

3

French political culture Representations and realities

3.1

Political culture in France: the traditional reading

Concentrating upon some of the most influential French, American and British studies, Chapter 3 introduces the reader to various interpretations of the French polity, namely those based on the revolutionary tradition, subcultural identities, centre-periphery relations and patterns of authority. The chapter uses a modified definition of political culture as an interpretative guide to understand the ideational underpinnings of contemporary French society. For McMillan (1996: 69): 'to study political culture is to study the beliefs, values, assumptions (spoken and unspoken) and modes of action to be found within a given polity'. Using this definition, to talk of French political culture, especially in the singular, is highly ambiguous. The cultural portrayals of France have a tendency to vary depending upon the cultural preconceptions of the observer. American observers, for instance, have provided some of the most stimulating insights into French culture, but these are not always those highlighted by French analysts, in part because of different normative standpoints adopted (for instance, the definition of what constitutes civic behaviour). Furthermore, there is a very real difficulty in measuring cultural attitudes, especially in the period preceding the advent of opinion polls.

At various stages in recent history, political culture has been advanced to explain a range of rather different obstacles to the smooth functioning of the French polity. Those studies undertaken before or immediately after the creation of the Fifth Republic looked for cultural causes of French political instability. The prevailing idea present in texts written in the 1950s and 1960s was that France had been prevented from becoming a 'modern' or 'stable' country on account of its uneven historical development and its idiosyncratic national character. As Safran (1991: 44) points out, 'American social scientists pointed to France's reluctance to marry her century – to the habit of ideological thinking, the prevalence of class distrust, the tendency to excoriate the political establishment, the absence of civic mindedness and an underdeveloped ethos of participation.'

Even though France developed democratic political institutions, and a sophisticated socio-economic infrastructure, certain analysts continued to refer to France as a 'delinquent' society, one marked by tax evasion, alcoholism, undisciplined motorists and a general lack of civic behaviour (Pitts 1981). These 'delinquent' traits raised the question of the 'governability' of the French, even

though, as Hoffmann (1994: 13) concedes, 'most of these uncivic cultural traits no longer stand up to serious scrutiny'.

As formulated by classic political culture theorists such as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in *The Civic Culture* (1963), the concept of political culture has had difficulties in explaining political, or socio-economic change. In the French context, the cultural norms detected in the 1950s or 1960s often appear ill designed to describe France of the 2010s. *A fortiori*, the above remark applies even more forcefully to cultural stereotypes derived from the nineteenth century or earlier. The cultural perceptions developed when France was a static, economically inward-looking society are likely to be of limited assistance in understanding how French politics and society have mutated under the impact of the economic, social, political and demographic changes of the post-war period. For political culture to be a meaningful concept, it has to transcend the cultural representations present at any one point in time. It has also to admit the importance of subcultures, either in addition to or against a prevailing national culture.

Representations of French political culture that prevailed during the early years of the Fifth Republic were influenced above all by two innovative surveys, *In Search of France* edited by Stanley Hoffmann (1965) and *The Stalled Society (La Société bloquée)* by Michel Crozier (1970).

In *In Search of France*, Hoffmann contends, among other arguments, that relations between state and civil society are far more closed and less pluralistic than in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In Hoffman's opinion, French political culture combined extreme individualism and authoritarianism. On account of their individualism, French people were reluctant to participate in voluntary associations, such as political parties and interest groups. When they did join groups, such groups were weak, fragmented and ill-disposed for compromise. In order to resolve inevitable disputes, they appealed for arbitration to the state. This provided the impetus for the development of a powerful bureaucracy to arbitrate disputes. There was a weak bargaining culture of negotiation between the competing groups themselves, and between groups and the state. In a critique of this portrayal, Vincent Wright (1989) demonstrates that relationships between pressure groups and the state were far more subtle than implied by Hoffmann.

