FRANCE FROM 1851 TO THE PRESENT

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UNIVERSALISM IN CRISIS

Roger Celestin and Eliane DalMolin

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To
Simone, Sonia, and Cassandra
and
Raymonde, Andrew, Sophie, and Paul

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Maurice Chevalier waiving his boater, or Edith Piaf—the Little Sparrow—alone on a dark stage, holding a note interminably while one or two melodies are dashed off on the accordion. These overexposed portraits are from a set of lingering 1950's clichés, most of them hovering under a striped café awning: the silly beret, the comical mustache, a toy poodle or two and intellectuals seated around outdoor tables bantering with women in low-cut dresses whose cleavages must be ogled with condescending concupiscence. Dispersed around the landscape is the perennial trio of perky French protuberances: the cigarette, the baguette and that frail filigreed phallus of an Eiffel Tower.

—Marcelle Clements, “Sighing, a French Sound Endures.”
New York Times, October 18, 1998

The French will be like us, and as they become like the rest of us—Americanized, prosperous, modern, complacent—a great historical epoch will vanish from the earth, the epoch of Frenchness . . . Perhaps as you hold this volume in your hands, you will be experiencing the last few minutes of the existence of the French difference . . . You can be sure that when the urge to be different fades and the need to make that difference a common property disappears, the world will feel a bit relieved and deprived as well. For, as Victor Hugo said, without the French we will be alone.

—Richard Bernstein, *Fragile Glory. A Portrait of France and the French* (1990)

Today it is France that is isolated, and this temptation of a France alone is not only on the Left but also on the Right.

—Jacques Julliard. “France Alone.” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 15, 2005
(two weeks after France’s “no” vote to the European constitution referendum, and two weeks before the International Olympic Committee’s “no” to Paris as host city of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games)

We are all in this. We are globalized. When Jacques Chirac says, “No” to Bush about the Iraq war, it’s a delusion. It’s to insist on the French as an exception, but there is no French exception.

—Jean Baudrillard, “Continental Drift.” Interview.
New York Times Magazine, November 20, 2005