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Henri Mendras

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Introduction



The last thirty-five years have witnessed a new French Revolution. Although peaceful, this has been just as profound as that of 1789 because it has totally overhauled the moral foundations and social equilibrium of French society. This judgement must not be impaired by the fact that violence has had no part within this second French Revolution, except for the limited violence of May 1968. Despite the profound transformations that have occurred during the post-war period, the idea of the 'Revolution', in the form of the violent and brutal upheaval of society, has today become a myth. The hymn to the Revolution sung by the revolutionaries of May 1968 seems anachronistically utopian in an industrialised society at the end of the twentieth century.

A number of salient features have characterised the Second French Revolution, which has overhauled the equilibrium of French society as it had existed since 1789.

The demographic and economic expansion of the post-war period until the onset of the economic crisis in the 1970s (1945–1975) has been sufficiently analysed by economists to preclude further examination here. After a century of demographic stagnation (1840–1940) France's population rose dramatically after the war, from 42,000,000 to 56,000,000 within one generation. Simultaneously, economic production forged ahead and the structure of the French economy was radically altered. The nation's wealth increased in a totally unprecedented manner and economic production multiplied five-fold within several decades.

The two dominant social classes produced by the French Revolution, the peasantry and the bourgeoisie, have disappeared. The expansion of tertiary-sector employment and the birth of the *cadres* (see below) have produced a complete overhaul in the nation's social class structure.

Industry and the industrial working class are in decline, despite the post-war economic boom.

The opposition between the town and the countryside, which was born

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with the industrialisation of the nineteenth century, is becoming blurred because an urban lifestyle now prevails everywhere. However, the nature of life in the towns has itself dramatically changed.

The great national institutions such as the army, the church and the republic are no longer challenged in principle by particular sections of society, and they have lost their immense symbolic importance and ideological character. Alternative symbols, such as the red flag, and the hammer and sickle (which figure on the national flag of over twenty Communist nations), have lost their revolutionary meaning in contemporary France.

National unification has become complete because of the influence of the education system, the universal penetration of French (at the expense of minority languages) and the development of the mass media. The extent of centralisation has made the decentralisation of power both necessary and possible.

Individualism has made such progress that it is no longer considered as an ideology, but merely as a way of life shared by everybody.

It is clear that we are witnessing the collapse of the post-revolutionary France that came into existence during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the contours and characteristics of the new France still appear uncertain. The objective of this book is to attempt to discern the architecture of this new French society.

THE 'THIRTY YEARS' WAR' 1914–1945

In order to understand the real extent of world upheaval between 1914 and 1945, we shall follow de Gaulle's advice and consider 'this thirty years' war as a whole', marked by two five-year conflicts, by the murderous Bolshevik Revolution and by an economic crisis which changed the equilibrium of Western capitalism. France emerged victorious but exhausted from the First World War. The glory of its armies and its field marshals could not hide the fact that the nation had suffered heavy losses in men and capital. The economic crisis of the 1930s became transformed in France into a political and social crisis, which was sanctioned by defeat at the hands of Hitler in 1940.

On the eve of the First World War, France remained a profoundly peasant society with almost half of its population making a living directly or indirectly from agriculture. Although it possessed its native bourgeoisie (see chapter 1), France had yet to become a profoundly industrialised society, in contrast with the UK, which since the end of the eighteenth century had sacrificed its agriculture to its industrial and commercial development. If its industry was less prosperous than that of the UK or Germany, the economic and financial power of France was nonetheless considerable. Large amounts

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of French capital were invested overseas: in China, in South America and in Eastern Europe (especially in Russia). Curiously, however, there was little investment in France's colonies.

In the political and ideological arena, France incarnated the liberal and humanitarian ideas of the Revolution and the Paris Commune for rebels throughout the world. In 1914, along with Switzerland, France was the only republic in Europe; all the other countries were still monarchies. Indeed, in many countries the republican anthem the *Marseillaise* was forbidden as a revolutionary song and still shocked traditionally inclined people in the French provinces. For Jews worldwide, France appeared a haven of tolerance and protection after the Dreyfus affair, which was viewed as a triumph for equal rights, invariably denied to Jews elsewhere. That representation was all the more paradoxical in so far as historians today see the Dreyfus affair as a manifestation of the anti-Semitism of a majority of the French people.

