

# Reconfiguring the French nation: Public debates on the Left and national identity

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**ABSTRACT.** Since the 1980s, neoliberal globalisation has shaped the fate of local and national cultural productions, from movies to music, from entertainment to food. How did French intellectual and political elites respond to this unprecedented challenge? What were the implications for the politics of nationalism and national identity? Two books respond to these questions, although in very different ways – the first directly and the second indirectly. Vincent Martigny's *Dire la France* explains how a new way of narrating French national identity emerged in the 1980s within an internationally oriented French Left, attentive of the coming challenges of cultural pluralism. Patrick Boucheron's (ed.) *Histoire mondiale de la France* advances into a more challenging direction by skilfully unsettling the 'our ancestors the Gauls' clichéd narrative. French history is thus redefined by moving away from the Frankish/Gallic myth of descent, thereby reconfiguring national identity along new lines. This article identifies how crucial debates on the cultural nation and cultural identity emerged in the wake of the May 1968 uprising, asking how much they contributed to the current shape and meaning of French national identity. It thus reviews what can be described as a new historiographical turn in French history.

**KEYWORDS:** cultural nationalism, ethnic majority/Staatsvolk/dominant ethnicity, France/French, globalisation, nationhood/national identity, revival/regeneration

Vincent Martigny. *Dire la France. Culture(s) et identités nationales (1981–1995)* [*Narrating France. Culture(s) and National Identities, 1981–1995*]. Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, col. «Références académiques», 2016, 376 pp., ISBN: 978-2724619454 (paper).

Patrick Boucheron (ed.), 2017, *Histoire mondiale de la France* [*Global History of France*]. Paris: Éditions du Seuil. 797 pp., ISBN: 978-2021336290 (paper).

Whereas the nineteenth century was undeniably the 'French century' across most of Europe, the twentieth century turned steadily into the 'American century'. Nowhere was this more clear than in the cultural field: until 1914,

Paris was the trendsetting ‘capital of modernity’, its cultural products irradiating throughout Europe and beyond (Harvey 2003). So wide was its cultural reach that the upper elites of several non-Francophone countries moved to French as their everyday language and incorporated various aspects of French culture into their daily life routines; they did so from West to East, from the *afrancesados* in Spain to corresponding Frenchified elites in Russia – and far beyond.

France’s long nineteenth-century war-tempered grandeur lasted from before the French Revolution to the *Belle Époque*. This dominant position, however, ceased on the day France entered World War I – paradoxically, this was the very war French artistic, industrial, economic, cultural and political elites had most strenuously wanted. After World War I, France’s direct and indirect influence on cultural and world affairs slowly but steadily waned.<sup>1</sup> Modernity was no longer wrapped in the *tricolour* but dressed in the Star-Spangled Banner.<sup>2</sup>

In the following years, Americanisation advanced on all fronts, so that the ‘irresistible empire’ (De Grazia 2005) had as its major mission to ‘seduce the French’ – along with most other peoples across the globe (Kuisel 1993). But it was only after the late 1970s and early 1980s that a sustained and still unceasing onslaught was unleashed against nearly every aspect of national and local culture across Western Europe – indeed, across the world. France, the former cultural master of Europe, had now to face the music and dance to the sound of the American rhythm, on a par with all the other globally mesmerised dancers. The start of neoliberal globalisation in the 1980s sealed the fate of European cultural production, from movie to music, from entertainment to food. During this watershed decade culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall, no force seemed capable of resisting the advance of cultural Americanisation and mass consumerism in, and beyond, Europe. Small localised cultural wars thus became pawns in the broader ‘cultural Cold War’ which swept across the globe (Saunders 1999).

How was this unremitting Americanisation received in France, the country that had previously enjoyed the enviable position of global hotspot for the modern cultural industry? How did French intellectual and political elites respond to the unprecedented, vigorous, sweeping challenge? Most of all, what were the implications for the politics of nationalism and national identity?