Perhaps the most widely diffused exposé of the pessimistic appraisal of French culture was that provided by Michel Crozier, in two highly influential books, *The Stalled Society* (1970) and *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (1963). The essence of Crozier's thesis was that the French were afraid of 'face-to-face contact' and that they are 'unable to cooperate'. In order to resolve disputes, individuals appealed systematically to those in positions of higher authority, especially representatives of the state, rather than attempt to negotiate, bargain or compromise among each other. This induced an exaggerated sense of hierarchy but at the same time created the conditions for rebellion against this authority if unwelcome arbitrations were made. Thus, French political culture combined a measure of routine authoritarianism with sporadic rebellions against authority. Underpinning Crozier's analysis is the belief that French people are torn between submissive subordination to the state and insurrectional outbursts against it.

In normal circumstances, such cultural traits normally produce a bureaucratic defensive mentality and a lack of initiative.

Common to both Hoffmann's 'static society' and Crozier's 'stalled society' lay the idea that the French nation was afflicted by numerous blockages, which prevented a normal democratic functioning of its polity. These blockages included a habit for overly ideological and abstract thinking (induced by France's Cartesian education system), the persistence of class rivalries, a penchant for uncivic behaviour, a deeply ingrained anti-political strain within public opinion, a distrust of those in authority, an inability to compromise or to conduct civilised face-to-face negotiations and a weak sense of political efficacy, leading to a low level of participation in voluntary organisations such as political parties or pressure groups. Such cultural portrayals partly influenced elite behaviour. This was true for General de Gaulle himself, for whom the French were an unruly bunch of individualists who could never agree on anything and who needed firm leadership to overcome their disunity. The belief that French society was archaic and conservative and that only the state represented the general will of the people was a powerful motivational force behind the state-led 'modernisation' drive from the late 1940s onwards. Given these cultural barriers, modernisation could only be carried out by a neutral, innovative and interventionist state. Fifty years later, 'declinologists' such as Baverez (2003) continued to identify cultural blockages within French society that prevent the necessary modernisation and adaptation to a changing global environment (see below).

Understandings of French political culture have long been overshadowed by the work of Hoffmann and Crozier. At best, they described aspects of French society at a particular stage of historical development. Even if we accept their initial premises, which are difficult to substantiate or disprove, French society has moved on since then. Critics of Crozier's thesis in particular have pointed to the development of voluntary groups and new forms of collective action, which point to a culture of negotiation and compromise. For Mendras (1989), for instance, Crozier's viewpoint is inadequate in analysing contemporary France. The opposition between us and them depicted by Crozier no longer accurately represents the structure of French society nor the norm to be adopted towards authority. The creation of new social groups during the post-war period, the 'new middle classes', which insist upon a bargaining model of authority, and whose values are broadly post-materialist, has weakened the authority patterns evoked by Crozier. These developments are eloquently summarised by Gaffney (in Gaffney and Kolinsky 1991: 18) who refers to a convergence of lifestyles, aspirations and social outlook, an assumed growing political consensus, a developing urbanisation and the importance of a diffuse cultural liberalism as symbolising the cultural identity of the new France.

A divided France? Post-revolutionary political culture(s)

The traditional portrayal of French political culture pointed to the persistence of cleavages inherited from the French Revolution. The divisions occasioned by

disputes over church, state and nation remained pertinent 150 years later: even today they continue to provide the backdrop to many assessments of contemporary France. In their analysis of political culture, for example, Hanley et al. emphasise the legacy of the French Revolution, the special status of Paris in French history, the slow rate of industrialisation, the role of the Church and anti-clericalism, the closed relationship between state and civil society and nationalism as 'the constants of French political culture' (1984: 109). These variables undoubtedly are of critical importance in understanding the evolution of French history, though they present a rather static portrait of contemporary France. The traditional portrayal of French political culture has emphasised the revolutionary tradition, the role of the state as an instrument of national unity, a tendency for uncivic behaviour and various characteristics attributed to France's status as a Catholic country.

A revolutionary tradition?

