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Review Article

French Cultural Policy and the American Mirror in the Sarkozy Era

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Although culture is not at the heart of the policy agenda of the current French administration, it will likely be affected by the Sarkozy revolution. French culture seems to be in a state of crisis, as evidenced both by the end of its 'rayonnement' outside of France and by its diminutive focus on the producers instead of the consumers of cultural goods. The options available for reform can, paradoxically given France's history of policy opposition to American culture, be inspired by what is done in the United States, as is suggested by Frédéric Martel's 2006 book *De la Culture en Amérique*. A reform of French cultural policy would have implications both for foreign and for domestic policies.
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De la Culture en Amérique (Culture in America)
By Frédéric Martel
622 pages, Paris: Gallimard, 2006 (in French)

Culture is not at the center of the policy preoccupations of the Sarkozy administration. Between public transport strikes, unhappy university students, and the difficulties of the French economy to catch up with growth in the rest of Europe, there are more immediate concerns on the policy agenda. Neither did the question of cultural policy play a particular role in the 2007 presidential campaign. Sure, artists came out publicly for their favorite candidate and may have obtained some promises in exchange, but overall the major contenders tried to avoid discussing the issue of culture as much as possible. Yet cultural policy has long been an essential tool of French foreign policy, as well as an instrument for defining the elusive 'French identity,' which, contrary to culture, was at the center of the debates in the presidential election.

Despite this absence of prominence, it is likely that French cultural policy will be affected by the Sarkozy revolution. First, because the 'hyperpresident' seems to be leaving no stone unturned in his quest to remedy all policies that seem to be in crisis — and French cultural policy is certainly perceived to be in

crisis. And second, because his personal background and inclinations, such as his professed admiration for American society and his self-identification as a proud non-intellectual, could provide an impetus for transformations in French cultural policy.

This review essay considers what the Sarkozy revolution means for French cultural policy and asks whether culture could well be an example of a policy where the end of 'American' as an injurious epithet may indeed open up avenues for reform. Is French culture ripe for being 'Americanized'? If it is, will it mean more McDonald's and cookie-cutter Hollywood blockbusters, or on the contrary a more diverse cultural production and an easier, more vibrant access to 'high' culture — in short, more of the cultural diversity so often defended by France in international fora?

A French Cultural Model in Crisis

France is a medium-sized country with a medium-sized economy, but it has been able to project greater political might in the world and weigh more heavily in international affairs than would be dictated by its size alone thanks to the particular quality and the unique 'rayonnement' of French culture –or so the lore goes. Are the quality and quantity of contemporary French culture enough to sustain and perpetuate France's habit of exerting influence beyond its means? What is left of the 'rayonnement' today?

Not much, it would seem. Seen from the United States, no one cares about French culture any more. The last notable French movie successes at the box office were *Amélie* (2001) and *The March of the Penguins* (2005). Neither contemporary French writers nor young French singers have met any sizable audience in the United States in recent years. Interest in studying French in high schools and colleges across America is dwindling. Even French food has lost its appeal as the epitome of cuisine and refinement. French culture is no longer on the map of the general American public.

As for those Americans who do still care about French culture, mostly in the intellectual elite, they deplore its dire state of crisis. A recent essay in *TIME* magazine painted a devastating portrait of French culture today.[1] The author, Don Morrison, argued that quantity is not the issue. Judging by the numbers, French cultural production is alive and well: 727 new novels published this year, hundreds of new music albums and more than 200 new movies released, blockbuster art exhibitions, concerts and operas everywhere. The problem is that this massive, lively quantity is barely visible in the wider world. Few works of French fiction are translated into English today, when earlier generations of French writers (Sartre, Camus, and Malraux, to name a few) had a remarkable following abroad. Indeed, France counts more Nobel literature laureates than any other country, but the last time the prize was awarded to a French author

writing in French was in 1985. The same is true for French cinema, which, despite the abundance of movies released each year, seems mostly designed for homegrown consumption. Long gone are the days of the French New Wave and its impact on setting the agenda for the rest of the movie world. Whether one takes music, art, or even fashion, the story is the same — the French capacity to impact the rest of the world has been seriously eroded. So much for the rayonnement.

Can America Teach France about Culture?

The American observation that French culture no longer travels well is not a reflection of recent political tensions between France and the United States over Iraq. Sure, the fact that the general American public was ready to believe that France had become the 'enemy' in 2003 did not help French artists become popular on the other side of the Atlantic. But the problems encountered by the export of French culture are deeper than that, and not limited to the United States.

