IMPOSSIBLE CITY

Also by Simon Kuper

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IMPOSSIBLE CITY

Paris in the Twenty-First Century

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To Pamela – forever my companion
on our Parisian journey.

And to Leila, Joey and Leo – our guides.

I wouldn't have done it without you.

Contents

The Real Paris

What follows is my personal view of Paris, complete with most of my blind spots. I'm a well-off white man, a native English-speaker, writing from inside dinky Instagrammable Paris – the city of just over two million people. I'm separated by the Périphérique ring road from the nearly ten million who live in the suburbs, or *banlieues*.

Over my twenty-plus years in the city, I've encountered hundreds of Parisians and suburbanites of all varieties. Even so, most of the people in these pages are men. A woman, or anyone else but me, would have written a different book.

This is my view of Paris in the first quarter of this century. The past is always present here, but in this book it features only as the population of ghosts who walk by the sides of us current Parisians, and who passed on the city that we are briefly allowed to inhabit.

Impossible City is the story of a naïve explorer entering an alien society, gradually penetrating it and getting to understand it, a little. I've experienced Paris as a journalist, but mostly as a human being. I have grown middle-aged here, seen my wife through life-threatening cancer, schlepped my children to innumerable football matches in

the *banlieues* on freezing weekend mornings, and – within one ten-month period – lived through two large-scale terrorist attacks on our neighbourhood. I've interviewed politicians, writers, footballers and ordinary Parisians, and eaten thousands of restaurant lunches. I've made lifelong friends and become a cantankerous Parisian myself, swearing at cars as I shoot through red lights on my bicycle.

And I've watched Paris change. This century, it has globalised, gentrified, pedestrianised, and been shocked into realising its role as the crucible of civilisational conflict: it's the most ethnically mixed city on the European continent. Sometimes it's a multicultural paradise, and usually it isn't. I've watched the Parisian elite slowly realise that it, too, needs to change. I hope this book is relevant to cities beyond Paris, because the issues I describe – from biking to house prices and segregation – are global.

I've become a French citizen, and expect to be buried here (probably in the suburbs, since the posh cemeteries in Paris are above my station). But I don't pretend to have shed my Angloness like an unfashionable suit and become effortlessly Parisian. In fact, I argue that for most Parisians, the performance of Parisianness never becomes effortless.

This is the book of an outsider looking in on a city that is itself full of outsiders. There's a common belief that there's an unchanging 'real Paris', and that if only you could wish away all the tourists and foreigners here, you'd find it, probably in the form of a Gauloise-smoking cheesemonger who has had the same market stall since 1978. That person does exist. But today's 'real Paris' is surprisingly international. During the pandemic, in periods when there were practically no visitors, I still heard English,

German, Italian and more on the streets every day. These 'foreigners' are Parisians too. And many of their French neighbours banging on their walls complaining about noise are also international people – often with parents who came from somewhere else entirely.

This is the Paris that I've got to know, from croissants to terrorists. I think it's real. I hope you enjoy it. I have, most of the time.

1

The Accidental Parisian

One day around the start of the century I was walking down a street in Paris, thinking, 'I'd like to live on this street'. Then a man on an upper storey threw open his front window and stepped out onto his wrought-iron balcony. I thought, 'He lives on this street!' Then he called out to a friend on the pavement, in English, in a British accent, and I thought, 'I could live on this street'.

In those days I was living in London in a shared slum above an off-licence. When the new landlord threatened to tear it down, I was faced with the great London question: do I spend a fortune I don't have on a grotty little flat in the suburbs and devote my life to paying off the mortgage?

Around that time, over a cheap Chinese meal, an old friend turned investment banker had let slip that he earned 'a seven-figure package'. I'd felt deflated for days: this was the kind of person I was competing with to obtain my little bit of London. I was then about thirty, and one evening I went to a dinner party with some Londoners who were about forty. They spent the evening talking about renovating their kitchens. I'm as philistine as the next person, but I did leave thinking, 'I don't want to become them'.

I wanted a bit more of the eternal in my life, and a bit less of the material. In fact, my ambitions were simple: to have a nice flat in the centre of a great city and make my living writing. But I was starting to accept that this was unrealistic.

Then a cousin mentioned that his holiday apartment in Paris had cost him about £30,000. 'You're joking,' I said. In London even in those days, £30,000 would just about get you a toilet.

