

The Discovery of France

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April 13-22, 2008

Why this nostalgia for the past, and why this discomfort of the modern? And is there a sharp line, as if somehow after the First World War the Past became the Past, for ever lost, and the Modern was irrevocably established. As a child I remember being told by our old teachers how lucky we were, how everything was given to us, while they in their childhood had to suffer. I resented it. I had not asked to be born into this Modern age, the Old Age seemed so romantic to me, how much did I not envy them to have grown up in times when there were no cars, no atomic bomb, and an absence of many other scourges of modern life. Only one thing in modern life seemed superior to that of the past, namely medical services. Hateful as modern life is to us, it is the only thing we have, and we would not like to be cheated of even that.

The past is secure, the future is by definition not. In the past we were born, in the future we will die. The past we have overcome and vanquished, the future will vanquish us. True when you are young, the future as a personal potential is very exciting, and few things sustain the child or the young person more than the reassurance of an almost limitless future. True it can vanish through early death, but that is more of a romantic possibility than a realistic assessment.

The past is somehow related to fiction. This might be part of its romantic appeal. The classical fairy-tales we devour as children always take place in some imprecise past, maybe this is why the Past is endowed with such enchantment. To us who resent environmental deterioration, the past also has a special appeal, after all deterioration is a steady decline, implying that the past was better. More biological diversity, untouched wilderness, cleaner air, less pollution. The past becomes an ecological paradise from which we have expelled ourselves.

The idea of no change is a very attractive and seductive one. It is sustainable and potentially eternal. History is a documentation of change, often a very dramatic one. But what is the subject of history, is it not superficial recounting the actions of a thin veneer of an elite, which may have made a lot of sound and fury, at least in recorded history, but which have signified very little. Mere ripples on the surface while the currents underneath have flowed on unconcerned. In an age of flux what does not change, or change very slowly, majestically indifferent to the comings and goings of mans petty concerns. Geological features, the antics of the weather (but of course recent climate concern has undercut this), the starry sky. All of which existed before we did and will exist after we are gone. And in the ages of documented human history, the ordinary lives of man, human nature being more or less intact, seems to have been one of those invariants. Human nature, whatever that means, may not have changed, but human lives have changed dramatically in the first modern century. Possibly a typical inhabitant of even the late 19th century probably had far more in common with his predecessors of centuries ago than he would have with his recent great grand-children. This is startling, and it is bound to have consequences, which

however do not seem to have been really seriously appreciated even if systematically and obsessively explored.

Let us take France. What is France? Geographically a hexagon, although the characteristic shape of France did not take definite form until the late 19th century. Historically it was defined by Paris, and its political, cultural, commercial, and scientific history may not involve more than a list of a few thousand people remembered by posterity, with a few tens of thousands playing supportive roles. Outside this veneer there was the undifferentiated mass of people, maybe counting half a billion people since early Medieval times¹ Marx did not even think that the mass of self-sustaining peasants made up a class, hence his lack of interest in them, they had as little communal feeling and cohesiveness as potatoes thrown haphazardly into a sack. Each peasant family struggling to survive passing no surplus to society at large having almost no relation to its neighbors. This description of Marx in *The 18th Brumaire* (which I had recently read and which the author also brings up and quotes) maybe unduly harsh, and also display an unexpected indifference to what does not readily comply to his theories, yet it points to a much unappreciated truth, at least in our modern age, of the superfluous nature of most human existence.

France did not really exist, apart from the fantasies of the Parisian elite and its metastases in the rest of the civilized world, until the turn of the last century. The land itself was literally undiscovered and unchartered, and the author begins his book of the first attempt at mapping the country by the astronomer Cassini² in the 1740's. It resulted into maps, and the attempt was repeated during the next century. It was science, it was Enlightenment, triangulations, lengths of meridians, the documentation of place names. Much of the land was unused, swamps, moors, wastelands of scant economic value. Some notable features like a grand canyon, was only discovered a hundred years ago or so.

