Representing the Social: France and Frenchness in Post-War Humanist Photography

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I Introduction: the paradigm of French humanist photography

You will recall the discussion in Chapter 1 of this volume of Roland Barthes's analysis of the semiotics of a Paris-Match cover picture of the 1950s, and how the presentation and the encoding of visual elements within that image produced a certain conception of France and French society. This chapter is more widely concerned with photographic representations of society. But rather than taking a single image as its subject, it explores in detail the representational role of a body of images which deal with French society in the era of post-war reconstruction, defined as running from the Liberation of Paris in 1944 until the end of the 1950s. The role of such representations in offering a redefinition of 'Frenchness' to a people which had suffered the agonies and divisions of war, invasion, occupation and collaboration, are explored here, through an examination of the form and content of what we term the dominant representational paradigm of illustrative reportage photography in that era.

The concept of dominant representational paradigm indicates that this photographic approach offers a certain vision of the people and events that it documents, a construction which rests on how they were represented by the choices of both photographers and the press. Like all forms of photographic representation it is not simply a 'record' of a given moment, for it cannot be innocent of the values and ethics of those who worked within it. As the previous chapter made clear, we are concerned here with a constructionist approach to representation.

It will be important to note that, when we talk about photographers and photography here, we are concerned primarily with professionals producing images for sale to the publishing industry (for newspapers, magazines, books, etc.), and for related commercial purposes (e.g. advertising). Because such uses were widely diffused, the styles of imagery associated with illustrative reportage photography also influenced amateur practice: but we are not concerned with this secondary aspect of representation, fascinating though it may be.

The representational paradigm discussed in this chapter is referred to as 'humanist photography' because its main focus was on the everyday life of ordinary people who – for almost the first time – formed the staple subject-matter of the illustrated press. Along with the radio and cinema newsreels, the illustrated press formed the main source of information and entertainment for the French public in the period from 1945 to the late 1950s: although TV began to be available in this period, the number of television sets in French households did not exceed the significant threshold of one million until 1960.

The argument developed here is that illustrative documentary photography within the paradigm we are concerned with was one amongst a number of
important elements contributing to the reconstruction of ‘Frenchness’ as an inclusive representational category after the 1939–45 war, during a period of considerable tension and instability which included economic penury, colonial wars, political disarray, social strife, rapid industrial development, and major demographic changes.

Through an examination of the development of key representational themes in the work of the main ‘humanist’ photographers of the time, the chapter explores how their work and its subsequent presentation in the French illustrated press contributed to the creation of a more ‘inclusive’ image of France, of French society and of French culture during this period.

This is not to argue that humanistic photographers were obsessed above all else with representing France and the French as an inclusive whole, from which division or strife were excluded – for that is manifestly not the case. Neither can their photography (a term used here and throughout the chapter to refer to their professional practices as well as their choice of subject and aesthetic) simply be reduced to a form of propaganda for an ‘ideal’ Frenchness associated with a particular form of state organization.

Though many of the photographers dealt with in this chapter were, for longer or shorter periods, members of the French communist party in this era, and most if not all would have placed themselves in a broad sense firmly on the left, it would be implausible to argue that a shared political agenda is evident in the form and content of their photography. Although a shared ‘social’ perspective could more plausibly be identified as providing a unifying thread for this work (in the sense of a common tendency to concentrate upon the urban working class and petty bourgeoisie, and the marginal underclass), a careful reading of this body of photographic work shows that its social aspects were hardly if ever presented in a strident or assertive way. This is probably because these photographers were more interested in representing what, for want of a better term, we must identify as the cultural aspects of Frenchness. To the extent that we can identify strong social and political dimensions in the French humanists’ work, these appear as if magnified by their cultural framework, so that, within the most widely characteristic of its images, key aspects of social structure and social interaction, of political order and dissent, appear coloured or coded by the expression of a distinctive Frenchness. Whilst many seemingly universalistic images of childhood, love, or popular entertainment seem to be abundantly available within this body of work, few indeed could really be said to elude the bounds of time and place. This is a photography of the cultural, a body of images which created a system of representations of what made France French in a particular era. Its attractions to later generations than those for whom it was originally made – as shown by the widespread appeal of such imagery in the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s – simply underscores the point.

The approach I take here is underpinned by sociological and historical perspectives on the evolution of a cultural moment. Though this may seem disconcerting, it must be said that we have no way of knowing whether the French humanists provided a fair or typical set of representations of French
culture in their imagery: a point I will return to later when referring to the 'truth-value' of documentary photography in section 2. They could not photograph everything; they had to select subjects, and they had to decide how to go about photographing them. Their personal motives thus entered into the choice of subject and into the way in which certain meanings and values were encoded in the content of the image. These things were central to the paradigm of French humanist photography, and before we get further into the analysis it will be helpful to outline why and how the concept of paradigm is used in this chapter.

The concept of paradigm first emerged in the history of science, and is associated with the work of Thomas S. Kuhn (1962). He employed it to describe the process by which certain theories about nature come to exert a dominant role in sciences, such as Einsteinian relativity theory in the case of physics. Rather than being a smooth evolutionary process by which knowledge advances incrementally, Kuhn showed that science is characterized by revolutionary upheavals and changes, breakthroughs in which the supporters of now theoretical systems overthrow what they consider to be the outmoded views and practices of their predecessors. He argued that scientific theories, experimental practices, training methods and forms of professional organization and publication 'cluster' together in characteristic ways. These clusters are what he terms a paradigm for they offer a complete system whose elements define the very structure and content of the knowledge considered 'scientific'.

One important element of the paradigm is that it contains a 'world-view', a set of statements which define its subject-matter, lay out what constitutes the role of the scientist, and at the same time offer scientists working within the paradigm interesting puzzles about the natural world to be solved. Generally speaking, paradigms 'die' when they run out of interesting puzzles to solve, when they come up against anomalies which cannot adequately be dealt with from their theoretical base, and when new groups of scientific 'young Turks' appear with the elements of a new paradigm. Then a 'paradigm-shift' occurs, which allows familiar things to be seen in revolutionary ways. It is only when the community of scientists accepts a new conceptual structure that matters settle down. In between the periods of crises leading up to scientific revolutions, 'normal science' takes place — by which Kuhn means puzzle-solving informed by the conceptual and instrumental framework of the paradigm.

In one sense Kuhn is arguing that scientists like to agree on and then follow the 'scientific' rules of the game, but that every once in a while — and principally when the pay-off from following them has become less rewarding — these rules get radically redefined. So the concept of paradigm covers, amongst other things, this idea that a consensus is formed among scientists over 'the rules of the game'. These tend to be fixed in the form of the
scientific community's recognized textbooks, lectures and laboratory exercises. It is not difficult to see that this way of looking at how change occurs in scientific thought might be applied to other bodies of knowledge and aesthetic values, and particularly those - like photography - which seem less aptly handled, for instance, by Michel Foucault's discursive theory of knowledge and power. None the less, Kuhn's theory is in some respects closely similar to that of Foucault (developed around the same time despite the lack of cross-influences), although they are formulated within what Kuhn would term 'different paradigms' and Foucault 'different discursive formations'! In particular, both concentrate on the radical breaks and discontinuities in conceptual systems between one period and another. Although Foucault's ideas about the relationship between knowledge and power have been usefully employed in certain analyses of photography, these have tended to concentrate - not surprisingly - on the exercise of power through photographic technologies and apparatuses, particularly that of surveillance (Tagg, 1988). But photography's role in the knowledge produced by the social and human sciences, Foucault's primary area of interest, is not the major theme of this chapter. Here the focus is upon understanding how photography as a set of visual practices is situated in a historical and cultural context. By contrast with those Foucauldian approaches which have looked at the exercise of power through photographic technologies and apparatuses, the main concern in this chapter is to understand the life-history and defining principles of a specific approach to photographic representation.

What the concept of paradigm offers us is a way into understanding how groups of photographers shared a common perspective on representation, how they clustered together in a way that ensured the dominance of the humanistic paradigm as a form of representation, developed a common agenda of central themes which expressed their 'world-view', and offered alternative images of French society which debunked and contested other forms of representation. By examining the representational paradigm in more detail we can focus more closely on the condition of photographic production, the social context in which the work was created.

