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Barnett Singer, *The Americanization of France: Searching for Happiness After the Algerian War*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013. vii + 283 pp. Bibliography and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4422-2165-9; \$53.13 U.S. (ebook). ISBN 978-1-4422-2166-6.

Review by Seth Armus, St. Joseph's College (New York).

The author of this wide-ranging and rather indulgent book has an intriguing thesis—namely, that France's embrace of "Americanization" is largely a consequence of the Algerian war. Having lost its North African mission in disastrous fashion, France also lost the barrier between the "serious" France of the past (i.e., a civilization of imperial restraint and sacrifice) and the "happy" hedonism of the *trente glorieuses*. For Barnett Singer, this retreat was much more important than initially understood and he thinks it goes a long way toward explaining the ease with which traditional France gave way, and the speed with which America filled its place. If you have ever been baffled as to why French baby-boomers seemed to prefer Johnny Hallyday to Charles Trenet, this may be your book.

Singer does not claim to break new ground. In the opening pages he mentions the prominent studies of postwar Americanization by Richard Kuisel and Kristin Ross. But, while he imagines his work as complementing theirs, he faults both the detailed analysis of the historian Kuisel and the theorized quotidian of the cultural studies scholar Ross as being "dated," neglectful of the Algerian War, and without the voice of "the people" (pp. 1-2).^[1] He aims to fill this void by bringing in the voices of a variety of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. Combining extensive primary source research with casual conversation and his own reflections, we have something of an oddity here; a very well-documented and, at times, passionately argued book that is ultimately more interested in telling a story than in making a case.

From the start, Singer's idea of "the people" is a peculiar one. Eschewing statistics and sociological analysis, the author, who is Professor Emeritus at Brock University in Ontario, concentrates on a number of highly subjective sources. An admitted adherent of the biographical approach, Singer wants to show the larger picture of France in transformation through these micro-histories, but he cannot overcome a serious methodological problem—specifically, who are these people and why should we believe them? He relies extensively, and uncritically, on bureaucrats like Jean-Emile Vié, and does nothing to complicate their perspectives. Too often, the "people" here seem to be merely useful launching points for the author's own highly individualistic concerns. This problem, combined with Singer's occasional, but shocking, embrace of cartoonish stereotypes, colonial nostalgia, and diatribes about t-shirts and baby boomers (he actually calls them "one of the weakest generations in all of human history") make it difficult to call this a piece of scholarship at all (p. 144).

The book opens with a light but useful synopsis of his thesis, before the first substantive chapter (actually chapter two), devoted almost entirely to the reflections of Jean-Emile Vié, a career prefect who had extensive experience directing security operations in Algeria. Through archival documents, correspondence, and interviews, Singer lets him tell his version of the Algerian War. A devoted civil servant, Vié believed France's struggle was noble, but doomed, and he reflects on the change that came over the nation as a result. His next chapter concerns the life-stories of some French military and *pieds*

noirs who witnessed De Gaulle's retreat, a readable chapter but marred by sentimentality. This is followed by an amusing chapter about pop stars who imported American style--most importantly Johnny Hallyday, and the rest of the yé-yé culture of the 1960s. In what is probably his strongest piece, the author (who has written on celebrities before) makes a convincing case for how crucial Hallyday was in moving France to American tastes and how strongly his style contrasted with the old France of Trenet and Aznavour. The fifth chapter follows the triumph of diverse aspects of Americanization in post-1968 France, from celebrity culture, to The Doors and skiing, with the final chapter giving free rein to a kind of "France we have lost" narrative that borders on stream-of-consciousness.

