Europeanising spaces in Paris, ca. 1947-1962
McDonnell, H.M.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Henri Cartier-Bresson’s status as a photographic pioneer and iconic cultural figure of the twentieth century is rarely disputed. The quality and extent of his work, ranging from iconic shots of his native Paris to the entire world, give ample evidence to corroborate the claims made for his genius. Of the pivotal events of this post-war period, there indeed seem to be few which he did not witness, armed with his characteristic Leica camera and sustained by his ethos of ‘the decisive moment’.

Claude Cookman argues that even though in later years Cartier-Bresson himself cultivated his image as that of a Surrealist artist, this is a misleading interpretation of his post-war work. Likewise, the axiom that the value of Cartier-Bresson’s oeuvre is its artistic expression of the human condition misses something essential about his vision.1 Cookman demonstrates that Cartier-Bresson’s work from the 1940s to the 1960s was motivated by a desire and a sense of duty to witness and communicate world events.2 His social realism derived in large part from his political formation in the Europe of the 1930s and his concomitant leftist adherence to social justice and rebellion.3

In the post-war period, Cartier-Bresson’s work was commonly thought of solely as an artistic representation of a generic human condition. An examination of the press reaction to the exhibition of his work at the Louvre in 1955 identifies just such a recurring trope of abstract or bloodless universalism. This response to the exhibition, which displayed his work from both the

---

1 See Claude Cookman, ‘Henri Cartier-Bresson Reinterprets his Career’, History of Photography 32/1 (Spring, 2008), 59-73.
2 Ibid., 62.
European and non-European worlds, is then examined as betraying various underlying Eurocentric notions or presuppositions about Europe. These in turn manifested themselves further in the absence of any reference to pictures in the exhibition which were particularly propitious for reflecting on the meaning of Europe.

A step is then taken back to examine two of Cartier-Bresson’s book collections: *D’une Chine à l’autre* (1954) and *Les Européens* (1955). Contrary to the kind of lofty, unmediated universalism attributed to him in the press on the Louvre exhibition, it is argued that these works were informed by a particular post-war European perspective. It is argued that each book, in different ways, represents various aspects of Europe or Europeanness which are not incompatible with universalism. However, they imply that, to borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrase, ‘particular ways of being in the world’ are taken into greater consideration than abstract notions of art or the universal human condition tend to allow. It is argued that these two collections strongly suggest an understanding of Europe that refers to its experience of violence; a particular perception of time; tradition and modernity; and deprivation and privilege. What is more, the two collections are examined in terms of how they contributed to a European self-understanding that derived from imperialism.

---

An exhibition of a selection of some four hundred of Cartier-Bresson’s photographs taken between 1930 and 1955 was inaugurated on 26 October 1955, in the Pavillon de Marsan at the Louvre, and ran until mid-November. As Janet Flanner described this exposition of photos from Europe and the non-European world in her Paris diary for The New Yorker,

Cartier-Bresson’s unfailing historical intuition – which has led him to keep dates, prophetically sensed in advance, with world events and changes, so that he was able to be present to take their pictures – makes his current exhibition a great general contemporary record of our time, sensitively seized by one man’s eye and his camera lens. In it, his snapshots, magnified to the size of paintings, become amazing modern portraits of humanity and its background scenes, both private and public, over the past few years, showing what people have done to each other in war, or what has luckily escaped history… The French are not born travellers; Cartier-Bresson has travelled for them, bringing back to the walls of the Louvre what he calls ‘the decisive moment’ of varied national existences, when thousands of people, singly or grouped, unconsciously furnished him, if only for an instant, with those perfect physical compositions which make great pictorial art, and which, with an artist’s eye, he seized, and in that instant made permanent.

Flanner also noted that Cartier-Bresson was the only photographer to have been honoured in a national museum in France. Jacques Duclos, one of the most senior and influential members of the French Communist Party (PCF), had in December 1953 complained about ‘l’européanisation de certaines salles du Louvre.’ Did Cartier-Bresson’s pioneering exposition there of the European and non-European worlds in turn Europeanise, in the sense of prompting reflection on the place of Europe in this new post-war world? In fact, the extensive French and foreign press

---

5 Incidentally, it is worth noting André Malraux’s claim in 1946 that a museum was itself a sort of quintessentially European space: ‘even now we find museums only in places where Europeans have organised them. The very idea a man of the Far East has of a work of art is incompatible with a museum.’ André Malraux’s speech ‘Man and Artistic Culture’, in Reflections on Our Age: Lectures at the Opening Session of UNESCO at the Sorbonne (London: Allen Wingate, 1948), 88.


generally emphasised less the originality of the exhibition than the fact that it was replacing a Picasso exhibition. It is suggested that there was a certain symmetry between this oversight and a failure to reflect on how this event might have made an original statement about the continent, that departed from received orthodoxies about the condition of the contemporary world, and Europe’s place therein. Incidentally, David Caute notes that the PCF attributed enormous importance to the 1954 Picasso exhibition at the Louvre, which reminds us that there were various forms of Europeanisation, of different value to different actors.

The press’s very restricted way of reflecting upon Europe also manifested itself in the absence of commentary on photos in the exhibition’s catalogue that readily lent themselves to interpretations of Europe, or would be interpreted as a statement about Europe in later years. In her report, Flanner noted Cartier-Bresson’s achievement both in terms of its value as testimony and in terms of artistic composition. In general, the press reaction highlighted more the latter, or alluded to the former only in terms of a rather Eurocentric invocation of humanity. Indeed, a trope that recurs in the reception of the exhibition was that Cartier-Bresson depicted a universal humanity or the human condition. To take one instance, the magazine *Leica fotografie* characterised his vision as ‘the height of human feeling.’ It continued,

Yes, humanity is his very own playground, the consistent theme of his magnificent photo-reportage. To him nothing is odd, he has no prejudices or predilections, no one-sidedness. No partisan approach, no veiled implication in the depiction of poverty; no suggestions in beauty, no glee in happiness, no censure in the degraded; only a uniform objectivity in the portrayal of mankind – and that is why the onlooker is moved by these pictures.

---

This kind of reference to humanity is best understood as a kind of universalism in which an idea of Europe as central and paradigmatic was undisturbed. Likewise, Le Parisien libéré reported, ‘Cette illustration d’événements les plus divers, pris sur le vif, ne concerne pas seulement tels pays ou continent, mais bien tout notre globe terraqué avec ses luttes, ses espérances, voire ses divertissements.’

What was at stake in such statements was less hypocrisy or disingenuousness than uncritical recycling of what Heidegger had described as the Europeanisation of the words ‘man’ and ‘world’. It was thus consistent that some journals reported on the exhibition either by referring overwhelmingly only to its European components, or by invoking the world as a whole, but with explicit reference to the centrality of Europe as a universal paradigm. In its report on the event, Paris Match, for instance, unabashedly laid out its focus of interest in a section devoted to ‘L’Europe en 5 photos d’identité.’ This showed photographs of a one-legged man manoeuvring through a still ruined Hamburg, two old women walking in the street in Athens, a musical performance attended by high society in London, a wall in Spain upon which there is an insignia of the Falange, and a fishmonger in Marseille.

It is also interesting to note examples of pictures that were not selected for Paris Match’s collage of Europe. One such image was the striking photo of portraits being carried out of a Dutch colonial administration building in Jakarta on the day before Indonesian independence, in 1949. Paris Match, however, was unmoved by this powerful statement about Europe’s place and

---

12 Cited in Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of "Subaltern Studies”’, Economic and Political Weekly 30/14 (8 April, 1995), 759 n.
role in the world; unsurprisingly so, given its summary dismissal in the article itself of Sukarno as a mere ‘agitateur’.\(^\text{14}\)

![Image](image.png)

Figure 5. Henri Cartier-Bresson, ‘Jakarta, Indonesia’ (1949). Google images.

