Chapter 1
The end of French exceptionalism?

The French distinguish themselves by thinking they are universal.
Paul Valéry (1871–1945)

In early January 2002, Jean-Marie Messier, head of the water-distribution-to-mobile-phones conglomerate Vivendi Universal, announced in a resounding interview the end of *l'exception française*. The furore which then arose from virtually every corner of politics and the media revealed the deep-rooted belief that France had remained, and should remain for the foreseeable future, a society different from its neighbours and partners. Different parties attach different meanings to this claim but all amount to a call to the government to set standards for society at large and enforce them. What Messier may have been voicing, however, was not so much a normative judgement as a statement of fact, pointing out the relentless erosion of cultural identities in the Western world and beyond. In this he was undoubtedly right. This process of convergence and standardisation, often referred to as 'Americanisation', in many aspects of social life, economic and otherwise, has affected France as it has its European neighbours, with increasing vigour in the second half of the century.

1. The end of Malthusianism

Convergence has affected first and foremost French patterns of demographic behaviour. The first Western nation historically to have undergone a demographic transition (a drastic reduction of its birth rate), France saw its population virtually stagnate for close to a hundred years from the middle of the nineteenth century

Table 1.1 Age structure of French and British population, 1914

%	France	Britain
aged below 20	33.6	40.1
aged 20–60	53.6	51.4
aged 60 and over	12.8	8.5

onwards. In 1936 it numbered thirty-nine million people, barely more than in 1836 (thirty-six million). 'Malthusian' behaviour (the voluntary limitation of family size) has been linked to precocious and widespread birth-control practices,[1] conceived as a strategy to maintain property holdings intact since the Code Civil (1804) stipulated the equal division of the family estate between siblings. As a result, the single-child family was especially prevalent in France before the Second World War.

From a demographic standpoint, the twentieth century can be conveniently divided into three successive and distinct periods: until 1945; from 1945 to 1968; and from 1968 onwards. Up to the Second World War the prolonged stagnation of the French population had far-reaching implications. In terms of numbers France was no longer a 'heavy-weight' on the Continent as other countries caught up with her; this affected the relative size of her army and therefore her military potential). But it meant also that France's population was ageing much faster than that of other comparable countries (see Table 1.1). The falling birth rate sometimes prevented the replacement of generations: from 1908 to 1912 and again between 1935 and 1939 France experienced negative population growth. Both before and after the First World War, foreign immigrants – first, Italian and Belgian, and later Polish and Spanish – came to fill the consequent gap in the workforce. France's ailing population was further hit by the hecatomb of the world wars. In the first, of all belligerents (bar Serbia) France suffered the highest casualty rate relative to its population. In addition to its 1.4 million dead, a vast majority of them young men, the number of wounded

[1] A British historian quipped that nineteenth-century French demographic behaviour amounted to 'copulation without population'.

Table 1.2 Population growth per annum by periods, 1870–1998

Period	France	Western Europe
1870–13	0.18	0.77
1913–50	0.02	0.42
1950–73	0.96	0.70
1973–98	0.48	0.32

(2.5 million) and the birth deficit in wartime (1.7 million) caused a gender imbalance in the interwar years which further depressed the birth rate. France paid a less catastrophic toll in the Second World War: less than half the number of lives lost in the first war and merely 400,000 births forgone (as a result of the internment of 1.8 million prisoners of war). But, unlike after the former war, the consequences of the latter were soon erased by the 'baby boom' which swept Western Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War.

No explanation can fully account for the reversal of the fertility rate which occurred in 1942, in the darkest hours of Nazi occupation, but the pickup proved to be lasting: in the thirty years which followed, France experienced, on the strength of a fertility rate of over 2.5 children per woman, the fastest rate of natural increase in its recent history (this was paralleled in terms of economic growth). After the Second World War the French population increased by a third, to fifty-two million by 1971. Having been outpaced until the mid-century by most European countries, France found itself leading the pack (see Table 1.2). The immediate causes of this change are fairly well documented: they can be safely traced to a sharp fall in the death rate, especially the infant mortality rate (which fell twenty fold in the course of one generation) and the consequent extension of average life expectancy. At the beginning of the century, this was 48.5 years for men and 52.4 for women; it is today 75 and 82 respectively.