The revolutionary tradition, a major marker of French Republicanism, can have several meanings. At its most basic, it involved support for the French Revolution, avowed even by conservative Republicans during the nineteenth century. For more radical Republicans, the revolutionary tradition signified that French citizens had the right to overturn an unjust government, if its institutions betrayed the ideals of the republic and democracy. For the left during the early twentieth century, the revolutionary tradition involved a commitment to provide a social and economic counterpart to the political revolution of 1789: in other words, to replace capitalism with socialism, as 1789 had eventually replaced the monarchy with the Republic. This interpretation of the revolutionary tradition strongly characterised the activities of the PCF during the inter-war years. A fourth version of the revolutionary tradition was that promulgated by the central state itself, channelled through the national education system. The revolutionary tradition was a justification for the actions of Republicans in overturning monarchist governments during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. French children in state schools are saturated with the feats of their Republican ancestors; an official revolutionary and Republican tradition was inculcated by an interventionist state. Republican regimes have claimed the French Revolution of 1789 as the foundation of their own legitimacy; the presence of the 1792 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen as the prelude to the 1958 Constitution is a good example of this.

The French Revolution initially produced a divided political culture in France: for or against the Republic, the Church, the lay state (Hayward 1982). Whereas the French Revolution eventually came to be accepted by most of the political elite, left and right continue to argue over whether the 1848 Revolution or the Paris Commune of 1871 were justified expressions of rebellion against unjust authority or not. The French revolutionary tradition is still contested by elements of Rémond's (1982) counter-revolutionary right. The official celebrations of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989 were marked by counter-demonstrations by those contesting the legitimacy of events two

centuries previously: Le Pen's FN represented a powerful counter-revolutionary force on this occasion.

What remains of this revolutionary tradition in contemporary France? Until recently, the main left-wing parties (the PCF and the PS) continued to refer to the French revolutionary tradition as a justification for their political activity. For the PCF, the notion of revolution formed an indelible part of the party's own political culture, however shallow that commitment revealed itself to be in May '68. In practice, ever since its creation in 1920, the PCF has fought elections like any other party and has eschewed any serious attempt at revolutionary upheaval, even when events appeared propitious, such as in 1944, or 1968. Despite its opposition to the 'personal power' it accuses the presidential system of promoting, the PCF in reality accepted to work within the institutions of the Fifth Republic rather than attempt to bring about a revolution. For the PS, it was sufficient that the PCF claimed a revolutionary heritage for it to define its own mission in terms of a revolutionary transformation of society (Grunberg 2011). Invigorated by their own myths, the Socialists attempted to portray their victory in 1981 as being more a change of regime than a mere change of government. Such illusions did not last for long. The failure of the Socialists' radical reform programme of 1981–2 destroyed many remaining aspirations: it took a left-wing government finally to bury the revolutionary tradition.

On a slightly less exalted level, the French revolutionary tradition has been invoked to explain the propensity of French citizens to take their protests to the streets as part of a collective-action repertoire (Tilly 1984, 1986). It does appear that certain social groups, such as farmers, fishermen, lorry-drivers and students, have used the tactics associated with past 'revolutionaries' to forward their own corporate demands, though this is scarcely indicative of their desire to overthrow existing society. Henceforth, street demonstrations from unsatisfied social groups are openly attempts to press for concessions rather than mythical insurrections aimed at overthrowing the government. Student demonstrations in 1986, 1990, 1995, 2006 and 2016 were indicative of this new public spirit. The revolutionary tradition has thus become a somewhat mythical aspect of French democracy. It is unclear what it signifies today, apart from a rather bland attachment to the slogans of the French Revolution and an instrumental use of political symbols.

Provincialism and the state

A celebration of provincialism is the counterpart of an excessively centralised state apparatus and a concentration of politico-administrative power in Paris. Provincial distrust of the state and of Paris is certainly deeply embedded. This distrust might be interpreted in terms of the process of state-building in France which took place by means of the incorporation and the suppression of regional identities. *La France profonde* has always distrusted the centralising and corrupting influence of Paris.