I sensed the glimmerings of a plan. 'But that was three years ago,' he cautioned. 'Now you'd pay double.' A couple of days later, I was on the Eurostar train to Gare du Nord station. I stayed in my cousin's flat on the then unfashionable eastern edge of Paris, near the Père-Lachaise cemetery where Oscar Wilde and Jim Morrison are buried. It was a nice neighbourhood, but the euro was then roughly on a par with the Iraqi dinar, and I soon realised I could afford something more central. I strayed into the 11th arrondissement, just east of the centre, then zeroed in on the Faubourg-St Antoine, the neighbourhood of the artisans who in 1789 had trekked a mile down the road to storm the Bastille prison.

Within days I had paid about £60,000 for a flat in one of those instantly recognisable Parisian buildings. It was made of cream-coloured stone, with wrought-iron balconies and a slate-blue roof. My flat was on the fourth floor of six – the building height settled on by the nineteenth-century town planner Baron Haussmann as the ideal compromise between urban density and human scale. The little street had a bakery, a butcher's, and several cafés and restaurants.

Looking back, I had crept under the wire at the last moment before the great cities closed down to us journalists. I had also performed a version of the Wellington Manoeuvre, named for the Duke of Wellington, who in 1814, straight after Napoleon was exiled to Elba, arrived in Paris as British ambassador and got a bargain on the emperor's sister Pauline's mansion. Wellington's place is still the British embassy today, and the flat I bought became my work-flat. It's where I wrote this book. I now live in a just-about family-sized apartment ten minutes away by bike, with my American wife and three Parisian children, all of us now French nationals.

Living in Paris was never the plan. I had bought that work-flat as an investment, without any intention of moving into it. At the time I spoke bad school French, and I was with Rick in *Casablanca*: it wasn't particularly my beloved Paris. On visits over the years I'd never got beyond tourist Paris, which is a sort of large facade designed to punish people who transgress against local etiquette.

I arrived to take possession of my flat a few days after the 9/11 attacks in New York. When my Eurostar pulled up, the Gare du Nord station was full of soldiers with machine guns. The people who ran France had suddenly realised that Paris was the largest nominally Muslim, the largest nominally Christian, and the largest Jewish city in Europe. Here was a whole new complexity to manage.

I planned to spend a few nice weekends in the flat, then rent it out. But my flatshare in London was disintegrating, as housemates stumbled into adulthood, and in 2002 I decided I might as well spend the spring in Paris. At the time I was writing a sports column for the *Financial Times*

and didn't tell my editors I had moved, though I think they eventually found out.

I bought a mattress and a few plates, and moved in. After a while, I realised I had emigrated. It didn't seem a big deal. Having been born to South African parents in Uganda, then raised mostly in the Netherlands, I felt comfortable being a foreigner. It was my natural state.

Paris at the start of the century offered a luxury even better than money: not having to think about money. I gradually discovered that many of my new neighbours and their dogs had no visible means of support. Their days seemed to consist of hanging around the building, and buying cheap vegetables at the nearby market. They would have been doomed in London. With hindsight, I was the harbinger of their gentrification. Around the time that I arrived, the city was also trying to clear the ageing prostitutes out of the rue Saint-Denis.

My new building's de facto ruler was an octogenarian lady, Madame Baguet, who revealed, intriguingly, that she had moved into her flat in 1945. (Many years later, a small handwritten notice was taped onto the courtyard door saying she had died: the end of a neighbourhood autocracy.) But there was also an Ivorian clothing designer, a Japanese-Vietnamese-French couple, and, judging by the chatter drifting through my kitchen window on summer nights, middle-class Britons somewhere close.

I had recently acquired a new girlfriend, an American, and I persuaded her to leave New York and join me. She took an instant dislike to Paris – the grey skies, the incomprehensible language, the rude people – but stayed anyway. Eventually we got married.

The Paris we got to know was the nineteenth-century city designed by Haussmann. The preservation of his Paris even through the horrors of the twentieth century wasn't an accident. Rather, it had become almost the point of the whole French national enterprise. The most obvious expressions were the law obliging Parisian residents to pay for the cleaning of their apartment facades every ten years, the armies of park-keepers and nocturnal garbage collectors, and the shoving of cemeteries, bus garages, municipal dumps and anything else unsightly into the netherworld of the suburbs.