The two books analysed here respond to these questions; the first one directly and the second one indirectly. As Vincent Martigny convincingly argues in his timely and original *Dire la France*, the French metropolitan project to counterbalance sweeping Americanisation began with the goal to redefine and narrate the very identity of France (Martigny 2016). This debate – and debacle – materialised mostly within an internationally oriented French Left, aware of the coming challenges of cultural pluralism (later, ‘multiculturalism’). If, as Martigny asserts, the *dire* [say] is the beginning of the *faire* [do], studying existing narratives of national identity needs to gain prominence, since they provide the framework for shaping future identity-based politics. The book

is cleverly organised according to a chronology opening with the role of national culture under the Gaullist *République*, while the main focus is on the intellectual debates emerging in the political circles around the *Parti Socialiste* [PS, Socialist Party], shortly before it assumed power under François Mitterrand's Presidency (1981–95). The material Martigny draws upon is the narrative and discourses that shaped these debates; these greatly challenged previous ideas of national identity and subsequently influenced actual cultural policies.

Far from being a movement confined to stateless nations, cultural nationalism (Hutchinson 2013) played a key role in identifying the main directives of France's proactive cultural politics at a time of great global changes – a legacy enduring into the current identity politics of this century. In contrast with both the Republican Jacobin idea of a national monolith and the Right's xenophobic anti-multiculturalism, the cultural nationalism of the 1980s stood militantly pluralistic, non-ethnic and relatively cosmopolitan – as can be seen in a host of international events and initiatives launched by the Socialist Minister of Culture, Jack Lang.

However, once seized by the Conservatives and the Far Right, French identity later shifted from a cultural to an ethno-national understanding. In the process, the Left's idea of a French nation also became more rigid, centralist, anti-pluralist and Jacobin – reasserting the dogma of a *République une et indivisible* ['one and indivisible Republic'] as announced two centuries earlier in the 1793 Constitution.

How can cultural nationalism be said to differ from more political nationalism? At the beginning the distinction was relatively clear, as the intellectuals and professional elites were the prime movers, and politicians largely relied on concepts, notions and scripts previously devised by influential *maîtres à penser*. In the 1980s, intellectuals, politicians, actors, artists and other public figures began a counter-offensive in earnest in the global battle of ideas. They typically belonged to a pre-Blairite, pre-Clintonian Left, which retained an emancipative thirst for social justice and egalitarianism, at a time when voters were not yet muzzled by the Third Way's embrace of neoliberal capitalism.

The cultural challenge posed by incipient 'globalisation' (the term was still unused at the time, as was its French equivalent, *mondialisation*) was largely identified as a form of imperialism uni-directionally stemming from the USA. It is perhaps surprising to learn that even some sections of the centre-Right shared this indignation and sense of *lèse-majesté*, before the advancing embrace of neoliberal globalisation – chiefly among them, Jacques Chirac, future President of France.

The book identifies the second half of the 1970s as a departure time period, although the title mentions the three quinquennials between 1981 and 1995. In 1979, some trendsetting works appeared, including Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Moreover, as Martigny reminds us, after Jack Lang became Secretary of Culture in the PS in 1977, a foundational party congress took place in Metz in 1979. Once François

Mitterrand became President of France in 1981, some of these oppositional discourses turned into state policies, endowed by more cohesive narratives and disseminated by public debates.

Within this generation of young socialists, the charming cultural entrepreneur Jack Lang, Mitterrand's closest advisor, became the most articulated spokesperson for a new form of French cultural nationalism, through a narrative combining artistic creativity with the struggle to shelter France's once vast cultural production from possible annihilation.<sup>3</sup>

Many key intellectuals, actors, artists and media operatives, as well as political elites and parties, participated in this process of rediscovery and conveyed through their acts, writings and speeches different 'accounts' of the French nation. Grassroots institutions and groups were also involved in elaborating a narrative of resistance, including local authorities, cultural associations and ordinary citizens.

Martigny sees the cultural policy put in place after 1981 as a continuation of the actions taken by the art theorist and novelist André Malraux (1901–76) as Minister of Cultural Affairs under President De Gaulle (1959–69). Jack Lang himself openly claimed the legacy of his illustrious predecessor. Yet among the Gaullists culture occupied a minor place in a political scenario obsessed by power geopolitics and rather served as part of a condescending sense of French 'exceptionalism' (Martigny 2016: 25).

