France from 1851 to the Present

Universalism in Crisis

Roger Celestin

and

Eliane DalMolin

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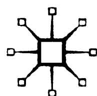

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To
Simone, Sonia, and Cassandra
and
Raymonde, Andrew, Sophie, and Paul

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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 Bersntein, *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

INTRODUCTION

In order to remain a great country, France must extend its language, its customs, its flag, its weapons, and its genius wherever it can.

—Jules Ferry, Speech to the Chamber of Deputies, July 28, 1885

France is only itself when it is at the forefront of nations . . . Only great projects can hope to compensate the seeds of dissent its people carry within themselves; our country, as it is, among others, as they are, must aim high and stand tall, lest it die. In short, in my view, France cannot be France without greatness [grandeur].

—Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs, 1940–1944*

So we do not have any regrets for the past? Will we not have to repent for having exchanged the banalization of France for simple material satisfaction? To abandon these old relics and to lose a part of our soul in the process; was this really the price to pay in order to be able to exist and to succeed in the great economic game? And are we prepared to continue in this direction? . . . Finally acquiring a sense of economics, have we fallen into line, after our loss of power, of our illusions, and a part of our soul? Are we condemned to be a middle-size nation like any other? Is God still French?

—Raymond Soubie, *Is God Still French?* (1991)

The above quotations span over one hundred years of French history and politics. In spite of the contrasting images of France they reflect—a secure, great, and ascending nation with a mission to extend itself over the globe (Ferry), a France that must remain true to its nature, that is, its *grandeu*r, in order to exist at all (de Gaulle), and a France that is no longer great, has lost its power, and sacrificed its ideals to material imperatives (Soubie)—they all have one thing in common: France, whether dominant or in decline, is different from other nations. As a British scholar puts it, "The idea that France is somehow unique is deeply embedded in the nation's self-image. This is not just the routine rhetoric common to all nationalisms, nor even the inflated vanity typical of most great powers. It reflects the conviction that France has an exemplary, universal role as a civilizing force, that its aspirations are those of humanity at large" (Jenkins, 112).

One way of characterizing the present study of France from the mid-nineteenth century to the first few years of the third millennium is to consider it to be an exploration of the basic proposition—not necessarily the authors'—contained in the three quotes used as epigraphs above: France is different from other countries or, rather, France is *more different* from other countries. In academia and the media, this difference has been referred to as the "French exception" or "French exceptionalism." Recent studies have examined this exceptionalism, attempted to pin down its properties, and also considered its limits (Chafer and Godin, Silverman and Wirth). Others, while accepting the existence of a French exceptionalism at one time, have announced its demise as of two decades ago, at about the time when France was celebrating the bicentennial of its 1789 Revolution (Furet, Juilliard, and Rosanvallon). Another although in a tone at once more playful, ironic, and radical—the work in question is

a novel—considers the issue a moot one and wonders whether "[the French realize that] they have been wiped off the map since 1945?" (Sollers, 200). Given that the author, Philippe Sollers, is French, alive, and well, and notoriously caustic, the question is to be taken with a grain of salt.

Our approach takes at least one thing for granted: the French have not been wiped off the face of the map. France's recent *non* to the European constitution in the spring of 2005, and its less recent *non* to the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2002 are, whether we agree with these positions or not, ostensible signs of its continued existence and, even, resilience. To these *nons* we can add a list of more positive items that reflect France's continued power and influence today: Paris continues to be the principal destination of travelers to Europe, just as the Cannes Film Festival remains one of the major showcases of international cinema; France possesses the world's third-largest film industry (after India and the United States) and ranks second (after the United States) in food exports. On a more technological front, it was from Toulouse, the center of France's advanced aeronautics industry, that Airbus A380, the world's largest commercial aircraft, was built and started out on its maiden flight in the spring of 2005 and, in June 2005, Cadarache, a small town in southern France, was designated as the site of one of the most ambitious scientific projects ever undertaken: the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER).

