It Can't Happen Here, N'est-ce-pas?

Confronting the forces of dissolution

Book Review by Gerda Bikales

The title of a much-talked about new book by Jean-Claude Barreau asks a provocative question: *Will France disappear?* Right there the subtleties of the French language come into play, for "disappear" is the accepted euphemism for death, while it also retains the meaning of fading away. The American reader is left to wonder whether we are talking about a definitive end or a slow evaporation into insubstantiality.

The inspiration for his book's title, Barreau tells us, comes from a 1970 book by Soviet dissident Andrei Almarik, *Will the USSR Survive until 1984?* At the time the question seemed absurd — the power of the Soviet Union seemed quite beyond dispute. Yet Almarik did not miss by much. The Berlin Wall crumbled five years later.

La France Va-t-elle Disparaître?
by Jean-Claude Barreau
Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset

Jean-Claude Barreau is hardly an apocalyptic right-wing crank wishing to raise anxiety about French survival. For many years the author was a worker-priest in the slums of Paris, an engaged social reformer in daily contact with the struggles of newly-arrived immigrants. Eventually he left the church, but not his faith. He married and raised a family, wrote novels and essays, and became an advisor to political leaders of both the left and the right. He was an advisor to President François Mitterand, a socialist, and later worked for two center-right cabinet ministers closely associated with immigration reform — Charles Pasqua and Jean-Michel Debré. In this book, Barreau often reveals himself to be a man of the left, though one often at odds with others who define themselves as such.

If the author's political stance defies labeling, his national identity is clearly French. His historical references tend to be obscure events in French history, not always easy to unscramble. His heroes are Joan of Arc, the young Napoleon (in his "First Consul" period), and Charles de Gaulle. His overarching loyalties are to the spirit of the Revolution of 1789, born of the Enlightenment, and to the secular Republic it so painfully established.

Barreau's understanding of the State is built upon a Hobbesian social contract. Given man's violent nature, the State is an artificial construct for channeling violence. It is not expected to deliver a terrestrial paradise, but merely to keep life from being hell. For the system to work, affective ties must bind the governed to the State and to each other. Likewise, the State must care for and about the people it rules, striving to govern wisely to keep their support. In each generation, the majority must consent to be ruled, or the State falls. Minorities can be suppressed, if the majority doesn't care about them but the majority can't be suppressed indefinitely. What Almarik sensed in the USSR in 1970 was bad governance and a loss of popular consent. What Barreau senses today in France is growing disaffection among the governed and between the rulers and its people.

Nation-States, we know, are unraveling everywhere. Still, it is startling to find the forces of dissolution working so effectively in that most classic of Nation-States. France is perhaps the oldest one, created by some accounts in 843 in the treaty formalizing the break-up of Charlemagne's

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empire. Paris has been its capital continuously since 987. In the intervening centuries, the characteristic hexagonal shape on the map that we recognize today as "France" has emerged, through many territorial expansions and contractions. The country emanates an aura of age-old solidity and unity, but in reality it is vulnerable and requires constant reassertion to maintain itself whole.

For France is not a nation based on race or ethnicity, but on a mythologized version of history accepted by all and on a vision of a common destiny. It may be fashionable in America to lump all fair-skinned people together into "Euro-Americans," but Europeans are highly sensitive to the different bloodlines ands cultures that populate the Continent and have shaped its often-tragic history. France is conscious of its "exceptionalism," its ethnic Pan-European heterogeneity, thrust upon it by geography. Bordered by the North Sea, the Channel, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, France is the melting pot of Europe. Flemings, Germans, Catalonians, Celts, Normans have blended with Gauls and Mediterranean tribes for centuries. More recently, immigration has added Armenians, Slavs, Jews, Asians and North Africans to the mix. "France *is* Europe," claims Barreau.

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If geography preordained its heterogeneity, it is a point of pride in France that it is French political philosophy and institutions that have allowed its citizens to thrive in unison, and to produce one of the world's most admired civilizations. From the ashes of royal tyranny and the excesses of the Revolution arose the secular Republic, committed to "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" for all. Discreet observance of religion and cultural traditions was tolerated in the private sphere, but each generation was carefully trained to consider itself wholly French. It has been said that France absorbed its immigrants — quite literally.