Another picture which was omitted in the European identity pictures has subsequently become perhaps Cartier-Bresson’s most famous image: a man jumping over a puddle on the place de l’Europe near the gare Saint-Lazare in 1932. This was not because its force had faded over the previous two decades, since it was not even published until 1946 in preparation for a show in New York at the Museum of Modern Art.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 63. One should add that this was far from Cartier-Bresson’s analysis of the situation there. He remarked to the Magnum office that, ‘The Dutch consider all this premature because the Indonesians have no middle class. One might wonder how many more years the Dutch consider their presence necessary to build one, if the last 300 years have not been sufficient.’ Cited in Peter Galassi, Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 14.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 31.
The Welsh photojournalist, Philip Jones Griffiths, remarked that the greatness of this image was its prescience. Referring to its time and place, he describes the photo as showing a generic European Jewish name on the poster (though it is perhaps more likely to be of Polish derivation), and a broken hoop representing historical disaster. Cartier-Bresson was as such, a ‘Nostradamus of the early 1930s who predicted what was going to happen to Europe in that one
single image: Europe jumping into the unknown.16 No such reaction was registered in any of the press at the time of the exhibition at the Louvre, however. The question remains open if this is more plausibly because Jones Griffiths overanalysed the image, or rather because such interpretations were still difficult and untimely in a post-war France and Europe that typically indulged in rather self-flattering nationally based rationalisations of what they had endured and, indeed, inflicted.17

Amongst the press reaction there were certainly no indications of attentive readers of Les Temps modernes who might have drawn from Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, which appeared in the October 1947 edition.18 Specifically, the shot of the gare Saint-Lazare clock in the background evoked no analogy with Benjamin’s reference, in thesis XV to the halting of a clock by the gunfire of revolutionaries in 1830 France. This example was so intriguing to Benjamin because it encapsulated the discontinuous time in the tradition of the oppressed – an explosive moment that shatters the continuous, historicist, homogenous empty time of domination. The latter concept of time is tied up with the belief in progress, which, as we examined in chapter 5 on the MSEUE, was rehabilitated to a degree in this period. A Benjaminian reading of Cartier-Bresson’s photo would have suggested this was as credulous as it was disarming politically. Benjamin’s own view of Europe was indeed deeply coloured by this pessimistic philosophy of history.19 Three years before Cartier-Bresson’s iconic photograph, Benjamin insisted on ‘pessimism all along the line… no confidence in the fate of European

---

humanity... And boundless confidence only in I.G. Farben and in the peaceful perfecting of the Luftwaffe.\textsuperscript{20} If such sentiments did not resonate with Cartier-Bresson’s reviewers at the time of the Louvre exhibition, we will see below that there was nonetheless a certain resonance with Cartier-Bresson’s own representation of Europe.

It was not only Paris Match that largely overlooked the non-European photographs in the Louvre exhibition, however. Likewise, Point de vue, the New Yorker, and Nouveau femina all emphasised the exhibition’s indebtedness to the book collections Les Européens and Moscou vu par Cartier-Bresson. In doing so, they diminished the importance of work from elsewhere that had been in other books like Images à la sauvette, or appeared for the first time.\textsuperscript{21} Le Monde’s priority of interest in the exhibition’s European aspect was capped with a reference to the decline of Austria as the heart of Europe. Presumably Paris now bore that mantel.\textsuperscript{22}

Similarly, Libération’s account of the exhibition starts by describing Cartier-Bresson as an ‘infatigable globe-trotter de la réalité humaine.’ The only photographs it actually described, though, were those that also appeared in Les Européens. Ultimately this universal human reality seemed subordinate to political events in Europe. Referring to a photograph of Germans it asks, ‘de quoi parlent-ils? De la C.E.D., peut-être bien.’\textsuperscript{23}

The New York Herald Tribune, on the other hand, reported on the opening of the exhibition in an article that concentrated on the Moscou work. In this context, it suggested that travel was an excellent basis for resolving conflict and thereby to further universal ideals. Quoting an Intourist official speaking at the Congress of the International Federation of Travel

\textsuperscript{20} Walter Benjamin, One-Way Street and Other Writings, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2009), 158.
\textsuperscript{21} Of course, as we have seen, Russia’s Europeanness was a controversial but unresolved question.
Agencies in Dubrovnik, the article claimed, ‘International tourism is “a means of lessening international tension and of securing world peace.”’ It continued: ‘This idea is hardly new. For about six years now, the same thing has been expressed in other words by the European Travel Commission’s slogan: “Understanding through travel is the passport to peace.”’ 24 The implication was that a precondition to humaneness was the prosperity inherent to the West that facilitated travel. Parochialism and poverty were conflated in an inadequacy determined by the European universal standard now taking shape, as it hoped to leave behind post-war impoverishment with the onset of les trentes glorieuses. There was of course a tradition of producing the European Other through travel – Sartre denounced this in What is Literature?, where he held that travel in the non-European world went hand in hand with the nefarious universalisation of capitalist standardisation and European military force. 25 But even leaving this aside, it is curious that the Herald Tribune writer did not register that the most obvious travellers in the exhibition were non-Europeans: desperate Indian and Chinese refugees uprooted by war and misery.

It is noteworthy that the kind of universalism ascribed to Cartier-Bresson’s exhibition at the Louvre resembled the reaction to Edward Steichen’s hugely acclaimed and frequented exhibition in the same year, The Family of Man. Having opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it thereafter toured the world. 26 It comprised 503 pictures by 273 photographers from 69 countries. Magnum accounted for 15 percent of the total exhibits despite having only eight

photographers.27 Susan Sontag’s analysis of this exhibition is revealing and applies likewise to the press reaction to the Louvre exhibition: ‘Steichen’s choice of photographs assumes a human condition or a human nature shared by everybody. By purporting to show that individuals are born, work, laugh, and die everywhere in the same way, “The Family of Man” denies the determining weight of history – of genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts.’28

Relating this to Cartier-Bresson, there is a sense of awareness in his work of both false and genuine promises of ideologies of universalism. From what he had learnt on his travels he was aware that universalism had fuelled the colonial civilising mission and a nefarious insistence on hierarchy, and also that it was the rationale behind the capitalism whose consequences he found lamentable. Indeed, in the preface to Les Européens he wrote, ‘Je ne veux pas parler bien sûr, du règne universel du complet-veston, ni de la standardisation mondiale des objets utiles, mais de l’homme avec ses joies, ses peines, ses luttes.’29 Cartier-Bresson’s position here belied the lazy presupposition of the equivalence of Europe and humanity or the universal in the press reaction to his groundbreaking exhibition. We will now examine his work in its own right to see how Cartier-Bresson’s precept translated into much more interesting and nuanced understandings of Europe in his collection D’une Chine à l’autre and in Les Européens.

D’une Chine à l’autre

This section examines Cartier-Bresson’s work in China during his stay there in 1948-1949, a period spanning the end of the Kuomintang regime and the ascendency of the Communists. These photographs were reproduced in contemporary French and international newspapers and periodicals, and were brought together in an important and innovative collection in 1954, *D’une Chine à l’autre*. Cartier-Bresson returned to China in 1958, recording Mao’s Great Leap Forward, but that is beyond the scope of the analysis here. The choice to focus on his work in his first trip lies in the fact that the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese civil war was experienced more as a rupture in two relevant senses. Firstly, Parisian intellectual circles were far less aware of contemporary China than they would be a decade later.\(^{30}\) Indeed, Jean Chesneaux argues that French intellectuals were largely indifferent to China in the first part of the twentieth century; an oversight that only ended with the triumph of the Maoist forces which Cartier-Bresson witnessed. Even French academic Sinology restricted itself to classical China, and French intellectuals were completely unprepared for the revolution, lacking any equivalent reporting to that of Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley on the American scene. As such, ‘the French intellectual scene was a blank page – a very Maoist feature – and this was a decisive contributing factor to what has been described – and branded in some quarters with utter contempt – as the “love affair” between Maoist China and French intellectuals.’\(^{31}\)

Secondly, the ascendency of Mao’s forces was more readily perceived as the point of China’s clean break with the European world and as a model for others who wished to cut ties in the same way. This certainly seemed to be Cartier-Bresson’s understanding of the China he reported from, as he recounted that Chim and Robert Capa had specifically assigned him the task


\(^{31}\) Ibid.
of reporting on the decolonisation of Asia for the newly founded photographic agency, Magnum. This break with the European world permeates Cartier-Bresson’s record of the events in China. China was not a formal colony, of course; but the extent of European (and indeed also American) sway over the country prior to the fall of the Kuomintang regime made it decidedly relevant to ideas of Europe which took European imperialism into account.

