“Ils sont fous, ces Gaulois”: Asterix between Cold War America and Gaullist France

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Abstract: Much ink has been spilled on the comic strip Asterix, but few observers have paid attention to the contemporaneous political context in which René Goscinny (1926–1977) and Albert Uderzo (1927–2020) produced this Gallic epic, and how it gives meaning to this world-famous comic star. The association of the fictional Gauls resisting Roman occupation in 50 BCE with France’s heated public debate in the 1950s and 1960s about the role of the Resistance during the German occupation from 1940 to 1944 was no doubt on the mind of French readers at the time. Yet the Asterix epic also is the most successful francophone comic strip in the world. On the one hand the epic works as anti-American diatribe, which equates the Pax Romana of the ancient past with the Pax Americana of the Cold War. On the other hand it is also an anti-Gaullist critique of France in the 1960s and 1970s. Accordingly the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar stands as a symbol for both the anti-Gaullist United States and the anti-American Charles de Gaulle. The contradictory nature of these two claims might be surprising, but the Asterix epic was never intended to be an internally consistent philosophical treatise. The epic looks more like a precursor to the animated series The Simpsons, given its circular narrative structure, the use of cameos by celebrities, and the parodic commentary on contemporaneous affairs.

Keywords: Asterix, French comic strips, France, Europe, United States, Cold War, Charles de Gaulle

Résumé : La série de bande dessinée Astérix a fait couler beaucoup d’encre, cependant peu d’observateurs ont accordé une attention particulière au contexte politique contemporain, dans lequel René Goscinny (1926–1977) et Albert Uderzo (1927–2020) ont produit cette épopée gauloise, et la façon dont ce contexte donne un sens à cette vedette comique de renommée mondiale. L’association des Gaulois fictifs résistant à l’occupation romaine en 50 av. J.-C. avec les débats publics houleux en France dans les années 1950 et 1960 au sujet du rôle de la Résistance au cours de l’occupation allemande entre 1940 et 1944 fut sans contester présente à l’esprit des lecteurs français de cette époque. Pourtant, l’épopée Astérix représente aussi la plus célèbre série de bande dessinée francophone au monde. D’une part cette épopée agit comme une diatribe anti-américaine, laquelle met sur un même pied la Pax Romana du passé lointain et la Pax Americana de la guerre froide. D’autre part, elle fonctionne également comme une critique antigaulliste de la France dans les années 1960 et 1970. Par conséquent, l’empereur romain Jules César représente à la fois le symbole des États-Unis antigaullistes et du Charles de Gaulle antiaméricain. Le caractère contradictoire de ces deux affirmations pourrait être surprenant, mais l’épopée Astérix n’a jamais été conçue pour être un traité philosophique intrinsèquement cohérent. Cette épopée ressemble davantage à un précurseur de la série télévisée d’animation
The Simpsons, en raison de sa structure narrative circulaire, l’utilisation de caméos par des célébrités, et des commentaires parodiques sur des sujets contemporains.

**Mots-clés :** Astérix, bande dessinée française, France, Europe, États-Unis, guerre froide, Charles de Gaulle

**Astérix** reached orbit on 26 November 1965 as the first ever French satellite. Only the third country to use its own rockets for a satellite launch, France had blasted *la Grande Nation* into space — and a small Gallic comic hero into the international spotlight. This remarkable achievement of modernity allowed President Charles de Gaulle to claim for his country a status equal with the two superpowers. France had finally shed its inferiority, and the famous comic figure had risen once again higher than his humble birth only six years earlier.

Much ink has been spilled on the comic strip *Asterix,* but few observers have paid attention to the contemporaneous political context, in which René Goscinny (1926–1977) and Albert Uderzo (1927–2020) produced the Gallic epic, and how it gives meaning to this famous comic star. Most studies have focused on its French origins and its references to the country’s history since 1789. Readers at the time quickly associated Goscinny and Uderzo’s fictional Gauls resisting Roman occupation in 50 BCE with France’s heated public debate in the 1950s and 1960s about the role of the Resistance during the German occupation from 1940 to 1944. Yet the *Asterix* epic still became the most successful francophone comic strip in the world, including in many countries that were not occupied by Germany in World War II.

An important reason for this international success lies in *Asterix’s* many open and hidden references to contemporaneous cultural, political, social, and economic issues in France and beyond. The epic works on the one hand as anti-American diatribe, which equates the *Pax Romana* of the ancient past with the *Pax Americana* of the Cold War. It is also on the other hand an anti-Gaulist critique of France in the 1960s and 1970s. Accordingly the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar stands as a symbol for both the anti-Gaulist United States and the anti-American Charles de Gaulle. The contradictory
nature of these two claims might be surprising, but the Asterix epic was never intended to be an internally consistent philosophical treatise. “My intellectual tutors are Laurel and Hardy rather than Kant and Spinoza,” Goscinny once admitted. Yet even if Goscinny and Uderzo repeatedly insisted that the Asterix epic primarily existed to entertain, they were not living in a political vacuum. Observers in the 1960s could not agree if Goscinny was an anti-American “Communist” or “paid by the Americans to make anti-Gaullist propaganda.”

The first twenty-four Asterix volumes, published between 1959 and 1977, mark the classical period of the epic when storyteller René Goscinny and graphic artist Albert Uderzo worked together. The two had created Asterix out of a fluke on a hot summer day in 1959 because they needed to fill a number of pages in an upcoming issue of a new comic journal. The first three Asterix volumes (1959/1961–1963), which all initially appeared as serialized instalments, convey the impression that Goscinny and Uderzo were still improvising and experimenting with the style and direction that the story of a little Breton village of indomitable Gauls and the Roman occupiers nearby should take. Only with the fourth volume, Astérix gladiateur (1964), does the epic find its characteristic artistic style and well-known metanarrative. Rome as the imperial centre, the Roman Empire beyond its peripheral garrisons in Brittany, and Emperor Julius Caesar as a major figure all appear for the first time and quickly become central fixtures in fifteen of the remaining twenty volumes.

