Yet la rue is not simply a visually interesting place. For the humanists it is the quintessential site *par excellence* where the public life of ordinary people occurs. The street is the site of market life, *of the spectacle gratuit* (free entertainment). It offered what the writer Pierre Mac Orlan (1882–1970) called the ‘fantastique social de la rue’ (social fantastic of the street). His formulation indicates that la rue was itself a space which was the object of much literary and artistic activity, a site whose nature was a sort of construction of debates which go back in France to mid-nineteenth-century writers such as Baudelaire. Such debates are intimately connected to ideas about modernity itself — a modernity first expressed by Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) as a world of the contingent, the transitory, the fleeting, whose quintessential expression is the modern city. And no city is more ‘modern’ than Paris. In the work of photographers such as Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau, Konis and several others working within the humanist paradigm, we see a common tendency to produce pictures which represent the city with all the ambivalence characteristic of modernism, as both a well-oiled machine, and a strange, even magical, place. Even the form of photography in which they engaged — which involved a good deal of wandering about on the streets — could be said to represent the viewpoint of Baudelaire’s modernist *flâneur* (strolling onlooker). For Baudelaire, the natural milieu of the *flâneur* is the ebb and flow of the urban crowd. It is significant that nearly a century later such a viewpoint continued to underpin the approach of the humanists: for instance, when describing his approach to photographing in the street, Robert Doisneau would often cite an old adage that ‘Paris est un théâtre où on paie sa place avec du temps perdu’ (Paris is a theatre where you pay for your seat by wasting time) (see Hamilton, 1995b, p. 249).

Thus, for photographers working in the French humanist paradigm, the street was a terrain which had already been circumscribed by the artistic debates around modernity and modernism. They grew up and learned their photography during a period marked by extensive change in both society and the visual arts. Much of this change turned around the modern city as a site of new approaches to society and culture, as the locus of the new forms of industry and commerce which would transform the world. By the late 1920s, when the modernist ‘new vision’ photography pioneered in Germany and Eastern Europe was beginning to attract attention in France, its influence was subject to modification by other artistic movements challenging the ‘machine-age utopia’ which such work seemed to celebrate. The surrealist movement found in photography a means of exploring the fundamental irrationalism which its members defined as underpinning the apparent order of modern life. Salvador Dali proposed that even the most humble photographic document was a ‘pure creation of the mind’, whilst André Breton used photographic views of Parisian streets without any special visual merit to illustrate his novel *Nadja* of 1928. Surrealists believed in the power of the image to reveal the unconscious. As Louis Aragon put it in his novel *Paysan de Paris* of 1923, ‘[For] each man there awaits ... a particular image capable of annihilating the entire universe’. The belief that photographs could be prized loose of their usual context and employed to challenge
accepted conventions explains the surrealists' fascination with the apparently purely 'documentary' photographs of Eugène Atget (1856–1927). In his pictures of the city streets and their inhabitants, often blurred or ghostlike because of the long exposures his methods and equipment demanded, surrealists could find support for the idea that Paris was a 'dream capital', an 'urban labyrinth of memory and desire':

Even for photographers working at several removes from organized groups like Breton's, surrealist themes and ideas proved inescapable. Especially for those beginning to explore the world outside the studio with unobtrusive handheld cameras, the surrealist model of an urban flâneur, a wanderer open to chance encounters, was crucial. ... [Aragon] believed that if one were attuned to the fleeting gestures, enigmatic objects, and veiled eroticism glimpsed in the street, an unsuspected pattern of affinities—a new kind of poetic knowledge—might be revealed. In the late twenties and early thirties the belief that the camera could snare and fix these moments of instantaneous, lyrical perception had many important adherents, among them Germaine Krull, Eli Lotar, and especially André Kertész and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

(Hambourg and Phillips, 1994, p. 101)

If the surrealists identified the street as a key site for a fantastic world which lay just below the surface of mundane reality, they were not alone: other literary and artistic movements also focused on this space because it was the arena of popular life and culture. One important source of such ideas was the writer Pierre Mac Orlan, who shared with the surrealists an interest in the work of Eugène Atget. Though he only began to write about such work at about the same time as Atget died, Mac Orlan provided a rationale for the primacy of the street in the emergent French humanist paradigm when he put forward the idea that such a photography was especially effective at transmitting 'le fantastique social de la rue':

Known primarily for his stories of outsiders in atmospheric locales (of which Quai des brumes remains the best known), Mac Orlan was no surrealist ... He was, however, perhaps the most perceptive French photographic critic during this period, and he developed what amounted to a modern poetics of the medium. Taking his cue from Léger, who had noted the 'shock of contrast' provided by a modern billboard set in the countryside, Mac Orlan reflected at length on the collision between technological civilization and the remnants of a popular culture rooted in the past. His notion of the 'social fantastic' referred to the frequently bizarre juxtapositions of the archaic and the modern, the human and the inanimate, glancingly encountered each day in the streets of the modern city—as, for example, in Kertész's split-second perception of the uncanny correspondence between anonymous passers-by and the cut-out figures of an advertising display [see Figure 2.3]. This mysterious new dimension of social reality could, according to Mac Orlan, be best
explored by photographers, the most 'lyrical, meticulous witnesses' of the present.

Mac Orlan recognized Eugène Atget as the precursor of this new photographic sensibility, but his Atget bore little resemblance to the Atget claimed by the surrealists. No primitive but 'a man who loved his métier and practised it with mastery'. Mac Orlan's Atget could translate a place or a moment into an image saturated with evocative power – an image that launched its viewer on an 'adventure of interpretation'.

Mac Orlan identified Atget's contemporary heirs as the photographic reporters. For these 'visionaries of the objective', photography was not an art of deliberate meditation but of instinct and immediacy.

(Handoug and Phillips, 1994, pp. 101–2)

Later in the 1930s, writing about Kertész's photographs of Paris, Mac Orlan declared that 'photography is the great expressionist art of our time' (1934). The ideal activity for both photographer and writer as visualized by Mac Orlan was thus to be a flâneur, a casual spectator who observes the 'fantastique social' of the street by taking part in it.