But such developments also obviously involved deep cultural, even psychological, features which were common to most advanced countries at the time. In the French case the 'baby boom' can be seen as a conjunction of two phenomena: on the one hand the maintenance, in the context of sharply falling infant mortality, of

relatively high fertility; on the other, the standardisation of sexual and family behaviour. Whereas before, population increases could be ascribed to the contribution of large families (while 20 per cent of women remained childless), from the 1950s onwards the vast majority of married couples conceived and raised between two and three children: the 'nuclear' family became the dominant pattern as the marrying age significantly decreased and divorce remained marginal (10 per cent of all marriages).

All this changed again in the wake of the 'sexual liberation' of the 1970s. In 1969, for the first time in a generation, the fertility rate fell below 2.1 (the minimum to ensure the replacement of generations). Marriage became disconnected from sex and procreation and families became more 'uncertain' as well as more brittle. The age at marriage (and procreation) was progressively delayed to the late twenties–early thirties. Today 40 per cent of all marriages end in divorce; 28 per cent of children are born out of wedlock; and around 220,000 abortions (legalised by the 'loi Veil' in 1975; fully covered by social security since 1981) are carried out each year.

Alone among all European countries France 'exported' very few of its children to the 'new worlds' in the nineteenth century (barely half a million left its shores permanently between 1820 and 1914). Conversely, because of its weak demography the country had to 'import' foreign workers, starting at the time of the Great Depression (1873–96) later in that century. This made France a forerunner in European settlement patterns since all Western countries now have sizeable foreign communities on their soil. Furthermore, the integration of these 'guest workers' was made relatively easy by liberal nationality legislation (law of 11 August 1927).

For most of the twentieth century, it was principally Europeans from neighbouring countries who moved to the labour-starved industrial conurbations of the north and east. Prior to the First World War, cross-border workers from Belgium in the north and Spain and Italy in the south accounted for a fair number of the transfers (France's Italian-born community was second in size only to that of the USA). In the 1920s, Poles first and later Spaniards joined them – the latter mostly Spanish republicans. At the height of immigration to France in 1931, three million foreign workers and their families had settled there. The decree of 10 August 1932 reversed the previous liberal measures and attempted to stem the growing unemployment generated by the incoming depression. A

Table 1.3 Distribution of immigrants by continent of origin, 1946–90 (%)

	1946	1954	1990
Europe	88.7	79.1	40.3
Africa	3.1	13.0	45.8
America	0.5	2.8	2.1
Asia	4.0	2.3	11.6
Total (million)	1.7	1.8	3.6

third wave of immigrants came in the 1960s as extensive infrastructure programmes demanded more hands than the native population could tender. In the first years of that decade, half a million *pieds noirs** (or ex-French colonists) resettled in the home country after Algerian independence (March 1962). Still this was not enough and Portuguese and Spanish workers came in throngs, soon followed by natives from the Maghreb (chiefly Algeria and Morocco). A second peak was reached in 1975 (7.3 per cent of the the labour force), one year after the government had officially ended its policy of encouraging 'economic' immigration.

Although official immigration is now restricted to a few tens of thousands a year (mainly on account of family reunification), the immigrant community has kept on growing in absolute and relative size (see Table 1.3). Since 1982, non-Europeans have constituted the majority of foreign immigrants on French soil, and with a fertility rate double that of Europeans, second-generation youths of North African origin (or *beurs** as they are commonly called) have become a sizeable and conspicuous group. French nationality was granted to two million permanent immigrants in the course of the century, but those of extra-European origin seem today little inclined to take it up and successive governments have tried to entice them to do so by various means. Perhaps this failure accounts for the fact that the foreign immigrant community today (five million people) looms so large in France as compared to neighbouring countries.

Where demography is concerned, the French, who adopted a different kind of distinct behaviour at the turn of the twentieth century,

* All (French) terms followed by an asterisk are succinctly explained in the Glossary at the end of the volume.

have returned to normality, or rather seem to have anticipated it. Their early experience with extensive birth control and the 'demographic transition' brought about a stagnation of their numbers which proved unconducive to economic growth and social progress. Nevertheless, they participated in the postwar baby boom and the following deceleration (sometimes referred to as 'baby crunch' or 'granddaddy boom'). Over the last twenty years, however, their fertility rate, although not guaranteeing the replacement of existing generations, has fallen markedly less than in other countries such as those of southern Europe, or even Scandinavia or Germany. The contribution of France's immigrant population seems indisputable in this regard. The future will tell if the fast-ageing population in one of the first secular societies of human history can be rejuvenated by its latest intake.