Kuhn's concept of paradigm has been successfully applied to the arts, including both painting and photography (see Davis, 1995, pp. 106–7). The idea of paradigm is helpful because it suggests that photographic approaches - as with 'schools' in fields such as painting or philosophy - follow cyclical processes of paradigm-shift not dissimilar to those in science. But instead of denoting a new form of scientific imagery, a paradigm-shift in photography generally denotes the appearance of a new visual aesthetic, so that a novel conception of representation becomes dominant. However, just as in a scientific paradigm-shift, familiar things are seen - or re-seen - in revolutionary ways. This is usually because one or more photographers has developed a new 'theory' about representation: a decision for instance to concentrate on a certain type of subject-matter, perhaps to make images of it which are framed or coloured in a certain way. The novel or revolutionary new image attracts attention from other photographers; it may be associated
with innovative forms of publication or display, and it may be located within a social group who cluster together and derive solidarity from the fact that they are in opposition to the status quo. Usually they have rejected as uninteresting the visual puzzles posed by ‘normal photography’, in the same way as dissident groups of scientists whose work will lead to a new paradigm tend to reject the puzzles posed by ‘normal science’. They have a new set of visual puzzles to explore, and this may in due course influence the community of photographers to adopt the new visual paradigm. This occurs through a complex process similar to that which happens in sciences, whereby the paradigm becomes institutionalized through training practices, the creation of standard reference works such as ‘textbooks’ (although in fields like photography these are more likely to be books of images or even exhibitions, rather than instructional texts), and the emergence of standardized work techniques.

Where aesthetic domains like painting, literature or photography differ from sciences is in their essentially multi-paradigmatic as opposed to uni-paradigmatic nature. In sciences, by and large, dominant paradigms such as Newtonian mechanics or Darwinian evolution rule entire fields like physics or biology. In the arts (and perhaps also the social sciences), dominant paradigms may conquer significant groupings (e.g. Impressionism in western painting of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century) yet not characterize the majority of output in a given field, which may see several competing paradigms struggling for dominance at any one moment.

Understanding photography as a body of practices and aesthetic values which follows a paradigmatic structure is helpful in understanding its representational role, for it focuses our attention on the interactions between the conceptions of photographers in constructing their images and the uses to which their photographs are put. To follow the Kuhnian scientific analogy, it is in the publication and diffusion of the output of those working within the paradigm that its influence is most clearly felt. Since we are primarily interested in the photographs of those working in the field of illustrative reportage photography, it is within this domain that we are concerned with exploring the paradigmatic nature of French humanism. Once those working within this approach have reached a point where their imagery is widely diffused in the illustrated press, we can begin to say that their photographic paradigm is dominant, in the sense that other practitioners are obliged to construct their own images within this set of visual rules in order to get their work published.
Before we go deeper into the French humanist paradigm it will be helpful to consider a further aspect of the representational issues which photography raises. We need to resolve certain questions about the 'truth-value' of the 'documentary' images produced by those working within the paradigm.

There is a central ambiguity within photography: 'depending on whether the mind or the eye is struck by its capacities to record or express, it is regarded now as a tool of documentation, now as an instrument of creation' (Lemagny in Lemagny and Rouillé, 1987, p.12). This problem derives from the invention of the photographic medium which was conceived as was so much else in the nineteenth century as a process which would reconcile art and industry. It will be helpful to consider certain of the meanings and uses of the 'documentary' aspects of photography, the senses in which a photographic image can be seen as either representing some important fact or as a means of recording an event, place, person or object in ways which have an 'objective' quality.

It is important to distinguish between at least two definitions of the term documentary which are pertinent to the dominant paradigm of photography we are concerned with in this chapter: documentary as objective representation vs. documentary as subjective interpretation.

Let us take first the idea of documentary as simply relating to documents of some sort (in this case photographic images). In this context, the image is normally referred to as a sort of impersonal 'legal proof', an objective record, similar in nature to an official form, a letter, a will, etc. It has purely informational value.

Insofar as the image is merely a simple record (i.e. a photographic reproduction of a letter, a painting, an object, a building, a scene, a passport portrait of a person, etc.), its factual or objective basis seems at first glance quite unexceptional. Like a letter or an object itself, the photograph is held to be an objective representation of something factual, the image a way of presenting 'facts' about its subject in a purely informational way. But complications begin to seep in to this apparently clear-cut notion of the photographic 'document', and they concern exactly how and on what authority the record is held to divulge its objectivity. Like all documentary records, photographic documents may of course be altered in order to offer a false or different interpretation from that which they would disclose if they had not been tampered with. But this is not at issue. What we are concerned with is the general belief that photography is an inherently objective medium of representation. This belief has grown up with the medium and it is still
routinely in play whenever we open a book or magazine or newspaper. The historian Beaumont Newhall put it most succinctly when he argued that ‘the photograph has special value as evidence or proof’. We believe it because we believe our eyes.

As John Berger has pointed out, photography emerged (during the 1830s) at a time when the philosophy of positivism was also moving into its heyday, and the two developed alongside each other. In essence (and simplifying enormously), positivism held that science and technology advanced our capacity to understand the physical and social world through the acquisition of factual knowledge (Berger, 1982, p. 99). Photography, as a modern technology – the combination, as David Hockney once memorably put it, of a renaissance drawing instrument and nineteenth-century chemistry – provided a tool whose seemingly objective mechanism for trapping factual representations fitted precisely within this positivist philosophy. Yet this understanding of photography was not in fact ‘given’ with the emergence of the medium.

When photography appeared in the 1830s, it was initially seen not as a primarily scientific tool but as an essentially creative medium, as summed up in Edouard Manet’s remark on seeing the first photographs: ‘from today, painting is dead’. Early uses of photography concentrated on landscape and portraiture, both modes of representation until then considered typical of painting and drawing, neither of which were considered as inherently ‘objective’ modes of representation in the scientific connotations of the term.

The great advantage of photography for its inventors – aptly summed up in Fox Talbot’s term ‘photogenic drawing’ – was that it provided a technological solution to the manual problems posed by the ‘quest for resemblance’ which dominated western art. Treatises on art from antiquity until the eve of the twentieth century gave an important role to the concept of imitation. However, this was not to be a merely slavish reproduction of nature.

An artistic work should introduce the soul into a world governed by supreme truth and ideal beauty. Often the artists could accomplish this only at the cost of exactitude: one example out of many is provided by the extra vertebrae given to Ingrès’s Odalisque, painted in 1814. The transcription of reality was not an objective undertaking but a means, available to man alone, of using the work which he produced or contemplated to establish a correlation with a world of infinity. Essentially, an image was the product of a mental effort: whether figurative or abstract, it constituted the substance of the only iconographical system that existed before 1839, the system generically known as ‘the arts of drawing’.

(Lemagny in Lemagny and Rouillé, 1987, p. 13)
As photography gradually supplanted the earlier iconographical system founded on the arts of drawing, a whole series of transactions occurred which placed its modes of representation within new iconographic frameworks. Technological and aesthetic developments saw the uses of the medium extend into many domains. As a result, a series of ‘paradigms’ of photographic representation emerged, each of which offered a particular vision of the world which photography could take within its remit. These included various artistic-aesthetic movements in which the expressive power of the photographic image was held to be of central value. However, this was in opposition to the emergence of a dominant paradigm, underpinned by a reflective approach to representation, which asserted that the photograph offered a ‘true image’ of the world. The ‘camera eye’ was considered to be like a ‘mirror held up to Nature’. The emergence and eventual dominance of such a paradigm in the nineteenth century helped the new medium become an integral part of the processes of industrialization, of scientific development and of social control/surveillance (Tagg, 1988, pp. 5–8). In this new paradigm of visual representation, the photographic image acquired truth-value. A photograph was seen as inherently objective (because of its combination of physical and chemical technology). The camera produced visual facts or documents. Thus, the very practice of photography could be said to offer a documentary objectivity to the images which it created.