After the 1918 victory and the Treaty of Versailles, France presented itself as the head of the allied coalition against the vanquished German enemy. Alongside its initial politico-military domination of Europe after the First World War, France could also claim to be the prevailing cultural force in Europe. The League of Nations, whose existence had been willed by the USA, was dominated by the oratorical art of French politicians. Moreover, the 1937 Great Exhibition made Paris the centre of cultural attraction in the world. These great events left the French people in no doubt that their nation was still top. This position appeared to be disputed only by England: neither a defeated Germany, nor an impoverished and tyrannised Russia, nor even an isolationist America could pose a threat to France's leadership amongst nations. In the 1920s the French army became the strongest in Europe, and its colonial empire continued to develop in every region of the world. French culture remained dominant and the French language was the one used in diplomatic conversations and at the League of Nations. Paris was the unchallenged literary and artistic capital, and attracted artists and intellectuals from all over the world.

Although France continued to present a positive image to the world and to itself, the nation's sharp decline in the 1930s was felt by everybody. It was certainly recognised by Hitler, to whom it gave room for audacious military manoeuvres, as well as by Stalin, who eventually changed sides and preferred to ally with Nazi Germany. France's decline was also felt by the small peasant in his field, or by the artisan in his workshop. France's intellectual and artistic influence during the inter-war period masked a worrying economic and demographic stagnation. The Popular Front left-wing government of 1936/7 is celebrated by the left as a time of unprecedented social

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progress, but few can deny that it was an economic catastrophe, or that the Socialist-led government proved incapable of dealing with the economic constraints imposed by the existing social and economic machinery. In fact, whatever their political complexion, successive governments suffered from an inability to make decisions, which finally led to the allies ceding to Hitler at Munich in 1938. In less than ten years, the French nation had lost its nerve and its power. Such a rapid decline appeared to be the delayed effect of the exhausting effort and horrible slaughter of the First World War which had deprived France of its finest flower. The government's loss of willpower was only one manifestation of the rapid decay suffered by the country in between 1931 and 1939, which led it to the collapse of 1940.

Despite the image of national *grandeur* presented to the outside world, French society became completely introverted during the inter-war period and organised upon the basis of static, anachronistic social structures. The nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, described in chapter 1, was ruined after the war. Pre-war investments in eastern Europe and overseas collapsed in the political and economic crises of the late 1920s and the 1930s. More than one and a half million households, which held Russian bonds given in return for the large loans accorded by the French government to the Tsarist regime before the war, were completely dispossessed of their investments when the new Bolshevik rulers cancelled all overseas debts. Moreover, French stocks and shares yielded low dividends and their stock-market value fell constantly. During the inter-war period, around one-half of the working population was composed of non-salaried, independent workers, such as small businessmen, artisans, shopkeepers and professionals. These 'independents' survived in a subsistence economy, and refused to invest or start up businesses. Small family firms, which had made France prosperous before the war (especially in the South), survived only for as long as one generation struggled to make them profitable, but they invariably closed once the first generation took retirement and its sons moved to the large towns to seek alternative employment. Both the small and medium-sized bourgeoisie and the peasantry lived increasingly modest lives during this period, and they had to cut back on all forms of expenditure. The overall impression was one of a period during which living standards were declining despite France's claim to greatness on the world stage.

In 1945, at the end of the last battles of this thirty years' war, the balance of power in the world had completely changed. The dismantlement of the colonial empires created a new political map in Africa and in parts of Asia which was conducive to all sorts of conflicts. Amongst the traditional monarchies, the only survivors were those which had conferred power to a parliamentary regime, and which conserved only a symbolic function. The

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remaining countries of the world were divided between pluralistic democracies and single-party states, which were to a greater or lesser extent totalitarian. The predictions of the great visionaries of the nineteenth century had at last come true: the world was dominated by two superpowers, the USA and the USSR. England, Germany and France became second-rate powers, and it was widely expected that Japan and then China (and later on perhaps Brazil and India) would take their place in the international hierarchy.

