.”

The English national image implied a profound distrust of the fancy language, refinement and unfounded speculations to be found in intellectual imports from the Continent. In his Observations on Mons. de Sorbiere’s Voyage Into England, Thomas Sprat described the “Temper of the English,” as “Free, Modest, Kind, hard to be provokd. If they are not so Talkative as others, yet they are more Careful of what they Speak.” On the contrary, as Samuel Johnson remarked, a Frenchman “must be always talking, whether he knows anything of the matter or not.” The Genius of the English Nation found its best expression in the straightforward inquiry of science, not in the high-falutin’ speculations of continental belles-lettres. As Henry Oldenburg boasted in 1665, “it must be said that England has a large number of learned and inquisitive men, a larger number than is found in all Europe; and what they produce is solid and detailed. The world has, for too long, been sufficiently entertained with general theories” (486). A century later, Arthur Young echoed in his Example of France as a Warning to Britain (1793) that he had “a constitutional abhorrence of theory, of all trust in abstract reasoning," of the kind, no doubt, that was cultivated in Parisian salons.

What goes for art and literature is also true of cuisine. Sprat also contrasted the moral virtues of Boil’d Beef and Roast with the sophisticated but artificial and deceptive nature of French cooking: “The English have the same Sincerity in their Diet which they
have in their Manners; and as they have less Mixture in their Dishes, so they have less Sophisticate Compositions in their Hearts, than the People of some other Nations.”

There is obviously much in current Anglo-American representations of France that strikes the reader as “déjà views.” In a book entitled *Nationalism, Romanticism and the Revolt against Theory*, David Simpson attempted to find out “why the British habitually and the Americans often have been hostile to theory . . . and how the anglophone national traditions have constructed and perpetuated this particular phobia.” Evidence from a variety of sources, from the English Romantics’ denunciation of the revolutionary Terror to contemporary critiques of the fetishism of method in French structuralism led Simpson to conclude that “the ‘theory wars’ occurring [until recently] in humanities departments are to some degree a mediated response to the tensions generated by the French Revolution and the English Revolutions of the 1640s” (179). Simpson’s contention is that we have been recycling the same debates and the same cross-cultural representations for the past three hundred years!

The paradox regarding the current France-bashing mood in the American media and in some sectors of academia is that it occurs at a time when France has been gradually losing much of what made up its cultural and political specificity, the famous “exception française” when compared to other European nations and even to the United States. Richard Bernstein, who spent many years in France as *The New York Times* cultural correspondent, was acutely aware of these changes. Unlike his colleague Alan Riding, Bernstein is filled with melancholic nostalgia for the glory that was France:

The French will be like us, and as they become like the rest of us -Americanized, prosperous, modern, complacent - a great historical epoch will vanish from the
earth, the epoch of Frenchness . . . Perhaps, as you hold this volume in your hands, we will be experiencing the last few minutes of the existence of the French difference. . . You can be sure that when the urge to be different fades and the need to make that difference a common property disappears, the world will feel a bit relieved and deprived as well. For, as Victor Hugo said, without the French we will be alone.¹⁸

Volumes have been written in the past twenty years on the liberalization of French political life, the emergence of a New France no longer divided along regional and religious lines, the gradual *embourgeoisement* of the French, no longer inclined to vote for the Communists or to fight one another over the correct interpretation of the Revolution of 1789, etc.

The end of government monopoly in the electronic media, the growing independence of the judiciary, the new consensus on leveling the playing field between “public” and catholic schools, as well as repeated calls for a relaxation of the strict rules of laïcité when it comes to Islamic students openly displaying markers of their religious identity all are signs of a profound transformation of French society. Not to mention the recent vote of the *loi sur la parité*, which puts France at the forefront of the movement for gender equity in electoral politics. Meanwhile, many intellectuals have moved away from the traditional anti-Americanism of the postwar and cold war periods, trading Marx for Tocqueville and even seriously reading North-American authors, from Rorty and Rawls to Taylor and Walzer.