This section will proceed as follows. Firstly, Cartier-Bresson’s work is situated within a general tradition of thinking about Europe through the representation of its Chinese Other, and then within a particular Paris-centered strand of this tradition. Secondly, Jean-Paul Sartre’s involvement with Cartier-Bresson’s project is examined in terms of its implications for thinking about Europe. Part of this involves examining how a single image can be appropriated for differing interpretations by looking at Sartre and David Rousset’s opposing conceptions of Europe and Europeanness in the context of Cartier-Bresson’s work from China. Thirdly, it is argued that Cartier-Bresson’s work in China impacted on Europe’s self-understanding in terms of violence. Fourthly, the case is made that the China collection implies an understanding of Europe in terms of perception of time.

Europe and China and D’une Chine à l’autre

---

Cartier-Bresson’s work can be located within the broad general European tradition of articulating a self-image in relation to its Others, key amongst which was China. As such, his work on China had a perceived function of locating Europe in the wider world in a kind of social, moral, existential, and political mapping. There was an additional Parisian context of reception that tended towards certain kinds of reflections on these photos in terms of the meaning of Europe and Europeanness.

Marx wrote in 1853 that the Celestial Empire was ‘the very opposite of Europe’, and his was just one intervention in the long history of thinking about China in terms of its relationship to Europe. One might say the European imagination of China was constitutive of certain ideas of Europe and of European identity. However, Perry Anderson argues that this was not the same Orientalism that Edward Said described. Prior to the nineteenth century, China was considered too distant to be a military or religious threat to Europe and generated tales not of fear but wonder and admiration: ‘From Bayle and Leibniz to Voltaire and Quesnay, philosophers hailed it as an empire more civilised than Europe itself.’ Thereafter, however, China was more and more depicted as primitive, barbaric and superstitious. Racism and foreign penetration increased alike. Having again won sympathy in its struggles against Japan in the early twentieth century, China was again the focus of fear and anxiety after 1948. Red China was thenceforth ‘a totalitarian nightmare more sinister even than Russia.’

Moreover, Cartier-Bresson’s work fitted into a certain specific French and Parisian tradition of representing China, and via China, Europe. Once again, a prominent assumption was

---

that France was not to be considered in isolation from Europe, but rather as its foremost representative. Relating China to a Europe whose axis centered on Paris was not an exclusively French habit: ‘Shanghai has often been called the Paris of the Orient’, remarked the China Weekly Review in 1930, before adding the qualification that ‘Shanghai has all the vices of Paris and more but none of its cultural influences.’ But Chesneaux argues that the history of European interest in China was invested with a distinct French commitment and style exemplified in scholarship and art through the French revolutionary period and beyond, in a line running through Voltaire, Diderot, Baudelaire, de Chardin, and Malraux. One might also point to French scholarship on China which included important figures such as Étienne Balazs, who was described as ‘the father of modern studies of China in Europe.’

If the Parisian cultural and intellectual scenes were unprepared for the events that Cartier-Bresson portrayed, they would nonetheless prove to be very attentive thereafter, both in a positive and negative sense. Indeed, Magnum made a point of relaying the success of Cartier-Bresson’s stories back to him even whilst he was still in China. Chesneaux elucidates part of the context for this interest in his work when he remarks on the fashion for China in French cultural life through the 1950s and 1960s. Theatres were packed for Peking Opera visits, Chinese literature was sold abundantly and Chinese exhibitions of art at the Grand Palais were frequented.

---


36 Chesneaux, China in the Eyes of French Intellectuals, passim. In this period, Malraux’s ideas about the relation between the West and China were reiterated in re-editions of his La tentation de l’Occident and in an afterword in 1949 for a reissue of his Les Conquérants.


38 Letter to ‘Henri and Eli’ from Elizabeth Reeve, London representative of Magnum (April 18, 1949) in FHCB, Correspondance HCB. Chine 1948 et 1949.'
en masse.\textsuperscript{39} He explains this in part by referring to a particularly marked French intellectual tendency of ‘political exoticism’,\textsuperscript{40} that is to say, to look for a model of reference in distant lands as a substitute for an unsatisfactory European society. All this can be taken as suggestive of the likely interest in Cartier-Bresson’s groundbreaking reportage from China and of the degree of exposure to its representation of Europe.

Moreover, because of France’s colonial war in Indochina, events in the Far East had an even greater impact in Paris. One might also conjecture that the interest in Cartier-Bresson’s pictures from Asia might have been heightened by the death of his close collaborator at Magnum, Robert Capa, in Indochina. Of course, Indochina was not China, however intertwined were their histories. But ‘Asia’ was commonly taken at both the political and cultural levels as an integral unit. Jacques Soustelle vociferously made the case that Asia, a designation that included the USSR, must be conceptualised as a whole in Western Cold War strategy. To insist on nuanced distinctions was an unaffordable luxury in this period of conflicts in France’s Far East colonial possessions and in Korea.\textsuperscript{41} Such sentiments were echoed in the 	extit{Assemblée nationale} in the context of the ongoing European political integration. In Flanner’s account, in a July 1957 session the State Secretary for European Affairs ‘put his finger like a compass needle on Western Europe’s necessary direction for survival by saying: “We are still living on the fiction of the four great powers (of which France was one). In reality, there are only two – America and Russia. Tomorrow there will be a third – China. It depends upon you… whether there is a fourth –


\textsuperscript{40} Chesneaux, 	extit{China in the Eyes of French Intellectuals}, 12.

Europe. If you fail to make this choice, you condemn yourselves to walking backward toward the future.”

Similarly, Spenglerian ideas about the threat to Europe from Far Eastern hordes were renovated by adherents of the *guerre révolutionnaire* doctrine like Maurice Papon, whose decisive role in the 17 October, 1961 killings is examined elsewhere. The same sort of race fears prompted concerns about immigration. A few years later in 1965, *Le Figaro littéraire* lamented the evolution of the centre of Paris:

> Autour de Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, il n’est guère que l’église elle-même, le Panthéon, l’École polytechnique, deux ou trois bistros et quelques merceries à demeurer résolument français. Partout ailleurs, c’est désormais la Chine. Ou le Japon. Ou le Vietnam… Car le ventre de Paris est devenu extrême-oriental, chinois surtout, mais l’Empire du Soleil levant et le Vietnam se rapprochent à grand pas… Cessez-donc de craindre le péril jaune: il est déjà arrivé à Paris.

It is in these general European and French traditions of thinking about China that one can place the parallel that Cartier-Bresson drew in *D’une Chine à l’autre* between a Shanghai-centered China and a Paris-centered Europe. The point was made more strongly still in explaining in his captions, for instance, that for the Chinese, jade was the equivalent of diamonds for the Europeans; by emphasising that Confucius was in fact a contemporary of Plato and Socrates; and in asserting that during the transition from the Kuomintang to the new regime, ‘un

---

43 Andrew Hussey, *Paris: The Secret History* (London: Penguin, 2007), 331. It is also ironic in the context of Cartier-Bresson’s representation of Europe that the listings of Cartier-Bresson’s work include ‘a routine day in Paris police station.’ For Europeanness in part underscored an ideological current in the Paris police and was performatively articulated in the routine violent treatment of North Africans, as we saw in chapter 3. See Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson*, 348.
service d’ordre et de contrôle est organisé par des volontaires, jouant le rôle des FFI. It is suggested here that once Cartier-Bresson adumbrated this comparison between Paris and Europe on the one side and China on the other, the reader and viewer was invited to do the same.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *D’une Chine à l’autre*, and Europe

Pierre Bourdieu argues that the importance of the preface has been overlooked as an important element of a work in its own right. In analysing Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to *D’une Chine à l’autre*, this section takes seriously Bourdieu’s emphasis on the processes of lending and appropriating symbolic capital between the prefacer and the author of a work. The case is also made here that Sartre’s thought is a useful tool to grasp how Cartier-Bresson’s work made a statement about Europe. Finally, the examination of Sartre’s involvement with Cartier-Bresson’s project is a propitious instance to examine the issue of authorship of the photographic medium, and the malleability of pictures to make different or opposing arguments. This will be examined in relation to David Rousset’s attack on Sartre with reference to Cartier-Bresson’s work in the context of broader debates about Europe and its Others and their representation.