Although Mac Orlan was not a surrealist, his vision of the city has certain links to their point of view. But whilst Breton, Aragon, Max Ernst and others saw the city as a metaphor for the essential irrationality of modern life, Mac Orlan's perspective was more concerned with the senses in which the city street is a stage on which all sorts of amazing stories are enacted. The street offered a continuous spectacle, an unending series of tableaux, immortalized in popular song and in the oral narrative tradition of ordinary Parisians. Mac Orlan believed that the street photography of those working in the French humanist paradigm was particularly effective at capturing moments in this flowing stream of daily life, at producing, as he termed them, 'poems of the street'. It is thus highly significant that Mac Orlan should later (in an unpublished letter to Willy Ronis in 1949) spontaneously describe some of Ronis's photographs of the popular quarter of Belleville-Ménilmontant as 'poems of the street', and be keen to associate himself with a book of photographs which Ronis and he published in 1954 (Ronis and Mac Orlan, 1954; see also Hamilton, 1995a, p. 31).

Now look at the three photographs of la rue shown in Figures 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5. Whilst looking at these images, consider how they fit within the French humanist paradigm, and what they tell us about how the photographers represented the daily life of the classe populaire.
FIGURE 2.3 André Kertész, Dubo, Dubon, Dubonnet, Paris 1934.
FIGURE 2.5 Robert Doisneau, *L'accordéoniste de la rue Mouffetard* (the accordionist of rue Mouffetard), Paris, 1951.
Those three photographs span three decades. The earliest is by André Kertész, a Hungarian photographer who, although strictly speaking not a central member of the French humanist group in the period which concerns us (for he had left Paris for New York by 1936), none the less created a body of work which was highly influential. This photograph also demonstrates how his work encapsulated Mac Orlan’s ideas about the ‘social fantastic’. As the above extract from Hambourg and Phillips points out, this idea:

... referred to the frequently bizarre juxtapositions of the archaic and the modern, the human and the inanimate, glancingly encountered each day in the streets of the modern city – as, for example, in Kertész’s split-second perception of the uncanny correspondence between anonymous passers-by and the cut-out figures of an advertising display. This mysterious new dimension of social reality could, according to Mac Orlan, be best explored by photographers, the most ‘lyrical, meticulous witnesses’ of the present.

(Hambourg and Phillips, 1994, p. 102)

Kertész’s work was widely published in the magazines which the young humanist photographers most admired in the early 1930s: Vu, Act et Medicine, Minotaure. Although the content of this image is more in line with Mac Orlan’s ‘social fantastic’ than it is with humanism, nevertheless the approach which Kertész takes to his subject-matter appears to have greatly influenced his younger French colleagues. But, as the images of Doisneau and Ronis demonstrate, their fascination with the frequently bizarre juxtapositions of the archaic and the modern, the human and the inanimate, glancingly encountered each day in the streets of the modern city, is more humanized than that of Kertész, for whom the formal juxtaposition dominates the imagery. The people and the advertising images are as one; that is the point of the photograph. We don’t really see them as members of a social group at all, so this is not a picture which informs our understanding of the classe populaire.

In Ronis’s Avenue Simon Bolivar, Belleville-Ménilmontant, Paris, 1950, the sense of juxtaposition between each of the elements – archaic and modern, human and inanimate, to adopt the phraseology of Hambourg and Phillips – is quite clear-cut. However, in this case what we see in the image are people who seem less like cardboard cut-outs than they do in Kertész’s photograph. A woman with her child carefully negotiates the steps. A man drives his horse and cart along the street, a shoe-mender converses with his customer, a couple push their child in a pram, a worker mends the traffic-light, a woman walks along with her small child in a push-chair. Even though we see none of these figures in close-up, they all seem to be real human beings, going about their normal activities. They represent the normal life of the street, and they humanize it as a space by their presence. The relationship between the figures hints at an order which is more inclusive; in other words, it suggests
that we are viewing a community. The relative uniformity of the individuals who are pictured also suggests that their social condition is relatively similar. We have no trouble in identifying them as members of the classe populaire. We are in a working-class quarter of Paris, and the photograph represents an organic community.

In Robert Doisneau’s photograph of L’accordéoniste de la rue Mouffetard, Paris, 1951, we are in slightly more enigmatic territory. We see three individuals quite clearly in this photograph: a woman on the right; a young man (art-student?) who is probably sketching just off-centre; and a blind accordionist in the left foreground. The remainder of the dramatic personae have their backs to us, and are obviously absorbed in something obscure. Perhaps to reinforce its obscurity, a no-entry sign looms above their heads. We are definitely in the territory of the social fantastic of the street, of which Mac Orlan was so fond. However, if we explore a little deeper we see this is a photograph which goes beyond bizarre juxtaposition, to tell us something about solidarity and the classe populaire. Apart from the art-student, whose dress and demeanour suggest he is an observer from the outside, all of the figures in this photograph are simply, even modestly, dressed. We are on the corner of a shopping street in Paris’s Latin Quarter: in fact in an area then (1951) quite run-down, where many homeless people or clochards lived. So clearly we are in the habitat of the classe populaire.

The crowd has turned its back on the blind accordionist, more interested in the amusement of the street corner. The woman is gazing out of frame, she has little interest in the accordionist either. He is an object of the gaze of the photographer and of the art-student alone, a man isolated by his disability (blindness) from involvement in the spectacle of the street, yet part of it as a producer of street entertainment. Let’s assume for an instant that he is a mutilé de guerre (someone wounded in the war). By framing his image in this way, is Doisneau suggesting to us (the viewer in 1951) that we have begun to forget about those who made a sacrifice for France? That we are beginning to be all too concerned with our own welfare to the detriment of others? The only person seemingly taking notice of the accordionist wants to appropriate him for his own purposes, as a subject in his drawing.

4.4 Children and play

The centrality of imagery about childhood and play in the post-war era seems readily explicable in the context of post-war reconstruction in France. The fact that 'old France' was so closely associated with 'Malthusianism'—essentially birth control practices which limited the population—placed even greater emphasis on the need to rebuild the society and the nation. The move from being a country in which the population was declining pre-war to one which would need to make up its numbers by reproducing at as rapid a rate as possible involved a transformation in attitudes. From 1945 it was a socially responsible thing to have children: the famille nombreuse (large
family) became an object of veneration rather than moral disapproval. De Gaulle himself had called upon the French to produce ‘12 million beautiful babies’. Under the Third Republic the large family had increasingly come to be seen as either a signifier of bourgeois domesticity and wealth or of immigrant penury; now it was respectable amongst the classe populaire, a duty even. Mothers who had borne more than five children were entitled to receive a medal from the prefect of their département.