2. Whither French *joie-de-vivre*?

In 1930, Friedrich Sieburg published a widely read book with a title reminiscent of the German proverb 'Happy as God in France',[2] in which he praised what he perceived as the laid-back French attitude towards and sensible suspicion of the modern world's obsession with profit and efficiency. In a famous passage he described a small-town shopkeeper putting up the shutters very promptly at closing time to go and admire the sunset in spite of the vociferous queue at his door. Half a century later there could have been no more complete change of scenery. Fourastié started his famous *Trente glorieuses* (1979) by contrasting daily life in two apparently widely differing places which turned out to be the same one seen successively in 1946 and 1975. These changes appeared dramatic seen from behind the camera of film director Jacques Tati in the late 1950s/early 1960s, from the humane and friendly atmosphere of the traditional marketplace where the eponymous hero of *Mon Oncle* (1958) lived to the impersonal, concrete and cold reality of the robotic, empty existence of the characters in *Trafic* (1971). Although the causes of this leap into modernity are somewhat hard to fathom, France was not the only country to experience it and one could

[2] The title of the English translation was *Is God a Frenchman?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931).

certainly find similar nostalgia-inspired scenes in many a film of the Italian new realism school. The 'Golden Age' of European economic growth ushered in a 'truly European society' (Kaelble, 1980) and resulted in a profound convergence of living standards and lifestyles across European countries, a trend quickly attributed in France to the irresistible attraction of the American way of life and sometimes satirised as 'Americanisation'. This process of convergence affected virtually every aspect of individual and collective life; it transformed social hierarchies, working conditions, the working and living environment, family life and leisure, training and consumption patterns. The general rise in income levels blurred class identities, dissolved class distinctions and extended middle-class living standards to the majority of the working population. As far as labour income is concerned, the salary range (after tax) narrowed over much of the century, especially between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s (1 to 4.1 in 1967, 1 to 3 in 1984). The trend was subsequently reversed and the gap has been widening since (1 to 6 in 1996). However, the standardisation of living conditions and lifestyles has proceeded, as is shown by the diffusion of working and living habits hitherto reserved either to the 'leisured class' or to a selective group of professionals, regarding dress and eating patterns as well as entertainment. This standardisation was brought about relatively quickly, by a phase of more intensive industrialisation followed by the seemingly unstoppable expansion of service activities (in and outside the tertiary sector). For the vast majority of French people, as in other advanced countries, the 'desk' has replaced the workbench, as Parkinson predicted.[3] Even in the mid-1960s, when farmers were still leaving agriculture in droves, the industrial sector ceased expanding, reaching a ceiling (also perceptible in other similar countries) of just under 40 per cent of the workforce and most new job creation was henceforth to take place in the service sector, reflecting in part a switch in people's consumption patterns towards traded and non-traded services.

As the proportion of manual labour was drastically reduced, so was, at least superficially, the amount of time that most people had to devote to earning a living. The recorded average annual working time shrank from upwards of 2,600 hours at the beginning of

[3] C. Northcote Parkinson, *In-laws and Outlaws* (London: John Murray, 1962).

Table 1.4 Distribution of workforce by sector, 1906–1998 (%)

Year	Agriculture	Industry	Services
1906	41.4	31.5	27.1
1931	32.1	36.2	31.7
1954	26.1	34.3	39.6
1974	10.6	38.5	50.9
1998	4.4	26.0	69.6

the century to under 2,000 hours in the 1950s and 1,500 today. From an individual perspective, the time alloted to gainful employment has also been curtailed at both ends of an individual's lifespan. Progressive extension of the school-leaving age to fourteen (1936) and sixteen (1959), as well as the growing enrolment of students in higher education, has delayed entry into the labour force. The emergence of mass unemployment in the 1980s also contributed to this. In 2000, as a result, barely 26 per cent of men and women in the 15–24 cohort were in employment (compared with 45 per cent in Britain and 46 per cent in Germany). At the other end of the spectrum, large segments of the ageing workforce have chosen to retire early and make up a growing constituency of senior citizens. In 1981, the official retirement age was lowered to sixty. But many public servants could already claim pension rights even earlier and pre-retirement schemes have been introduced for employees aged fifty or over facing redundancy and with few prospects of re-employment.[4] The transfer from the active to the inactive population, along with rising life expectancy, is continuously swelling pension costs and health expenditure. Because of the generous provisions introduced for statutory pensions in the 1970s, a pensioner household's annual earnings are now on average 20 per cent higher than those of households with at least one person in employment.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, France presents the familiar sight of a relatively dynamic society increasingly dominated by an ageing gerontocracy (a feature most apparent when considering

