

Sarkozy and the “Decline” of France: The Great Illusion

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Two thirds of French people think their country is in decline. That is without doubt the principal reason why Nicolas Sarkozy was elected President of the Republic. Moreover, the main way the media contributed to his triumph was by years of constant propaganda on the theme of “the decline of France”, along with the related theme of “security”.

There are various ways to counter that notion. One is to show that the selection and interpretation of the statistics used to “prove” France’s decline are extremely biased. (For example, on the subject of youth unemployment, see Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, in Washington, D.C., “[An Economist View of the French Election](#)“.)

Another approach is to ask what solutions are proposed by the heralds of “decline”.

The declinists cleverly mix up two problems. One is the decline of France in relation to the emerging countries, especially in Asia. The other is the supposed decline of France in relation to other industrialized countries, especially the United States and Britain. The first form of “decline” is merely the reflection of a very positive development: the fact that large parts of the Third World are catching up with the industrialized West. But, since it would make no sense to propose imitating China and India, the declinists propose imitating the Anglo-American model, which is supposed to avoid decline by a series of measures: flexible work conditions, destruction of hard-won social protections and public services, tough security enforcement and moral rearmament.

But let’s take a closer look at their favorite model, the United States. The Americans have spent hundreds of billions of dollars to invade Iraq. Thousands of their soldiers have been killed, tens of thousands wounded, and they are completely stuck. They can’t win, because they have succeeded in turning the immense majority of Iraqis against them, and they can’t leave, because it would mean the end of their empire. And so they are going to be bogged down in Iraq for many years, losing still more men, money and prestige, while causing unspeakable and useless suffering to the Iraqi people. And why are they in Iraq? Among other things, thanks to manipulation of public opinion concerning weapons of mass destruction. The Americans have intelligence services that spy on the whole world, a free press with immense resources, universities packed with specialists on every conflict and problem on earth. And yet, they have not been able to understand the most elementary realities, that even a child traveling to the Middle East could understand, that is, that they are hated primarily because of their support to Israel, and that their intervention in the region is bound to provoke massive rejection.

If that blend of incapacity, ignorance and arrogance is not symptomatic of a society in decline, then it's hard to imagine what "decline" is all about. Slight gaps in GNP and unemployment rates are minor technicalities in comparison. France, in contrast, which in 2003 still had an elite described as "aging, outdated, behind the times"-but still able to think-did not go along with that madness.

But that's not all. The rest of the world, and especially France, is constantly called upon to do as the United States does. Now, let us imagine that by the wave of a magic wand, the rest of the world really starts to imitate the United States. Where will they get all the petroleum and other raw materials that the United States imports in vast quantities, on which its society is totally dependent to preserve its way of life? Where will they get the immigrant workers, often undocumented, that is, without rights, or the floods of cheap imported goods which are not even really paid for, since they are financed by ever-expanding trade deficits, but which enable workers who have lost their industrial jobs to continue to consume the things they need? And finally, where will they get the brains that the United States drains from the rest of the world; because it is cheaper to offer high salaries to lure people who are already well educated than to finance a genuine system of mass education?

The fact is that the American model is impossible to imitate, because its very survival depends on the existence of a world outside the United States which is quite different. It is true that the situation of Europe is fairly similar, but it is precisely our degree of proximity to the "American model" that is the proper gauge of our decline. Moreover, without the military power of the United States, neither France nor Europe can even try to prolong a situation that is untenable in the long term.

It is rather amusing to see Sarkozy, who is supposed to embody "the France that works hard and wins", score his greatest electoral hit among retired voters. His program, like that of George W. Bush, is not turned toward the future in a realistic way, but on the contrary attracts people who long for the good old days when Europe and the United States were far more powerful than they are today. The fantasy of power is another sign of decadence.

Sarkozy's election is an undeniable victory for the United States and for Israel. But it runs the very real risk of being a pyrrhic victory, because the decisive battles of our times are taking place outside of Europe: in Asia, in Latin America and in the Middle East. And there, the United States is losing on all fronts. We are living in a world that we no longer dominate and to which we shall have to adapt, and not by nostalgia for the past.

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