The French people rapidly understood the nature of this new world balance of power and France's position within it. Traumatized by the 1940 collapse and then by successive colonial defeats in the 1950s and early 1960s, they accepted that their country was a second-rate power. However, they did not renounce their aspirations for France to continue to play a world role, which de Gaulle presented to them as a 'burning obligation'. They readily understood that a strong economy and active diplomacy, supported by a powerful army, were the main instruments for playing this role. Although they had been overcome by foreign arms in 1940, the French people showed themselves to be capable during the post-war period of staging a dramatic demographic and economic recovery. Such a national recovery merits an explanation, which this book attempts to provide. Before undertaking the explanation, however, we must situate French society in its chronological context during the post-war period.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SECOND FRENCH REVOLUTION

In 1944 France found itself in a state of destruction and disorganisation which had no parallel in any other country. During the war, it had been forced to fall back upon the basic networks of family and neighbourhood relations, which had ensured people's survival. In the immediate post-war period, the nation still used equipment and machinery which had not been replaced since 1930. By 1950 France had rebuilt its ruins, replaced outdated machinery and equipment, recovered its GNP of 1939, and launched itself into a giant industrial leap forward. By 1965, the country had caught up for the first time with the projected growth rate that had been made back in 1900–14.

Thus twenty years were needed to make up for the losses (and the failures to gain) that had been incurred during thirty years of wars and economic crises between 1914 and 1944. In other words, in 1965 France recovered the position that it ought to have occupied had its economic growth continued calmly along the upward curve established at the beginning of the century. In the years after 1965, economic growth in France continued at an astonishing 6 per cent annual average until the aftermath of the oil crisis of 1973.

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The 'thirty glorious years' after the war enabled France to multiply its income five-fold and to triple its productive capital (see figure 1).

This fantastic enrichment was all the more spectacular in that it went hand in hand with a rapid upturn in population (see figure 2). In the half-century of demographic stagnation preceding the war, a low birth rate had been compensated by a strong influx of immigrants, which had just about managed to keep the population at its 1900 level. The post-war baby-boom and continuing high levels of immigration led to spectacular increases in population which helped to accelerate the move towards the towns in the 1960s. During the 1960s, economists, town-planners and developers confidently announced that France would soon be virtually entirely urbanised: 80 per cent of the population would live in towns. Despite these predictions, and despite a very real exodus of population, the rural infrastructure has maintained itself into the 1980s, and around one-half of the population continues to live in villages and small rural towns of under 20,000 inhabitants. After years of rural exodus, the population of the countryside and small towns has recently been growing more quickly than in the towns: between 1975 and 1982 the rate of demographic growth in rural communes was 7 per cent, compared with 3 per cent for the country as a whole and 1 per cent for the large towns. Notwithstanding thirty years of urbanisation, France remains the most rural of all the industrialised nations.

In 1945, the heads of almost half (45 per cent) of French households were independent workers, who lived by running a small farm, shop or business. Forty years later, the vast bulk of the active population (85 per cent) were wage-earners, working for employers other than themselves. The peasants, who represented one-third of the population in 1945, have been replaced by a far smaller group of farmers (6 per cent). Whereas the *cadres* did not exist

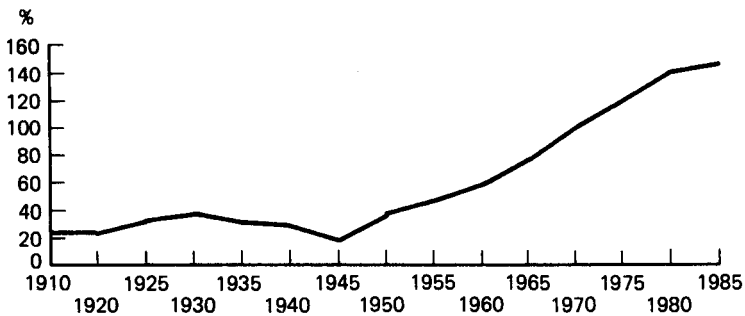


Figure 1 Growth of national income (1972 = 100).

Source: INSEE

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in 1945 as a recognisable occupational category, forty years later they comprised around one-fifth of the workforce.

