

The French temptation

By Patrice de Beer,
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A film released in the chilly and wet mid-summer of 2007 reminds the French of the good old days, where seasons were seasons, winter cold and summer - the season of love - hot. A "once upon a time" when the majority of people lived in an idealised countryside, where families were families, children were close to their parents, and jobs were jobs. Éric Guirado's *Le fils de l'épicier* [1] (*The Grocer's Son*) is in its way a mordant corrective to the zealous modernisation project of the country's new president: is *this* how the French really think of themselves in the age of globalisation?

The phenomenon the film conjures is well known. When the present appears gloomy, wages are low, work-opportunities scarce, daily life stressful, politicians unreliable, business untrustworthy, religion too remote to matter much, savings always threatened by a Bourse storm created by nefarious speculators - when such experiences and thoughts dominate daily life, people so often are drawn to look through the rear mirror. That is, rather than anticipating a bright future and dedicating all efforts to realise it, they fantasise that the present could be as reassuring as the past-that-never-was. It's no surprise that a popular radio channel, filled with the *chansons* that defined the "sound" of France to the French themselves and to the world, is called *Radio Nostalgie* [2].

This is Éric Guirado's emotional landscape [3]. The physical location that evokes it is a barren region just north of Provence inhabited by ageing, lonely people in decayed mountain villages abandoned by the young, where local shops and cafes have all but closed. The isolated residents depend for the provisions of daily life on *le camion* - the travelling van which supplies them with the basic goods which would otherwise be available only after a long walk or drive to the nearest town. (I witnessed the same phenomenon in a village near the Spanish border where my favourite *charcutier*, also the local grocer, closed because he could not afford to implement all the European Union's health regulations. This left local villagers with only two options: *le camion*, or the supermarket in the neighbouring town).

The *France profonde* depicted by the young director [4] of *Le fils de l'épicier* - which could also be "deep England [5]" (English or French [6] versions), or its many other equivalents elsewhere in Europe - may today be a barren, neglected place. But it is also the imaginative repository of the authentic, the true, the natural - the place where life, food and wine are "the best in the world", and where the nation's "true values" are embedded. The contrast with the urban France where most French citizens now live (by choice or necessity) - dominated by media, fast living, shiny surfaces and easy money - is stark. This symbolic opposition is a potent resource for conservative politicians like Nicolas Sarkozy [7], an emblematic figure of the "new" France

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[3]"Why is the left so

who lauds the essential verities of the "old" while promising "change" - and wins a resounding popular victory.

Urban reality, rural fantasy

What is going on here? The acclaim by critics and public that has greeted *Le fils de l'épicier* (reminiscent of the response to that earlier exercise in urban nostalgia, *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* [8]) is a clue. The story is of Antoine, a young, selfish drifter unable to stick to a job or to a relationship who returns to the village he left ten years earlier after the father he loathes is struck by a heart attack. In replacing his dad in the driving-seat of the "grocer's van", Antoine gradually discovers that this unfamiliar world where he doesn't fit anymore in fact offers the secret of "real life".

Real life is rural, and discovering it means ridding oneself of the evils of urban life. A cinematic caricature? Not for the hordes of *urbains (rurals-plus-urbains)* who are rediscovering [9] their "roots", or creating new ones - for whom, rather, it is a dream come true. Those who can afford to go "back to the land" can purchase (by mail-order [10] catalogue, naturally) a "French-made", modernised churn to make their own butter (€73.50); a "traditional" beech mould (€34.50) to spread on their *tartines maison*, themselves baked in bread-making machines (€89.25 to €219.50); and pour their homemade jams into grandma's-style copper-pots (€149.90).

The post-1945 era - *les trente glorieuses* [11] (thirty glorious years) - was the period when France proudly overtook the British economy and in little more than a generation catapulted itself from a semi-traditional rural world into a modern, urban one. During that time it became not just forgivable but fashionable to forget one's roots in the soil, by pretending for instance to be unable to distinguish a beech-tree from an oak. The children and grandchildren of peasants became Frenchmen [12] (to adapt the phrase of Eugen Weber [13], whose death in 2007 is symbolic), while taking pride in forgetting they ever had peasant origins.

The fetish of urban modernity continued through the Francois Mitterrand [14] years (1981-95) when the socialist president managed the political trick of reconciling the French with a business world they routinely despise; and through the *longue durée* of Jacques Chirac, when France drifted as the world changed around it.

Now, it is reality-time for the French - which means also fantasy-time. Those with copper-pots of money (made perhaps on that hated Bourse) can afford to turn the fantasy of rural "retreat" into reality - complete, of course, with email, pensions, technology, welfare, TV, cars, and all the accoutrements of modern life. The rest can be tempted to gaze backwards (or inwards) fondly to what they think know best, away from the hard globalisation which their leaders - political, intellectual and business [15] - have failed in the last *trente inglorieuses* to prepare them for. What better in this chilly season than a touch of nostalgia, especially if it can be combined with a sprinkle of nationalism?

gauche? [3]" (26 February 2007)

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