But the French sacralisation of Paris went beyond all that. Just how far the country's rulers would go for this city dawned on Winston Churchill when he secretly flew across the Channel during the German invasion of June 1940. He was vesting his hopes in the Battle for Paris. In conversations with French officials, to whom he insisted on speaking his terrible French, he asked, 'Will not the mass of Paris and its inhabitants present an obstacle dividing and delaying the enemy?' But Marshall Pétain, who a few weeks later would become ruler of Vichy France and Hitler's ally, was dismissive: 'To make Paris a city of ruins will not affect the issue.' The French general Weygand added that 'no attempt at resistance would be made in [Paris] . . . he could not see it destroyed by German bombardment'.[1]

So I spent my days in what was visually, except for the cars, pretty much still the nineteenth century. Even when the interior of a building had been demolished, the Haussmannian facade was usually preserved. Every time you walked through the great stage set of Paris, you felt by your side, as Isaac Bashevis Singer remarked after

visiting, 'the mute presence of generations of inhabitants who were both dead and alive'. All over the city, these ghosts were preserved in plaques on facades: a musician had lived in this building, a Resistant was gunned down there. Almost every street in Paris is what historians call a 'site of memory'. And the longer I spent here, the more ghosts I sensed.

The Paris I initially got to know was a relatively navigable, midsized town – the world's most compact great city. There were only a little over two million people packed on top of each other in what's called *Paris intra muros* ('inside the walls'): the central city inside the Périphérique ring road. Once I'd made friends, seeing them was easier than in London because they often lived just a walk away – Paris life is oddly medieval. In those first few years I rarely found reasons to cross the 'Périph', or even to wonder much about the suburbs, the *banlieues*, that were said to lie beyond it. In 2005 I followed the suburban riots on CNN, but I saw no trace of them when I stepped outside. Only years later would I grasp that twenty-first-century Paris *intra muros* was just a small splodge in the middle of a vast metropolitan area.

Meanwhile I worked to raise my French to mediocrity. I had arrived aged thirty-two, just the stage in life when language-learning capabilities take a nosedive. Happily, French didn't have many words, and after taking some refresher courses I realised that I'd learned the grammar several times over. Facial expressions were a big help, too: the French really did use eyebrows, shrugs and pouts as much as words, so you often got the message even before the other person began to speak. (In 1977, the Harvard

professor Laurence Wylie identified eight different French gestures that signified a lack of interest or concern.)

But speech remained an obstacle. The French only pronounced the first couple of letters of most words, leaving you to guess the rest. The most difficult thing was numbers: 'quatre-vingt-dix-neuf' (literally: 'four twenty ten nine') would never become an intuitive way of saying 'ninety-nine'. Language teachers recommended the so-called *école horizontale* – a romantic relationship with a French person, ideally a language teacher – but I wasn't sure my wife would approve. The moment I had to speak French, my perceived IQ dropped 30 points. Negotiating daily life – plumbers, electricians or bureaucrats – could be exhausting. What was the French for 'fuse box'? On the upside, the most quotidian task felt like an adventure. Just going out to get a chicken in Paris, you learned something.

It took me years, but I eventually completed the ultimate French bureaucratic odyssey: enrolling in the country's social security and tax systems. It was as if Kafka's Josef K. had finally found the right bureaucrat in the Castle and got the stamps he needed. I then found I was paying about half my income to the French state. On the one hand, this disincentivised me from doing extra paid work. On the other, it was relaxing: since there was little point in maximising my earnings, I could devote my life to something more interesting. I think that living in Paris did give me a few percentage points more eternity than I would have had in London.

But in these first few years I barely interacted with the city. After a morning spent working on an article about somewhere else entirely, I'd push open the heavy wooden

front door of our building, step onto the tiny pavement, and realise with surprise: 'I'm in France!' Back then I used Paris as a base, and hung out mostly with other Anglophones.

In these early days, my main point of contact with the city was food. Every morning I'd hurry to my favourite café, a place called A la Renaissance, aiming to arrive before the croissants ran out. The coffee at Renaissance was terrible, like everywhere in Paris back then, but the point of it was to stop time: while you were drinking it, you didn't have to be anywhere else. The horseshoe-shaped bar was perfectly lit, as if they were perennially about to film a perfume advert. It's not that Renaissance was uniquely wonderful. The point was that there were hundreds of other Parisian cafés like it. The density of excellence was what made Paris special.

On the café wall hung a group portrait of the owner and customers a century earlier, posing in front of it in their moustaches, bowler hats and flat caps. Fashion aside, if they had all been reincarnated in the twenty-first century and walked into their old bar together, they would have felt at home. The café's name was the same, the canopy looked unchanged, even the interior had survived generations of renovations almost intact, and croissants and bad coffee are eternal.