2.2 Documentary as subjective interpretation

The second definition of documentary is in many ways richer but less apparently clear-cut, and deals with the more social and personal aspects of the term – as when we speak of something being a ‘human document’. Examples might include a journal or diary, someone’s written account of their experiences, a ‘documentary’ film about a person’s life, a picture story in a magazine. In this context, the document’s informational value is mediated through the perspective of the person making it, and it is presented as a mixture of emotion and information. Indeed, it is in creating images which have the power to move the viewer, to retain their attention through the presentation of a telling image, that this form of documentary works. Edward Steichen described the work of a group of photographers who recorded the rural and urban changes which America underwent from 1935 to 1943 as a body of images which struck the viewer by their dramatic verisimilitude: ‘it leaves you with a feeling of a living experience you won’t forget’ (quoted in Stott, 1973, p. 11). Roy Stryker, who led the group referred to by Steichen, argued that ‘good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or person looks like, but it must also tell the audience what it would feel like to be an actual witness to the scene’ (ibid., p. 29). One of the photographers in Stryker’s team, Arthur Rothstein, underpinned these ideas when he formulated his belief that ‘the lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print’ (ibid., p. 29) – with the implication that the two are interchangeable, so that the viewer is in effect ‘there’ when the shutter clicked.
You may note in reading what follows that what I describe as **subjective interpretation** in this section sits rather awkwardly between Chapter 1's categories of **reflective** and **intentional** representation. However, it is difficult to disentangle such conceptual distinctions from the practices and statements of documentary photographers, as the discussion below makes clear, for the subjective mode of 'documentary' representation became **paradigmatic** during the 1930s and 1940s and has remained influential until the present day within illustrative reportage photography, or 'photojournalism'. William Stott, in his classic study (1973) of the emergence of this mode of representation in 1930s' America, makes the point that during that period the idea was forged that the documentary nature of a work gained force from its association with the individual 'real' experience of its author. The authenticity which derives from the sense of 'being there' conveyed a special truth-value to works which could claim they were fashioned from experience.

This form of 'documentary' gained currency in photography with the rise of the mass illustrated magazines in the 1930s, but it should be pointed out that its general form was also evident in other genres such as film and books, where the idea of documentary as objectively grounded but subjectively constructed interpretation was widely used – as in famous examples such as John Grierson's film *Night Mail* (1936) or James Agee's and Walker Evans's book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), or even John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1936). Such ideas have come to infuse documentary photography. As Marianne Fulton has written:

**Photojournalism is intertwined with the major events of the twentieth century. Indeed, the public's judgements about historical and contemporary incidents are often based on the photographs available to show them. It is a powerful medium, capable of focusing attention on the significant issues of our time; its descriptive ability is no less than that of words. As critic A.D. Coleman wrote, 'We are becoming visually sophisticated enough as a culture to realize that photography is not a transcriptive process but a descriptive one'. Despite the increasing awareness that depiction does not embody truth itself, photography remains a principal medium for our understanding of the world. This trust and expectation give special significance to a two-dimensional medium, which in reality can only record the outward appearance of things. That it succeeds in seeming to go beyond the surface is a testament to our acceptance of its verisimilitude and the individual insight of the photographer. As a consequence, just as the Civil War became a shockingly real encounter through the work of Matthew Brady's studio, so photojournalism still provides important access to both feeling and facts.**

**Photojournalists, in the photographic tradition of Brady, are more than spectators in an historical grandstand. Being there is important, being an eyewitness is significant, but the crux of the matter is bearing witness. To**
bears witness is to make known, to confirm, to give testimony to others. The distribution and publication of the pictures make visible the unseen, the unknown and the forgotten.

... in Europe the coming of the smaller camera influenced photographers' style and manner of working, and this in turn had an impact on picture editors' approach to magazine layout. At the same time, the rise of Hitler forced many of the prominent photojournalists to relocate, sending them to France, England and subsequently the United States. The migration would have a profound effect on photojournalism. The European 35mm candid style soon challenged the traditional large format work of American newspapers.

In the United States newly developed printing methods allowed for large, high-quality magazines based on European models. Especially important in the days before television, the magazines, such as Life and Look, became a sort of national newspaper showing labor strife, political figures, and world conflicts. In the 1930s, as in other eras, technology, the picture-making it facilitated, and the world-wide political situation combined to shape our ideas of photojournalism and the world it pictured. One writer was moved to say, 'All hell broke loose in the '30s and photography has never been the same since'. While referring to changes in camera design and specifically to the Leica, the quote aptly encapsulates the flux of events.

... Because photojournalism is of the moment, it presents a sense of continual present, which in turn conditions our expectations of the medium and thereby defines the course of technological experimentation. For example, in the 1930s anticipation that photographs and stories could be published together resulted in the achievement of commercially transmitting photographs over telephone lines or radio waves, bringing the world into everyone's home.

(Fulton, 1988, pp. 106–7)

As Fulton makes clear, the 'documentary' nature of photographic journalism, whether for a newspaper, magazine or book, is essentially interpretative. The representations that the photographer produces are related to his or her personal interpretations of the events and subjects which he or she chooses to place in front of the camera lens. However, they are also assumed to have some 'truth-value' in the sense that they allow the viewer privileged insight into the events they depict.

There is thus a double process of construction at work here. First, the photographer is involved in a process of construction in choosing and framing his or her images so as 'to make known, to confirm, to give testimony to others'. Through the photographer's construction of their existence at a given moment of time and space, subjects (for instance, 'ethnically cleansed' refugees in Bosnia) who have no opportunity to speak directly to people
outside their immediate area are provided with the chance of 'giving
testimony' to the readers of a newspaper or magazine. This occurs through
the 'distribution and publication' of a photographer's pictures, which, as
Fulton argues, makes 'visible the unseen, the unknown and the forgotten'.
But this is, in other words, to pass through a second process of construction,
where the photographs are then selected out from their original ordering and
narrative context, to be placed alongside textual information and reports in a
publication. Their selection, placing and framing, their connection with the
content of the text, their captioning, all provide ample evidence that the
meanings available to the viewer/reader on the basis of a documentary
photograph are a complex representational construction in the sense
discussed in the previous chapter.

The fact that the constructed nature of photographic social documentary
relies upon more than mere visual fact-collection is also implied more
directly in Fulton's contention that 'photojournalism still provides important
access to both feeling and facts' (my emphasis). Thus, those photographers
who define themselves as working within the dominant humanistic
paradigm of documentary reportage would tend to associate themselves with
an early exponent of the genre, the American Lewis Hine, when he said 'I
wanted to show things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things
that had to be appreciated' (quoted in Stott, 1973, p. 21). It is significant that
Hine had been a sociologist before adopting photography, because he
believed that the camera would be a mightier weapon than the pen against
poverty: 'If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera'
(ibid., p. 30).

The socially ameliorative strain running through photographic social
documentary (evident today, for instance, in the work of the Brazilian
photographer Sebastião Salgado, who undertakes lengthy and widely
published projects on global social issues such as famine, manual labour and
migration) reminds us again of the essentially constructionist form of
representation on which it draws. Yet part of the power of such work – its
ability to influence the perceptions of the viewer – derives from the
ambiguity of the photographic representation itself, the notion that the
images so produced are not the product of a human brain but of an
impersonal 'camera eye'. Lewis Hine felt that the camera was 'a powerful tool
for research' because it mechanically re-creates reality as crafts such as
writing or painting never can (quoted in Stott, 1973, p. 31). Another
American photographer working on social documentary in the 1930s,
Margaret Bourke-White, argued that 'with a camera the shutter opens and
opens and the only rays that come in to be registered come directly from the
object in front'. By contrast, writing was clearly less objective to her:
'whatever facts a person writes have to be coloured by his prejudice and bias'
(ibid., pp. 31–2). Though such a binary opposition (photography =
objectivity; writing = bias) is completely unsustainable, Bourke-White's
statement none the less underlines the point that the representations
available through photography are qualitatively different from those available through writing. Photography deals with the images of real people, whereas writing is made of words; the photograph seems closer to lived experience than words ever can be. This tends to privilege the photographic image over the written word for many viewers, and therefore underpins its claim to documentary objectivity. Although few of us now believe that ‘the camera never lies’, the apparent objectivity of the camera-produced image may help to fix the meaning of a given text, by providing it with a representational legitimacy. Thus, the association of the photographer’s interpretative grasp of his or her subject with the ostensibly objective photographic image secures a status for the work of documentary which places it beyond mere opinion.

