Eternal France: Crisis and National Self-Perception in France, 1870-2005

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Her glorious fatherland is henceforth the pilot of humanity's vessel.
Jules Michelet, 1831[1]

We have all peasant ancestors
Claude Michelet, 1975[2]

The rejection by the French electorate of the European Constitutional Treaty on 29 May 2005 effectively brought the movement towards a federal Europe to a stop. It might be interpreted as purely contingent, an aberrant victory of the "little French," Eurosceptic tendency that had been held at bay by the pro-European liberal élite in the Maastricht vote of 1992 but now took its turn to triumph. France was divided into a Europhile and Europhobe tendency that were fairly evenly balanced and a further vote would see the majority pass back to the Europhiles. The effectiveness of the anti-federalist campaign, however, suggested that the result of 2005 was not an unexpected event but the expression of a deep-seated anxiety about outside threats to French national identity which in fact has manifested itself frequently at times of national crisis.

The Past in French History, published in 1994, postulated two basic models of French national identity. One was that of a confident France defined by a striving after greatness. "France cannot be France without greatness," de Gaulle began his *Mémoires de guerre* in 1954, echoing the notion of the "great nation accustomed to conquer" evoked by the poet and dramatist Marie-Joseph Chénier in 1797. The second was an open, generous conception of *la patrie* as the bearer of the universal values of liberty and civilization. In 1792 the Convention declared "in the name of the French nation that it will provide fraternity and aid to all peoples who seek to recover their liberty," a manifesto that was confirmed in the 1946 constitution of the Republic.[3] There was a final section on the cult of Joan of Arc as a national icon contested between Right and Left, but there was no deeper understanding of the role of Joan of Arc in French national consciousness.

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[1] Jules Michelet, "Introduction à l'histoire universelle," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Viallaneix (Paris, 1972), 227.

[2] Claude Michelet, *J'ai choisi la terre* (Paris, 1975), 14.

The shock of the 2005 vote prompted me to explore another model of French national identity to which the cult of Joan of Arc gave a clue but which needed to be placed in a much wider context. This model was that of a closed, fearful, defensive view of the nation in the older sense of an ancestral homeland, indeed of an "eternal France," whose identity was constructed against the ravages of change in a turbulent and menacing world. In search of this image I decided to examine moments of national crisis in French history since 1870 to explore the elaboration and development of this model.

An obvious question is why it might be thought necessary to go back to 1870 in order to explain an event that took place 135 years later. I will answer this anecdotally, then in terms of an understanding of traumatic events. The vote of 2005 brought into focus memories I have of my own adopted French family, whom I visited near Troyes (Aube) for the first time in 1967. The mother's family came from Belfort, where her great-grandfather had been among those who resisted the Prussian siege in 1870, a heroism immortalized by *Le Lion de Belfort* monument at Denfert-Rochereau in Paris. The war memorial on the square of the small Champagne town in which she lives is, significantly, not a *poilu* of 1914-18 but an infantryman of 1870. In pride of place over the dining room fireplace is a large engraving of one of Edouard Detaille's pictures of the 1870 war, showing the tenacious defense of Champigny outside Paris by French soldiers, the enemy invisible behind its high walls. On the mantelpiece in the sitting room is the photograph of the mother's uncle who died in the First World War, a proud young man in uniform, his medals displayed in the frame. In the kitchen, finally, is a map of France, bearing the name of Vidal de la Blache, showing the country's mountains and rivers in brown and blue on green, a constant reminder of the timeless fatherland. None of these has been moved in nearly forty years. The mother, now in her eighties, often returns to stories of the ravaging of the region by the English in the Hundred Years War and the Germans since, a testament to the enduring presence of the painful memories of recurrent war, defeat and occupation. I have no doubt that the mother voted against the Treaty in 2005; despite pressure for a "yes" vote from the Chiracist deputy-mayor of Troyes, the Aube voted "no" by a margin of 57 per cent to 43 per cent.[4]

