

MICKEY MOUSE AND THE FRENCH IDENTITY

Introduction

On the eve of Euro-Disney's opening in France in the spring of 1992, newspapers described the park as a "horror made of cardboard, plastic and appalling colors, a construction of hardened chewing gum and idiotic folklore taken straight out of a comic book".¹ (Orvell, 1993:240) They moved on to talk about a "cultural Chernobyl"². (Quoted in Le Point, 21 March, 1992 No. 1018: 71) Finally, they called for an organized resistance: "If the [French] do not resist it, the kingdom of profit will create a world that will have all the appearance of civilization and all the savage reality of barbarism"³ (Novelist Jean Marie Rouart quoted in Alan Riding, "Only the French Elite Scorn Mickey's Debut", The New York Times, 13 April 1992, A-1: 1-13) These heated statements may seem excessive: how could an amusement park and a three fingered animated mouse inspire such apocalyptic language? Yet objections along the same lines have not lost steam in the ensuing decade, and diatribes against American cultural imperialism have been flowing faster than Coca Cola in a McDonald's. They warn of the great threat that anything American represents to the French cultural environment, conceived as equally important in defining sovereignty as their physical environment. In

¹ Miles Orvell, "Understanding Disneyland: American Mass Culture and the European Gaze" in Kroes, Rydell and Bosscher, eds, *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass culture in Europe*, (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Vu University Press, 1993) p. 240

² Quoted in Le Point, 21 March, 1992 No. 1018 p. 71

³ Novelist Jean Marie Rouart quoted in Alan Riding, "Only the French Elite Scorn Mickey's Debut", The New York Times, 13 April 1992, A-1 pp. 1-13

a less angry but nonetheless ominous style, many writers, more or less equating Americanization with globalization, have characterized a communication and entertainment market increasingly dominated by American interests as, curiously, not a threat to France's economy, but to its very identity.⁴ (Gordon and Meunier, 2001: 22-41)

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, it offers a challenge to that assertion and observes the situation to be just the opposite -- that for all the predictions of a looming cultural disaster in France, the dialectic existing between American pop culture and the discursive resistance to it, have in fact provided a fantastic opportunity for France to reinforce a distinct cultural identity and to reclaim a coherent political role, both internally and externally. However that same discourse about culture has helped to obscure very real challenges to the French economy. The second goal of this paper is to address cultural identity analysis itself and posit that cultural identity can never be studied outside of political and societal structures of power and control. In this light it further indicates that cultural identity analysis as well as cultural identity discourse purposely ignore economic considerations, and often lead to self defeating policies. It is the ultimate theoretical purpose of this paper to confirm MacLeod and Voyer-Leger (2004)'s statement that

“Identities should never be accepted as permanent concepts without further explanation. In fact, the definition of a national identity can fluctuate because it is part of a debate, sometimes even a struggle, taking place at every level of society, a debate the parameters of which the leaders try to control.”⁵

⁴ See among others Gordon, Philip and Meunier, Sophie, “Globalization and French Cultural Identity”, French Politics, Culture and Society, Vol. 19, No 1, Spring 2001, pp 22-41

⁵ MacLeod, Alex and Voyer-Leger, Catherine, “ La France d'une Puissance Moyenne a l' Autre », Revue Etudes Internationales, Vol. xxxv, No1, March 2004, p. 75 Translation is mine.

I choose to start and finish the paper with the case of France, and to weave theoretical considerations in between, in order to further demonstrate that cultural identity is always the reflection of political structures and power struggles, and that it can never be studied in abstraction nor dissociated from specific cases. It is therefore insufficient, by itself, as a field of inquiry or as a level of analysis.

This analysis indeed starts by showing how, although the diffusion of American pop culture in France has always been the product of an American economic agenda, it has always carried for the French a symbolic value, the negative or positive character of which is often determined by the social class and age of the subject. The paper then moves on to show how the symbolic values attached to American goods have distracted the French response away from the economic sphere to that of cultural identity. This section explores how the malleability of the very concept of cultural identity is part and parcel of its political function. It lays down the analytical framework in which the paper finally argues that the discursive manipulation of the concept of cultural identity has served to preserve the internal legitimacy of the French state and to strengthen its international political influence, but has ultimately limited its economic choices.

Section I: From Buffalo Bill to Mc Donald's: freedom, decadence or entertainment?

The first task at hand is to offer an historical perspective on the spread of American pop culture in France, showing the substantive disconnect between the economic nature of exported commercial goods on the one hand and the symbolic – negative and positive – values attached to these goods. In the long history of French

participation in international markets, no imports have taken on the symbolism that American goods have come to carry in the last 50 years, and none have inspired such an emotional reaction. Depending largely on social classes, that response has ranged from venomous rejection based on a perceived cultural threat to passionate embracement of the American Dream. The French aristocracy and political elite have often perceived America as not quite civilized, a land of savages and slave owners. Clemenceau, for example, said “America? That is the development from barbarity to decadence without the detour through culture”⁶. (Wagner, 1977: 23) On the other end of the social spectrum, the European working class, French included, especially after the industrial revolution, has always looked at the US as the land of opportunities.

This section covers the different phases of American penetration in the French market, and selects a few illustrative examples of American cultural products and their perceived symbolic values. It concludes by offering an explanation of the overall attractiveness that American popular culture carries for a great majority of the French population.

