

INTRODUCTION



During the summer of 2003, a medical doctor in the Grenoble region pinned on the door of his surgery waiting room a large and colourful poster that warned his patients of a great danger: statistics clearly showed that young French children were becoming as obese as their American counterparts. Various unappealing photos of hamburgers, chocolate bars and fizzy drinks showed that the excessive consumption of junk food was primarily responsible for this worrying trend. Of course, similar concerns are regularly expressed in the British and American press, usually with an exhortation to review the menus that schools serve to children. But in this French surgery, the argument was taken further and developed in peculiar, but not unsurprising terms. The doctor had highlighted with a fluorescent red pen the conclusion of his home-made poster: parents who had forgotten the nutritive qualities of the perfectly balanced French diet were feeding their offspring a variety of unhealthy and culturally alien products: 'The Anglo-Saxon diet is undermining the health of your children'. The doctor pressed his patients to show enough civic virtue (*responsabilité citoyenne*) to revert to a more balanced regime and to defend 'l'exception diététique française'. It is unlikely that a British or American journalist writing on the subject of obesity among young children would make the link between dietary principles and citizenry. Although it is not entirely clear what *l'exception diététique française* and *la responsabilité citoyenne* actually mean, as an incantation it works fairly well; it conjures up the idea that something quite fundamentally French is under siege and that fraternal courage and permanent mobilisation of citizens are needed to save it from evil. Moreover, it implicitly suggests that the French have the best diet in the world and that other peoples would be better off adopting it.

This book is *not* a collection of such stories. As Sue Collard points out in her contribution to this volume, the expression 'the French exception' is now routinely 'used as a way of pointing to areas in which France is perceived as being different from other countries, [from ...] road safety [to] gynaecology, [... from] the constitution [... to] the shooting of migrating birds'. As such, an *ad infinitum* review of such occurrences would be no

more than a mildly entertaining exercise, whose sole value would be to state the obvious: each country has its own particularities. This book seeks to explore and evaluate how two different, but related discourses have constructed the notion of the French exception in specific ways, have ascribed certain value(s) to it and have mobilised it for specific reasons.

In this volume, the chapters are organised in three sections. In the first section, the contributions by Hewlett, Majumdar and Collard aim at problematising the French exception. This first part therefore provides the reader with the context necessary to understand how the notion of exceptionalism has been framed and defined and the reasons why it has acquired such a visibility. It also charts the limits of its heuristic value as an analytical tool. The second part looks at the exceptionalism in the field of politics, whereas the third one focuses on culture, media, and sport. The aim of this introduction is to highlight the recurrent themes that cut across the contributions gathered here.

The French exception as an analytical framework

As Nick Hewlett points out (chapter 1), whether we think that the notion of the French exception as an analytical framework is 'inaccurate or even trivial', we have to admit that it has permeated an enormous number of academic works. If the notion of French exception is not explored as such, it often looms in the background or provides a backdrop to various arguments. For instance, David Howarth and Georgios Varouxakis use the notion of French exception in their introduction with great care, to explain that France 'is, or rather [...] sees itself as being, permanently in crisis' and to discuss whether this exceptional lack of consensus has not reached the end of its tether today (2003: x). In their conclusion, they emphasise France's claim to universalism and point out that what makes it different is that it is only country that 'offers its "sister-republic", America, a mirror image through which to see itself better, and the rest of the world an alternative way of living and thinking than that of the *hyperpuissance*'. (Howarth and Varouxakis 2003: 211). Likewise, David Bell in *French Politics Today* (2002) makes the point that it could be useful to look at French political culture as 'exceptional' and introduces his argument by stating that '... the history of French politics will help explain why France is different' (Bell 2002: 3). This is done with much nuance as he also points out that France shares many common traits with other Western liberal democracies. Nevertheless, the questions that Bell puts forwards in the course of this book suggest that the notion of 'the French exception' is a useful starting point to ask interesting questions: 'What is distinctive about the French economy?' (39); 'In what ways is the French Left distinctive?' (78); 'In what ways is French foreign policy distinctive?' (240).

