



How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People

Sudhir Hazareesingh

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Why are the French such an exceptional nation? Why do they think they are so exceptional? The French take pride in the fact that their history and culture have decisively shaped the values and ideals of the modern world. French ideas are no less distinct in their form: while French thought is abstract, stylish and often opaque, it has always been bold and creative, and driven by the relentless pursuit of innovation.

In *How the French Think*, the internationally-renowned historian Sudhir Hazareesingh tells the epic and tumultuous story of French intellectual thought from Descartes, Rousseau, and Auguste Comte to Sartre, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida. He shows how French thinking has shaped fundamental Western ideas about freedom, rationality, and justice, and how the French mind-set is intimately connected to their own way of life—in particular to the French tendency towards individualism, their passion for nature, their celebration of their historical heritage, and their fascination with death. Hazareesingh explores the French veneration of dissent and skepticism, from Voltaire to the Dreyfus Affair and beyond; the obsession with the protection of French language and culture; the rhetorical flair embodied by the *philosophes*, which today's intellectuals still try to recapture; the astonishing influence of French postmodern thinkers, including Foucault and Barthes, on postwar American education and life, and also the growing French anxiety about a globalized world order under American hegemony.

How the French Think sweeps aside generalizations and easy stereotypes to offer an incisive and revealing exploration of the French intellectual tradition. Steeped in a colorful range of sources, and written with warmth and humor, this book will appeal to all lovers of France and of European culture.

How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People Details

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Johan says

Truly exceptional and so much insight. To name just one of many moments: Enjoyed particularly the critical and sharp but funny summary of Finkielkraut's pessimistic thoughts. To read and re-read this book.

J says

Sudhir Hazareesingh is a fellow at Oxford, whose work seems to be primarily focused on modern (18th Century - 21st Century) France. He is of Mauritian extraction and because of this he offers both an outsider's view of France, while still being close enough to offer a different perspective via the Francophonie.

This is a geeky and nerdy book. If you want an easy, simple, and pre-packaged answer booklet for your visit to Paris - you've made a mistake; go to the Lonely Planet books. If you're learning French / have learned French / enjoy French food then, sadly, this book is also not for you. I think an apt analogy would be something like this: if this book were a book called "How the French Cook", it wouldn't be a friendly introduction with some nice recipes. It would be a dense, specific, history-laden, gastronomic explication of the development of French cuisine. It would be intended for those who have a degree of: cooking knowledge, knowledge of history, and are capable of maintaining a view of the *grande* narrative.

Hazareesingh looks at essential polarities (a very French thing, I discovered in reading the book) such as Rationality/Mysticism, Universality/Specificity, Locality/Nationality and other such tensions, he essentially argues that the French are intensely dialectical. If you know anything about Structuralism, then by reading this book you quickly realise why postmodern/critical theory/structuralism/post-structuralism came so easily and naturally to *la belle France*. The French are infuriatingly, wonderfully confused; they are splendidly assured too.

Hazareesingh is not a boring writer, nor is he actually (certainly not by French standards) a difficult writer - he uses standard British English and the occasional 'academese'. He is snarky, eloquent, and opinionated - this is not hagiography. Hazareesingh loves his subject, but shows with unflinching language the French's (often) mad ramblings: their hysteria around their language; their quasi-religious adherence to communism; their universalism and their antipathy to the outside world (i.e. Islam and the 'Anglo-Saxons/Anglo-Americans').

It is an intellectual history with the explicit purpose to inform the reader where the nodes of French thinking lie, points of departure and so on. The second part was especially fascinating to me, since as a Humanities student I have been rather a-contextually forced to read many of the big names mentioned here: Sartre, Fanon, Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Irigaray, de Beauvoir, Latour etc. bla bla bla - all are placed within the distinctive French intellectual tradition, whose hallmark (Hazareesingh argues) is a *penchant* for large, overarching analysis. This is in sharp contrast to our technocratic, particularism in the English world - hence the Continental vs. Analytical philosophy divide.

Hazareesingh gives the French too much credit. I think he certainly failed to address the enormous intellectual debt France owes to Germany (and vice-versa, but the book doesn't concern the Teutons). He also misses the intellectual competition that nations engage in: having your biggest rival on the border certainly contributes to that.

