

**Edmiston, William F. and Annie Duménil.**

***La France Contemporaine.* 3rd edition.**

**New York: Thomson & Heinle, 2005. Pp. xxx+295. Instructor's Edition ISBN 1-4130-0374-4.**

College instructors all agree, I think, that “culture and civilization” are an integral part of any self-respecting French program. The problem facing instructors, therefore, is twofold: defining the beast and then finding an appropriate text, one that is comprehensive enough to give third- and fourth-year students a comprehensive overview of French culture and civilization yet accessible to non-native speakers who, in many cases, are still struggling to master the fundamentals of the French language. I think it fair to say that by the time students have reached the end of the intermediate language program, they know all about the *baguette* and are somewhat familiar with a smattering of “lower-case” cultural items ranging from greetings and ordering a meal in a restaurant to the arts and entertainment; so, clearly, “Capital C” Culture and Civilization must be concerned with the evolution of French society over time. This reviewer was delighted to discover Steel and Onge’s *La Civilisation Française en Évolution*, also published by Heinle, and has used it in combination with the text under review here for the past ten years or so — with a great deal of success, I might add. I can think of no better texts on the American market today, specifically developed with the undergraduate student in mind. Whereas Steel and Onge take a more diachronic, interdisciplinary approach, moving horizontally across time, examining one historical period after another, and then vertically, pausing to look at how, for example, the arts developed in the age of Louis XIV, *La France Contemporaine* is divided into sixteen thematic chapters, which each examine a different aspect of French civilization:

Chapter 1: La France physique

Chapter 2 : Paris

- Chapter 3 : Les régions et les provinces
- Chapter 4 : Les langues de France
- Chapter 5 : L'union européenne
- Chapter 6 : La république française
- Chapter 7 : L'État
- Chapter 8 : Les partis politiques et les élections
- Chapter 9 : La famille
- Chapter 10 : Le travail et le temps libre
- Chapter 11 : La protection sociale
- Chapter 12 : Les religions
- Chapter 13 : L'immigration
- Chapter 14 : L'éducation
- Chapter 15 : Les médias
- Chapter 16 : La technologie et le commerce

New to the third edition of *La France Contemporaine* is the organization of these sixteen chapters into five units, *La France et l'Europe*, *La vie politique*, *La vie sociale*, *La vie culturelle*, and *L'information et la technologie*, providing “the focus necessary for comprehension of current French communications and interactions” (IE-4).

The focus of each chapter, naturally, is on France; however, the authors make frequent references to parallels and contrasts between France and North America, which is an excellent pedagogical technique to reinforce a point as well as to teach cross-cultural awareness. Students should reflect on their own culture as they learn about France and realize a thing or two about what makes it unique. Also, they should be reminded of just how much France and the U.S. have in common. The coverage of each subject is perfectly adequate for an introductory-level course, but instructors will want to add material as needed, in light of current events. When discussing *La vie politique* in the second part of the text, for example, instructors could easily incorporate a section on the presidential election in the spring of 2007 and include material from French newspapers, magazines, and television news (courtesy of SCOLA, which transmits French news broadcasts twice daily).

One distinctive feature in the third edition is a brand new introduction titled “La France et les États-Unis,” which underscores the close relations between our two nations and may help offset some of the hostility toward France on American campuses in the aftermath of the war in Iraq (which I feel helps explain a recent decline in enrollments). There is also the five-unit organization of the chapters mentioned above and an updated *Repères chronologiques* section, which helps students bone up on the historical content of each chapter. Each chapter still concludes with various comprehension exercises, *Contrôle des connaissances*, which can be assigned on a daily basis and easily corrected. My students also appreciate the suggestions for further research on the Internet contained in the *Contrôle des connaissances* section.

The Instructor’s Edition includes a 30-page discussion of the organization of the text and includes many useful tips on how to use it in class with the best results,

as well as pertinent *Cultural Notes and Cross-Cultural Expansions* on each of the sixteen chapters, containing invaluable cultural tidbits in footnote form.

Although this text is intended for third-year French civilization courses, it could also be used in an advanced language class as a cultural reader, as well as in a business language class to give students a better sense of how France works, and, why not, in an orientation class for students planning to study abroad. The text is written entirely in French, in an authentic and sometimes quite sophisticated language that is never too difficult for the advanced intermediate level, so students will definitely have an opportunity to hone their language skills and gain not only the knowledge but also the linguistic tools necessary to speak about France with some degree of authority. Thankfully, there are a *Lexique* and *Liste des sigles* at the end of the text to help the reader identify all the abstruse acronyms that are so much a part of everyday life in France.

No one expects an undergraduate manual of French civilization to be complete or even to offer an in-depth study of any one of a number of salient topics. Some instructors might miss a section on *la Francophonie*; however, the focus throughout is on France, as stated at the outset. Instructors who so desire can easily include a section on the French Empire and decolonization in the context of the chapter on *L'immigration*. Although this chapter tried to outline the subject succinctly, in easily digestible chunks (“Un peu d’histoire,” “Les Asiatiques,” “Les noirs,” “Les Maghrébins,” “L’immigration et la politique,” and “La nationalité française”), it does not do a very good job of presenting the challenges facing France’s many ethnic minorities and thus, not surprisingly, fails to anticipate the riots that shook France in the fall of 2005. Personally, I would have liked to see more attention to French history and find that the information contained in the *Repères chronologiques* could easily be expanded to provide a clearer and more detailed overview; however, as the authors point out in their introduction, this manual is not intended to be a history of France (IE-3), so instructors who wish to include a unit on, say, the French Revolution or the Algerian War of Independence will have to find suitable supplementary materials. On the other hand, it would be relatively easy, I think, to include more tables and stats in a series of appendices, and perhaps also to include more pictures, in color. All things considered, however, an introductory text aimed at undergraduates does not get much better than this one: in terms of its organization, up-to-date content, activities, and overall usefulness, *La France Contemporaine* is unsurpassed; it could be used as is, in toto (it is a godsend to new instructors, especially), or as I use it at present, as an invaluable supplement in a one-semester introduction to French Civilization.

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