Several political landmarks more or less coincided with the beginnings of this fundamental social transformation: the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1955, the birth of the Fifth Republic in 1958, and the end of the Algerian war and the process of decolonisation in 1962. Perhaps the last date was the most important of all, since for the first time since 1939, France no longer found itself at war. Moreover, for the first time in its history, the fear of war was about to disappear from the nation's life as the major anxiety of most French people. A new lasting era of peace had begun. For French people born since 1945, there is the virtually unanimous expectation that they will not have to fight in a war during their lifetimes, whereas every preceding generation had had to contemplate the possibility of armed combat and the honour and duty of dying for one's country.

In a number of spheres, the year 1965 represented the first major modification in the upward progress of post-war demographic and economic trends. The birth rate dropped for the first time since the war, and the productivity of fixed capital (which had been growing since 1946) began to diminish. These two reversals were symptomatic of a more general movement which was discernible in many other spheres. The length of the working week, which had risen slightly from 1946 to 1964, began a decline which has been continuing ever since and which has accelerated as a result of more paid holidays, the rise in unemployment and earlier retirement. Unemployment, which had been maintained at the level of around 3 per cent, began a slow increase which would reach 11 per cent of the working population in 1987 (see figure 3). Despite the increase in overall unemployment since 1965, female employment has expanded rapidly since then: whereas women comprised only 30 per cent of the working population in 1965, they

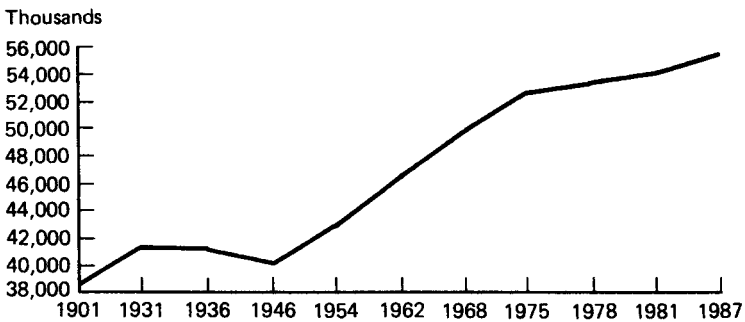


Figure 2 Growth of the French population. Source: INSEE

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represented 44 per cent in 1985. Finally, immigration began to rise from 1965 onwards. As a result of all these partially contradictory movements, the number of those in work began to grow rapidly: an average of 19,000,000 from 1945 to 1965, 21,000,000 in 1975 and 25,000,000 in 1985. The result of this has been that the indices of the number of unemployed and of those in work have followed an almost parallel upward evolution. Amongst other demographic trends which can usefully be dated from 1965 are increases in life-expectancy for men and women, the rise in the divorce rate and a decline in the annual number of marriages.

If we shift our attention away from economic and demographic statistics towards significant events, the year 1965 clearly represents a turning point in the history of modern France.

For the first time the President of the Republic was elected by direct universal suffrage, which radically transformed the functioning of republican institutions.

The conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in Rome transformed the discipline and the rites of the Catholic Church.

Although the first hyper-market opened its doors in 1963, it was in 1965 that this new form of commerce began to expand with staggering rapidity. There would soon be no clearer sign that the lifestyle of French people was being transformed and that culture patterns were becoming more homogeneous.

Cheap paperback books (*livres de poche*), another instrument for the spread of mass culture, began to appear in bookshops from around this date.

The University of Nanterre opened its doors in 1965, the first new university created to cater for the massive, ten-fold increase in the number of students. Nanterre lay behind the initial spark which fired the May 1968 'revolution'.

The first nude pictures appeared in magazines and at the cinemas. A near two thousand-year-old practice of 'decency' was suddenly called into question.

The expression of hedonistic values, which had been repressed before the sixties, suddenly expanded within all strata of society.

These various indicators and events mark 1965 as the year which ended one stage of post-war development: that of economic and social reconstruction. The French people appeared suddenly to have become aware that a hard twenty-year effort to reconstruct the nation was about to bear fruit, that they could take a break, work less and have fewer children, in order to start enjoying the rewards of their labour. The Second French Revolution was beginning.