Moreover, French analysts have made the same observation about the decline in the capacity of 'rayonnement' of French culture, as well as about the failures of French cultural policy to serve the French public well. Several books on the perceived crisis of French cultural policy have recently been published in France. From Françoise Benhamou's *Les Dérèglements de l'exception culturelle*[2] to Jean-Claude Wallach's *La Culture, pour qui? Essai sur les limites de la démocratisation culturelle*,[3] analysts worry that the current cultural policy model is no longer adapted to contemporary French society, in particular because of its centralized management by the state. More concerned with encouraging artists to create than to make sure that their art is indeed diffused and enjoyed by the French population, the current policy has, to a large extent, lost its relevance.

Paradoxically, the most interesting of this recent crop of books is Frédéric Martel's *De la Culture en Amérique* (*Culture in America*), a book that does not talk directly about French cultural policy but instead paints a fascinating portrait of American cultural policy. It is a book about the United States — how culture is made, financed, and received by Americans. A voluminous tome based on a dissertation, 4 years of fieldwork, more than 700 interviews, and extensive archival research, this book meticulously tries to unearth the roots of American cultural imperialism, rather than simply criticizing and rejecting it. But in mirror, between the lines, it is also a book about France.[4]

It is a book about what American cultural policy is — in stark contrast with what French cultural policy is not — and about what American cultural policy is not — in stark contrast with what French cultural policy is. *Culture in America* challenges French conventional wisdom about American culture, and in so doing challenges conventional wisdom about French culture as well.

French conventional wisdom about American culture is almost caricatural. Unequivocally, the French discourse on American culture is characterized both by its imperialism and by its lowbrow, mass-market quality. This is partly a consolation for the French: The United States may flood the world with low culture driven by market forces, but at least France has an active, state-led cultural policy producing high-quality arts, which has no match on the other side of the Atlantic.

Martel shatters this French conventional wisdom in two ways. First, by showing that American culture is not made only of stupid TV sitcoms; it is also about the 'high culture' so cherished by the French. Second, by arguing that the United States does actually have a cultural policy and, even more surprisingly, that the market is not the principal regulator of cultural creation in America.

Martel spent 4 years in Boston as the French cultural attaché, during which time he explored the power of attraction of American universities, disappeared deep within archives, and traveled extensively in search of American cultural life, crisscrossing the country à la Tocqueville. The result is an incredibly rich, dense, well-documented picture of a country where, as he argues, 'the ministry of culture is nowhere, but cultural life is everywhere.' His comprehensive portrayal of the vibrancy and diversity of American culture is a shocking eye-opener for the French. Sure, there was Hollywood, Broadway, and Disney. But Martel explains how the United States has also become the world's mastodon in contemporary dance, modern painting, literature, and, most of all, academia — not sectors typically popular with the market. How, the French ask, did this happen?

The long-held view in France is that the state plays a central role in fostering the arts. The French mantra is that culture is not a product whose worth is determined by the popular, uncritical masses. Successive French governments have long supported the notion that culture ought to be exempted from the usual rules of trade, with allowances for the state to subsidize and protect the fine arts. Martel's book poses two vexing questions to the French: 'Why is there no ministry of culture in America?' And, 'how can actors, competitors and partners, pursuing their own particular interests, work towards the general interest and collectively contribute to making a global system that is tremendously efficient?' Martel identifies a third way between state and market — a culture resulting from the non-profit sector, including philanthropy, foundations, universities, and corporate giving. This, he argues, is the base of the cultural system in the United States, a system which is, like the United States itself, 'original and complex, decentralized and unbalanced, dynamic and irrational, pluralist and atomized, with considerable assets and multiple perverse effects.'

Martel also shatters French conventional wisdom in another way, by questioning the real meaning of cultural diversity. The French are the

self-proclaimed worldwide champions of what they call 'cultural diversity,' even attempting to erect it as a universally recognized principle. In 2005, France and Canada successfully enshrined 'cultural diversity' into the UNESCO charter — against the lone opposition of the United States and Israel. For America, so goes the French myth, cultural diversity is anathema because it challenges the powerful Hollywood machine. With *Culture in America*, Martel subtly trashes the French hypocrisy on cultural diversity by showing how much the American cultural model values and promotes cultural diversity internally. He analyzes how the United States has actively promoted the development of minority cultures through the empowerment of community organizations and indirect support, such as tax incentives. The irony is that the United States today is possibly the most diverse culture in the world. France, by contrast, has a very uniform, elitist culture, managed by an egalitarian state that does not recognize or promote ethnically based diversity. Yet the United States has not been able to translate this cultural diversity at the international level, showing off only its mass-market, conforming culture to the rest of the world. To a large extent, the French are right that, when it comes to trade in cultural goods, the United States is projecting the uniform preferences of its corporate Hollywood cultural machine. And the French, for their part, have not been able to encourage the cultural diversity they champion internationally at home.