One of the early cultural exports from America was the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, introduced in 1889 at the Paris Exposition and touring Europe thereafter. The Wild West Show provided the blue print of the success American cultural transmission in Europe: a commercial venture designed to showcase American technology following the Civil War. It demonstrated technology and American know how; it was a huge and well organized production; it was advertised through gigantic bill boards; and most importantly, it was widely entertaining. The show was a huge success, especially with

⁶ Wolfgang Wagner, “The Europeans’ Image of America”, in Kaiser and Schwarz, eds, *America and Western Europe*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1977) p. 23

French working class, and it instantly took on both positive and negative symbolic significance. For the working classes, American culture was a democratic alternative to an elitist social structure, a symbol of emancipation. At that time firearms in Europe were restricted to the government forces and to the upper class.⁷ (Sears, 1993) On the other hand, for those in power, American culture was a symbol of unchecked (i.e. non governmental) use of violence.

After WWI, the US made a conscious decision to export its cultural goods to Europe in general and France in particular. France, like England, had accrued a huge debt to the United States during the war and the United States needed to recoup the money. It was a time of vast American presence in France: tourists, artists, intellectuals, business people, helped by a strong US dollar, were abundant in Paris. Their presence in the country, a strong economy back in the US, and American technological innovations -- especially radio and phonographs -- helped bring new forms of entertainment to France. American jazz became the symbol of the roaring 20's (*les années folles*) in France. In that case, the appeal was essentially generational; jazz was the first American export to become a symbol of the contest between the old and the young, and to "represent for young generations the discarding of Edwardian values and a future of freedom and emancipation".⁸ (Oliver, 1975: 140) Younger generations rebelled against the entrenched cultural order and turned values upside down, embracing American forms of culture.⁹ (Dean and Gabilliet, 1996: xlvi) .The value of jazz as a symbol of youth and

⁷ John Sears, "Bierstadt, Buffalo Bill, and the Wild West in Europe", in Kroes, Rydell and Bosscher, eds., pp. 3-14

⁸ Paul Oliver, "Jazz is Where you Find it: the European experience of jazz", in Bigsby, C.W.E, ed., *Superculture American Popular Culture and Europe*, (London, UK: Elek Books Ltd. 1975) p. 140

⁹ John Dean and Jean-Paul Gabilliet, " Preface: Ever the Twain Shall Meet", in Dean and Gabilliet, eds. *European Readings of American Popular Culture*, (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) p. xlvi

emancipation has been repeated in all phases of the American presence in France. In effect, American popular music has always been widely accepted by young generations and widely feared by the older ones as the catalyst of revolutionary attitudes pitched against the established order. It has often led to statements that America would “precede Europe on the road toward decline and social decomposition”¹⁰. (Dean and Gabiliet, 1996: xxxix) American pop music still garners the same attraction for young generations and remains a cultural demarcation between young and old:

“Time and time again, generations have parted ways in their appreciation of American culture. Time and time again, younger generations in Europe have had to explain to their elders what was so appealing about jazz music, about Laurel and Hardy, blue jeans, sneakers and western movies”.¹¹ (Kroes, 1996:172)

Meanwhile, many have decried jazz, rock’n roll, hip hop, and rap as precursors of looming decadence and as corruptors of youth and family values.

What we need to extract from the preceding observations is that during the intra-war period American mass culture appealed to a small group of French *avant garde* and intellectual artists, to urban youth, and to the working class. These groups, especially, youth and working class have been important vectors of the spread of American pop culture. It was indeed their growing numbers after WWII that would strengthen the American cultural – and economic- presence. The baby boomers were the fastest growing segment of society after WWII and the working class had more leisure time and disposable income than ever before.¹² This reinforced the formidable appeal of American products after the US victory over fascism had set the ideological tone for an American

¹⁰ Dean, xxxix

¹¹ Kroes, Robert, *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve Seen the Mall” Europeans and American Mass Culture*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996) p. 172

¹² Starting in 1936 the policies of the socialist government, the *Front Populaire*, had institutionalized limits on the work week, minimum wage and paid holidays.

penetration in Europe. The liberating GIs brought with them not only the victories of individualism over fascism, and democracy over totalitarianism; they also brought chewing gum, nylons and an array of glamorous consumer goods that enraptured the youth of Europe. Between 1945 and the 1960's, American products dominated the European markets, including that of France. Foreign direct investments and American corporations had entered the economic landscape¹³, the American style of packaging, and advertising were attractive for the European public, and economies of scale meant that American goods were cheaper.¹⁴ (Kroes, 1996: 326)

Back in the US, the will to ensure that Europe would remain an economic partner and a strong political ally against the Soviet Union led to an aggressive, multi-faceted foreign policy with an emphasis on. -- alongside political pressure and economic assistance like the Marshall plan, -- establishing as many cultural links as possible. Fulbright exchanges, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the establishment in 1948 of the United States Information Agency (now the US Information Service), and the Voice of America Radio Program were among the multifarious manifestations of an American cultural diplomacy designed not only to create constituencies but also to advertise American products to an European audience. In the meantime, GATT negotiations, led by the US, would ensure liberalization of trade and the further opening of the European market for American goods.

¹³ Singer, International Harvest, Heinz, Carnation Milk brands became increasingly recognizable by Europeans. Ford, Monsanto, IBM, ITT also had established several subsidiaries.

¹⁴ Kroes, 326

Hollywood movies remain the symbol of that era. During the intra war period American movies were dominating the European markets.¹⁵ In 1925 US films made up 95% of all the movies shown in the UK, 60% in Germany, 75% in France and there was already a clear understanding in America that the film industry could play a significant role in establishing economic and cultural influence abroad. (Costiglia, 1984) In 1926, Congress had established a motion picture section in the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce and the bureau chief had attested that US films “stimulated the desire to own and to use such garments, furnishing, utensils and scientific innovations as are depicted on the screen.”¹⁶ WWII strengthened that trend. In the words of Richard Pells (1997: 213) “no single person was more responsible for transforming the cultural balance of power between Europe and the US than Adolf Hitler.”¹⁷ The appeal of US cinema was immense after years of war, German occupation, and economic hardship. Through movies, the French became familiar with American life style, or what they believed it to be. The films projected a glamorous and modern culture, and –symbolizing escape by carefully blending fiction and reality – served as effective advertising clips for American products. “America for the Europeans has always been a blend of fiction and truth -- a fiction created by the European’s own needs to imagine a better world”¹⁸ yet bespeaking a truth that remained shocking. Western movie heroes, following in the “bootprints” of Buffalo Bill, became symbols of both the radical freedom and shocking decadence of an American lifestyle that existed largely in the French imagination.