Despite its many idiosyncrasies, the book is well documented and the archival material is impressive. Singer has made real use of departmental archives, which is refreshing and still unusual for a book of this sort. The footnotes, far more than the text, demonstrate a deep familiarity with the literature on postwar France. Singer seems unlikely to mislead on the facts of French history, and students might enjoy the significant part of the book that is devoted to a clear and witty paraphrase of events. But even in historical summary, he remains a somewhat unreliable narrator. Three examples that caught my eye should suffice. He calls Charles De Gaulle "nearly a clinical narcissist" (p. 63). Is Singer qualified to render this diagnosis? And, in any event, on what is he basing this "near" diagnosis? Later, he refers to an official speaking, "his heavy Burgundy accent masking a truly sincere person..." (p. 92). Although my spoken French is weak, I think I can imagine a Burgundian accent (that's a less guttural "r" than in Paris, right?), but am I supposed to find something inherently "insincere" about it? A few pages further, when discussing De Gaulle, he dismisses the *force de frappe* with one word--"risible" (p. 98). I assume I'm not alone in failing to find the humor in nuclear proliferation.

Were the samples in this study not so stridently subjective it might be easier to overlook these oddities, but Singer seems to have absolved himself of the obligation to take them critically. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the chapter on Emile Vié. Singer has amassed an enormous amount of information about the career of this supposedly emblematic bureaucrat [2], but he appears to have forgotten that he is a historian and Vié is a *fonctionnaire* and, moreover, one trying to defend his actions in Algeria. Blinded, perhaps, by friendship or his genuine admiration for the man, Singer turns this large chapter into a mere conduit for Vié's narrative. He is, bluntly put, thoroughly uncritical in his reliance on Vié and other supporters of French Algeria. While he has sympathy for Algerian *indigènes* in principle (especially Kabyles and Harkis) he seethes with contempt for the FLN, whom he repeatedly calls "thugs." (pp. 14, 17, 209, 235). It gets worse: defenders of the FLN in Paris are "mob lawyers" bought with "blood money" whom, although they are "Communists," live in the comfort of wealthy suburbs, "Titoistically" (p. 47). Let me be clear, these are not just Vié's assessments, they are the judgment of Singer. He has embraced Vié's perspective so uncritically that it is impossible to say where the subject's voice ends and the author's begins. The story presented by Singer is unacceptably one-sided. The French officials are shown as merely reacting to Muslim aggression, never provoking it, and the events in Paris on October 17, 1961 are not mentioned at all.

As you might have guessed, those looking to critique the author as an apologist for colonialism will find it all too easy. Not sharing that instinct myself, I was, at first, pleasantly surprised to see him reject the facile "colonizers bad/colonized good" moral arithmetic that still dominates much scholarship on Algeria. I think Singer is on to something about the crucible of the Algerian War and I also agree that the French experience has relevance to America's own troubled war on terror. There are moments in both of his chapters on Algeria when he does an excellent job describing the way terror deforms civil society--something not always appreciated in the modern anti-imperialist canon. And, as I mentioned above, histories of this era do not always do justice to the legitimate concerns of French *colons*, Algerian Jews, and Kabyles. But, in the end, his neglect of the context of the FLN is irresponsible, and rather than ambiguity, we get something akin to colonialist nostalgia. For example, he makes repeated reference to torture (I counted at least a dozen) but in every case it is torture *of French* or Harki loyalists *by* the FLN. His overall impression of the French in Algeria is as a group of tragic, but honest men,

struggling to bring enlightenment (Kipling style) to their unworthy subjects. There are sepia-tinged passages that seem to beg for the musical accompaniment of Enrico Macias, pleading “elle vivait en paix, sous les oliviers.”[3]

Singer argues that the failure in Algeria opened the way for an invasion that has, bit by bit, robbed France of its soul. With Algeria gone and the toughness borne of occupation and resistance fading, the baby boomers embraced the flesh-pots of American materialism and consumer culture. As mentioned above, Singer hates baby boomers to a disconcerting degree, dismissing this entire generation with language that has no place in historical scholarship.[4] They, more than anyone else, are to blame for the mess France is in today, since they were happy to fight beneficent grey-haired authority but too weak to stand up to what Singer calls a cultural invasion from America and a physical invasion from North Africa.