If such ambiguities are indeed in play when we look at a work of social documentary photography, they derive from two aspects of the process of representation. First, they are inherent in the practice of social documentary photographers who in ‘witnessing’ events on our behalf are by their own accounts typically also concerned with showing us, in Himm’s words, ‘the things that ha[ve] to be corrected [and] the things that ha[ve] to be appreciated’. It is worth pointing out that the idea of the ‘committed photographer’ – a classic contemporary example being Sebastião Salgado – is enshrined as a role-model amongst documentary photographers. Secondly, the ambiguities also derive from the mode of presentation of such images – either in the form of pictures used to illustrate magazine or newspaper articles, or as the material of books. In both cases, there may be more or less textual support for the images – from a detailed essay to simple captions. But the general and implicitly objective nature of the images made by the mechanical process of the ‘camera eye’ confers a truth-value on the documentary idiom. The very act of publishing images which have a self-consciously documentary purpose – You Have Seen Their Faces, An American Exodus, A Night in London, Vietnam Inc., Forbidden Land, La Banlieue de Paris, Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age: the titles of some notable books in this genre – invites the reader to enter the process by which the representation of their subjects is constructed (Calder and Bourke-White, 1937; LANGE and Schuster Taylor, 1939; Brandt, 1938; Jones-Griffiths, 1971; Godwin, 1990; Condras and Doisneau, 1949; Salgado, 1993). The reader engages with the work as a body of images which aim to disclose a deeper truth – about, to take the works cited above, the Depression in American, about street life in 1930s’ London or 1940s’ Paris, about the Vietnam war, about access to the English countryside, about the nature of labour-intensive industry. Far from being a mere recitation of visual facts, social documentary turns out to be a mode of representation deeply coloured by ambiguities, and generally representative of the paradigm in which it has been constructed.
In order to better comprehend the relationship between French humanist photography and its historical context, it will be necessary to take a brief and rather simplistic look at key trends in the history of France from the Front Populaire era (the mid-1930s) to the advent of the Fifth Republic (i.e. about 1960). At the end of this chapter we also glance at France and its contemporary problems, to examine divisions within French society in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a discussion which will provide some insight into the reasons for the widespread nostalgia in more recent times for representations of Frenchness in the 1940s and 1950s.

France in the 1930s was in many ways a deeply conservative society, still shaken by the after-effects of a terrible war (1914–18) and of the rapid economic change which followed it, leading to the crisis of the period from 1932 onwards. Alongside the social malaise of a société bloquée, where many groups and institutions turned in upon themselves to close off external threats or pressures, one also finds numerous attempts to change and to innovate, a classic struggle between tradition and modernity. The introversion of the Third Republic, founded in 1871, is symbolized by its Maginot Line, a great white elephant of a defensive system running along the borders of eastern France, which was to prove irrelevant to modern warfare when put to the test in 1940. The pacifism which characterized the left had the same effect as the nationalism of the right: a refusal to see the dangers mounting outside France.

The Third Republic was dominated by two great social groups, the peasantry and the 'independent' middle classes (artisans, shopkeepers, property-owners, professionals). In 1936, the agricultural population still made up 36 per cent of the workforce, and although its share of the cake was slowly reducing in size, by contrast the monde ouvrier of industry and manufacture remained comparatively small and was widely regarded as a necessary evil rather than as a respectable source of wealth or a key factor in modernization. Successful industrialists were disdained by polite society, whilst the regime within factories was characterized by an oppressive discipline designed to keep the worker firmly in his place. The working class was effectively excluded from the 'republican synthesis' resting on the village and the bourgeoisie. Leon Blum, the leader of the Popular Front government which came to power in 1936, summed up his social policies most aptly as his desire to 'bring into the city those who camp at its gates' - the classe ouvrière or working class. Many of those who made up the industrial workforce were immigrants, another factor reinforcing their exclusion: on the eve of war, fully half of all those who worked in the mining industry came from outside France (mostly from eastern and southern Europe). At the census of 1931, about 7 per cent of the population were registered as foreign. Xenophobia was rampant, fed by a strong nationalist movement. This helped Daladier's government of 1936–9 to turn back the clock after the brief advances of worker interests during the Popular Front (paid holidays, limited social
security). A common fear of the bourgeoisie was that, once they were given paid holidays, the unwashed hordes of the working classes would invade the beaches of 'their' resorts.

Although it contained advanced industries and modern technology, France was a society built on the peasant farm, the small workshop, the family firm. Savings were put aside rather than invested in the business, food was consumed on the farm rather than produced for sale, and many industrial organizations only survived because their access to a captive market in the French colonies meant they were insulated from market forces in the outside world. To make matters worse, France also suffered from a declining birth-rate which meant that its population was reducing in size: 'the Frenchman is getting rarer', as one commentator put it in 1939.

The Vichy regime, which was set up to rule France after the defeat of 1940, sought both to accommodate the occupier and to return the country to an earlier condition. 'La France', argued its president Marshal Pétain, 'est un pays essentiellement agricole' (France is essentially an agricultural nation). Vichy also reinforced and exploited the xenophobia of the French, its anti-Semitic laws enacted in October 1940 owing less to Nazism than to the fear of the foreigner which since the 1930s had afflicted much of French society. By contrast, in the emergent Resistance (and particularly after the German invasion of Russia in 1941), the role of former unionists and the working class generally became determinant. The strike of May–June 1944 in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region made the miners into mythical patriotic heroes. Socialists and communists were key players in the Resistance movement, and prepared the ground for a fundamental change in the social topography of post-war France.

By the Liberation in 1944, France had lost 1,450,000 of its population, of which 600,000 were military and civilian deaths, whilst the remainder were the result of the outflow of foreigners and the decline in births. The population, at 40 million, was now slightly smaller than in 1901. Three-quarters of the country had been damaged by the war, and finding housing was virtually impossible. Feeding the towns was made difficult by the total disorganization of the transport system. Industrial production was at 38 per cent of its level in 1938. Few products were available, whilst the money in circulation had increased during the war: classic conditions for runaway inflation. As prices were controlled, the black markets which had appeared during the occupation simply got larger. Everyday life, difficult enough between 1940 and 1944, became even harder. By the winter of 1945–6, the food ration was lower even than it had been in the height of the occupation. To make matters worse, the épuration (purges) which followed the Liberation made it harder initially to heal the wounds of political and social division which the occupation had opened up in French society. The peasantry was sometimes accused of having profited from the food shortages of the period 1940–4; whilst those who ran shops and businesses frequently found themselves blamed for having amassed fortunes from the shortage of
consumer goods. Perhaps not accidentally, the two social groups which provided the backbone of the Third Republic were those most often accused of having derived advantage from the war.

Profiting from a post-war consensus about the need for radical social change, the Fourth Republic, created in 1946, turned its back on the traditional groups of French society. Reconstruction could no longer depend on the pre-war ruling élites or the resources of a backward rural world. The state itself—in the form of a national plan—was involved in actively directing the modernization process. From 1944 to 1946, a series of important decisions were taken by a government which brought together Gaullists, republicans, communists and socialists: nationalizations to extend the public services (trains, mines, banks, insurance companies, gas, electricity, Renault); the creation of the national plan; social security and family benefits; councils giving workers a say in the running of companies.

Of course, the bourgeoisie and its ruling élites had not been magically erased in 1945. Its gradual reappearance in the post-war world indicated that traditional France coexisted alongside the forces of social renewal. But a new social force now took an important place on the socio-political stage and in the public imagination: the classe ouvrière or working class. Its appearance had been prepared during a long struggle since the beginning of the century which had both defined its identity and its characteristic modes of expression. The strikes of 1936 and 1938, the struggles of the resistance, and the major strikes in the autumn of 1947 and 1948 ‘gave the group a common history and nationalized labour conflicts, so making the state henceforth the essential interlocutor of the working class’ (I.R. from Borne, 1992, p. 24). The classe ouvrière, concentrated in its ‘great industrial bastions’ (coal mines in the north, iron and steelworks and textiles in the east, automobile works in the suburbs of Paris, the great docks at Le Havre, Cherbourg, Marseilles, etc.), became more homogeneous and stable. As Philippe Aries found when studying the industrial suburbs (banlieues) of Paris in the late 1940s, workers were by this stage less inclined than they had been earlier in the century to seek ways out of their class (into shopkeeping or public service for instance) because they were conscious that their position now gave them a security and certain privileges which had not existed before.

The post-war consensus began to dissolve after 1947. with strikes and violent confrontations between workers and the forces of order, which continued into 1949. The trade unions divided into those associated with the socialist party and those with the communist party. The developing cold war outside France played a part in this, and henceforth put the state and the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail – the trade union most closely associated with the French communist party, the PCF) into direct opposition.

Conditions for workers remained very hard until at least the mid-1950s. Inflation continued to be a problem until the end of the decade, constantly depressing wages, and housing was a nightmare, resulting in the growth of
shanty towns (*bidonvilles*) around the great cities. The countryside began to denounce its inhabitants towards the towns as industrialization progressed, and about 1 million male workers left the land between 1946 and 1954, with another 700,000 following them from 1955 to 1962. The pressure on the towns was intensified by the post-war ‘baby-boom’ whereby the French abandoned wholesale the ‘Malthusianism’ which had hitherto characterized their demography. At the Liberation, de Gaulle had called upon the French to produce ‘12 million beautiful babies in the next decade’ as an act of patriotism, and they responded with gusto.

