

Journal : *FOREIGN POLICY (USA)*

Published : *May 2007*

By : *Sophie Meunier*

## The French Twist

It's no secret that France's relationship with American culture is, to put it politely, ambivalent. The French protect their cultural creations from U.S. domination through a complex system of quotas and subsidies, and they are the most vocal opponents in the world of the American cultural steamroller. Yet the French flock en masse, like everyone else, to watch the latest Hollywood blockbusters, and France is McDonald's most profitable market after the United States.

What is less ambiguous, though, is the French discourse on American culture. Unequivocally, it is characterized both by its imperialism and by its lowbrow, mass-market quality. This is partly a consolation for the French: The United States may flood the world with low culture driven by market forces, but at least France has an active, state-led cultural policy producing high-quality arts, which has no match on the other side of the Atlantic.

Frédéric Martel's *De la Culture en Amérique (On Culture in America)*, an unlikely hit, has radically shattered this conventional wisdom. A voluminous tome based on a dissertation, four years of fieldwork, more than 700 interviews, and extensive archival research, this book meticulously tries to unearth the roots of American cultural imperialism rather than simply criticize and reject it. It is a book about the United States—how culture is made, financed, and received by Americans. But, between the lines, it is also a book about France.

Martel has a passion for his topic, and the feeling is contagious. After various stints in French government ministries (including the one responsible for the infamous 35-hour workweek), he spent four years in Boston as the French cultural attaché. He used this unique position as a springboard from which to explore the power of attraction of American universities, disappear deep within archives, and travel extensively in search of American cultural life, from the General Motors Center for African American Art in Detroit to the Acoma Cultural Center in New Mexico, from the south-side barrio in Milwaukee to black churches in North Carolina, crisscrossing the country à la Tocqueville. The result is an incredibly rich, dense, well-documented picture of a country where “the ministry of culture is nowhere, but cultural life is everywhere.”

Martel's comprehensive portrayal of the vibrancy and diversity of American culture is a shocking eye-opener for the French. Sure, there was Hollywood, Broadway, and Disney. But Martel explains how the United States has also become the world's mastodon in contemporary dance, modern painting, literature, and, most of all, academia—not sectors typically popular with the market. How, the French ask, did this happen?

*On Culture in America* challenges French conventional wisdom about American culture in two ways. First is France's long-held view of the role of the market and the role of the state in fostering the arts. The French mantra is that culture is not a product whose worth is determined by the popular, uncritical masses. Successive French governments have long

supported the notion that culture ought to be exempted from the usual rules of trade, with allowances for the state to subsidize and protect the fine arts. Martel's book poses two vexing questions to the French: Why is there no ministry of culture in the United States, and how has high culture been able to thrive in its absence? Martel identifies a third way between state and market—a culture resulting from the nonprofit sector, including philanthropy, foundations, universities, and corporate giving. This, he argues, is the base of the cultural system in the United States.

Second is the issue of cultural diversity. The French are the self-proclaimed global champions of what they call “cultural diversity,” even attempting to erect it as a universally recognized principle. In 2005, France and Canada successfully enshrined “cultural diversity” in a UNESCO convention—against the lone opposition of the United States and Israel. For the United States, so goes the French myth, cultural diversity is anathema because it challenges the powerful Hollywood machine. With *On Culture in America*, Martel subtly trashes the French hypocrisy on cultural diversity by showing how much the American cultural model values and promotes cultural diversity. He analyzes how the United States has actively promoted the development of minority cultures through the empowerment of community organizations and indirect support, such as tax incentives. The irony is that the United States today is possibly the most diverse culture in the world. France, by contrast, has a very uniform, elitist culture, managed by an egalitarian state that does not recognize or promote ethnically based diversity. Yet the United States has not been able to translate this cultural diversity at the international level, showing off only its mass-market, conforming culture to the rest of the world. To a large extent, the French are right that, when it comes to trade in cultural goods, the United States is projecting the uniform preferences of its corporate Hollywood cultural machine. And the French, for their part, have not been able to encourage the cultural diversity they champion internationally at home.

*On Culture in America* received incredible media coverage in France, given its length and its quasi-academic nature. More than 100 articles appeared in the French press, and for a while Martel was ubiquitous on the radio and television. Even more surprising is the fact that the coverage of his book was so positive. From the right-wing *Le Figaro* to the left-wing *Le Nouvel Observateur*, with no less than three separate articles in *Le Monde*, French analysts and journalists had nothing but praise for the book. One would have expected more knee-jerk anti-American reaction, especially considering that French cultural policy for the past few decades has been largely in reaction to the United States. Somehow, French elites must have been impressed by the thoroughness of the work based on facts and data, rather than impressions and ideology, à la French intellectual Bernard-Henri Lèvy's recent travelogue, *American Vertigo*. They've recognized *On Culture in America* for what it is: a pioneering work on a topic rarely discussed, even in the United States.

More than anything, the book is a slap in the face of those who criticize the United States for its lack of high culture. Paradoxically, the book also helps the French bolster their view that culture is not a good whose value is determined by market forces, as it shows that even in the United States, culture is greatly subsidized. At least now, thanks to Martel, the French understand better the indirect, opaque, and complex underpinnings of American culture. In the end, however, the greatest paradox of all is that, in spite of the entirely different, polar opposite processes through which culture is financed and produced in France and the United States, cultural practices end up being quite similar in the two countries. Whether it's the percentage of artists in the population, theaters per person, or the number of people who have read a book, visited a museum, listened to a classical concert or watched a dance

performance, Martel has revealed that France and the United States are not nearly as far apart as they seem.