Undoubtedly the inclusion of Sartre’s name on its cover lent clout to Cartier-Bresson’s message in *D’une Chine à l’autre*. Indeed, Sartre’s prefaces had become something of an institution, and there were various examples of him contributing to work that had something to

---


say about Europe, implicitly or explicitly. One thinks in this period particularly of works by Henri Alleg, Albert Memmi, Paul Nizan, and Frantz Fanon. Conversely, if amounting to nothing like a renunciation of the PCF, it is plausible that prefacing Cartier-Bresson’s book afforded Sartre an intellectual space adjacent to, but also acceptable to, the party and its Stalinist expectations of its cultural associates. For Sartre never reconciled himself to this circumscription of the intellectual’s craft, even in those years between 1952 and 1956 when he was allied with the party.

Sartre’s thought is also useful in an analysis of the content of Cartier-Bresson’s photos. A superficial reading of his preface suggests that Sartre conformed to the kind of ideas identified above about a generic human condition, or a bloodless universalism.

By getting your models to pose, you will give them time to become other: other than you; other than people; other than themselves. The ‘pose’ produces the elite and the pariahs, the generals and the Papuans, the Breton-looking Bretons, the Chinese-looking Chinese, and the ladies bountiful: the ideal. Cartier-Bresson’s snapshots catch people at high speed without giving them time to be superficial. At a hundredth of a second we are all the same, all of us at the heart of our human condition.

Here Sartre contrasts the human condition that Cartier-Bresson captures with the ubiquitous and crude stereotyping of Others. There is of course a long history of the latter in the self-understanding of Europeans. However, Sartre is not positing the sort of abstract universalism that so pained Aimé Césaire and which he expressed in his open letter to Maurice Thorez announcing his resignation from the PCF in October 1956:

---

Je ne m’enterre pas dans un particularisme étroit. Mais je ne veux pas non plus me perdre dans un universalisme décharné.

Il y a deux manières de se perde: par ségrégation murée dans le particulier ou par dilution dans l’“universel”.

Ma conception de l’universel est celle d’un universel riche de tout le particulier, riche de tous les particuliers, approfondissement et coexistence de tous les particuliers.50

Sartre’s understanding of the dialectic correlated with Césaire’s conception of the universal. As he put it in his Notebooks for an Ethics, written in 1947 and 1948: ‘The Other, in history: The Orient (China, India, Japan). How can one dare to do a dialectic of history that does not take into account these 400 million human beings who, like us, have fifty centuries of history? The dialectic (whether Hegelian or Marxist) only considers part of humanity.’51

Paige Arthur argues that in this passage Sartre revealed himself to be still limited by a Eurocentric perspective. That is to say his aspiration to a universal history that takes collective Others into account still took European man as its central point of reference.52 Be that as it may, it is important to note the point that Sartre’s references to Europe in general are little commented upon, and part of the redress of this neglect must take account of the fact that his Europe was thought through precisely in terms of its relations with the rest of the world.

Sartre’s approach is also useful in the sense that it reiterates the political content of art. This was no less the case for the Cartier-Bresson photos that he prefaced. Photography was identified by Sartre as but one modern form of a timeless human culture, an anthropological

---

52 Paige Arthur, Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (London & New York: Verso, 2010), 29. One should also note that in her work, Arthur argues that the interchange between interpersonal and group alterity in Sartre’s philosophy is problematic, as it is at odds with his methodological individualism. See Unfinished Projects, 114-115.
constant of the need to negate the world as it is. In *Being and Nothingness*, he defined man as a being who is not what he is and is what he is not. Richard Kearney explains that, ‘as soon as I realize myself as I am now, I am already imagining myself as I am no longer (my past self) and as I am not yet (my future self). My present self is haunted by past and future absences. To imagine is, therefore, a temporal act in which I constitute myself as both nothingness (i.e. no actual given thing here and now) and freedom.’

If photography is a mode of negation and Europe is a term of reference for Sartre generally and in the Cartier-Bresson preface in particular, it follows that the reader of the book was invited to imagine Europe in a similar spirit of negation, or to imagine an idea of Europe that is haunted by past and future absences. Any consideration of Europe’s place in the world was to reckon with this simultaneous and constant process of looking back and forward in time. As we will see, Cartier-Bresson’s photographs in the collection lend themselves to such interpretations of the continent.

Sartre’s involvement with Cartier-Bresson’s China project is an opportune point to discuss the issue of the particular susceptibility of the photographic medium to appropriation for diverse interpretations and claims, which might indeed differ markedly from those of the photographer. Cartier-Bresson himself was well aware of this problem and explicitly complained about it in the course of his time in China. His biographer Pierre Assouline writes that,

---

With the photos he took in China, he was extremely precise in the phrasing of his captions, as if conscious that the historic nature of the events he had witnessed made it essential to avoid any chance of misinterpretation… At the head of his reportage on life in Shanghai and Nanking after the defeat of the nationalists, he wrote: ‘This photo may only be reproduced if accompanied by its caption or by a text written explicitly in the spirit of the caption.’

It is, then, instructive to compare David Rousset’s use of Cartier-Bresson’s photographs to attack Sartre with respect to his attitude to China, and Sartre’s interpretation of Cartier-Bresson’s work in his preface to *D’une Chine à l’autre*. This example is particularly enlightening because what was at stake in this argument was a struggle over what one might term the European credentials of the intellectual.

One of Cartier-Bresson’s photos was reproduced in the *D’une Chine à l’autre* collection with the caption: ‘fête célébrant l’entrée solennelle de l’armée à Shanghai, le 1er août 1949.’ He comments that, ‘on exposait dans ces défilés les problèmes du moment. La cérémonie avait été prévue pour le 5 juillet 1949. Devant la menace d’un bombardement nationaliste elle avait été décommandée et remise au 6 juillet.’ The same photo appeared in an article by Rousset in *Demain* in January 1956, alongside the following caption: ‘L’étoile rouge est lourde à porter pour les frêles épaules des jeunes communistes chinois que semble surveiller, tel le “Big Brother” de George Orwell, la gigantesque effigie du tout-puissant Mao Tse Toung.’

---

In the article Rousset refers to ‘le continent jaune’ in an implicit contrast to the white European continent, exemplifying a persistent, if attenuated, trait to define Europe in racial terms. Rousset did not invoke Europe specifically in the article, but it was present as an implicit point of reference and comparison. Indeed, he worked in circles that aimed to fortify Europe as a bulwark against totalitarianism. He was thus instrumental in forming the Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire alongside Sartre in 1948, which invoked Europe as a third way in the Cold War world. Furthermore, his invocation of Orwell is symptomatic of his continuing commitment to a particular cultural and political vision of Europe. Institutionally this current of thought was represented in the Parisian journal Preuves, which assembled many key anti-Soviet writers from all over Europe such as Orwell himself, Hannah Arendt, Salvador de Madariaga,
Franz Borkenau, Denis de Rougemont, Raymond Aron, Manès Sperber, Nicola Chiaromonte, and Czesław Miłosz. It expressly advocated European values, European culture and Europe’s political integration. Reciprocally, the journal took pains to defend Rousset during his libel trial against Les Lettres françaises in 1951. And yet Preuve’s very credentials of Europeanness were controversial, for it was labeled an instrument of American propaganda, negating Europe since, so it was claimed, its propagandists would have it absorbed into an American capitalist imperium.