The deeper explanation examines French history as a series of national crises that have recurred since 1870. This is, of course, only one possible reading of events. The defeat of France in 1870 has often been seen to have given rise to desires for revenge which found catharsis in 1918, a view argued most recently by Wolfgang

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[3] Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre*, vol. 1, *L'Appel, 1940-1942* (Paris, 1942), 1; M-J Chénier, "La mort du général Hoche," in *Oeuvres* III (Paris, 1826), 187-8; Jacques Godechot, *La Grande Nation* (Paris, 1983), 75-6; Jacques Godechot, *Les Constitutions de la France depuis 1789* (Paris, 1979), 390; Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven and London, 1994), 112-13, 135, 150.

[4] *Le Monde*, 31 May 2005.

Schivelbusch in his comparative analysis of the impact of defeat in the American South in the Civil War, France in 1870, and Germany in 1918.[5] However, Bertrand Joly has taken the opposite line that while the French could not forget their humiliation they did not think in terms of an offensive war against Germany to retake Alsace-Lorraine.[6] This echoes more nearly the sense of Ernest Renan in his much-quoted 1882 lecture *What is a Nation?*, in which he wrote, "Yes, suffering unites more than joy. As far as national memories are concerned, mourning is more potent than triumph, because it imposes duties and dictates a collective effort."[7] After 1870 the French entered a long period of mourning during which they constructed a first version of closed, fearful but eternal France. The First World War was a French victory that might have laid these demons to rest, but it was a Pyrrhic one, leaving a million and a half French dead, a tenth of them at Verdun. The closed, fearful view of France remained and may indeed be regarded as a cause as well as an effect of the armistice of 1940, which was the most serious crisis for France in modern times. While de Gaulle issued his call to continue the struggle from London, Pétain himself struck a deeper chord by announcing, "I will not abandon French soil and accept the suffering that will be imposed on the fatherland and its sons. The renaissance of France will be the fruit of this suffering."[8]

After 1945 France recovered her national sovereignty, national unity and her empire, but the scars of four years of German occupation and virtual civil war were slow to heal. Significantly, de Gaulle, addressing liberated Paris from the Hôtel de Ville on 25 August 1944 paid homage to "the only France, true France, eternal France." "In the last 155 years France has been invaded on seven different occasions," he reflected in 1945. "There is not a single power in the universe that has suffered so much."[9] In the postwar period France experienced the rapid economic growth and modernization of what became known as the *trente glorieuses*. With the return of de Gaulle in 1958 she exchanged the incubus of colonies in revolt for leadership of Europe and an independent nuclear deterrent, so that national greatness was once more part of the agenda.[10] And yet traditional France, represented by its peasants, artisans and shopkeepers, resisted modernization through Poujadism and farmers' revolts, and even as France became a modern, urban society in the 1960s it developed, as we shall see, a cult of the home-loving Gaul, Astérix. France reached a high-point of confidence when Jacques Delors, who as finance minister converted the French socialists to the idea of Europe and as president of the European Commission drove through the Single European Act of 1986, proclaimed that far from losing her identity in the European Union, "France will be even more France than she is today because she is stronger economically and more influential intellectually and politically."[11] However, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany was felt in France very much as a defeat, with the leadership of Europe passing squarely from France to Germany. Subsequently, in the later 1990s, globalization was seen in France as yet another defeat, this time at the hands of Anglo-Saxon ultra-liberalism which brushed aside countries such as France that refused to sacrifice their standard and quality of life to the demands of global competition. Viviane Forrestier's 1996 treatise *Economic Horror,* denouncing this threat, sold 350,000 copies in France alone.[12]

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[5] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat. On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery* (London, 2003), 10-35.

[6] Bertrand Joly, "La France et la Revanche (1981-1914)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et Contemporaine* 46:2 (1999): 325-47.

[7] Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne le 11 mars 1882," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1947), 904.

