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978-0-521-65323-7 - Fascination and Misgivings: The United States in French Opinion, 1870-1914

Jacques Portes

Excerpt

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Introduction

The 1976 Bicentennial of the United States produced many events and publications in most of the industrialized countries, and not just in the land of George Washington. In the same manner, the last American presidential elections could be followed “live” in all French households that were interested in them, just as they were in many other countries.

These examples show, if it needs to be shown, the influence exerted by the United States on what by general agreement is called public opinion in many countries throughout the world. This rash of interest, an almost daily phenomenon, can be explained in many different ways: by economic power, strategic hegemony, or mass-produced culture, all of which came into being in the recent past. Yet the United States played an important role in European opinion, particularly in France, in earlier times, even in the absence of the reasons advanced today. This being the case, it can be asserted that the opinions expressed today about that great country are fed by all the data of the past, which constitute a kind of substratum without which such opinions would remain quite superficial.

Ever since its birth, the United States has played a determining role in French opinion. It has been relentlessly observed by writers from François-Jean de Chastellux right after gaining its independence,¹ René de Chateaubriand a few years later, the still pertinent Alexis de Tocqueville, the young Georges Clemenceau, the social lion Paul Bourget,² and the hostile Georges Duhamel to, more recently, Simone de Beauvoir and a great many more or less famous others. In this manner a certain vision of America, made up of exoticism, modernism, and a “get-rich-quick” mentality, was transmitted from generation to gener-

1. F.-J. de Chastellux, *Voyages dans l'Amérique septentrionale dans les années 1780, 1781 et 1782* (Paris: Taillandier, 1980). This is the first reprint since 1788.

2. P. Bourget, *Outremer, notes sur l'Amérique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Lemerre, 1895).

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ation. Thus the employees of the French postal service referred to overtime as *Californies*; surely this term came directly from the California Gold Rush of 1848, even if it later took on a derisive meaning. Also perpetuated was another, darker image, this one of violence and fury: Chicago still evokes the notion of gangsterism, despite the perfectly commendable results of that city's long-standing anticrime campaign.

Within that lineage of opinions and perceptions, it is important to pay special attention to a significant period that permits us to grasp in its full complexity what the French have thought of the United States, since much of it is certainly still present in their collective mentality.

Thanks to a number of thorough and very rich studies, French opinions of the United States are particularly well known for the period from the American Independence to the end of the Civil War,³ and then again from 1914, when the two countries again fought side by side as they had done during the War of Independence,⁴ until the Second World War.⁵ And finally we have, for the contemporary period, an ever-growing number of opinion polls, which lay out in detail everything the French can possibly know and think about the United States.⁶

By contrast, the period between 1870 and 1914 seems to have been almost totally neglected.⁷ Moreover, in reading about the subject, one frequently encounters titles that refer to notions of indifference or superficial knowledge,⁸ as if these forty years were a “slack” between

3. G. Chinard, “Le mirage américain,” in *Les réfugiés huguenots en Amérique* (Paris: 1925); D. Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956); R. Rémond, *Les Etats-Unis devant l'opinion française, 1815–1852* (Paris: Colin, 1962); S. Copans, “French Opinion of American Democracy, 1852–1860,” Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1942; T.A. Sancton, “America in the Eyes of the French Left, 1848–1871,” D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1978.
4. Y.-H. Nouailhat, *France et Etats-Unis, août 1914-avril 1917* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1979); A. Kaspi, *Le temps des Américains, 1917–1918* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1976).
5. D. Artaud, *La question des dettes interalliées et la reconstruction de l'Europe* (Lille: A.R.T., 1978); D. Allen, “Modern American History,” in *French Views of America in the 1930s* (New York: Garland, 1979); D. Strauss, *Menace in the West: The Rise of French Anti-Americanism in Modern Times* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1978); K. Huvos, *Cinq mirages américaines: Les Etats-Unis dans l'oeuvre de G. Duhamel, J. Romains, A. Maurois, J. Maritain et S. de Beauvoir* (Paris: Didier, 1972).
6. J. Rupnick and M. Humbertjean, “Images des Etats-Unis dans l'opinion française,” in *L'Amérique dans les têtes* (Paris: Fayard, 1986).
7. With the notable exception of the book by S. Jeune, *De F.T. Graindorge à A.O. Barnabooth, les types américains dans le roman et le théâtre français (1867–1917)* (Paris: Didier, 1963).
8. P. Albert, *La France, les Etats-Unis et leurs presses, 1632–1976* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1977). The chapter treating the period 1880–1914 is entitled “A Time of Indifference.” J.-B. Duroselle, *La France et les Etats-Unis des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1976), also evokes “a century of distant relations, 1815–1914.”