Since their day, climate change had lightened the Parisian winter. But even so, for five months of the year, the city was almost perfectly grey: pavements, buildings, sky. Then, when spring arrived, it was as if a giant hand had suddenly switched on the lights and the central heating. Paris is built for sunlight. It's like a Mediterranean city

plonked down in the north: white and grey buildings, designed for the play of shadows, with a population drawn largely from southern Europe and North Africa, living in tiny apartments that they need to escape. When the *terrasses* appeared outside the cafés each spring, it was as if the city's capacity doubled in size overnight. The *terrasses* turned Paris into a stage set, where the waiters, customers and pedestrians became the actors. That's why the café chairs faced outward, so that the diners could inspect the passers-by. Since everyone was a part of the decor, you were expected to dress for your role.

With familiarity, I lost some of the ability to see Paris's beauty. I'd rush across the bridge behind Notre Dame at sunset sending a text message. But the almost constant sense of well-being I got from the food didn't wear off. Every day I ate here felt like a gift, even if was just a hunk of Comté cheese with semi-salted butter on a baguette bought in a local market so beautiful that tourists would photograph me buying it. When I bought avocados in the market, the stall-keeper would ask which day I planned to eat them, then select the ones with the optimal level of ripeness. On the greyest day, I'd have glimpses of perfection.

Lunch in Paris was a joy partly because of the contrast between the extreme urbanity and the ever-fresh produce from farm and sea. The lamb on my lunchtime plate might be my only contact with nature all day. In fact, looking back, I can say honestly, without being pretentious, that lunch may have been the main reason I stayed. In London at lunchtime, I'd see colleagues sitting at their desks eating what looked like plastic bags but turned out

on closer inspection to be sandwiches. When I did manage to get out for lunch in London, I'd sit in a sandwich shop called Harpers but known as 'Toilet Harpers', it being a converted public toilet. In Paris there were about twenty very decent restaurants within a short stagger of my flat.

Parisians still stuck to appointed mealtimes. A restaurant might be half-empty at 12.30 p.m., packed at 1 p.m., and half-empty again by 1.45 p.m. As a foreigner, I learned to arbitrage by turning up then, when space was opening up but before the kitchen closed at the ritual 2 p.m. I also learned always to order the daily miracle of the *menu du jour* (or *la formule*): that day's set menu, the best affordable lunch on earth in two or three courses, made from whatever fresh ingredients the restaurant had had delivered that morning by a double-parked van. (By contrast, the stuff on the *à la carte* menu was generally reheated from frozen.)

Lunch in Paris at the start of the century was still a solemn ritual that took about ninety minutes. It started with the waiter unfolding the wine list, and ended with his finally deigning to notice my increasingly desperate requests for the bill. Back then, the experience cost little if you earned British pounds, and nothing at all if, like most local office workers, you had '*tickets restaurant*' coupons supplied by the boss. Daily happiness for me became a table for one with my book. Boiling pasta at home felt like missing the point.

The grandest restaurant on the street was owned by a big fat man who hung around the entrance like a bouncer, glowering at potential customers, sending the message: 'My food is too good for you.' A sign by the door conveyed

the Parisian restaurateur's ancient belief that he knew best: 'The meat dishes will be served blue, rare or undercooked.' Yet the fact is Parisian restaurateurs *did* know best. They had been serving *sole meunière* and *crème brûlée* for centuries, and over time they had worked out how to make them. I read that French cooking was 'stuck in a rut' and in need of 'bold new flavours'. I didn't care. Most of the everyday places I went to didn't feature in international gourmet guides, but eating standards were about as high as on any other ordinary street on earth. What makes Parisian food so good is that almost all the customers are food critics. Having eaten the same stuff at home since childhood, they know their onion soup. If it isn't excellent, they'll go to the place around the corner.

The same standards applied to the growing variety of ethnic restaurants. One day I was eating in the local hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese canteen when the woman who ran it told me she was going to turn it into a Szechuan restaurant – the new fashion. To do this, she'd despatched her husband, the chef, to Szechuan for a months-long cooking course. That's what it took to survive in Paris.