[8] Philippe Pétain, speech of 13 June 1940, in *Actes et Écrits* (Paris, 1974), 448.

[9] Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1970), 440, 656. The seven occasions he cited were 1792, 1793, 1814, 1815, 1870-1, 1914-18, 1940-45.

[10] Philip Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur: Ideological Aspects of de Gaulle's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, 1980).

These defeats, it may be argued, were traumatic events which turned the French away from notions of national greatness or a universal mission to spread liberty and civilization and towards a closed and fearful concept of eternal France. Responses to traumatic events, in the sense of bodily or more often psychological wounds, have been analyzed as taking one of two forms. For Freud, they could result in a "compulsion to repeat" the experience or "defensive reactions" against them.[13] American neuroscientist Alan Schore argues that responses switch between hyperarousal or "frantic distress" on the one hand and on the other dissociation, disengagement from the stimuli of the external world as a defensive strategy and what he calls "metabolic shutdown."[14]

Whether trauma can affect not only individuals but also communities has been keenly debated. Kai Erikson argues that when catastrophic events impact on communities, "the shared experience becomes almost like a common culture, a source of kinship," making it possible to speak of a "traumatized community.[15] Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma cannot be experienced purely individually but only collectively, though a process of witness that implicates not only the current generation but, as in the case of the Holocaust, future generations too.[16] One example may suffice. The writer Henri Bosco, born in 1888, learned of the war of 1870 from a village shoemaker, the *père* Simon, who constantly sang patriotic songs from the war. The shoemaker, recalled Bosco, "had not experienced the battlefields. But he had lived through that sad time at an age in which people participated in a civic sense at least, by discussions about the fortunes and misfortunes of their country."[17]

The concept of dissociation or shutdown, as a collective response to loss or threat, helps us to understand the model of the French nation that was inward-looking and fearful but also protective and nurturing, a community or home and a continuity that was constructed precisely to overcome the ravages of defeat, occupation and division. Three elements characterized this conception of the nation that we will explore here. The first was that of the land of one's ancestors, the ancestral territory for which its descendants were prepared to die and indeed had died and in which they were buried. The second was that of the land of France as its soil, which had been made plentiful by the work of generations of peasants and rural artisans, organized in patriarchal families and villages that provided the economic and moral backbone of the nation. The third was the "great ancestors," the national heroes who had saved the fatherland, in particular Joan of Arc, who drove out the English and Vercingétorix, who had rallied Gaul against the Romans fifty years B.C. and, in doing so, became its martyrs. Together these elements provided a history of survival that could be passed on to future generations in order to permit them to survive. These elements of eternal France were not only reactionary and simplistic, but also polyvalent, capable of popular, mass or left-wing constructions and, therefore, appealed to a wide variety of publics.

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[11] Jacques Delors and Clisthène, *Our Europe. The Community and National Development* (London, 1992), 152.

[12] Viviane Forrestier, *L'Horreur économique* (Paris, 1996), translated as *The Economic Horror* (Cambridge, 1999) and *Une Étrange dictature* (Paris, 2000); Philip H. Gordon and Sophie Meunier, *The French Challenge. Adapting to Globalisation* (Washington, 2001).

[13] Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* [1937-8], in *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 23 (London, 1964), 74-6.

[14] Alan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self* (New York and London, 2003), 67-8, 124.

[15] Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble* (New York, 1995), 230, 233, 237. See also his "Notes on Trauma and Community" in Cathy Caruth ed., *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London, 1995), 185-8.

[16] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London, 1996), 136.

[17] Henri Bosco, *Souvenirs*, vol. 1, *Un Oubli moins profond* (Paris, 1961), 213.