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cataclysms, the Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War on the one hand, and the merciless War of 1914 on the other.

To be sure, relations between the United States and France were particularly peaceful during these years. There was nothing analogous to the alliance of 1778 followed by a quasiwar, or to the tensions that arose during the presidency of Andrew Jackson or the reign of Napoleon III. These were moments when the two countries approached but also confronted each other, although their relations never attained the intensity they were to have in the turbulent years of the twentieth century. Between the dates 1870 and 1914, which were more significant for France than for the United States, both on the grand stage of international relations and on the smaller stage of the relations between the two countries, there were few major crises, few outpourings of feelings.

Nonetheless, the scenery of Franco-American relations was not static, and some of the activity that took place upon it was bound to affect French opinion. Thus, the first years of the Third Republic were marked by a certain coolness. The Americans had been frightened by the Commune, and the French, even those who were Republicans, did not appreciate the compliments President Grant bestowed on the newly minted Emperor of Germany as early as 7 February 1871.⁹ Victor Hugo, the bard of the Republic, swept the public along in his anger, which recaptured the passionate tones of the *Châtiments*:

So now, people proud of prodigious endeavors,
Land of Fulton and Franklin and Penn,
Living dawn of a world, Oh Great Republic,
Your name now stands for a step to the dark!
Treason! to let Paris be struck by Berlin!
To invoke splendid daylight to foster the night!
How can you betray your tradition of freedom!
Lafayette came to aid you, joined by brave Rochambeau,
Now darkness threatens, yet you smother the torch!
How can you say: force is all that is true, the sword
Must dazzle all eyes when it strikes.
So bow down; twenty centuries of struggle are vain,
Progress, a vile snake, must writhe in the dust,
And selfish acts are a people's ideal.
Nothing is forever, nothing stays absolute.
The master commands; he is justice and truth.
So let everything die: rule of law, duty, freedom,
The future before us, reason to guide our steps,
Divine wisdom as well as the wisdom of men,

9. Cf. T. Stanton, "Le Général Grant et la France," *Revue de Paris* (1 Nov. 1894): 192.

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Dogma and the book, Voltaire and Jesus too –
Nothing counts under a German boot.

You whose gibbet casts a shadow immense
On a world in its youth as on one near its end,
John Brown, you who showed to the eyes of all nations
A new Golgotha under different skies,
Exalted and just one, untie the knot round your neck,
Come and whip now that man with your venerable rope!
For his is the fault that history in sorrow will speak:
– France came to the aid of America, drew
The sword and gave freely her all to deliver a friend,
And then, Nations, America stabbed generous France! –

That the savage, given to skulking and creeping,
That the Huron, proud of his sharp scalping knife,
Pays respect to that great bloodstained chief who rules Prussia,
That the Redskin admires the cruel Borussian,
'Tis no wonder, for he sees him poised for plunder and pillage,
Untamed and ferocious; his wood understands that forest afar.
But that the man who for Europe embodies rule of law,
The man bathed in bright rays of Columbian splendor,
The man who stirs memories of a heroic world –
That this man should now crawl on his belly before
The hideous iron scepter bequeathed by a dread past,
That he casts you, o Paris, into darkness and gloom,
That he delivers to the emperor that proud country he leads,
Entangling it with tyrants, with murder, with horror,
And submerging it in that awful triumph of wrong,
That he places this virgin into that bed of shame,
That he shows the whole world his America, kissing
The heel of Caesar on his foul chariot of triumph,
Oh! that shakes the walls of all the great tombs!
That, deep in their catacombs, rouses the pallid remains
Of proud victors and the valiant who suffered defeat!
Kosciusko, quivering with rage, rouses Spartacus;
Madison wakens and Jefferson rises;
Jackson holds up both hands to be spared this nightmare;
Dishonor! cries Adams; but a stunned Lincoln
Bleeds; the assassin has struck him today.