A half-century ago, Cadarache was designated by Charles de Gaulle as France's national center for atomic research; there is thus a clear continuity between de Gaulle's idea of a France of *grandeur* and the country's present-day accomplishments. However, the world France was instrumental in creating, a world in which it was also a major political and cultural power, has changed. The result is obviously not the disappearance of France itself, but the disappearance of what we would like to call the *compatibility* between France and the world in which it exists, the disappearance of a basic congruence between its universalist principles and ideology, and those that obtain in the world today. In order to better understand this disappearance and its effects on the republic, it is necessary to take a closer look at what is meant by French exceptionalism and the essential place held by republican universalism in its definition.

French exceptionalism originates in the Enlightenment and the Revolution of 1789. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, among them Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, perceived themselves as the harbingers of a new world in which arbitrariness, injustice, and the irrational, all associated with the Ancien Régime, would be vanquished by the forces of reason and progress. This would be true not only of France, but also of the rest of the world, for these notions of reason and progress were perceived as being universal.

The French Republic that was born of the Revolution of 1789 perceived itself as the enactment of these universal principles, as reflected, for example, in the revolutionary motto *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. The republic created by the French Revolution was perceived as the particular embodiment of the Enlightenment's abstract universalism, a "universalist republic." The sovereignty and specificity of a particular nation were thus inextricably linked with principles that were considered universal. This meeting of the universal and the particular, of the universal *in* the particular, is at the heart of what has been referred to as French exceptionalism. Other elements also contribute to the construction of France as a modern nation: the secular republic recognizes only individual citizens and not members of particular groups—religious, regional, or ethnic, among

other possibilities—that would have an identity over and above republican citizenship. A strong and interventionist state ensures equality before the law and, more generally, leads the way toward perpetual progress. Within its borders, the forces of arbitrariness, injustice, and irrationality give way to republican principles and a modern nation, a process Eugen Weber referred to as "turning peasants into Frenchmen" during the half-century that preceded World War I. Beyond its borders, the republic had a mission to advance the cause of universal reason and progress by spreading them throughout the world. This is the aspect of French universalism that laid the basis for France's massive colonial project, referred to as its *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission). Culture, and more specifically, a certain idea of cultural greatness, also lies at the core of the republic's mission both inside and outside its frontiers.

All of these characteristics of the universalist republic combine to create what is generally referred to as French exceptionalism. The first French Republic may have been the one that emerged from the Revolution of 1789, but universalism in practice, at its height, is traditionally associated with the period of French history known as the Third Republic (1870–1941). The year 1870 is the starting point for a number of recent cultural histories of France (Forbes and Kelly, Sowerwine). On the inside, the Third Republic's *instituteurs*—teachers sent out throughout France to inculcate republican principles to the masses—and, on the outside, its soldiers and colonists with their pith helmets in Asia and Africa, have become symbolic of French republican universalism in an ascending phase of its development. The Third Republic coincided with a period when the universal Enlightenment principles at the core of the French Republic were values that dominated on the international scene. This is what we have referred to above as the compatibility between French universalism and the world in which France existed. Further, the years of the Third Republic coincided with a period when France was a major military power and, as Jules Ferry, one of its emblematic figures formulates it above, France was in a position to "extend its language, its customs, its flag, its weapons, and its genius" to the far reaches of the globe.

Yet our study begins two decades earlier, in 1851. This choice is dictated by the need to delineate the passage from the republic that emerged from the revolution of 1789, which bequeathed universal principles that were philosophical, civic, and political, to a period when, at the onset of the conservative regime of the Second Empire (1852–1870), the notion of universalism went beyond this essentially political and ideological arena to become an overwhelming cultural force. It was from this moment on that Paris started to become the archetypal city of modernity, a modernity announced by the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire as early as 1845: "The Heroism of modern life surrounds and pushes us further . . . That man will be the painter, the true painter, who manages to draw out the epic side from modern life, and to make us see and realize, by means of color or drawing, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and patent leather boots. May the true seekers give us next year that rare delight of greeting the advent of novelty" (407). It was the period during which impressionism made its first appearance, and the period that saw the beginnings of colonial ambition.