The French did not even exist. True there were people living there since the beginning of time, at least going back to the Gauls of Caesar (and beyond), but did they realize that they were subjects of a French King and later citizens of a French nation. The teaching of history that I absorbed as a child was centered around the notion of a Nation, and the importance of national solidarity and pride in your country. Most people throughout history have not had the benefit of a historical education and hence stayed unaware of the notion of Nationhood and being part of a greater political cohesion than that given by their village. In fact until recently France was a mosaic of local dialects only a part of which could be characterized as French. Apart from the obvious anomalies of Flemish in

¹ How to make such an estimate? France has long been a populous country, say with at any time a population of twenty million people even during the 16th and 17th century. Imagine a life-expectancy of thirty years, and a time span say of six hundred years, why not a thousand? It is the order of magnitude which is interesting. By the advantage of hindsight we think of many of the accomplishments of the thinkers of the past as middling, what would we not have done, had we had the advantage of having lived in such unchartered times. Sobering to think that the chances of us having been remembered might have been one in a hundred thousand.

² One of many in a distinguished line of scientists. Cassini I-IV, namely Jean-Dominique (1625-1712), Jacques (1677-1756), César-François Cassini de Thury (1714-1784) and Jacques-Dominique (1748-1845) the latter involved in cartography as well, marrying a young peasant girl, who had become intrigued by his instruments.

the north, Allemand in the north east, Breton in the northwest, Basque in the southwest, Catalan in the south and Italian in the south east, France is bisected by a line roughly from Bordeaux to the Jura dividing Oil from Oc, two variants of primitive French, sufficiently apart as to qualify as different languages had there been political incentive for doing so. The world of the typical inhabitant was very small, maybe never extending beyond earshot of the bells of the local church. The churches and their small communities dividing up the physical land. Travel was for most people not only inconvenient, not to say risky, but unnecessary. This physical isolation naturally caused as well as being the effect of this linguistic fragmentation. Of course this is not mainly a French characteristics, just as most of the things that the book discusses, are not specifically French phenomena, but this is of course a tacit assumption by the author.

The life of the people in the past was one of misery. Often, except for a very small lucky fraction, an unmitigated one. There were no social safety-nets except the precarious ones provided by your family. If you sunk, you sunk to the bottom and became part of the scum, the human debris, which still form such a major component of the population of the Third World. In fact the Third World was the whole World until about a hundred years ago. The misery of existence was the overwhelming fact of the same, and the overcoming of it in the First World counting as one of the triumphs of modernity. No wonder that our elderly teachers, the generation of our grand-parents, saw fit to inform us of our unprecedented luck we had done nothing to deserve. Of course this wave of affluence can it be sustained ecologically? Is it a price we are willing to pay in the long run? Our well-being has not been entirely founded on technological invention. Now when misery recedes back from living memory it becomes mostly forgotten and when not romanticized³.

We have mentioned the church, or at least the sound of its tolling bells in its steeple. At least people had been Christianized. Some change had at least occurred. History had not entirely left people in peace. True, the trappings of Christianity had claimed the entire population. The Church after all hinting to a greater sense of community than the village. There had even been a split off of Protestants in more recent centuries, the very act of recognizing and promoting a religious distinction being a symptom of sophistication and thus essentially an obsession of an elite⁴ The religion of the unreflecting masses having essentially been unchanged since pagan times. France, especially in the north west is lit-

³ Nowadays the supreme tales of the horrors of the past are being told by Holocaust survivors. In twenty or thirty years there will be none left. What will then happen to that awareness? Will the past then become sanitized?

⁴ History provides a depressing list of persecution of minorities, which often as a result strengthen the identities of the victims and stimulate their ambitions. The Jews constitute an obvious case, but also the Huguenots of France, escaping to Holland and German lands, are of a similar nature, although not blessed with quite as long a history of religious identity. In addition to those aristocracies of persecution, there are many, often forgotten and neglected ones, leaving little trace in the collective mind. Robb brings up the case of Cagots, a gipsy like tribe of people of obscure origin and composition, leading a life on the margin, in principle reduced to menial chores such as rope-making, but by becoming skilled carpenters making themselves invaluable as a workforce for the well-to-do. Their services may have been appreciated, still their presence resented, denied access to churches and cemeteries. It all reminds us if the Indian caste-system, vestiges of which must have been prevalent in a far wider world. It is safe to assume that

tered with menhirs and dolmens, the significance of which was part of a living tradition, supposedly stretching far back into the dawn of history⁵. Furthermore the Catholic faith encouraged pagan idolatry, especially that of the virgin Mary, who was repeatedly reported to have appeared in revelations, shrines of whom were erected as well as effigies to which to offer prayer and tribute. In such a way old superstition was welded naturally to received religious dogma. Lourdes being a representative phenomenon, surviving deep into modernity. Yes ancient superstition, involving fairies and other denizens of the woods, were an integral part of life, adding to nature an extra emotional dimension nowadays missing, when wilderness has been reduced to being a recreational resource.