¹⁵ in Costiglia, Frank, *Awkward Dominion American Political, Economic and Cultural Relation with Europe 1919-1933*, (London, UK: Ornell University Press, 1984.)

¹⁶ Costiglia, 76.

¹⁷ Pells, Richard, *Not like US: How Europeans have loved, hated, and transformed American culture since WWI*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997) p 213

¹⁸ Dean, xviii

The 60's brought a reversal -- not in the spread of American goods, but in the change of the symbolic discourse accompanying them. The mid 60s' saw a first true rejection in France of American policies in the context of which, American popular culture was going to become the easy pray of an anti Americanism which remains constant to this day. The backlash against the US was the strongest among the French left but had some resonance among the greater public. On --American made-- TV sets in French living rooms, were seen spectacles of racial unrest, police brutality played on American campuses, along with scenes of urban decay and violence, and of war in Vietnam. They all undermined the post-WWII America's image as the savior of democracy and replaced it with a new one -- that of imperialistic aggressor.¹⁹ Yet, while the symbolism attached to cultural goods was changing, the consumption of the same goods continued unabated.

It was in this context that American fast food made its way to the French market and became widely consumed, McDonald's -- tightly associated with American imperialistic design ²⁰ and by far the most controversial export of American pop culture -- is the paradigmatic example of that paradox. It is consistently characterized as a threat to the very identity of France, yet its consumer appeal is undeniable. In France, food -- American or otherwise -- has always carried an emotional and symbolic value. Food in France is at once a geographical and an historical marker. Food is " the most sacred component of (our)national identity, at the least teasing attempts to compare us even to

¹⁹ Richard Pells, " American Culture Abroad: the European Experience since 1945" in Kreos, Rydell and Bosscher, eds., p.74

²⁰ Many French supported the actions of the activist Jose Bove when he burned down a Mc Donald's a few years ago. In June 2004, 60% of the French wanted Jose Bove to be amnestied by the President. http://terre-net.com/actus/actus_detail.asp

the Italians, we see red. At the mere suggestions that Americans can cook, war looms.”²¹ Indeed American fast food (the only type of American food known abroad) is described as “fast, too sweet, too soft, savorless, shapeless, undefined, unrefined, artificial, chemical.., the only soothing remark one can hear is that it is better than English food”.²²

Food in France (or I should say *cuisine*), is always associated with a region. It is a connector to the past

Our absolute confidence in our own cooking perfection can't be accounted for without a common reference a common unspoken norm of excellence...There is a collective food memory transferred to him/her long ago through our mother's wombs as part of a genetic heritage.²³

In this light, there can be very few common points between an American utilitarian perspective on food on its nutritional value and a French emotional perspective on food and its cultural value. Favier makes a very interesting remark on that distinction. She describes the “Gas/Food” signs on American freeways and comments that “it would be difficult to acknowledge a few basic needs in a more unsophisticated, utilitarian way”.²⁴ This needs to be compared to the French *autoroutes* where each rest stop on the way has a boutique with regional delicacies, restaurants, etc.

This section will close with a few points of explanation on the popularity of American cultural products. The last point on McDonald's provides a first level of explanation. Why, if they are so bad, are Mc Donald's restaurants so popular in France?²⁵ Economics provide the answer. McDonald's are cheap, and friendly to youth and children (unlike most restaurants in France where to this day it is easier to bring your dog than a child). Similarly, American movies are constantly the biggest hits at the box

²¹ Mireille Favier, “Pride and Prejudice: American Cuisine, the French and Godliness”, in Dean , ed., .p120

²² Ibid, p. 121.

²³ Favier, in Dean and Gabilliet, eds p. 121,

²⁴ Favier, in Dean and Gabilliet, eds. p.123

²⁵ In April 24, 2004 NPR reported the that the French division of McDonalds was the company's most successful one, judged on a per consumer basis <http://www.npr.org/templates/story.php?storyId=1850482>

office in France because their often simplistic message of good and evil is easily understood by many. Critics may say that “to unify the world audience the US cinema must erase all original forms or content likely to unnerve or upset the global teenage community”²⁶ but it is nonetheless true that they offer good entertainment.

There is also a deeper level of explanation. American popular culture is highly modular, and thus assimilating. Indeed, American culture itself is the product of different cultures, many of them European.

“In their selective appropriation of the European cultural heritage, Americans have had to dissect patterns of traditional and organic cohesion while feeling free to rearrange the components parts into a new whole.”²⁷

American mass cultural forms have themselves been assembled and re assembled abroad by different groups in a literally limitless numbers of combinations.²⁸ Furthermore, American popular culture, being essentially a culture of the present, has facilitated the creation of a common bond among diverse immigrant populations, outside of their respective past. In most places with a longer modern history than that of the US, culture tends to be perceived as an heritage (a link to the past much more than a link to the present) while in America the idea of culture has been related to the practice of shaping reality. Technology is always a fundamental component of American popular goods: technology in music, special effects in movies, food processing etc. In Europe culture provides a mean to share a common experience in the past; in the US culture provides a means to share a common experience in the present. It creates a horizontal connection across ethnic groups and across social classes. As such, American pop

²⁶ Francis Bordat, “Creative Chiasmus: Comparative Evolution of US television and Cinemas Products in the 1980s”, in Dean and Gabilliet, eds. p. 15

²⁷ Kroes, 165

²⁸ Kroes, Rydell and Bosscher, p .ix

culture links heterogeneous groups and renders them behaviorally homogenous. This characteristic makes American popular culture highly exportable, since it has already developed a high common denominator at home.²⁹ American products when they leave America have already been tested on a vast and heterogeneous audience.³⁰

Finally the appeal of American popular culture feeds on itself and therefore can only grow. American pop culture has dominated Europe for long enough that it has become part of everyone's psyche. When Europeans go to America for the first time, they have moments of recognition, of *déjà vu*. Through movies and TV shows Europeans have all been on the streets of San Francisco, in Time Square, in Arizona at the Grand Canyon. American popular culture is part of any European (and French) childhood. Therefore it has become part of a European past and in that sense has rejoined traditional perception of what culture is for Europeans, as mentioned above.