In a Nation-State with such a highly developed sense of national identity, what dangers could be lurking, dangers serious enough to imperil its very existence? Barreau identifies them at some length. In essence they are of two kinds: threats to the State and threats to the Nation.

The most imminent threat to the French State is the European Union, post-Maastricht. Conceived after the devastation of the Second World War as a low-key economic free-trade zone of independent nations, it has steadily been recasting itself as the Nation of Europe — a federation modeled after the United States, in which the nations of the Continent take the place of the states. The European nations, however, are fully developed and delineated civilizations, with their own political systems, which must be disabled to make room for the new Supernation. And indeed, no one who has recently traveled to Strasbourg (site of the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and the European Court) or to Brussels (where the powerful European Commission is headquartered) would have failed to notice the gigantic construction projects underway to house these ambitious institutions and their appendages, nor to wonder whether the costs and grandeur are justified.

The power appropriated by the European Union is subtracted from the national legislatures, and these are losing authority over large areas of public life. The Union's own parliament is home to a variety of political misfits, often losers in national elections, who don't feel accountable to anyone. The French delegation appears to be particularly disinclined to defend its own nation's interests. Many crucial decisions are made by the Commissioners in Brussels, faceless technocrats beyond the reach of voters. The European Union is busy demolishing the "Europe of Nations" and is replacing it with the "Nation of Europe." This has resulted in some vital losses for the French State: a loss of interest in national politics by its electorate, a loss of sovereignty as decision-making moves outside the country, and a loss of legitimacy as government decisions come under scrutiny and criticism by Brussels and Strasbourg.

To accelerate the destruction of national governments, Brussels has taken up the cause of regions, "communities," ethnicities and minorities. The Council of Europe has concocted a "Convention on National Minorities" that goes

counter to the French tradition of respect for individual rights and rejection of group rights. Brussels is now headquarters for lobbyists from every group and region, maneuvering for European Union support in wrenching concessions from national governments.

Barreau greatly admires the Euro-skepticism of the British. Alone among the Union's members, Britain seems to have been spared the fever of Europeism, and still dares to defend its own interests from this European version of the globalization bandwagon, a cultivated fear of being left behind in the new economic global village. French leaders, on the left and on the right, are committed Europeists, though the economy of France has suffered badly in the mad rush toward a common European currency. Barreau argues that France is in the best position to say "no," to slow down the pace, to force reconsi-deration of Europe's new structure. Its battered economy is still largely domestic and can manage on its own, if it came to that. France holds the key to a united Europe — there might be one without England, but none is possible without France.

These ideas play well with the French people, who sense that they are headed the wrong way. But the leadership stubbornly persists. The author conjectures that it is still suffering from the shame of defeat by Germany in 1940. It has lost confidence in a future for France, and can't conceive of one apart from Europe's — dominated though it is by a politically purified post-Maastricht Germany. A far-fetched explanation, perhaps, but one that still resonates more than fifty years after World War II.

The somber assessment of the consequences of European Union may surprise American readers, who tend to view it as a fairly benign development, and fear only its potential as an economic competitor. Though we are ourselves partners in a controversial North American Free Trade Agree-ment, there is still little day-to-day awareness of its impacts, and adverse political (as opposed to economic) consequences to the American Nation-State have not yet appeared on our radar screen.

We are, however, quite familiar with the internal dangers that, Barreau claims, threaten to dissolve the French nation.

It is telling that much of the media discussion of this best-selling book has centered around immigration — a topic to which the author devotes less than twenty pages. The past year has seen a number of highly publicized events relating to immigration policy, including the occupation of a Catholic church by 300 *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants) claiming a right to be legalized, a high-profile hunger strike by ten *sans-papiers* and a celebrity-initiated protest against tougher immigra-tion laws that spread rapidly before withering in the face of contrary public opinion.