In the Cold War West of the 1960s children and adults quickly warmed to Asterix. This fast international success naturally attracted academic
and lay attention. Scholarship ranges from biographies on Goscinny and Uderzo\textsuperscript{13} to histories of \textit{bandes dessinées} [francophone comics].\textsuperscript{14} Linguistic and literary research,\textsuperscript{15} and translation studies.\textsuperscript{16} Ancient historians and classicists have produced a large body of scholarship that examines the accuracy of Goscinny and Uderzo’s portrayal of ancient Rome.\textsuperscript{17} Fans in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland have dedicated much of their free time to teasing out interesting details.\textsuperscript{18}

But only two authors have systematically explored the \textit{political} meaning of the \textit{Asterix} epic. André Stoll in the 1970s and Nicolas Rouvière in the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Marie-Ange Guillaume and José-Louis Bocquet, \textit{René Goscinny, biographie} [\textit{René Goscinny: A Biography}] (Arles, France: Actes Sud, 1997/2017); Caroline Guillot and Olivier Andrieu, \textit{Goscinny} (Paris: Editions du Chêne, 2005); Guy Vidal and Patrick Gaumier, \textit{René Goscinny} (Paris: Dargaud, 2018); Christian Philippsen, \textit{Uderzo de Flamberge à Astérix} [\textit{Uderzo from Flamberge to Asterix}] (Paris: Éditions Philippsen, 1985).
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Joel E. Vessels, \textit{Drawing France} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); Laurence Grove, \textit{Comics in French} (New York: Berghahn, 2010); Charles Forsdick, Laurence Grove, and Libbie McQuillan, eds., \textit{The Francophone bande dessinée} (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Marc Blancher, “Ça est un bon mot! [That’s a Good Saying!],” in \textit{Enjeux du jeu de mots} [\textit{Word Game Issue}], ed. Esme Winter-Froemel and Angelika Zirker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 273–290; Judith Kauffmann, “Astérix,” \textit{Ethnologie française, nouvelle série} 28.3 (1998): 327–336; see also various chapters in Richet, \textit{Le tour du monde d’Astérix}.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Siobhán McElduff, “We’re Not in Gaul Anymore,” in \textit{Son of Classics and Comics}, ed. George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall (Oxford: Oxford University, 2015), 143–157; François Cornilliat, “How Do You Pronounce a Pictogram?” in \textit{Visible Writings}, ed. Marija Dalbello and Mary Shaw (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 195–210.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Mary Beard, \textit{Confronting the Classics} (London: Profile, 2013), 272–280; Kai Broderson, ed., \textit{Asterix und seine Zeit [Asterix and His Time]} (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001); Kai Broderson, “Asterix (2001),” in \textit{Classics beyond Classics}, ed. Kai Broderson (Heidelberg, Germany: Antike, 2015), 131–136; Stefan Brenne, “Asterix und die Antike [Asterix and Antiquity],” in \textit{Antico-mix}, ed. Tomas Lochman (Basel: Skulpturhalle, 1999), 106–119; Jo-Marie Claassen, “Anachronism and Accuracy in the Asterix Series,” \textit{Akroterion} 25.4 (1980): 15–22; René van Royen and Sunnyva van der Vegt, \textit{Asterix: Die ganze Wahrheit [Asterix: The Whole Truth]} (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1998); René van Royen and Sunnyva van der Vegt, \textit{Asterix entdeckt die Welt [Asterix Discoveres the World]} (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2001).
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Bernard Lassablìere, \textit{Ils sont fous ces humains! [They Are Crazy, These Humans!]} (Paris: Harmattan, 2002); Bernard-Pierre Molin, \textit{Astérix} (Paris: Editions EPA, 2018); Marco Mütz, \textit{Das inoffizielle Asterix & Obelix Lexikon} [\textit{The Unofficial Asterix and Obelix Lexicon}] (Munich: Riva, 2017); Jaap Toorenaar, \textit{Asterix, die fröhliche Wissenschaft [Asterix, the Science of Bliss]} (Zelhem, Netherlands: Arboris, 2012); Keijo Karjalainen, \textit{Politix: Asterix und Politik} [\textit{Politix: Asterix and Politics}] (Cologne: Saxa, 2007).
\end{itemize}
early 2000s both place Asterix firmly within the context of France’s history, though they offer different interpretations. Stoll emphasizes the continuous play with references to the country’s history since the Revolution in 1789.19 Rouvière however explores the popularly accepted association between the indomitable Gauls and the French Resistance during WWII. At first sight his analysis appears plausible given France’s history of conflict with Germany before 1945, the continued mythmaking about the Resistance afterward, the death of some of Goscinny’s French relatives in German concentration camps, and the third Asterix volume, which plays in a thinly disguised Germanic state.20 But Rouvière’s interpretation ultimately requires amalgamating the various Germanic peoples (Goths and Vikings) that appear in Asterix with the Romans into a unified threat to ancient Gaul.21 However in the few volumes where Germanic people appear they are always distinct from the Romans.22 Only two volumes include ironic references to a German occupation of France in the future — that is, two millenia after 50 BCE — while both still show an ongoing Roman occupation.23 And unlike the numerous caricatures of famous people from the post-1945 period in many Asterix volumes, there is not a single one about the Nazis in any of the twenty-four volumes. Goscinny himself denied deep associations of Asterix to the Nazi German occupation of France in 1966, claiming that it “is not possible to joke about concentration camps.”24 And Uderzo later added that his friend certainly would have found better ways to write an anti-German comic strip than by creating fictional Gauls resisting Roman occupation.25 At the end of the day neither Stoll nor Rouvière saw Asterix primarily as a critique of Cold War issues and post-1945 French affairs.

I. ASTERIX — FROM HISTORICIST FOOTNOTE TO INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

What is the Asterix epic and why did it become such a quick international success? The twenty-four volumes co-produced by Goscinny and Uderzo tell the adventures of the diminutive title hero — a Gallic warrior — and his chubby friend Obelix — a manufacturer-wholesaler of menhirs. They live in a Breton seaside village, which continues, as the last holdout in the Gaul of 50 BCE, to resist the Roman occupation. Their little settlement is

19 Stoll, Asterix.
20 Astérix et les Goths (1963). All references to Asterix volumes refer to the modern French reprints published by Hachette (Paris).
21 Rouvière, Astérix ou les lumières, 97–137, 147–177.
22 Astérix et les Goths (1963); Astérix légionnaire (1967); La Grande Traversée (1975).
23 Astérix et les Normands (1966), 31; Astérix en Hispanie (1969), 28.
24 Quoted in “Political or Simply Funny,” New York Times, 12 September 1966, 9.
25 Numa Sadoul, Astérix & Cie [Asterix & Company] (Paris: Hachette, 2001), 199.
surrounded by four Roman garrisons tasked to contain if not defeat them. In several volumes Asterix and Obelix peripherally interact with historical events of ancient Rome (Caesar’s invasions of Britain in 55 and 54 BCE, the Battle of Thapsus in 46 BCE, and the Roman gladiator games), ancient Greece (the Olympic Games), and ancient Egypt (the struggles between Caesar and Cleopatra). Yet the two heroic Gauls are supposed to be only footnotes in history. The name Asterix derives from “astérisque” [asterisk, or *) and Obelix from “obèle” [dagger, obelus, or †].

The Gallic village is surprisingly small but still sufficiently large to maintain a functional rural society. Apart from Asterix and Obelix it includes Chief-tain Abraracourcix (Engl.: Vitalstatistix), the druid Panoramix (Getafix), the bard Assurancetourix (Cacofonix), a monger of (rotten) fish, a blacksmith, and an assortment of villagers with unknown professions. The village’s bucolic routine is occasionally interrupted by bouts of internal violence, particularly when heated discussions about fish turn into fistfights among the male villagers. And whenever the bard tries to sing he ends up on the receiving end of violence targeting high culture (Figure 1). The indomitable Gauls draw their supernatural physical prowess from the magic potion, which the druid prepares in a gurgling giant cauldron before military encounters with the Romans or other external enemies.

