

INTRODUCTION

Flourishing in a Tough Climate

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Research on France and the French-speaking world is flourishing across much of the globe. The internet draws scholars who work on things French into webs of connectivity within and across disciplines, and nations, as never before. The sheer diversity of topics and approaches scholars pursue in that variously defined field we call “French Studies” has probably never been greater, certainly never more visible. If you pay close attention to H-France with its daily cascade of conferences, calls-for-papers, book and journal announcements, and reviews, you know what I mean. Diversity of this kind has many sources: the demographic variety of the scholars who work in this field with a desire to ask new questions, pressures within disciplines to specialize, and the cumulative effects of the several “turns” scholars have made over recent decades—the new social history, the linguistic turn, the new institutionalism in political science, the colonial and transnational turns, and more. French Studies thrives too on the relationships foreign scholars cultivate with their counterparts in France, who now have more opportunities than their predecessors had for international conferences and exchanges, especially within Europe and across the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. This journal and others like it are prospering accordingly: the volume and quality of the articles spilling forth is evidence aplenty of the vibrancy of the field.

Yet scholars in French Studies also feel under assault. In the United States they find themselves allied with their liberal arts colleagues to defend the besieged ramparts of the humanities *tout court*. Historians and literary scholars worry about declining enrollments as students flock to supposedly more vocationally remunerative subjects. All things considered, French language enrollments in high schools and colleges in the United States have held up remarkably well over the past two decades, in no small measure because teachers of French have learned to teach the subject as a world language. But the



countervailing pressures are real, and the nightmare scenario has in some instances come to pass—notoriously so in SUNY-Albany's 2010 decision to eliminate its French, Italian, Russian, Classics, and theater programs, and in the current threat to close the department of French Studies at Tel Aviv University. In political science and sociology (though, notably, to a lesser extent in anthropology) the challenge for French specialists has come not so much from enrollment pressures as from disciplinary colleagues who discourage single-country studies, and in some departments even two- or three-country comparisons.¹ In short, if scholarship in the field is flourishing, the institutional spaces scholars occupy can no longer be taken for granted.

Last year *French Politics, Culture & Society* galloped into its fourth decade. Given the climate in the field I have just described—intellectual vitality alongside institutional vulnerability—we thought it a good moment to think about where the journal, and the particular multidisciplinary formulation of French Studies it represents, has traveled and where it might be headed. As the editor, I invited a few scholars from several disciplines, including colleagues involved with the journal since its beginnings in 1980s, to write short essays either on where they would encourage the field to go, or on a particular set of questions they felt held potential for new research. I sought no common agenda for the field's future, much less an editorial position for the journal. The aim was to elicit a variety of views to stimulate thinking in the field.

"French Studies," of course, can mean many things. Since its beginnings in 1983, the journal has embraced a loose but distinctive notion of French Studies as the study of France and other francophone societies principally through the disciplines of the social sciences and history. This perspective is idiosyncratic, differing as it does from the more common experience in North America of French departments broadening their scope beyond the classical literary canon to include cultural history and the study of a wider range of texts, genres, and modes of cultural expression. British connotations of French Studies have been different still, since the term provided a rubric under which to bring together literary and non-literary specialists on France into single, multi-dimensional departments in many universities in the UK.² In any event, French Studies has usually entailed an intimate connection to the teaching of language and literature. This was less the case in the early development of the journal. Its founders, George Ross and Stanley Hoffmann at Harvard's Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, initially created it as a "newsletter" for the Conference Group on French Politics and Society, a France-centered caucus of the American Political Science Association. Some "newsletter." It quickly became an outlet for essays, think pieces, *reportage*, interviews, and book and film reviews for leading specialists on France in political science and political sociology. And indeed, the study of politics in the broad sense of the term lay at the heart of the enterprise, fueled as it was by the intensity of the interest the early Mitterrand years inspired among scholars. From the start the editors also roped in historians, mostly specialists on twentieth-century polit-

ical and social history. As George Ross explains in his essay below, the newsletter *cum* journal very much reflected a “holistic” approach to the study of France that the Harvard Center, and Stanley Hoffmann’s unbridled multidisciplinary curiosity, embodied. A deep immersion in the study of all things French, combined with a desire to interrogate connections any single discipline alone was ill-equipped to see, gave the journal a sharp focus and a maverick flare. Re-reading the early issues today it is easy to see how the founders encouraged accessible writing, erudition untarnished by jargon, and ample doses of irreverence and wit. To cite but one example: Laurence Wylie’s outraged response to a Republican Party fund-raising letter seeking to scare up big donations to Ronald Reagan’s 1984 election war chest by invoking the specter of Mitterrand’s socialist France as a threat to the United States.³