What of the year 1851 itself ? That year, *universal* suffrage, a fundamental republican principle, which had been severely limited, was reinstituted; it was the year in which ordinary humanity entered the exclusive world of Art in Gustave Courbet's realist masterpiece *Burial at Ornans*; the year in which *the world was not enough* for the French

who visited the first World's Fair held in London, but preferred to call it *exposition universelle* (*universal* exhibit—emphasis added), announcing their own qualifier for the exhibits they would organize throughout the following decades. The year 1851 was the year of President Louis Napoleon's coup d'état that led France out of the republic and into the empire, but also out of the age of cholera into that of a self-proclaimed age of progress and culture.

The exceptions to universalism and to "great culture" also became evident during this period, revealing the paradox of exclusion that is part and parcel of these concepts. Universal suffrage was "fully" restored but it excluded women. The impressionists appeared on the scene, but they would have to exhibit at the *Salons des Refusés* (Exhibit of the Rejected), a parallel exhibit outside of the official *Académie*-sponsored *Salon*. Baron Haussmann's project to transform and modernize Paris is commonly associated with the policies of the Third Republic, but it is as Prefect of the Seine from 1853 to 1870, appointed by Napoleon III, that he oversaw the modernization of the city and the changes brought to its social geography; the wide avenues and monuments of "Haussmannization," also entailed the relocation of the poor and working-class population to peripheral sectors of the capital.

After the defeat of the French Empire by Germany in 1870 and after the Third Republic was proclaimed that same year, modernity and French republican universalism followed parallel courses. The Third Republic's claim to universalism was, as we have seen, simultaneously a claim to modernization and progress. Those forces that could not be assimilated in the process were relegated to categories that bore a variety of names: the backward, the unhealthy, the mad, the criminal, the unpatriotic, the provincial, the unclean, and subversive masses, in a word, and in one uniform category, the "different." In the very process of affirming and extending themselves, French republican universalism and modernity thus both consist of a dual movement of assimilation and exclusion that designates a multiplicity of "others." Universalism and modernity have in common an imperative to delineate differences in order to advance or even exist at all. These developments did not occur exclusively in France, but, as Max Silverman suggests, there is something—that we will call exceptional—in the way they manifested themselves in that country: "Although this process of boundary-drawing was a fundamental feature of modernity in general, we might once again suggest that France was exemplary. For in which nation were rationality and the irrational, science and superstition, nation and race orchestrated so systematically as ideological opposites as in France?" (2).

The opposites were set up, but universalism prevailed. Until the advent of World War II, France the universalist, modernizing republic existed in a world where it was not only a major power but also one whose principles and ideology were made compatible with that world by its power. World War II may seem a rather exact marker to indicate the end of this compatibility, and indeed signs of a shift were present well before the German blitzkrieg in the spring of 1940 led to the collapse of the Third Republic and to the beginning of the infamous Vichy regime. The *expositions universelles*, for example, were not exclusively showcases where the republic displayed scientific advances and the successes of its colonial expansion and "civilizing mission" for the edification of its citizens; they were also venues of mass entertainment for the amusement of consumers, already announcing the Disneylands of America. They indicated a blurring of the separation between republican public sphere and

consumerist private space, and they were also announcing the late twentieth century "Euro-Disney" built in the suburbs of Paris. The colonies were not exclusively vast tracts of land where the empire could spread its civilization and extend its trade, but also the source of other practices, other esthetics that would reappear in the center of the empire in the works of the great modernist artists like Picasso. The Russian Revolution of 1917 also constituted a spectacular counterdiscourse to the French Republic's universalism; it represented the paradox of *another universalism.*

On the eve of World War I, shortly before this "other revolution," French film production represented 70 percent of the world film market. While this was indicative of France's continued cultural prevalence, films made in the United States, that "other republic" born in the late eighteenth century, would soon begin to claim an ever-increasing share of the market. In fact, the film medium itself, at least a certain practice of this medium, already constituted a challenge to the universalist republic's traditional definition of culture, the "high culture" with which France is still commonly associated. "Hollywood movies," on the other hand, would become a fundamental component of mass culture associated with an American brand of popular culture. The calls to stop "American cultural domination" were not yet being heard, but the world in which French universalism was the dominant paradigm was being bypassed. To an ideology that placed the citizen's allegiance to republican principles above all else, the United States presented the challenge of a Fordist production model and a system where the consumer is king. During the same period, the Russian revolution held out the promise of a world in which the proletariat would rule.