The Asterix epic emerged in the wake of a 1949 French law, promoted by an unlikely alliance of anxious Catholics and ardent Communists, to prevent the publication of American comic strips — particularly the pulp magazines published by Timely Comics (today Marvel Comics) — that supposedly worshipped violence, crime, and vice. Francophone comics productions thereby acquired the necessary space to rise to enduring popularity, as was the case with Tintin (originally started in 1929 in Belgium), the Wild West parody Lucky Luke (1946), the Schtroumpfs (Smurfs; 1958), and Asterix (1959). Poignantly the Asterix creators René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo were inspired by one of the most famous American comic artists — Walt Disney — whose productions were not the target of the 1949 law. Of Jewish-Polish-French extraction, Goscinny had grown up in Argentina since age two but left Buenos Aires for New York in 1945 with the intent to work for his artistic hero Disney, though he failed to secure employment. By 1948 he befriended Morris (Maurice de Bevere), the creator of Lucky Luke, who spent time in New York to gather materials for his Wild West parody. Between 1955 and his death Goscinny wrote the texts for forty-seven Lucky Luke volumes (issues 9–55). In 1951 Goscinny moved permanently to Paris where he met Uderzo, a French graphic artist of Italian immigrant heritage. As a child Uderzo had fallen in love with Mickey Mouse when its French publication started in 1934. As he was a lifelong Disney fan, Uderzo’s art in the Asterix volumes is much closer to his American idol’s style — the

26 Toorenaar, Asterix, 8.
flowing and round lines, big feet, large eyes, and bright coloration — than to that of Hergé (Tintin) or Morris (Lucky Luke). 27

Before and while Goscinny and Uderzo invented Asterix in 1959, they had been working on a variety of serialized comic strips, some of which share thematic elements with the story of the indomitable Gauls. Lucky Luke, which to the present day is heavily influenced by Cold War interpretations of the Wild West from the post-WWII period (most notably the John Wayne movies), imparted to Asterix masculine gallantry, the exalted sense of justice, and the aura of an anti-hero. Goscinny and Uderzo later claimed that they chose ancient Gaul as a topic in 1959 because it so much resembled their beloved Wild West. 28 Their short-lived Oumpah-Pah (1958–1962) — a sympathetic but still racist take on North American Indigenous People — provided the theme of resistance to a dominant colonialisT-imperialist settler society. 29 More importantly however, Lucky Luke,

27 Thierry Crépin, “Le Comité de Défense de la Littérature et de la Presse pour la Jeunesse,” Libraries & Culture 36.1 (2001): 131–142; Laurence Grove, Comics in French (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 133–136; Stoll, Asterix, 9–11; Goscinny and Goscinny, Goscinny raconte, 65, 116; Screech, Masters of the Ninth Art, 76–77; Russel B. Nye, “Death of a Gaulois,” Journal of Popular Culture 14.2 (1980): 182; Uderzo, Uderzo se raconte, 45–46, 54, 86, 122–125; Vessels, Drawing France, 58–60; Vines, “Recent Asterix,” 209; Sadoul, Astérix & Cie, 10–11, 41.

28 Sean Griffin, What Dreams Were Made Of (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 217–234; Uderzo, Uderzo se raconte, 159; Goscinny and Goscinny, Goscinny raconte, 181; Screech, Masters of the Ninth Art, 76.

29 Renée Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, Oumpah-Pah: l’intégrale [Oumpah-Pah: Complete Edition] (Paris: Albert René, 2019); Nye, “Death of a Gaulois,” 184; Bernard de Choisy, Uderzo-Storix (Paris: Éditions Kean-Claude Lattès, 1991), 99–103.
Oumpah-Pah, and Asterix all employ the method of *othering* — the use of a different culture or historical period as a narrative foil — to comment on and satirize contemporaneous affairs. Of course the use of antiquity for political commentary had a long tradition in European art. In nineteenth-century France, Honoré Daumier’s cartoons and Jacques Offenbach’s *opéras bouffes* used it as a merciless tool to ridicule Napoleon III.  

This wide range of French, European, and American inspirations, pedigrees, and associations laid the groundwork for the epic’s international success. Yet Asterix similarly benefitted from Goscinny’s sophisticated storytelling, the high quality of Uderzo’s art, and the atmosphere of adventure in a fictional ancient world that was both strange and at the same time familiar to its readers. Many West Europeans born in the 1960s and 1970s grew up reading and rereading the Asterix volumes so often that they could quote from them verbatim. And what the Gauls experienced whenever they left their peripheral Breton village for an adventure was strikingly similar to the sensation of a 1960s/1970s family summer vacation in another West European country.

Goscinny and Uderzo satirized these encounters with foreign cultures by employing well-known stereotypes. The Germans are goose-stepping; the sports-mad Britons drink warm beer; the Vikings are scary, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and fearless; the Greeks exhibit wisdom and straight noses; the Spaniards are proud and sentimental; the Swiss come across as obnoxiously punctual and excessively clean; and the Belgians brew beer and invent french fries. In the same vein French readers undoubtedly recognize the stereotypes about various folks in their own country — the arrogant Parisians, the funny accents of the people in the Auvergne, and the wine lovers of Bordeaux. However the stereotypes that Goscinny and Uderzo use to characterize non-Europeans and women are racist and misogynist. In conformity with established European pictorial tropes, sub-Saharan Africans often appear as slaves with large red lips, big white teeth, and ape-like bodies. Native Americans in Newfoundland, which Asterix
and Obelix happen to discover just days ahead of the Vikings, live in teepees and dance like primitive savages around totem poles. The cliché not only is bigoted but also appropriates customs of Indigenous Peoples from the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest. Furthermore the early volumes almost completely lack a female figure playing a significant role in the development of any of the stories, while women mainly appear as cantankerous or silly sidekicks in all twenty-four volumes.\textsuperscript{33}

For adult readers, the Asterix volumes not only are a lovely reminder of a childhood spent avoiding Latin homework but also remain a never-ending source of riddles about Western history, politics, and culture, which Goscinny and Uderzo left unexplained. Allusions to historical events include references to the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and Germany’s late nation-state formation in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{34} Hints on contemporaneous events point to the never-ending discussions on the construction of a tunnel below the English Channel in the 1960s, the boring sessions at the United Nations in Geneva, the Olympic Games of 1968, the moon landing in 1969, labour unrest in 1973–1975 in the wake of the Arab oil embargo, the closely fought French snap elections of 1974, the financial limits of state intervention in times of economic crisis during the 1970s, and the nuclear missile threat during that entire decade.\textsuperscript{35}

Veiled references to celebrities are equally recurrent. For example, the American actor Charles Laughton, who played the corrupt Roman Senator Sempronius Gracchus in the 1960 Hollywood movie Spartacus, reappears as the equally corrupt Roman prefect of Lutetia (Roman Paris) in the second Asterix volume. The cover of Astérix et Cléopâtre (1965) is a tongue-in-cheek version of the 1963 movie poster for Cleopatra, starring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison. The Beatles have a cameo in Astérix chez les Bretons (1966), though Asterix and Obelix are less impressed than the screaming young ladies in front of the stage. In Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques (1968) Uderzo even engraves his and Goscinny’s likenesses in a
relief at the gates of the Olympic village. Similarly frequent are allusions to Western art. Goscinny included numerous literary quotes or paraphrases thereof from William Shakespeare, the Bible, and, unsurprisingly, Roman authors such as Julius Caesar, Livy, Seneca the Elder, Ovid, Lucan, Horace, Vergil, Tacitus, Terence, Cicero, and Vegetius. And Uderzo’s pen satirized famous pieces of European art such as Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, Auguste Rodin’s *Thinker*, the Roman sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons*, Myron’s *Diskobolos*, Pieter Brueghel’s *The Peasant Wedding*, and countless (fake or real) busts of Julius Caesar.