I'd regularly drink affordable wine so good it was, in the French phrase, 'like Jesus pissing in your mouth'. In one restaurant a few doors from my flat, I ate a chestnut soup so perfect that it was almost funny, yet for the kitchen it was routine, something it had done every autumn forever. A restaurant on the same spot a century earlier had probably done it forever too. Here is the writer Marmontel describing a meal he remembered eating down the road from me about 250 years ago: 'An excellent soup, a side of beef, a thigh of boiled chicken oozing with grease; a little

dish of fried, marinated artichokes or of spinach; really fine Cressane pears; fresh grapes, a bottle of old Burgundy and the best Moka coffee.'[2] He didn't eat it in a restaurant. He ate it (or so he wrote) in the Bastille prison.

On my rare ventures into tourist Paris, I was reminded why some foreigners hate the city. One day I went to meet a visiting friend in a random café near Opéra. The black-waistcoated waiter sneered at us in English, eventually brought us the world's most expensive canned orange juices, and chucked in ice cubes against our express request. He was ashamed to be serving tourists, he wanted to show that our money couldn't buy his subservience, and he didn't care if the two of us ever came back. He knew he could hang us upside down and flay us, and the café would still be packed with tourists next year.

I mostly stuck to my neighbourhood, where restaurateurs and shopkeepers had to treat the regulars well. It would be a stretch to describe my street as warm and fuzzy like something out of an Edith Piaf song, but within a few months I was granted the eternal ritual of neighbourhood initiation: you walk into a restaurant and the proprietor strides over to shake your hand. It sounds like a cliché of *la vieille France*, but it really did work like that. The joy of Paris – as of any good global city – is that you live simultaneously in the great wide world and in your neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, even London's more dismal suburbs were becoming unaffordable. Bit by bit, I shipped the rest of my stuff over to Paris. Life there turned out to suit me. From Anglophone writers like Hemingway I had absorbed the

expat's view of the city: a place almost devoid of French people that serves only as a stage for the white Anglophone male hero.

While here, the hero leaves behind the encumbrances of daily existence: the need to earn a buck, diets, sexual mores. Everything dissolves here except art, food and love. It's the place where you can satiate your appetites without consequences.

But for the Anglophone hero, Paris is meant to be only a holiday from materialism (ideally while the exchange rate is favourable – the true magic of the city in Hemingway's 1920s, and again in the early 2000s). Eventually, the foreigner is expected to return home to reality. Most nights just before falling asleep, partly to reassure ourselves we wouldn't spend our entire lives here, my wife and I would have a ritual conversation that went: 'Where could we move to?' We never got around to leaving. Instead, gradually, reality caught up with us in Paris.

2

Losing to London: Paris versus the Anglosphere

In my early years in Paris, the city's usually tacit rivalry with London broke out into a formal head-to-head competition: the bid to host the 2012 Olympics. Since I was a sports columnist, I'd regularly interview the Parisian bid's chief executive, Philippe Baudillon, who was a one-man embodiment of the French elite: a slender diplomat in pinstriped suits with open-necked shirts, a graduate of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, the 'school of presidents'.

Baudillon had spent much of the previous two decades bidding unsuccessfully for various Olympic Games. Paris's most recent failed campaign, for the 2008 Games, had been too 'technical and French', he admitted. The functionaries had poured all their brainpower into the bid, and presented the platonic ideal of an Olympics, in French, without wasting much time asking International Olympic Committee (IOC) members and other foreigners what they wanted. This time, Baudillon said, his team had ditched the arrogance. 'I'll give you an example: we wrote the bid in English and in French at the same time. We try to think in a language that is not our own, so as not to be confined.'

Losing to London: Paris versus the Anglosphere

Paris became the bookmakers' favourite to host in 2012. Whereas London had fallen victim to its own success, grown too swollen and expensive to get around, Paris had its unrivalled compactness. It planned to put the athletes' village in one of the last undeveloped spaces inside the Périphérique ring road: the disused railway yards at Batignolles, within ten minutes' drive of most of the planned venues. I attended a lunch where the French sports minister boasted that the Games would be located 'practically in the centre of Paris'. Fans, athletes and dignitaries would only need to brave the *banlieues* for events at the Olympic stadium, the Stade de France.

When the IOC gathered in Singapore in July 2005 to choose the host, Baudillon's team flew in feeling chirpy. Every IOC member had a copy of Paris's enormous bid book, which proved the superiority of its proposal. But then Britain's prime minister Tony Blair spent three days going up and down the Raffles Hotel, flattering IOC members with one-on-one meetings.

President Jacques Chirac dropped by only briefly, to address the meeting in French. He'd attended summer school at Harvard as a young man, and spoke good English, but believed that French presidents should always speak their own language, even if their listeners couldn't understand it. The Paris team began to realise, queasily, that few IOC members had bothered to read their bid book.