If the period 1945–55 witnessed the rising importance of the *classe ouvrière* within French society, it also saw the emergence of a key struggle within the middle class over the future direction of society and the economy. On the one hand were those who came to be known as ‘Poujadistes’, after Pierre Poujade, the founder of an important movement of shopkeepers, artisans, and those who ran small independent businesses. Poujadism symbolized the defence of all the ‘little people’ threatened by the beginnings of modernization and development in the French economy. Poujade was the spokesman for the old provincial middle classes, who turned towards the past and wanted to restore ‘the real France’: their discourse evoked memories of the 1930s – xenophobia, radicalism, defence of empire. Opposed to them was those who wanted to modernize France, linked most closely to the ideas of Pierre Mendès-France, who described his party as the ‘new left’. The Mendésistes belonged to the new middle classes of salaried employees, students, the ‘enlightened’ neo-bourgeoisie of managers and technicians. They wanted a republic of technocrats and intellectuals, not one of shopkeepers and farmers, and were ready to give up empire in favour of modern industry:

Thus, in the middle of the 1950s, the major social conflict, because it was decisive for the future of French society, was less an opposition between the working class and the bourgeoisie, than at the heart of society, between the middle classes themselves. In the end, and this is the direction of the 1960s, the troops of Pierre Poujade were defeated; the new middle classes triumphed because they carried within them both economic modernity and a style of life which was contemporaneous with this modernity.

(Tr. from Borne, 1992, p. 33)

Behind these changes loomed larger problems for France which came from its colonial empire: defeat in Indo-China, and a bloody independence struggle in Algeria. The crisis which brought de Gaulle back to power in 1958, and created the Fifth Republic, was compounded by internal and external problems. Simplifying greatly, it was the forces of the new France which won out, as the quotation from Borne above underlines. France withdrew from its empire; economic modernization was reinforced.
To reiterate for a moment: at the end of the 1939–45 war, the French people were obliged to confront the consequences of a period which had thrown into question what it meant to be French. Since 1939, France had experienced war, humiliating defeat, occupation, collaboration, resistance, insurrection, and liberation by the invading armies of its erstwhile allies. These events had combined to divide French people amongst themselves, and, before any reconstruction could begin, it seemed as if a ritual ‘cleansing’ of society (épuration) would be necessary.

The purges and reprisals against those known or suspected of collaboration or fraternization were often savage, and continued for some while after the end of the war. There was considerable disorder in the regions, including cases of banditry by gangs of collaborationist thugs who had taken to the hills. The mixed sentiments and violent events of this period explain some of the turmoil surrounding the transition which France underwent in 1944–5 from occupied state to free republic.

This was the context in which, from 1944–5 onwards, the humanist photographers worked to produce images for publication. After the épuration, it may seem hardly surprising that French people rapidly sought ways of creating a new sense of unity, to reconstruct a sense of what it was to be French. The role of the photographer in providing illustrative images to the press may not have been of critical importance, but it certainly played a part in the evolution of new representations of Frenchness which can be seen as having a primarily solidaristic role. These images tended to cluster around certain themes which will be examined more closely below, but the majority contain a central core of symbols which have to do with community and solidarity, and with the sense of happiness or contentment which derives from human association.

According to a number of commentators on popular culture, the immediate post-war period was characterized by the French public’s passion for illustrated magazines. Many new titles emerged (often to disappear as swiftly), but this was the period when magazines such as Paris-Match regularly achieved print runs in the region of 1 million copies per issue.

French people’s fascination with such media seems to have been in large part a response to the agonies and privations of the war years, when France was cut off from the rest of the world and from images about it. Reviewing the type of material contained in these publications indicated that one feature of this folle soif d’images (crazy thirst for pictures), as it has been called, was the prevalence of images of what could be regarded as ‘quintessential Frenchness’. Such images may be seen as providing a means of representing France and the French in an inclusionary way, representations which may have played a part in healing the wounds of a society divided by war, defeat, occupation, collaboration and resistance. The visual approach and social
perspective of humanistic reportage produced the images which such a market demanded.

Moreover, this concentration on the inclusionary, on solidarity and communality, is neither accidental nor epiphenomenal: as we have seen, such values were related closely to widely felt needs in post-war France, as witnessed by General de Gaulle’s speech as head of state in September 1944:

[F]rance needs to ensure that special interests are always obliged to give way to the common good, that the great sources of common wealth may be exploited and managed not for the profit of a few but to the advantage of all, that the coalitions of interest which have weighed so heavily on the conditions of men and even on the policies of the state itself might be abolished once and for all, and that finally each of her sons and daughters might be able to live, to work, to bring up their children in security and dignity.

(tr. from quotation in Borne, 1992, p. 21)

Such sentiments of equality, of communality, are also evident in the widespread nationalizations and comprehensive social legislation enacted in France during the period of post-war consensus which lasted from 1945–7. Women gained the vote for the first time in 1945. There was a comprehensive recentring of social discourse in progress. As the historian Dominique Borne has argued:

Without doubt for the first time in the history of France, [the word ‘worker’] is foregrounded without any reticence ... Exaltation then of the worker, essential producer of wealth; on the morrow of the war political parties and unions of all persuasions called for production to be intensified. By contrast the bourgeoisie is devalued by much of public opinion. The bosses are ‘beyond the pale’. In his book which appeared just after the war, Leon Blum [prime minister of France in the Popular Front government from 1936–8] accuses the bourgeoisie of being responsible for the defeat of 1940 and thereby denounces the bankruptcy of the ruling élites.

(tr. from Borne, 1992, p. 21)

Although the post-war consensus about such values was to hold both left and right in France in a fragile alliance only until 1947, it is easy to see in the social and political discourse of the era that ‘humanism’ is strongly foregrounded. Yet, as many commentators have emphasized, outside perhaps of the communist party, the consensus was founded more on a sentimental than an ideological terrain:

Combat, the journal of Aron, Beurdet and Camus, carried the sub-title ‘From resistance to revolution’, but what revolution? and for which society? A general humanism, the desire for a society more just and
fraternal, consensus on the role of the state, but absence of a more precise vision of the society to be reconstructed. The social future defined itself negatively, against the overcautious bourgeoisie of the Third Republic, against the ruralist society of Pétain.

(Tr. from Borne, 1992, p. 22)

A consensus found more on a sentimental than an ideological terrain, a ‘general humanism, the desire for a society more just and fraternal, consensus on the role of the state, but absence of a more precise vision of the society to be reconstructed’: such could be the general definition of what constitutes the social vision of the photographers whose work we consider here. Their humanism is most evident in the ‘universal’ character of many of their themes: family, community, comradeship, love, childhood, popular pleasures. However, the foregrounding of the classe ouvrière in the post-war consensus meant that the humanist photographers tended to focus their cameras on this group or rather included workers within a slightly less clear-cut social order, the classe populaire, which encompassed social categories normally placed outside the classe ouvrière, such as small shopkeepers and self-employed artisans.

The term classe populaire requires a little explanation, as when literally translated into English as ‘popular class’ it completely loses the meaning it has within a French context. Dictionaries often simply translate it as ‘working class’ which is too limiting, for in French the term evokes the idea of the popular masses, who might include a wide range of economic or occupational groups in addition to manual workers – office workers, teachers, nurses, retired people, even agricultural workers and peasant smallholders, etc. The term has political connotations, too, for there is constantly present the idea that the classe populaire is a potentially revolutionary social grouping. We might in English describe the sorts of people it includes as ‘the common people’, but this is both vaguer and less indicative of the values or culture of the classe populaire, which for French society of the mid-twentieth century was a term quite clearly redolent of a whole range of associations: a revolutionary history (whose most recent outburst had been the Popular Front in 1936 and the Liberation of Paris in 1944); and particular forms of leisure and entertainment which revolved around the bistrot or guinguette, the bal musette, music hall and the lyrical ballads of an Edith Piaf or Maurice Chevalier.

The emphasis on universal humanity, in this context, means the representation of major issues and concerns through their impact on specific individuals who are shown as the agents of their own destinies. It is a reaction against those totalitarian ideologies and impersonal economic forces which tend to treat people as a monolithic and de-individualized mass. Although this approach is most characteristically and dynamically displayed in the magazines and books of the period 1945–60, its roots are clearly visible in the new wave of reportage photography for the mass-market illustrated magazines which had appeared earlier, in the 1930s. This was the period in
which the role of professional editorial photographer was created, and in which the modern image of the photo-journalist pacing the streets, Leica in hand, in search of the ‘decisive moment’, was defined.

