Review of Alain Peyrefitte's *Le Mal Français*
[The French Disease]

by David James Fisher

The hot topic on the Paris cocktail party circuit this season is *Le Mal Français*, the thick best-seller by former Gaullist minister Alain Peyrefitte, in which he speculates darkly on the French national character and the decline of France. A great deal of nonsense has been written on these subjects in recent years, but Peyrefitte treats them critically and speculatively. This is an ambitious, if wrong-headed book, which attempts to uncover the roots of 400 years of civilizational malaise.

Peyrefitte not only writes cultural history in a readable style, but comes equipped with an impressive blend of erudition and practical political experience. A busy man, he has managed to assimilate the vast body of historiographical literature on modern France, while holding seven ministerial positions under the presidencies of de Gaulle and Pompidou. During the same period he wrote five books, including a 1973 best-seller on China.

Peyrefitte considers himself a pragmatic humanist: a practical thinker committed to extending the welfare of all French citizens. He has no use for theories that cannot be applied. He graduated from the prestigious Ecole Nationale d'Administration (E.N.A.), a post-graduate college established in 1946 to train the managerial and technocratic elite of France. Both the assumptions and conclusions of this book reflect the points of view of the E.N.A., especially on the question of modernization. Peyrefitte insists on the importance of untrammeled individual initiatives and market-place competition to end the decadence of contemporary France. He would place entrepreneurs, bankers, engineers, and technocrats at the helm of French institutions. Peyrefitte ties his allegiance to an advanced, liberal capitalist economy to a pure form of Gaullism.

With the death of André Malraux, it is possible to call Peyrefitte the last eloquent Gaullist. Uncritical of the late General, he accepts the grandiose cultural nationalism of de Gaulle's. Peyrefitte's major goal is to restore France to an "exemplary" role in world affairs.

Like most important books, Peyrefitte's advances a thesis. France, he proclaims, is sick, enervated, and blocked. To support his diagnosis, he points to France's inefficient bureaucracies, to its retarded economy (compared to the United States, Japan, and West Germany), to its underpopulation, to the survival of hierarchical Catholic influences, and above all, to a retrograde, even perverse, French mentality.

What Peyrefitte means by mentality is the shared wishes, fears, beliefs, superstitions – the perceptual modes of the populace. Collectively, he says, the French are and have been essentially negative, they distrust foreigners and one another because each and every Frenchman distrusts himself. This has resulted in a self-defeating society, irreconcilably split on political and class lines.

Furthermore, distrust has translated itself into a stubborn refusal to face what Peyrefitte calls the realities of the twentieth century, specifically the necessity for continuous economic growth, for perpetual scientific and technological innovation, for stepped-up competition and profit making in France. Peyrefitte much prefers industrial to social or political revolutions, and his book laments the absence of an industrial revolution in France – throughout, in fact, the entire Mediterranean south. Until Frenchmen accept the modern spirit of individual enterprise, he insists, the country will never emerge from the "mess," the socio-economic and institutional impasse in which it now finds itself.

Peyrefitte agrees with the consensus school of French political science. He is too astute an observer to dismiss easily the presence of conflicts in French society. Rather, he boldly asserts that class struggle and sharp ideological stances merely feed the French disease, thereby creating more social immobility and more disruption of the economy. To extricate France from this bind, he proposes a "poly-centric" society based on tolerance, compromise, and mutual trust. Consensus can be re-established, he believes, by a stable and "impartial" presidential power, in addition, the French must agree on fundamental issues, such as the Constitution and laws, national defense, independence from the superpowers, and confidence in an economy founded on private property and free enterprise.

Consensus would end the ongoing drama of revolution and repression so characteristic of French history since 1789. It would also create social cohesion and discipline, which are vital for increased industrial production. In other words, class collaboration stands as the only alternative to political and social "delirium." To achieve his goal of trust, Peyrefitte advocates increased participation on the local level by French citizens and decentralization of power and culture.

There are, however, some serious blind spots in Peyrefitte's thesis. He omits, significantly, any discussion of massive unemployment, poverty, racism, and the structural inequalities of contemporary French society (the unequal access to education, culture, and job opportunity and the class-bound nature of civil liberties), which are plainly part of the French disease. He takes as his model for steady economic growth the United States and the northern Protestant countries of Europe. Yet, it remains unclear that such economic systems, themselves now in crisis (one need only think of England), can ameliorate the lot of the vast majority of their countrymen.

Moreover, Peyrefitte's comments on French intellectuals and on the academic community are often spiteful. During the crisis of May-June 1968, he was Minister of Education and significant sectors of French academia opposed his policies. Similarly, he criticizes the rebellious students of the Sixties and Seventies in a self-serving manner. To label their behavior "hysterical" and "excessive" is to misrepresent a profound political and cultural challenge to the French disease with the vocabulary of pathology. The young people, trade unions, and intellectuals who participated in the "events" of those days chose confrontation rather than collaboration to break the French stalemate. The French psychoanalytic community, perhaps better equipped to pass judgments on pathology than Peyrefitte, viewed the '68 cultural revolution as a "return to health."

In conclusion, Peyrefitte's notion of therapy for a sick France turns on his subtle advocacy of old forms of social control, including the voluntary cessation of criticism by dissatisfied members of the population. There can be no trust in a society unless all the partners in such a contract are equal beneficiaries of such trust. While proclaiming the need for change and innovation, this book nevertheless reaffirms the status quo; while condemning ideology for

being outmoded and divisive, this book is slanted in a Gaullist and technological direction; it appropriates the idiom of France's left-wing intellectuals, while attempting to undermine them.

Peyrefitte's pessimism often slides into masochism. The ultimate paradox of his book derives from its self-defeating thesis, for in dwelling on the French disease, it confesses to the failure, not the ability, of Gaullism and advanced technology to provide the solutions for a stalled French society.

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