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Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Modern France. A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 152 pp. Illus. \$11.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0195389418; \$7.16 U.S. (Kindle). ISBN-10: 0195389417.

Review by Edward Berenson, New York University.

I can imagine getting an email from Oxford University Press: “We would like to invite you to contribute a volume on ‘Modern France’ to our prestigious collection of ‘Very Short Introductions.’” At first I’d be flattered and then, very quickly, I’d shrink back in horror. How could anyone boil down modern France to, what, 30,000 words? It’s impossible, of course. To approach the subject in the space of two journal articles, you’d to make a series of strategic choices, settle on an angle of attack, discard strict chronology, and focus on what interests you the most. Vanessa Schwartz did all these things and more in this gem of an essay on modern France, a book that will be useful and enjoyable to specialists and general readers alike.

We’d be hard-pressed to find anyone better informed about French culture and cultural history than Schwartz, which is why it made perfect sense for her to look at modern France through that prism. So, the book begins not with the French Revolution, as might a traditional text, but with its commemoration in 1989. In the process, Schwartz introduces her readers to the main themes of her volume: the French obsession with their language and its influence around the world; the vexed issue of national identity in a country that has burst through the ragged seams of cultural uniformity; and role and standing of French culture both at home and abroad.

Schwartz doesn’t ignore the French Revolution, though she skirts its origins and political evolution, which would have taken up too many pages. Throughout the book, she gives short shrift to politics in general, but had she discussed in any detail republicanism, Radicalism, socialism, and communism—to say nothing of the various French regimes—her analysis of French culture would inevitably have suffered. Instead of origins and politics, Schwartz focuses on several of the cultural developments that followed in the Revolution’s wake. She’s particularly interested in the Revolution’s expansive symbolism, and in “fraternity,” the revolutionary desire to extend the fruits of 1789 to a community of brothers both within France and beyond its borders. Her attention to symbolism allows her to highlight the pathbreaking work of Lynn Hunt and Mona Ozouf, and the discussion of fraternity sets up an excellent analysis of French nationhood and national identity along with an entire chapter on the “civilizing mission.”

Key to revolutionary symbolism was a new way of representing time. Radicals devised a calendar meant to reset chronology itself by declaring the first day of France’s new republican regime the beginning of Year I. It was as if everything that had happened before was unworthy of collective memory and should be promptly forgotten. The problem is that the Revolution also “inaugurated a new era of historical sensibility,” as Schwartz puts it. It helped create the idea of nostalgia and an interest in ruins and personal memoirs. And by crystallizing the notion of nationhood, the revolution ushered in new forms of historical thinking that traced the nation’s origins back to antiquity and encouraged an explosion of historiography in the nineteenth century, many of whose most famous practitioners wrote about the French Revolution. All at once, the Revolution erased the past and focused attention on it. Schwartz

mentions this apparent contradiction without exploring how it might be resolved. Did the revolutionaries unwittingly encourage nostalgia by making the past into forbidden fruit? Did official forgetting ensure the return of the repressed? Or did the often-somber reality of the revolutionary years produce a revised view of what had come before, if not necessarily a desire to turn back the clock? In any case, the Revolution was so rich in events that it was inevitable that future generations would want both to chronicle them and to try to understand how and why they had occurred.

Most of those who wrote favorably about the Revolution claimed that it had enshrined civilization over barbarism (despite the occasional lapses in the Year II) and that France possessed a special mission to disseminate that civilization around the world. As Schwartz shows, civilization's vehicle was the French language, which according to contemporary commentators, would enlighten backward provinces still in the grip of "impure" tongues and quickly spread to neighboring countries where it would unlock the door to a superior (French) form of life. Colonization would do the same, or so its apologists claimed, and for that reason, imperial expansion would result not in economic exploitation, as in the British case, but in cultural uplift for the masses of people until then untouched by French civilization.

Schwartz notes that Catholic missionaries rather than representatives of the secular state often performed the crucial linguistic work. So did French Jewish leaders, concerned about the plight of co-religionists in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe. These French-educated, culturally-assimilated Jews created the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a network of French-language schools and related institutions. The AIU was designed to fortify vulnerable foreign Jews with the nourishment of French language and civilization. In 1883, Pierre Fonçin applied the AIU model to other parts of the globe, where dozens of branches of his Alliance française would dedicate themselves to the notion that "French uplifts and serves." That the AIU and Alliance française operated mostly outside of France's colonial domains shows that the effort to extend French cultural influence transcended the country's formal imperial project. And even when the French language served as a tool of colonialism, it could be appropriated by colonized peoples for their own purposes. As Léopold Senghor explained, "In the rubble of colonialism, we have found this wonderful tool—the French language" (p. 49).

France's cultural leaders understood that not everyone could or would learn French; the next best thing was to encourage the translation of French literary works. The greatest writers may have reached relatively limited audiences, but I didn't know until reading Schwartz's book that Jules Verne's novels have sold three times as many copies worldwide as Shakespeare's plays and that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1943) stands as one of the best-selling books of all time, with translations into more than 180 languages. These statistics may not demonstrate the influence of French civilization, but they make clear that certain French writers enjoy global renown, though perhaps not the writers many of us would have thought.

