

## TAKING LIBERTIES: A TALE OF TWO BICENTENNIALS

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The Paris supermarket offered a July 1989 *prix révolutionnaire* on biscuits and detergent which you could take home in your plastic *tricouleur* bag which was made in Italy. *Le Point* magazine offered revolutionary dress for kids for only 230 francs (about \$A50). Monoprix, the French Woolworths, had notebooks with drawings of the taking of the Bastille on the cover for only 9F50 (a change from the usual illustrations drawn from Hollywood and Manhattan). A money purse featuring the revolutionary bonnet and the numbers "1789-1989" from the local corner shop in Clichy and "fabriqué en Taiwan" cost only 12F. This was the French "revolution" 1989 style!

Some older people, who wanted more than a "1789" red, white and blue ice cream, found that "Marianne", the female symbol of the revolution, could assist. Presented in red, white and blue, "Marianne" was naturally "*le parfum*" of the revolution at Galeries Lafayette. In open-minded France, *Playboy* ran an *édition spéciale* called "Marianne makes her revolution". Marianne and other full-breasted friends, in the spirit of Delacroix but taking more liberties, photographically captured Paris with only a hint of red, white or blue.

In the Bicentennial Australia of 1988 uncertainty about national colours (green and gold or red, white and blue?) inhibited the ice cream makers but no one else. Bicentennial place-mats littered fast food chain tables, souvenir knick-knacks (often also made in Taiwan) and "Buycentennial" car sales, grating "Sellebrations", and flags and jingles on TV all roused the patriotic spirit.

Advertisers and packaging designers took liberties with 200 years on a scale larger than in France; perhaps because the Australian Bicentennial Authority took out a copyright on every possible word ("Australia", "Bicentenary") and number ("1788", "1988", "200 years") and combination and then sold it to advertisers, the deluge was even greater than in France. For every patriotic cockade adorning a brand of alfoil on French supermarket shelves five products carried patriotic notes in

Australia; consumer patriotism covered the whole range from breakfast cereals to toilet paper.

Though the advertisers and those entrepreneurs of celebration, the politicians, stole two bicentennials, it could have been different. In the new world young Australia might have asked more of its history, as Australian Aborigines did when looking back over their 40,000 years. In old world France, patriotism and earnestness might have meant even greater awareness of the history of "liberté, égalité, fraternité"; local libraries tried with special displays, but their hours are often short and French kids prefer the *vidéothèque*. "Bread", in all its modern variations that Coles New World or *Ed, l'Épicier* have to offer, and "circuses" for politicians and people have been more important.

The two great performances of the Australian celebration were a New Year's Eve telecast linking far parts of Australia by satellite to a Sydney TV studio with a cast of star anchorpersons (a rather tired Clive James was imported for the occasion) and the great Australia Day (26 January) aquatic celebrations on Sydney Harbour.

If the first was a technological feat, the second provided a wonderful natural and human spectacle: of thousands of craft on the water, despite the Coke flag on the "First Fleet" re-enactment's leading ship and the obligatory stand of local politicians and English royals.

It was also a symbolic spectacle. On the land, mostly hidden from the cameras, aboriginal and white protesters opposed this celebration of an invasion. In France, all agreed to forget about the two forms of invasion which characterise recent French history, the three invasions of France in the last hundred and twenty years and the more "glorious" invasions which formed part of French imperialism.

If around Australia critics lamented that the Bicentennial was mainly a Sydney thing, in France Parisian domination was simply accepted as natural. In both cities, the politicians knew that, above all, it was their occasion. In Sydney, Labor premier Barry Unsworth bet his government's re-election on following the gala, but lost.

In Paris, President Mitterrand's 14 July *méga-spectacle* was upstaged by his Gaullist opponent Jacques Chirac, the Mayor of Paris. Despite

a festive armistice Chirac suddenly announced massive celebrations of the 100 years of the Eiffel Tower (including fireworks, perhaps left over from that night on Sydney Harbour) in June. An illuminated and lighted tower, with "100 ans" in large letters and a tightrope walker who crossed the Seine to the tower (he hadn't tried Sydney Harbour!) stood tall for Chirac, for Parism and for Gaullism.