Hence the *Asterix* volumes form a historicist epic of the Celtic-Roman past with an appeal to France and the Cold War West. But in contrast to other contemporaneous epics — like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and George Lucas’s *Star Wars* — the volumes do not form a continuous narrative. The *Asterix* adventures look more like precursors to the animated series *The Simpsons*, given their circular narrative structure, the use of cameos by celebrities, and the parodic commentary on contemporaneous affairs. Like most inhabitants of the *Simpsons* universe, the *Asterix* characters do not age over multiple episodes. The cast is always stuck in the period around 50 BCE. Each episode of both *Asterix* and *The Simpsons* starts with a complete reset of the narrative, even if both repeatedly disrupt the reset as later instalments include allusions to earlier ones. Both also employ running gags across many episodes — for example the riotous sinking of the pirate ship and Bart’s prank calls to Moe Szyslak’s tavern. In the end both succeed in commenting on society, politics, history, and culture, mainly because of their wide-ranging exploitation of well-established cultural tropes, a shared basis of knowledge acquired in universal schooling, and fragments from ongoing public discourses. Thus *Asterix* and its more recent sibling *The Simpsons* each form a colourful and ever-growing but ultimately internally inconsistent collage of narratives that allow the audience — comics readers and TV viewers alike — to construct different interpretations.

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36 *La Serpe d’or* (1962), 43–44; *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (1965); *Astérix chez les Bretons* (1966), 19; *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (1968), 29; Toorenaar, *Asterix*, 16, 32.

37 For Shakespeare see *Astérix légionnaire* (1967), 48; *Astérix en Hispanie* (1969); *Astérix en Corse* (1973), 34; *Le Cadeau de César* (1974), 5; *La Grande Traversée* (1975), 45; Toorenaar, *Asterix*, 53, 70, 93, 97. For the Bible see Toorenaar, *Asterix*, 13, 25, 56, 68, 105. For Caesar see *Astérix en Hispanie* (1969), 6; Toorenaar, *Asterix*, 12, 21, 22, 30, 38, 41, 57, 72, 76, 85, 93, 105.

38 *Astérix légionnaire* (1967), 35; *Le Devin* (1972), 8; *Les Lauriers de César* (1972), 16; *Astérix chez les Belges* (1979), 47; Toorenaar, *Asterix*, 84.

39 Jason Mittell, *The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 17–54.
II. ASTERIX AND COLD WAR AMERICA

Similar to the creators of *The Simpsons*, Goscinny and Uderzo used *Asterix* to take a stab at contemporaneous events, in particular the Cold War and France’s position in the American-dominated world. Despite their biographical associations with the United States and their artistic indebtedness to Disney and the “Anglo-American style” of humour, which Uderzo and Goscinny freely admitted, the epic adopts the aura of an anti-American diatribe.\(^40\) In one of his few hints about the political meaning of *Asterix*, Goscinny himself joked, “We were inspired by the desire to be the master in our own house, by the feeling that foreign Camembert does not taste as well as the French [original].”\(^41\)

This anti-American reading of *Asterix* equates the Romans, who had occupied much of the southwestern half of Europe by 52 BCE, with the Americans, who were dominating West Europe after 1945. As the ancient *Pax Romana* becomes the modern *Pax Americana*, the Roman Empire stands for the politically, economically, militarily, and culturally powerful United States of the Cold War. In this interpretation the indomitable Gauls in Asterix’s village resist an imperialist juggernaut that aims at subduing, controlling, and ultimately absorbing all conquered people into a melting-pot society. The little village thereby emerges as the last bastion of self-determination in a world dominated by a centralized empire run from a faraway capital and threatened by a uniform foreign culture. Unsurprisingly the Roman Army, as Uderzo’s pen sketched it, includes cameos by US President Richard Nixon, comedians Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, and blues musician B.B. King.\(^42\)

The *Asterix* epic emerged in a France that arose humiliated and insecure from WWII, even if the country managed to regain status quickly in the early Cold War. France had collapsed within six weeks under the German onslaught in 1940, had lived under four years of Nazi occupation without putting up much nationwide resistance (despite the later myth to the contrary), and had experienced the indignity of being liberated by foreigners — Americans, British, Canadians, and French Africans — in 1944. Although US military, political, economic, and cultural hegemony was much less overbearing in the western half of Europe after 1945 than Soviet imperialism was in the eastern half, West Europeans quickly drew

\(^{40}\) “Comic Strip,” *Sun*, 1 January 1967, B4; see also Goscinny and Goscinny, *Goscinny raconte*, 102.

\(^{41}\) “Comics: Gnom von Gallien,” 154.

\(^{42}\) Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 31–46; Le Cadeau de César (1974), 33; Obélix et compagnie (1976), 27; *Astérix chez les Belges* (1979), 24–25.
parallels to antiquity. The British came to see themselves as the wise ancient Greeks advising the powerful but unsophisticated neo-Romans on how to run the world. Greek politicians portrayed their country as the cradle of democracy that was under attack from the Soviet barbarians. Italian and French leaders alike depicted their countries as age-old civilizations worth saving from communism.43

American dominance not only led to West Europe’s integration into the so-called Free World but also extended to the sphere of culture from high art to ordinary consumer goods. American lifestyles and cultural productions — from Hollywood movies and pulp fiction — appeared attractive to many in a continent still reeling from a destructive war. In any case the US government promoted the production and distribution of American movies, literature, and art shows to the outside world. As a result references to US films are ubiquitous in Asterix.44 At the same time the American government pushed the advertisement — mostly through Hollywood movies — of European culture in the United States itself, which led to the quick growth, fuelled by increasingly affordable air travel, of American tourism to the Old World.45

The strains in Franco-American relations during the Cold War are legend. President Franklin D. Roosevelt intensively disliked the leader of wartime Free France, the cantankerous Charles de Gaulle, and wished another French politician had appeared at the helm of liberated France in mid 1944. Although de Gaulle resigned in early 1946 because he could not get the presidential republic of his liking, the subsequent leaders of the weak parliamentary Fourth Republic (1944–1958) still resented American attempts at integrating West Europe because they feared an unchecked resurgence of (West) Germany. Eventually they decided to seize the European integration process, which was jump-started and partially funded by the United States, to turn their country into a European leader. But resentment over the Anglo-American refusal to acknowledge France’s equal status continued into the 1960s and even sparked the country’s own A-bomb program in 1956.46