The ‘baby boom’ of the post-war era (the birth-rate was at its highest between 1946 and 1950, before a slightly higher peak between 1961 and 1965) was the result of a number of factors: the return of a large proportion of the younger male population either from imprisonment in Germany or from internal exile in the southern half of the country; the lifting of the threat of imprisonment, deportation or worse; the natural sense of optimism which occurs within populations from whom the threat of war has been lifted. In this context, which saw the birth-rate rise from about 630,000 a year before the war to over 800,000 a year from 1945 onwards, and an equivalent decline in infant mortality as well, it would be surprising if the humanist photographers had not widely represented childhood in their work. But another factor is also relevant. Most of the photographers themselves became parents during this period, for, as we have seen earlier, one important aspect of their work was that it drew upon the same sources which nourished their own lives. Often, the photographs which represent childhood are of their own children: as in Willy Ronis’s famous image of his son Vincent launching a model aeroplane in 1952.

FIGURE 2.6 Henri Cartier-Bresson.
Now look at the three photographs on childhood and play shown in Figures 2.6, 2.7 and 2.8. How do these images represent childhood within the context of the *classe populaire*?

Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph of the young Michel Gabriel proudly carrying home his two bottles of wine manages to convey the idea of a new and exuberant generation of French children and the sense of a classe populaire confident of its position in society. Michel is evidently proud that he's been given the responsibility of bringing back the vin de table, then a staple part of the diet of the classe populaire. He is proud perhaps of being photographed. (Was he aware? Cartier-Bresson always tried to make pictures without alerting his subjects.) He is showing off to the girls we can see in the background: for this is not merely an errand, but a game. The street which forms its background is the natural site of such play, the locus for the entertainment of the classe populaire.

In Robert Doisneau's La voiture des enfants, Porte d'Orléans, Paris, 1944, we have another image, this time one in which representations of childhood and
play offer a solidaristic viewpoint. Different age groups – from a boy aged perhaps 14–15 to a pair of infants – happily coexist in their wrecked car, photographed on the wasteland of the zone on the outskirts of the city, not far from Doisneau’s home in Montreoule. This photograph was taken in the late summer of 1944 (probably soon after the Liberation of Paris), but from 1942 onwards the French birth-rate had been steadily growing so the evidence of a latent ‘baby boom’ was mounting even before post-war reconstruction had begun. The signs of waste and destruction in the image are visual plays which put emphasis on the vulnerability and attractiveness of the children by the effect of juxtaposition; but are they there for a purpose which has to do with the imminent end of the war? The framing and selection of the image invokes a universal value – the sanctity of a happy childhood – but this is counterposed and reinforced by the wrecked car and rubble, symbolic of war and conflict. Play is symbolic of freedom, so the photograph has something to say not simply about childhood but also about liberation from an occupying power. (It is fascinating to note that when Doisneau photographed the insurrection which led to the Liberation of Paris in August 1944, some of his photographs concentrated on how Parisian children were reacting to the events by, for instance, camouflaging toy prams to imitate the camouflaged tanks and lorries of the retreating German army.)

In the later photograph (1954) École maternelle, rue de Ménilmontant, Willy Ronis offers an image which must have been very familiar to parents of the era: a line of children, holding hands two by two, are led by their teacher across a school yard. By Ronis’s framing of the image we are immediately drawn into the context, for we observe from a window of the school itself. So this is a privileged image of the nursery school, one usually available only to teachers or pupils. This framing also offers another interpretation of the scene: the idea that these children are being carefully protected and nurtured, because they are the future of France. (It is interesting to note that this photograph was also used for a poster campaign at the time to encourage parents to ensure their children immunized: this campaign, though not explicitly mentioning it, evidently traded on the same idea.)

4.5 The family

For reasons which will be obvious, the emphasis on familial themes has clear linkages to others, particularly those of childhood and play, housing and housing conditions, and love and lovers. But, as we have noted, the immediate post-war period in France was also one in which there were severe strains on the family as a social institution. The return of the 1.7 million prisoners and deportees from Germany from early 1945 onwards created many difficulties, leading to a high rate of divorce and separation. Poor housing conditions must have played a role in this, as did the penury of the period 1945–7. Despite de Gaulle’s exhortations to the French to create ‘beautiful babies’, social surveys indicated that fully one-third of all pregnancies were unwanted. Compared with other developed countries,
birth control remained primitive, and abortion continued on a massive scale (perhaps half a million a year) with probably 20,000 women dying per year as a result of the back-street or self-induced nature of most of these terminations. The first French family planning clinic was not set up until as late as 1961 (Larkin, 1988, p. 180).

The introduction of social welfare reforms by governments of the liberation era (which were added to those instituted just before the war, and by the Vichy regime during it) served to bolster the family, and by 1958 the proportion of working-class family income accounted for by welfare payments (family allowances etc.) amounted to as much as 20–25 per cent as opposed to less than 3 per cent pre-war (Larkin, 1988, p. 206). Although the family as an institution was under some threat in post-war France, the long-run increase in the birth-rate and social welfare measures placed great emphasis, both in public policy and in the popular consciousness, on the centrality of the family as a pillar of reconstruction, as a means of rebuilding France. The tax regime favoured larger families and penalized the single and households without children. Over the period 1943–62, average family size was at its highest in 1950 (when it reached 2.45 persons). Speaking of the post-war change in attitudes to the family, Dominique Borne writes ‘the measures were taken at a moment when a change in climate began to be seen, a rehabilitation of the family: from the constricting social unit which the literature and the theatre of the 1930s had commented upon ironically, it became the household in which the child took a central place and was the source of happiness’ (tr. from Borne, 1992, p. 81).

Although the constitution of 1946 had confirmed that women shared equal rights with men, the older Code Napoléon which regulated marriage and the family was in force until 1965. This ensured that husbands retained formal authority in a marriage:

... until 1970, the man had legal control of the children. Authority was the property of the father, tenderness of the mother. Of course the model was often contradicted by the facts – in the case of divorce children were almost always given to the mother – but, since the birth-rate was so important, the bourgeois family model remained dominant, and the mother’s place was in the household. Moreover, few middle and upper class women worked, and even working-class women were less likely to work than before the war.

(tr. from Borne, 1992, p. 82)

From the war until the 1960s, the family changes: larger than in the 1930s, vigorously encouraged by the state, founded on a couple which relies far more than before on their feelings of affection as the criterion for the choice of partner. However, traditions remain: the foundation of the union is the institution of marriage, the family is virtually the only place of reproduction, family relations are highly hierarchical. Sexuality is still a taboo subject, single mothers (called girl-mothers at the time) are pointed out in the streets.