Be outraged, great people. O nation supreme,
I love you with tender and filial heart.
America, I weep. Oh! the sorrow I feel at this dreadful affront!
Her brow was still crowned with a halo of glory,
Her star-spangled banner made history proud.

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As Washington urged on his swift steed of glory,
 Sparks adhered to the folds of the standard fair,
 Witness to duty fulfilled,
 And then, to dispel any lingering shadow,
 He filled it superbly with the stars of the sky.
 This illustrious banner is deprived of its luster, alas!
 And I weep . . . Ah! cursed be the wretch who has made us to see
 On this proud flag as it waves in the heavenly breeze
 Drops of light stained with mud!¹⁰

The effect of such a cry was devastating and made itself felt until the 1880s. The very bad climate between the two countries explains why the genesis of the Statue of Liberty was so slow. Conceived under the Empire, when the United States offered the very model of the Republic, the project was launched by a national subscription only in 1876, and great efforts on the part of the promoters, Edouard Laboulaye and Auguste Bartholdi, were needed to reach its goal four years later. Meanwhile the statue, which should have marked the first centennial of the United States, became a French Republican symbol at a time when the Third Republic finally found its bearings. Strangely enough, once the colossal work was completed, handed over to the Americans on 4 July 1884, and inaugurated two years later on 28 October 1886, the statue that became an essential symbol of the Great American Republic preserved practically no trace of its French origin. Thus “Miss Liberty,” who had started out as a pure Frenchwoman, very soon became a hundred-percent American. In this manner, the extraordinary success of this gift given by France to the United States was diverted from its original meaning, and as a result contributed little to the warming of Franco-American relations.

Little wonder that the centenary of Yorktown in 1881 was the occasion of a few sour notes,¹¹ and that throughout the 1880s Franco-American relations were dominated by the paltry quarrel over the French prohibition of imported American pork. At this point, the two countries truly treated each other as “porcelain pigs”; they may not have had any serious dispute, but neither did they have any particular reason to mend fences.

It was not until the end of the decade that exchanges became more frequent, and that the American colony in Paris grew large enough to warrant the launching of a Paris edition of the *New York Herald* by James

10. Victor Hugo, “L’Année terrible,” *Poésie XII, Oeuvres complètes*, pp. 101–104.

11. The descendants of the few German officers who had aided the Americans during the War of Independence were treated with the same honors as the French, to the great indignation of the latter.

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Gordon Bennet in 1887. At the official level, the upgrading to the rank of embassies of the American diplomatic missions in 1893, accompanied by the required reciprocal measures, contributed to facilitating Franco-American relations. That same year the Chicago World's Fair was a major attraction for many Europeans.

Strangely enough, it was the Spanish-American War of 1898 that brought about a real rapprochement between France and the United States. Initially this event no doubt caused considerable concern, but it soon became clear that the Great Republic's ambitions were strictly regional. On the other hand, that Republic now attained the rank of a genuine great power, which made it easier for a country like France to deal with it.¹²

A good diplomatic understanding developed eventually, marked by the conclusion of a treaty of arbitration and by the United States' support of France at the Algésiras Conference. This entente owed a great deal to the accession to the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt following the assassination of President William McKinley. Roosevelt was a francophile, and the French liked him for his dynamism and his outspokenness. Beginning in 1900, the Franco-American rapprochement was celebrated whenever the occasion presented itself: Inaugurations of statues and busts, exchanges of professors, travel and official missions became increasingly frequent. A veritable Franco-American lobby brought together the descendants of the great French families who had played a role in the American Independence movement, people like the Lafayettes and the Rochambeaus, and writers or civil servants who had become accustomed to exchanges between the two countries.

Yet in fact the bases of the cordial Franco-American relations in the *Belle Epoque* were no more firm than the coolness of 1870–80 had been. The two countries maintained solid commercial ties, which remained fairly constant,¹³ but the number of French people who emigrated to America, barely a few thousand, was as small as ever.

In short, Franco-American relations were still quite superficial and carried little weight in an opinion absorbed by Fashoda [the colonial conflict with Great Britain in Africa], by the Dreyfus affair, and by the issue of separation of Church and State; however, their positive evolution was bound to be well received.