43 Michael Neiberg, The Blood of Free Men (New York: Berghahn, 2012); Ray Argyle and Maurice Vaïsse, The Paris Game (Toronto: Dundurn, 2014), 13–14; Anthony Hartley, A State of England (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 60; Ioannis D. Stefanidis, Stirring the Greek Nation (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 110–123; Alessandro Brogi, Question of Self-Esteem (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001), 13–46.
44 Richard H. Pells, Not Like Us (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Greg Barnhisel, Cold War Modernists (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Toorenaar, Asterix, 18, 31–32, 38, 52, 62, 73, 87, 108.
45 Carolyn Anderson, “Cold War Consumer Diplomacy and Movie-Induced Roman Holidays,” Journal of Tourism History 3.1 (2011): 1–19; Christopher Endy, Cold War Holidays (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
46 Charles L. Robertson, When Roosevelt Planned to Govern France (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); Emmanuel Cartier, “The Liberation and
French intellectual elites shared the anti-American feelings of their government. The influx of US culture — from high art to consumer products — amounted to an imperialist threat to French political self-determination, cultural independence, and supposedly, Camembert. Particularly leftist journalists and intellectuals scoffed at the arrival of conformist American consumerism and aggressive advertisements as early as the late 1940s. Unsurprisingly two early Asterix volumes mock the advertisement culture of the Roman (that is, American) way of life. Even among French politicians supporting the Cold War alliance with the United States, there were critics of American cultural influence. Yet French consumers were happy to guzzle Coca Cola, wolf down cheeseburgers topped with industrial cheddar, purchase modern household appliances, and even buy a mass-produced car that promised mobility in the city and freedom beyond.47 As expected, Asterix volumes joke about the negative consequences of excessive individualized mobility (Figure 2). Cities appear congested with horse-drawn chariots, and overland roads are jammed with tourists heading in their carriages for a summer vacation at the warm seaside.48 In light of the successes of American art exhibitions in Paris, French intellectuals warned their government in the mid 1950s about the American threat to Western civilization and the parallel demise of the France’s global importance. At the more mundane level Franco-American disagreements arose over the issue of tourism. Did it intensify the bilateral Cold War relationship or just create a lopsided economy geared merely toward serving rich foreigners but not helping lower-class French citizens?49

Given these larger discourses on Franco-American relations, the Asterix volumes contain frequent vignettes on the industrial mass culture that emerged in post-WWII France and that was shaped, though not exclusively, by the US capitalist model. Along with references to increased mobility mentioned above, highway service stations and motels — American inventions from the interwar
period — are also the butt of jokes. When Asterix and Obelix roam Europe in various adventures — usually on foot — they complain about the eyesores that modern infrastructure projects such as bridges and aqueducts create in an otherwise beautiful Gallic landscape. Recurrent in the Asterix volumes are also references to the noisy nature of standardized Roman multi-storey rental dwellings. For anybody growing up in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, all of these references are familiar allusions to a ubiquitous and widely accepted suburban mass culture that had emerged in Europe, partially along American ideas, after WWII. Yet much of the biting criticism comes into sharp focus only during the rereading of the Asterix volumes in adulthood.

Moreover the Asterix epic frequently satirizes the perceived menace of American Cold War policies and the accompanying, unbridled, and even corrupting influence of US capitalism. In an early volume a Roman military commander tries to manipulate a pliable Gallic chieftain to defeat the indomitable villagers through a traditional battle between the chiefs. In later volumes however Roman Emperor Julius Caesar himself concocts the challenges, largely with the aim of conquering a little village of no real significance so that he can claim that he has conquered all of Gaul as the eternally victorious general — “veni, vidi, vici.” In Le Domaine des Dieux (1971)
Caesar tries to force the indomitable Gauls to accept the superiority of Roman civilization by building a modern satellite city—a “second Rome” near the village in order to crush its cultural and political independence (Figure 3). Like American tourists who flooded Europe’s historic city centres from the safety of their American luxury hotels in the 1950s and 1960s, the newly arrived Roman colonialists swamp the little village from their modernist suburbia for a daring shopping adventure. The influx of Roman money spent on locally produced vegetables and quickly manufactured “antiques” distorts the local village economy, triggers inflation, and creates a stratified society that threatens to upset existing social relations. Before the village completely disintegrates under the onslaught of capitalist consumerism, its inhabitants turn the tables, sow dissent among the dwellers of the Roman satellite city, and transform the suburban dream into a civilizational nightmare. In Obélix et compagnie (1976) Caesar even attempts to corrupt the Gauls directly by systematically buying up one of the only commercially made products in the village—menhirs. Indeed the incomprehensible rise in the demand for the entirely useless cone-shaped boulders quickly leads to the emergence of a monetarized village economy with increased division of labour and the open display of vulgar consumerism. Yet in an early case of imperial overstretch, the Roman treasury runs out of cash before the unity among the villagers collapses under the influx of money easily earned and spent. In another two volumes Caesar attempts to sow political division among the indomitable Gauls by sending an agent provocateur or by simply gifting away the village to a drunk Roman legionnaire on the day of his discharge. Of course these two schemes fail too.

Ultimately the conflict between the Roman emperor and the indomitable Gauls peaks in the Cold War–style military containment. But the struggle always remains asymmetrical—between the Roman Empire and the Gallic village, between the global overlord and the local insurgent. In Le Tour de Gaule (1965) Caesar sends an emissary who decides to quarantine the village with a giant wooden palisade that resembles both the limes at Rome’s imperial northern border as well as the Berlin Wall (1961–1989). In their initial reaction to the wall the Gauls coin the oft-repeated catch phrase: “Ils sont fous, ces Romains!” — “They are crazy, these Romans!” (Figure 4). In a

Asterix volumes, for example at the beginning of Astérix en Hispanie (1969), 6, just after Caesar had been triumphant in Spain—except in one village of course.

55 Le Domaine des Dieux (1971), 6.
56 Le Domaine des Dieux (1971); see also Aae Annabel Jane Wharton, Building the Cold War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
57 Obélix et compagnie (1976).
58 La Zizanie (1970); Le Cadeau de César (1974).
59 Frédéric Maguet, “Astérix, un mythe? [Asterix, a Myth?]”, Ethnologie française 28.3 (1998): 319.
challenge to Roman containment, Asterix enters into a bet with Caesar’s emissary that he will be able to collect food samples from all parts of Gaul on a circular journey that references the famous and gruelling bicycle race, the *Tour de France*. The ensuing story is as much a Gallic challenge to Roman domination as it is a fictitious restoration of postwar France to national greatness. Outwitting Roman agents and treasonous Gauls, Asterix and Obelix rely on sympathetic but still mostly passive countrymen — an implicit reference to the myth of WWII resistance — and their own wit to deliver the collected samples back to the village. Caesar’s emissary is forced to accept defeat while receiving the well-known village specialty — a punch — as a gift of honour.60