The new magazines of the post-war era could not compare in quality with their pre-war counterparts, but in the scope and multiplicity of the subjects which they treated they were far ahead. They also allowed a freer rein to the expression of political values (and particularly a commitment to the classe populaire) on the part of the photographer.

Many of the photographers within the humanistic reportage group shared a left-wing perspective on the social changes underway in post-war France, and some of their photographic projects attest to a more subversive and questioning approach to the ‘new France’. At the same time, those images of joy, pleasure, happiness, romance, which appear so frequently among the work of the group, also support the notion that they shared an essentially optimistic and positive perspective on human nature, and a belief in its ability to surmount hardship and handicap. A more considered view would argue that the approach of the photographers is one in which both an optimism about social reconstruction and a pessimism about its effects seem to be balanced.

All of this was occurring at a time when magazines and other periodicals were experiencing a post-war surge (in Paris alone, some 34 daily papers were being published in the harsh conditions of 1945 as compared to 32 in 1939), and the demand for illustrative photography of the type practised by Doisneau, Ronis and their colleagues was extensive and growing. Yet the magazines were not exclusively concerned with France: indeed there was a fascination with what was going on abroad, particularly in America. Raymond Grosset, director from 1946 of the photographic agency Rapho, recalled:

> In the first two or three years after the war the press was avid for reportages coming from the United States showing American life. There was no interest in views of ruins and of privation – moreover, to do a reportage in France represented an additional cost. Only Regards (a magazine funded by the PCF) was able to send Robert Doisneau to photograph a coal mine in the Nord!

*(Tr. from unpublished interview, 1990)*

Despite many problems with paper and other materials, new magazines continued to appear: many of course soon disappeared or merged with other titles, but this activity supplied a constant flow of work – although it was, recalled Grosset, extremely poorly paid. Indeed, it was this major boost in demand for illustrative photography of human interest which provided the impetus for the development of humanistic photo-journalism: in such conditions, specialized organizations could emerge and flower, whilst the
social role of the photo-journalist became recognized and his or her status elevated. However, this did not necessarily mean that such photographers — as in Doisneau’s or Ronis’s case — could survive simply on low-paid reportage work, and their typical range of activities would also include advertising, portraiture, industrial photography, public relations work and what we would now term ‘travel’ photography. The strict specialization and role-differentiation which were being ushered in by post-war change had not yet begun to bite amongst those who practised photography for a living. Like the typical peasant who farms a scattering of plots with a range of produce, the typical ‘freelance’ reportage photographer working within the humanist paradigm of the 1940s would have hoped to have a variety of clients in different domains, for in that lay security, the spreading of risk over several distinct sources of income.

Turning now to look more closely at the photographs made by the French humanists, we shall examine first an image originating in the period we are concerned with, but which was extremely popular during the period from around 1985 until at least the time when this chapter was being written (1995). There’s a strong likelihood that many readers will have seen it, and that some may have a copy somewhere, as a poster, postcard or as a picture torn from a newspaper or magazine (see Figure 2.1(a)).

FIGURE 2.1(a)
Robert Doisneau.
Le baiser de l’Hôtel de Ville (kiss outside the Town Hall), 1950.
The photograph, which is now known as *Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville* (kiss outside the Town Hall), was made in April 1950 as part of a reportage for *Life* magazine by the French photographer Robert Doisneau (1912–94). As you will see from the spread from the magazine reproduced as Figure 2.1(b), it was initially given a supporting role. At the time, each issue of the magazine was read by perhaps 24 million people (the print-run in 1950 was about 8 million copies per week, and the calculation was that about three people on average looked at each copy); moreover *Life* was distributed throughout the world. As Irving Penn, a young American photographer, pointed out:

The modern photographer stands in awe of the fact that an issue of *Life* magazine will be seen by 24,000,000 people. It is obvious to him that never before in the history of mankind has anyone working in a visual medium been able to communicate so widely. He knows that in our time it is the privilege of the photographer to make the most vital visual record of man's existence. The modern photographer, having ... the urge to communicate widely is inevitably drawn to the medium which offers him the fullest opportunity for this communication. He then works for

*FIGURE 2.1(b)* Pages from *Life* magazine, 12 June 1950, showing the original use of Robert Doisneau's photograph now known as *Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville*, but then captioned *Kiss rapide* by *Life*. As can be seen by its placement within the context of the photo-story (two pictures are not shown here), the photograph was not considered a key image when it was first published.
publication, he has become in fact a journalist ... The modern photographer does not think of photography as an art form or of his photograph as an art object. But very so often in this medium, as in any creative medium, some of the practitioners are artists. In modern photography that which is art is so as the by-product of a serious and useful job, soundly and lovingly done.

(quoted in Davis, 1995, p. 218)

The photographic agency for which Doisneau worked at the time, Raymond Grosset's Rapho, was continually seeking such assignments, which would pay their photographers well during a period when the French magazines could pay very little, even for a cover shot. Many of those made by Doisneau himself for French magazines were lucky if they earned 300 francs at 1990 prices (i.e. about £30/$45) - whilst a story sold to Life could multiply that figure by twenty or thirty times! The idea behind this particular assignment was extremely banal, built on what now seems to be the rather outworn cliché of romance in springtime Paris. At the time, however, such a 'picture-story' would have seemed an amusing and uplifting contrast to certain weightier issues (such as the Cold War; McCarthyism; the developing war in Korea) which would have appeared elsewhere in the magazine. America, like France, Britain and other countries recovering from the war, was going through a post-war marriage and baby-boom, so the story can also be seen as a classic 'post-war reconstruction' story.

The assignment was given to Robert Doisneau, because he had already begun to develop a series of images of les amoureux (people in love). As with a number of the magazine photographs he was making at the time, Doisneau knew that for reasons of common decency he could not risk using images of real couples kissing, and that the only way to carry out such an assignment was to use figurants (models) and to place them in interesting situations using very 'Parisian' settings as backdrops. The models were all young actors, who were paid to play the role of young lovers (some indeed could readily play their parts without acting!). Doisneau took them to various locations in Paris, photographing them in the rue de Rivoli, near the Hôtel de Ville, by the place de la Concorde, on the Metro steps at the Opéra, in a bistrot, at the gare St Lazare, by the Elysée Palace, on Pont Neuf, by a street market in the quartier Latin, on a three-wheeled delivery cycle, on the quais of the Seine, by the Square du Vert Galant, etc. Though the names of many of these locations might not mean a great deal to a non-French reader, they would all have had a certain cultural significance to the many French readers of illustrated magazines, as places which even a person who did not live in Paris might recognize as typically Parisian. As an experienced photographer of the Parisian scene, Doisneau was using his intimate knowledge of city backdrops to make images which had a wider remit, and which were designed to illustrate certain cultural stereotypes about the French: 'in Paris young lovers kiss wherever they want to and nobody seems to care' as Life sub-titled the article. The text continued: 'In other cities bashful couples usually seek out parks or deserted streets for their romancing. But in Paris
vigorously young couples, determined to uphold the municipal honour, can be observed in unabashed courting in even the most crowded parts of the city. The photographs and the text express very clearly a strong representation of one aspect of Frenchness: that French people are very romantic, and are not afraid to demonstrate this aspect of their culture in public (although at the time such behaviour would perhaps have been frowned upon by ordinary French people).

The resulting article and picture series in Life was extremely popular, attracting a good deal of correspondence. But rather more significantly perhaps for our concerns, it was also published a little later in a slightly modified form in the French paper Ce Soir as 'ce reportage qui a fait raver les Américains' ('The article which delighted the American public'). The images were presented as being 'unposed pictures' by Life, a rubric which rather awkwardly leaves open their documentary nature, but which was entirely in keeping with the typical form of representation of such 'human interest' stories at the time. Given its origins, it is remarkable that the apparently documentary form of the story has caused such controversy in the case of one image, Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville, which became the focus of a court case in the 1990s based on a claim that the couple featured had not consented to appearing in the photograph. Whilst this is an image à la sauveur as another prominent French photographer of Doisneau's generation – Henri Cartier-Bresson (b. 1908) – would have called it, the record of a 'decisive moment' as his phrase has come to be rendered in English, it has acquired a notoriety which has gone far beyond its merits as an image.