Debates in the 1980s had already focused on issues of economic domination: as Martigny shows, markets crushed cultural identities generating cultural homogenisation and uniformity (p. 183). Here, the legacy of the May 1968 student uprising can be seen in the way culture was conceived as a means of social transformation. Antonio Gramsci's notions of 'cultural hegemony' rose high within the PS' rank and file.<sup>4</sup> The Left, including the PS, was convinced that only the development of an independent intellectual class could challenge the foundations of cultural hegemony and thus reverse the power relations of the capitalist mode of production. Since May 1968, the groundbreaking work of Herbert Marcuse (1964) and other members of the Frankfurt School guided the public debate across Europe and beyond: one of its core arguments was the idea that culture influences power and shapes social relations, including individual personality and group interactions. In France, Pierre Bourdieu's idea of culture was influenced by the anthropological research of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958, 1961) and Marcel Mauss (1966). Bourdieu's later work was even more deeply concerned with the destructive impact of neoliberal globalisation and its sequels – even while he declined to be identified as a 'public intellectual' (Bourdieu 1998, 1999). For Left intellectuals then, the structure of capitalism is based on cultural domination, and it is only through the prior creation of a national, and possibly international, counterculture that capitalism can be challenged or at least deeply remodelled. Culture, far from constituting an autonomous practice limited to the artistic or patrimonial realm, lies at the core of an ideological battle whose goal is radical social transformation. The link between cultural and economic change operates both

ways. There can be no upheaval of capitalism if the foundations of cultural and social domination are not undermined.

Nonetheless, political considerations soon grabbed the front seat, progressively dodging and sidestepping the cultural debate, just when a fierce Republican reaction was taking shape. Five years later, Jack Lang evoked the disintegration of the very principle of culture: bourgeois culture is only an ossified social heritage, confiscated by the ruling class, 'it is not even a culture, rather the formation or deformation of a caste' (Lang et al. 1978; cited in Martigny 2016: 49).

By that time, the Right and the Centre Right completely lacked a cultural project of their own. As Martigny argues, the corruption-ridden conservatives under President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974–81) had no interest in cultural matters, besides 'bourgeois competitions and dinners in the city' (p. 49). All these themes emerged during the May 1981 presidential campaign, which led Mitterrand's Socialist Party to victory. But despite the contiguous cultural activities of pluralists like Jack Lang, the Mitterrand government steadily shifted to the usual rigid vision of French nationhood focused more on economic interests than cultural debates.

How did the Right and the Far Right react to the challenges emerging from the Left? Mostly by either ignoring or subverting them. The mainstream Right began to reinvent its own path by incorporating notions of ethno-political, rather than cultural, national identity culminating in President Nicolas Sarkozy's establishment of a Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development in 2007. The *identitarisme* (identity politics) of the Right was more concerned with notions of national identity and unconcerned with culture, remaining vehemently hostile to multicultural coexistence to the point of opposing the recognition of France's regional languages, such as Corsican, Basque, Catalan, Breton or Occitan.

The notion of 'cultural nationalism' (Hutchinson 1987) becomes relevant here, as identity debates in the 1980s reformulated the notion of a new French moral community. Yet as Left and Right converged around the promotion of 'cultural identity', the Left steadily moved towards Jacobin Republicanism by discarding the multicultural policies that lay at the core of its earlier programmes. The result was an evolution towards a 'culture-blind' understanding of citizenship and national identity, while fostering a single homogeneous 'French culture'. Faced with the threat posed by a complex and multi-voiced world, French elites have taken shelter under the umbrella of the pre-existing majoritarian institutional context, turning to patriotism – and eventually populism – as a reservoir of political legitimacy, just as the latter was undermined by neoliberal globalisation (Conversi 2012b, 2014).

Yet there is a chasm between the plural, non-isolationist discourses of the 1980s and the current *obsession identitaire* [identity obsession] of the Right. The transition from one to the other is still being navigated in uncharted waters – in fact, in all likelihood, there was no such transition in the first place: the viscerally anti-multicultural Right does not share the same concerns with

non-French cultures as the Left did in the 1970s and, in general, favours cultural homogenisation over cultural coexistence. The Right has a shortage of major intellectual figures of global calibre. No international luminaries such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, the founder of structural anthropology, can be included within its rank and file.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary Right connects rather with De Gaulle's *passé* Great Powers politics, which is the antipode of Lévi-Strauss's structuralist penchant for cultural relativism.