Thus, a “stock of images, stereotypes, and cultural references” could form over almost forty years, undisturbed by any sudden crisis but

12. J. Portes, “Un impérialisme circonscrit,” in J. Rouget, *L'Expansionnisme et le débat sur l'impérialisme aux Etats-Unis, 1885–1909* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1988), pp. 21–46.

13. A. Rowley, *Evolution économique de la France du milieu du XIXe siècle à 1914* (Paris: CEDES-CDU, 1982), p. 405.

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enriched and continually renewed, at least in part, by new developments in both countries, that of the observed and that of the observers.

To be sure, this period did not bring a major event that would have challenged French opinion as a whole, which did not seem to be interested, but one cannot help thinking of what was to come a few years later. Before too long the French, both in the intellectual milieu and in government circles – and even in the secret chambers of the decision makers – would have to enter into direct and intense relations with the Americans. Some experienced these relations in negotiations, others in their contacts with the troops from overseas, but in both cases, they had to call on their accumulated memories, “the presuppositions, the simplistic clichés, the distorted images,” or on the most serious information available at the time. The immediate nature of the events might well profoundly alter this body of data, but it could not disappear overnight. After all, those who had to decide or act both during the First World War and in the interwar period had all been trained and educated in the preceding period, and we know that the years of early training furnish the basis of a person’s knowledge and the framework of his or her thinking. When these people came to deal with the Americans, most were initially unable to base their attitude on anything but the data accumulated during the prewar years.

Practically all of the decision-makers . . . had been born before the century, had lived in the pre-1914 Europe, and were part of a mentality and a set of attitudes that are completely outdated today. . . .¹⁴

This statement shows the great importance of the period 1870–1914 for the formation of French opinion on many subjects, and particularly on the United States.

The calm relations between the two countries went hand in hand with political stability in both of them – a striking contrast with the preceding period.

In the United States, the nation’s unity was no longer contested and the automatic functioning of its institutions had resumed its more or less stately course. In France, despite some major jolts, the Third Republic had acquired a hitherto unknown permanence and, thanks to the victory of the Republicans and the rallying of the Catholics, was no longer seriously challenged.

The studies of René Rémond, Sim Copans, and Thomas A. Sancton have shown that the political position of French observers was of great importance in shaping their opinion about the United States, which acted as a kind of litmus test: “The American experience introduced an

14. J. Chelini, *L’Eglise sous Pie XII, “la tourmente, 1939–1945,”* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), p. 9.

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element of passion that was liable to upset the equanimity of the most objective minds.”¹⁵ This went so far that one author has formulated a rule stating that in the nineteenth century a change of regime in France furnished the key to a change in French opinion about the United States.¹⁶ It seems clear that after 1870 this explanation no longer holds, since the long-lived Third Republic was bound to shape French attitudes toward the American democracy in a lasting manner.

Yet this relative political quiescence by no means diminishes the richness of the period under study here, during which both France and the United States underwent profound changes that modified their respective positions in the world.

In many respects, the United States changed much more rapidly and profoundly than did France. One might liken them to two sailing ships of the same category taking off together at the starting gun and finding themselves at the end of the regatta, one still among the half-tonners and the other among the great ocean-going catamarans. Both countries had about forty million inhabitants in 1870, a figure that had remained almost unchanged for France in 1914, whereas it had more than doubled for the United States. If the French production of raw steel rose from 0.11 to 4.69 million tons between 1870 and 1914, that of the United States increased from 0.04 to 31.80 million tons. If Parisian buildings topped out at five stories, those of New York, a tall city already, joyfully reached forty by the eve of the war.

One could adduce many more statistics and comparisons for other areas, and the results would be similar. Although this comparison is interesting in itself, there is no need to push it very far, for the two countries were endowed very differently by history and by nature. But it is important to recall just how wide the distance between France and the United States became. Not that France remained immobile – far from it – but the pace of change in the United States was much more accelerated, so that its situation at the end of the period was completely different from what it had been at the beginning.