Yet what are these great cultural achievements that the indomitable Gauls defend so forcefully against the onslaught of Roman civilization? Although several Asterix volumes poke fun at the materialistic corruption of the imperial civilization, its vulgar and arrogant display of wealth, and the bad taste of Roman citizens,61 Goscinny and Uderzo used their position as outsiders to the Parisian cultural establishment to hold up a mirror to French snobbery. In a particularly poignant passage in *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (1968) Chieftain Abraracourcix lectures his compatriots, at the moment of arrival in ancient Greece, to behave in a “dignified manner” toward the host country because it supposedly “does not have our glorious past and history.”62 In the pursuant pages however the Gauls behave like narcissistic, disrespectful, vulgar, loud, and consumerist (American) tourists. Ultimately Goscinny and Uderzo’s version of Gallic cultural achievements — as presented across virtually all Asterix volumes — is remarkably meagre. It mainly consists of wolfing down roast boar, carousing

60 *Le Tour de Gaule d’Astérix* (1965). The original French uses “la châtaigne,” which can be translated as “chestnut” or “punch” into the face; see p. 48.
61 *La Serpe d’or* (1962), 43–44; *Astérix chez les Helvètes* (1970), 7–13, 17, 20.
62 *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (1968), 22.
whenever an opportunity arises, engaging in fist fights over rotten fish, and suppressing the only example of high culture in the village (Figure 1) — the bard Assurancetourix. *Vive la culture française!*

The criticism of American Cold War dominance over France of course raises the question of whether the indomitable Gauls are hidden commies or even outright Soviet-style world revolutionaries. Although some observers suspected Goscinny of being a communist in the 1960s, the answer is an emphatic no. With the magic potion in their possession, the villagers are in a great position to start a global war of liberation against Roman imperialism and impose a just *Pax Gallica* onto the world as the dialectical end of the historical process. But Asterix and his fellow Gauls share the magic potion with outsiders only in moments when they intend to correct individual cases of injustice — be it a wronged Egyptian architect, a fellow British village holding out against Roman occupation, or even an upright Roman official poisoned by another, corrupt Roman official.

There is one exception however. In the very early volume *Astérix et les Goths* (1963) the indomitable Gauls distribute the magic potion to all factions in the brewing civil war among the Goths so as to delay the emergence of a unified Germanic state that could subjugate the rest of Europe in the future. Of course the painful scars of past Franco-German conflict lurk only thinly disguised in the background. Ultimately the Gauls never try to escape the petty bourgeois state of their mind to develop a proletarian class consciousness, which Karl Marx and his disciples postulated two millennia later as the basis for revolution. Embracing anything that resembled communism or world revolution in Cold War France would have been commercially unrealistic for Goscinny and Uderzo. Asterix likes to be a humorous nuisance to Roman imperialism but never is a mortal threat to US imperialism: "*Ils sont fous, ces Americains.*"

### III. ASTERIX AND CHARLES DE GAULLE

The *Asterix* volumes however can also be read as an anti-Gaullist critique, despite President Charles de Gaulle being an avid reader. The serialized *Astérix le Gaulois* started in the fall of 1959, just a little more than a year after the general’s return to power as the last prime minister of the Fourth

63 Astérix et Cléopâtre (1965); Astérix chez les Bretons (1966); Astérix chez les Helvètes (1970); Astérix et les Goths (1963), 37–45.

64 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* [*Manifesto of the Communist Party*] (1848), <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me04/meo4_459.htm>, accessed 21 March 2020; Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewuβßsein* [*History and Class Consciousness*] (Berlin: Malik, 1923).

65 Goscinny and Goscinny, Goscinny raconte, 83.
Republic. The twenty-four volumes co-produced by Goscinny and Uderzo between 1959 and 1977 span almost the entire period of Gaullist dominance in French national politics under three successive presidents: Charles de Gaulle himself (1959–1969), Georges Pompidou (1969–1974), and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974–1981).

Goscinny and Uderzo’s Gallic epic seamlessly connects to a long-established public discourse on France’s supposed Celtic past. Before the Revolution in 1789 France’s monarchy and nobility alike had placed themselves into a political lineage going back to the Frankish king Charlemagne (742–814). Unquestionably France received its very name from its Germanic past. The revolutionaries of 1789 saw their conflict with the nobility in quasi-ethnic terms — the fine republicans of Gallic and Roman descent fighting against the evil Germanic invaders. Soon thereafter Napoleon built up his own empire out of the ruins of the Revolution, even if he used almost exclusively the iconography of Imperial Rome to that end. This was unsurprising for a man who had read the classical Roman authors as a child and who would dictate his thoughts on Julius Caesar’s military victories in his exile on Saint Helena. After Napoleon’s final defeat in 1815, France was in search for a new primordial myth.66 Napoleon’s cult of ancient Rome went out the window, which is why one of the rare references to the deposed French emperor in the Asterix volumes is a picture of a psychotic patient whose hallucinations of being Napoleon make no sense to the Gauls (Figure 5).67

In the search for a new national myth, French intellectuals in the nineteenth century discovered the country’s supposed Celtic ancestry, which dated long before the more recent Germanic past and the somewhat older Roman tradition. Going back to pre-Roman times allowed the humiliated post-Napoleonic France to refashion itself as a foundational European nation. Although Napoleon’s nephew Emperor Napoleon III (1852–1870) did not entirely reject his uncle’s Roman fixations, he still promoted the Celtic myth. French archaeological surveys in the mid nineteenth century discovered — or claimed to have done so — many of those places where

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66 Krzysztof Pomian, “Franks and Gauls,” in Realms of Memory, vol. 1, Conflicts and Divisions, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 27–78; Eran Almagor, “Our Ancestors the Gauls,” American Anthropologist 96.3 (1994): 587–588; Françoise Meltzer, “Reviving the Fairy Tree,” Critical Inquiry 35.3 (2009): 517–518; Ira Grossman, “Napoleon, the Reader,” Research Subjects: Napoleon Himself, <http://www.napoleon-series.org/research/napoleon/c_read1.html>, accessed 23 March 2020; Napoléon Bonaparte, Précis des guerres de Jules César [Chronicles of Julius Caesar’s Wars] (Paris: Les Perseides, 2009).

67 Le Combat des Chefs (1966), 30. The other two references refer to his Corsican background and his Egyptian campaign in 1799. Stoll, Asterix, 119–123.
Julius Caesar defeated France’s newly found forefathers, including Bibracte (58 BCE) and Alesia (52 BCE). By the late nineteenth century the Celtic myth had become a widely accepted aspect in France’s national school curriculum, academic research, and art production, though the craze started to wane somewhat after the 1920s. Poignantly the French worship of a defeated people psychologically helped the country go through its own defeats at Germany’s hand in 1870–1871 and 1940. But as much as the ancient Gauls could laugh at their subjugator Caesar when they were resurrected to historicist greatness in the nineteenth century, the French could sneer at the Germans in 1945.