The contemporary distinction between Right and Left ideas of the nation and nationalism is thus sharp (Conversi 2017). The former is built around fear so as to mobilise public opinion against internal foes and external enemies. The latter is built around culture, inclusiveness and the value of social justice. The former does not have a tangible programme except rallying the flag and building walls, while the latter focuses on comprehensive social welfare and attention to tangible social problems.

*Dire la France* is a brilliant, in parts outstanding, book that fills several critical gaps in the study of nationalism and contemporary French history. It challenges the relatively recent idea that the Left and nationalism are incompatible, refocusing their relationship around specific forms of envisaging and of narrating the nation. Debates in the 1980s implied nothing less than a rediscovery of French national identity and, in the process, remaking it through new discursive lenses.

For Roger Brubaker, the 'differentialist turn' of the Mitterrand's years was followed by a low-tone 'return of assimilation': public discourse has reverted to a 'normatively defensible understanding' of the notion of assimilation (Brubaker 2001). However, this 'weak assimilationism' has been unable to withstand two major challenges: on the one hand, the spectacle of 'irresponsible radicalization' stirring ethno-religious diasporas (Conversi 2012a) and, on the other hand, the pitfall of xenophobic populism. In fact, over 15 years later, Brubaker re-interpreted the rising populist conjuncture as a civilizational (*civilizationism*), rather than national (nationalism), opposition between 'self' and 'other'. Thus, a purely identitarian "*Christianism*" (rather than Christianity) prevailed through a secularist, even atheist, lens adopting various themes of the liberal Left – from gender equality to freedom of speech (Brubaker 2017).

More recently, the very notion of a fixed, primordial French identity has been challenged by a new generation of French historians. The *Global History of France* edited by Patrick Boucheron (2017) assembles 122 contributors who focus on 146 key dates for epochal events in as many chapters. Each has been entrusted to a scholar, often relatively young (bar a few emeriti), with a marked absence of footnotes and stoically adorned with a scraggly condensed bibliography. Each chapter combines, in four or five pages, a chronological approach with a contemporary 'trans-national' perspective. 'Trans-national' does not mean imperial history or a longing for the civilising mission of *la France universelle et éternelle* [universal and eternal France] but rather global history, cross-history or 'interconnected history'.



Nearly all the chosen dates uncover new cross-cultural scenarios in a formidable sequence of 40,000 years of 'French' history, enriched by witty anecdotes. The simplicity of ordinariness overcomes the triviality of extraordinariness, as habitually conveyed by predictable treatises replete with Great Men and Grand Events.

Here, we find no *longue duree* narrative yet a very long history of France. Beginning with the Neolithic Revolution, described as the greatest rupture in world history, the volume rejects the 'our ancestors the Gauls' clichéd narrative and, in general, the notion of a French identity that has existed since time immemorial. Instead, it begins with the 'Cro-Magnon Man' (European early 'modern' humans), the first *Homo sapiens sapiens* of the Upper Palaeolithic, whose fossilised skeleton was discovered in 1868 at Les Eyzies, Dordogne, and carbon-dated to about 28,000 years earlier. Rather than Frankish sovereigns and Gallic tribes, our common nomadic hunter-gatherer ancestors enchant us with their intricate rituals of hunting, birth and death, with their intermingling of racial and genetic materials from various provenances, a miscegenation trend which persisted during the next 36,000 years. Then the hunter-gatherer lifestyle reigned supreme across the planet apparently in optimal equilibrium with the surrounding natural environment. France was thus not 'French' from the depth of history – the ancient, millennial, age-old, timeworn nationalist myth of origin loses some of its charm.

