
H-France Review Vol. 6 (August 2006), No. 85

Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2005. xii + 259. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 (cl). ISBN 1-84545-154-6.

Review by William I. Hitchcock, Temple University.

For scholars of Americanization in Europe, France has always presented a fascinating case-study. Here is a nation which has a long tradition of national and cultural achievement, has evinced fierce pride in its cultural production, and has styled itself as a champion in resisting American modes of consumption. Yet France is also a nation in which aspects of American mass-market culture have taken root and indeed thrived. The evidence is visible across France, from the presence of American chain stores in every large city and most towns, to the penetration of French youth culture with American modes of music and dress, to the astonishing and wholly unexpected success of Euro-Disney. The paradox is too glaring to go unnoticed: even as one hears French citizens denounce the American lifestyle, one can catch glimpses of gas-guzzling Hummers in the streets of Paris.

The historiography of Americanization in Europe has grown over the past decade to include a wide array of provocative methodological approaches. The very term Americanization has become something of a catch-all to indicate a century long process of interdependence, rivalry, cooperation, and exchange between the United States and Europe, through which Europe's social, economic and even political character has been changed. The debates in this large literature have tended to focus on how deliberate American agency was, and on the effectiveness of European resistance, and adaptation, to Americanization.[1] For the case of France, Richard Kuisel has probably done more than anyone to lay out the basic framework of the problem: between 1945 and the early 1970s, French life was dramatically altered by a sudden surge of economic growth, accompanied by the opening of the French cultural sphere to products, tastes, habits, and desires imported from the United States. Kuisel showed that this process was never complete, or hegemonic; France adapted to, reshaped, and subverted aspects of American economic and cultural power. Yet the evidence of a significant recasting of French life in these three decades, along lines frequently urged by Americans, is overwhelming.[2]

Brian McKenzie, one of Kuisel's former students, has now entered this debate with a useful, well-researched monograph on the US public diplomacy that sought to support and to expand the impact and reach of the Marshall Plan. McKenzie should be congratulated on two counts: the author has used both French and American official sources—something many scholars of the Marshall Plan have failed to do. Second, McKenzie tries to connect the policy of Americanization that Marshall Planners overtly laid out in the late 1940s to its actual implementation as a form of cultural power. This is an aspect of the Marshall Plan experience that is often completely absent from the earlier cold-war focused scholarship.

The basic argument of the book, however, may disappoint those readers who see in the process of Americanization a kind of sinister agenda that sought to use the dollar as a weapon to gain access to French minds, hearts, loyalties, and markets. McKenzie, focusing on the public diplomacy of the Marshall Plan bureaucracy, argues that the United States failed to sell the idea of America to France in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Indeed, the campaign may have backfired; the harder the US government pushed in trumpeting the American way of life, McKenzie argues, the more French citizens—all too accustomed to state-sponsored propaganda after the decade of the 1930s and the war years—shut it out. Worse, when French people heard the Marshall Planners' promises that productivity

would swiftly lead to better lives, more leisure, and higher wages, they found this rhetoric entirely inconsistent with their own still-difficult circumstances, with shortages, depressed wages, and longer working hours. Marshall Plan dollars may have helped restart the French economy, but the massive U.S. effort to persuade French people to emulate the American economic and social model was a bust.

McKenzie lays out his evidence in five chapters. These are workmanlike essays, not particularly well-integrated into a complete narrative. Given the fairly well-developed historiography on this topic, McKenzie need hardly have devoted the first chapter to a rather banal survey of American ideas behind the Marshall Plan. Most readers will not be surprised to learn that American officials believed “the more Americanized Europe could become, the better off it would be” (p. 21) or that the Marshall Plan was part of an anti-Communist policy in Europe; or that the Plan “was about extending American influence”(p. 56). But chapter two offers more imaginative material: McKenzie here reconstructs the impact of traveling exhibits organized by the U.S. Embassy to promote Marshall aid and the American way of life that the Plan might make possible for French people. Snaking across rural France, these caravans, with their posters and charts, pamphlets and loudspeakers, aimed to educate French people in the provinces about how Marshall aid had helped France recover from the war; it also put on display new ideas about economic organization and agricultural practices that could increase French productivity.

These caravans did not attract many visitors: after traveling 2,300 kilometers across six departments, the exhibit organizers tallied but 54,000 visitors: not exactly a nation-wide campaign. While McKenzie is quite right to use these exhibits as evidence of the official American effort to sell the Plan and its benefits, he fails to demonstrate their impact on the target audience: “it is difficult to assess the impact of these exhibits,” he writes (p. 87). This of course begs the question: can such small-scale efforts whose impact is unknown be considered evidence of Americanization? The chapter fails to persuade that this exercise changed many minds, or indeed even shaped the reception of Marshall Plan aid and ideas in France. Of course, Americans played on the larger stage of Paris, too. Large art exhibits were arranged in the early 1950s by the U.S. government in an effort to showcase the creativity and freedom of American democracy: paintings by Jackson Pollock and designs by Frank Lloyd Wright, among many others, were given particular prominence in a series of shows in 1951-1952. Here again, however, French critics and reviewers engaged the works on their merits or demerits, and did not come away thinking any better of American life, or American economic aid, for having seen American artwork. If this is Americanization at work, it is pretty tame stuff.