All of this taking place in the aftermath of World War I strangely resembled the situation that would be prevalent in the aftermath of World War II, which was thus not a sudden limit marking the abrupt disappearance of compatibility between French universalism and the world. Rather, the post–World War II period reflected the crystallization of trends that had been evolving for decades. There is, however, a crucial difference between the two eras, between a time when the Ford Company was making the "Model T"—production lasted from 1908 to 1927—and the aftermath of World War II: thirty years after the Bolshevik revolution and twenty years after the last Model-T came off the assembly line, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two superpowers while France, as Alain Soubie bemoans above, was becoming "a middle-size nation." This was the point where French political and economic power could no longer sustain or enforce the principles of French republican universalism on a planetary level. In addition, the two systems represented by the United States and the Soviet Union at that time offered alternative models that also presented themselves as "universal."

In this new distribution of power and influence France aligned itself with the neoliberal economies of the American-dominated North Atlantic sphere. It opted for the American modernization model in the three decades that have been called France's "Thirty Glorious Years," when it was transformed from a war-devastated country into one of the world's fastest-growing economies. In the midst of these transformations, de Gaulle attempted, during the years of his presidency (1958–1969), to maintain a "certain idea of France," to enact a policy of "grandeur." However, the increasing privatization of everyday life along consumerist patterns, and the disappearance of the French Empire were signs that, by then, the French republican universalist model had already reached a critical point. This passage from a paradigm

in which France was dominant to one in which it no longer was paralleled what Silverman refers to as "the crisis of modernity" itself:

> If modernity was intricately connected with industrial society and class conflict [respectively symbolized by the Model-T and Revolution], the nationalizing mission of the state, colonialism, and the cultural avant-garde, then today's transformations in the industrial fabric of society, the attack on the so-called sovereignty of the nation-state from above and below (through globalization and localization), post-colonialism and the broadening of the cultural sphere to encompass what were formerly designated as the political and social spheres, all bear witness to the crisis of modernity. (4)

We acknowledge here the scholarship of others working in this area, Silverman's work in this instance, by stating that, before we read his *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society*, his introduction in particular, we had thought of *The Crisis of Modernity* as a possible title for this book. For we too see in the contemporary debates on French identity and French exceptionalism a reflection of the passage from a modern to a postmodern paradigm.[1]

However, our method and, as previously mentioned, our point of departure differ from those of previous studies. The aim of *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in Crisis* is to provide a chronological narrative and a broad historical sweep as a background against which we can examine France's claim to universalism through an exploration of politics, culture, and society over a 150-year span. To a certain extent, this study can be considered a cultural history, but one with a particular thesis. As is the case in cultural histories, we try to provide an overall account that includes as much information as possible; but we have also chosen to focus our narrative on the opposition or tension between a homogenizing and centralizing state and the resistance to its policies and ideology represented by different individuals, groups, and movements. In addition, we have taken into account a shift in the context of this opposition: in an initial phase, covered in the first five chapters, France's universalist ethos exists in a period where it dominates, and the exceptions to its principles can be relegated to the status of aberrations. In a second phase, covered in chapters six through ten, a phase whose beginnings we locate in the aftermath of World War II, it has become increasingly difficult for the republic to apply policies based on its claimed universalism. This is the phase where, internationally, it no longer dominates and, nationally, has to contend with the appearance of either previously repressed or newly emerging identities claiming their place. In order to maintain a hold on its founding principles in this second phase, the republic has had to make an increasing number of adjustments in its recognition of differences. *Universalism and exceptionalism had to make exceptions*. Whence our title and our approach: universalism in crisis. Gustave Flaubert's (1821–1880) sardonic definition of "exception" in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (*Dictionary of Commonplaces*) gives us an idea of the intricacies involved in the transformation of French republican universalism in this second phase: "Exception: Say that it confirms the rule. Don't venture to explain how."

Since we do not claim to offer a totalizing or exhaustive account of France from 1851 to the present time, our argument has also directed and limited our selection of material. Rather than attempt to include a maximum amount of information at the cost of simply naming or mentioning people and events when there was no room for

analysis or development, we have chosen, as much as possible, to include only material for which we could provide at least some background, while providing continuity for the reader. When this could not be done within the narrative, we have also included a number of "dossiers" as a means of developing particular events and trends. Our goal is to combine information and chronological continuity with a particular proposition. It is our hope that the readers of this study will not only find a general presentation of France over the past 150 years, but that they will also find in our approach a unifying framework for the many names and events they encounter in the process.