To be sure, saying that France is 'different' or 'distinctive' or 'exemplary' does not necessarily mean that it is 'exceptional'. The majority of the contributors to this volume are, as we shall see, sceptical if not critical of the 'French exception' as a heuristic device. Moreover, an exception only exists in opposition to a general rule or a norm and it is difficult to determine what this norm is or could be (or even if it exists at all). Indeed, how are we to decide whether any departure from the norm constitutes a variance, a deviation or an exception? Yet most academics also recognise that the notion has often been used in their field, that it has helped to generate some relevant research questions (notably about the permanence of its 'exceptional status' in a more globalised or Europeanised environment) and that it has encouraged the development of further comparative studies.

As an analytical tool, the notion of French exception is usually constructed along two different but closely related axes. The first axis maps the origins and contours of the French exception. It has its roots in a distinctive republican model, attaching central importance to the prestige of the state, the primacy of politics and the active propagation, at home and worldwide, of certain values, perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be enlightened and progressive. Thus, the 'French exception' could be defined by four core elements:

- (1) The French State, in its *Jacobin, dirigiste*, republican or protectionist guise, is supposed to dominate civil society and to play a more powerful role than in any other Western democracy.
- (2) France is a country divided against itself, where domestic conflicts are more polarised than in other Western countries. It displays a degree of political radicalism which ensures that debates are highly politicised and issues are solved, if at all, through confrontation, not negotiation.
- (3) France has long seen itself as the depository of values inherited from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Its mission is to diffuse them universally. From the Napoleonic conquests to colonial expansion, from the Gaullist refusal of the cold war divide to the development of *Francophonie*, France has presented itself as a model to follow for the rest of the world. In this respect, it shares the same ambition as the U.S. and this might help to explain the periodic outbursts of anti-Americanism in France.
- (4) The French republican model only recognises individuals and not communities within the nation-state. Thus, the existence of minority groups, from regional minorities such as Bretons to religious minorities such as Muslims, are not acknowledged (Rosanvallon 2004). The reluctance of President Chirac to sign the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the new legislation to ban the wearing of the veil in schools by Muslim girls testify to the continuing durability of this model.

Two important points need to be made. Firstly, within academic discourse, such characteristics are obviously treated as hypotheses rather than empirical truths. Indeed, academics – and this is the second axis of the debate – have long tried to evaluate critically whether and to what extent such hypotheses make sense at all. After all, this is what their job is about. For instance, the Jacobin tendencies of the French State, its propensity to denigrate regional particularisms and to promote a homogenised national culture have often been critically re-examined by social scientists. The historian Jean-François Chanet (1996), for example, clearly shows that our traditional views of republican centralisation, both as a concept and a practice, should be empirically reassessed. Education policy under the Third Republic did not always seek to eradicate positive attachments to a regional culture. Instead, it mobilised existing regional identities to promote the development of French national consciousness. The discourse developed by the central administration was not monolithic and was characterised by constant hesitations and adjustments between Jacobin and Girondin traditions. As a result, the formulation and implementation of education policy did not display the homogenising tendencies that are usually associated with *les hussards noirs de la république*. Likewise, Pierre Grémion's seminal work on the French prefects (1976) highlighted the relations of complicity, rather than of domination, between local elites and the representatives of the central state, leading to a more subtle reassessment of the idea and practice of centralisation. Finally, Dupuy and Thoenig (1985) have described the French State apparatus as being rather fragmented, marred both by inertia and internal conflicts, a description far removed from the image of an all powerful and effective bureaucracy. In this volume, Anne Stevens (chapter 6) and Ben Clift (chapter 8) show that the traditional image of a powerful *and* efficient state, either in its Jacobin or *dirigiste* guise, has not always been supported by empirical evidence.