Part of the trouble is simply the author’s style. He chose to make this a sort of informal, personal story. It seems to suit him and the stories are told in a light manner, even when the subjects (e.g., repression of nationalist violence in Algeria) are anything but. Some readers will surely find this appealing, and I agree that undergraduates in particular might enjoy this sort of exposure to French history via *ego-histoire*, but even when he is not passing it off as historical judgment, there is still too much of the author in the book. I lost count of how many times he interjected phrases such as a “Parisian beauty [was] telling me this, stylish, petite, with all the graces”(p. 54), or on “why did I find myself enjoying so many of his [Hallyday’s] driving, truly rocking, offerings?”(p. 123), or, responding to French friend hearing Jim Morrison and responding “*c’est genial!*” Singer inserts “was it *really* so *genial*? ...This revolutionary, oedipal, in-your-face, thuggish lead singer en route to his own self-destruction? I think not” (p. 145).

Singer devotes his last chapter to musings about how different the France of today is from the country of thirty or even twenty years ago and how much of this can be attributed to Americanization. Having warned us in the introduction that he would conclude with a “Letter from France” style essay, he makes good on the threat, concentrating his observations on the insecurity Muslim immigrants have brought to the cities, the ubiquity of American culture, the popularity of t-shirts and shorts, his own fruitless search for beret-wearers in Lorraine, and, ultimately, little of substance. Even though these observations tend toward the superficial, he considers them proof that America has “won,” and is annoyed that, in this profoundly Americanized France, the “myth” of anti-Americanism persists. Those who continue to fall for it should, he believes, be scolded. Joining Kuisel and Ross as targets of his criticism are those writers and scholars, French, British and American, who have, in Singer’s mind, got it all wrong. No one, from Adam Gopnik to Jacques Portes, from Robert Paxton to Philippe Roger, is spared (pp. 172-173).

This would all be easier to swallow if his primary complaint against these writers was not their supposedly uncritical resort to clichés about France, something he attributes to ignorance and intellectual fashion. Even if he has a point, he is simply not in a position to do this having written a book so filled with clichés himself. One of these accusations struck me as especially breathtaking. Singer heaps scorn on a number of authors for their simplistic use of the term “French Cartesianism” as an explanation (p. 171). Yet in his own discussion of both De Gaulle and Raymond Aron he reverts to precisely that term—explaining De Gaulle’s contempt for the common people and Aron’s studied ignorance about Algeria as a consequence of their “French Cartesianism” (pp. 97, 238).

This is a pity, since the argument that animates this book is a worthy one, and I must admit I found the perspectives of the Algerian eyewitnesses he studied to be of real interest. Singer clearly loves France and he’s a bit broken up over what he feels has happened to it. He wants to share his own story about how he thinks a country he loved became less and less loveable throughout his lifetime. But every country in Europe has faced the same challenges, be it immigration, the internet, global consumer capitalism or the many “*défis américains*.” Europe has neither collapsed, nor surrendered nor become America. What makes the story interesting is how these nations adapt and survive—keeping some of

their traditions and altering others. Singer is not interested in these success stories. For all of his concern about following Americanization to the present day, something about his pessimistic tone of cultural decline feels far from contemporary, perhaps, dare I say, even interwar.

NOTES

[1] Typical of this indulgent narrative style, he credits Kuisel and Ross on the first page as having shaped his approach, but then never mentions them again.

[2] Jean-Emile Vié was, after his time in Algeria, the prefect in Nantes. Apparently he shared Singer's contempt for the May '68 crowd, as at least one journalist has reported that, on May 13, 1968, Vié requested that Paris give him permission to fire into the crowd of demonstrators. His request was denied.

See http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5lb1p_mai-68-a-nantes-le-prefet-voulait-t_news.

[3] Enrico Macias, "La France de mon Enfance," in the album entitled "Master Série," released in 1970.

[4] There's the quotation I mentioned on page 144, but Singer again taunts them on pages 143, 160 and 163, these execrable "baby boomers who continued shamelessly to advertise their princely, righteous self-indulgence and generational weakness." All that said, at times he seems to figure it the other way around, that is to say the nascent hedonism of the postwar period was, by the time of the Algerian War, already weakening France's desire for a fight.

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