In keeping with the ethos of Preuves and of a certain mould of intellectual who conceptualised his or her vocation as a distinctly European space, Rousset accused Sartre of betraying the calling of the intellectual to criticise state power. In his preface to D’une Chine à l’autre, Sartre, like Rousset and others elsewhere like Mauriac and Malraux, pointed to the intellectual as integral to certain ideas of Europe. But far from a commendation, he indicted those who created a mythologised Europe through the representation of the Chinese. He located photography squarely within this tradition of conceiving Europe by fetishising the supposed irreducible differences of its Other, or even producing those differences: ‘There are photographers who encourage war because they produce literature. They seek out a Chinese who looks more Chinese than the others; in the end they find one. They make him adopt a typically Chinese pose and surround him with chinoiseries. What have they captured on film? One Chinaman? No… the Idea of what is Chinese.’

For Sartre, it was to Cartier-Bresson’s credit that he transcended these artificial and nefarious dichotomies to recognise a universal human condition. He assessed that ‘the

---

59 See ibid., 64.
60 Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘From One China to Another’, 23-24.
picturesque is wiped away, farewell *European* poetry; what remains is the material truth, the poverty and greed of the fallen regime.‘\(^{61}\) Susan Sontag remarked that European photography was largely guided by notions of the picturesque, key among which was the idea of the foreign.\(^{62}\) One might suggest here that Sartre anticipated but inverted her remarks by showing that it is the picturesque and photography that have contributed to defining Europe and the European.\(^{63}\)

But if these ideas of Europe have been constitutively dependent on distortion of its Other, that is not to say that Sartre posited some kind of true Europe which only needed to be uncovered. When Sartre celebrates the end of European poetry in Cartier-Bresson’s work, we can read this as meaning that poetry is definitive of a certain idea of Europe which like poetry, according to his analysis in *What is Literature?*, is an end in itself. This Europe is like the aesthetic artifact that is unashamedly self-grounded. Europe is thus reduced to its form, something to be contemplated in its autotelic and self-satisfied inertia. But ‘for Sartre’, Robert Young reminds us, ‘politics begins rather than ends with identity.’\(^{64}\) As such, ideas of Europe are only of interest in the way in which they either deter or further the process of becoming, of advancing towards a society free of class exploitation within and of oppression without.

Europe and Violence

---

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 25. Emphasis in the original.
One of the most arresting photographs in *D’une China à l’autre* is of a Shanghai neighbourhood in the aftermath of a bombing raid. Its caption reads: ‘L’aviation du Kuomintang a bombardé Shanghai. Les bombes sont tombées sur les faubourgs où elles ont fait de nombreuses victimes parmi la population qui y vit entassé dans des paillotes.’

![Figure 8.](image)

*Figure 8. Henri Cartier-Bresson, ‘Un quartier de Shanghai a été bombardé par l’aviation du Kuomintang’,* *Photo monde* (January, 1954) in FHCB.

Its scene of terrible destruction and suffering could immediately be recognised as a core element in a shared European experience. Jacques Soustelle made precisely this point in *Foreign Affairs* – and in doing so unwittingly confirmed Benjamin’s linking of Europe and the air force that we noted above. Soustelle addressed Americans wishing to understand the European mentality, and insisted on the fundamental importance of such devastation, not just in terms of the effect of bombing but also the recent experience of violence in general. Here he referred to the ‘the peoples of Europe’, and ‘particularly the French people’:

> the psychology of our people must be understood in America. It is a very different psychology from what must have been that of the American people following the last world war. The United

---

States suffered during the war; but the country was not occupied by the enemy, Americans did not have to witness the slaughter of their fellow citizens in extermination camps, they did not watch their cities go up in flames, see their harvests destroyed by warring armies, roads, railroad lines and bridges cut, ports in ruins. The French went through all that for four years, sharpened, too, by the bitterness of defeat.\(^66\)

We should note that Soustelle did not seem to view his remarks as problematic, given that Paris was certainly not among the European cities that went up in flames, at least on any remotely comparable scale. Rosemary Wakeman remarks that one of the reasons that the images of Paris by photographers like Cartier-Bresson have become so iconographic is precisely because the city did indeed emerge from the war intact, in stark contrast to so many other European capitals.\(^67\)

Soustelle’s remarks can be understood as articulating an idea of Europeanness with reference to a consciousness of what Judith Butler describes as the distribution of human physical vulnerability across the globe.\(^68\) There are two remarks to make about this.

Firstly, the notion of a global distribution of violence, rather than talking about violence in a specific place at a specific time, connotes its provisional nature and suggests it is something shifting and even unforeseeable, something that having passed can just as easily return. An idea of Europe or of European identity based on this notion must be correlative unstable, contradicting the cliché that the very function of identity is to be a rock of permanence in a world in which all else is changing. This Europe was quite at odds with those who constructed firm and unproblematic lineages such as Denis de Rougemont, which suggests that Jean-Baptiste Duroselle was rash in his contention in his 1965 work that there was an abyss between the Europeans before and after 1945.\(^69\) On the other hand, Perry Anderson writes about the tradition

---


of conceptualising the idea of Europe, particularly in the nineteenth century, in relation to the ideals of peace. Such an ethos was ‘central to virtually every shade of Europeanizing opinion.’\(^70\) It was thus a bitter irony that in the light of such a heritage Soustelle’s understanding of Europe was defined by violence and fear of violence.

Secondly, this Europe diverged from ideas of nationalism rather than supplementing them, as in many traditional and contemporary ideas of the continent. The war to which Soustelle refers was often the basis of a solid and resolute image of nationhood in the post-war period; the myth of *résistantialisme*, or the ‘Vichy Syndrome’, flourished in France and had equivalents throughout the continent. The point is that nationalism could put the experience of violence to work in an affirmative culture of martyrdom, romantic sacrifice and national redemption. A shared sense of Europeanness lacked any comparable civic apparatus to override suffering and death, and so fell back on raw destruction and loss as its default terms of commonality, terms that were undiluted, unmediated and not sanitised as in nationalist ideology. Hence the writer Roger Nimier’s lament that that this century’s only true Europeans were ‘des cadavres sur les décombres.’\(^71\) Incidentally, Nimier was the subject of a Cartier-Bresson portrait in 1950.\(^72\) Lucien Febvre, likewise, offered an extremely dreary prognosis of a continent ever more threatened by mechanised warfare in his course on European civilisation at the Collège de France in the newly liberated Paris of 1944-1945.\(^73\)

Having been invited to draw comparisons between China and Europe and it having been made clear that capitalism was a key concern of the work, a Parisian audience might have been


particularly drawn to another photograph of a desperate and harried crowd in Shanghai in December 1948. It was featured in the first issue of *Paris Match* in March 1949. The crowd is scrambling to receive an allowance of gold from the Kuomintang authorities following massive inflation.

![Figure 9. Henri Cartier-Bresson, ‘Shanghai’ (1948). Google images.](image)

It is hypothesised that the photograph’s particular power to resonate with a Parisian audience derived from its depiction of subjective and objective systemic violence. The subjective form refers to the most common understanding of violence as a tangible act of aggression perpetrated by an identifiable agent. Slavoj Žižek explains the distinction between this conventional sense of violence and its objective sense. The latter describes ‘the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems… Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent.’\(^{74}\) In these terms, the confluence of these two forms of violence in ‘the Great European Civil War of 1914-1945’ was still fresh in the memory of

---

Cartier-Bresson’s post-war audiences.\textsuperscript{75} In fact, Cartier-Bresson’s own worldview was shaped during the 1930s, a point that, Cookman argues, is seriously underestimated. He described how Cartier-Bresson aligned himself with two political trends in 1930s Europe: opposition to the capitalist class which many blamed for World War One and the ravages of the Depression, and the rise of the left in opposition to the fascism of Hitler, Franco, and Mussolini.\textsuperscript{76} Cartier-Bresson was not at all unusual in holding capitalism to have been the catalyst for this catastrophe. Accordingly, the photograph can be supposed to have struck a chord with a certain deep-seated popular mistrust of capitalism in post-war Europe.

Of course, to resonate with a Parisian and European audience is not necessarily to say anything at all about Europe itself. There are two reasons why one can claim Cartier-Bresson’s work did so, however. Firstly, its context of reception was one in which there was a strong tendency to read the scenes it showed of China turning Communist as symptomatic of weaknesses embarrassingly internal to Europe as it defined itself. Secondly, it illustrated the point that Europe was not reducible to itself, and that its own history did not unfold merely within its continental frontiers, but globally. Europe’s presence in the non-European world was not supplemental to, and therefore detachable from, an authentic understanding of the continent.