SECTION II: the role of cultural identity

This formidable appeal, alongside the fact that American products are often cheaper, forms a true economic challenge for France's own food and cultural productions. As early as the intra war period, resentment was brewing on the part of local producers. Later, in the 50's, French wine growers tried to have Coca Cola banned as an illegal medication, an addictive and poisonous substance.³¹ They only relented when the US opened its borders to Champagne wines. American food processing technique and quasi control of Genetically Modified foods all contribute to a hegemonic

²⁹ Antoin Liehm, *Le Monde* 8 February 1995.

³⁰ Todd Gitlin, *Le Point*, No.1018, 21 March 1992. p. 75. Translation is mine.

³¹ Wagnleitner, Reinold, *Coca-Colonization of the Cold War: the Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. xiii

position of American productions on the world market, and threaten to displace local farmers and producers. Similarly, The difference in domestic market sizes and consequent accessible budgets gives American movies a disproportionate competitive advantage, and French movies are for the most part not faring well at the box office. Yet what is interesting in the French response to American exports is that it is seldom laid out in economic terms. More often it spins on the symbolic values aforementioned and is spelled out in terms of cultural identity and threat thereto. This is why at this juncture this paper needs to reflect on the definition of cultural identity and the role of a cultural identity discourse before bringing it back to the specifics results of such discourse in France.

The first part of a definition of cultural identity entails an understanding of how the malleability of the term culture itself allows multiple manipulations of its meaning. It is within this understanding, that the affixing of an “identity” can be described not as an objectively observable fact but strictly as a discursive construct, making impossible to dissociate culture from its political purpose.

Indeed, no discussion of culture can evade an overview of the usages of the terms. The word “culture” has many connotations and the current usage of the terms is as multi-formed as its past, since both historical and current meanings of the term apply at one point or the other. The first usage of the term refers to cultivation³² (from the Latin: *cultura*). It is still used in that sense, in the term *agriculture*.³³ Under later usages, especially in the West and under the influence of Matthew Arnold (1869), the term

³² The world culture is similar in many European languages in English and French culture, in German *kultur*, in Spanish, *cultura*.

³³ Jumping to a more modern understanding of the term , though one could state that what the main stay (or cultivation) of a society influence the organization and practice of that society. Simply put, culture creates culture

culture moved to be also understood as the domain of the aesthetic, the arts, or what we commonly call High Culture.³⁴ It is to date still widely used in that sense³⁵ and is closely linked to concepts of knowledge or refinement. Finally, in the second half of the 19th century, culture moved to anthropology and has since then “stood for the way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes and material things.”³⁶

The role of anthropologists has been, through thorough empirical observations to describe different life styles and societal organizations and practices. At various times, inventories of cultural categories were made and culture was thus defined as everything on a list of topics: social organization, food, religion, economy, etc.³⁷ These accounts taught a greater audience that indeed different “cultures” had different customs, without really explaining the reasons why. In the words of Edward Hall:

it was difficult ,if not impossible to say in precise terms what it was that made one culture really different from another, except to point out that there were people who raided sheep

³⁴ Matthew, Arnold, quoted in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

³⁵ For example France has a Minister of Culture and Communications whose role is the protection and promotion of the arts, and of the French cultural heritage <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/>. Similarly, every embassy or consulate in the world has a “cultural attaché”.

³⁶ Hall, Edward, *The Silent Language* (New York, NY: Anchor Book 1981), p.20

³⁷ “The Modern technical definition of culture, as socially patterned human thought and behavior, was originally proposed by the nineteenth-century British anthropologist, Edward Tylor. This definition is an open-ended list, which has been extended considerably since Tylor first proposed it. Some researchers have attempted to create exhaustive universal lists of the content of culture, usually as guides for further research. Others have listed and mapped all the culture traits of particular geographic areas. The first inventory of cultural categories was undertaken in 1872 by a committee of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, which was assisted by Tylor. The committee prepared an anthropological field manual that listed seventy-six culture topics, in no particular order, including such diverse items as cannibalism and language. The most exhaustive such list is the "Outline of Cultural Materials," first published in 1938 and still used as a guide for cataloging great masses of worldwide cultural data for cross-cultural surveys. Like the table of contents of a giant encyclopedia, the outline lists 79 major divisions and 637 subdivisions. For example, "Food Quest" is a major division with such subdivisions as collecting, hunting, and fishing.” <http://www.wsu.edu:8001/vcwsu/commons/topics/culture/culture-definitions/bodley-text.html#top>

³⁷ Hall.24

and others who gathered food.... that people worshipped different gods and organized their societies in varying ways.³⁸

When culture moved to the field of sociology, descriptions and analyses of the properties of cultures and of the role of culture in a society as a system of meaning were added to topical categorizations.³⁹ Finally, culture has also become a level of analysis in the field on International Relations. Under post modernist then constructivist influences, it is increasingly considered as an essential field of inquiry, in a quest to understanding the world.