The Land of One's Ancestors

The amputation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 was a massive blow to the integrity of the ancestral territory. The impact was felt not only by locals, forced to choose between France and the Reich, but by the French of the interior. Maurice Barrès, whose hometown of Charmes in Lorraine was occupied by the Prussians during 1870 war, when he was a boy, became obsessed by separation from the bodies of the soldiers of that war, buried in what was now German soil. He went on a pilgrimage to the battlefields of the war of 1870 almost every August in the 1890s on the anniversary of the clashes in Alsace, the high point of which was the visit to Reichshoffen, site of the last charge of the cuirassiers.[18] At the time of the Dreyfus Affair Barrès developed a cult of French soldiers buried in what was now German soil in order to promote a sense of solidarity with the lost provinces and an idea of a French nation rooted in *la terre et les morts.* "At Chambière," outside Metz, where 7200 French soldiers from the war of 1870 were buried, he told the Ligue de la Patrie Française in a lecture of 1899, "where the sand is mixed with our dead, our heart persuades our mind of the great destiny of France and imposes on all of us a moral unity."[19]

In 1918 the ancestral territory of Alsace-Lorraine was recovered, and the French were reunited with their dead. "Today," reflected Maurice Barrès, returning to the cemetery of Chambière, "we see the sons of France stretched out among their avenged fathers, in the reconquered soil. It is a great tribute to French loyalty."[20] Victory, however, had come at a massive cost, especially to soldier-peasants. Homage to the sacrifice of those who had defended the fatherland was paid in every town and village where war memorials were erected by public subscription. Unveiling that of Capoulet-Juniac (Ariège) in 1935, Marshal Pétain said that the peasants ensured the "solidity" of the infantry, "retaining the passionate commitment to fight so long as the enemy trampled on French soil. In the darkest hours—I will recall it before this monument," said Pétain, "it was the calm and determined look of the peasant which sustained my confidence."[21]

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[18] Maurice Barrès, *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1925), 115-30.

[19] Barrès, *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme*, vol. 1, 92; and Yves Chiron, *La Vie de Barrès* (Paris, 2000), 21-2.

[20] Maurice Barrès, entry of 29 November 1919, *Chronique de la Grande Guerre, 1914-1920* (Paris, 1920), 626.

The cult of the land of ancestors goes a long way to explain the decision to sue for armistice in 1940. And yet the defeat left one and a half million French soldiers prisoners of war in German camps. Vichy therefore developed less a cult of soldiers who died in the campaign of 1940, who were much fewer than the casualties of the Great War, than a remembrance of the POWs, who generally repaid the compliment with a fervent Pétainism.[22] The absence of the POWs was a principal reason for the state of mourning that now became official in France, with the result that dancing, for example, was banned until the national territory was liberated.[23]

Although after 1945 France was again free and whole, it still bore the scars of occupation and division. Its suffering was marked less by the graves of combatant soldiers than by those of civilians who had died during the liberation of France, usually innocent people who had been massacred in brutal collective reprisals inflicted by the Germans on communities suspected of harboring "terrorists." The most famous instance of a massacre of innocents was at Oradour-sur-Glane near Limoges, torched by the SS Division Das Reich on 10 June 1944, killing 642 inhabitants, the ruins of which were consecrated as a historic monument in 1946 to bear witness to Nazi barbarism.[24] The scars of these massacres made it difficult for the French to accept the European project of the 1950s, in particular the proposed European Defence Community (EDC) which looked to rearm Germany within the framework of a European army and by the same token to subordinate the French army to European command. Debate on the EDC coincided with the trial at Bordeaux in January-February 1953 of members of the SS Division Das Reich for the Oradour massacre. The majority of soldiers on trial were not in fact Germans but annexed Alsatians drafted against their will into the German army. The sentencing of thirteen Alsatians to long years of hard labor or prison provoked powerful protest in Alsace, and the National Assembly responded by amnestying the condemned soldiers. The population of the Limousin in which Oradour was situated, aggrieved by their treatment and fearful that the EDC would rearm Germans, registered sharp opposition to the EDC in public opinion polls taken between 1953 and 1955, while Alsace, hoping that European cooperation would end it being torn between France and Germany, was the French region most in favor.