Note

1. We are aware of the sometimes contentious reception of the term "postmodern," but endorse it here as a means of summarizing a variety of developments. These range from the end of colonial empires to the replacement, in advanced industrial societies, of the old "smokestack" and assembly line industries by service and information oriented economies, with all of the social and political upheavals this entails; from the appearance of mass consumerism to the globalization of economic flows; from an admittedly problematic notion of ethnic homogeneity, to multicultural populations; from what the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has called "grand narratives," such as the discourse of the Enlightenment or of universalism, to a multiplicity of discourses.

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PART I

1851–1944: UNIVERSALISM TRIUMPHANT

Eliane DalMolin

CHAPTER 1

FRANCE AT MID-CENTURY

1851: The Year of the Universal

Until 1870, the French never ceased to claim that their singularity was to be bearers of the Universal.

—Françoise Mélonio, *Histoire culturelle de la France* (1998)

France has a passion for the universal.

—Pierre Bouretz, *La République et l'universel* (2000)

When he arrived in London for a quick visit to the World's Fair held at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park in September 1851, French writer Gustave Flaubert was at a key moment in his personal and literary life. He had recently returned from a long trip to Egypt and Turkey, and he was filled with extraordinary memories and dreams of visiting the exotic lands of the "Orient." He had also just begun writing his masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*, the sordid and tragic story of a bored provincial bourgeois housewife. The topic of this new novel alone reflected his critical sentiment toward the materialistic and disingenuous rising Western bourgeoisie, while his recent travels reinforced his enthusiasm for Eastern culture and beauty. His love of the East may very well have been a response to his disapproval of Western bourgeois life. What he saw in the conservative and status-driven French society of the mid-nineteenth century was far from the ideology of the egalitarian society imagined by the partisans of the 1789 French Revolution. So, when the first World's Fair opened its doors in London to an indisputably bourgeois public, he was the first to be surprised at how enjoyable the event was, and he was genuinely pleased to see the heteroclite display of artifacts from all over the world. Despite his general disillusionment with French bourgeois principles, he could not escape the "universal" feeling brought on by the international spirit of the great bazaar embodied by the 1851 London Fair. He would speak with admiration of the fair as a "very beautiful object [. . .] admired by everybody" (Seznec, 23). The fair was indeed a beautiful universal venue where a predominantly bourgeois crowd came to admire not only modern civilization, but also the wonders from faraway lands. Against all odds, Flaubert momentarily put aside his profound dislike of the bourgeois way of life and enjoyed being "like everyone else" as he went through the extensive display of novel and beautiful objects offered by the

exhibit. More particularly, his inclination for the exotic was readily satisfied by the Chinese and Indian booths where he spent some time writing descriptions of the various exhibited artifacts: from India, a howdah-harnessed elephant, a sofa, a jacket, a sword, fans, and turbans; from China, folding screens, silk shawls, a sculptured ivory tree, a sampan. This Eastern bric-a-brac in the middle of a proper bourgeois setting did not strike Flaubert or any other visitor as odd or anachronistic; on the contrary, it suggested the beginning of an era when the Western world became increasingly fascinated with Eastern cultures in particular, and more curious about the rest of the world in general.

Under the roof of the Crystal Palace many different cultures converged. As a "multicultural" moment, the fair was indeed perceived by its contemporaries as the epitome of universal enlightenment. It was a gathering the French appreciated and even envied as they felt they were in a higher cultural position to hold this type of event and impress the world audience with their ability to host foreign cultures while showcasing their own.