Secondly, until the mid-1980s, the assessment and evaluation of such hypotheses did not make, or indeed require, any explicit reference to the notion of 'French exceptionalism'. Indeed, the role played by the state, the polarised and radical nature of French society as well as the willingness to promote French *rayonnement* on the international stage, were used to describe France's attempt to overcome the humiliation of her fall in 1940 and to embark, *coûte que coûte*, on a largely state-led programme of modernisation from 1945 onwards. As Sue Collard (chapter 3) shows in this volume, it is difficult to know exactly when the expression 'French exceptionalism' first appeared. What is certain, however, is that it became common currency after the publication, in 1988, of an influential book by François Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon: *La République du centre. La fin de l'exception française*. The book argued that France's road to modernisation had run out of steam, that state intervention had become counter-productive, that the existence and radical expression of political

conflicts were now irrelevant, archaic or even morally dangerous, and that France's destiny was to become a 'normal' country, with ambitions limited to her medium-sized status. It was time to bring to a close a political culture and a republican model inherited from the Revolution. France had taken a long time to complete its modernisation and had chosen a tumultuous path to do so. Now the time had come to join the European club of liberal democracies (Gauchet 2002). The argument opened a space for a heated political debate between those who called for such normalisation and those who defended a more traditional French model. Or to put it another way, the notion of the French exception started to be a popular one when it became charged with political values and an object of political ambitions.

The French exception as a political and polarised discourse

The notion of 'French exceptionalism' can be conceived not only as a framework of analysis, with hypotheses to be tested, but also as a political discourse with a specific agenda. From the late 1980s this discourse fell on fertile ground. The celebrations of the bicentenary of the French Revolution led some historians, notably around François Furet, to reassess critically the inheritance of the French republican model, particularly the dangers associated with unlimited popular sovereignty. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism, there seemed to be no alternative to neoliberal values and the rule of the market. The consensual method adopted by the Socialist prime minister Michel Rocard (1988–1991) made a sharp contrast with the voluntarist and often rhetorically *marxisant* policies pursued by the Socialists only six years before (1981–1983). The pragmatism of the left in government, the transformation of Gaullism into a 'normal' conservative party, the consensual cohabitation between Prime Minister Balladur and President Mitterrand in 1993–1995, all seemed to indicate that France was moving towards a more consensual political culture. The evolution of the EU towards an ever closer union, the further transfers of sovereignty organised by the Maastricht (1992) and Amsterdam (1995) treaties and the introduction of the euro (1999) put further constraints on the state's room for manoeuvre. New technologies accelerated the globalisation of culture, often perceived and understood as a process of Americanisation of the French life styles. Some applauded the 'end of the French exception' as the surest sign of France's ability to 'modernise' itself. Others deplored it and sought to underline both the merits of the French traditional model and the dangers of liberalisation *à l'anglo-saxonne*. In this volume, the nature and the intensity of this debate is charted by Sue Collard in chapter 3.

The distinction that has been made so far between the French exception as an analytical framework and as a political discourse is in fact an extremely porous one. Academics do not simply and dispassionately test hypotheses, they also take sides. This is still blatantly the case in France: the role of the Fondation Saint-Simon, analysed by Collard, demonstrates the interconnection between academics, politicians, civil servants and business leaders. Indeed, it can be seen as perpetuating in a lacklustre and less prestigious guise (see Kelly, chapter 14), the traditional role played by 'intellectuals' in French (political) culture. In this volume too, academics may take sides. Nick Hewlett (chapter 1), for instance, who explores the centrality of radicalism in French political culture, appears sympathetic to this tradition. He demonstrates how the primacy given to politics is related to a healthy conception of democracy and active citizenry. He explicitly challenges those 'liberals' who advocate 'the end of the French exception' in order to depoliticise the *polis*, which is a necessary prerequisite for the development of unchecked capitalism. He is also optimistic that the new radical movements that are emerging on the left of the political spectrum will perpetuate the French radical tradition. Interestingly, he also stresses that this radicalism seems to be particularly exceptional when seen from an 'Anglo-Saxon' vantage point and wonders whether an observer from Southern Europe would view French radicalism in the same way. Brigitte Rollet in chapter 12 takes sides too. She may be quite sympathetic to the intervention of the state to support French cinema against the homogenisation (Americanisation) of culture, although the effectiveness of such intervention, as she points out, remains to be demonstrated. Furthermore, Rollet questions the content of this cinema, which is sometimes defined as '*citoyen*', and develops an argument against the traditional republican universalist discourse that still refuses to grant minorities the visibility they deserve. This leads, sometimes, to the production of rather bland films, which is a pity, she argues, given the opportunities to promote cinematic originality, to celebrate overtly cultural, sexual and gender differences and to explore subjects directly related to the development of a multicultural society.