After de Gaulle returned to power in 1958 France accepted the European Community as a customs union, so long as her farmers were protected under the Common Agricultural Policy, and forged ahead as a great power by developing a nuclear deterrent or *force de frappe*. Michel Debré, prime minister in 1958-62, became defense minister in 1970, after the fall of de Gaulle, and immediately went on a pilgrimage to Alsace, for the centenary of the Franco-Prussian war, visiting the battlefields of Froeschwiller and Wissembourg in the steps of Barrès, declaring that only nuclear weapons could adequately defend French soil.[25] He had much less devotion to other parts of France, some of which were scheduled to become military bases linked to the nuclear weapons program. He proposed to extend the military base at Larzac on the limestone plateau of the Causses in southwest France, seeing it inhabited by only a few sheep-farmers, "still living more or less as they had done in the Middle Ages." The plan was contested, however, in a way that revealed two very different views of the land: as a resource to defend the land of one's ancestors and as a resource made fertile by labor of generations of farmers. A united front of local farmers, post-1968 *gauchistes,* radical Catholics and Occitan nationalists duly occupied the plateau and harassed the army. Among these was José Bové, a young anarchist who had spent three years as a child with his scientist parents at Berkeley, had been expelled from school for irreligion and refused military service as a conscientious objector in 1974. He and his wife rented a plot of land from a peasant as part of a collective scheme to deny it to the army and to raise sheep for Roquefort cheese, and he received a suspended sentence for occupying the military base in 1976. Success came when François Mitterrand came to power in 1981 and abandoned the Larzac project.[26]

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[21] Philippe Pétain, speech at Capulet-Juniac, November 1935, *Actes et écrits* (Paris, 1974), 17-18.

[22] Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French* (London, 2006), 181-212.

[23] Robert Gildea, "*Les Années noires*? Clandestine dancing in Occupied France," in Martyn Cornick and Ceri Crossley eds., *Problems in French History* (Basingstoke, 2000), 197-212.

[24] Sarah Farmer, *Martyred Village. Commemorating the 1944 massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley, 1999), 59, 94.

The Land

This conception of the land, articulated by the Larzac movement, was that of the land of France, made fertile by the labor of the peasant, with tools provided by the rural artisan. It was a regular element in the construction of eternal France, within which patient labor on the family farm was seen to be the bedrock of the patriarchal family, which nurtured new generations of peasants and of the rural community, which maintained the economic and spiritual balance between the healthy countryside and the corrupting influence of the city. Its relationship with belligerence was more ambivalent, for though the land bred soldier-peasants for whom the defense of the fatherland and the defense of their own farms were supposed to be the same thing, in reality the land was generally loath to lose its sons to wars from which many would not return.

Both before and after the First World War there was an enthusiasm for folklore and a nostalgic movement of writers such as the Angevin René Bazin, the Breton Alphonse de Châteaubriant, and the Auvergnat Henri Pourrat who won the *Figaro*'s literary prize in 1922 for his *Gaspard des Montagnes,* the adventures of a native of the unforgiving soil of the Auvergne, presented as a popular story-tale and aspiring to reveal the peasant soul.[27] This cult of the land and rural community was not only the province of reactionary writers and eccentric folklorists. Provence, rather than the Auvergne, developed a rural nostalgia that reached a mass public, on the left as well as the right. Marcel Pagnol (1895-1974), the son of an *instituteur,* deemed unfit to fight in the war and a failure as a teacher, took Paris by storm in 1928 with his play *Topaze*. His breakthrough came when he bought the film rights to the rustic novels of his exact Provençal contemporary Jean Giono and set up his own film company. Filming on location in Provence, Pagnol used powerful comic actors such as Fernandel to make Giono's stories less epic and more familiar, such as *La Femme du boulanger* (1938) in which the village rallies round to restore the baker's unfaithful wife to him and with her their supply of bread.[28] At the height of the Popular Front Pagnol appealed to a French public that was nostalgic about a village life that even for city-dwellers was only a generation away.

