

A French Look At America

The French can write more honestly about race in America than they can about race in France.

by Marian Evans

Among the many peoples who profess to despise the United States, the French are second to none. This does not, of course, keep them from copying some of the very faults they love to denounce. This paradox has rarely been so evident as it was last fall, when a leftist French magazine lambasted the deterioration of America only a few weeks after disturbances in a Lyons suburb that had a strangely "American" hue. The irony was not lost on thoughtful Frenchmen.

The French mass-circulation weekly, *Nouvel Observateur*, occasionally runs special reports on the United States. In its most recent, in the issue of November 22-28, 1990, the report is subtitled, "Has the Multi-racial Society Failed?" This is a question that none dares ask in the United States, for fear of getting an answer.

Even *Nouvel Observateur* stopped short of answering the question with a resounding "yes," but it called its lead story, "The End of the White Dream," and introduced it with a series of questions:

"How will the greatest power in the universe stand up against the pressure of these [racial] communities that are bent on conquest, but that often fight amongst themselves? Against a backdrop of economic crisis and war in the Gulf, does this West Side Story on a continental scale have any chance of a happy ending? Is it possible to build a successful multi-racial society? This is the fundamental question that America today poses for Europe."

In a series of articles and accompanying photographs, *Nouvel Observateur* goes on to chronicle the disintegration of America's racial and cultural core. It cites the usual indices — crime statistics, illegitimacy rates, test

scores, dropout rates — and suggests causes by letting Americans speak for themselves. Blacks talk of their preference for the company of other blacks, Hispanics speak of the necessity of preserving their language and culture, and Asians rail against "white cultural imperialism." There are profiles of film director Spike Lee, Washington Mayor Sharon Dixon,

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and General Colin Powell.

The only white person *Nouvel Observateur* gives much space to is 37-year-old Joel Kotkin, of whom we had never heard, but who is introduced as one of America's foremost thinkers on multi-racialism. Mr. Kotkin, grandson of Jewish immigrants, sings the conventional praises of "diversity" to a skeptical French reporter. Asked what he thinks of people who say that the United States would be better off if it closed its southern border, Mr. Kotkin replied, "That would be stupid — suicidal. I don't know what planet those people live on. What I say in reply is that we need these new immigrants . . ."

There follows a series of articles that attempt to convey the texture of America's decaying society. One reporter writes that in Miami, a \$100 bill is useless after dark; there is so much crime that no storekeeper dares keep on hand more than a few dollars in change. Another speculates that sexual promiscuity has become the last refuge in a society that has lost its structure; America is the only country in the world in which people think they suffer from a clinical addiction to sex. Yet another reporter wonders if Operation Desert Shield may not be the last gasp of an exhausted superpower that no longer has the strength to maintain either its own unity or identity.

Nouvel Observateur is known in France as a leftist publication, and it generally supports the Socialist Party. It is nevertheless willing to raise questions that not even American "conservatives" dare touch. No American of any political stripe questions the desirability of a multi-racial society, but *Nouvel Observateur* is profoundly skeptical. One of its articles concludes: "*E pluribus unum*: unity comes from diversity. That is the motto on American coins. In a society that is becoming more multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual than ever before, that will be the real gamble of the 21st

century."

Meanwhile, back in France, it is increasingly clear that *Nouvel Observateur* need not have sent its reporters all the way to America to study the frictions of multi-racialism. In mid-October in Vaulx-en-Velin, a suburb of Lyons, there was a perfect reenactment of a drama that has become dreadfully familiar in cities all across America.

The incident was touched off by a fatal encounter between white policemen and non-whites. Two young men on a 1000 cc motorcycle ran into a patrol car and one of the riders died. Non-whites claimed that the police had somehow deliberately caused the accident. The police said that the black rider, who was driving illegally without license or helmet, panicked when he saw the patrol car.

Whatever happened, hundreds of young non-whites spent the next several days smashing shop windows, looting stores, burning cars, and battling with police. The rioters were mostly blacks and Arabs who have been streaming into France from former colonies. France is discovering, first-hand, the costs of non-white immigration.

