SOCIAL CHANGE IN MODERN FRANCE

_Social Change in Modern France_ describes and explains the radical transformations which have taken place within French society during the past thirty-five years. The authors contend that these changes constitute a revolution in French affairs as important as that of 1789. Since the late 1950s the traditional social structures of the Third Republic have been transformed: peasantry and bourgeoisie have disappeared or mutated; the great national institutions of church, army, trade unions and schools have declined or severely weakened, and a late and rapid industrialisation has wrought profound economic changes. Even the French Communist Party has become a virtual irrelevance. All these institutions, so characteristic of French society throughout the Third Republic, have now ceased to be the object of major conflicts and tensions. In their stead local institutions, voluntary associations and the family have acquired a renewed strength and serve as the basic network for social relations and social life. Traditional French ‘joie de vivre’ has become diversified, and expressed in a series of varied life-styles. In contrast to the conventional analysis of a conflictive, endemically unstable country, Mendras and Cole regard contemporary France as a sturdy and cohesive society, based on widespread consensus.
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Social change in modern France

Towards a cultural anthropology of the Fifth Republic

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Preface

Social Change in Modern France originated as La Seconde Révolution française, by Henri Mendras. It started from the precept that the social sciences had recently become too specialised, that social scientists were in danger of losing sight of the overall structure of society by concentrating too exclusively on their own specialisms. Taking as its object the post-war social revolution and the likely future evolution of French society, the book set itself the task of drawing together the main pieces of this complex mosaic, in order to give a comprehensive overview of the whole. This procedure is obviously open to the objection that it leads to a cavalier interpretation of each particular sphere of society, upon which specialists would prefer to deliberate alone. This risk is fully assumed by the authors. The dual ambition of Social Change in Modern France is to provide a considered analysis of the revolution which has changed French society during the past thirty-five years and to attempt to draw an outline of the new society of the third millennium, which is presently in the process of construction.

In its analysis of the Second French Revolution, the book concentrates initially upon the great institutions (such as the church, the army, the school and local government) and their working-class counterparts (the Communist Party and the trade unions), which have traditionally claimed so much attention. It charts the fundamental changes to which they have been subjected. It looks beyond these institutions, however, and seeks to discover the new social structures which organise the lives of groups and individuals. These institutions are frequently barely visible; indeed, they are often still in the process of being invented.

The great success of La Seconde Révolution française in France prompted Professor Mendras to have the book translated into English: Alistair Cole agreed to undertake the task. What began as a work of translation, however, was transformed into one of adaptation, interpretation and creation. The result is that Social Change in Modern France is more than a translation of La Seconde Révolution française: it is the fruit of a collaboration between Henri
Mendras as author, and Alistair Cole as co-author. The authors hope that "Social Change in Modern France" will fill an important vacuum in the understanding of contemporary France in the English-speaking world. It attempts to provide a serious but accessible sociological study, we hope avoiding the pitfalls of journalese and impressionism which have characterised most other such works. The authors are grateful to Vincent Wright of Nuffield College, Oxford, who played no small part in the materialisation of this project, and to Shirley Letwin, who read the manuscript. Any mistakes are, of course, our own.