In traditional, pre-'68 accounts of French political culture, emphasis was also laid on the importance of the central state as a cohesive idea holding together French society. As surveyed in Chapter 1, modern France was created as an

extension of the central state. This process had begun under the *ancien régime*, as the monarchy attempted to impose its control over feudal barons. The process of state-building was considerably strengthened by the Revolution, which smashed the autonomous power of the aristocracy and imposed the will of Paris on the provinces. After the revolutionary upheavals of 1789–99, Napoleon provided a further impetus towards the creation of the centralised nation-state: the emperor relied on autocratic personal rule, backed by unrivalled control over military force, to impose a powerful and efficient type of state machinery, key features of which have remained unaltered until the present. A highly organised and regimented bureaucracy (selected by means of a centralised and elitist system of national education) was the key legacy of the Napoleonic period. Throughout the 100 years following the Revolution, the central state attempted to ensure the lasting subordination of unruly provinces to its rule. The nomination of central state representatives (*prefects*) in France's ninety-six departments was a testament to the state's centralising mission (Machin 1976). But this affirmation of central authority went alongside a reality of regional variation (Cole 2011). Research from various disciplines – and at various stages of French history – has revealed a rich provincial diversity surviving beneath an officially regimented system. Sociologists have emphasised the diverse patterns of kinship and family structures as well as varying types of authority structures in different French regions (Todd 1988; Le Bras 1995). Linguists have revealed the survival of regional dialects in spite of efforts to subordinate them in the nineteenth century. Social historians and geographers have insisted upon the importance of territorial identities in explaining lasting regional political allegiances. Political scientists, finally, have illustrated how the state machinery (the prefectures, notably) has functioned in specific manners in different parts of the country. These findings reaffirm that provincial diversity is the counterpart to centralisation. Indeed, the traditional strength of the French state might be directly related to the endless variety of regional variations public policy-makers have to take into account. This accounts in part for the highly codified nature of the French legal system. This is in part because regional variation was so strong across the nation that the state had to take positive action to affirm the revolutionary principle of equality.

Challenges to the French state have come from several directions:

- from the EU and the process of European integration (Chapter 13);
- from decentralisation (Chapter 7);
- from developments in the education system (Chapter 12); and
- from the globalising pressures of the international economy and developments in public policy (Chapter 11).

Certain of these developments run against the grain of a *dirigiste* state tradition. The French state is far from omnipotent. The importance of the state as a reference point of national identity remains more marked in France than in most other European nations, however, alongside a tradition of central state innovative action and a particular conception of public service that relies heavily on affirmative state action.

An uncivic nation?

Critical observers have diagnosed French political culture as being responsible for a weak sense of civic responsibility. This is typified by a deeply ingrained anti-politicism and a pervasive distrust of politicians. That there exists a deep distrust of most politicians might be verified even by occasional visitors to France. This might be explained in terms of political culture, but other explanations are equally valid, notably those relating to political performance: anti-political sentiments within the French electorate are particularly marked when the political and economic systems are not performing as effectively as it should be, such as during the Fourth Republic or since the mid-1980s. It is important not to take such developments in isolation: strong anti-political sentiments within public opinion have not been limited to France but have been a more general phenomenon throughout western Europe and the United States. Indeed, by many comparative measurements (such as the degree of electoral participation), France is a model of civic pride. Moreover, while politicians in general might be subject to criticism, one's own representative is usually spared from excessive opprobrium. This is revealed by the rate of re-election of sitting mayors in the six-yearly municipal elections, even in circumstances of mayors being involved in criminal trials, as in the 1995 contest.

A low level of political participation and an excessive penchant for individualism were classically highlighted as evidence of incivisme. This is difficult to substantiate. It sits uneasily with the proliferation of voluntary associations which have emerged during the post-war period; the fact is that one-half of French people claimed to belong to voluntary associations in the mid-1980s, a comparable figure with other European countries. Levels of participation in elections, where even municipal contests can attract three-quarters of registered voters to cast a ballot, are among the highest in Europe. As measured by participation rates, the French electorate would appear to have a preference for two types of election: the municipal and the presidential. The presidential election involves a direct communion with a national leader; the municipal contest allows close contact with recognised local spokesman.

The suspicion of *incivisme* (a lack of civic behaviour) went alongside the absence of the regular alternations in power between social-reformist and moderate conservative parties, of the type diagnosed in Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany or the United States. In the political circumstances of post-war France (the unstable coalitions of the Fourth Republic, giving way to a right-wing monopoly from 1958 to 1981), political discourse assumed a radical edge, a counterpart to a lack of face-to-face contact between political groups themselves. The importance of ideology as a means of political competition can be related to the late development of an industrial working class, to the rivalry between the two left-wing parties, to the structure of the French education system and, at a different level of analysis, to the strong influence of Marxism on French intellectuals (Judt 1986; Hazeersingh 1994; Chabal 2015). The traditional left-right cleavage that sustained such ideological competition is in decline. The experience of the left in government after 1981 and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1990 had a critical effect upon what remained of traditional ideological frames of reference.