Still population was not entirely chained to the land. There were migrations, seasonal ones, reminiscent of transhumance, when people travelled to find work or to ply trades. Traditionally rivers are the main sources of transportations, roads generally being of poor quality. There were exceptions to that, namely the Roman roads that had survived close to two millennia and appeared almost timeless and eternal, cutting through the landscape in straight unforgiving lines. However, they were too scarce to really supply the network needed, and most of the terrestrial movement of goods and people were channelled through paths and trails through the land. Consequently movement was very slow, walking being almost exclusively the only option. News traveling all over the area in one day did not appear until well into the 19th century, the news of the fall of the Bastille took weeks to disseminate. Slow movement also makes for a large world. When it took weeks to move from one part of France to the other, the country became an empire, at least in extent if not in efficiency.

The second part of the book deals with the development of Modern France as an entity, at least from the view point of the tourist. The first tourists to France were foreigners, British in fact, making the Grand Tour of the continent, out of which the denotation - tourist, stems. The British defined what should be sights, in fact it is not so clear cut what a tourist should really be interested in. In former times a hideous industrial complex, of which there were not that many in France, would be assumed to attract a visitor, not the local chapel or church. Nowadays what does a typical guide-book list? The typical tourist is assumed to take an inordinate interest in old architecture. It is of course the British tradition of the Grand Tour. With the arrival of the British some parts of France became almost part of Britain again, at least their presence were established across the Channel. Hotels, which formerly had almost not existed, became far more common, as did higher standard and comforts, including the water-closet, the abbreviated form of which being one of the first modern English borrowings. The British, as all tourists, sought out the authentic, i.e. what had not yet been claimed and spoiled by other tourists. This created an industry of fake authenticity and artifacts and spurious traditions. Sea resorts grew up along Normandy and Calais, local populations being driven away or used as servants. The

the Cagots only make up one of many lost and despised minorities, the disappearance of which, through absorption and assimilation rather than outright extermination, provides another triumph of encroaching modernity.

⁵ Time is a tricky business, which every individual can testify to in his or her own private life. In unrecorded communal history, events which may be assumed to be ancient can be quite recent, while customs no one pays any heed to may after all be quite old.

British were gradually being replaced, or at least outnumbered by the domestic variety as the 19th century was getting to its close. It all fitted well into the growing awareness of France as a nation and as it geared itself to new glories. As the notion of a nation become more and more wide-spread, there was a growing incentive to learn and discover it.

The spectacular growth of tourism would not have been possible without the improvement of transport. The old diligence was a luxury, affordable only to the very rich. It was also unreliable not to say dangerous. Transports on rivers constituted a better option, especially with the building of canals, which during the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the next was considered the way of the future⁶. In the middle of the 19th century, railways revolutionized travel. At the turn of the century the bicycle had been invented and perfected⁷. This revolutionized unscheduled individual locomotion, and as such decades before the advent of the motor-car, the scourge of modern life, it predated many of the features that later on would be taken over by motoring. In fact it took several decades into the 20th century before cars became more common than bicycles. But the latter is of course beyond the scope of the book.

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⁶ After Sweden had lost most of its territorial extent, except for the core of the country, a rejuvenation in form of a canal, linking the western coast to the capital was proposed and built. At a time it was a major undertaking expecting to have significant economical potential. I do not know to what extent that was ever fulfilled, the canal still is functioning with all of its locks and, but now provides but an idyllic venue of slow transportation.

⁷ According to the author, an enthusiastic biker himself, who has crisscrossed France on his bike, savoring the gentle pace and the intimacy of travel, the major innovations of the modern bicycle were in place almost a century ago, and in fact most bicycles were of better quality than the majority of which now is being used.