As the essays by George Ross and Arthur Goldhammer so vividly convey, the approach to French Studies associated with the journal evolved in response to a changing France. The 1990s were pivotal. With the end of the Cold War and with the integration of the French Left into the political mainstream of the Fifth Republic, the revolutionary tradition that for so long had fueled the fascination of foreign scholars with France lost a large measure of its magnetic force. What emerged was a more sober focus on how the French struggled with the many challenges of that complex decade, especially the acceleration of Europeanization after Maastricht and the manifold conflicts over the politics of difference. Head scarf affairs and a reaffirmation of *laïcité*, campaigns for *parité* and the PACs, controversies over whether and how to combat ethnic and racial discrimination, polarizing debates over immigration and naturalization—these issues took center stage in public affairs amid the rise of the far-right National Front and a reassertion in response, by leaders of the mainstream Left and Right, of the republican principle that individuals, not groups, were the legitimate bearers of rights. *French Politics and Society* published articles on all these developments. And it mobilized experts on both sides of the Atlantic to exchange views on many of the biggest policy debates. Special issues featured “The Mitterrand Decade” (1993), “France and the European Community,” (1993), “A Century of Organized Labor in France” (1996), and the elections of 1995 and 1997. A historically and sociologically informed focus on politics still gave the journal a gravitational center. And a notion of French exceptionalism, sometimes made explicit, often not, still gave the enterprise an added telos, a sense that the study of France offered special opportunities for insight because people in France fought, governed, and conceived things differently.⁴

The conception of French Studies as a multidisciplinary pursuit anchored mainly in history and social sciences still defines the journal to this day. But much changed too over the past fifteen years as the journal sought to keep up with a fast-expanding field. When in 1999 the journal became the joint effort of both the Harvard Center and NYU’s Institute of French Studies, we made a deliberate choice to enlarge the journal’s terrain.⁵ For one thing we added

“culture” to the title, a conveniently ambiguous word that served to signal a desire to publish more work on film, literature, music, art, and architecture, as well as in disciplines of cultural history and cultural anthropology. Not that these subjects and fields had been neglected during the journal’s first two decades. Many a film, for example, was reviewed in the journal, and anthropologist David Beriss’s 1989 article on the “Foulard Affair” was one of the most commonly cited of the journal’s articles during the 1990s. But we now actively encouraged scholars to see the journal as a place where work on culture, variously defined, could contribute to a multidisciplinary conversation about France and other francophone societies.

We also signaled a desire to publish work that situated France in a number of international contexts—in particular, Europe, the Atlantic world, and the regions of the former French empire. This commitment to “France and the world,” to borrow the framework Laura Frader analyzes in her essay below, had been important to the journal from the beginning, especially work on France and the EU and on French-American relations. But by the end of the 1990s immigrant debates, the growth of Islam in Europe, and the rise of the National Front were rapidly bringing the colonial and postcolonial into the forefront of scholarly research. The journal made it a priority to support this work. A robust series of special issues appeared in the years that followed: “Race in France” (2000), “Transatlantic Perspectives on the Colonial Situation” (2002), “Le Conseil français du culte musulman” (2005), “Lost Banlieues of the Republic” (2006), a three-part series on laïcité (2007–2008), “The Controversy over *Statistiques Ethniques*” (2008), “Aimé Césaire” (2009), and “Algerian Legacies in Metropolitan France” (2013), and two more now in the works on colonial rule in the early nineteenth century and on religion and decolonization in francophone territories. The French Studies field, as it turned out, lent itself readily to the colonial and transnational turns because the French empire offered such an abundance of topics and field sites on five continents, and because the intensity the debates in France over immigration and discrimination gave these turns a special urgency. Yet, as the titles of our special issues suggest, these publishing projects scarcely marked a departure from the journal’s core mission of thinking about France. Most of this work still focused on concerns within the Republic, or on how to reconceptualize that Republic, as Emmanuelle Saada discusses below, as an imperial republic. The journal’s colonial and transnational turns, in this respect, represented more continuity than rupture. They did nothing, moreover, to diminish its editors’ commitment to publish a continuing abundance of work on a vast range of other subjects, including special issues on elections, the EU, Simone de Beauvoir, the cinema, Jewish rescue, and wartime literature.