There is little firm evidence of a weaker incidence of anti-civic attitudes in France than in comparable democracies. Safran (2003) points to the alleged French tendency for tax-dodging as evidence to underline the lack of a civic culture in France. This is disingenuous. While no one might like paying tax, the high incidence of French tax evasion is more likely to reflect the structure of taxation system rather than anti-civic attitudes. Viewed as a whole, the Fifth Republic appears as a regime that for long enjoyed a high degree of political legitimacy. While political choices divide French elites, the Republican form of government is less contested in contemporary France than at any period since 1789. Catholics have become fully reconciled to the regime, even more so than during the short-lived Fourth Republic (Donegani 1982). Republicanism has become banal, losing its mobilising force, but no longer inspiring intense hatred (Kriegel 1992). Even the FN's historic leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, while courting with the symbols of counter-revolution, and openly contesting 1789, was careful to portray himself as a Republican.

A Catholic identity?

Certain cultural attributes have been attributed to France's heritage as a Catholic nation. A distinction must here be drawn between the cultural legacy of Catholicism *stricto sensu* and its impact upon political culture. In social terms, practising Catholicism appears to be in decline in France, as elsewhere in Europe, although France remains an overwhelmingly Catholic country in nominal terms. In terms of political culture, France has never been a culturally homogeneous Catholic society. Indeed, the divisive and bitter struggle between Catholicism and anticlericalism helped to shape contemporary political identities.

In political terms, the heritage of Catholic anti-Republicanism retarded the emergence of a modern Christian-democratic movement as a federating force of conservatism. The rallying of the Catholic Church to the Republic during the 1890s did not represent a fundamental compromise with the theological foundations of Roman Catholicism, which continued to refute the legitimacy of the Republican form of government until after the Second World War. Catholics excluded themselves from the Republic until the emergence of French Christian democracy, in the form of the MRP and its participation in the post-war progressive tripartite alliance. The failure of French Christian democracy in the Fourth Republic stemmed in part from its ambiguous political message: MRP voters were far more conservative than its progressively minded leaders, who espoused social Catholicism and class solidarity. It also suffered from being a regime party of the Fourth Republic, with the ultimate discredit that this implied. Even before the fall of the Fourth Republic, organised political Catholicism had to cope with the emergence of Gaullism, as an alternative, pro-Catholic, federating force of French conservatism.

The influence of Catholicism might best be understood in subcultural terms: the existence of a powerful Catholic political subculture undoubtedly had a structuring effect on the political behaviour of France's most dedicated Catholics, rather similar to that exercised by the PCF over the industrial working class.

This subculture was particularly present in the French countryside, especially in certain départements and regions such as Brittany, Normandy, Vendée and Alsace-Lorraine. The weakening of this subculture has been closely tied to the decline of rural France, and the process of urbanisation, accelerated in the post-war period. In fact, as early as 1943, doubts were cast as to the real incidence of religious practice and belief among a majority of French citizens (Mendras 1989). The decreased incidence of religious belief and the diminishing saliency of religious-based political cleavages has reduced the differentiation between pious Catholics and other members of French society.

Certain causes continue to provoke the powerful mobilisation of practising Catholics (Donegani 1993). In the 1980s, the defence of 'free' schools provided one such cause to mobilise Catholic opinion (and conservative opinion generally) in defence of its identity. Deeply rooted in French history, this issue has an instrumental appeal that mobilises middle-class parents primarily in defence of the quality of education received by their children rather than in terms of evangelisation. More recently, the opposition of practising Catholics to the gay-marriage law passed under the Hollande presidency revealed that the capacity for mobilisation was intact. Religious identification also has a marked impact upon voting behaviour. Michelat and Simon's classic study (1977) revealed that voting patterns were closely associated with the degree of religious identity and practice. Regularly practising Catholics consistently supported right-wing parties; the strongest support for the left came from those professing no religion. This cleavage remained the most important indicator of voting choice on the second round of the 2012 presidential election (Ryan 2012). While religious identity continues to matter at the margins, most French citizens are neither pious Catholics nor firm anticlerical non-believers.