As a conclusion, culture is now used as a catch all term and can signify at any given time: *cultivation* either of plants or animals or even of micro organisms, i.e. the culture of wheat or blood cells; an expression of *tastes and preferences* by a group, i.e. high culture or its opposite, pop or mass culture; an expression of *knowledge and education*. i.e. a cultured or cultivated person; a *grouping* of a distinctive group of people (often in opposition to another group or culture), i.e. youth culture; a *civilization*, i.e. Eastern culture; a set of *learned behaviors attitudes and meanings* in any given group i.e., Western culture; a *system of meaning* or a form of communication, i.e. cultural codes. We could also add with Weber and others that culture is not neutral and is a product of structure it itself creates, meaning in other words that the definition of culture itself is nothing but a cultural interpretation of what culture is.

However, affixing the term identity to culture denies the elusive character of the concept of culture and imposes a deterministic and fixed value to a fluid notion. Yet, because the phrase “cultural identity” is the crux of political rhetoric it requires

³⁹ See among others Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, 1973. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus* would also fall under that category.

nonetheless a working definition. The definition of cultural identity that this paper suggests is based on an analogy found in the field of International Law. One of the four major sources of international law is “international custom, as evidence of a general practice accepted as law.”⁴⁰ A customary norm exists only if two conditions are met: an objective condition and a subjective one. The objective condition refers to the actual practice, the subjective condition to the general belief that the said practice is legal: the *opinio juris*. Once a custom is proven to exist, it has the function to create a binding norm on the international community of states.⁴¹ Similarly one can argue that the concept of “cultural identity” is made up of two distinct parts, inseparable from its specific purpose. Cultural identity is first made of empirically observable practices (the objective element) that are consistent over time. Just like in international law, not every practice is customary. A one- time practice cannot qualify as a custom; it has to frequently repeat itself overtime to ensure predictability and therefore consistency. Furthermore a practice cannot be limited to a small sub group within the group. For a practice to be a custom it needs to be general, practiced by the majority.⁴² Once we have established what practices are customary, they can be organized into categories. We can here use anthropological definitions of culture and study the following categories: organization of economic survival, food, language, entertainment, religious beliefs and practice, administration of justice, group stratification (age, gender), family life, and housing. To those, we can add

⁴⁰ Art. 38 (1) of the Statute of the ICJ.

⁴¹ For example, in the law of the sea, maritime states have had a long lasting practice of claiming sovereignty over territorial seas and the said practice is indeed believed to be legal, making therefore sovereignty over territorial water a binding norm of international law regardless of the existence of a Treaty.

⁴² I used here the same objective criteria used in legal systems to define that indeed a practice is a custom

alongside Edward Hall, concepts of time and concepts of space, and context of information transmission.⁴³

Cultural identity is then made of the shared belief (the subjective element) that these practices are essential components of the group's identity. In other words the belief that if these practices change too rapidly, are distorted, or even disappear, the group will also disappear. The second task of identifying a culture is to move to the subjective field and ascertain, not necessarily the meaning (in Geertz's understanding) of the practices but more so, the subjective value attached to each of these customs by the group that practices them. How important do they believe those practices are in maintaining, strengthening or reproducing the identity of the group? What practices are perceived as being the essence of the group (as being essential)? There is no perfect methodology to accomplish the daunting task of identifying beliefs, short of surveying an entire group in a systematic way. Discourse analysis appears to be second best since indeed cultural as well as national identities "are constructed in permanent discussions [and] react to new challenges by discursive evolution and the integration or refusal of new ideas into their established set of social frames."⁴⁴ Indeed a review and analysis of as many statements as possible can be a useful endeavor. In this light, cultural identity entails a dynamic interaction between objective elements and subjective elements.

Finally, just like in law a custom (practice and *opinio juris*) has the function of creating a binding norm for all, the existence of an identifiable general practice alongside

⁴³ Edward Hall

⁴⁴ Seidendorf, Stefan (2003): "Europeanization of National Identity Discourses? Comparing French and German Print Media". European Consortium For Political Research- ECPR. Joint Sessions of Workshops. Edinburgh, 28th March- 2nd April 2003 p.1

the shared conviction by a majority in the group that the practice is essential, serves to create an emotional bond among the people of the group. In the words of Roland Barthes:

Culture can be defined by the people who share the same myths. It means that culture affirms itself through the symbols that we are exchanging that allow us to acknowledge that we carry the same identity.⁴⁵

It connects individuals within the group to the rest of the group and therefore creates a cohesion that would not exist otherwise. Cultural identity just like national identity is a psychological link among individuals. Indeed, “in nationality, there is an aspect of sentiment; it is at once soul and body”⁴⁶. It is true that at some point, discussion of ‘cultural identity’ must intersect with the discourse on nationalism. As such cultural identity, like nationalism, is never dissociable from its function of creating cohesiveness. Cohesiveness can then be used to legitimate the political organization, the “social contract” or even the state. Once there is group cohesion, that group can be enlisted as such to support or legitimate various decisions. Both practice and belief are linked to the function that cultural identity serves in ensuring the cohesion of a group and its function in supporting the existing social and political order.

In this light, one can argue that those who benefit from the social or political order and who control the discourse (in all of its forms be it oral, textual or visual) have the possibility through the repetition of the discourse itself to influence beliefs and thus shape

⁴⁵ Quoted in Sotton, Emilie: (2001) “Les Enjeux de la Diplomatie Culturelle dans la Mondialisation d’après l’Exemple de la France aux Etats Unis”, Institut D’Etudes Politiques de Lyon, 2001 <http://doc-iep.univ-lyon2fr/Ressources/Documents/Etudiants?Memoires?MFE2001/sottone>. Translation is mine.