Still, there is no gainsaying the challenges that the colonial and transnational turns, along with disciplinary resistances to single-country studies, have posed for a French Studies field originally conceived as the holistic study of France. To question the viability of the nation-state as a unit of analysis, to

decenter the object of study into a large network of francophone places outside Europe, and to sub-divide the field further over matters of method or theory: centrifugal forces such as these can make it difficult to hold the field together. In the essays that follow, George Ross, Arthur Goldhammer, Laura Frader, Emmanuelle Saada, Laurent Dubois and Achille Mbembe all weigh in on this issue (without my prompting). Although their views differ strikingly in some respects, they share a conviction that future work should deliberately set out to interrogate the “articulation,” as Saada puts it, “of local and global dynamics.” None of our authors harbor illusions about how difficult this is to do. On the contrary, it is a “vaste programme,” as Goldhammer says, to dig deeply enough into the local and broadly enough into the global to break new ground. Nor, I would add, can it be done without bringing state and nation into the conceptual frame—not to re-reify them naively as self-evident units of analysis, but to understand the roles national actors and institutions often play in mediating the relationship between the local and the global. We should remain cognizant, moreover, of how the local can reshape the global, and not just the reverse, as David Bell has recently reminded us was the case with the French Revolution.⁶

Several of our authors also insist on the importance of the language and its mastery in giving the field its future. A deep understanding of the people we study—and of the local, as Arthur Goldhammer argues—requires it. The French language, if we choose, can increasingly give the field its most discernible boundaries. Laurent Dubois and Achille Mbembe take this conviction furthest by arguing that field’s future requires a radical decentering of its traditional focus on the Hexagon so as to follow French speakers into the cultures and places they reside, most notably Africa. For Emmanuelle Saada French alone will be insufficient for colonial specialists who wish to explore more deeply how the colonized experienced empire, something the field must do, in her view, if the colonial turn is to continue. This effort will require learning indigenous languages.

A renewed focus on language also heightens the stakes for new work at the intersections of literary analysis and historical and sociological research. Here Marie-Eve Thérenty’s essay has special pertinence. Thérenty describes a major multi-year collaboration in France between literary scholars and historians to write a large history of the nineteenth-century press, and she explains why the press (and one can extrapolate this to other media) begs for the kind of multiplicity of approaches this collaboration entailed. Experimenting at the crossroads of literary study, linguistics, history, and the social sciences remains one of the most promising, if challenging, frontiers for the French Studies field.

If language serves as a gravitational force for our entropic field, so too does the continuing relevance of a “holistic” vision, to return to George Ross’s term, that invites us to use a variety of approaches, and to move agilely across spatial and temporal scales, to handle the complexity of the subjects we tackle. Take, for example, the question of how to account for the enduring

electoral appeal of the National Front in the old industrial towns of the northeast and in the commercial towns of the southeast. A comprehensive answer would have to draw on an analysis of a host of things and the use of quite a range of methods—a socio-linguistic investigation of electoral discourse, field studies of party tactics and dynamics, histories of industrial decline and Communist party faltering in selected locales, a social psychology of xenophobia, microhistories of municipal politics, and so on—as well as efforts to situate the analysis in any number of wider comparative contexts. No one scholar should or could do all this, of course. The point is that the collective scholarly enterprise of working on such a subject from a variety of perspectives and with a variety of methods gets us closer to answers to our questions, and it gives French Studies cohesion as a field. Holism, it seems to me, is above all this openness to the collective scholarly conversation, a willingness to make the questions primary, more than the methods, so as to keep the collective inquiry moving forward and the field of French Studies welcoming to its many disciplines.

Where will the questions come from in the future that are compelling enough to mobilize inquiry in this way? In surveying the work the journal has published over three decades, I'm struck by how closely it follows in the tracks of the most salient public issues agitating people in France at the time, often quite directly in the work of social scientists, and usually more thematically in the work of historians. This close connection between scholarship and civic debate is hardly surprising in a field like French Studies, but it's not to be taken for granted. It reflects the seriousness with which many scholars in this field take their relationship to France or other francophone countries they study. To enter the fray, however, entails a choice. In that spirit, Laura Frader ends her essay by enjoining historians who have done so much to advance research on gender, sexuality, and the empire to take what they have learned about the past to shed more light on contemporary debates in France today. In that vein the essay Michèle Lamont and Nicolas Duvoux have contributed to this issue of the journal is particularly pertinent, illustrating as it does how effectively social research can speak to a fundamental societal problem, in this case the impact neoliberalism has had on the way people have strengthened the symbolic boundaries they use to distinguish themselves from others and to define who they think really belongs to France.