Still, acknowledging defeat in modern times remained for the French as bitter as it is for the fictitious Gauls in Asterix. In a typical case of psychological denialism Chieftain Abraracourcix and other veterans refuse to acknowledge the existence — and hence the trauma — of Alesia (Figure 6) while remembering the victory at Gergovia shortly before. At least Abraracourcix managed to get hold of the abandoned shield of Vercingetorix, who had led the Gauls into defeat at Alesia in 52 BCE. This allowed him — an entirely “unheroic figure” in Goscinny’s words — to claim the legitimacy
to lead the indomitable Gauls in their continued resistance to Caesar. But Uderzo visually rubs in defeat on the first page of every single *Asterix* volume. Maybe in reference to his own Italian ancestry his pen rams the giant Roman standard into the map of ancient Gaul where most scholars in the 1960s presupposed the location of … Alesia.\(^7\)

President Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970) was deeply steeped in the French myth of Gallic ancestry — and not only because of his family name, which reaches back centuries to low nobility in Burgundy and Flanders. His uncle Charles Jules-Joseph de Gaulle was one of the French intellectuals that handcrafted the Celtic myth in the nineteenth century. De Gaulle’s speeches, particularly during WWII, were soaked with Gallic rhetoric about France’s ancient history and eternal glory. After his final retirement in the spring of 1969 he even visited Ireland for six weeks to explore his Celtic family roots.\(^7\) Thus both the well-established public discourse about France’s supposed Gallic past — which Uderzo remembered having learned in school in the 1930s — and Charles de Gaulle’s return to power in mid 1958 provided a perfect background for Goscinny and Uderzo to launch the *Asterix* epic in October 1959. While the first three volumes, published between 1959 and 1963, struggle to develop a uniform concept, *Asterix* as an epic settles in with the fourth volume in 1964 — at the precise midpoint of de Gaulle’s presidency — in which Julius Caesar appears for the first time. Because the two *Asterix* creators were outsiders to the French political elites, they were in a perfect position to satirize France’s invented national myth.\(^7\)

But despite his own commitment to France’s long-standing Celtic discourse, President Charles de Gaulle resembles Emperor Julius Caesar much more than the supposed Gallic hero Vercingetorix. Numerous scholars have observed that de Gaulle’s grandiloquent rhetoric, including his Celtic oratory, primarily served to mask the intellectual void of Gaullist

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71 *Le Bouclier Arverne* (1968), 12, 10, 47; Mireille Rosello, *Declining Stereotype* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1998), 168–169; Rouvière, *Astérix ou la parodie des identités*, 61–68; Stoll, *Asterix*, 23. Uderzo assumed that Alesia is near Clermont-Ferrand, but according to Reddé it is near Dijon; see Reddé, “Battlefield of Alesia,” 183–191.

72 Stanley Hoffmann and Inge Hoffmann, “The Will to Grandeur,” *Daedalus* 97.3 (1968): 830–831; Charles [Jules-Joseph] de Gaulle, *The Celts of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. J. Davenport Mason (Tenby, Wales: R. Mason, 1865); Maurice Agulhon, “De Gaulle et l’histoire de France [De Gaulle and the History of France],” *Vingtième Siècle* 53 (1997): 3–12; Julian Jackson, *De Gaulle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 25, 92; Max Byrd, “The Irish in Paris,” *Wilson Quarterly* 34.3 (2010): 34.

73 Uderzo, *Uderzo se raconte*, 157–158; Philippsen, *Uderzo de Flamberge à Astérix*, 126–128; de Choisy, *Uderzo-Storix*, 136–148.
ideology, disguise his authoritarian reflexes, and cover up his disgust for the parliamentary Fourth Republic. Caesar similarly lacked an ideological core but he chose brute military force over ethnonationalist rhetoric to obtain absolute power. Both the president and the emperor managed to blur the line between ruler and country; their public personae came to represent the state that they headed. In the volumes published from 1964 to 1968 Uderzo generally sketches Caesar like de Gaulle — arrogant, stern, aloof, soldierly, taller than everybody else, standing with a straight back, and walking with long strides (Figures 7 and 8). Only his face remains distinctive, largely because his busts were as well known in antiquity (and today) as de Gaulle’s photo was in the 1960s.

Other historical parallels are even more significant. Caesar and de Gaulle were both destroyers of the old and creators of the new. The Roman leader demolished the floundering Roman Republic and built the Roman Empire in its place. The Frenchman quickly axed the crumpling parliamentary Fourth Republic in 1958 after his return to power to create the centralized Fifth Republic, headed by a strong president — himself. Both also entertained European designs. Between 61 and 50 BCE Caesar conquered parts of Spain, all of Gaul, and parts of the Balkans, even if his external exploits ultimately triggered the Roman Civil War that broke the republic and led to his assassination on the Ides of March in 44 BCE. De Gaulle however started his imperial pretensions by withdrawing from Algeria, which led to civil warlike conditions in France and an assassination attempt in 1962 by a disappointed French colonialist from Algeria. But his ultimate aim was to lead a united Europe without the Anglo-American powers and to restore France to global status — a task of Caesarean ambitions but ultimately of Vercingetorixian failure.

74 Graham O’Dwyer, Charles de Gaulle, the International System, and the Existential Difference (London: Routledge, 2017), 21–26, 58–75; Adrian Goldsworthy, “Julius Caesar and the General as State,” in Makers of Ancient Strategy, ed. Victor Davis Hanson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 206–226; Hoffmann, “Will to Grandeur,” 861–864.
75 Astérix gladiateur (1964), 17, 38–46; Astérix chez les Bretons (1966), 5; Astérix légionnaire (1967), 37, 39, 41–42, 45–46; Le Bouclier Arverne (1968), 17–19, 46–47. The only exception to the aloof portrayal of Caesar seems to be when Caesar is in love with Cleopatra; see Astérix et Cléopâtre (1965), 5, 35, 37–44, 46.
76 Klaus Bringmann, A History of the Roman Republic (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 229–321; Philip Thody, The Fifth French Republic (London: Routledge, 2002), 17–25; Philip Williams, “How the Fourth Republic Died,” French Historical Studies 3.1 (1963): 1–40; Jean Lacouture, De Gaulle: The Ruler, 1945–1970 (New York: Norton, 1992), 315–324; Lüthi, Cold Wars, 100–106.
After de Gaulle’s retirement in the spring of 1969 Uderzo seemed to have sketched Caesar in more jovial lines, suggesting a semblance to de Gaulle’s successor, President Georges Pompidou (1969–1974). That Uderzo satirized Gaullist politicians is beyond doubt. President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974–1981), who served as de Gaulle’s finance minister in the late 1960s, appears as a grim Roman tax collector in Astérix et le Chaudron (1969). And President Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), a rising Gaullist star in the 1970s, emerges as the failing economic adviser to Caesar in Obélix et compagnie (1976). Of course this raises the question of how many other, now less well-known, French politicians are hidden as caricatures among the members of Roman Senate shown in several Asterix volumes from the 1970s.