(tr. from Borne, 1992, p. 82)
What we see therefore in the representations of the family produced by the humanists is a large number of images which deal with these themes, and in large measure reproduce the moral framework emphasized by Borne.

Now look at the four photographs on the family shown in Figures 2.9 to 2.12.

Rather than being given a commentary on the content of these images as in the earlier examples, you should now feel confident enough with this mode of analysis to start providing your own notes on how these images fit with the general thesis that the themes that most concerned the French humanists played a role in offering more inclusive representations of France and Frenchness.

How do these images represent the family in post-war France?

**FIGURE 2.9**
FIGURE 2.10
Robert Doisneau,
La paix du soir (a peaceful evening), Montrouge, 1955.

FIGURE 2.11
Willy Ronis, Le départ du monachier
(a cod-fisherman takes his leave),
Fécamp, 1949.
As Dominique Borne has emphasized, in the 1940s and 1950s, 'the family changes: larger than in the 1930s, vigorously encouraged by the state, founded on a couple which relies for more than before on their feelings of affection as the criterion for the choice of partner. ... Sexuality is still a taboo subject, single mothers [called girl-mothers at the time] are pointed out in the streets' (ibid., p. 82; my emphasis). The centrality of love and affection as the basis of marriage and the family in post-war France is translated into a rich vein of imagery by the humanists.

As you will recall from the detailed analysis of Robert Doisneau's *Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville* in section 4.1, the theme of love and lovers is a central element in the humanists' imagery of post-war France: not merely for internal consumption, but for export abroad as well. The 'poetic realism' which seems to characterize their approach is, as Marie de Thézy points out, closely linked to their 'love of humanity' (de Thézy, 1992, p. 15).

Thus, the young lovers — whose representational role in the context of post-war reconstruction bridges issues about the family and about fraternity generally — have a central part to play in representations of France itself. Within the work of all of the humanist photographers there are many images which deal with a theme which has more than simply romantic associations.

In Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph of a couple embracing in front of a motorcycle (*Paris, 1952*; see Figure 2.13) and Willy Ronis's slightly later image (*Les amoureux de la Bastille* [lovers at the Bastille], 1957; see Figure 2.14), the representation of the lovers confines sexuality to, at best, a kiss or close physical proximity. More overt forms of sexuality were generally speaking simply not represented because of a shared
sense of *modestie* (modesty, discretion) on the part of the photographers. They might however be alluded to, for instance in images of the 'world of the night' (night-clubs, bars, dance-halls, etc.). In Robert Doisneau’s photographs of the tattooed people he found in squalid *bistrots* on the Left Bank or near the Les Halles produce market, for instance, there are examples of erotic imagery as part of the tattoos; but in most cases he ensured that the pictures were cropped so as to exclude them.


d. Paris and its sights

The predominance of Paris and its sights in the imagery of the humanists also has its social and economic overtones. For if Paris and its architecture, its streets and public places, represents France, it was also a place to which large numbers of French people flocked after the war. France experienced a massive exodus from the countryside as those hitherto employed on the land came to the Paris region to work on building sites, in factories and in offices. Between 1946 and 1954, one million male workers left agriculture for the cities, followed by a further 700,000 between 1954 and 1962.

But the role of Paris in the new France contains certain ambiguities, especially in the representations of the humanists. Whilst the capital represented modernism, it also stood for older ideas about the city as a collection of smaller communities, each with its own distinctive character. As de Thézy points out, the humanists were also overwhelmingly attracted to the less salubrious aspects of the city:

They roamed in a Paris still resembling a village, a Paris of people who over the years and the centuries had left their imprint. The friend and walking companion of Brassai, the American writer Henry Miller, expressed himself in these terms: ‘... when I come back in the evening, the rue Tombe-Issou, ugly, morbid, particularly in those parts where it is falling into ruins, is a street from a fairy-story. I hope it will always be like that, that no house is repainted, no window repaired; it is perfect as it is in its obsolescence. It is a small history of French thought, of French feeling, of French taste. From the little two-place urinal (pissoirière) on the crossroads, up to the wash-house, a little higher, it is a pure masterpiece. It has been mended and patched, piecemeal, but it has not changed’...

(tr. from de Thézy, 1992, p. 15)

A classic of this genre is Willy Ronis’s study of Belleville-Ménilmontant in north-east Paris (Ronis and Mac Orlan, 1954). As Ronis has said: ‘I can’t remember if I thought that the quartier would disappear as soon as it did, but so much of Paris was changing in this period (1947–50) that I wanted to record this way of life before it went forever’ (tr. from unpublished interview).

This hilly quartier, with its winding roads, old buildings and frequent dead-ends, had the reputation of being slightly dangerous, on the edge between the civilization of the city and the savagery of the ‘zone’ – the wasteland between Paris and the countryside. In popular mythology it was the home of the Communards of 1870, and of the titi Parisien such as Maurice Chevalier and la même Piaf who were both born there. It was a place where ordinary people went to drink and socialize in the many tiny buvettes (drinking stalls), cafés and bals populaires (small dance halls). It was a vibrant, colourful community, with a solid social base, where many artisans and craftsmen lived, and in which small factories and workshops proliferated.

Ronis could not immediately find a publisher for his work, despite an offer by the writer Pierre Mac Orlan, who wrote to him saying that he must:

... write a study for your great collection on the life of Ménilmontant. I already have the cardinal elements of it in front of me: they are part of what I have always called the social fantastic (fantastique social) which for want of a better term designates a contemporary romanticism. I find this presence of the poetic and mysterious force of everyday life in your poems of the street. You take images of life in a way which is already familiar to me. One detail, of a violent discretion, gives to a spectacle its literary value. Photography is far more a part of literary art than it is of the plastic arts. But that would be the theme of my preface.