De la Culture en Amérique, which received large media coverage in France, has opened up the eyes of many in the French elites to both the shortcomings of French cultural policy and the complex picture of American cultural policy-making. The book is a slap in the face of those who criticize America for its lack of high culture. But paradoxically, it also helps the French bolster their view that culture is not a good whose value is determined by market forces, as it shows that even in the United States, culture is greatly subsidized, albeit in indirect and opaque ways. In the end, the greatest paradox of all is that, in spite of the entirely different, polar opposite processes through which culture is financed and produced in France and the United States, cultural practices end up being quite similar in the two countries. Whether the percentage of artists in the population, theaters per person, or the number of people who have read a book, visited a museum, listened to a classical concert or watched a dance performance, Martel has revealed that France and the United States are not nearly as far apart as they seem.

Reforming French Cultural Policy in the Sarkozy Era

Could the combination of the shared observation that French culture is in crisis and of Sarkozy's reform style and hyperactive leadership lead to an overhaul of cultural policy in France, including a reassessment of its goals and means? Culture is, after all, an essential tool of French foreign policy, so a presidency

which is trying to reassert France's role in the world pragmatically, not rhetorically, should definitely include a reform of cultural policy as part of its foreign policy agenda. Culture can also be part of the domestic agenda, as it touches upon the sensitive issues of national identity and diversity.

In foreign policy, a strong culture has long been a central instrument of France's international power, which in turn enabled French culture to be stronger. In colonial times, France attempted to exert a 'civilizing mission,' promoting its values derived from the age of Enlightenment to illuminate the wider world (not without the use of force). After the dismantlement of its colonial empire, France has been able to 'punch above its weight' in world affairs thanks to the leverage provided by 'la francophonie' and by the strength and reputation of its culture.

When globalization started to sweep the world in the 1990s, the French were among the most fearful and the most vocal about the phenomenon. One of their central fears was that market forces would wipe out cultural diversity, with Hollywood and the American cultural machine acting as a steamroller on the rest of the world. Successive French governments therefore enacted the policy of 'cultural exception,' which they defended with particular vigor first in multilateral trade negotiations during the Uruguay Round of GATT and which they then established as a policy principle in the European Union. In recent years, the fight to preserve 'cultural exception' has given way to a fight to promote 'cultural diversity,' which the French have successfully enshrined in the UNESCO charter in 2005 against US opposition.

Since he has been elected president, Nicolas Sarkozy has led what some analysts have termed a 'hyperactive' foreign policy — from freeing the Bulgarian nurses in Libya to holding a tough talk on Iran, from reconciling France with the United States to well-publicized visits in China and Algeria among others. The goal of this ubiquitous French presence in international affairs seems to be to restore France's role in the world. Reinforcing the French cultural presence abroad as well as making sure that French culture is indeed exportable are two objectives that would help Sarkozy in his quest to have a successful foreign policy.

A reform of the French approach to the management of cultural policy could also help Sarkozy with his domestic agenda. First, because culture has a pivotal role to play in the definition of national identity. This was a central issue during the 2007 presidential campaign, in large part at Sarkozy's initiative, and is still a hot political topic in the current presidency, as demonstrated by the Villiers-le-Bel riots in November 2007. What does it mean to be French today? What is in the common pool of shared values and experiences that define Frenchness? According to the many analysts who argue that French cultural policy is in a state of crisis, the main weakness of the current cultural policy model is that it no longer reflects and is no longer

adapted to contemporary French society. A reform of the goals and means of cultural policy, for instance supporting a broader diversity of cultural creation or organized as a kind of cultural affirmative action, could positively impact the integration of disenfranchised minorities into 'Frenchness.' This would be consistent with Sarkozy's prior indications in the past that he was in favor of some sort of affirmative action in France.

Second, a reform of French cultural policy would be consistent with Sarkozy's domestic political agenda because it could provide an opportunity to revisit the complex relationships between market forces and state management, at the center of the current policy debates. Sarkozy has publicly called for a 'democratization' of culture. Does this mean that cultural policy will rely more on market forces than in the past?

Reforming along the lines of increased diversity and increased market forces suggests coming a step closer to the American cultural model. Indeed, the cultural arena, which has long been the bastion of the most vibrant anti-Americanism in France, could well be an example of a policy where the end of 'American' as an injurious epithet may indeed open up avenues for reform. Is French culture ripe for being 'Americanized'?