The French exception and the weight of external constraints

The political debate about the 'end of the French exception' has compelled academics to formulate new hypotheses, to revisit well-established ideas or to decipher recent shifts in traditional discourses. In particular, the increasing weight of external pressures (globalisation, European construction, and generally the central role played by the market place) have opened new opportunities for comparative analysis. In a more global con-

text, the comparative method is still very useful (Hague and Harrop 2001). It does not presuppose that convergence is the necessary or likely outcome of the forces of globalisation or Europeanisation: the resilience of national cultures and strength and flexibility of specific institutional arrangements should be taken into account in order to understand how each nation mediates such general trends. This is a point clearly made by Parsons in chapter 7 when analysing the evolution of French industrial relations: 'Although changes in the world economy may pose common problems, [...] this does not mean that different countries will react in the same way. [...] This should not surprise us as current responses will depend, to some extent at least, on pre-existing institutional structures and the former compromises they embody, as well as upon pre-existing actors, all with their own attitudes and values that inform their past, present and future choices and strategies'. Thus in the case of industrial relations, and using a comparative framework, Parsons is able to demonstrate that, although it is possible to identify a degree of convergence towards a 'European model' with more decentralised forms of collective bargaining, France remains characterised by 'a chronically weak and divided trade union movement and the consequent need for state intervention in the area of industrial relations'.

Globalisation and Europeanisation also help to generate new questions: to what extent, for instance, has 'French *politics* acquired a European character, since much of French *policy* [...] is made within the EU (Guyomarch et al. 2001: 2)? Conversely, to what extent has France been able to influence European developments and to shape the EU to its own liking (Guyomarch et al. 1998)? Is there still some room today for the development of a voluntarist – but plausible and successful – economic policy at national or European level? These questions, of course, preoccupy most left-wing parties today (Lardech 2000, Glyn 2001). Faced with similar dilemmas, however, these parties do not necessarily produce the same answers. A comparative analysis is again useful. For instance, Clift (chapter 8) contrasts the arguments and strategies developed by the French Socialists under Jospin to 'Europeanise' employment policy with those of the British New Labour administration and the German Government led by Gerhard Schröder. The French attempt to reproduce a *dirigiste* strategy at the European level, Clift argues, received lukewarm support, to say the least, from British and German Social-Democrats and finally failed, partly because Jospin's *dirigisme* remained far too anchored in the French tradition, far too 'exceptional'.

The political visibility of external constraints today and the realisation that the EU is unlikely to become '*la France en plus grand*' fuel a variety of euro-sceptic discourses on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. The claim that French exceptionalism has now reached its end has also prompted academics to revisit the past and to question whether the

notion of French exceptionalism had not been exaggerated in the first place. In some cases it has, in others it has not. For Raymond Kuhn it is difficult to argue that French television has ever had any 'exceptional status' and therefore it does not make sense today to talk about its 'normalisation'. Replacing the object of his analysis in its temporal and spatial context, Kuhn builds up a comparative study of French television in Western Europe over the long term 'since the advent of television as a mass medium after the end of the Second World War' (chapter 11). Using five different variables over the period (scale and centralisation, degree of politicisation, diversity profile, sources of finance and degree of public regulation and control), he concludes that French television 'from its origins to the present day can be satisfactorily regarded as a national variant of wider European trends, rather than a special case apart'. Yet, as Kuhn notes, this has not prevented the development of political and cultural discourses that have attempted, for specific reasons, to portray French television as remarkably different and therefore exceptional.