A good deal of future work in the field will likewise take its cues from the burning public issues of the day. We might anticipate, for instance, given the current financial and geopolitical turmoil besetting Europe, a renewed emphasis in the field on France in its European context and on multidisciplinary approaches to economic topics. The changes posed by climate change and environmental degradation, and their likely staggering consequences in Europe and Africa, seemed destined to inspire research. Studies of religion and society, of *laïcité*, and of Islam in Europe have proliferated in recent years; this domain of research seems likely to expand further. French-American compar-

isons of all kinds, policy-oriented and otherwise, will surely continue to be a staple of the field, and well they should.⁷ As I tell my undergraduate students at the beginning of term, France is the country most like the US that differs most from it. No provable claim, of course, but the analytical torque that French-American comparisons provide remains extraordinary.

One could easily add to this list for themes and approaches for the near future. What's safest to say, however, is that the future will surprise. It will orient the field in ways we cannot yet see. The study of France and the French language in the United States, as elsewhere, has long been shaped by the unexpected—by the Cold War, for example, as Arthur Goldhammer reminds us. The field still draws on the inheritance it acquired during the First World War when French dethroned German as the primary foreign language of study in the US, a position it held until Spanish surpassed it after the Second World War. German never really recovered.⁸ Global events, and their unanticipated effects, matter immensely in this business. All signs point to a bright global future for French, especially because demographic growth in Africa will make it one of the world's most rapidly expanding languages in coming decades. But how this reality will shape the field of French Studies, even if we all declare ourselves “francophone” in the spirit Dubois and Mbembe urge, is hard to say. What matters most, then, in insuring the field's creative future is not our clairvoyance, but the continuing arrival of talent that will respond to the opportunities the future holds. About that I'm sanguine. From the vantage point of the journal, you can see that great talent keeps on coming, despite the travails of a tough climate.

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Notes

1. On the pressures against country specialization in the social sciences, see Kenneth Pomeranz, “Histories for a Less National Age,” *American Historical Review* 119, 1 (February 2014), 8–9.
2. On French Studies in Britain, see Diana Holmes, “A Short History of French Studies in the UK,” in *French Studies in and for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Philippe Lane and Michael Worton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).
3. *French Politics and Society* (October 1983), 40–43.
4. On the importance of French exceptionalism in the study of France, see Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer, *The French Exception* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), and by the same editors, *The End of the French Exception? Decline and Revival of the ‘French Model’* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

5. In 1999 we also more formally adopted the double-blind peer review process and created a larger editorial board to enlist expertise in a wider range of fields. Berghahn Books became our publisher. Little did we know how effectively its burgeoning journal division would escort us into a digital age that would make *FPC&S* more accessible to readers across the continents than we ever could imagined at the time.
6. David A. Bell, "Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 37, 1 (Winter 2014): 1–24.
7. For a recent effort to structure research and scholarly exchange through French-American comparisons, see the extensive program of "Comparaisons franco-américaines," a conference held at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre and at Sciences Po on 17–18 June 2013: http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sciencespo.fr%2Fceri%2Fsites%2Fsciencespo.fr.ceri%2Ffiles%2Fcol_17062013.pdf&ei=R2SXU-GZFMWRyAS404KQDQ&usg=AFQjCNFY-
8. My thanks to Shanny Peer at Columbia University for calling to my attention to World War I as pivotal for the teaching of French in the United States and for pointing me to sources on this subject. See Shanny Peer, *Celebrating a Century of French Culture and Ideas at Columbia University in New York* (2013), the catalogue of an exhibition at Columbia University's Maison française in 2013. See also Joseph Louis Russo, "The Study of Modern Languages in Our Colleges," *Modern Language Journal* 9, 3 (December 1924): 137–49; and J. Preston Hoskins, "Statistical Survey of the Effect of the World War on Modern Language Enrollment in the Secondary Schools of the United States," *Modern Language Journal* 10, 2 (November 1925): 87–107.