⁴⁶ Ernest Renan, “Qu’est ce qu’une nation?,” *Œuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, ed Henriette Pshichari (Paris, France : Calamnn-Levy, 1947 [1882], vol. 1, p 902.

the concept of cultural identity to fit their needs.⁴⁷ We need to keep in mind that the spokespeople of a cultural identity are not always representative of the group.

The next and most important task is therefore to identify the context in which the discourse of cultural identity takes place, the power structure within the society and the goals of the leadership, internally and externally. A brief look at France's history in the post Westphalia period shows a progressive centralization of the state in France ideologically based on the construction of a distinctive national French identity superseding regional forms of identification. Starting with Louis XIV, national legal structures, tax structures and even education measures were implemented to progressively insure more unity to an increasingly centralized state. A few decades after Louis XIV, Rousseau's principles of social contract confirmed the need for the French to establish a political consensus, and one that was going to support the post Revolutionary Republic. After the Terror, and even more so during the reign of Napoleon, the Republican/ Jacobin tradition was clearly defined: it centered on the assimilation of regional and ethnic differences to a unitary idea of "*Frenchness*" and French citizenship. French national identity should ideally take precedence over other forms of ethnic, linguistic, and religious identification.⁴⁸ The standard modernist argument would contend that the concept of a cohesive French identity to be preserved was, in itself, a political construction made necessary by the dissolution of traditional identity markers based on divinely-ordained monarchies.⁴⁹ These ideas, along with new technologies and

⁴⁷ In much simpler terms: if you repeat it enough, it becomes true.

⁴⁸ Silverman, M. *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Race and Citizenship in Modern France*, (London: UK Routledge., 1992)

⁴⁹ Smith, Anthony D. *Theories of Nationalism* (London, UK : Duckworth, 1971) and Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Revised edition ed. London & NY: Verso, 1991).

economic realities, created a need for a new narrative which could support and be supported by post-revolutionary ideologies of liberal humanism. The result was a change in the way individuals in France came to understand their relationship to the “imagined community” which informed their sense of extended networks and social connectedness. Whereas, previous to the Enlightenment, the strongest source of group identity beyond the immediate, primordial village was based on divinely-ordained, dynastic, and absolute hierarchies (i.e. the church, Christendom), the new imagined community was the Nation-State, a political construction based on identifiable characteristics that are worldly, sovereign (as opposed to secondary to divine sovereignty), humanistic, and – importantly – *limited*.

The inherent limitedness of a Nation-State is essential because it marked a shift from the possibility of a messianic expansion of group identity (through empire or through religious conversion). As Anderson puts it:

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind⁵⁰

This limitedness made the nature of group imagination implicitly *relational* at the same time that it created an ontological vacuum where anxiety about both individual and group identities was once addressed by self-reinforcing religious orthodoxy. In other words, any group identification or allegiance had to give way to an individual’s identification as a French citizen. In return, the Republic, the Consulate or the Empire, would offer individuals the protections and rights embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

⁵⁰ Anderson, p

From then on the French state has traditionally been “*dirigist*”, defining democracy as a positive duty of the state even more so than a right of the people. Consequently the public sector has always legitimized its pervasiveness in all aspects of French life -- political, social and economic.

This characteristic has prevailed through most of France’s recent history. However, in the recent past various external circumstances have altered the strength of the French state and therefore its ability to express its traditional historical role. The loss of the Empire, exemplified by the Algerian war and independence, the increased pressures of globalization and the European integration, have all limited the actual economic power of France. Increasingly unable to control economic trends, the French state has moved to a redefining of sovereignty from a political economic concept to a cultural one. If the Gaullist concepts of *prestige* and *grandeur* could not be achieved through economics then they could be achieved through the affirmation of the strength of French culture. Dominique Schnapper well reviews how culture has progressively become part and parcel of the welfare state. He identifies two eras in that history: first, the Andre Malraux era (under de Gaulle) when cultural policy was designed as the regal duty of the state to give to all access to knowledge and to extend social protection to all artists; then the Jack Lang era (under Mitterrand) when the state became a cultural welfare state. The state now defines culture⁵¹ and is set out to protect the French from what it defines as cultural attacks, whether these attacks come from abroad or even from the French themselves. The governmental and intellectual elite have indeed carefully fashioned, to that end, the assertion that anything with commercial appeal (therefore potential economically challenging) is intrinsically not “cultural” and furthermore could

⁵¹ Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France. T 42, No. 3, 1997 p 71.

erode what *is* cultural. There is a powerful tradition of intellectual elitism displaying nothing but contempt for commercially successful artistic endeavors, especially if such success is even in a most tenuous fashion remotely linked to American popular culture.⁵² Bernard Pivot at times lamented that any books that sell well are by definition treason because the majority of the public is by definition stupid.”⁵³

However, a new challenge has been facing France’s elite: the realization that the revolutionary Jacobin ideal of assimilation of all into one well defined French culture is imperiled by an increasingly multi cultural population resisting this assimilation. How to then affix a cultural identity on a multi cultural group? According to Social Identity Theory, individuals are more likely to think of themselves as members of a group when membership in the group reinforces similarities between group members and amplifies dissimilarities with other groups.⁵⁴ In a context where similarities are harder to identify *prima facie* because of the highly heterogenous nature of the group, the second segment of Turner’s proposal is paramount: how to amplify dissimilarities with other groups. Further insight into this observation is provided by the Object Relations theory of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytical theory shows us that the creation of a static ‘self’ is one of the primary, activities of the human consciousness, and it acknowledges an emotional dimension of social identity that requires – particularly when alternative identity markers such as place, routine, and language are challenged or removed – the creation of an abject-other in contrast to whom a particular social identity is reinforced.⁵⁵ Examples of

⁵² *Connaissance des Arts*, April 1996 , pp.102-107 Translation is mine.