What is significant for our purposes about Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville is that it exemplifies certain key themes in the representational paradigm of French humanist photography. First and foremost however – and a fact easily forgotten – is that, like many of the rest of the images of the humanists, this is a black-and-white photograph. At the outset it has reduced the complexity of the original scene to shades of grey, a convention which we nevertheless readily accept; for this transposition has become the most readily understood representation of this time and place, to the extent that if we were to see a colour image of the same type of scene it would strike us as odd. Yet the 1950s were not black-and-white: people lived them in colour.

Ostensibly this is an image about everyday life. We can try to 'read' the image as it would have appeared to contemporary viewers. Forget for a moment the fact that Doisneau used models. His reasons for doing so are not that he wanted to fake something, but that he did not want to embarrass people who might be kissing somebody other than their current partner! If he had not had such scruples, Doisneau could have used many of his instantanés (snapshots) of anonymous couples, taken during his walks around Paris, to create the series. But this might have caused problems. So, on the basis of his unposed photographs, he 're-constructed' a new series of photographs of lovers kissing, asking his models to embrace in locations which would evoke Paris, and thus creating a set of representations of this idea of 'young love in Paris' which corresponded with what he had already observed. In this sense, the
photograph is closer to a fashion picture than what is simple-mindedly assumed to be a documentary photograph. But as we have seen, the whole idea of documentary is shot through with ambiguities. This did not, as indicated above, prevent Doisneau being sued shortly before his death in 1994 by a couple who maintained that *Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville* was indeed a documentary image of themselves, taken anonymously in 1950.

The *amoureux* are photographed doing what other Parisians were doing everyday on the streets of the city – as they walk along, they kiss. The backdrop of the photograph is the Hôtel de Ville, a recognizably Parisian landmark: an area where there are many shops patronized by ordinary members of the *classe populaire*.

If we look at the couple kissing, what do we see? Firstly they are in their early twenties, and are dressed quite informally for the time: he has a scarf round his neck, his shirt is open and he does not wear a tie. He has what seems to be a cigarette-end in his free hand, his hair is wind-blown. She has an open cardigan, a blouse and skirt. Neither wears a hat. Certainly they are not well or expensively dressed. (As everybody else seems to be more warmly dressed, they might also be oblivious to the weather.) The fact that they are walking in a busy public place whilst kissing suggests that their passion is a normally acceptable behaviour for such a situation. (Remember that *Life* captioned the whole story with the rubric ‘in Paris young lovers kiss whenever they want to and nobody seems to care’ – which implies that in the USA at that time, such behaviour would have been scandalous or at least remarked upon.) None of the several passers-by seems concerned by it. The couple are evidently of modest means, like the people around them: two men in berets, a classic signifier either of the *classe populaire* or of the peasantry. This tells us we are not in a chic, upper-class or expensive area, but neither are we in a poor one. Although we have no way of deciding the occupation or class background of the subjects, they seem to be ‘ordinary people’ and thus we might easily assume that they too are from the *classe populaire* – he might be a skilled craftsman, she a shop-assistant.

Observe also the position from which the photograph is made: we are evidently viewing this scene from the pavement seats of a café. At our left side is a customer: again a person who seems quite ‘ordinary’ in dress and attitude. He is not particularly aware of the couple either. The angle of the shot – looking slightly upwards – means that we, as viewers, are hardly in a position to dominate its subjects as voyeurs. Indeed, this angle and the turning of the man’s body towards us seem to give us a privileged view of what is going on, as if it were a play being performed for the benefit of the camera. The subjects seem content to display their intimacy to us, thus depriving the photograph of any hint of voyeurism. They are in that sense displaying a sense of complicity with the viewer, who might be assumed therefore to share their social position and outlook on life. (We now know that there was in fact more complicity between photographer and subject than the image offers, but that simply foregrounds the aspect of construction implicit in this as in all modes of representation.)
Within this image, then, are a number of representational elements which place it within the humanistic paradigm, and then register the specificity of time and place. First, the photo is about young love: a universal human emotion. In 1950 in France, young lovers frequently married and had children; so a second and third order of universal human behaviour are implied in the image. Secondly, the setting in which the image is made locates it quite precisely as the first arrondissement of Paris, and tells us that it represents the everyday life of the streets. Thirdly, styles of clothing and the models of cars in the image fix its date fairly well (some time between 1945 and 1955). Fourthly, the cues as to the social groups which the participants belong to also fix the image as concerned with the classe populaire. Fifthly, the image is not exploitative or voyeuristic: the subjects, by their apparent ignorance of passers-by and photographer, indicate that they are complicit with their representation in this way. The photographer has merely grasped a 'decisive moment' from what any passer-by would see, a slice of everyday life from the free spectacle of the street. But the passer-by would typically be a member of the classe populaire him/herself. And finally, the image is a monochrome (black-and-white) representation of the original scene.

These six elements help us to devise a useful categorization of the central features of the humanistic paradigm:

1. **Universalism**: The centrality of 'universalistic' human emotions as subject-matter.
2. **Historicity**: A place-time specificity in the framing (e.g. backgrounding, contextualization) of the image.
3. **Quotidianality**: A concentration on everyday life, the ordinary existence of the classe populaire.
4. **Empathy**: A sense of empathy or complicity with the subject of representation.
5. **Commonality**: The viewpoint of the photographer mirrors that of the classe populaire.
6. **Monochromaticity**: The image is rendered in monochrome.

Each of these elements is discernible in the output of the humanists for the illustrated press, as well as in their personal work (much of which was used for publication, either at the time of production, or later). It will be evident from the discussion so far that the general perspective of humanism represents an inclusive and generally solidaristic representation of Frenchness, anchored in the classe populaire — which, as we have seen, provided the central group in the public imagination in post-war France. We shall now turn to look in greater detail at the themes and subject-matter of humanistic reportage, to explore how each of its themes served to round out the picture of the classe populaire and underpin its centrality to images of France and Frenchness in the post-war era.
The choices of subject-matter by the humanists – and thus the images they made available to the picture agencies and magazines for which they worked, as well as those which formed their personal archives – reflect a number of influences: aesthetic considerations; socio-political interests; cultural linkages to other art forms; and, of course, market forces – the demand for images with particular themes.

If we examine the themes commonly appearing in the work of the humanists, we find a considerable number of images which tend to cluster around ten major areas relating to the wider concerns of French society at this time, and also to the photographers' own personal interests.

These are:

1. *La rue* – the street
2. Children and play
3. The family
4. Love and lovers
5. Paris and its sights
6. *Champs* – homeless and marginal characters
7. *Fêtes populaires* – fairs and celebrations
8. *Bistrot*
9. *Habitation* – housing and housing conditions
10. Work and craft.

Although far from constituting an exhaustive list, these ten themes are of central importance. They constitute a sort of multi-layered grid on which images of this era made by photographers working within the humanist paradigm can readily be placed. You will recall Kuhn argued that in the 'normal' phase of a scientific paradigm's life-history there are certain recognized puzzles that all adherents of the paradigm have to 'solve'. If we liken Kuhn's puzzles in science to the thematic issues handled by photographers, we can see that the prevalence of these themes within the work of the French humanists functions in much the same way. To work as a humanist was to privilege certain subjects, certain themes, over others. They become the 'puzzles' of normal photography in the humanist paradigm, a series of issues which link directly to the context of the time and place where they were made.

The privileging of specific subjects and themes is also directly connected in a broader sense to the world-view or perspective embraced by the photographers. Though he was speaking about the Popular Front period when he said that 'For a short time the French really believed that they could love another. One felt oneself borne along on a wave of warm-heartedness'
(quoted in Galassi, 1987, p. 75), Henri Cartier-Bresson's words could as easily be applied to the immediate post-war period. In 1951, Cartier-Bresson told a journalist that the most important subject for him and his colleagues 'is mankind: man and his life, so brief, so frail, so threatened'. The world-view of the humanists placed great emphasis on the unifying perspective of solidarity, the idea that it is through association and comradeship that French society will be made better, that the bonheur (happiness) which each photographer sought to express in his imagery will be found in striving for the general good rather than for individual advantage. More recently, a key member of the humanist group, Willy Ronis, alluded to the concern with solidarity which appears in his work, influencing his approach and his choice of subjects in the immediate post-war period:

This atmosphere of what I would call feeling, which is strongly imprinted in my photographic choices of the time, it was not simply due to my character and my sensitivity, it was equally present in the ambience of the moment, since we had rediscovered liberty, and we felt very united. There was no longer the fear that existed during the occupation, of not knowing what your neighbour was thinking, for sometimes it was dangerous to speak to your neighbour, because every so often there were denunciations ... and then all of a sudden [after the liberation] there was a free press, the occupation forces were gone, it was over and we were all together again. Naturally other problems came up, but they were not problems resulting from war and occupation. That changed everything.

