

Hazareesingh Sudhir. *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*. New York: Basic Books, 2015. 351 pp. ISBN: 978-0-465-03249-5.

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In *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*, Sudhir Hazareesingh takes on the difficult task of examining the French intellectual tradition and its role in forming the French national identity and lifestyle. While some may be initially skeptical of Hazareesingh's ability to generalize about the philosophical inclinations of the whole of France, one must pay attention to Hazareesingh's background and to the wording of "An Affectionate Portrait" in the book's title. In other words, *How the French Think* is not a "be all, end all" treatise on the French intellectual tradition but rather, as is clearly evident in the book's preface, a warmly insightful and humorous look at the French:

I began observing French public life as an adolescent in my native island of Mauritius in the 1970s, when I was drawn to the country's culture, history, and politics by a variety of influences. First, my secondary school, the Royal College Curepipe, where we were served a copious diet of French classics, from Molière and Racine to Saint-Exupéry, Gide, "hell is other people" Sartre, and the inevitable (and already somewhat irksome) Camus. (IX)

Hazareesingh continues with a description of his family setting, in particular his father, "Kissoonsingh, a Cambridge- and Sorbonne-trained historian who worked as principal private secretary to the prime minister of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam" (IX). He also mentions "the French cultural attaché in Mauritius, Antoine Colonna, a close friend of the family was a native of Corsica (and thus a living link with the mythical birthplace of the emperor)" (IX). Thus, Hazareesingh, a Common University Fund (CUF) Lecturer in Politics and Tutorial Fellow in Politics, Balliol College, Oxford, a fellow of the British Academy, the author of *The Legend of Napoleon* and *In the Shadow of the General*, both award-winning books, and who divides his time between Oxford and Paris, is well-placed to comment on French intellectual life. Yet, as with all books that are based in an author's personal perspective, there are bound to be readers who agree

wholeheartedly with the author's point of view, others who disagree, and yet still others who find that some comments ring true and some are overly negative. For example, in demonstrating how French intellectual thought helped to form the basis of Western ideals of freedom and justice, Hazareesigh analyzes the works of Descartes and Rousseau. Of particular note is his discussion of the French *salon*:

The *salon* was often a site for the development of pioneering ideas and social practices: thus, it was one of the privileged arenas in which women could engage in philosophical debate – notably, by critically confronting the work of Descartes. ... These intellectual exchanges later took on more overtly political dimensions, preparing the way for the modern democratic era. (11)

He also examines the unease of the French at the continued dominance of American culture in a global economy (e.g. McDonald's restaurants, 180-181) and the impact of the Dreyfus Affair on contemporary French politics: "... there has perhaps been no greater failure over the past decade than the collective inability of the intellectual class to confront the rise of the National Front and the growing dissemination of its ideas among the French people – a silence all the more remarkable as, throughout their history, and notably during the Dreyfus Affair, French intellectuals were at the forefront of the battle against racism and xenophobia" (209). However, missing are discussions of Edith Piaf, a French cultural icon, and while he mentions Pierre Curie, he does not speak of Marie Curie. Nonetheless, there is plenty of food for thought in the preface, introduction ("A Yearning Toward Universality"), the ten chapters, and conclusion ("Anxiety and Optimism") in *How the French Think* to satisfy everyone from the casual reader who wants to understand better the French way of thinking to those who want to have a launch pad for a more in-depth investigation of French intellectual thought and its role in contemporary society.