Universalism, anti-Americanism and the French cultural exception

The notion of a French cultural exception acquired some salience during the 1993 'Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations[...] where France led European opposition to U.S. proposals for deregulating the audiovisual industries. Subsequently, the notion of the exception was extended to cover the entire political domain' (see Kelly chapter 14). The argument that French culture was under siege and threatened by progressive Americanisation generated much nostalgia about France's past cultural *rayonnement*. In particular much was written about the death of the French intellectual (Hazareesingh 1991; Ross 1991; Jennings 1993). In this volume, Kelly demonstrates that the exceptional status enjoyed by French intellectuals from the end of the Second World War to the 1970s has not been exaggerated. Equally, the progressive disappearance of this specific group from the 1980s onwards is beyond doubt. Yet Kelly shows how, with the passing years, the postwar intellectual has acquired a near-mythical status. In his contribution, he tries to 'clarify the basis on which the legend has arisen [... how] its "halo effects" have surrounded intellectual activities in France up to the present day and have also inflected the way earlier periods have been understood'. Today, 'nostalgia for the Golden Age easily leads to optimistic denials that it has come to an end and both contribute to the legend of the French intellectual as a permanent feature of the French exception'. Nostalgia might indeed be a key to understanding the vitality of the 'French exception' as a discourse. For *Le Monde* (2002), it is the discourse of a middle-range country that still thinks of itself as a major power.

Nostalgia for French cultural *rayonnement* and fears of Americanisation have their roots in France's claim to universalism. In the specific context of Francophonie, Margaret Majumdar (chapter 2) analyses the progressive discursive shifts that have affected French universalism and how such shifts have led *la Francophonie* to move from a concern with cultural and linguistic issues to a more politically-oriented organisation. France now seems to have redefined its universal project as it presents itself as the standard bearer of pluralism and cultural diversity in a world threatened by the homogenising forces of globalisation. Thus, 'Francophonie [is] increasingly seen as a vehicle for the defence of French exceptionalism in the face of "Anglo-Saxon" cultural hegemony'. Similar arguments, as Janet Bryant shows in chapter 9, have been put forward to justify French opposition to American intervention in Iraq, with France presenting itself as the champion of multilateralism. In both cases, as Majumdar argues, 'there is a perceptible gap between the idealism of the present discourse and the political and economic realities that have now come to the fore'.

The same point is made by Janet Bryant in chapter 9. She explains that the notion of French exception in the field of defence policy is more a question of rhetoric than substance. This rhetoric still serves specific political and professional interests. In particular, it can be mobilised to cajole French public opinion at a time when such opinion is likely to become too critical about the government's handling of specific domestic issues. Anti-Americanism remains a winning card in French domestic politics. The reality is rather different, as Bryant shows in her analysis of the progressive but still partial normalisation of French defence policy, notably through a *rapprochement* with NATO.

Sheila Perry (chapter 10) is sceptical about the supposedly all-powerful influence of American models and ideas on French political culture. Through her analysis of presidential debates in France, she shows that, in this particular field at least, the Americanisation of French politics is more a myth than a reality. The overall organisation of presidential debates still mirrors the most salient features of French political culture: the 'institutionalisation of the bipolarisation process', and 'the dramatic embodiment of political conflicts' and the primacy granted to presidential elections over all others. Perry also notes the more deferential tone adopted by French journalists toward political leaders than is customarily the case in the U.K. and the U.S. Whether or not this is detrimental to the quality of the debate remains an open question. For the Communist leader Robert Hue, presidential debates in France are even vital for the preservation of democracy and for the healthy politicisation of issues. Without such debates, he argued, there is a real risk that French democracy will Americanise itself. Such debates generate further electoral mobilisation and are the right antidote to abstention rates *à l'américaine* (*L'Humanité*, 26 March 2002). The argument here is similar to that developed by Hewlett and calls for a

repoliticisation of democracy in order to avoid the anaesthetic effects of *la pensée unique*. But it also shows how much the Communist discourse has changed and how far it has gone in its acceptance of the presidential nature of the regime.

Consensus and polarisation

The development of *une pensée unique* among the main parties of government and the marginalisation of other voices with a more radical agenda are of course at the heart of the debate about the French exception. The fact that the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) today is a spent electoral force (it only gained 3.24 percent of the votes in the 2002 legislative elections) is often taken as evidence that France is on the road of normalisation. Indeed, the electoral collapse of the PCF today constitutes a dramatic change in the French political landscape. Bell (chapter 4) reveals that what distinguished the PCF from other Communist Parties in Western Europe was not so much its subservience to Moscow, but its sheer electoral success, which monopolised most of the space to the left of the political spectrum and left very little room for the development of a reformist social-democratic party. This success can be explained by its ability to rework into its discourse radical and nationalist republican themes inherited from the Revolution or even the Enlightenment: 'It is the Revolution which is the key to "exceptionalism" on the French left'. If Communism is ideologically discredited today, the same may not necessarily be said of radical republicanism and new parties or movements might carry on the polarising role that the PCF once played. The relative electoral success of the French extreme left or the popularity enjoyed by the *altermondialistes* around José Bové might just be evidence of this.

