

Marie-Christine Koop and Rosalie Vermette, eds. *La France à l'aube du XXI^e siècle: Tendances et mutations [France at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century: Trends and Transformations]*. Birmingham, AL: Summa, 2000. 286p.

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This ambitious project involved nineteen authors, each contributing one essay on a variety of topics as outlined in the title of the book: the political, social, and cultural aspects of France at the turn of the century. The last section is devoted to American perceptions of France, a reading that should be complemented by Serge Abrate's two-part study of Franco-American relations in the *American Association of Teachers of French National Bulletin* 30.2 (November 2004) and 30.3 (January 2005). Abrate, of course, has the advantage of seeing these relations from the post-Iraq War perspective whereas the essays included in Koop's book were composed pre-2000. In a sense, because of the time required to find a publisher and get a manuscript into print, every scholarly book is obsolete when it hits bookshelves. Through no fault of the authors involved, this is especially true of this work. Koop's effort may have been more interesting had it been done after the meltdown in Franco-American relations, but every work must be taken in the context of its composition and judged on its own merits, not on the basis of "what-if"s.

The contents of the book were finalized in 1997 at a time well before the Iraq War, the catastrophic heat wave that caused a scandalous death rate among France's elderly population, allegations of French involvement in the United Nations oil-for-food program, drastic revisions in France's employment and social security programs, and other events that brought about seismic changes in precisely those aspects of French society discussed in this book. Perhaps it is just that fact that will make this book of such interest and value to those future scholars who wish to examine the effects of George W. Bush's presidency and of the 2004 election on America's European policies and relations. It offers a thumbnail sketch of what was just before what is. A striking conclusion one may draw from this study is how similar in nature and in scope are France's situations and problems to those of the U.S.: an aging population in need of an overhaul in health care and social security; the family and how to place gay couples in that context; inequalities among educational degrees, among others.

I caution that this book is not for novices, those utterly unaware of how France works as a political entity. Most authors offer valuable navigation through the alphabet soup (RPR, UDF, SMIC...) of French political shorthand. However, it is at times difficult to discern the audience for whom this work was intended. It is arguable that

if one understands the arguments made in the essays, particularly those concerning politics, one has no need to read them. It is also the case that the essays are of uneven quality; however, their interest will lie, of course, in the eye of the reader. This is essentially a book of facts and statistics, with very little interpretation or “value judgments.” (A notable exception to this generalized critique are the chapters on graffiti and social issues, and on France “in trouble or just in transition.”) There is a signal lack of attention given to the place of the church or to religious/moral values in France; a brief overview of the convulsions of church-state relations throughout the ages would have been a useful introduction to this missing element. Even the most ardent anti-clerical Frenchman will agree that the church placed its stamp on the development of the nation and remains a solid part of France’s *patrimoine*. Missing as well is discussion of anti-Semitism and of anti-Muslim sentiment in the context of this *patrimoine*. I emphasize that it is “in this context” because several of the chapters focus more on the situation of Arabs in France than on France itself. An overriding theme of this book seems to be the sense of loss of French identity on the part of the French themselves. This sentiment springs from a perceived physical invasion by foreigners and a suspected cultural invasion by Americans, especially involving the replacement of French by English on the world stage.

It is a practical impossibility to give each essay the attention it deserves, so I will concentrate on each section with a brief mention of selected authors. The longest section of *France at the Dawn...* is the first of five: politics. As in four of the five sections, at least one essay is in French, to be expected from a Summa publication, a house specializing in French studies. Douglas J. Daniels offers a good explanation of “cohabitation” and of the fact that it is virtually built into the French governmental paradigm. Those who have had the misfortune of breathing Parisian air will be relieved to know that the French are at last taking environmental issues seriously. However, the perception that pro-environmental positions are against the interests of developing nations and France’s commitment to “nuclearization” hamper a thorough “greening” of the country as does the firm belief that the obsession with second-hand smoke is an “American obsession” and therefore suspect. (I have known vociferous anti-nuclear “Greens” who smoke!) The chapter, “France’s Aging Population,” projects into the year 2005 and one may compare Alice Strange’s prescient discussion of this “watershed year” with current national arguments by reading any of the on-line French newspapers, especially *Le Monde* (www.lemonde.fr). Of especial interest is France’s consideration of exactly the same “fixes” for a social security system in allegedly imminent crisis as those proposed by the current U.S. administration, including personal retirement accounts (*plans d’épargne retraite*). The three chapters on French “identity” demonstrate to an extraordinary degree how similar are

France's and America's struggles with diversity and multiculturalism. The section on cultural issues describes what the French have at their disposal to fill their (considerable) leisure time: novels whose main focus is on contemporary social issues (read: immigration and assimilation); French films; and "cultural spaces," especially the "metal and glass" ones which replaced or severely reconfigured the revered Louvre, the BNF, and Les Halles. The extremely interesting chapter on French film by Jeri DeBois King cites Dudley Andrew's interesting assertion that the French cinema is not a cultural artifact, but rather a propaganda tool rendering creativity impossible (208). The hottest topic of the book, Franco-American relations, is left for last. The editor of *France at the Dawn...* wisely selected a Frenchman, Michel Sage, writing in French, to approach the delicate topic of relations between France and the USA. Sage's position, that America regards France (usually) as a military ally but a cultural enemy, is particularly astute. The Conclusion provides a useful compendium of recent titles for further reading on the topics discussed in this book. Brief biographies of the book's contributing authors close the text. There is no index.

In terms of form, the book should have undergone some serious proofreading. There are, scattered throughout, inexplicable (and distracting) gaps between words, and some incidences of careless composition and/or typos: "help" in place of "helped" (18); "This has not and will not happen" (25); "chaffing about" when "chafing against" is meant (47); the use of "disinterested" when "uninterested" would be preferable, and the misidentification of the film *Cousin, Cousine* as *Cousins, Cousines* (260). *