The rapid development of the United States during these years is so well known that a detailed discussion of it would be of little use; however, it has now become clear that by the 1890s, thanks to this development, that country was able to put into place the characteristics it was to retain for most of the twentieth century. A heterogeneous population, powerful economic development driven by very large companies, the diffusion

15. Rémond, *Les Etats-Unis dans l'opinion française*, p. 417.

16. D. Echeverria, “L'Amérique devant l'opinion française,” *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* (Jan.–March 1962): 59.

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of machine technology, a way of life marked by an emphasis on convenience, and an increasingly frequent presence on the international stage – these features can be observed almost unchanged from the first Roosevelt to the second.

How would the French react to profound change? The American example seemed rather difficult to follow; France could make every effort to modernize economically and to diversify socially, but it simply could not do it at the same pace. The notion of two sister-Republics did not hold up under scrutiny.

Yet the prodigious development of the United States also contributed to making the two countries more similar, despite the disparity of the results. Before the Civil War, the Great American Republic was an essentially agricultural country, marked by the shameful archaism of slavery, that played no more than an extremely minor role in international affairs. This made it very different from a France that had already entered the era of industrial development and was still very visible in world affairs. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the two countries certainly had different sail areas and tonnages, yet they sailed the same waters and were no longer ships of different categories.

The French would have to become used to this changed balance. To this end they were subjected to the prejudices René Rémond has brought to light in his book *Les Etats-Unis devant l'opinion française, 1815–1852*; however, these prejudices did not allow them to come to grips with the new realities. Shaping French opinion became a new field of endeavor; it might focus on the daily life of the Americans and their food habits as well as on social conflicts or the development of American imperialism. The French had something to say on a great many subjects, and it was necessary to take this into consideration and to extend the study of French opinion to hitherto neglected areas for which the United States furnished the most telling examples.

Thanks to this inevitable renewal of the very bases of observation, the United States should have become more and more intelligible. But once the French became accustomed to scrutinizing the mysteries of the future in America, would they discover them where we know them to have been, that is to say, far away from the traditional examples to which they had usually looked in the past? Would they allow themselves to be carried away by their prejudices, or, rather, by the lure of the turning crystal ball whose thousand iridescent facets reflected American reality of the moment?

These are the questions that must be answered in order to reconstitute the “global opinion” of the French concerning the United States between

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1870 and 1914. In this period of long-term maturation, French opinion was fed by a variety of channels. On the one hand, there was the regular flood of prejudices left over from the past in areas where they could still apply, along with new questions raised by the situation within France itself. In the latter category were the place of the Catholic Church and the problem of free and universal primary education, to mention only two particularly striking examples. On the other hand, certain specifically American events and forms of development claimed the attention of the French, gave rise to judgments, and contributed to shaping their opinions. Among these were the War of 1898 against Spain and the development of “monopolistic industries” at the turn of the twentieth century.

There was continuous interaction between these two sources of information and reflection, and one must try to determine the share of each in order to gain a better understanding of the alchemy at work in the formation and evolution of French opinion. Establishing these boundaries is particularly important because things American became increasingly ubiquitous in the course of this period. American businesses, particularly insurance companies, established themselves in Europe, including, of course, France. As was only normal, advertisements routinely appeared in the press, giving even greater visibility to the American presence. Similarly, beginning in the 1890s, articles about the United States from press services were featured more and more frequently in the Parisian dailies, often without additional commentary.¹⁷ Modern means of communication and transportation brought about a spectacular rise in personal exchanges by mail, mutual visits, and the development of international congresses. A large number of Americans, about 10,000 of them around 1900, were living more or less permanently in Paris and had daily contacts of all kinds with French people. In fact, the echo of great marriages between penniless aristocrats and daughters of magnates of industry or banking – Boni de Castellane and Anna Gould – is heard to this day.

Aside from the great difficulty of reviewing them in a satisfactory manner, it should be pointed out that these kinds of multiple contacts represent a particular aspect of the study of opinion.¹⁸ While the French no doubt did form an idea of the Americans through these contacts, the fact that these took place in France itself, within an accustomed framework and the familiarity this implies, was not conducive to shaping French opinion about the United States as a whole.

17. M.B. Palmer, *Des petits journaux aux grandes agences* (Paris: Aubier, 1984).

18. H. Blumenthal, *American and French Culture, 1800–1900: Interchanges in Art, Science, Literature and Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965).