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[25] Michel Debré, *Combattre toujours, 1969-1993,* vol. 5 of *Trois républiques pour une France : mémoires* (Paris, 1994), 65-6, 137-8.

[26] Hermann Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home. France in the Global Age* (Durham and London, 2004), 24-55; José Bové, *La Révolte d'un paysan* (Villeurbanne, 2000), 6-20; and Alexander Alland, *Le Larzac et après. L'étude d'un mouvement social novateur* (Paris, 1995)

[27] Henri Pourrat, *Les Vailances, farces et gentillesses de Gaspard des Montagnesi* (Paris, 1922). Three further volumes folowed by 1931.

Vichy, therefore, drew on a widespread sentiment with its policy of a return to the soil as a way of restoring France's national character and resolve. Pagnol, whose wartime romance *La Fille du puisatier* was filmed during the period of the defeat itself, was regarded as too frivolous by the Vichy regime and suffered an eclipse.[29] Henri Pourrat, who stayed in his small hometown of Ambert in the Auvergne, was delighted to find his values consecrated by Vichy. The material and moral integrity of France, he argued in his *Man with the Spade. A History of the Peasant* (1941), was threatened by loss to the countryside of migrating labor and dead soldiers. After her defeat she could only find salvation in "her old blood," that of the peasant married to the soil. After Pétain's visit to Ambert in October 1940 he wrote *The French Leader*, exalting the Marshal's ability to communicate directly with real men, whether peasants or peasant-soldiers, and to draw on the "earthy wisdom" that they embodied.[30]

The close association of rural and regionalist ideas with Vichy threatened to discredit them after the Liberation except that, as we have seen, they were profoundly embedded in French consciousness since 1870 at least. Henri Pourrat now eschewed politics and concentrated on bringing out volumes of Auvergnat stories.[31] Untainted by the occupation, Pagnol, elected to the Académie Française in 1949, brought his second wife to the screen in 1952 with *Manon des Sources*, the story of another shepherdess who wreaks slow vengeance on the peasant family who killed her father by blocking up the water source. Pagnol brought out a novel version of *Manon des Sources*, preceded by *Jean de Florette*, as *L'Eau des Collines* in 1962, and after the death of his father in 1951 he took up autobiography, exploring his childhood before the Great War in Marseilles. He returns to his family roots in the Provençal countryside, learns to hunt with his father and uncle and is eventually invited to stay at his château by an old colonel who had taken part in the famous cavalry charge at Reichshoffen in 1870. These texts became beloved in French schools by setters of dictation and *morceaux choisis*, and provoked correspondence with whole classes about whether such and such an anecdote or character were true.[32]

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[28] Raymond Castans, *Marcel Pagnol* (Paris, 1987); Jacques Mény, *Jean Giono et le cinéma* (Paris, 1978), 61-6; Thierry Dehayes, *Marcel Pagnol à l'école de Jean Giono?* (Pont-Saint-Esprit, 2001), 39-66; and Brett Bowles, "Politicizing pagnol. Rural France, film and ideology under the Popular Front," *French History* 19:1 (2005): 112-42

[29] Castans, *Pagnol*, 235-45.

[30] Henri Pourrat, *L'Homme à la bêche; histoire du paysan* (Paris, 1941), 251-62, 282; and Henry Pourrat, *Le Chef français* (Marseille, 1942), 46-61.

[31] Henri Pourrat, *Trésor des contes*, 13 vols. (Paris, 1948-62).