The weakening of the proletarian subculture

The above point is reinforced by the importance of subcultures, which exercise a far tighter influence over their members than a more diffuse national culture can possibly achieve. In several instances, analysis of subcultures has proved fruitful in explaining the persistence or otherwise of political phenomena. Subcultural analysis is essential for understanding the role of industrial workers in the politics of the PCF and the trade-union movement, as I will illustrate below. The use of subculture might also prove useful in appraising the social organisation of France's immigrant communities, notwithstanding state-led efforts at 'integration' which go beyond those attempted in most other European countries. The weakening of subcultures has reduced differentiation between social groups and strengthened individualism, without necessarily increasing integration into a unified national culture.

The weakening of the proletarian subculture is of considerable importance in understanding the decline of the PCF. Throughout the Fourth Republic, the PCF acted as a counter-community, in opposition to the rest of French society, in some senses a mirror image of the Catholic Church (Kriegel 1985). The party was a highly organised community, which offered its members the emotional

satisfaction of belonging to a cohesive, well-organised counter-society, with its own norms, duties and satisfactions. At its height, the PCF was a genuine tribune of the industrial working class, articulating better than any other party the demands of alienated workers. The PCF's obsession with *ouvrièrisme* reflected its own position within the political system. Most of the party's electoral support came from industrial workers. With its conquest of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) in 1947, the PCF was the only party that could lay a genuine claim to be able to organise the working class politically. Communist Party cells proliferated in industrial areas throughout France, especially in the larger factories, the mines and the docks. The role of the Renault factory at Boulogne-Billancourt in the Paris 'red belt' was of particular symbolic importance. The decline of this tightly organised and cohesive subculture began in earnest in the 1960s. The diminishing importance of traditional manufacturing industry, the enfeebling of class solidarity, the rise of unemployment, the breakdown of a specifically proletarian lifestyle and identity have all contributed to weakening the Communist subculture to the point of its extinction.

The interaction of leading subcultures with overall society can have a dynamic effect on both. The breakdown of specific subcultures increases the fluidity associated with the prevailing values within wider French society, such as individualism. Evidence suggests that the integrative character of subcultures can be lost once they no longer control their members. Is it any coincidence that the FN has prospered in former working-class bastions controlled by the PCF, today polarised between the remnants of an indigenous proletariat and a high presence in the local population of third-generation immigrant families (Tiberj 2008)?

3.3

Exceptionalism, decline and revival

This final section reviews debates since the 1980s on the highly contested notion of the French exception. A disclaimer is probably necessary. For comparative political scientists, the claim of French exceptionalism is tautological. Each country can lay a claim to its own form of national distinctiveness. As Spotts and Weiser recalled in their 1986 work, Italy was 'a difficult democracy'. In the ensuing decade, it became even more difficult, as the Italian republic collapsed amid popular revolt against generalised corruption and political instability that far surpassed anything witnessed in France. For British prime minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–90), the whole of the European continent appeared out of step; the powerful coalition of heads of the major European states against the Iron Lady suggested that the UK was really the exceptional power. Similar judgements could be reached with respect to other European nations, as well as the United States, whose presidents routinely celebrate American exceptionalism. If each country is distinctive, logically none is exceptional.

These objections make good sense, and yet a good deal continues to be written about French exceptionalism, including in the first two editions of this book (Hewlett 1998; Lovecy 2000; Collard 2001). We take as our starting point Lovecy (2000), who distinguishes between two faces or readings of French

exceptionalism, involving two alternative normative discourses, centred on change and resistance to change.