Eric Hobsbawm argues that 1914 marked the beginning of the breakdown and crisis of Western bourgeois civilisation of the nineteenth century, which was characterised by a capitalist economy and was ‘profoundly convinced of the centrality of Europe.’\textsuperscript{77} If Europe’s catastrophic self-destruction had subsided with the end of the Second World War, the old certainties in its primacy remained vulnerable to any further disruption of the stability of the world system. As

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75} Donald Sassoon, \textit{One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century} (New York: The New Press, 1996), 135.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Cookman, ‘Compelled to Witness’, 10.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Hobsbawm argues, the emergence of Communism from this European catastrophe derived exactly from the weakness of this European civilisation.\textsuperscript{78}

This indictment of contemporary Europe was reflected in the concluding text after the photographs in \textit{D'une Chine à l'autre}. Here the consequences of European capitalism for China and capitalistic imperialist Europe itself were condemned in equal measure.\textsuperscript{79} The text states, ‘Mais ensuite vient le temps de malheur, des défaites et des humiliations; c’était l’âge d’expansion du capitalisme occidental, de la main-mise des puissances européennes sur une Chine qui devient le paradis des aventuriers.’\textsuperscript{80}

This is a vital point since, coupled to the images, it disrupts the production of an imperial understanding of Europe that James McDougall points to when he describes the projection of empire’s violence onto those it targeted. McDougall is not merely accusing European powers of historically putting forward self-serving arguments. Rather, ‘a fundamental psychological and ideological mechanism of colonial rule – one of the several ways in which Europeans not only produced imperialism, but contrived to live with it in perfectly good conscience, indeed in the conviction of its “greater good” – has been the externalisation of imperialism’s own violence onto its victim.’\textsuperscript{81} This is undermined by Cartier-Bresson’s photographic and textual indictment, not merely of Europe’s subjective violence of military coercion, but also the objective or systemic violence of European capitalism that, as it were, battered down Chinese walls. Cartier-Bresson, in short, hints at Aimé Césaire’s contention in his \textit{Discourse on Colonialism} that

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{79} It is not clear whether this text was written by Cartier-Bresson or someone else. But as it was Cartier-Bresson’s collection one would assume he had control to include and exclude what he wanted in a way which he did not have with newspaper and magazine commissions. Moreover, what is stated corresponds to Cartier-Bresson’s political convictions as we have outlined above.

\textsuperscript{80} Cartier-Bresson, \textit{D'une Chine à l'autre}.

\textsuperscript{81} James McDougall, ‘Savage Wars? Codes of Violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s’. \textit{Third World Quarterly} 26/1 (2005), 120.
Europe’s exertion of force in the world was not supplemental to but constitutive of it, and that any plausible understanding or idea of the continent must reckon with this.\(^{82}\) We will see later, though, that such a gesture towards Césaire’s anti-colonial critique of Europe was curiously absent from Cartier-Bresson’s *Les Européens*.

**Europe and Time**

Susan Sontag argues that the photographic medium has an inherent propensity to make one reflect on time. She writes, ‘All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.’\(^{83}\) If photography in general provokes reflection on time, Cartier-Bresson’s work did so all the more. His concept of the ‘decisive moment’ reflected his reputation for spontaneity and gift for timing. For Sartre, this gave Cartier-Bresson’s work in China a distinctive mark of authenticity and set him apart from his peers. We noted above that Sartre considered Cartier-Bresson’s photos to be shorn of any sort of posing in his subjects – capturing them at high speed precluded appearing superficial. In Sartre’s terms, then, the Europe that Cartier-Bresson represented in his work was a continent shorn of alibis. One can surmise that the prestige, or symbolic capital, of Sartre’s preface was such that the point was taken seriously by its readers. And that being the case, one photograph from the China work stands out as a statement about Europe.

---


It is particularly interesting to view the photograph in the context of a summary Cartier-Bresson wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* regarding the two years he had spent in Asia: ‘The last war changed the Far East more than any part of the world… In addition to our own problems at home, we are paying for our grandfathers’ failure to foresee that the colonial system was not eternal.’84 Tellingly, Galassi notes that the remark about the colonial system was expunged from the published text.85 Nonetheless, the photograph made a comparable statement about Europe and its sense of time which was far less controvertible than his excised words. The caption for the picture read: ‘Sur le paquebot. Un groupe d’Européens et d’Américains ayant

---

85 Ibid., 67 n.
vécu longtemps à Shanghai. The picture shows two men in the foreground, sitting just behind a sign in both English and Chinese forbidding third class in that section.

In the first instance, the caption reminds us that ‘Europe’ must always be distinguished from ‘the West’. More importantly, though, the photograph forcefully suggested that the time of European and Western privilege, exemplified here by a literal class barrier, had passed, and passed ignominiously at that. Not a trace of a proud or sentimental downing of the flags here, only the resigned and ineffectual anonymity of old men. How starkly this contrasted with Edward Said’s description of British India in the heyday of European imperialism:

When it became common practice during the nineteenth century for Britain to retire its administrators from India and elsewhere once they had reached the age of fifty-five, then a further refinement in Orientalism had been achieved; no Oriental was ever allowed to see a Westerner as he aged and degenerated, just as no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj.

Moreover, if, as for the historians of the Annales school, Europe was best made sense of in the long wave of history, Cartier-Bresson showed that a singular event was not necessarily merely the froth on that wave. The sense of the photo is that Europe’s self-definition and rationale had been overturned very quickly, and that sense was underscored by the singular monumental episode of Europeans exiting the non-European world. It connects with Jean Monnet’s distinction between the European and the non-European worlds in terms of the tempo of political adaptation to the new post-war world. The reform of the former contrasted with the

---

86 Cartier-Bresson, D’une Chine à l’autre, photo 141.
revolution of the latter, including that represented by the victory of the CCP over the forces of Chiang Kai-shek, whom Monnet had of course once advised.\(^8\)

It is important to keep in mind the disadvantages of photographs in the sense that they could be appropriated for differing and contradictory interpretations of Europe. Here one sees the flip side of the photographic medium. Its representation of Europe in its striking and simple immediacy was as powerful a statement as the masterful indictments of Europe by contemporary anti-colonial polemicists like Fanon, Sartre, or Césaire.

---

*Les Européens*

Cartier-Bresson’s book *Les Européens* was published in 1955. Galassi assesses that, alongside *The Decisive Moment* (1952), in half a century of books issued in Cartier-Bresson’s name ‘not one is remotely comparable to these two in quality, either as a book in itself or as a vehicle for the work as a whole.’\(^9\) Not merely a cultural artifact though, there was a distinct political aspect to the collection, if not in the way it was appropriated in a review by *Jeune Europe* – the organ of the Paris-based *Mouvement européen*. Its claim that Cartier-Bresson’s book demonstrated the unity through diversity of Europe was more revealing of the felt need to supplement European political integration with an appeal to the affections of its peoples, rather than simply putative economic and political pragmatism.\(^9\)

---


\(^9\) See ‘Les Européens à la sauvette’, *Jeune Europe* (1 January, 1956). Incidentally, the terms of the review are so close to Sartre’s preface to *D'une Chine à l'autre* that it would be somewhat generous to exculpate the journal of plagiarism.
The collection proceeds country by country. It is notable that it finishes with France and that its final picture is of the rue Mouffetard in Paris – a kind of homecoming to Europe’s centre having wandered through its peripheries. Galassi also makes a point of noting that it was released in the same year as the high-profile exhibition, *The Family of Man*, which subsequently toured the world. The publication of *Les Européens* was in itself something of a European undertaking – it was published by Tériade, the Greek-born, Paris-based art critic and publisher, and its impressive front cover was designed by the Catalan Surrealist Joan Miró, himself a frequent visitor to the French capital and the subject of a Cartier-Bresson portrait.