[32] Pagnol, *La Gloire de mon père* (Monte Carlo, 1957), *Le Château de ma mère*

The "Great Ancestors"

"The cult of ancestors," declared Renan, "is the most legitimate cult of all. Our ancestors made us who we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (I mean the genuine article), that is the social capital on which a national idea is based."[33] The period after 1870 saw the development of the cult of two national heroes, Joan of Arc and Vercingétorix, the Gallic chief who had defeated Julius Caesar at the battle of Gergovia in 52 B.C. before succumbing to him at Alesia and being taken to Rome for execution. These two heroes, imagined hand in hand for the Salon of 1872 by the sculptor Chatrousse, symbolized an eternal France that went back to ancient Gaul and a united France, despite the battles that took place between rival political and religious factions to "own" their memory. The epic journey of Joan of Arc was commemorated in towns and cities that erected equestrian statues to her at the end of the nineteenth century, from the famous Frémiet statue on the Place des Pyramides (1875) to those in Chinon, Orléans, Reims, and Rouen. The cult of Vercingétorix, the Gallic chief, was embedded in the rural landscape rather than the city, but the site of his defeat at Alésia was disputed between partisans of Alise-Sainte-Reine (Côte d'Or), which raised a great statue to him there in 1865, and those of Alaise (Doubs), each side sponsoring frantic excavations.[34]

The Great War brought the apotheosis of the cult of Joan of Arc. Her popularity surged ahead of that of Vercingétorix, perhaps because the pagan Gaul who succumbed to the Romans ill reflected France's proclaimed struggle on behalf of Christianity and civilization. Joan had perished too, but she had saved France and could work miracles. The need of the average *poilu* for supernatural protection and above all the "miracle of the Marne" when German troops were checked before Paris, already abandoned by the government as in 1870, turned her into a national heroine. Barrès, now president of the Ligue des Patriotes, campaigned for a national festival in her honor from December 1914, arguing that she was making a reality "the generous dream of eternal France." Joan was canonized in 1920 and the first national festival in her honor was held on 8 May 1921.

Defeat and occupation in 1940 gave a powerful boost to the cult of Joan of Arc, one who could point the way to deliverance. Parallels were drawn between the divisions and sins that had brought France to its knees now and in her time, but given the presence of the Germans the enemy was still cast as the English who had occupied France and burned Joan in the fifteenth century, while the French renaissance was conceived less in military terms than as the moral and spiritual renewal that must precede it. Alongside Joan, however, Vercingétorix was rehabilitated as a national hero. Archaeological digs were resumed at Gergovia, north of Clermont-Ferrand, by Strasbourg professors and their students who had been relocated to Clermont after the German re-annexation of Alsace. This plateau was chosen for the second anniversary of the Légion Française des Combattants, on 30 August 1942, to commemorate the victory of Vercingétorix over the Romans and the birth of the fatherland. Although or because half of France was under German occupation and Vichy was fighting a losing battle with the Allies and Free French for control of her colonies, sachets of earth

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(Monte Carlo, 1958), *Le Temps des Secrets* (Monte Carlo, 1960); *Le Temps des amours* (Paris, 1977); see also the postface to the final volume by Bernard de Fallois, 316-17; and Castans, *Pagnol*, 297-329.

[33] Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, 26-7.

[34] Joël Legall, *Alésia, archéologie et histoire* (Paris, 1963), 38-46.

were sent from communes of all parts of France and the Empire to be buried in the monument that topped the plateau as a symbol of French national unity.[35]

The recovery of France after the Liberation did not make redundant the cults of her great ancestors, on the contrary. Joan was celebrated as theirs at one and the same time by the Catholic Church, the Communist Party and de Gaulle. The bimillenium of Vercingétorix's defeat at Alésia was commemorated at Alise-Sainte-Reine in 1949, but much more potent was the way in which his legend fed into the phenomenon of the strip-cartoon character Astérix and his comrades created by the humorist René Goscinny and artist Alberto Uderzo in 1959. Where school textbooks in the 1960s portrayed the Gallic village as an assemblage of peasant huts which compared unfavorably with the clean streets and running water of the Roman town, the Astérix series proclaimed the superiority of the Gauls over all other civilizations, including the Roman. Astérix's village is the only place in Gaul to have resisted the Romans, by a typical Gallic combination of cunning and magic, but resistance is at the service not of any high ideals but of the home sweet home, good food and good company beloved of the average Frenchman, who by the 1960s lived in the city but yearned for his roots or a second home in the countryside and was nostalgic for traditional values. It is ironic and eloquent that at the moment when France seemed to recover confidence in its own influence in the world the attention of the reading public, particularly young people who made May '68, should be absorbed by the exploits of Gallic heroes ranged against a world in which everyone else was "fous."[36]