(quoted in Hamilton, 1995a, p. 31)
The idea that the photographs of Ronis and other humanists are concerned with a ‘poetic realism’ is aptly expressed by Mac Orlan. But it is also closely connected to the existing demand within the publishing trade for books about Paris and its sights. There was a strong market in France for album books – well-reproduced collections of photographs on a given theme, supplemented with a text usually presented in the form of a preface written by a prominent author. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, several of Ronis’s compatriots had produced such works: Robert Doisneau with Blaise Cendrars in *La Banlieue de Paris* (1949) and *Instantanés de Paris* (1955); Henri Cartier-Bresson with Tériade in *Images à la Sauvette* (1952); Izis with Jean Cocteau in *Paris des Rêves* (1950); Izis with Jacques Prévert in *Grand Bal du Printemps* (1951) and *Charmes de Londres* (1952); and Izis with Colette in *Paradis Terrestre* (1953). There were also several compilations where many of the humanists were represented, such as François Cali’s *Sortilèges de Paris* (1952). All of these publications encapsulated one or other aspect of the poetic realism of humanist photography. Interestingly, they could contain more oblique references to Parisian monuments, as in Willy Ronis’s *Place Vendôme, 1947* (see Figure 2.15) and Robert Doisneau’s *Place de la Bastille, 1947* (see Figure 2.16). The symbolic role of Paris as the representation of a new France in which past and present intermingle thus combined with a demand for touristic images consumed as much if not more in France than abroad (many of the photographic albums of Paris published in this era with images by the humanists have only French texts).
The emphasis on clochards, and on the exotic world of the marginal people of the night which occurs throughout the iconography of the humanists, is explained by the role which such figures play in the construction of an inclusive Frenchness in such imagery.

For the humanists, as Marie de Thézy argues: 'The symbol of [a] rediscovered internal freedom then was the clochard [homeless person or vagrant]. an omnipresent theme in literature and image. Free of all attachments, of all conventions, he is humanity in its purest state' (de Thézy, 1992, p. 15). Rather than marginalizing the clochard, he or she is included within the framework of humanism. However, whilst the clochard certainly figures as a romantic and mysterious figure in the literature of writers like Mac Orlan, Jacques Prévert, Jean Paulhan, and Raymond Queneau, and is celebrated in the artistic theories of avant-garde painters such as Jean Dubuffet, it is evident that such people also played a well-established role in the economy and
society of post-war Paris. Clochards both define the limits of normality and are represented as an integral element of the city's populace. But even more remarkably, they are represented as a microcosmic community.

In the immediate post-war period there was a population of perhaps 5,000 or more clochards in the Maubert and Mouffetard districts of the Left Bank alone (out of the total of perhaps 10,000 or so in Paris), living amongst the derelict hôtels particuliers (private mansions) and ancient apartment buildings of the quartier. There, and across the Seine around Les Halles (the central market until 1968), there existed a whole network of restaurants, bistros and even small hotels which catered for the clochards. They formed a shifting and precarious society and economy — but most interestingly of all, a subculture — which functioned at the heart of the great city. As a noted writer on this world (and a collaborator with several of the humanist photographers), Robert Giraud, puts it: "the clochard does not work, he carries out obligations. Everyone has his fiddle, or his "defence" (his way of getting by), that he will not give up to anyone else, and of which he jealously guards the secret. The clochard gets by during the night and often sleeps during the day wherever he is taken by fatigue, on a bench, a ventilation
grille, even on the pavement or on the paths along the Seine' (quoted in Hamilton, 1995b, p. 190).

These were the people who begged outside the churches of the Latin Quarter, who collected cigarette-ends in the streets and bistros to sell at the “dog-end” market (marché des mégots) in the place Maubert, who were engaged as casual help in the markets, and who foraged in the detritus of the 'stomach of Paris' at Les Halles. Others worked as biffins during the night, ensuring that the rubbish bins were placed out in the street to be collected by the dustmen as they passed through the city, and sifting through the rubbish for anything worth selling which could be carried away in an old pram. They slept rough on the quais of the Seine and under the bridges of Paris, and plied a miserable trade as freaks in cafés and bars, showing their tattoos and deformities to the clientele for a few sous. They were a reserve army of labour for the market traders of Les Halles, unloading the produce delivered each night to the stalls, and clearing up the old cabbages and butchers' scraps which could not be sold. It was taken for granted that those who worked the markets stole some of what they handled, an amount traditionally allowed for by the traders who called it la redresse.
4.9 **Fêtes populaires -- fairs and celebrations**

In the huge body of work produced by the humanists, there are many images which depict the celebration of solidaristic community, and this -- apart from the extremely photogenic nature of such events -- goes a long way to explain the prevalence of *fêtes populaires* (fairs and celebrations) in the corpus. Certain moments were privileged: the common practice of holding street parties for the 14 July celebrations can be seen as expressive of both local and national solidarities. Bastille Day of course must be considered as being an important celebration of the French state as well as an occasion for simple enjoyment. In the aftermath of war, such festivities had a representational value of great significance. But they were also celebrations of a more traditional and communitarian style of life. In the contact sheet of twelve images taken from Robert Doisneau’s photographs of the 14 July celebrations in the Latin Quarter, 1949 (reproduced in Figure 2.19), we get a glimpse of how the humanists approached such themes. It seems clear that Doisneau wanted to record the communal aspects of the street party: for the images deal with various aspects of the idea that popular entertainment involved everybody, young and old, and that the celebrations spill over from public into private space. Perhaps it is significant that the band is set up in front of the ‘Maison de la Famille’ -- it is certainly no accident that Doisneau ensured that his photograph contained this juxtaposition of building and people.

It is also probable that humanist photographers fastened on the *fêtes populaires* because they were the symbol of a more traditional and solidaristic society, one which was tied to a particular place and time, integrated within the pattern of work (the *fêtes populaires* generally being celebrations of key moments in the agricultural cycle) and within a restricted framework of everyday life. In the immediate post-war period, the rural connections of the *fêtes* were in process of being severed, and the local events, such as that shown by Robert Doisneau in his *Course de valise* (suitcase race) at Athis-Mons (see Figure 2.20), made in the outer suburbs of Paris in 1945, offer an image of urbanized festival. The ritualistic aspects of the festival are already in process of being redefined: for, as the 1940s and 1950s progressed, they began to give way to the development of leisure, in itself a largely urban construction. Leisure is the opposite of work: it is less integrated within the framework of everyday life, being rather a symbol of another life. As life for ordinary French people became more privatized, the tendency for people to go out into the street to celebrate at *fêtes populaires* became less marked. The wider diffusion of the four great symbols of privatized life -- the car, the television, the refrigerator and the washing machine -- began to occur on a major scale towards the end of the 1950s. Until that time, few households had access to the goods which helped to create a "civilization of leisure", as one famous book of the early 1960s put it (Dumazedier, 1962).