[4] In 2000, 37 per cent of the 55–64 age bracket were in employment compared to 51 per cent in the OECD and 66 per cent in Japan.

Table 1.5 Age distribution of French population (%)

Age	1901	1946	1995
under 20	34.4	29.5	26.8
20–60	53.0	54.5	53.5
over 60	12.6	16.0	19.7

politicians) while at the same time worshipping all the attributes of youth.

Thus, in this very 'postmodern' country, professional activity (or gainful employment) seems to have receded to a shorter proportion of people's lifetimes and to be interspersed with longer waiting periods (of training, retraining, unemployment and eventually early retirement): a person's working life appears much shorter but perhaps more intense at the same time. While working time has dwindled, employment has become an obsession; work demands less physical energy but far more mental energy, concentration, focus. People increasingly organise their personal life around their career and even temporary unemployment causes most people affected by it grave psychological and material disruptions. We have indeed come a long way from Sieburg's village shopkeeper.

The average French person's working and living environment has been as much transformed in the course of one generation or two as have been his or her working conditions. To get the full picture, one naturally needs to step off the tourist trail which has (rightfully) made France the world's favourite holiday destination. The impressions expressed by the young American hero of Benoît Duteurtre's recent novel *Voyage en France* (2001) is of garish, vulgar industrial estates, drab shopping malls, fast-food outlets and ubiquitous traffic congestion – much the same as where he comes from.

In the past fifty years the supposedly traditional French way of life has all but disappeared and the circumstances of most French people have converged onto a Western standard. This becomes apparent when examining the dominant environment of French daily life.

Sociologically, rising incomes and rural migrations have buoyed the suburban middle classes. Entire segments of the former working class were *de facto* included in the middle class during the 1970s

and 1980s. In 1911, 66 per cent of the population still lived in the country and France was one of the least urbanised countries in Western Europe: there were only fifteen cities with over 100,000 inhabitants against forty-nine in Britain and forty-five in Germany. By 1990 the share of the urban population had risen to 75.3 per cent of the total. Definitions changed, however, in the meantime and so did the urban living environment. Up to the Second World War, middle-sized nineteenth-century provincial *bourgs* (market towns) dominated France's urban landscape. Increasingly since then, urban settlement has involved the continuous expansion of metropolitan areas in the form of sprawling suburbs (a phenomenon known to geographers as 'rurbanisation'). Until the 1960s the urban population, as well as the industrial areas, were concentrated geographically in the north-eastern half of the country (north of an imaginary line stretching from Normandy to Marseilles), where industrial build-up naturally attracted rural and other migrants. Since then, developments have been more segmented or complex. Older industrial regions like the Lorraine and Nord have shed older residents and failed to attract new; in the greater Paris area, population shifted first from the urban centre to the immediate suburbs (nicknamed the 'little crown' or 'red belt' on account of their predominantly left-wing vote) and then to the more remote 'great crown'. To the surprise of British or American visitors, most French inner cities are well preserved and (apart from the central districts almost wholly taken up by corporate offices) are still inhabited by their local residents. But a yawning gap is developing between the 'civilised' metropolises and *le désert français*, between the agreeable if conventional *lotissements** (middle-class residential areas) and the drab *cités** (popular housing estates), between the hectic pace of commuting and the workplace and the forced inactivity and lack of purpose of those kept out of it. This tension has fuelled stress, a growing sense of insecurity, and an 'existentialist'[5] quest for a new identity among the French who have become the world's largest consumers of tranquillisers – as well they might: a Frenchman (Laborit) patented the first brand.

[5] A reference to the basic tenet of 'existentialism' according to which a philosphy of life can be grounded only in life experience (cf. Sartre, 1946).