I was following events from my apartment. Just before the IOC announced the winner, I raced to the town hall, the Hôtel de Ville, to watch the supreme moment on its big screen. I had thought the place would be jam-packed with people wanting to celebrate Paris's triumph. Instead,

most of the city was going about the serious business of finding lunch. There were only a few thousand curiosity-seekers waiting outside the town hall. A couple of diehards managed to start a chant of 'Paris!', which lasted about thirty seconds.

We stared at the screen. When the IOC's president Jacques Rogge paused and pronounced, 'London', he seemed to be naming more than just the Olympic host. Paris had lost the battle of the cities (even if it was said that one delegate had decided the outcome by accidentally pressing the wrong voting button). London's victory expressed what everyone, even the French, understood at the time: the Anglophone world was the future and they were the past. Early in the new century, it felt as if Paris was over.

The city had had its stint as the 'Navel of the World' – the centre of the universe, the place that taught everybody else eating, romance, painting, manners, democracy and the 'universal language' of French. Certainly until 1940, almost every would-be artist felt they ought to spend time here. Even the failed Austrian painter Adolf Hitler claimed, on his one visit to the city, after his army had conquered it: 'I would have studied here if fate had not driven me into politics, for my aspirations before the First World War were entirely artistic.'[1] He could have become another harmless fantasist hawking postcards in Montmartre.

Peter Lennon, in his memoir *Foreign Correspondent: Paris in the Sixties*, describes one of the final nights of the city's reign as the Navel. He and his friend Samuel Beckett walk into a Left Bank basement café where they

see sitting, at separate tables within a few square metres of each other, Eugene Ionesco and Jean-Paul Sartre. Everyone nods politely at everyone else, then resumes his evening. Where else on earth, wondered Lennon.

Slowly, Paris ceased to be the Navel. Saul Bellow in 1983 (I was still in the phase of learning about Paris from Anglos) felt sorry for the city, 'which had been a centre, still *looked* like a centre and could not bring itself to concede that it was a centre no longer'.[2]

Nonetheless, into the 1990s, the people who ran France could maintain some claim to global centrality. They had modernised a peasant country during the *trente glorieuses*, the 'thirty glorious' years of economic growth from the Liberation through to the 1970s. They had introduced Europe's fastest trains, the TGVs – the latest move in the centuries-old attempt to impose Parisian rule on the recalcitrant provinces. They had co-created the world's fastest passenger plane, Concorde; made France an independent geopolitical actor, which regularly defied Washington; and they continued to imagine that they spoke the universal language. In the 1980s, they still led the world in tech, launching a sort of French-only ur-internet called 'Minitel', which seems to have been used mostly for reserving tennis courts and having phone sex.

But then, around 1995, the internet arrived. The *anglosaxon* creation was indisputably better than Minitel, and mostly in English. Pretty soon Minitel terminals were being wrapped in plastic bags and stored in Parisian cellars, where many presumably sit to this day. The internet helped reduce French to the status of kitchen language, or an accomplishment like Latin, taught in

high-end foreign private schools. Nobody used the phrase 'Navel of the world' any more, except ironically.

I came to Paris carrying with me the standard post-war Anglo evolutionary narrative about France, which said that the French would eventually come to their senses and become like us. They would work longer hours, slash state spending, let foreigners buy their big companies, and back the US in wars. In short, they'd accept globalisation, or as we Anglos called it back then, 'modernity'.

I arrived at the time when the Iraq war was brewing. The French were opposing the planned American-British invasion. That prompted *anglosaxon* sneering about how the French hated American culture, plus accusations that the 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys' (copyright *The Simpsons*) were backing Saddam Hussein because they hated Jews. I asked the British-American historian Tony Judt, a specialist on France, how such a bizarre theory had taken hold. He explained that the only bits of modern French history that most educated English-speakers knew were the Dreyfus affair, Vichy and the Holocaust.

In fact, the Parisian elite had come to a different view on Iraq largely because it informed itself from different historical experiences than did its *anglosaxon* counterparts. Chirac had been a young conscript in the French army trying to occupy an Arab country, Algeria, and that hadn't worked out brilliantly.

In February 2003, I watched on TV as the United Nations debated the coming invasion. Dominique de Villepin, France's foreign minister, Parisian to his impeccable cufflinks, argued against war, in French of course. Most of the delegates listened to the translation on their

headphones. It was a metaphor for France's modern role: De Villepin still expected to be heard by the world, but wasn't quite. Like most French thoughts, his got distorted, as if on a crackling radio frequency.

