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0521026911 - Fascination and Misgivings: The United States in French Opinion, 1870-1914

Jacques Portes

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Fascination and Misgivings

The United States in French Opinion, 1870–1914

Through the views of French travelers and diverse French studies about the United States, this book shows that the United States held a pivotal place in the French consciousness during the second half of the nineteenth century. The American landscape, skyscrapers, and the presence of Native and African Americans were puzzling and exotic to the French. At the same time, towns and industry gave the proof of an emerging economic power also present on the international scene. Meanwhile, the French people found attractive models of social engineering in American society: schools and universities, the changing role of women, the birth of the middle class. Even before World War I, the United States found its place in French opinion, following trends that were to continue throughout the twentieth century: fascination and misgivings, attraction and repulsion.

Jacques Portes is Professor of American History at the University of Paris VIII. He won the first Organization of American Historians (OAH) Foreign-Language Book Prize, as well as a prize from the French Academy of Belles Lettres, for the French-language version of this book. He has also written, in French, a book about the Vietnam War and the American people, and another about the birth of mass culture in the United States. He has traveled extensively in the United States and has presented papers at OAH and American Historical Association conferences, as well as in Europe.

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Preface

The title of Jacques Portes's book, *Fascination and Misgivings*, immediately reveals its twofold purpose and the two poles between which it constantly oscillates. On the one hand, the United States continues to exert an undeniable fascination on French opinion; it is a fascination in which certain myths (and illusions) of earlier decades are still present. On the other hand – and this is the novel aspect of this study – this same opinion is beginning to show signs of misgivings and hesitation, even criticism and objections to what was until now considered, rightly or wrongly, the American model. This more apparent than real contradiction constitutes the originality of this study, the result of long digging in the rich loam of both literature and journalism, travel accounts and the treatises of economists, work that was rewarded with a doctorate. The present version is a less academic adaptation of that thesis.

The most symbolic example of that duality is the famous Statue of Liberty. The idea of commemorating the centenary of the United States' independence and the Franco-American alliance with the gift of a colossal statue was the brainchild of a liberal French jurist, professor at the Collège de France, Edouard de Laboulaye, at the end of the Second Empire. At the time, the gesture made a political point, which was to consecrate the United States as the land of liberty at a moment when liberty was still under threat in France. It took twenty years to carry out this project, in part because of the change of regimes in France in 1871, but also because of the Americans' lack of interest in this symbolic gift. For to the great indignation of the French, they were not even eager to contribute to the building of a pedestal, without which Bartholdi's work, the generous gift of individuals, associations, and collectives, could not be placed in its assigned location on Bedloe's Island, where it would greet new immigrants as they approached their new country at the entrance of New York harbor. When the famous statue was finally inaugurated in 1886, the anniversaries that would have been appropriate had all passed:

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1876 (Declaration of Independence), 1878 (French alliance), and 1883 (recognition of American independence). But who cared? Nobody did, because in the end nothing is more artificial than to cling to historical memories when they are overtaken by realities for which the living are not ready.

These are the realities Jacques Portes has endeavored to capture with the historian's tools, in other words, by keeping close to the documents he assembled in a long and varied pursuit.

The period under study (1870–1914) corresponds to the only liberal phase in French history, a period that seems fairly baffling to the outside observer. During the earlier authoritarian regimes, whether it be the Empire (First or Second) or the monarchy (Bourbon or Orleanist), America had always served as reference, for it was a country where the fundamental liberties, those that were proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, in the Bill of Rights, or in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, were always respected and honored, whereas in France they were openly flouted. Hence the popularity of Lafayette's flights of lyricism, the sorrow felt at Lincoln's assassination, and the success of the letters Clemenceau published in *Le Temps*. Hence also the role of refuge played by the United States for those who had been banished by the successive French regimes, people as diverse as Chateaubriand, Volney, Talleyrand, Hyde de Neuville, Joseph Bonaparte, and later Cabet and Victor Considerant. After 1871, once France had regained its liberty, the United States ceased to play the role of beacon it had represented for the enlightened segments of French opinion. Witness the famous American Constitution of 1787, so often invoked previously, but barely mentioned by the framers of the French so-called Constitution of 1875. Why continue referring to the United States, now that liberty had been firmly established in the French hexagon?