Regardless of his authoritarian attitude and conservative views, de Gaulle oversaw France’s modernization as president. Not only did he revamp the creaking French constitutional system but the period of Gaullist dominance from 1958 to 1981 was also one of major political realignments that reshaped long-established party loyalties based on class and religion. His presidency fell into the three decades of rapid post-WWII urbanization, from fifty to seventy-three percent of the populace, which happened

77 For Caesar’s less stern look in Asterix after 1969 see Astérix en Hispanie (1969), 6–8; La Zizanie (1970), 3–8; Le Domaine des Dieux (1971), 5–6, 27; Le Cadeau de César (1974), 6–7. For Giscard d’Estaing see Astérix et le Chaudron (1969), 43–44. For Chirac see Obélix et compagnie (1976), 12–17, 19, 21, 24, 27, 32–33, 35–41, 43, 47–48; Goscinny and Goscinny, Goscinny raconte, 50, 53. For the senate see La Zizanie (1970), 5–8; Obélix et compagnie (1976), 12–13.
late in comparison to other European countries and primarily manifested itself in a massive migration from the countryside to squalid living conditions in the quickly growing cities. Furthermore, after a period of transition toward state centralization since 1945, France’s economy took off at the beginning of de Gaulle’s decade in power, pushing the country ahead of most other West European economies in annual growth during most of the 1960s. Previous investments into nationwide infrastructure projects drove that economic boom while the state-sponsored emergence of large-scale industrialized agriculture radically changed rural life.\(^78\)

Against the background of these rapid political and socio-economic changes, the *Asterix* universe describes what the dwellers of the overcrowded and anonymous French cities must have yearned for — a paradise lost. Many *Asterix* volumes start with a sketch of the bucolic village of the indomitable Gauls, where life seems to be less hectic, people are healthy, the sun shines eternally, and neighbours have time to stop for a friendly chat on the street (Figure 9).\(^79\) The village itself is protected by an almost untouched forest that separates the utopia from the regimentation, anonymity, and even lurking danger of modern urban life (Figure 10). The forest sports happy owls, beautiful flowers, and an abundant, self-replenishing amount of game (keep in mind the massive boar consumption in the village).\(^80\) Some volumes even contain references to the clean air in the countryside, pollution in the city, and rivers used as urban trash dumps.\(^81\) Uderzo’s vision of this pastoral paradise was shaped by the time he spent as an adolescent at the sparsely populated northern seaside of Brittany during WWII. Poignantly, Celtic cultural life there had survived into modern times despite attempts by successive French republics, which claimed to be dedicated to Celtic ancestry, to suppress it.\(^82\) The six volumes, in which an outside force tries to upset the internal balance of the village, provide urban readers with a dream-fulfilling story in

\(^{78}\) Tony Judt, *Postwar* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 548–551; Robert Gildea, *France Since 1945*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 93–126; Shuangshuang Tang, “Regional Planning in France during Rapid Urbanization Period (1945–1970)” (unpublished dissertation, Université Paris-Est, 2013), 9–10.

\(^{79}\) *La Serpe d’or* (1962); *Astérix et les Goths* (1963); *Le Combat des Chefs* (1966); *Les Normands* (1966); *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (1968); *Astérix en Hispanie* (1969); *La Zizanie* (1970).

\(^{80}\) For the forest as protective belt see *La Zizanie* (1970), 42; *Le Domaine des Dieux* (1971), 4; *Astérix en Corse* (1973), 10; *Le Cadeau de César* (1974), 10. For the forest as source of recreation and food see *Astérix légionnaire* (1967), 5, 10; *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (1968), 5; *Astérix et le Chaudron* (1969), 12, 19; *Obélix et compagnie* (1976), 18, 23, 43.

\(^{81}\) *Le Bouclier Arverne* (1968), 13; *La Serpe d’or* (1962), 11.

\(^{82}\) Uderzo, *Uderzo se raconte*, 77–80; Dietler, “Our Ancestors the Gauls,” 593–595.
which the villagers restore the lost paradise through unity, compassion, friendship, and joint effort.\footnote{83}

As the Asterix creators sing the praises of a simpler and more harmonious life, they also mock the snobbery of French urbanity. Chieftain Abraracourcix cannot stand his successful, rich, and pretentious brother-in-law in Lutetia, while his wife still wants to escape the sullenness of the village to the supposedly alluring life in the modern city.\footnote{84} Abraracourcix’s own brother sends his effeminate, lazy, and consumerist son to the old-fashioned village so the indomitable Gauls can turn him into a real man.\footnote{85} The anti-modern character of the village reaches its pinnacle in the archaic refusal to pay taxes to the central and anonymous state — and even in the theft of tax money.\footnote{86} At the same time the Asterix epic also sends a progressive message. Obelix’s dog, Idéfix, is an early environmentalist and probably would have become a pioneering tree hugger had he been only a little bit larger.\footnote{87}

At heart the Asterix epic restores, in satirical form, the values of liberty, fraternity, and equality of the 1789 Revolution to Gaullist France. The indomitable Gauls aim to be free from the constraints of an authoritarian, centralized, and uniform state. They live in a (male) fraternity — of the rough
sort with each other and of the sophisticated kind with other wronged people. The social hierarchy of the village is remarkably flat. Because the epic celebrates opposition to authoritarianism, it is anti-monarchical, anti-Napoleonic, and anti-Gaullist at the same time. The indomitable Gauls are hence revolutionaries — not of the Soviet kind but in the style of 1789. The target of their revolution is not the ancien régime but its restoration in the form of modern France that arises under Charles de Gaulle. “Il sont fous, ces Gaullistes.”

IV. CONCLUSION

Both Goscinny and Uderzo repeatedly denied that the Asterix epic had any political meaning but merely existed to provide humorous entertainment. This might have been true at the very beginning in 1959, when they came up with the basic idea. However, starting with the fourth volume, Astérix gladiateur (1964), it is beyond doubt that they satirized contemporaneous politicians and European history. Ultimately the Asterix epic has been so successful in France and the former Cold War West primarily because it comments so much on a widely shared knowledge of culture, history, and politics. Its creators denied any political meaning probably because they did not want to be drawn into nasty public debates about their private views. Commenting on Asterix also would have undermined the very character of the epic, which offers a large number of riddles left intentionally unexplained. Keeping silent about the political meaning was a matter of personal self-protection and commercial promotion.

Because Asterix is a circular epic with a reset at the beginning of each episode, it naturally produces a wide variety of narratives, even if they all start at one common point of departure — in the little Breton village of 50 BCE. Hence this kind of epic cannot be internally consistent, and neither Goscinny nor Uderzo planned it so. This ultimately turns Asterix into one giant open riddle. What is it really about? I suggest that there are two competing but also complementary answers. One is that Asterix works as an anti-American diatribe representative of a particular intellectual discourse in Cold War France. The other is that it furthers an anti-Gaullist critique that celebrates French revolutionary equality and the American Wild West. By 1965 the Asterix epic soared with a satellite into the space, only six years after its creation. Space junk by now, the satellite will remain in orbit for centuries to come — as an invisible monument to a particularly creative period in French comic strip history.

88 Vines, “Recent Asterix,” 205–206.
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