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Introduction

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THE MANY FACES OF MODERN FRANCE

Modern France is a country of contrasts: a fascinating, often puzzling mixture of old and new, tradition and innovation, welfare-state socialism and reactionary conservatism. Its diversity is at once France's greatest strength and the source of its most troubling problems. As the 20th century draws to a close, France has established itself as one of the world's most modern and technologically advanced nations, a world leader in nuclear technology and production, telecommunication networks and high speed transportation. In addition, as one of the founding nations of the European Union (EU), it is poised in the 21st century to assume an even greater international prominence as a core state within one of the world's largest economies. However, despite its rapid economic development and deepening ties with other EU nations, France has managed to preserve through protectionist policies and an elaborate social welfare system a decentralized economy and a traditional, distinctly French culture and lifestyle. Most French citizens still live in communities with populations under 2,000, enjoy 4-6 weeks of paid annual vacation, and receive extensive cradle-to-death social benefits, including free healthcare, post-secondary education and generous pensions. In France, corner *boulangeries* (bakeries), family-owned hotels and neighborhood cafes can still thrive amidst the growing number of *supermarchés* (supermarkets), international hotel chains and McDonald's franchises. In contrast to its highly urbanized European neighbors, France remains an agricultural nation, with nearly 60 percent of its land under cultivation. Its strong agricultural sector, still largely composed of independent small farmers, now provides about one-fourth of the European Union's farm produce.

This act of balancing tradition and technological innovation, agriculture and industry, international cooperation and protectionism is, of course, difficult to maintain. In part due to its diversity, France is a nation facing great

challenges as it enters the 21st century. The disintegration since 1945 of its colonial empire, the need to protect French small businesses and family farms from the EU's increasingly competitive multi-national economy, and the high — and perhaps prohibitive — cost of sustaining a social welfare state have all created chronic problems to which there are no easy solutions. In many ways, France appears mired politically, socially and economically by its past. Its post-WW II colonial policies have in recent decades resulted in large waves of legal and illegal immigrants, which have in turn fueled support for an openly racist, ultra-right wing party, The National Front. Garnering about fifteen percent of the vote in recent national and local elections, The Front's nationalistic, anti-immigration, and anti-EU agenda appeals to many French citizens worried about France's high unemployment (currently about 12 percent) and fearful of the cultural and economic impact of the nation's growing ethnic diversity and participation in the EU. In addition, France's government-sponsored educational and healthcare systems, which have long been viewed as models of advanced social welfare, are increasingly being strained by an aging population, chronic unemployment, and a growing immigrant underclass. Finally, efforts by recent French governments — both conservative and socialist — to enforce existing EU agricultural policies and to reduce France's national debt in accordance with the EU's Maastricht Treaty have led to nationwide general strikes and demonstrations by farmers and public employees who are intent upon preserving their jobs, social benefits and traditional way of life. To date, the current French government — under the socialist leadership of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin — remains officially committed to preserving jobs and benefits while continuing to strive to meet the strict requirements of Maastricht. Whether it will be possible to achieve both goals is the subject of much cur-

rent debate, but it seems likely that continuing economic difficulties and increasingly vocal anti-EU sentiment may prevent France from joining the select cadre of European nations which will meet Maastricht standards for full EU membership when the treaty goes into effect in January of 1999.

The students whose essays comprise this 15th annual volume of *Perspectives on Business and Economics* had the opportunity during a 10-day tour in the spring of 1996 to experience these many diverse faces of modern France firsthand. Their experiences during their stay shaped their research topics, which highlight some of France's greatest accomplishments and most challenging problems.

Two essays deal with France's recent technological successes in the areas of transportation and energy production. Building upon her visit to France's newest nuclear facility at Civaux (located in western France near the city of Poitiers), Melissa McAloose discusses the history and future of France's highly successful nuclear power industry. Currently the largest European exporter of electricity generated by nuclear power, the state-owned utility company, Electricité de France (EdF), faces new challenges as it tries to remain competitive and retain its domestic monopoly under new EU rules that will soon allow foreign electric utilities to market their services in France. Having experienced during his visit the efficiency of the T.G.V., France's high-speed rail system, Jeremy Colello looks at its development during the past quarter century and its potential to serve as the model for the creation of a new transportation infrastructure that will bypass national borders and connect all EU nations in the 21st century.

Two other articles also deal with France's trade and economic relationships within the EU and other foreign markets. Several recent graduates of one of France's premier graduate schools of management, the ESC-Poitiers, also participated in the 1996 tour as part of a joint Lehigh/ESC-Poitiers student exchange. Two of these students, Sophie Lambert and Sandra Sanoh, are contributing to this volume their expertise in the areas of international development and cooperation. Their article compares French and European positions with regard to encouraging development in former third-

world European colonies and discusses France's contributions to EU development agencies such as the European Investment Bank (B.E.I.) and the Public Aid for Development Agency (APD). In contrast, Jennifer Tzeses examines the issue of foreign relations from an entirely different angle — that of the efforts of international businesses to market their products to a culturally diverse global audience. She argues that international advertising campaigns, both by French companies hoping to increase their sales abroad and by foreign companies desirous of entering the French domestic market, must take into account cultural attitudes and values operative in each target foreign market if they wish to be successful.

Finally, benefiting from their numerous interviews and discussions with local and national French politicians, educators, administrators and organizations such as the anti-discrimination group S.O.S.-Racisme, four students have contributed essays that explore aspects of French politics and social policy. Julie DeMoyer examines the multiple-party political system in France, which has in recent years encouraged the growth of a number of small splinter parties that have collectively attracted substantial numbers of French voters. Ms. DeMoyer analyses the platforms of both the National Front and one of France's most well-known ecological parties, The Greens (Verts), and assesses their future ability to become mainstream political parties.

Lara Becker addresses the issue of underachievement in the French educational system, particularly at the secondary level. France has long been a leader in education, committing more of its annual budget to its public schools (primary, secondary and post-secondary) than most other European nations. Despite this, underachievement and dropouts are serious problems, and Ms. Becker details the various reforms and initiatives designed to address these problems by identifying and aiding students from disadvantaged families.

France's educational problems are partly a reflection of its immigration policies and the difficulties recent immigrants are having assimilating into mainstream French culture. Sarah Verbosky explores the economics of immigration in France and the impact which immigra-

tion has had on French society. She concludes that recent anti-immigration sentiment overestimates the negative impact which immigrants have on unemployment and ignores the economic advantages that immigrants, who are willing to work for lower salaries and fewer benefits, offer to French business and industry.

Finally, Sarah Freeman examines the French national healthcare system and its effectiveness in providing high quality, low cost care to all French citizens. She argues that although the system is not without flaws, it represents an excellent model for other industrial nations, such as the United States, which are desirous of reforming healthcare. Ms. Freeman explores

the efforts of one U.S. city, Rochester, N.Y., which has successfully implemented a similar system for its residents.

Collectively, the student essays in this volume cover a diverse range of topics that reflect the many faces of modern France and the many roles it plays in Europe and the world today. As France today strives to address its problems while preserving its strong culture and institutions, these essays suggest that its efforts can offer solutions and perspectives which can benefit us all.

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