He finished, 'This message comes to you today from an old country, France, from an old continent like mine, Europe, that has known wars, occupation and barbarity . . .'. Jack Straw, Britain's foreign secretary, replied: 'Mr President, I speak on behalf of a very old country – founded in 1066 by the French.' The delegates – almost all listening to him without headphones – guffawed. English wit had pricked French pomposity. Again the *anglosaxons* had prevailed.

The French were realising that the new global conversation was dominated by Anglophones, through English-language media and academic journals. '*Anglosaxon*' journalists like me interpreted France to the world, and so I'd get emails from French readers accusing me of '*frenchbashing*', even though I never learned to '*frenchbash*' half as well as the French themselves.

The transmission problem for the French wasn't merely that they spoke French. It was also that they thought French. In general, they relied less than we did on data, and more on reasoning from first principles. This was a country where philosophy remained a compulsory subject in the high-school *baccalauréat* exams. Every serious enquiry in Paris was, in part, philosophical. Is man a *Homo economicus*? What is his capacity to become a 'subject'? I went to a conference where a French historian praised a compatriot: 'I heard in your Kant a little Rousseau.' At the coffee break, a Dutch economist grumbled: 'I just think, "Who cares what Rousseau said?" I want facts.'

Those were thin on the ground in Paris. Reading the French press, I noticed even more factual errors than in Anglo media. It was partly because most of their circulations were too small to pay for subeditors. But more than that: facts in Paris were treated as boring, unimaginative, low-status things. And maybe thinking in concepts rather than facts helped the French grapple with fundamental truths. It all added up to a complete alternative model to the Anglo world. Sadly, almost nobody outside France seemed to know or care. If the French had thought up the Enlightenment this century, foreigners might never have noticed.

The Anglophone world was loud, monstrously vibrant, and moving ever closer. The first Eurostar passenger train travelled from London's Waterloo Station to Paris's Gare du Nord on 14 November 1994. By the time of the Iraq debate, the trip took just two hours, thirty-five minutes. Later it shortened by another twenty minutes. Never before had two great capitals in different countries been almost within commuting distance.

As a Eurostar frequent traveller, I found I was living the dream of the young Mick Jagger. When he studied finance and accounting at the London School of Economics in the early 1960s, he yearned to become a foreign correspondent for the *Financial Times*, based 'between Paris and London'. I did often feel that I was based somewhere between the two. Some days, I'd have coffee at the Renaissance, then stumble to Gare du Nord, and later that same morning have my second coffee with someone at King's Cross. After white and grey Paris, London's colours seemed straight from a psychedelic 1970s album cover: the bright red buses, the red-brown bricks, and the flowers in front gardens.

Losing to London: Paris versus the Anglosphere

I was always instinctively comparing the two cities, and on my Eurostar journeys I noticed the pattern: Parisians tended to go to London for work, while Londoners came to Paris to play. Paris hovers between two possible destinies: it is forever somewhere between being Rome and being London. Early this century it was more like Rome: a dusty open-air museum with a food hall attached. It felt like a suburb of global London.

'We don't think of ourselves as in competition with Paris,' said John Ross, advisor to the mayor of London, while the city prepared for its Games. 'We've won that contest. We measure ourselves against New York.'

In 2006 our first child, Leila, was born. Immediately we began the battle for a spot in a state-funded crèche. Without any of the contacts that smooth Parisian life, we had only one weapon: English. We discovered that there was a form letter that gets passed down from Anglo to Anglo, emailed across the generations, written once upon a time by someone in beautiful French, explaining that the local crèche would benefit from the presence of an English-speaker like one's own child. It worked for us.

That was because Parisians – who always expect to live at the global cutting edge – now wanted their children to learn the new global language. The jump to English wasn't easy. I suspect Americans and Britons would have had a bit of a shock if they had suddenly been told in adulthood, 'Every time you go abroad, or do business with foreigners, or enter the global conversation, you'll have to do it in French.'

But many Parisians made the transition, often with joy.

I found little evidence for the canard that they despised *anglosaxon* culture. One evening I went to a little jazz bar to see a ninety-one-year-old American singer, Jon Hendricks. His voice had almost gone, and his daughters did most of the singing while the smiling little bird-like man in a sailor's cap swayed rhythmically alongside. Even when he tried to sit out a number beside the stage, he couldn't help it: he just kept tapping. And the French audience loved him.