The case will be made that two particularly striking motifs of the book are a Europe which negotiates tradition and modernity, and a Europe defined by privilege and deprivation. Beyond these, the legacy and memory of the Second World War, or more broadly Europe’s thirty-year catastrophe, are a presence that permeates the whole collection. This is most obvious in pictures of bombed out urban landscapes, but it is equally implied by shots of banal everyday activities, since the radical distortion of that everyday life had been a point of European commonality in that conflict. This legacy and presence, it is argued, crowds out the Europe of imperialism, which is conspicuous in its absence.

Europe of Tradition and Modernity

Galassi writes that Cartier-Bresson was profoundly moved by the undermining or loss of traditional ways of life and the destructive effects of modernisation. Moreover, he writes that he often photographed scenes which could have existed hundreds of years before, and goes as far as
to say that his work is tinged with ‘romantic primitivism’. This claim is corroborated by various photographs of agricultural or rural life in the collection from, for instance, Greece, Spain, the USSR, and Italy. However, the very first photograph of the collection suggests a more complicated representation of tradition and modernity and their implications for Europe. It shows a scene of industrial chimneys beside an otherwise serene Greek landscape with the archaeological museum of Elusis and its ruins from the fifth century BC in the foreground.

Figure 11. Henri Cartier-Bresson, ‘Greece’ (1953). Google images.

The photo lends itself readily to the interpretation that Europe, as represented by classical civilisation – commonly assumed to be its originator – lay prostrate, decapitated, and broken before the ugliness of modern industrialism. This, it seems, was at once antipathetic to Europe and yet integral to it. In an approximation of Benjamin’s notion above of what industrialism implied for Europe, the caption for the photo states, ‘Les cheminées d’usine sont dans le style de la fin du XIXe siècle. L’élément milieu du XXe siècle n’apparaît pas sur la photo, mais

s’entendait, l’aérodrome d’avions à réaction étant tout proche.‘92 It is telling to compare this caption with Cartier-Bresson’s statement, as reported by Galassi: “the 1930s were the nineteenth century” and the scourge of American-style technology, business, commerce and consumption didn’t begin to saturate Europe until the mid-1950s.‘93

In the first place, if the 1930s were comparable with the nineteenth century, the power of the photograph is increased by the effect of abruptness and rupture. Secondly, this suggests that capitalist modernisation was bad enough when it was a European affair of nineteenth-century origin, something Cartier-Bresson made clear in his work on China. It was even more deplorable when a defining characteristic of Europe was only, at most, ambiguously European, that is to say American-driven post-war development.‘94 Thirdly, there is something more menacing about this American-oriented modernisation which, according to the caption, was invisible, comparable to the omnipresent violence that Sartre observed in the China photos.‘95 It suggested a key contemporary concern about the accelerated smashing of (European) cultural specificity beneath the wheels of standardising technology.

Europe of Privilege and Deprivation

---

92 Cartier-Bresson, Les Européens, caption for photo 1.
93 Galassi, Henri Cartier-Bresson, 65.
95 Sartre, ‘From One China to Another’, 28. See also Assouline, Henri Cartier-Bresson, 171.
As the *International Herald Tribune* reported in its review of *Les Européens*, ‘the raison d’être for the photograph [figure 12] of four bald, bullnecked and bullet-headed German industrialists is not its striking composition but rather its significance.’

![Figure 12. ‘Un hall de l’établissement thermal de Wiesbaden’, in Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Les Européens*, photo no. 28.](image)

Indeed, one strong motif of the book is its characterisation of Europe as defined by a contrast between privilege and deprivation. Its juxtaposition of the two conditions suggests their mutual implication, as exemplified by the contrast of this photograph and that in figure 13 showing a

---

man in West Germany standing with a sign hanging from his neck reading: ‘Je cherche du travail, n’importe lequel.’97

Figure 13. ‘La pancarte autour du cou du jeune homme porte l’inscription “Je cherche du travail, n’importe lequel”’, in Henri Cartier-Bresson, Les Européens, photo no. 25.

There is a distinction between such a glaring juxtaposition of haves and have-nots here, rather than the ubiquitous poverty in his work on China, which suggests that the former is a particularly Europe characteristic. One might counter that his work on China was produced during a period of war, so that poverty and deprivation were necessarily a secondary concern. But the very fact that Europe was no longer in the depths of armed conflict brought to the forefront a new European commonality of shared aspirations to restructure the traditional forms of European society. No longer was social justice to be deferred for the sake of national salvation, and the consensus that formed around welfare statism made such a contrast in the photos particularly objectionable because Europe was their location.

97 Cartier-Bresson, Les Européens, photo 25.
The full caption for that photograph of the unemployed man (figure 8) reads: ‘Il y avait, en 1953, environ 9 millions de réfugiés et 1 million et demi de chômeurs en Allemagne de l’Ouest.’ It is interesting that Cartier-Bresson made a link between the deprivation of unemployment and poverty, and disenfranchisement in terms of security of residence and nationality. For a notable feature of the book is that it is structured according to nation state, moving from Greece to Spain and through Germany, England (a slight exception), Austria, Switzerland, Ireland, the USSR, and Italy, before finally looking at France. Here the nation state and Europe are in a supplemental relationship: to talk of the Europeans and Europe did not contradict or impinge on the nation state; rather nation states were constitutive of Europe, again a common notion in the history of the idea of Europe, particularly in the nineteenth century. Charles Maier even argues that historically, frontiers are a particularly European obsession.

However, this position comes at the price of glossing over the contradiction to which Cartier-Bresson alluded here. Even if most European refugees had been settled by the time of the appearance of the book in 1955, dissatisfaction and bitterness inevitably remained. There were in fact plenty of perennially frustrated political émigrés in Paris. What is more, as Hannah Arendt argued, the very existence of refugees subverted the authority of nation states, and so the refugees were treated as if they carried ‘the germs of a deadly sickness.’ This metaphor of illness was also used frequently with regard to immigrants in Paris who, it was feared, carried deadly diseases like tuberculosis. In both cases, it is contended, this myth functioned to delineate deviance from a normative Europeanness. These issues of inclusion in relation to Europeanness as understood in France also connected back to the photograph from Greece. The

---

101 Wakeman, *The Heroic City*, 189.
term of abuse ‘métèque’ was still quite current in this period, after all. Introduced into France by the far right-wing Charles Maurras at the height of the Dreyfus affair, this neologism derived from the ancient Greek word *metic*, which referred to aliens who had no citizenship in a Greek city.\(^{102}\)

Europe of Imperialism

This contestation of the legitimacy of hierarchy and privilege in Cartier-Bresson’s vision should logically have extended beyond Europe’s internal definition to Europe’s place in the world at large. Cartier-Bresson was, as we have seen, a committed and consistent anti-colonialist. In this sense, crucial to *Les Européens* were not only the Europes that it showed, but also those that it did not: above all, the Europe of colonialism. Even its most obvious manifestation in the metropole – the presence of burgeoning immigrant communities – was conspicuously absent.\(^{103}\) That absence was all the more significant given that, as Étienne Balibar points out, the term ‘Europeans’ was predominantly used to refer to groups of colonisers in European colonies until the middle of the twentieth century.\(^{104}\)

Even the somewhat different Soviet variant of imperialism was absent due to the inclusion of photographs from Russia but none of Eastern Europe, except for a couple from Ukraine. Curiously, it appears that he did in fact produce photos in Warsaw on a stopover during


\(^{103}\) We should note that immigration and imperialism are not strictly causally linked. However, as Benjamin Stora points out, the connection made in the public mind in France between immigration and imperialism was particularly acute. See Stora, *La gangrène et l’oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 281-300.

his return to Paris. Of course, Cartier-Bresson was simply offered the opportunity to work in the USSR and not in Eastern Europe, but the effect of that absence in the collection remains no less real.