Much has been written in the American and the French media about Sarkozy's professed love for the United States. For Sarkozy, the immigrant and the non-graduate of French elite schools, the best things about the United States are its 'can do' attitude, the hope of social promotion through hard work, and the praise of success. This explains, in part, his choice of undertaking early in his presidency a very public rapprochement with the United States in foreign policy. By reconciling France and the United States in foreign policy, Sarkozy is also trying, less visibly perhaps, to reconcile the French with the idea that there are indeed some aspects of American public policy which may well be worth importing. Whether it is affirmative action or the reform of the justice system, multiculturalism or the administrative spoils system, Sarkozy is attempting to launch a serious revolution in French policy-making and thinking — that is, to show that the fact that a policy is American does not discredit it *per se*.

Therefore the time may be ripe for a reform of French cultural policy, borrowing some of the positive aspects of the American cultural model as described in Martel's book. Americanization does not necessarily mean more McDonald's and cookie-cutter Hollywood blockbusters; on the contrary, it could mean a more diverse cultural production and an easier, more vibrant access to 'high' culture.

The lines of such reform are starting to appear. First, the introduction of more private funding to support cultural creation and access to culture, *à l'américaine*. For instance, the tax law was changed in the summer of 2007 to allow for private gifts to higher education to become partially deductible from

income taxes. Some of France's elite institutions, such as Sciences Po and École Polytechnique, immediately jumped on the opportunity and launched capital campaigns — an American concept, never heard before in France. They are looking for private donations to pay for chaired professorships, support scholarships, and build an endowment (a word so foreign that does not even have a direct French translation!). As the director of Sciences Po, Richard Descoings, argued in a November 2007 letter to the alumni, 'in addition to a financial revolution, this is a cultural revolution.'

In addition to allowing private funding for culture, Sarkozy has also suggested more public funding as well. In a well-publicized letter he sent in August 2007 to the Culture Minister, Christine Albanel, he proposed to end admission charges to museums and hike the budget of the Culture Ministry. He also indicated the need for more cultural education for all, suggesting the inclusion of art-history classes in the high school curriculum.

Finally, the Sarkozy imprint on cultural policy will most likely include a vast reform of audiovisual policy, replacing the sweeping 1986 law on audiovisual services. The main goal is to 'democratize' culture and the French audiovisual landscape, and it sets four priorities: (1) a reform of public audiovisual services, including a stronger differentiation of content from the private sector; (2) a reform of the relations between producers and broadcasters; (3) a reform to encourage original creation and not simply a 'copy-and-paste' of American series; and (4) a relaxing of the rules governing private ownership in the audiovisual sector (now capped at 49% by a single owner), so as to promote the emergence of large, internationally competitive audiovisual groups.

It is no secret that France's relationship with American culture is, to put it politely, ambivalent. The French protect their cultural creation from US domination through a complex system of quotas and subsidies, and they are the most vocal opponent of the American cultural steamroller in the world. Yet the French flock en masse, like everyone else, to watch the latest Hollywood blockbusters, and France is McDonald's second most profitable market, after the United States. This ambivalence is not about to disappear as, ironically, it may well be the American model that can lift France out of its perceived cultural crisis. Within France, cultural policy has failed of late to represent and adapt to contemporary French society, and there is a feeling that it is more designed to encourage cultural creation than cultural consumption. Outside of France, cultural policy has failed to succeed in making French culture shine internationally as it once did. Structural factors explain the loss of cachet of French culture in the wider world. These include the fact that, because of demographic and geopolitical factors, French is only the 12th spoken language in the world; the rise in the economic power of China, making European, including French culture, seem *dépassé*; and the sluggish economic growth in France which does not bode well for making culture a policy priority. Yet

French culture could potentially be reinvigorated by some pragmatic decentralization, greater focus on diversity, and the prudent introduction of private financing. It would indeed be ironic if, far from being steamrolled by the American mastodon, French culture could regain its international 'rayonnement' thanks to the import of American policy methods.

Notes

1 Don Morrison, 'The Death of French Culture,' *TIME* (European edition), 21 November 2007.
2 Francoise Benhamou, *Les Dérèglements de l'exception culturelle* (Le Seuil, 2006).
3 Jean-Claude Wallach, *La Culture, pour qui? Essai sur les limites de la démocratisation culturelle* (Editions de l'Attribut, 2006).
4 See Sophie Meunier, 'The French Twist,' *Foreign Policy*, May–June 2007.