Bookworm says

Definitely for an audience that is not me. I think I must have read an article somewhere about this book, but whatever appeal that led me to pick this up definitely was not on me once I actually read it. The author claims that it's an examination of how the French think (hence the title :). I guess what I had been hoping for was more of a psychological/sociological examine of the French people, but instead it is much more academic than I thought it would be.

The author instead examines various types of French thinkers, writers, philosophers and their influences on the French. But it's not really "how the French think." It seemed much more of "How *I*, the Author, Think French Think." The overall style of the book reminded me of another book, 'How the French Invented Love,' where the author examined love as presented by various French writers, lovers, etc. but not much in the way of a broader historical context.

Maybe it's just me but I wanted statistics, polls, citations to academic studies in sociology/psychology, etc. I'm fully willing to acknowledge that's either my own personal mindset or perhaps very "US" of me, so used to being in your face with political polls polls polls. But I just can't help but wonder if the approach would be different. If you wrote a book about "How Americans Think" I'm not sure there would be so many academic names or writers or philosophers, etc.

I can't help but feel this book is meant for a very small, rather narrow audience and I'm not part of it. Which is fine, but I just don't think I got as much out of it as someone else who is more entrenched in this. Library borrow.

Jerry Smith says

Hmm. Not quite what I was expecting which was a light hearted view of how the French approach the world. This is a heavy, esoteric volume that delves deep into the history of French culture and existentialism as a means to explain how the country relates to the world and to itself. This is all very well and not uninteresting but presented in such high brow terms that it becomes hard to read and risks coming across as pretentious at times.

I am all for exploring the richness of the English language (as ironic as that may seem when discussing a book about the French) but this is taking it to a level that sometimes makes this hard to read and indeed I was unable to get into it significantly before having to return it to the library. I will probably return to it, but for the moment it seemed a little too much like hard work to me.

Thorlakur says

A brilliant outline of French thought from Descartes to the present day. Mr. Hazareesingh does a good job in explaining the everlasting French crisis and pessimism, linked with the notion that French status in the world is ever declining. This book can be recommended to all Francophiles, and Francophobes alike.

Morgan Henley says

The book drags on at some points, but overall interesting. If you can get through the first half, the second half will be a rewarded as it's ability to find themes within French history and culture are impressive.

the gift says

this is a later addition: after the attacks in paris i was very sad, though of course such terrorism afflicts other cities, countries, even more violently- but this felt personal, felt immediate, for the victims were in many ways living what is for me the ideal, just drinking, talking, laughing with each other at some cafe... however it is less than ideal, this is how i want to think the french think...

first review: while there is certain uncertainty in characterizing an entire country as manifesting a 'style' of being, of thought, this is a helpful examination, expression, celebration of 'the intellectual' in a given world. this book is ambitious, is dedicated, is historical, is most convincing when recounting the past several hundred years- the first half of the book- which serves to give a grounding on interpreting France and her intellectuals, her elites, her peoples, throughout the 20th century and the early 21st... of other languages i have read more French authors, more French philosophers, than anywhere else. that the world needs France, needs holistic, gentle, general life, politics, society, seems to me incontestable. this does not mean it best remain nationalistic or parochial, be only 'true' french like right-wing populists want, but something of an export anywhere in the world could use...

Wendy Greene says

Everything you ever wanted to know about French thought!. The book made me think of a PhD comp exam. Every page, a new name. Every page, a different school of thought. I would have much preferred and would have learnt a lot more had he concentrated on one period instead of writing the ultimate survey course. In its defense, I did actually find the two last chapters interesting, perhaps because they dealt with France (more or less) today. (Unfortunately, the book was published after Charlie Hebdo but before the Bataclan massacre.)