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Barreau's position, adopted by Interior Ministers Pasqua and Debré, is that legal immigration of about 100,000 persons a year is manageable (adjusted for population size, this number would correspond to about 450,000 persons in the U.S.). As France no longer recruits foreign workers (though citizens of European Union countries are allowed to work there), these admissions are reserved for family reunification and political asylum cases. It is clandestine immigration, in numbers unknown but increasing rapidly, that the author insists must be stopped. This is not an easy task, especially as border controls have been given up within the European Union. To be effective, the laws have to be strict and consistently applied.

Commenting on recent events, Barreau reserves his wrath for the "angelicals," his term for those ethereal kind souls too delicate to bother with the crass reality of numbers and legal procedures. They prefer to dream up a world without borders in which residency in France is a universal "right." In this they are joined by an activist judiciary that, more often than not, will invalidate the law's intent by managing to find technical or human rights violations in every detention or deportation order. The judges don't worry about what happens to the people they release, who promptly swell the ranks of the unemployed and exploited, the discontented

and the resentful.

Barreau is not a hard-liner who would deny the State the right to show compassion in some situations — provided it is clear that the grant of legal residence is always the willful option of a humane government, and not an automatic "right" of would-be immigrants. He advocates consistent and well-publicized deportations of recent settlers, for these have a dissuasive influence on others contemplating clandestine residence. At the same time, he favors discreet adjustment for those already well adapted to life in France.

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The national civic crisis stretches far beyond willful disobedience and judicial perversions of the laws. The historic sacrifices of generations for the good of the Republic are little taught and beyond the comprehension of today's youth. The prevailing spirit of the day is cynicism, and a Frenchman's ultimate civic obligation is to criticize his country. For its own good, naturally. The book quotes philosopher Michel Serres, who mostly teaches in America, asking humbly in the pages of *Le Monde*: "Could you perhaps — not every day of course, that would be asking too much — but just from time to time could you say something good about France?"

The schools have not only given up the teaching of history as civic grounding, they have fallen into the trap of multiculturalism. In 1973, France negotiated agreements with sending countries to send instructors to teach immigrant students their native language and culture. In short order this came to mean the teaching of the Koran and Islamic fundamentalism in the public schools! Everyone bemoans this breach in the school's secular character, but no government has had the courage to dismantle the system.

For Barreau, several other trends are eroding the nation's cohesiveness. Though a believer in women's reproductive rights, he worries about France's demographic decline, and the lack of confidence in the future it implies. The generations no longer renew themselves, and the nation's culture can't be transmitted to children who are not born. When birthrates are low, immigration becomes more problematic. It does not merely add population, it substitutes population.

And, finally, there is the end of military conscription, announced for 2001. The idea that every young Frenchman owes his country the time and courage necessary to defend it dates back to the Revolution and is strongly embedded in the French ethos. It is closely tied to people's conception of French citizenship. But in the wake of the Cold War the time required has grown much shorter, the courage much less, and there is a general recognition that a professional army would be more effective. Still, military service asked something of the young, who soon will be freed of this quasi-symbolic duty, too.

There is still a longing in the land for a self-affirming France that is more than a geographic site, especially among the common people who are not in fashion. They are still stirred by the sight of the tricolor flag and the sound of the *Marseillaise*, they still take pride in being French, they still love their homeland, though expressing that love is now a little awkward. Patriotism and its symbols have been discarded and ridiculed by the hip and fashionable elites as ancient artifacts from a world by-passed by globalization. The National Front has wrapped itself in the discards, and people are flocking to it, hungry to reaffirm their belief in a French future, hardly listening to the party's dangerous message of fascist revival.

Barreau pretty much leaves us there, though he fantasizes a more optimistic if unlikely future that could renew his dying country. In that scenario, it would dawn on the French leadership that their abdication of Brussels and blindness to civic decline can only lead to an eventual National Front victory. They will do the right thing. They will say, "enough."

American readers owe a debt of gratitude to this author who shows himself to be somewhat antagonistic and ill-informed about our country. But by focusing so sharply on the force of dissolution undermining his own, which we believed so solid and coherent, he has held up a mirror in which we may catch our own image. **TSC**