And yet, the terms of the American quarrel with France remain largely unchanged. The system of Francophobia is not only historical, in that it carries with it notions, feelings

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and images that have been bandied around for a long time, but it is also ideological, precisely in that it relies so heavily on representations and cultural habits from the past. It presupposes the existence of an eternal, homogeneous France, unchanged since the days of Racine or Jules Ferry. Many of the recent novels and movies on France analyzed in this issue by Carolyn Durham and Brigitte Humbert exemplify this ideological viewpoint: many contemporary Anglo-American novelists and directors look at France through the lenses of a kind of latter-day Orientalism. Ironically enough, these recent representations of France project on their object the same expectations of exoticism, primitiveness and a-temporality as French and British writers of the colonial era did when writing about East Asia or the Middle-East. At the end of the American century, France has come to occupy in movies such as Chocolat the place of the quaint, backward but oh-so-romantic imagined “other” of modernity, a place filled with autocratic Papist aristocrats, bigoted peasants, repressive priests and repressed parishioners.

The underlying premise of the newspaper articles I quoted at the outset is that all French people are hostile to the Internet, that the country as a whole is allergic to the competition required of a prosperous free-market economy. The truth is that the French do not agree with one another on these matters, and that the current political debate is often framed in terms of an opposition between supporters of free-market competition (le libéralisme) and defenders of the welfare state, between the self-proclaimed “modernists” who favor globalization and those who wish to preserve national sovereignty and the Jacobin legacy, from Chevènement to Pasqua.

The imagined France of many American critics is quite simply an anti-America. It serves as a counter-model to better showcase the virtues of the American way, as a
counter-example to what a truly modern, forward-looking, tolerant, pluralistic society should look like. French failures are used to highlight, by sheer contrast, American political and economic successes. In the mirror of France, many Americans often see what they are grateful for not having become. The same, of course, is true of French anti-Americanism, which simply reverses valences, praising what the opponent denigrates.

France is usually cast as the bad pupil in the international class of globalization, the fly in the ointment of the American-led geopolitical project. Some French politicians and intellectuals are happy to oblige, voicing their opposition to American influence in a variety of areas, from military strategy to la malbouffe, from the GATT agreements to Eurodisney. It has been often remarked that the two countries have since the Enlightenment embodied competing versions of democracy, modernity and universalism, and continue to do so today. A few years ago, Dilip Gaonkar proposed to introduce a measure of complexity in the often-simplistic view that there is only one way to face the challenges of modernity, suggesting that we speak of “alternative modernities.” Rather than painting France with the broad brush of archaism, as many Francophobes do, it might be more accurate to say that it offers an alternative model of modernization, one that carries remnants of a different past, marked by the ascendancy of the state, the influence of aristocratic values, an abstract, universalistic definition of citizenship, a collective conception of democratic rights, and a unitary view of the nation.

In the introduction to his study of French literary fascism, David Carroll warns us against the moralist reading of history that is at the core of a lot of what gets published about France these days:
What interests me is neither the innate goodness nor the evil of French society or French culture. Like all societies, France has just and unjust, benevolent and criminal, and democratic and antidemocratic moments in its long social and political history.

Like all cultures, both homogenizing and heterogeneous, decentralizing and antiracist elements can be found in its cultural and political history.\textsuperscript{19}

Because it rests on a reductive vision of culture and society and does not allow for the complex interaction of social forces and ideas that make up France’s past and the present, the system of Francophobia projects onto its object a watertight logic that holds it prisoner of an enduring, fatal identity. By doing so, it remains mired in culturalism, a view whereby everything that takes place in a given society can be explained by some unchanging, self-replicating cultural entity at work in its midst.

2. This prevalence of the absolutist/aristocratic model in American views of France may explain why the majority of American political scientists polled by Martin Schain for his paper picked Louis XIV as the most important figure in French history.


7. In fact, the French do not seem to be significantly more hostile to immigrants than their European neighbors, or than Americans, for that matter. A 1997 study of French opinion regarding immigration concluded that 40% of the respondents could be labeled as “racist” or “tempted by racism,” since they agreed with such statements as “in French one does not feel at home any longer,” “there are too many Blacks and Arabs in the country,” “immigrants will never become French,” “immigration is linked to crime and unemployment,” “and foreign workers abuse welfare benefits.”