Thus, the emphasis on popular celebrations in the work of the humanists attests to a desire on their part to represent the life of the *classe populaire* as
FIGURE 2.19  Robert Doisneau, Contact sheet showing twelve photographs of the 14 July celebrations, Latin Quarter, 1949.
solidaristic, and this also partly explains their great fascination with sideshows and fairgrounds. But the fact that high culture was contemptuous of popular entertainment was also a motivating force. Humanism contained subversive notions and its imagery often included pictures which cocked a snook at authority. As the forains (side-show people) represented a marginal and alternative popular subculture, many humanists were drawn to photograph them out of a desire to record this aspect of life. Until the late 1950s, touring fairs would regularly visit most of the quartiers populaires of Paris, whilst banquistes (itinerant street performers) were a common everyday sight – as in Henri Cartier-Bresson’s Fire-eater, place de la Bastille, 1952 (see Figure 2.21). Whilst such material is evidently highly photogenic, it also strongly evokes the solidaristic aspects of popular entertainment, an element also found in the concentration of imagery around the bistrot.
FIGURE 2.21 Henri Cartier-Bresson, Fire-eater, place de la Bastille, 1952.
4.10 **Bistrots**

In the post-war era, the *bistrot* (a sort of cross between café, bar and pub) was a critical locus of community life, a public space in which many solidaristic activities could take place. Within an urban context, the *bistrot* formed a central element in the functioning of local communities. It was the place where political groups could meet, as well as the headquarters of a local sports club such as a football team, or the regular venue for a card-school, as in Willy Ronis's *Café-guinguette, rue des Cascades, Belleville, 1949* [see Figure 2.22]. Its omnipresence in the photographs of the humanists thus attests to its centrality in the life of the popular community. Indeed, there was an entire literature focused on *la vie du bistrot* (*bistrot* life), which was held to be almost a cultural form in its own right – the place where the oral narrative tradition had its securest moorings, the space where people met as friends, as lovers, for business, or to exercise their profession (writers like Sartre, de Beauvoir, Queneau, for instance, worked daily at a café table).

Marie de Thézy argues that the centrality of the *bistrot* in the humanist paradigm derives from its universality: ‘Accessible to everyone, the *bistrots* were the meeting place of the people of the street. Even the most scruffy wanderer could always experience “the inexpressibly simple pleasure of entering a familiar café ... of shaking hands ... of talking about his life”’ (de Thézy, 1992, p. 16). Robert Doisneau’s *Un café d’été* (a summer café), Arcueil, 1945 (see Figure 2.23) perfectly expresses this common thread in the humanist corpus.

**FIGURE 2.22** Willy Ronis. *Café-guinguette, rue des Cascades, Belleville, 1949.*
FIGURE 2.23
Robert Doisneau,
*Un café d’été (a summer café)*,
Arcueil, 1945.

FIGURE 2.24
Robert Doisneau,
*Restaurant*.
The *bistrot* was also a space where itinerant entertainers – from accordionists to those who exhibited their tattoos and deformities – could ply their trade. This might be a simple eating-place, as shown in Robert Doisneau's 1952 image *Hesruant tiquetonne*, in the Les Halles produce market area, where the diners are entertained by Pietrette d'Orient and Madame Berthe (see Figure 2.24). As a site of popular entertainment, the *bistrot* offered a place where its enjoyment was communal rather than privatized. It is thus a symbolic locus of sociability – the tendency to associate and communicate with others which cements society together.

### 4.1 | Habitations – housing and housing conditions

Post-war France had to rebuild itself: all of its new families had to be housed, industry had to be renovated, the needs of an expanding society had to be met. The *crise du logement* (housing crisis) which afflicted almost everyone in France was exacerbated by the rural exodus and by the need to renovate the industrial base. After energy, transport, and steelmaking, housing was only fourth in the list of priorities of the liberation governments. Shanty towns (*bidonvilles*) grew up around the great cities as the pace of rebuilding could not keep up with the demand for housing, particularly for the rural people and the immigrants pulled in by France's great need for industrial and service workers. Such themes are clearly evident in Jean-Philippe Charbonnier's *Les mal logés* (bad housing conditions), La Cornueve, 1952 (see Figure 2.25); and in Willy Ronis's *Bidonville* (shanty town), Nanterre, 1958 (see Figure 2.26). It was not until 1953, eight years after the end of hostilities, that the construction industry managed to achieve 100,000 new homes per annum. During the decade which followed the war, the housing deficit amounted to 1.5 million homes – in other words, about 4.5 million people at any one time lacked a roof over their head (Sorlin, 1971, p. 65).

The solution to this problem in many cities, and particularly in and around Paris, was the creation of *grands ensembles* – vast apartment blocks of social housing built on greenfield sites – well illustrated by Willy Ronis's *HLM* (social housing), Porte de Vanves, Paris, 1957 (see Figure 2.27). Although this helped solve the housing problem in the medium term, in the longer term it has created major problems in that these old estates are now the locales for many contemporary social problems.

In the context of the housing problems of the reconstruction era, the emphasis on *habitations* in the photography of the humanists demonstrates how much their work mirrors the social issues of the time. Perhaps not surprisingly in a body of work which sought to represent the main features of everyday life, the use of domestic space is a theme to which these photographers often returned. As in all their work, the reasons for this depend not simply on the nature of the assignments which they received but also on their own preferences.
FIGURE 2.25
Jean-Philippe Charbonnier.
*Les mal logés* (bad housing conditions), La Corneuve, 1952.

4.12 Work and craft

The period 1945–55 witnessed the rising importance of the working class or classe ouvrière within French society. As we have seen, the crisis of reconstruction put great strains on a productive apparatus which relied upon the labour of the workers, and it is therefore not accidental that miners, industrial workers and all those who laboured with their hands should be represented in a generally positive light, and the Frenchness of their labour accentuated, by the humanists. The photographers identified closely with the classe populaire, and in their work their identification is often focused quite explicitly on the worker – as seen particularly well in Jean-Philippe Charbonnier's Miner being washed by his wife, Lens, 1954 (see Figure 2.28).

As you will recall from section 3, in post-war France a new social force had effectively taken on an important place on the socio-political stage and in the public imagination: the classe ouvrière. 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' (ib. 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.

