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France Since 1945

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There are two qualities in Dr. Gildea?s book that are immediately apparent. The first is the sensible planning of the contents. Beginning with "The Crisis of Empire", the last chapter is "France in search of a world role". The second chapter is "Crisis in the state", balanced by the penultimate chapter, "The Republic of the Centre". In between lie "Echoes of the Occupation" and "Cultural Revolutions", with a key central chapter dealing with what are called "Les Trente Glorieuses" and the markedly less successful years that followed, which one French writer has called "Les Trente Piteuses".

The second quality is the amount of detail that is available in a relatively short book. We find here the well known names of the Vichy past, Klaus Barbie, Touvier, Bousquet and Papon, with short explanations of their importance; there are the names of politicians who are recalled because they achieved fame through being corrupt, names such as Medecin, Carignan and Pelat (and although the last named is stated to have died in 1989 it might have been added that he died in prison); popular songsters are not forgotten, and find mention of Juliette Greco, Jaques Brel, Serge Gainsburg and Johnny Haliday, the last having his real name revealed and reference being made to one of his wives (but where is Catherine Sauvage and her overtly political songs ?). We have the new Look (Dior), the New Philosophers (Bernard-Henri Levy and Andre Glucksman), the New Poor (the 1980?s), the New Right (Alain de Benoist), the New Society (Chaban-Delmas) and the New Wave (Chabrol and Godard). Gildea is quite right to make no mention of the New Romanticism (Gonzague de Saint Bris), but is he justified in omitting from the catalogue of "New" the Nouvelle Cuisine (Bocuse) ?

The comedian-clown Coluche, with his anti-racism and sympathy for the poor is given his role in politics when he seeks to stand for President in 1981, and we are told that he had the support of the sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu, the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, the film stars Belmondo and Depardieu, whilst later we are told of his contacts with Mitterrand via Attali and Jean-Louis Bianco and his influence amongst the socialists via Julian Dray. (But there was no need to refer twice to his rock concert on the place de la Concorde in June 1985 and some mention should have been made to his enthusiastic following among the motor-cycling community).

Thus in a work which is already being used widely as a reference book and as an indispensable text book, the role of politicians is being played down, so that some who were of considerable importance such as Christian Pineau, Jean-Marcel Jeanneney or Edgard Pisani receive only a single passing mention. But the importance of cultural is continually stressed. In accordance with present preoccupations this means that culture is not confined to the chapter specifically designated or dealing with that subject, still less to the work of the Ministers of Culture whom Gildea has singled out, Malraux and Lang (other inhabitants of the rue de Valois, such as Duhamel, are not mentioned in this context). But culture is headlined in many places.

For example, at the beginning of the book, the author classifies the phenomenon of anti-Americanism largely in cultural terms. He gives importance to the role of the supremely American drink, "Coca-Cola". He shows how the pre-1939 slogan "mourir pour Danzig" was mimicked by the slogan "mourir pour le Coca-Cola" indicating a fate that was undesirable. Coca-Cola is explained as being an image. It meant American capitalism, American bad taste in competition with the wine, the fruit juice and the mineral water which were part of the French civilization. It was not only the Communists who felt deeply about the dangers of being "coca-colonised".

Yet the inhabitants of Ploermel, in Brittany, to take one example out of many, were not anti-American because of Coca-Cola. Their town had been destroyed by American bombing. The bitterness caused by high level bombing of the American Air Force was very real. And although it is difficult to assess the extent of knowledge about the history of the war years - it was widely known that Roosevelt had been a friend to Vichy, that he had hoped to establish some sort of American provisional government in France which would issue its own currency, that he had treated France as a vassal rather than an ally. If one turned to legend, had not America protected German war criminals, were the Americans not pouring money into Germany, was not the Marshall Plan an attempt by American capital to take over France ?

Had Dr. Gildea pursued the theme of anti-Americanism, he would have seen how de Gaulle told, in his Memoirs, of the American general who had tried to stop the victory parade down the Champs Elysees on 26 August 1944. "Naturally" commented de Gaulle "I paid no attention". In the 1960s the General is alarmed at the prospect of America being in the position of a colonial power, and ordering the closure of certain French enterprises and he expresses his determination never to allow such a situation to arise. Post de Gaulle anti-Americanism is not cultural in any way, as any examination of cinemas and television programmes shows. But all French governments have shown a determination to stand aside from American foreign policy and to fear of American domination, whilst admiring what was dynamic and democratic in American society.

The directness with which Dr. Glidea are solves problems is admirable. Thus, when answering the question of why there was not a Communist revolution in France in 1944, he gives three reasons. Firstly, because France was ultimately liberated by the Allied forces rather than by the internal Resistance. Secondly, because de Gaulle made the restoration of the state a priority and succeeded in establishing the machinery of governmental authority very rapidly (a measure which also foiled American attempts to use their military authority and currency). Thirdly, because the majority of the party was not in favour of a revolutionary seizure of power, and de Gaulle was seen by Stalin as an agent who would limit the authority of the Anglo-Saxon powers in the West. It is refreshing to read such clear statements which do not get lost in speculations about the divisions within the Communist party, with Duclos suggesting that Thorez had become too much of a parliamentarian, Thorez being alarmed by Marty?s influence in the Internationale, and the power and influence of the party varying from one Resistance group to another.

Dr. Gildea is equally direct, but perhaps a bit rapid in his account of the decline of the Communist Party. Bearing in mind that he has a section on the transition from Marxism to gauchism (where he puts Althusser,

curiously enough, alongside Castoriadis, Lefebvre and ?Cohn-Benditism?) and a section on the union of Communists and Socialists, the suggestion that there was a decline in the 1980?s simply because of the incompetence of the party direction is scarcely adequate. There is much more to write about changes in the basis of communist traditional strength, as well as about divisions within the Party?s leadership.

The effect on the French of the pulling down of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 is well described, with its revival of French fears and phobias. President Mitterand escapes censure and his policy is given a steadfast coherence which he probably does not deserve. But in his conclusion the author does not spare criticism of France as a whole, explaining that the Franco-German axis in Europe must be maintained and that France should be more ?reticent? as he puts it, referring to its colonial adventures in recent years. Dr. Gildea, after writing his account of some fifty years of French history is well entitled to have a moment of lecturing his subject, and this too, he does sensibly and well.

It is a feat to write about general de Gaulle and President Mitterand without resorting to anecdotes. This makes it all the more surprising that Edouard Balladur is singled out for semi-anecdotal treatment. ?A practising Catholic known as "the canon" to his friends, his socks were bought in Rome by the wife of the French ambassador to the Holy See, whereas Beregovoy?s came from Prisunic?. We are not, incidentally, told where Madame Edith Cresson bought her dresses. And might one not know more about Balladur by recalling that he abstained from making his devastating attack on his predecessor?s financial policy, when he learned that Beregovoy had committed suicide ?

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