

Review - book reviews:

France on the Brink: A Great Civilization Faces the New Century

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By Richard Minitier

By Jonathan Fenby Arcade, 465 pages, \$ 27.95

Intellectuals usually either love or hate France. In *France on the Brink*, Jonathan Fenby takes the wiser course--he both loves and hates France.

Much of what we think we know about France and, more importantly, what the French think they know about themselves, simply isn't true any more. Consider the unofficial emblems of French nationalism: wine, berets, and cafés.

While the French still drink more wine per capita than any other nation, the number of people who drink wine every day has dropped by half since 1980. Wine consumption is falling while soft drink consumption continues to rise. Seventy percent of 14- to 25-year-olds say they never drink wine. Even former President Jacques Chirac prefers beer to wine.

When Air France put a beret atop a globe, the symbol of France was recognized worldwide. But only three beret-making factories survive in France, down from 30 in 1945.

Balzac called the café the "parliament of the people." One of the few French institutions not torn from its foundations by revolution, it is dying a slow death. The number of cafés has fallen from 510,000 in 1910, to fewer than 51,000 in 1995. Every year more than 1,500 cards close in Paris alone.

Only France's legendary freedom for smokers remains as a hallmark from a happier time. In a crowded café in the shadow of Notre Dame, I recently asked a waiter for a cigar ashtray. The waiter, ignoring pleas from an American family at the next table wagging their hands in front of their noses, turned and said, "Monsieur, the world is your ashtray." Indeed, it was. The sidewalk was littered with butts of fine Cohibas and cheap cigarettes. Yet smokers aren't free in France because the French love liberty, but only because they loathe change. The French intuitively endorse Lord Falkland's dictum: "When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change."

Which brings us to the reactionary nature of French politics at century's end. France was the cradle of communism and its watered-down cousins, fascism and socialism. While other nations struggle to throw off the shackles of these failed philosophies, France strives to save its archaic visions. The continuing appeal of the welfare state in France is best illustrated by a story Fenby cites: Former Socialist Party Prime Minister Leon Blum was released from a Nazi prison in 1945. The first time he picked up a suit he'd taken to the cleaners, he found a handwritten note in his pocket: "Thank you for the congés payés," the paid holidays Blum ordered into existence in the

1930s. Thus was the entitlement mentality coaxed into existence by Blum and his chums.

The Right didn't offer a genuine alternative. De Gaulle's mother regarded Blum as an "agent of Satan." A favorite prewar slogan of de Gaulle's right-wing allies was "Better Hitler than Blum." It wasn't the cost to employers of the government-mandated holidays that offended the Right, which looked down on business anyway; it was the way paid vacations gave "cap-wearing louts" the ability to invade upper-middle-class beaches in August.

French politics has long been dominated by poisonous extremists. Consider the case of Communist Party boss Eugen Fried, a Stalinist who urged French Communists to collaborate with the Nazis after the invasion of 1940. Despite mounting evidence of Stalin's murderous excesses, Fried loyally followed every order from Moscow. Similarly, poet Louis Aragon wrote that his pain at Stalin's death equaled the sorrow he felt when his mother died. "Georges Marchais, Secretary-General of the French Communists from 1972 to 1993, was a scary remnant from the caverns of Stalinism whose outbursts provided regular occasions for national mirth," Fenby writes. "A bushy-eyebrowed, potato-headed thug whose lack of style could make him almost endearing on occasion, Marchais supported the crackdown on Solidarity in Poland and the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan (the latter in a television interview direct from Moscow)."

Neither journalists nor government officials ever shunned Marchais for his increasingly outrageous defenses of totalitarianism. "What's a gulag?" he asked. "What we call a prison, they call a gulag." When questioned about brutality in the Soviet Union, Marchais replied, "I tell you, they didn't arrest enough! They didn't imprison enough! If they had been tougher and more vigilant, they wouldn't have gotten into the situation that they're in now."

Actually, the situation in France is now dire. France's breathtakingly bureaucratic welfare state has created the very society socialists theoretically oppose: A small, rich, educated elite rules over a morose middle class and an increasingly numerous and angry army of the unemployed. Muslim African immigrants, numbering over 3 million, resent the government that sends them lavish welfare checks and, increasingly, they look to terrorists for leadership. A handful of schools credential the elite to a degree unimaginable in the English-speaking world. The elite, shuttling between business and government, design ever more complex plans for society that never seem to succeed. Crime, joblessness, urban terrorism, and cultural decline all increase relentlessly-- imagine New York City in 1977 and multiply by ten. It turns out socialism, not capitalism, is the unsustainable system.

Fenby, a left-leaning journalist, paints a picture of France on the brink of collapse and, perhaps, violent revolution. What if he is right?

Richard Minitzer writes for the Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic Monthly, Reader's Digest, and other publications.

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