If the French have worked to spread their cultural influence abroad, even more important has been their capital city's ability to attract people from around the world to France. This attraction has extended to dissident intellectuals like Marx and Heine, to political exiles, American Bohemians, and to the millions upon millions of tourists who make Paris the most visited place on Earth. Paris has also attracted large numbers of immigrants, whose labor was (and is) often essential but whose steady flow from places like Italy, Poland, Portugal and North Africa has never found a prominent place in France's national narrative. Even now, when everyone talks about the waves of immigration to France, there is nothing remotely resembling a consensus about how to understand this phenomenon.

Schwartz gives requisite attention to immigration and its consequences for France's "national identity," but she's far more interested in Paris as "capital of the nineteenth century" (Walter Benjamin) and as "where the twentieth century was" (Gertrude Stein). Although she doesn't discuss the potential tension between the two quotes, Schwartz is playing on her home turf in the Paris part of the book. If the story she tells here about the boulevards, department stores, poster art, museums, photography, and cinema is

familiar, it's in part because her earlier work has made it so. Schwartz doesn't have room for many quotes, but the ones she's chosen are apt—both for showing the importance of the phenomena in question and French conceits about them. “The boulevards,” wrote Alfred Delvau, “are not only the heart and head of Paris, but also the soul of the entire world” (p. 58). Here, as elsewhere in the book, there are some terrific factoids: in 1911, Paris boasted the world's largest movie theater, with an astounding 3,400 seats. And nowadays, Paris and the provinces together host more McDonalds restaurants than any other country except the United States. Speaking of American institutions, Schwartz quotes F. Scott Fitzgerald telling Hemingway that Paris is a town with “1,000 parties and no work” (p. 74). More seriously, Claude McKay maintained that, in the 1920s, the “cream of Harlem was in Paris” (p. 74).

Schwartz's final chapter will perhaps be the most controversial. Here, she argues that modern France has been a center, not only artistic innovation, but of technological originality as well. “Contrary to the image of France as a country solely dedicated to tradition, artisanal craft, and small-scale production,” she writes, “France has been at the cutting edge of mass production and the development and applications made possible by the high-tech world” (p. 102). Although the word “solely” unfairly stacks the deck, this argument should be taken seriously. Both the Statue of Liberty (1875-1886), whose lithe wrought iron skeleton was designed by Gustave Eiffel, and the Eiffel Tower (1888-1889) itself, stood as marvels of modern engineering, as did the Eiffel's beautiful Garabit bridge.

The same can be said of the Gare de l'Est and the Gard du Nord as well as the iron-and-glass structures of Les Halles. The French helped pioneer these and other techniques of modern urban design, and beginning with the Eiffel Tower, have been unafraid to display them—although not without an often-hostile critical response. Think of La Défense, the back-to-the-futuristic cluster of office buildings west of the Arc de Triomphe, or the Centre Pompidou, or I. M. Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre. The new Bibliothèque nationale de France also belongs to this splashy techno-urbanism, even though its architectural pedigree is less distinguished than that of the Louvre pyramid or the Centre Pompidou. The latter points to the longstanding desire of French leaders to create monuments to themselves and their reigns by erecting symbolically meaningful, if not necessarily aesthetically pleasing, structures like the Palais de Versailles, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Bibliothèque François Mitterrand.

Beyond colossal buildings and fresh urban design, the French have made distinctive contributions to transport and communications as well. The Suez Canal halved the distance from London to Bombay. Louis Blériot piloted an airplane across the English Channel just eight months after the Wright brothers first briefly flew a plane 100 meters high. Both before and after the Second World War, Dassault built innovative military aircraft, while in the 1960s, the Caravelle became one of the first commercially viable jet planes. The TGV, of course, has proved a rousing success. Still, there has been a downside to many of these projects. The Statue of Liberty needed a torch-to-toe restoration in the 1980s, because its iron core had rusted to the point that the great monument threatened to sag. The Concorde disaster, like the nineteenth-century fiasco of the Panama Canal, is too well known to repeat. Mitterrand's Très Grande Bibliothèque is architecturally null, and although its high-tech computer systems now work remarkably well, scholars often wish that book storage, conservation, and digitization were such that fewer volumes would be *hors usage*. As for Schwartz's claim that the Minitel, the small, screen-based communication device introduced in 1982—not long before the Macintosh—represents French technological sophistication, the opposite case can be made. It may be that the Minitel delayed France's widespread use of the Internet and wasted resources on a piece of technology outmoded from the start, as the comparison with the Mac suggests.

Still, Schwartz is right to point to French technological achievements and to question the stereotype, all too common in the United States, of France as a country mired in the past. English-speakers have much to learn from Schwartz's history of French cultural and technical innovations, just as we do from her thoughtful analysis of France's efforts to make its “civilization” universal. A slightly longer book,

impossible in this case, might have allowed us to glean a thing or two from the country's telling, if turbulent, political history as well.

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