Like virtually every non-white enclave in a mainly-white nation, Vaulx-en-Velin is plagued with unemployment, crime, and resentment, but few people expected trouble there.

The town has been proud of its efforts to spruce up the immigrant quarters: tree-lined streets, a brand new shopping center, and even a 150-foot practice wall for rock climbers. In the aftermath of the riots, blacks and Arabs predictably claimed that the city hadn't done enough for them and that the police are racist.

France can look forward to more headaches. Four and a half million inhabitants—about 7% of the population—are immigrants, of which blacks and Arabs form a large majority. These figures do not include the children of immigrants, since those who are born in France automatically qualify for citizenship and are counted as Frenchmen. Just as they do in America, non-whites clump together in neighborhoods that quickly go down hill. Racial friction is now as French as *croissants*.

France has nevertheless not been quite as soft-headed about immigration as the United States. In 1974 it theoretically closed the door to former colonials, and it has even offered Arabs cash as an incentive to go home. Even so, it is estimated that more than 100,000 new immigrants enter the country each year to join North

African relatives already living in France.

Also unlike the United States, France has vocal and effective opponents of immigration. Jean-Marie LePen's National Front party, despite its recent origin and consistent hostility from the press, manages a solid 15% of the vote in national elections. Such a showing is enough to guarantee that the cultural and racial implications of immigration are discussed in France and not brushed aside with meaningless slogans about "tolerance" and "diversity." Nevertheless, with that curious combination of blindness and perspicacity that permits us to detect the failures of others but not our own, magazines like *Nouvel Observateur* lead with Pavlovian shouts of "racism" whenever they write about Mr. LePen.

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Some European countries are waking up sooner than others. Austria has a very small non-Germanic population, but in last October's parliamentary elections the anti-immigration (and limited government/low taxes) Freedom Party went

from 18 to 33 seats, and is now the third largest party in parliament. Support surged after its leader, Jorg Haider, coined the slogan, "Vienna must not become Chicago." He could have chosen nearly any big American city to make the same point.

It was not so long ago that the United States was an attractive model for Europeans. Those who visit America today are shocked by the crime, poverty, and dilapidation of many cities. People who, a generation ago, might have wished their parents had emigrated to America, are now thankful they stayed home.

It will soon dawn even on the socialist Frenchmen who write for *Nouvel Observateur* that America's immigration policy has been folly, not because America is a "capitalist society" intent on creating an underclass, but because the policy has ignored race. We welcome their trips to America if that is what it takes for them to understand what the anti-immigrationist Mr. LePen is saying—that an American-style immigration policy brings American-style problems. The sensible Austrians plan to avoid both the policy and the problems. ●

The Rise of the European-American

Richard Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*, Yale University Press, 1990, 374 pp., \$35.00

by Thomas Jackson

In an era in which the ethnic demands of everyone but white people are the subject of such obligatory interest, it is a pleasant surprise to find a book about the ethnic identities of Americans of European descent. And if, as the flyleaf claims, the author goes on to explore the dawning consciousness of whites as "European-Americans," the book would seem promising. *Ethnic Identity* is, in fact, a useful analysis of what white Americans think about their European origins, and the book is worth reading for that. As a reflection on rising white consciousness, it is no

more than one would expect from a mainstream university press.

The author, Professor Richard Alba, has based his book not only on general sources but on a detailed survey of white ethnic identity that he carried out himself. His primary message is simple: The American melting pot has been a roaring success, so long as its ingredients have been white. With the exception of Jews, virtually every group of European immigrants has, within three generations, become largely indistinguishable from the others. The old English stock painlessly absorbed immigrants from northern Europe, and even digested the southern and eastern Europeans

and the Irish without much more than a gurgle and a case of heartburn.

As Professor Alba points out, the ultimate test of assimilation is the ease and frequency of intermarriage. On this score, there is virtually no European group that has failed to mingle with the rest. Three quarters of the marriages of white people today cut across lines of European nationality. Indeed, as the author argues, at this rate the very notion of European ethnicity is blurring.

Only Jews, with an intermarriage rate of only one quarter to one third, resist the final step to assimilation, and this resistance weakens only slightly in succeeding American-born genera-