As the political aura of the United States began to weaken, its perception by the French underwent a radical change. Until late in the nineteenth century, they continued to consider it a simple, even patriarchal nation, committed to the virtues of landownership; in short, a colonial country, if not in its political organization then at least in its activities and its mores. To the average French person, the Americans were the major purveyors of cotton, which had been sorely missed during the Civil War, and the representatives of a society that evoked a certain nostalgia for the French sugar islands. Slavery, to be sure, had just been abolished, but the consequences of this fact were as yet difficult to grasp. What the French discovered in the last decades of the nineteenth century was a new face of the United States, a country in the throes of both industrialization and expansion.

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Industry and expansion had hitherto been the monopoly of the old continent. This traditional order of things was first upset by the appearance in everyday life of a whole series of mechanical inventions from across the sea: the Singer sewing machine, the McCormick harvester, the Remington typewriter, canned meats from Swift or Armour, incandescent lightbulbs and Edison's phonograph, Morse's telegraph and Bell's telephone. It was a far cry from the pioneers conquering the Great Plains or the California Gold Rush to the great factories where standardized products that transformed daily life were manufactured even before Henry Ford's methods led to the spread of automobiles for everyone. How had this come about? This was the question economists attempted to answer in works like Levasseur's *L'ouvrier américain*. New forms of work had appeared, and they constituted a challenge to the employers and workers of old Europe.

Crossing another threshold and stepping into a domain that was hitherto the preserve of the traditional great powers, the United States also began to engage in expansion, in what some qualified as imperialism. Not satisfied with dominating the North American continent after driving out the Russians, it decided to move into the Pacific Basin, where it took over Guam, Samoa, the Hawaiian Islands, and the Philippines, and into the Caribbean, where it annexed Cuba and Puerto Rico. And the connection between these two spheres of expansion was to be safeguarded by the takeover of Panama, where the United States bought the French company that was building the Panama Canal. Where would all this ambition stop? And here was President Theodore Roosevelt, offering to help the Emperor of Japan and the Tsar settle the conflict that pitted their two countries against each other and playing the role of mediator between France and Germany in their quarrel over Morocco.

The French certainly did not recognize their America, the America of Fenimore Cooper, Emerson, Mark Twain, or Edgar Allan Poe, in the power that burst onto the stage of material life and international politics in this manner. It had lost what some called its virginity, and what others characterized as its exceptionalism. This was a decisive shift that often baffled those who had little or no information. People had no inkling that one day the French would appeal to the Americans – as a last resort and on two occasions – to help them regain their liberty when it was threatened once again, not by yet another revolution but by the invasion of their closest neighbor.

Between 1870 and 1914 the French thus witnessed a fundamental transformation of their relations of thought, production, and power with America. Jacques Portes has shown great originality when he chose to carry out a global and total analysis of this phenomenon, and to evoke

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the different forms in which it expressed itself during these decisive years. The fact that such an analysis had never before been attempted is sufficient to underscore the interest and the freshness of this work. In the wake of changes in the traditional perceptions, old stereotypes lost some of their force, while new representations were not easily accepted, and this was true in many different areas. What, in the end, was left of the famous “American Mirage,” so well described by Durand Echeverria? Almost nothing.

These are the realities Jacques Portes has captured well. His way of going about it will astonish and even shock certain readers, for it overthrows many received ideas. And yet it has the merit of providing a faithful account of an evolution that was until now poorly understood or altogether misinterpreted. The author is to be congratulated and thanked, and may he be rewarded by the success this book deserves!

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