

Culture > Magazine > France in the World

## France in the World

by Michael Worton

*Présence française dans le monde: l'action culturelle et scientifique*

Philippe Lane, with a preface by Xavier Darcos

Direction de l'information légale et administrative, Paris, 2011

The world of the 21st century is changing rapidly, as globalisation modifies the way that nations operate and identify themselves, and as geo-political balances of power change - for a variety of reasons (economic/financial; constitutional; environmental, etc). Within this context of shifting influence, soft power has re-emerged as a vital tool in diplomacy and national positioning.

Philippe Lane's elegantly written and clearly argued book on France's cultural and scientific 'foreign policy' throws light not only onto the way that France has been developing a determinally coherent policy of cultural and scientific outreach.

His book provides an excellent history of France's long tradition of cultural diplomacy, ranging from the 18th century up until today, where he focuses on the three new agencies that were created in 2010: *CampusFrance*, which seeks to promote higher education and training overseas, to facilitate staff and student exchanges, and to build networks of co-operation and of the sharing of good practice; the *Institut français*, which has responsibility for co-ordinating all the overseas agencies dealing with cultural issues, notably the network of French Institutes in different countries, and responsibility for promoting French culture in all of its forms globally; and *CulturesFrance*, which has a specific responsibility for shaping and promoting French culture overseas.

The three new agencies will work closely together in order to provide a clear image and 'brand' for France overseas. However, as Xavier Darcos, President of the Institut français, has argued, it is vital that uniformization is avoided and that there be no sense of cultural imperialism. In France's definition of itself both at home and overseas, the notion of difference is vital, with all actions underpinned by a concern with an understanding of the other as **other**. Lane's book is very rich in data and examples, and he highlights important issues that are perhaps insufficiently understood at the moment, such as the role of both culture and science in harnessing creativity and developing innovation and crucially, the role of culture in combating poverty and social exclusion. Another point that he makes at several points in the book is the importance of partnerships. However, he is at pains to stress that like other nations, France needs to envisage new kinds of partnerships, ones which are both truly reciprocal and dialogic and strategic rather than simply opportunistic.

Lane charts thoroughly all of the organisational changes that were made in France over the last decade in order to move it to the position of much greater strategic coherence that it currently has, and he furnishes his analysis with many details, as, for example, when he lists the very many different kinds of cultural 'exports' from France, ranging from writers, musicians, artists, dancers, through to circus performers and many innovative partnerships in science and higher education.

In his chapter on scientific and university diplomacy, he refers to the recent reforms that have created considerable turbulence in the HE system in France, notably the giving of autonomy to the universities and the creation of ten new institutes in the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), showing how these reforms shared with the organisational reforms in the cultural sector a desire to bring a new sense of dynamism and direction and also to develop new kinds of community which are genuinely outward-facing and consequently engaged in dialogue.