⁵³ Bernard Pivot is a highly revered TV personality made famous by two TV literary shows, “Apostrophe” in the 80’s and “Bouillon de Culture” in the 90’s.

⁵⁴ Turner, Hogg, Oakes, M, Reicher S, and Wetherell M. *Rediscovering the Social Group: A self Categorization theory* (Oxford: England: Blackwell, 1987)

⁵⁵ Kristeva, J. *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York, NY : Columbia University Press, 1991)

this phenomenon are myriad, where the dissolution of clear distinctions between self and other inspires the group to re-imagine itself in starker contrast. As Norton observed

...it is only when categories of self and other are empirically dubious that they emerge with clarity: Individual and collective identities are created not simply in the difference between self and other but in those moments of ambiguity where one is other to oneself, and in the recognition of the other as like⁵⁶

One should look at the works of Jean Claude Deschamps who explains remarkably well how, in a context where you have an “in” group and an “out” group, the other group’s behavior is always seen as intentional and unitary while one’s group is seen as more complex, more prone to compromise and to be affected by circumstances.⁵⁷ A perceived increase of power in the “out” group strengthens the tendency to assume intent and become what Deschamps calls the “attributional bias”. Any conflict between the two groups will strengthen their identity and encourage the exaggeration of the other’s attributes. This of course confirms critical theory and other constructivist approaches to international politics which emphasize the interplay of perceptions and actions in shaping events

Finally, when one has to define self and others, he/she tends to do so with limited tools. The limited cognitive resources at the disposal of individuals and *a fortiori* of groups drive them to use certain memory enhancing techniques.⁵⁸ Heuristics and stereotypes present individuals with simpler ways to interpret the world, to make choices or to support decisions. This observation has always represented a fantastic opportunity for leaders who can manipulate or create these stereotypes when need be. It has been made even easier in this century with graphic and visual images imposing a reality and limiting room for differences of interpretation. While a phrase in a speech can conjure up different mental images for different individuals, televised images have become the shared “reality” of all. In that context, categorization at the national level has been made even simpler than before. If one can easily agree with words of sociologists and critical

⁵⁶ Norton, A . *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1988)

⁵⁷ Deschamps, Jean Claude , *L'attribution et la Catégorisation Sociale.*, (Berne, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1977)

⁵⁸John Turner, “Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Groups, ” in Henri Tajfel, ed. *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* , (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982) pp. 15-40

theorists like the late Pierre Bourdieu⁵⁹ that language is not neutral and carries with it subjective meanings, one can also easily expand that concept to the new role that images have created.

Applied to the French /American case, all preceding assertions are easily proven. The ruling class of France has consistently defined itself through its intrinsic opposition to the United States. The more powerful the United States has become, the more virulent the opposition against it, often leading to sometimes simplistic stereotypes and categorizations. The genesis of the relationships between France and the US parallels that of Europe and the US, and starts with the colonization of America by Europe, followed by the independence of the United States and the subsequent conceptual dichotomy of new world/old world, which defined Europe and America as counter images of each other. This dichotomy has had a symbolic significance, for the distinction between the two worlds illustrated a set of values. The new world, to exist, had to part from the old ways, and the framers of the constitution warned against European politics, the class system and the aristocracy. To this day in the United States, references are made that are reflective of this dichotomy, the latest being of course Donald Rumsfeld's remarks, on the eve of the conflict with Iraq, that France belonged to the old Europe.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, in France like in the rest of Europe, the new world was received with a mix of attraction and rejection – the split often strictly following class lines. One can agree that

“It is striking that well into the 20th century prejudices against America were less pronounced among the poor in Europe than amongst the bourgeoisies and the intelligentsia; for the proletariat and the poorest members of the bourgeoisie,

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), is identified as a post-structuralist in the tradition of F. de Saussure [‘habitus’ conditions interpretation, etc.]

⁶⁰ Robert Kroes judicious remark comes to mind: “ Americans love historical watersheds,; they love to proclaim the end of historical periods and the beginnings of new ones. If there is not a ‘New Era ’ to be proclaimed, there is instead a “New Deal”, a “new Frontier, a “New Nixon”; there are always books appearing with titles such as the End of Ideology” or even the “end of History” in “*Introduction: America and Europe – A clash of Imagined Communities*”, in Dean and Gabilliet, p. xli

America was always a refuge in times of need, a land of promise, offering a Chance even to the destitute, while the educated tended to look down upon this country as supposedly lacking in intellect and culture.”⁶¹

The “Guardians of European”high Culture” have traditionally been at the forefront of the attacks on American influence in all its forms and have invariably targeted mass culture. In a country like France, where the attack was most diffuse, the active, comprehensive rejection of the myths and symbols of America, as well as of American model of society, produced the concept of ‘anti Americanism’. As a political expression, on the Left, it meant the rejection of neo imperialism and the imperatives of the Cold war. On the right it gave conservative elites a new outlet for their traditional anti industrialism and their rejection of mass society and its alleged “vulgarity”, conformism and standardization.⁶² Georges Duhamel described the Americans as ‘slaves subjected to the social dictates of a consumption society in spite of their hallowed rhetoric of freedom and individualism’, echoing Simone de Beauvoir.’s statement: “a thousand choices allowed. Thus the American citizen will be able to consume his liberty inside the life that is imposed on him without so much as noticing that such a life itself is not free “. The discourse skillfully exploits the otherness of American culture and “served the defense of Europeanism, even if the latter, ironically, was no more than a virtual image, a mirror construction caused by the very vastness of the challenge that “Americanism” represented.”⁶³

What is remarkable, however, is how deeply the negative discourse on American culture used as a way to define the French culture in opposition, has been internalized in France. While many French people enjoy American pop culture, they all have

⁶¹ Wagner, in Kaiser and Schwartz, eds. , 22

⁶² Kroes, 323

⁶³ Ibid, 322

internalized some forms of “guilt” about it. One example is to be found in a study made a decade or so ago. Pells summarizes a survey done around the TV show “Dallas”. In 1983, the then French minister of Culture Jack Lang denounced Dallas as the “latest and most troubling instance of Americana cultural imperialism, a threat to the national identity of France.”⁶⁴ One writer decided to see if there was some truth into it. She concluded that the majority of the respondents had internalized the assumptions of the critics. Whether they liked Dallas or not most viewers accepted the premise that Dallas was bad for them. viewers felt guilty about watching it, yet they loved it.