[In a television interview, 1995]

One image which perhaps illustrates this general perspective on solidarity very aptly is a photograph by Robert Doisneau, made near his home in Montrouge, on the outskirts of Paris, in 1949 (see Figure 2.2). This deals with solidarity in an intriguing way, and it demonstrates that photographs rarely operate as representations simply on one level.

Look at Figure 2.2 and try to answer the following questions:

1. How does this photograph fit within the paradigm of French humanism as set out above? In other words, how does it deal with the six elements of the paradigm?

   **Universality**: The centrality of 'universalistic' human emotions as subject-matter.

   **Historicity**: A place-time specificity in the framing (e.g. backgrounding, contextualization) of the image.

   **Quotidienality**: A concentration on everyday life, the ordinary existence of the classe populaire.

   **Empathy**: A sense of empathy or complicity with the subject of representation.
Commonality: The viewpoint of the photographer mirrors that of the classe populaire.

Monochromaticity: The image is rendered in monochrome.

2 How does Robert Doisneau deal with the concept of solidarity in this photograph?

In the work considered in this chapter, we often find a picture where many themes cross-cut within a single image, and produce a layering of important themes whose representational value increases as each symbolic element is introduced. Such a process is quite evident in Doisneau’s photograph, *La rue du Fort, manifestation pour la paix* (peace demonstration, rue du Fort). Montrouge. 1949.

This photograph was made as part of a reportage assignment Doisneau carried out for the French communist party-financed magazine *Regards*. He was assigned to photograph a demonstration organized by the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail, the union closely linked to the French communist party), which took place at the stade Buffalo (Buffalo Stadium). This sports stadium was not far from the place Jules Ferry where Doisneau was living, whose trees can be seen traversing the image at the top centre of the photograph. Doisneau had gone to the top of a building near the stade Buffalo so that he could photograph the interior of the stadium, filled with demonstrators and their banners, from a high viewpoint, and also have an interesting angle on the procession as it came up the street towards the stadium.

So this is a photograph which is about political events, and also about the area where Doisneau lived, the banlieue (industrial suburbs) of Paris, a subject on which he was also then working to produce a book with a noted populist writer, Blaise Cendrars. Now, at the same time as it is an image about Doisneau’s interests and work, it is also an image which has certain things to say about the visual approaches of humanist photography, in its composition it bears all the landmarks of photographic modernism. This is best seen in the tilted angle of view that Doisneau would have seen in his viewfinder frame. But this composition has not been constructed just to make the image more visually interesting. It has a role to play in suggesting the meaning of the photograph. For the strong diagonal tilt has the effect of emphasizing the solitary worker digging his vegetable plot. Thus, the chacun pour soi (everyone for himself) individualism which Doisneau had observed amongst some of his neighbours in the banlieue, the cultivation of his own little garden, is effectively counterposed to the sense of solidarity communicated by the mass of demonstrators with their banners who stream up the rue du Fort. The photograph was used in the book Doisneau published with Blaise Cendrars later in 1949, *La Banlieue de Paris* (Cendrars and Doisneau, 1949). It was Cendrars who chose the images for this book: he also organized the sequence in which they appeared, and wrote captions for them, although his selection and layout followed principles laid down by Doisneau over a decade or more of work on a personal project about the banlieue and its people (Hamilton, 1995b, pp. 147–78). You can see that Cendrars was fully aware of the political construction of this image, which he captioned ‘They annoy us with their politics...’, for he is careful to point out in his caption that the décentrement (tilting) of the image was used to that end.

How does the photograph fit within the grid of the paradigm of French humanist photography? Let us examine each of the constituent elements in
First, let's consider universality. By using a visual juxtaposition between the group and the individual, Doisneau makes the image turn on the tension between a pair of universals: individual needs and the common good. If we all decide to dig our gardens rather than demonstrating together (acting solidaristically), isn't it unlikely that world peace will be achieved? If we (the French) had acted more solidaristically a few years ago, perhaps we would not have lost a war and suffered occupation? On the other hand, is it not natural that people fear being caught up in the irrationality of the crowd? The presence of the child between the procession and the gardener introduces a further note of ambiguity into the image. World peace is something we dream of for our children's sake, so perhaps the child represents childhood, and stands for the universality of this dilemma, the tension between individualism and solidarity.

Secondly, how does the image invoke historicity? To begin with, this is an image which is about the banlieue of Paris, a setting which is quite precisely conveyed by the buildings and in particular by their heterogeneous nature and the fact that we can see some allotments in the foreground. Although we can't see the people in detail, we can see they are dressed quite uniformly, and this, with the few vehicles which are also in the frame, provides some clues as to its dating: we are quite clearly in the banlieue rouge (left-wing suburbs) of the post-war period.

The photograph deals with quotidiennality in interesting ways. Doisneau's careful tilt of the frame to emphasize the man digging his garden in effect forces a dynamic juxtaposition, contrasting the ordinary everydayness of this activity among the classe populaire with the fact that, occurring alongside it, there is indeed an 'event' – a special day on which there is a peace rally at the stade Buffalo in Montrouge. In this way, he creates a framework of quotidiennality in which the event takes place, and anchors this political event within the everyday life of the classe populaire.

The extent to which Doisneau's empathy is engaged with the subjects of representation seems at first glance to be quite severely mitigated by his choice of a distant and panoramic viewpoint. This could be taken as distancing him from the scene, almost as an impartial observer. But the frame-tilting works against this, for it pushes our attention towards the solitary digger, and suggests that his individualism is aberrant in this context. Moreover, along the wall which separates allotments from street we see a group who are watching the demonstration, who have laid down their spades to participate in it, if only as complicit observers. By framing the picture in this way, Doisneau suggests that he shares the solidaristic values of those who are actively demonstrating and of those who are passive but sympathetic observers.

Does this photography suggest commonality – that the viewpoint of the photographer mirrors that of the classe populaire? I think it does this by offering an inclusive view of a fairly mundane side of the event. The peace rally has not yet assembled in the stadium to hear the addresses of the
invited speakers. So we are seeing what goes on as the event is being prepared. We, as observers via Doisneau's lens, are offered a 'backstage' view. We are shown a slice of the landscape of the banlieue, a sort of cross-section of what goes on there, a scene familiar to any denizen of a small apartment building off the main thoroughfares of the town. Thus, the inclusive viewpoint translates immediately into that of the classe populaire. It is exactly what any member of that group could have seen of the event, would have witnessed as it was prepared.

Lastly, the image is provided to us in black-and-white: monochromaticity supports the other elements to offer us a photograph which is unmistakably rooted in the typical concerns of the French humanist paradigm. Although it is not impossible to envisage a colour rendering of this scene, such a representation would have been highly anomalous at the time, for two reasons. First, the majority of magazines for which Doisneau and his colleagues worked were only printed in black-and-white (occasionally with a second colour, and sometimes using four colours for the front cover) because the cost of colour printing was beyond their means. Secondly, although colour photography was reasonable advanced by 1949 and its principles were well-known to Doisneau, its use for such a subject in the banlieue would have been in marked contrast to its typical uses at the time - highly coloured scenes of major occasions such as a state visit or the wedding of a film-star, postcard views of 'noble' settings (e.g. the great buildings of Paris), or 'charm' photographs for magazine covers (a pretty girl with bright flowers, for instance). Colour photography represented luxury and decoration rather than humanist photo-journalism.

As we have seen by examining La rue du Fort, manifestation pour la paix, Montrouge, 1949, each of the elements characteristic of the paradigm of French humanistic photography also has an important relation to the historical moment. Now we can take the analysis a stage further by examining the central themes explored in the work of the French humanists: as the discussion of key trends in the social development of France from the 1930s to the late 1950s in section 3 has demonstrated, these themes translate directly into the preoccupations of the French during this era, and reflect the social changes which France was experiencing.

4.3 la rue - the street

If any one locale could be said to characterize French humanism it is la rue. This is due in part to the characteristic mode of working of these photographers, the fact that they preferred to make their photographs sur le vif (on the spur of the moment) in the street rather than in the studio. This implies a naturalism in their approach, a stress on the use of available rather than artificial light, the attempt to reproduce the ambience of the scene in the photograph. We should not ignore the fact that the overwhelming majority of their images were made in black-and-white, thus reducing the complexity of the street scene to a more manageable palette of shades of grey.