For the French, the time for a universal gathering seemed propitious, especially so in the mid-nineteenth century when "universal" liberties earned after the French revolution seemed compromised by national contradictions and self-interest, and when the *Hexagone* suddenly appeared too small to realize the dream of Enlightenment and equality that had been formulated at the end of the eighteenth century. By 1851, the ideal universalism originally defined as a political principle of inclusiveness seemed more and more unattainable and questionable as it was increasingly overshadowed by exclusion. Despite the promise of comprehensive unity behind its basic definition, universalism had never been a perfect concept, but at the very least it represented hope for relative equality among citizens of a single nation. It is this idea of relative equality that had been eroded with time and political regimes during the first half of the nineteenth century, and finally seemed in real jeopardy with the debilitating "reforms" brought to universal suffrage in 1851. As it faced political failure, universalism came to mean "for all, with the exception of many," rather than "for all, with the exception of a few," but despite its inherent contradiction it nevertheless survived by reinventing itself through a radical shift toward the cultural domain. The World's Fair "format" presented the perfect venue to reassert universalism's all-embracing quality differently and to display cultural artifacts for all to see and share. The French felt that it was time to take the lead and to show the world their own cultural standards and their dream for a modern society. It would be a society where, ideally, life would be easier and healthier for everyone, for the rising bourgeois class as well as the growing working class. The French thus aspired to a model society resting on universalist principles of goodness and happiness for all classes. In addition, universalism also meant the development of a policy of cultural prestige to make France "shine," *rayonner* in French, throughout the world as a beacon nation for the arts and culture. In other words, universalism was defining both the domestic and international image of France.

As part of their policy of *rayonnement*, the French thought that an international fair of their own would introduce other nations to the high level of their culture while also giving them the opportunity to share their own ways of life. Thus, the London event showed that a fair was the ideal venue for giving foreign cultures visibility in the Western world, allowing their influence to make its way into Western arts, while also influencing them to respond positively to Western culture. The London Fair brought

all these sentiments to the surface and prepared France psychologically for the next fair-like event, which would be held in Paris in 1855.

The fair appeared to Flaubert, as it did to others, as a place where East met West; a place where a nation was given the opportunity to shine as the host and ambassador of universal values and to exhibit the world's most remarkable and various cultural accomplishments under its auspices. At the end of the fair, the French learned the cultural power of the Universal and vowed to seize and multiply its effects at home in order to rise to what they felt was their destiny as "bearers of the Universal" (Mélonio, in de Baecque, 191).

We thus begin with the premise that 1851 may well be the pivotal year in the rise and establishment of a ubiquitous and already growing universalism, a universalism marred with exceptions and contradictions but filled with renewed cultural energy both within France's borders and beyond. It was the year when the Universal extended its far-reaching powers to the public, cultural, and artistic spheres of a French society in full industrial expansion, to citizens, who were now in the process of moving from predominantly agrarian and local ways to more urban and worldly lives. Beyond its own borders, France also appeared more clearly to the world as a country asserting its cultural position by constantly building upon two key principles in the constitution of its modernity: quality and equality: quality of life and relative equality in the human community both inside and outside of France. No doubt, throughout the years, many variations came to distort and even at times to negate this two-pronged theory but, like most social and cultural theories, the general intention and inner patterns of this dual view of French culture came to represent and project a certain image of France to the rest of the world.

Within the *Hexagone*, the question of equality was at the heart of France's constitutional battle over universal suffrage in 1851. The French were witnessing the end of the elusive and inflammatory Second Republic (1848–1852), a time when the conservative republican administration made the mistake of reducing the number of male voters, thus bringing chaos and dissent to French political life and facilitating the takeover of Napoleon III, then "prince-president" of the Second Republic. His coup d'état would, in turn, rapidly reinstall imperial times to France for the next eighteen years (1852–1870).

In terms of quality of life, as demonstrated during the 1851 fair and for many other fairs to come, the French imposed themselves on the bourgeois scene as the nation of taste and sophistication as well as of the esthetics of everyday life. The French shined with standards of excellence at the London Fair, and, beyond the event itself, the occasion gave them the impetus and the ambition to surpass the British event in subsequent years. Indeed, the 1851 fair inspired the French to do better in areas including industrial innovation, colonial exhibitions, and the general quality and presentation of the event itself. With a renewed sense of cultural confidence, they organized five individual events of enormous proportions during the second half of the nineteenth century. Each one of these shows was bigger and more spectacular than the preceding one. They were held in Paris in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900 in order to showcase France's continuous industrial advances, its high quality products, its relatively new and growing colonial empire, and its thoroughly revamped capital, which from that time on became a primary destination and an object of beauty and curiosity for the entire world. After the 1851 London Fair, the *exposition universelle* (Universal Exposition), as the French called it, became a huge event for France and