In his third chapter, McKenzie makes creative use of tourism as a site of Americanization, showing persuasively that Franco-American government officials converged on a series of economic initiatives to promote tourism in France, chiefly as a way to channel more U.S. dollars into France. French hoteliers were urged to update their menus, refresh their infrastructure, and cater to an American clientele. Over three million tourists traveled to France in 1952. Alas, the tourism industry proved to be a double-edged sword. As airlines introduced economy-class fares, travel became a middle-class pursuit, and the “average American” that stepped out on the Champs-Élysées in the 1950s often found France a stuffy place in which Americans, they asserted, were unwelcome, and where their loud, demanding and impatient style was out of place. According to McKenzie, State Department officials came to see mass tourism as something of a liability in projecting the best features of American civilization. So here again, efforts to showcase America failed.

No more successful were the U.S. efforts to penetrate the minds of the French working class. The Labor Information Division of the Marshall Plan bureaucracy in Europe used films, pamphlets, exhibits—the usual tools—as well as American labor organizers from the CIO to persuade the French worker that American modes of production, as well as non-Communist trade unions, were likely to bring greater wealth as well as political stability to France. But the effort foundered: first because there was little

evidence in 1950s France that workers were in fact better off than before the war, since their average wages were actually falling; and second, because the powerful CGT, the Communist-controlled labor union, had denounced the Marshall Plan and many French workers were indeed skeptical of its role in French economic life. French workers or organizations that came out in favor of U.S. aid were swiftly characterized as “mere stooges” for U.S. interests (p. 152). In any case, the effort failed to make much headway: in 1950, one U.S. specialist declared that “the average French worker seems to have few thoughts about the Marshall Plan and fewer accurate ideas” (p. 170).

McKenzie concludes with a survey of American-funded publications in France, especially *Rapports France--États-Unis*, a monthly magazine devoted to explaining America to French readers, and emphasizing points of Franco-American convergence. Here again, McKenzie stresses the goals and hopes of American originators of the material—they envisioned this journal as a key to improving understanding of the United States in France—but he also stresses the shortcomings of the campaign. By 1952, French public life was awash in Americana, much of it outside the controlled official channels: films, fiction, and products had poured into France, and smaller government efforts like *Rapports* could not hope to compete any longer with the free market. Perhaps the Marshall Planners had reaped what they had sown.

McKenzie’s book is subject to two broad criticisms. First, as a book that limits itself to U.S. official public diplomacy, it really does not tell us much about Americanization as it unfolded in France. Richard Kuisel, in *Seducing the French*, made an effort to explore the patterns of production and consumption in France from the 1950s onward, and how they began to shift away from traditional French habits toward something approaching a normative, modern “Western” model. Whether this constitutes Americanization or merely modernization is a subject of considerable debate, and it would have been welcome if McKenzie had engaged this debate more systematically; instead, he leaves it behind in his introduction and restricts himself to U.S. official efforts to portray America, and so does not address the realities of Americanization as it took root in France. We are given sustained, well-conceived vignettes of official American projects to explain America to France; but insofar as these efforts failed to persuade their French audience, we come away with no new understanding of the global economic and social forces at work upon France in the 1950s. Second, the book would be far more satisfying if it put on display French people, and French voices, as they interacted with the process of Americanization. The French people who figure in these pages are often cut-outs, and their voices are usually drawn from carefully prepared official sources. A deeper exploitation of departmental archives or personal papers, or indeed of business and industry archives, might have yielded a more richly textured portrayal of French citizens as they contended with, challenged, and frequently ignored, the zealous entreaties of the Marshall Planners.

NOTES

[1] Just to name a few examples: Volker Berghahn has used a biographical approach to illuminate the ways that Americans worked in the European intellectual circles to promote American ideas and ideologies: *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); Maria Höhn’s case study, *GIs and Fräuleins: The German-American Encounter in 1950s West Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), is an fascinating investigation into the interaction of race, gender, and Americanization; Kristin Ross developed a highly suggestive if problematic portrayal of France in an era of Americanization and decolonization that sees culture as a central transforming element in making France modern: *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995); Reinhold Wagnleitner has explored

American economic policy in the Marshall Plan era as it unfolded in Austria: *Coca-colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after The Second World War* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Rob Kroes has done a great deal to theorize the problem of Americanization, concluding that Americanization is a manifestation of modernity rather than a hegemonic normative prescriptor, and as such it is a process that has been adapted to, transformed, and redeployed by Europeans: among his other work, see "American Empire and Cultural Imperialism: A View from the Receiving End," *Diplomatic History* 23, 3 (Summer 1999): 463-477. An important contribution that sees social policy ideas moving in both directions is Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

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

William I. Hitchcock
Temple University
whitch@temple.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172