The first school, writing in the 1980s, talked of the end of the French exception and looked to an optimistic future whereby peaceful and gradual internal change would fundamentally modify the conflict-ridden society inherited from the French Revolution. Mendras (1989) referred to a Second French Revolution, an endogenous process that had overhauled the norms of French society and reshaped French institutions (the family, the army, the Church, even the PCF). Furet, Juillard and Rosanvallon (1988), associated with a particular group within the PS, proclaimed the advent of the republic of the centre, signifying the end of ideological politics, changing political discourses (less rooted in traditional ideological referents) and the acceptance of new paradigms of economic competitiveness and social modernisation. The message was taken up by centre-left politicians, from Rocard in the 1980s to Valls in 2015, the latter who called for the PS to be supplanted by a new centre-left reformist party. The message of these revisionist political sociologists and centre-left reformers was echoed in rather different terms by legal constitutionalists, who pointed to the triumph of the rule of law and the institutional embedding of legal norms in bodies such as the Constitutional Council (Cohen-Tanugi 1990). France was moving closer to other democracies – European and American – in so far as it had accepted the rise of constitutionalism as a governing ethic and embedded it within its own institutional practices. As similar processes were going on at the EU level, there was a goodness of fit between France and the emerging European polity. These writers were innovative in that they established a revisionist critique of the French Revolution itself and cast French *exemplarité* (leading by example) as a flawed model.

The debate on the end of French exceptionalism soon produced a vigorous reaction on the part of those who sought to defend the French model, endlessly reinvented for political or intellectual purposes. There were, broadly speaking, three assaults on the ‘end of the French exception’ thesis. The first was political. In response to republic of the centre, politicians from across the political spectrum (from the left [Jean-Pierre Chevènement] or the right [Chirac]) defended the ‘French model’, phrased in terms of defending national capitalism, protecting the social-welfare model under attack from global forces and supporting the integrative model of citizenship. In a major recent study, Chabal (2015) identifies the emergence of a powerful Republican national narrative since the mid-1980s, transcending left and right (though especially influential on the left), built on the ruins of the end of Socialist ideology and Marxist orthodoxy. In this new national-Republican narrative, Chabal argues, the nation and the republic have replaced the more traditional markers of the left–right cleavage such as social class or centre–periphery conflicts. National Republicanism has spread beyond the ranks of Socialist and Gaullist politicians to encompass philosophers (such as Alain Finkielkraut, Régis Debray and Dominique Schnapper), demographers (Patrick Weil, Hervé Le Bras), economists (Jacques Sapir) and historians (Mona Ozouf, Bernard-Henri Lévy).

The second, more sustained attack was intellectual. It found its resonance in the writings of those such as Todd (1995) who argued that a deep social fracture

had opened up in French society as a result of social and economic modernisation and the imposition of ‘external constraints’ on French society. Deepening European integration, in particular, had created a new cleavage within French society that separated the haves from the have-nots. The referendum on the EU treaty of 2005, analysed in Chapter 13, revealed a clear social and territorial fracture between the winners and losers of European integration. One decade later, Todd was joined in a slightly different register by controversial writers such as Eric Zemmour (2014), whose *Suicide français* (2014) defends the thesis of a steady weakening of the French nation-state since the 1970s under the influence of immigration, multiculturalism and a lack of resolve of French elites. For their part, contested philosophers such as Alain Finkielkraut or Régis Debray each defend a traditional version of the French Republican model threatened by economic globalisation, multiculturalism and a weakening of state capacity.

The third attack on the optimistic framing of the end of French exceptionalism came from liberal political economists; not so much challenging the foundations of the French model but drawing fundamentally negative conclusions from the defence of an unsustainable social model and linking performance to the persistence of defensive attitudes and positions. The emergence of a powerful liberal critique of the state, and of a widely diffused and persuasive economic liberalism, is the counterpart to the national-Republican narrative (Chabal 2015). Nicolas Bavarez’s best-seller *La France qui tombe* (2003) was explicit about the linkage between the debates on French exceptionalism and the decline of France. In *La France qui tombe*, Bavarez speculated upon whether ‘there exists a French exception, or specificity that condemns attempt to reform to failure?’ In this construction, French exceptionalism signifies the survival of an archaic, statist political model that is synonymous with decline and France’s refusal to marry its century.