Photographers such as Robert Doisneau and Willy Ronis, who worked regularly for the communist press, naturally produced a considerable body of work on 'social' themes – work conditions, strikes, welfare issues. This is well illustrated in two photographs by Ronis: *Artisan, Belleville-Ménilmontant*, 1948 (see Figure 2.29); and the more overtly 'political' *Délégué syndical* (shop-steward), strike at Charpentiers de Paris, Paris, 1950 (see Figure 2.30). References to the heroism of physical labour are common in the corpus, of which Henri Cartier-Bresson's *Un fort des Halles* (porter of Les Halles market), 1952 (see Figure 2.31), is a good example. These representations of workers dealt with key issues about the working class during the post-war era in France.
FIGURE 2.29
Willy Ronis,
*Artisan, Belleville-Ménilmontant*,
1948.

FIGURE 2.30
Willy Ronis,
*Délégue syndical* (shop-steward),
5 The end of humanism

The photography which we have examined here ceased to play so important a role in the reintegration of French society from the early 1950s onwards. The apogee of such work really occurred in about 1955, for by the end of the decade new interests and other internal divisions within France (and external threats from the loss of empire) had begun to rend the fragile consensus of the immediate post-war era. In addition, the increasing privatization of French society which followed modernization and economic development progressively eroded the solidaristic base of urban communities, so that everyday life itself was increasingly conducted not in public space but behind closed doors. We have to add to these social changes factors which reflect aesthetic shifts, particularly in the use of the photographic image on the printed page.

There was an increasing belief (amongst editors, graphic artists and photographers), evident from at least the early 1950s, that the visual images created by photography constituted a new and distinctive language. A prominent book editor, François Cali, argued that ‘A hundred good photographs explain immediately, infinitely better than a hundred pages of text, certain aspects of the world, certain current problems’ (quoted in de Thézy, 1992, p. 52). In the leading photographic circles of the time, it was increasingly thought that the image itself could be freed from the burden of documentary representation linked to a text or at least a caption, and thus take on any number of forms. The idea that the picture should speak for itself — become in effect a universal language — was very persuasive, particularly to photographers who thus saw their profession elevated by its autonomy from the printed word.

In France, the diffusion of ideas about photography as a universal language was encouraged by a number of events during the 1950s, including a major exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1954, the Biennale Photo-Cinéma, launched by the magazine Photo-Monde, and organized by Maximilien Vox. To accompany this exhibition, the magazine published an album entitled Cent photos sans paroles (One hundred photos without words). Later, a similar publication to mark the tenth anniversary of the United Nations was produced with 84 photographs of people from 36 countries, presented completely un-captioned. A major conference on the role of the image in contemporary culture was held at UNESCO, and several initiatives to further the universalizing tendency of photography were undertaken. They fell on largely fallow ground, yet the conceptions of photography which had given rise to them became established principles by the early 1960s. It is important to note that many of the photographs made by Ronis, Doisneau and their confères had a contemporary resonance as universal expressions of humanistic themes.

These ideas about photography as a universal language were not confined to France, for on the other side of the Atlantic similar propositions were taking
form. The creation of the humanist-inspired Magnum Photos agency in Paris and New York in 1947 (its founders included Henri Cartier-Bresson) may be seen as an integral part of this process, for the ambitious projects which its founders hatched – which had names such as 'People are people the world over', 'Generation X', etc. – led to the hugely popular exhibition The Family of Man which was mounted in The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in 1955. Magnum's approach was founded on the idea that its members could work on integrated story ideas which bespoke a universal humanity, and that their images could be sold to a mass magazine audience which, if not yet global, was at least very numerous (in its heyday in the late 1940s, each issue of Life was seen by 24 million people). Edward Steichen, director of the department of photography at MOMA, had long been fascinated by the idea of photography as a universal language and a tool of mass communication (Davis, 1995, p. 221). This democratic and inclusive notion of photography also informed the aesthetic of Willy Ronis, who had begun to attract attention from America as early as 1947, when Louis Stettner of the left-wing Photo League in New York came to see him with the view of mounting an exhibition of French photography. It is likely that his initiative may have influenced Steichen's decision to mount a major show in The Museum of Modern Art in late 1951/early 1952, called Five French Photographers, in which Willy Ronis exhibited 25 of his prints in a 160-print exhibition which also featured the work of Brassai, Doisneau, Cartier-Bresson and Izis. In his introductory text panel, Steichen emphasized the humanistic universality of the images on show:

There is a deep undercurrent of unity in their photography with its forthright emphasis on the human aspect of things, moments and places portrayed. Here is tender simplicity, sly humour, warm earthiness, the 'everydayness' of the familiar and the convincing aliveness found only in the best of the world's folk arts.

It offers a new sphere of influence and inspiration in photography, particularly to amateur photographers. It supplies a threshold leading to the first universal folk art which could be created by the millions of amateurs practising photography throughout the world.

(Archives of the Photography Department, Museum of Modern Art, New York)

In his later show, The Family of Man (seen by 9 million people throughout the world from 1955 onwards), Steichen developed a form of presentation of the photographic image in which it was completely de-contextualized. Editorial photographs whose role had been to supply an image to support a written account were presented in a form which effectively denied this.

As the 1950s drew to an end and magazine photography became more specialized, a younger generation of photographers with a new and more aggressive perspective began to make their presence felt in the editorial field,
and the humanist aesthetic itself lost impetus, in France as in the rest of the world. William Klein's close-up photographs of street scenes in New York are only one example of the way in which the humanist paradigm was contested by new forms of representation (see Figure 2.32).

Television began to compete more directly with illustrated magazines for the attention of the reader. The celebration of daily life and of Frenchness for its own sake now seemed increasingly outmoded, and were no longer inclusive categories within which the spectator could find him or herself securely located. Traditional celebrations of the life of the urban community began to disappear: the 14 July as a popular street celebration submitting to the increasing practice of the French to divide themselves into those who took the whole of July as a holiday and those who took the whole of August. The day was still celebrated, but elsewhere – in seaside resorts.

Figure 2.32: William Klein, *Gun*, New York, 1954–5.