In relation to 1965, May 1968 appeared as the symbolic expression of a

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profound transformation that had been taking place for three years. During revolutions, symbols are more important than the events that they express, and are the moving forces of change. The causes of the May 1968 events have been analysed in numerous books. The reaching of adulthood by the first generation of the post-war baby-boom is one explanation that everybody agrees with. Such a phenomenon also occurred in other Western nations, and this helped to explain why similar events took place in the same year in a number of countries which were otherwise very different. However, the events in France were different from those which took place in other countries, since it was only in France that a nationwide strike emerged from a mere student rebellion. Only a fundamental transformation of society could explain why such a movement emerged in France. The awareness and violent expression of this transformation gave the May 1968 movement its particular character. Both ideology and symbolism contain their own dynamism which can slow down or accelerate movements within society; they became the central moving forces of the May 1968 social uprising.

The fantastic leap-forward of the 1950s had occurred with scarcely any political change taking place by comparison to the inter-war period. The Fourth Republic was increasingly difficult to distinguish from the pre-war Third Republic, and its institutions soon became paralysed by the quarrels of factions and parties. After the war, the same politicians returned to power. Moreover, despite the profound transformations which were occurring within France's post-war system of social classes, the same bourgeois personalities dominated the real positions of power at every level of society. The economic miracle of the post-war period was largely achieved

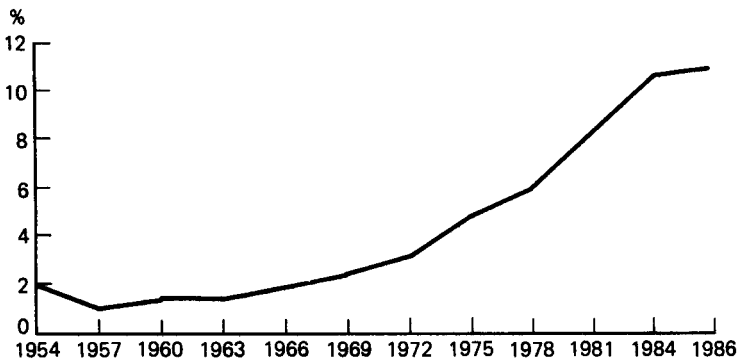


Figure 3 The unemployed as a percentage of the total working population. Source: INSEE

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thanks to economies of scale, which promoted the development of institutional giants (huge companies, dealing with large government departments) alongside of which the individual felt isolated and impotent.

The ideological reaction to the creation of vast institutions was commonly expressed in the slogan 'small is beautiful'. It is not so much what is small which is beautiful and seductive, however, as the diversity and complexity of contemporary western societies. Since 1968, all Western societies have abandoned ingrained ideas of the need for growth at any price, and recognised that the desire for economic growth must be set alongside the need to manage complex and diversified social structures in a cohesive manner. Within the French context, the compulsive drive for economic growth has been modified since 1968 to take into account the demand for more collective facilities, and for a greater cohesion amongst the different groups within society.

The young revolutionaries of May 1968 also demanded a more transparent society. Paradoxically, the May 1968 revolutionaries could be likened to the technocrats in the civil service, who dreamt up perfect descriptions of society in order to be able to manage that society more rationally. Both visions were equally naive, since at that very time French society was becoming increasingly complex, impenetrable and difficult to analyse in terms of categories or statistics. Neither the technocrats' nor the students' utopia, both of which promised a stifling world, has materialised.

The first oil crisis of 1973 was initially considered as the beginning of a new temporary hiccup in the economy which would be overcome as rapidly as others during the post-war period. This did not occur. Certain economic indices (for example inflation) began showing signs of a more durable crisis. The invention of 'stagflation' in the 1960s was the concrete sign that the post-war economic miracle was drawing to a close. Another indicator was that although the rise in GNP and average incomes continued after 1973, they did so at a slower rate and levelled off completely in 1983. Despite this, most social and demographic indicators continued in their earlier patterns: unemployment, female employment, life-expectancy and divorce all continued to rise; whereas the birth and marriage rates continued to fall.

The economic 'rules of the game' became unsettled throughout the world from 1965 onwards. The traditional industrial sectors in the developed nations became less and less of a motor for growth, and were replaced by service industries fuelled by growing consumption and by industries based on new technologies. The economists who had previously claimed to be able to manage growth suddenly found themselves at a loss to explain or control the profound transformations that were occurring in patterns of