I saw crowds swoon for Andre Agassi at the French Open tennis tournament, and watched Parisian *intellos* sit at the feet of the Yale law professor Bruce Ackerman, imbibing his wisdoms in English. The queues for an Edward Hopper exhibition stretched two hours on freezing nights. Josephine Baker, the American dancer who became a heroine of the French Resistance, was reburied in the Pantheon. Paris has avenues named after Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. I wonder how many British or American streets are named for Charles de Gaulle or Voltaire. The city had Anglo-run restaurants, later *'les food trucks*', and around the corner from us, '*Le Festival Jerk Off (Queer and Alternatives) – Danse, Théatre, Installation*'. By the twenty-first century, any Parisian who mocked *les anglosaxons* as primitives marked themselves as passé, or as locals had begun to say, '*un hasbeen*'.

Many Parisians progressed only as far as 'Globish': the simplified, dull, idiom-free version of English with a small vocabulary. That just about got them through transactional encounters, for business or picking people up in bars. But Globish wasn't enough for building relationships. I saw it when I went to international conferences. During the day,

everyone spent the sessions checking email. Afterwards, the French would go for dinner together to speak French, while the Anglos ate with the northern Europeans (often while bitching about the French). At 11 p.m. the Americans went to bed and the Brits went off to the bar to build more trust.

The global language helped draw global talent to Anglophone cities. A French friend of mine had moved to London shortly before I moved to Paris. Like most educated Europeans of our generation, he spoke excellent English, and quickly fell in with Greeks, Costa Ricans and so on who spoke excellent English too.

Since global talent rarely spoke French any more, it seldom came to work in Paris. Many ambitious French people had responded by exporting themselves to London, New York or Silicon Valley. One French architect in London told me that President Nicolas Sarkozy had invited him to the Elysée Palace, interrogated him about everything that was going on in London, and then suggested he return to Paris. 'OK,' the architect had said, 'if you can give me an office with fourteen nationalities.'

And so, in those early years, I absorbed the idea that Paris had become a backwater. Still, it was a liveable one, and my wife and I seemed to have decided to stay. In 2008, when she was pregnant with twins, we needed a bigger apartment, and without much discussion we assumed we would buy in Paris. But getting a mortgage was tricky. French banks wanted proof that we'd be able to keep paying no matter what. We showed them some shares. Shares can fall, they scoffed. Then a bank sent me to a cardiologist. He turned me inside out, and was already ushering me

wordlessly out of the door when I asked him what he'd found. 'There's nothing,' he mumbled. He wasn't working for me. He was working for the bank, which wanted to know whether I'd live long enough to pay off a twenty-five-year mortgage.

At the time, all this caution struck me as risible, an example of France's fear of modern finance. Then, about a month after we got our mortgage, the global financial crisis hit. Stock markets collapsed. So did house prices – but not in France. The French didn't give sub-prime mortgages and so they didn't have foreclosures.

That's when I had what the French call a *déclic*, a clicking into place of a new realisation. I began to see how often the French are right about the biggest issues. They had sat out the Iraq war, powered their country on clean nuclear energy, established a crèche system that would allow us to raise our children without going insane or broke, and achieved the world's best work-life balance. Unbowed by Paris's defeat to London, they were even gearing up for another Olympic bid. Maybe the French were smarter than I'd thought. Though few of them would ever admit it, their country seemed to be handling modernity pretty well.

3

Parisian Neighbours

The flat we bought was on a drab boulevard on the eastern edge of the trendy Marais neighbourhood. Our building looked classically Haussmannian, though in fact it dated to about 1800, before the baron's time. It was buildings like ours that had given him his model for the new Paris. I was told that from about 1850 until 1950 it had been the home of a single extended family, who had spread across various apartments – a common phenomenon in Paris in the era. Gradually flats were sold to outsiders, and by our day the original family had vanished as completely as the Knights Templar, who had run a fort in our neighbourhood in medieval times.

Even before we moved in, the Marais had become the national epicentre for what the French call (borrowing from the American journalist David Brooks) '*bobos*': bourgeois people with bohemian tastes such as cycling, coffee and *bio* food. In English, *bobos* would usually be called hipsters. *Bobos* tended to work in semi-creative professions like journalism, design or the upmarket end of the food industry. The Parisian-Moroccan novelist Leila Slimani, who lives among *bobos* and is fond of them, captured them marvellously in this account of a dinner party: 'They talk