Robert Doisneau's files contain photographs of a 14 July street party somewhere in Paris for nearly every year from 1945 until 1958. After that, the practice became more and more difficult to find, and perhaps less and less interesting to photograph.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have continued the discussion of representation generally, by taking a close look at how documentary photography operates in relation to images of society. We have examined a particular set of photographic representations of society: those concerned with France in the era of post-war reconstruction from the Liberation of Paris in 1944 until the end of the 1950s. The argument advanced here has been that these representations played a particular role. They helped to offer an image of French society and a redefinition of ‘Frenchness’, of what it meant to have a French identity, to a people which had suffered the agonies and divisions of war, invasion, occupation and collaboration. These experiences had fractured or even dishonoured prevailing conceptions of French identity, by calling into
question certain consensual and central notions which had underpinned the Third Republic. As we have seen, in the typical representations of Frenchness which appear in the work of humanist photographers, a new consensus about French society and about what it means to have a French identity is in the process of being forged. It is built around certain key themes or ‘sites’ – la rue (the street); children and play; the family; love and lovers; Paris and its sights; clochers (homeless and marginal characters); fêtes populaires (fairs and celebrations); bistros; habitations (housing and housing conditions); work and craft. Representations of these themes served to reconstruct Frenchness as a unifying identity in a period of major social, political, economic and cultural change.

We have examined how humanism constituted the dominant representational paradigm of illustrative reportage photography in France during the era we have explored. The concept of dominant representational paradigm is taken from the work of T.S. Kuhn, and is employed as an alternative to the discursive theory of knowledge and power advanced by Michel Foucault because it allows us to better explain the links between the ideas and images of the photographers working within the humanist paradigm and the social and cultural contexts in which they worked.

We have also addressed questions about the ‘truth-value’ of the ‘documentary’ images produced by those working within the paradigm, for the idea that groups of photographic works can be understood in this way also implies that they offer a certain vision of the world. We considered two models of the truth-claims of documentary photography: documentary as objective representation and documentary as subjective interpretation. In the first, which developed during the nineteenth century, photography was readily perceived as an inherently ‘objective’ mode of representation, for as one view puts it ‘the photograph has special value as evidence or proof’. We believe it because we believe our eyes. This model was shown to be 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’.

Contrasted with this approach to documentary as objective representation – in which the documentary nature of the image as a true reflection of reality is assured by the very mechanical–physical–chemical processes which define the medium of photography – is that of the idea of documentary as subjective interpretation. It is this notion on which the ‘documentary’ claims of photographic journalism depend. In essence, and whether produced for a newspaper, magazine or book, such work derives its claim to be ‘truthful’ by being fundamentally 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. They are validated by the fact that the photographer experienced or ‘witnessed’ the events or sentiments which they portray, and thus lay claim to a wider truth. They are not merely records, for 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. It is in this sense that we can begin to see how the paradigm of French humanist photography may be understood within the constructionist model of representation.

It is important to consider how the paradigm of French humanist photography contributed to the construction of 'Frenchness' as an inclusive identity during the period of post-war reconstruction. In this context we cannot, however, neatly separate the construction of national identity from how it was represented. If the humanists fastened on to certain themes to construct their images of Frenchness, this was – as has been argued – because they had certain ideas about what being French meant, and also because those ideas had some symmetry with political and ethical ideals, and with visually observable behaviour. Other 'models' of Frenchness might have been possible. What we get from the corpus of humanist representations is a particular composite image of national identity, and, as I have argued, this was provided with *representational legitimacy* by the apparent objectivity of the camera-produced imaged. Humanism offers a composite representation of essential Frenchness in the 1940s and 1950s, but it is neither true nor exclusive in any fundamental sense – a point recognized by Robert Doisneau who once described himself as a *faux témoin* (false witness).

The fact that subjective interpretation is so tightly woven into the work helps to explain some of its appeal today. For we cannot ignore the fact that such representations have, since the mid-1960s, proven to be extremely popular with a new audience. If we take one photographer as an example, we know that Robert Doisneau's photograph *Le baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville* (considered earlier) has sold over half a million copies as a poster in its official form since 1985. Illegally copied versions – which have been widely sold throughout the world – take this figure into the millions. A 1992 survey found that 31 per cent of the French public know about Robert Doisneau. But Doisneau is only the tip of the iceberg; all of his humanist contemporaries experienced a similar phenomenon of 'rediscovery' during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It seems as if the French (and the rest of the world) found in such images something exciting and attractive. What?

Obviously I cannot provide an exhaustive explanation of the nostalgia for French humanist representations of Frenchness of the era 1945–1960 in the conclusion to this chapter, but it is possible to suggest a number of factors which might go some way towards explaining their appeal. First, the fact that French society began to experience mounting problems of urban decay and social disorder in the 1980s, linked to areas where there was a high concentration of people of North African origin, helped to increase support for nationalist parties. Jean-Marie Le Pen's *Front National* acquired a voter base of perhaps 15–20 per cent of the electorate (in opinion polls) although its success in elections was less pronounced. In such a context, ideas about French 'identity' became contested and volatile. In the black-and-white
images of French life in the 1940s and 1950s, such issues seem unproblematic, easily resolved.

Secondly, the decline in the 1970s and early 1980s of manual labour and the disappearance of the industrial heartlands — a traumatic experience for miners, shipbuilders, steelworkers, etc. — swept away a defining feature of national life in the post-war era. It broke the consensus that French society was founded on the labour of the classe ouvrière. It may not be coincidental that much of Le Pen’s support came from workers who had hitherto supported the French communist party. Here again, the images of French humanism tend to present the classe ouvrière as heroic and solidaristic. Nostalgia for such photographs may express hopes for a return to a time when work and economic conditions were more secure.

Thirdly, the facts of urbanization and privatization, and the omnipresence of the car have led to a situation where the street has become increasingly represented as a place of danger — for children and adults alike. In the imagery of the humanists, life takes place in the public spaces of the city. It is not privatized, and the car hardly appears as a threat.

We could easily multiply the examples in which the imagery of the humanists provides an apparent contrast with contemporary life. What is most evident in the contrasts, however, is that life ‘then’ appears to be a ‘golden age’: hard, but rewarding, not bereft of conflicts and disputes, but warm and communal — a sense in which everybody shared the hardships of the era, in which social, cultural and ethnic differences were levelled. The humanist paradigm appears, then, to offer an ‘ideal’ image of French identity, from which all contemporary problems have been miraculously erased: as in L.P. Hartley’s famous view that ‘The past is another country, they do things differently there’.

From this point it is but a small step to the conclusion that, far from being a mere recitation of visual facts, social documentary photography turns out to be a mode of representation deeply coloured by ambiguities, and generally representative of the paradigm in which it has been constructed. Our consideration of the post-war history of France, and in particular of the atmosphere of the country in the period immediately following the liberation, shows quite clearly how the paradigm of French humanist photography developed and diffused a certain view of France and of French identity in the period 1945–60 — a view which has subsequently re-emerged to play another role in the 1980s and 1990s.