Cartier-Bresson was not oblivious to the issue of the significance of absences. In the opening lines to his preface, he recounts being confronted over his lack of photos of Scotland by a Scotsman who demanded to know precisely what that meant. Cartier-Bresson took the point while insisting that his oversight had been in no way deliberate or planned, and was due in large part to the arbitrary wandering of the photographer. We can credit Cartier-Bresson’s explanation and still insist that in light of his own words he should not have been oblivious to the significance of that absence. Indeed, much of the material for the work was gathered during a European tour in May – July 1953, during which time he passed through Italy, France, Spain, Switzerland, Germany, England, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium. One could argue that as a pan-European phenomenon, imperialism was less of an obvious trait than the two tropes that dominate the book: Europe of tradition and modernity; and a Europe of privilege and deprivation. The work suggested that imperialism might be no less integral to Europe, but only manifested itself visibly in such things as the culture of immigrant communities, or demonstrations and gatherings for or against empire, all limited for the most part to major urban centres.

One can read this absence as an expression of a distinct lack of space for other determinants of European identity in the aftermath of the catastrophe of the Second World War. This formative experience was most obvious in the various shots of destroyed cityscapes. But

---

106 It is thus no coincidence, for example, that opposition within the PCF to the party’s policy on the Algerian war was heavily concentrated in Paris, Lyon, and Marseille. See Danièle Joly, *The French Communist Party and the Algerian War* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 132.
even those pictures that show trivial activities of everyday life implied it, since it was precisely a point of European commonality that everyday life had been utterly disfigured during the war, as was the desperately felt need to reconstruct it thereafter. Cartier-Bresson’s concerns about the consequences of modernisation and privilege and deprivation are, then, inseparable from this European disaster. Consequently, the radical prioritisation of the World War in thinking about the meaning of Europe crowded out any kind of rationalisation, negative or positive, of European imperialism, despite the abundance of its manifestations in Paris.107

The title of the work, translated as The Europeans, is also of significance, particularly as contrasted with the indefinite article of the title of the Cartier-Bresson collection of 1997, Des Européens.108 One could interpret this use of the definite article in the title of the 1955 work as a suggestion that the category of Europeans was closed and decided. If, according to Balibar, the term Europeans would later become controversial in response to the growth of immigrant communities, it did not appear to be so for Cartier-Bresson here. It is the effect, if surely not the intention of the collection Les Européens, that ‘European’ corresponds to an unswerving racial criterion of whiteness. If in this Europe colonialism was overridden by the priority accorded to the legacy of the Second World War, it is also the case that the failure to think beyond the immense scar at the heart of Europe made the book’s reasoning compatible with that of those groups which began at this time to propagate a racially based definition of Europe and Europeanness. In this sense, the absence of colonialism in the book’s treatment of the European supports Fanon’s contemporary insight that ‘not only must the black man be black, he must be

108 The change in article translates in the English to Europeans or some Europeans. However, in the English editions, both the 1955 and the 1997 works are entitled The Europeans. The 1997 collection contains some of the same photos, but also includes shots from earlier and later in Cartier-Bresson’s career.
black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.¹⁰⁹ Fanon’s claim here is all the more pertinent precisely because Cartier-Bresson manifestly paid much sympathetic attention to the supposed non-European, quite apart from his work outside Europe. A photo from 1932 which shows immigrant labourers on the quai Javel in Paris was included in the 1955 Louvre exhibition (figure 14).

![Figure 14. Henri Cartier-Bresson, ‘Quai de Javel, Paris, 1932’. Google images.](image)

Likewise, a later image from 1968 shows immigrant African or Caribbean workers washing the windows of a pleasure boat in Paris. There is also a Cartier-Bresson photograph of two Africans sweeping the streets along the Champs-Élysées.¹¹⁰ The first of these was included in the 1997 collection Des Européens, when the parameters for thinking about Europe and Europeanness had

¹⁰⁹ Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, 110.
¹¹⁰ I am grateful to Claude Cookman for this reference. He notes that by itself one could read it as a neutral document, but seen in conjunction with all his other socially concerned photographs and in light of his political positions, it is likely best read it as a critical statement. Claude Cookman, personal communication, 20 October, 2010. Recall also that in its foundational manifesto, the Fédération des étudiants nationalistes contrasted a street sweeper with Marcel Bigeard, one of the commanders at Dien Bien Phu, to make a statement about European supremacy. See chapter 5.
shifted significantly. Even sticking to the timeframe of *Les Européens* – 1950-1955 – one is struck by his decision to exclude pictures of a demonstration against the Algerian war, and of Parisians crowding around a newsstand to see the press’s report of France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu, both from May 1954.\(^{111}\)

A second reading of the title *Les Européens* could take its definite article as a provocation rather than prescription, a call to self-reflection rather than exclusion, or even an incitement to politics in Rancière’s sense.\(^{112}\) After all, it was hardly uncontroversial to include pictures from the USSR and so suggest that Russians were clearly European. We have already seen that Soustelle took the USSR to be Asian, even more so ideologically than geographically, and such sentiments were common. In a review of his work *Moscou* which was assembled from shots taken on the same trip, the *Gazette de Lausanne*, for instance, referred to its presentation of a ‘mélange de peuple asiatiques.’\(^{113}\)

Conclusion

The enormous prestige of Cartier-Bresson has often gone hand in hand with a restricted interpretation of his work as that of an artist in the sole service of surrealism, a view given

\(^{111}\) Cartier-Bresson originally declared he had finished his work on *Les Européens* in March 1954 - two months prior to the shots of the Algerian war demonstrations and the events at Dien Bien Phu. However, he obviously reconsidered this when he was granted permission to visit the USSR in July 1954 as some of his pictures there are included in the work. Evidently, for whatever reason, about which one can only speculate, he did not consider the Algerian war demonstration or newsstand pictures worthy of inclusion in the reedited version. Of course, he was the first photographer granted access to the USSR for seven years so it is understandable that his photos there would take priority in any reworking of the collection. For chronological details see Galassi, *Henri-Cartier Bresson*, 309-310. The photo of the reaction on the Paris street to newspaper reports of the defeat at Dien Bien Phu is reproduced in Blanchard & Deroo, *Le Paris Asie*, 165.


additional weight by Cartier-Bresson’s own reinterpretation of his career in this light. Or he is regarded as simply a brilliant depicter of the human condition or abstract universal humanity. This is not simply the case with contemporary commentary, but also in the reaction to his work in the post-war period, both in France and internationally. However, taking Claude Cookman’s reinstatement of Cartier-Bresson’s work in the category of politically engaged social realism, this chapter has set out to analyse how aspects of Cartier-Bresson’s work can be understood as that of a situated post-war European with all the advantages and limitations that this entailed. His testimony about the new post-war world in turn produced certain kinds of representation of Europe and of Europeans. His record of the rise of the Maoist forces in China suggested a European self-understanding that relied to a significant degree on the experience of violence and the perception of the monumental shifting of time. *Les Européens*, on the other hand, suggested a Europe characterised by a tension between tradition and modernity and between privilege and deprivation. Counter-intuitively, a common thread linking the two collections was a Europe defined by imperialism – forcefully delimited and denounced in the first, only to be conspicuous in the second in its very absence.

Regarding both of these collections and the Louvre exhibition, the case has also been made that any consideration of Cartier-Bresson’s representations of Europe must consider the malleability of the photographic medium. This is something of a double-edged sword, as photographs could be appropriated for quite different purposes, as we saw in the example of David Rousset’s attack on Sartre – a dispute which in part derived from opposing understandings of Europe and the European intellectual. On the other hand, the striking immediacy of photography could make enormously powerful statements that resisted the removal of any captions or text, as in the example of aging Westerners resignedly departing China by boat.
The Europeanising aspect of Cartier-Bresson’s work, whether in the space of an exhibition, his books, or of a single photograph, also derived its power from absence. We have seen that this is the case in the Sartrean sense of a photograph as an instrument of negation, calling forth absent pasts and futures in the representation of a Europe; or in the power of Cartier-Bresson’s photos from China to intrigue European audiences precisely because of the sense of acute distance from that country, though Cartier-Bresson’s work insisted that this remoteness did not at all represent a radical disjuncture from Europe. Likewise, the absence of interpretations of certain photos, such as the picture from the colonial building in Jakarta or the gare Saint-Lazare, or of the absence of imperialism in Les Européens, remind us of the historical contingency of what elements are considered vital or disposable in an interpretation of Europe.