Section III the results

This internalization is indicative of how the discourse on cultural identity in France has been successful in creating a sense of threat and giving credence to the government’s role of protecting the French against this threat. As a result, in a country where demonstrations against the government’s economic policies abound, few question its cultural function. The point here is that the French state has skillfully manipulated an emotional need exacerbated by the alienating effects of globalization and by feelings of loss of traditional identity markers (e.g. the transition from Franc to Euro).

On a positive side, it has helped the state redefine and re-legitimize its sovereignty internally. The government has been able, with very little opposition, to enact legislature designed to ward off the perceived threat: restrictions, quotas, protection of the French language measures and many others such policies.

⁶⁴ Pells, . 259

It has also helped France to refine its political role internationally. Indeed, cultural identity is not only defined from within. It has recently been conceptualized as a negotiation among forces both internal and external to the nation in question. “One of the most critical of external forces involved in the process is the reputation a nation enjoys in world opinion, as reflected in its more or less consensual perception by other countries. It is where we move into the realm of international relations.”⁶⁵ It is undeniable that France has reclaimed an international political voice as the spokesperson of those opposed to current American policies. This is greatly helped by the prevalent cultural identity discourse at home. While there are pragmatic and understandable political reasons to oppose the US, the French government has brought its rationale to an emotional level, almost a moral duty, helped in that task by the negative emotional valuation long attached to American cultural products in France.

It is, however, arguable that not all results of the French cultural identity discourse are positive. It has indeed created cohesion and support for the government, and thus helped the state -- but has it really helped the nation as a whole? One can first argue that it has only served the interests of an intellectual and political elite who are interested in keeping intact a class *status quo* that has long existed in France. Indeed “the use of myths rather than others to buttress a given collective identity, and thereby to legitimate a set of socio-political relations will inevitably serve some groups interest better than others.”⁶⁶ In that sense the French elite has always skillfully moved the debate from a discussion on economic competitiveness to a discussion on identity threat. It has

⁶⁵ Rusciano, Franck Louis, “The Construction of a National Identity: a 23 nation study”, Political Research Quarterly Vol. 56; Issue 3 found at http://global.factiva.com/en/arch/print_results.asp p.1

⁶⁶ Abizadeh, Arash: “Historical Truth, National Myths and Liberal Democracy; On the Coherence of Liberal Nationalism’ The Journal Of Political Philosophy, Vol. 12, No.3, 2004, p.293

consequently legitimized protectionist policies, to the quasi- exclusion of other options. The purpose of this last statement is actually not to decry protectionist policies *per se*, but moreover to point out that they have become the only option that the French will support, not for their intrinsic economic values, but for what they symbolically represent in the fight to preserve an elusive identity. For example, French president Jacques Chirac strongly supported restrictions on foreign movies and was quoted saying that he did not want to see "European culture sterilized or obliterated by American culture for economic reasons that have nothing to do with real culture."⁶⁷ Because the reaction to protectionism is often retaliatory protectionism, it may prevent French cultural products from being exported abroad and therefore finding expression to ensure the very survival of French identity. "For what is really culture but a collection of knowledge allowed to leave the original territory and to get projected throughout the world. If not culture serves to reinforce nationalism and is no longer culture."⁶⁸

It is important, in this light, to place the current discourse over the American threat to French identity, in the context of both radical steps towards European integration and the ongoing impacts of economic (and implicitly cultural) globalization in general.

"We seem to succumb in other words, to a new global political economy of culture in which we are relegated to the position of more or less alienated consumers of symbolic goods, over the production of which, we feel we have little control."⁶⁹

One can then agree that

⁶⁷ Quoted in Rinaman, Karen (1996) : " French Films Quotas and Cultural Protectionism " at <http://www.american.edu/ted/frenchtv.htm> p 2.

⁶⁸ Bernard Pivot quoted at <http://www.fdlm.org/fle/article/316/pivot.html>

⁶⁹ Stephan Palmie, "Conceptualizing Cultural Flows: perspectives on Globalization" in Kroes, Rydell and Bosscher, eds. p. 272

“The word Americanization is unduly alarmist. It reduces the complex processes of cultural influence, of borrowing, imitation and reception to the stark binary of a zero-sum game. In the field of two opposite alternatives of Europeanism as opposed to Americanism, any degree of Americanization implies an equal degree of de- Europeanization.⁷⁰ .

CONCLUSION

While cultural traits are undeniable, the affixing of an identity on those traits is a political exercise. In doing just so the French government has not so much protected the culture of France against various threats, it has itself created the enemies that it could combat. In doing so, since the end of WWII the French political elite has successfully justified its role as the champion of an identity, it itself defines. This discourse has been so well internalized by the French population, that while the government (regardless of its orientation) is constantly attacked on for its economic and social issues, its cultural role is almost never questioned. This article started with Mickey Mouse. It has to close with Asterix. Asterix is a widely popular French comic strip character developed 40 years ago. The story line is that this feisty little Gaul leads the resistance of the last village in France fighting the invader, the Roman Empire. Asterix epitomizes not so much the actual resistance to any imperialistic design but the fact that the French believe that they exist only if they resist.

⁷⁰ Rob Kroes, in Kroes, Rydell and Bosscher, eds., p. 303