Sam Eccleston says

This is a brilliant overview of French thought; exploring in equal measure the philosophical works and historical events which have provided the dialectical framework for the evolution of modern French culture. The account is nuanced enough to avoid easy and unconvincing generalisations, while at the same time saying something substantive about the distinctive approach to the world which characterises the French. Of particular interest are passages dealing with the post-mortem apotheosis of Napoleon, the spirituality of post revolutionary France, the conflict between Camus and Sartre, and the misinterpretations of French Structuralists and existentialists by their post-structuralist heirs in the American academy, all of which deserve book length treatments in their own right. The rest of the narrative is thoroughly fascinating; every page is worth the read.

Tim says

Hazareesingh presents an accessible and lucid review of French philosophy from Descartes and Rousseau to the present. The book celebrates the passion for ideas that underlies the French approach to the world.

"the Gallic attachment to the deductive method of reasoning, immortalized by Descartes, which starts with a general, abstract proposition and then proceeds to a particular conclusion or proposition."

Philosophy is more than an academic pursuit. The debate of ideas, "the French predilection for conducting arguments about the good life around idealized metaphysical concepts," is a dynamic underlying French politics, literature, and culture.

Last January 3.7 million people marched in Paris right after the Charlie Hebdo attacks as an expression of solidarity with core values of tolerance and freedom of expression in the face of hatred, intolerance, and violence. I finished this book the day terrorists unleashed a series of attacks in Paris killing over 120. May the French continue to show us how to stay true to one's ideals in the face of evil.

Jim Coughenour says

I read Hazareesingh's book soon after finishing Gary Gutting's *Thinking the Impossible*, which addressed a narrower subject (French philosophy) within a more concentrated span (since 1960). Even so, the overlap is less compelling than expected. Hazareesingh's French thinkers are a bit more grim, less brilliantly Gallic than Gutting's. After a telling prologue (Dominique de Villepin's 2003 address to the U.N. countering the Bush/Blair rush to invade Iraq), Hazareesingh begins with Descartes, and the book bogs down.

Of course: *À chacun son goût*. For my taste, the bulk of Hazareesingh's book is as dry as a day-old baguette – as compared to (first example to mind) Tony Judt's *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* or even Gutting's careful account. The last couple chapters, documenting French thinkers' thoughts on their own decline, are slightly more interesting but at the cost of a certain acerbity ("mindless word games in the style of Derrida and Baudrillard"). Those targets are too easily hit, and far from affectionate.

At its best, the book provided a dogged survey of writers I knew nothing about or had largely forgotten. One example: I was startled to see the name of Reynaud Camus, whom I remember only for his unapologetic *Tricks: 25 Encounters* (1981, introduction by Roland Barthes and the ostensible subject of Gore Vidal's spectacular polemic "Pink Triangle and Yellow Star"). It appears he's moved far beyond sex with strangers.

Camus believed that the notion of France as a land of immigration was a "myth" that had been fabricated by the ideologues of the establishment for the sake of promoting multiculturalism and the "decivilized" utopia of a global village. According to the author, the strategy was succeeding: the sacred concepts of patriotism, patrimony, and heritage had been emptied of their substance, and France was facing a "replacement" of its native populations by immigrants from the Maghreb – an Islamic invasion that Camus described as a "counter-colonization."

Indeed, a quick read of the Wikipedia entry on Camus reveals a complicated character who does indeed (as he did in 1981) seem entirely French. And Hazareesingh is helpful on explaining this exacerbated debate, especially post *Charlie Hebdo*.

I could have used more of this, more flavor – there's precious little on French fiction (nothing on its crime fiction, one of my favorites); almost nothing on its music or film or food. – Well, there is one orotund quote from the philosopher Yves Roucaute

who used a sustained comparison between the blandness of the fast-food hamburger and the authenticity of the French *sandwich jambon-beurre*... This opened the way to a lyrical evocation of the liberating virtues of the French café... "Remarkable school of equality, the French café symbolizes equal dignity. Extraordinary school of liberty, the French café opens its doors to all and allows true choice. Prodigious school of fraternity, by this apparently simple act of buying a sandwich is created a communion around regional products. So with butter, bread and pork, without knowing it, you declaim these three words: 'liberty,' 'equality,' and 'fraternity.'"

Sans doute! And as I started my review with the metaphor of taste, so I must conclude with the delightful scene from *Diva* on Zen and the art of the baguette.