Various dates function as signposts. For instance – and of great interest for scholars of nationalism and refugee studies – the year 1923 is earmarked for a dimly known, but highly significant, event: the arrival in France of the Aznavourian family who escaped the consequences of the Armenian genocide unleashed 8 years earlier by the Young Turks in 1915 (Akçam 2012; Kieser 2011). Their son, Shahnour Vaghinag Aznavourian, born on 22 May 1924, became famous as the singer and songwriter Charles Aznavour, one of the standard bearers of the *chanson* (French song). The idea of France as *terre d'accueil* [welcome land] and *terre d'asile* [land of asylum] is also explored through a captivating chapter on 'the other September 11', that of 1973, when the government of Salvador Allende in Chile was overthrown by a US-led military coup and France subsequently welcomed 10,000 Chilean refugees. Other dates are steeped in deep symbolic, emotional resonance.

The year 1984 brought the unexpected death of Michael Foucault at 53, whose global contribution is explored in the light of his last, sometimes posthumous, writings, most notably his commentaries about the first phase of the 1979 Shi'a Revolution in Iran and the *Solidarnosc* trade union movement in Poland.

This chronological sequence unearths a network of national, co-national and trans-national narratives funnelled by creativity, novelty, inquisitiveness and vision, like flashes in the firmament of time which assist to irradiate the obscure night of 'nationalising' historiographies. The *Global History of*

*France* has established a trend setting path with similar enterprises springing up across Europe, from ‘the global history of Spain’ (Núñez Seixas 2018) to the ‘global history of Italy’ (Giardina 2017) and even to the ‘global history of Sicily’ (Barone 2017). Slowly, the history of every ‘nation-state’ and ‘stateless nation’ is potentially being rewritten through singular vistas and perspectives, while differing from the more traditional study of global or world history.

The two books here reviewed signpost epochal changes: the first describes the actors from outside and the second is itself a prime mover and protagonist of current changes. Both analyse French national identity from a pluralist viewpoint and thus offer remarkable contributions to the study of French nationalism by addressing national identity in two momentous times of change: the 1980s, the era of incipient neoliberal globalisation, and the contemporary identity politics characterised by the rise of far Right populism. These very different volumes offer valuable tools to tackle the question of national narratives through an innovative perspective. At first glance, *The Global History of France* edited by Patrick Boucheron and Vincent Martigny’s *Dire la France* may appear not to have much in common beyond the broader theme of French national identity and its narrative. Yet they both reveal new cutting-edge trends in the study of nations and nationalism: the first for its reliance on the discursive aspect of the national narrative in a watershed historical moment and the second in overcoming deconstructionism, while attempting to produce a new ‘instant history’ better suited for the ‘Twitter age’. In this way, we have discovered two new ways of reconceiving French national identity in an accurately pluralist fashion.

## Notes

1 Although American writers and artists such as Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald and Cole Porter, as well as some of the best jazz musicians, flocked to Paris in search of inspiration, by the 1920s, Hollywood had already begun to supplant and overtake la *Ville Lumière* by captivating European public tastes: the cultural Americanisation of the old continent had begun in earnest and was in slow motion during the 1920s and 1930s. It was not yet an entirely unidirectional process. There was still space for experimentation, fusion, combination and merging of styles: in the 1930s, the Romani guitarist and composer Django Reinhardt created ‘*manouche jazz*’, a unique style combining American swing and Gypsy beat with reminiscences of the accordion-based *bal musette* ensembles typical of popular Paris (Perchard 2015). While the influence of America was still limited to the elites, its speed and pace started to gather momentum.

2 After the parenthesis of fascism, itself a prolongation of the state of war (with its rage building of centralised propaganda states which overstepped the French model), the new world order following the Allies’ V Day in 1945 deepened the Americanisation of Western societies and Japan, despite the cascade of creativity emanating from Italian neorealist cinema, the continuing resourcefulness of the French *chanson*, the lasting popularity of *sirtaki*, *hasapikos* and other Greek folk dances, plus a few other areas of dwindling resistance.

3 Lang served as Minister of Culture (1981–6 and 1988–92) and as Minister of Education (1992–3 and 2000–2).



4 In 1974, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi published *Pour Gramsci, choix de textes gramsciens commentés* (Macciocchi and Gramsci 1975).

5 Early on in the public debate, Lévi-Strauss played a pivotal role by pooling together the grey matter needed to set the foundations of an inclusive, anti-assimilationist and non-Jacobin notion of French identity, incorporating respectful inputs from other cultures (Lévi-Strauss and Benoist 1977).

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