The durability and the strength of the Front National (FN) also ensure continuing polarisation. Yet in this respect France is far from being exceptional. For instance, Emmanuel Godin (chapter 5) places the electoral strength and the political discourse of the French extreme right in its European context and shows that it is difficult to describe the FN as an exceptional party in Western Europe today: its electoral dynamics, the profile of its voters and the discourse it develops are similar to many other European extreme-right parties. Both Bell and Godin show the resilience of a radical tradition in France and the continuing role played by protest parties at a time when some commentators were heralding the demise of political ideologies. However, as Godin notes, other Western countries are also becoming politically more polarised, not only because the 'postmaterialist' extreme right is now a pan-European phenomenon, but also because the values it defends have permeated the agenda of other parties, notably, but

not only, traditional right-wing parties. In such respects, France might well be the norm rather than the exception.

The role of the state

France, it appears, also conforms to the norm in the field of sport policy. In chapter 13, Patrick Mignon notes that countries such as Britain or Australia seem to have abandoned their traditional *laissez-faire* approach to sport and have come to endorse a more interventionist model, with the state taking more responsibility for the organisation and financing of competition level sport. Paradoxically, this is happening precisely at a time when, in France, such intervention is coming up against the limits of its effectiveness. Indeed, Mignon argues that such intervention will not be sustainable in the long term and that it has its own limits, in terms of both sporting success and the regulation of sporting activities. Nevertheless, his contribution helps us to understand both the roots and the resilience of state intervention in this sector and reminds the reader that general hypotheses about the decline of state intervention must be tested empirically rather than taken for granted. The continuing presence of state intervention is of course not limited to sport. Brigitte Rollet (chapter 12) stresses the 'almost incestuous relationship between state and culture in France' and the state's determination to defend the 'French cultural exception', but also the limited success of this strategy. The willingness to defend cultural diversity in a globalised and Europeanised context justifies and renews the legitimacy of state intervention, as Rollet shows in the case of cinema. In the end, Clift, Parsons, Kuhn, Rollet and Mignon's contributions taken together, offer a complex and varied image of state intervention and of its changing nature and intensity over time and across different sectors.

Voluntarism is one thing but to achieve the desired results is quite another. To do so in a more liberal, open and flexible context, the French State needs to reform itself, its procedures, its organisation and its culture. So far, it seems, this has been a rather difficult task. Anne Stevens (chapter 6) demonstrates this when she makes the point that 'unlike its counterpart in Whitehall or (to a lesser extent) the Netherlands, the French civil service has experienced no more than mild and incremental change'. Although the reform of the civil service has been high on the agenda of successive governments since Michel Rocard's *renouveau*, its overall characteristics have not changed dramatically since the description that Grémion and Suleiman gave of it in the 1970s. One of the main reasons put forward by Stevens to explain this limited change is the fact that France has been unable to develop 'a new, alternative or competing set of ideas to which the politico-administrative elite could appeal. Even under governments of the right, there is no presumption that the private sector is more efficient

or competent that the state sector'. The weakness of a liberal political and cultural tradition in France, which the Fondation Saint-Simon both deplored and tried to remedy, made it difficult to build powerful neoliberal arguments, legitimising changes with the strength of a moral argument, in the way that Thatcherism did (Jobert 1994; Godin 1996).

This volume shows that the notion of the French exception is in a number of ways problematic. It is nevertheless a useful starting point as it obliges us to address interesting questions about contemporary developments in French society, politics and culture. In the field of French studies, it also encourages us to enrich our approach with comparative research. It compels us to examine issues related to the processes of globalisation and the Europeanisation of French society, politics and culture, and to assess how France both contributes to, and undergoes, this process. Further analyses of the discursive shifts that affect the debate on French exceptionalism must also be attempted. In this respect a historical perspective that examines the various discourses that have periodically heralded French decline would also be of interest (Baverez 2003).

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