the world. The success of the French expositions of the nineteenth century may be attributed in large part to an unparalleled effort by the French to satisfy the simultaneously materialistic and refined desire of a flourishing Western bourgeois population aspiring to a comfortable and practical life to complement their recently acquired social status. In responding to bourgeois demands, the French put their heart and soul into solidifying their long-standing attachment to high and tasteful standards of living while keeping up with the practical demands of an advanced modern culture. Throughout the nineteenth century, curious and fascinated world citizens flocked to Paris in ever-increasing numbers and watched in delight as culture and progress came together in a single place. French singularity was indeed of universal proportion as it attracted the world to see the splendor of its modernity. Not surprisingly, the showcasing of a highly modern France during this time firmly contributed to placing the French at the vanguard of world culture and universal ideals for many years to come.

The London World's Fair

The 1851 "London Universal Exhibition: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations" occupied much of the year, opening on May 1 and closing on October 15. To display the best of the world for the first time required acts of cultural and architectural audacity and courage, and a certain amount of risk. The British wanted to show the world that they were ready to welcome foreign cultures with much enthusiasm and a complete sense of novelty. For the occasion they built the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, a uniquely modern and disposable construction. In architectural history, it will stand as the first temporary large convention center: tall, spacious, and ephemeral. It was the fair's symbolic representation, built exclusively for the occasion and immediately pulled down at the end of the fair in order to restore Hyde Park to its original traditional configuration. The Palace was nonetheless in and of itself a magnificent construction fit for the most prestigious show on earth. Entirely made of glass and iron, two new construction materials, it looked like an immense transparent cage or a prodigious cut diamond receiving and reflecting light all day long and standing proud in the modern world of architecture. Its temporary presence added to its value by becoming the primal example of what, in 1859–1860, French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire would call the "transitory nature of the modern world" and the "eternal quality" that can be retained from its fleeting conception (*Painter of Modern Life*, 12). The Crystal Palace appeared as the quintessential example of modernity, and the World Fair it harbored as the first and optimal world show.

The idea of expositions were not new to the French, as they were in fact the first to organize annual national industrial shows (1782–1804), but when Louis Joseph Buffet, minister of agriculture in 1848 and again in 1851, suggested that these events become international, the French government hesitated: it did not see any immediate benefits to internationalizing these events and was not ready to "globalize" them. The mood was unchanged until the London Fair actually began. By early May 1851, France's growing bourgeois society embraced the idea of universalism and of international competition embodied by the London Fair. The very idea of the fair was considered an innovation and privilege to show national and international treasures, and a prestigious means to confirm the status of France as one of the world's most developed and refined nations. Indeed, in 1851 the French realized that the concept

of gathering national and international industrial and cultural novelties during an international event would lead to world recognition of their newly developed industry on the one hand and of the status of French culture on the other. The fair had the positive effect of making the French understand the crucial role that such an event could represent for the future of their country's highly respected culture. Through a fair or exposition of their own, they felt that they could lead the world "in matter of art and taste" a sentiment expressed by political economist Adolphe Blanqui (107), and assert their new industrial leadership in the "global economy" (Walton, 10).

Competition between major European countries became a factor in asserting cultural power. It played a leading role in the understanding of universalism, as by definition the concept invited open challenges and comparisons between different cultures and the desire for any country involved in such challenges to outdo the others. It also raised the bar for other "less-developed nations" to adopt the ways and to catch up with more industrialized nations. In this idealized universalism, free trade encouraged competition among nations and had the effect of bringing them together in the international brotherhood of economically competing cultures displaying their particular types of national novelties. For France, novelty was framed by bourgeois standards of quality. Elegant and popular goods were made with new and more practical, but no less beautiful, materials. For example, in the *orfévrerie*, or French silver industry, Charles Christofle exhibited his popular line of silver-plated and gilded house items, which looked truly elegant but cost less than the solid silver items.