On 14 July as Parisians fled the city two weeks earlier than usual and tourists flooded in, it was Mitterrand's show. The garden party for heads of state, the commemoration of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the official opening of the new Opera in the Place de la Bastille were all part of Mitterrand's plan to make France the cultural, and therefore the spiritual, capital of Europe or perhaps even the centre of the world. This was not a vision shared by Margaret Thatcher, who had no time for either the French (of for other "Continental") or for "liberty", except the liberty of capital; she made a gift a Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, with its emphasis on the guillotine.

The highlight of Mitterrand's show was a grand night parade, a *gigantesque jamboree* of the music and dance of the world, a grand parade along the Champs Elysées of 6,000 performers watched by 450 million viewers. *Le petit roi*, the king, of this theatrical revolution was Jean-Paul Goude, a 48 year old advertising creator who had previously sung the praises of Club Med, Kodak and Lee Cooper. In 1989 he was most famous as the creator of the "Oh Oh Orangina" soft drink ad which became not only a cult but an erotic dance.

The traditional military parade earlier in the day might have made General de Gaulle rise in pride from his grave, but the dance spectacle might have disturbed his rest in other ways. Although the American opera singer Jessye Norman, singing *La Marseillaise* in a *tricouleur* kaftan, echoed the part of the opera singer Mlle Aubry during the Revolution, the Florida Marching Band, Chinese bicycle riders, acrobats and African dancers were revolutionary indeed. The only problem was, as Australians who saw the SBS TV coverage realised, the cameras picked up more dark than light and not much sound.

*Son et lumière* can be fun, but 1988 and 1989 also demonstrated politicians' love of longer lasting monuments, of *grands projets*. In France, which had once erected great monuments in celebration of

military victories, such as the *Arc de Triomphe*, the emphasis fell on the symbolic as well as the useful: *la grande arche* at La Défense as well as the new Opera, the glass entry pyramid to the Louvre as well as the repainting with gold of the dome of the Invalides. In Australia, the Darling Harbour waterfront redevelopment, plans for a tunnel under the harbour and the grey stone exteriors of the new Parliament House reflected an only fractionally more practical bent. And neither the pyramid nor Darling Harbour could keep out the oppressive summer heat. In both countries massive projects expressed confidence despite national economic problems; for politicians, as once for emperors, great buildings could encourage popular delusions in difficult times. And the critics, whose predecessors had been repelled by the "ugly iron" of the Eiffel Tower, lamented the rectangular ugliness of the grand arch and condemned the concrete bunker which had replaced Capital Hill in Canberra, and its Italianate Hollywood entrance hall.

Unlike 1889 when Paris had the world exposition it was left to Brisbane in 1988 to "show the world" (although Expo 88 was more "world-famous" in Brisbane than anywhere further north) while the French, who encouraged the celebration of something French around the world, had no travelling exhibition to take the spirit to the provinces.

It was on the smaller scale, of souvenirs and tourists, of Bicentennial 88 and 89 logos and revolutionary postcards and beer mats, however, that the bicentennials won their followers and their sales.

Why did more serious matters get drowned in the flood of celebratory trivia? In Australia some politicians and social critics sought a treaty between white and Aboriginal Australians while in France Mitterrand placed some emphasis on the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But neither justice nor liberty seemed to stick. To most advertisers it meant consumption. Renault 19s were advertised with the slogan "*Vive la Liberté*" while the German General Motors Opel, the Corsa, was also called "Liberty". To rock entrepreneurs it meant the 24 June "Liberty Show" with Dylan and INXS, Stevie Wonder and Rod Stewart. In fashion, the magazine *Marie-Claire* discovered "*Liberté, fluidité, légèreté*" as one of this year's styles while the catalogue discount store *La Redoute* was confident that its mail order selling offered *Liberté, Simplicité, Tranquillité*.

In a Parisian suburban school a "revolutionary day" on which some of the children dressed up as rock musicians rather than revolutionaries (few Australian children dressed up as convicts in 1988!) made France's history seem a long way away. One parent was drawn to reflect that it was lucky that they had "all that stuff - Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité - then", as no one believed in any of it today. In France, as in Australia, shops and tourism ruled, not human rights or even social ideals. While most white Australians ignored rights as the French ignored the rights of their colonial *citoyens*, *boutiques bicentennaires* offered liberty and patriotism for consumers with cash or credit cards. The modern slogan was no longer "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" or Death, but Galeries Lafayette, Myer or Death.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>One account of the more serious contestations over the French bicentenary is Margaret Sankey, "The French bicentenary celebration and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*", *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 66, 7, December 1989, pp. 15-22.