For Bavarez, reform has always been difficult in France, the French Revolution ensuring political instability for over two centuries. The legacy of the Revolution continues to make itself felt: reforms have been possible only at moments of national crisis, the result of upheavals sometimes resulting in changes of regime. The French Revolution has had a lasting impact. It embedded a deep culture of illiberalism as a result of Bonapartism on the right and the revolutionary tradition on the left. It produced the destruction of corps intermediaries and instilled a lasting suspicion of civil society. It erected the Jacobin state into the fount of all political legitimacy and initiative. In the Jacobin state, the centre has always piloted reforms, and there has been a weak civil society. As described by Bavarez, the French model is entirely defensive, with France attempting to defend its new Maginot Line, defined in terms of the triptych of a multipolar world, the cultural exception and defence of public services (Bavarez 2004, 2016). In this model, change has been framed as being external and unwelcome; the duty of governors is to define national responses, be they nationalisations, hard cores or the policy of industrial patriotism. And, as change is external, France has deliberately dragged its feet in transcribing EU directives.

These themes were taken up by other writers in the decline frame. For Crozier and Tillet (2000), France remains a blocked society, headed by outmoded and out-of-touch elites. The law is used as a tool to undermine the patient work of

contracts determined by negotiations between social partners. Civil society is greatly weakened by the continuing interference of the state. The hostility to a flourishing business community is more deeply ingrained than ever. Other writers challenge Bavarez's belief that the politicians are primarily to blame for this state of affairs. If politicians are reluctant to reform, this is because they fear the conservatism and corporatism of French society (Picq 2004). Politicians act with prudence because they fear political extremes.

From these rather contradictory accounts, the French model is alternatively portrayed by supporters as a fragile edifice to be defended against its enemies or a source of powerful thick-ish universalism, providing cohesion and consistency for French society to affront the modern age. But the thrust of the liberal argument is that French society has not been well prepared to face the challenges to this model. By criticising the centralising state, a blocked society, an inbuilt fear of change and the failings of the political institutions, the 'declinologists' renew with some deeply ingrained traditional beliefs about political culture in France.

This detour via the 'French exception' has had the merit of stimulating a debate about the nature of the French polity and society and has phrased this in implicitly comparative terms. We must acknowledge the descriptive utility offered by the French exception. Notions of the French exception have a useful heuristic value in so far as they describe an assortment of features – some contradictory within their own terms of reference – commonly associated with a traditional model of French politics and policy. They also elucidate a particular type of political discourse that remains deeply embedded within France. The rather paradoxical alchemy of exceptionalism (France as unique) and universality (France embodying human values applicable everywhere) describes the perception that many French institutions and actors have of their role.

3.4

Concluding remarks

Traditional portrayals of French political culture should be treated with caution. France in the mid-2010s is, above all, a pluralistic society which contains a broad range of political orientations and cultural practices within its midst. Social and political change has been pronounced throughout the post-war period (Berstein et al. 1994; Berstein 1999; Bréchon et al. 2000). With the weakening of traditional structures of power, there has been a move towards a greater autonomy in all strata of society, a move facilitated by the weakening of the influence of traditional institutions such as the church, the state, political parties, the military and the extended family (Mendras and Cole 1991). The birth of new social classes during the post-war period has been accompanied by a transformation of attitudes towards hierarchy and authority. Crozier's stalemate society no longer corresponds to an accurate portrayal of contemporary France. Although it failed as a political movement in the short-term, the longer-term cultural significance of May '68 should not be underestimated. The egalitarian, anti-hierarchical ethos present in May '68 has had a profound impact upon French attitudes towards hierarchy and authority.

The image of a French nation reconciled with its political system needs to be tempered. Older cultural representations have resurfaced in the discourse of the flourishing far-right movement:

- the distrust of representative democracy;
- the corruption of existing political elites;
- the moral decadence of modernity; and
- the rejection of outsiders (in the form of immigrants).

All have their roots in past representations of French culture. This underlines the fact that French culture – including French political culture – has always been multifaceted. France has become a European society similar in most respects to its neighbours; this is eminently more important than its cultural specificities, which nonetheless continue to provide a sense of national identity that gives the French a distinctive place among Europeans.

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