France had mixed feeling about free trade. The dominant bourgeois class, whose tastes dictated the choice of goods and exhibitors at the fair, wished to claim the exclusivity of their inclination for beautiful arts and crafts, while recognizing that mass-produced objects made them more readily available and less expensive to purchase. Whether on a small-scale or mass-produced, items of quality were the pride of many French artisans and manufacturers. This sentiment was, however, constantly jeopardized as they felt the pressure of British competition. Indeed, the unequivocal competition between France and Britain pervaded many aspects of the 1851 exhibit.

Dossier 1.1 The World's Fair as Viewed by the Press (1851)

In *Le Pilote de Londres*, a newspaper printed in French in London and distributed on the first day of the fair, May 1, 1851, the lead article displayed critical views on the uneven distribution of booths in favor of the British and consequently attempted to dissociate London from the universal objective of the fair: "The London fair is not a British fair but truly a universal fair [. . .] Hyde Park is a neutral ground where nationalities disappear and where all populations should receive equal treatment in relation to the size of their representation" (*L'Illustration*, 427, 272). The journalist appeals here to the very notion of universalism to claim equal and proportional representation for all nations at Hyde Park. Under his pen, universalism becomes the ultimate concept with which France defends its right to be a real competitor, a true player in the world game. Here, universalism applies only to French interests even when, in an effort to discredit the British occupation of the largest area of the fair ground, the writer aspires to see "all populations" fairly represented and gathered at the palace. This seemingly well-intended and idealistic notion that the fair could truly be a

universal event is ultimately part of the French journalist's rhetorical style, a means of pointing to and frowning upon the British. In this publication, France justified its mission as an egalitarian and world-friendly nation by criticizing in universalistic overtones a world event for minimizing the French presence.

Emphasizing the universal character of the fair was the firm intention of Paulin, director and editorialist of *L'Illustration*, the most popular newspaper of the time, appropriately subtitled *Le journal universel* (The Universal Journal). In his inaugural article on the fair Paulin declared with optimism, zeal, and utopian energy that the World's Fair was indeed universal, with global repercussions for mankind, the changing face of the arts, and the sweeping progress of industry:

> *The moment, they say, is solemn. All countries in the universe are invited to measure themselves in the peaceful arena of labor. For the first time in the history of humanity, men from all countries of the world will be gathering. There is no denying it; this meeting of all populations at an industrial tradeshow is a revolution unheard of. It is the most complete victory of common interest and intelligence over prejudices. The Fair is the first universal council of mankind. It will have immense consequences for the future of the universe, for world peace, for the advance in the arts and the industry, and for the greatness of civilization. The glory of such an event will eternally be the honorific title of Prince Albert. Before the marvels of industry, men of State and economists will be forced to modify their opinions. They will have to tackle the most important international questions: free trade, the universal system of weights and measure, single currency, universal lettre de change, new measures of uniformity in trade agreement for all the countries of the globe, and a general system of prevention against commercial fraud and counterfeit. All these questions will be brought forth and will require an answer* (L'Illustration, no. 427 [1851] : 274).

This printed media display of solemnity and grandeur promoting the universal character of the fair emerges here from a sincere desire on Paulin's part to see all global accomplishments as part and parcel of the catalyzing event represented by the fair.

It is important at this point to discuss the difference concerning the very name of the fair in English and in French: "World's Fair" in English becomes "Universal Exposition" (*exposition universelle*) in French. A quick sociolinguistic analysis of the two ways of naming the event reveals an essential difference in the way the two nations, France and England, constructed the respective cultural vision it embodied. In effect, the term "world" points to the way the British represented the international dimension of the fair. To them, the world was indeed the biggest geographical unit that would make the fair a true manifestation of and for all mankind, whereas the French conceived an even larger, infinite concept to represent the same event: "the universe." The term is both grandiose and unrealistic as it goes beyond the planetary possibilities of the event, but it also adds a touch of idealism and anticipation to the notion itself. In other words, the view from the French "universe" is greater and more futuristic than the one from the British "world," a distinction that followed the pattern of competition between the two countries, whereby the French felt it was their objective not only to catch up with the British, but to outdo them.

The comparison of the two labels for the event leads us to a contradiction in terms. The British "world" refers to a more limited space compared to the French *universelle*; in addition, the British "fair" points to the numerous fair-goers while the French *exposition*