As the embodiment of a certain idea of France, superior but parochial, Astérix became a symbol around which to analyze France's predicament. In *The Astérix Complex* of 1985, for example, commentator Alain Duhamel exposed the contradiction between France's European and indeed global ambitions and her instinctive retreat to the cult of national heroes and heroines. France, he argued, had ceased to become a great power on its defeat in 1940 and with the loss of its empire twenty years later. It still had much to be proud of, with pro-European sentiment much stronger among the French than ten years before and France now the world's third nuclear power, third exporting power and fifth industrial power: "we are no longer living in the age of the Basque beret, the baguette and *pétanque*." And yet, he observed, while the French wanted their country to retain "a role and a voice," they "aspire even more to tranquility, stability and if possible prosperity." Like Astérix, he concluded, the average Frenchman was "passionately attached to his village and convinced that nothing in the world can match it."[37]

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[35] Antoinette Ehrard, "Vercingétorix contre Gergovie?" in Paul Viallaneix and Jean Ehrard eds., *Nos Ancêtres les gaulois*, 313-4; and Dietler, "Our Ancestors the Gauls", 592.

[36] See in particular *Astérix le Gaulois* (Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1961), *La Serpe d'or* (1962), *Astérix et Cléopatre* (1968), *Astérix et le bouclier d'Averne* (1968), *Astérix et le Chaudron* (1969), *Astérix chez les Goths* (1968), *La Tour de Gaulle d'Astérix* (1968), *Astérix chez les Bretons* (1969), *Astérix en Hispanie* (1969), *Astérix chez les Helvètes* (1970); Guy Vidal, Anne Goscinny, Patrick Gaumer, *René Goscinny. Profession humoriste* (Paris, 1997), 59-76; and Daniel-Henri Paleaux, "De l'imagerie culturelle au mythe politique: Astérix le Gaulois," in Viallaneix and Ehrard eds., *Nos Ancêtres les Gaulois*, 437-43.

[37] Alain Duhamel, *Le Complexe d'Astérix* (Paris, 1985), 10, 217-35.

The Maastricht Debate

We are now better placed to understand the near-rejection of the Maastricht Treaty by the French electorate in 1992 and its rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005. This may be studied at the level of political debate, concentrating on issues of national sovereignty and economic and social well-being. It is my contention, however, that if we are to grasp the force and meaning of the recent hostility of the French people to the European project we need to understand powerful references that continue to be made to the idea of an eternal France.

When the treaty was debated in the French Assembly in May 1992, Foreign Minister Roland Dumas defended it as being squarely in the tradition of the European project started in 1950. During the referendum campaign another Socialist minister Elisabeth Guigou argued, “France has never been a country closed in upon itself, in its bunker.”[38] The treaty of Maastricht was approved by the National Assembly on 13 May 1992 by 398 votes to 77, with 99 abstentions and carried by the narrowest of margins in the referendum of 21 September 1992 by 51 per cent in favor to 49 per cent against. For many politicians Maastricht represented an unacceptable challenge to French national sovereignty, which was the guarantee of French republican democracy against the technocrats of Brussels who were seen as vehicles of international finance-capitalism. The Communist Party, perennially hostile to Europe as a supranational instrument of capitalism, together with the National Front, came out against the treaty. While most socialists backed the treaty, a dissident Jean-Pierre Chevènement organized a conference in his base at Belfort on the 1991 anniversary of the battle of Valmy to defend the ideal of a strong, Jacobin republic, guarantor of the universal values of 1789, and denounced “the new Holy Alliance of capital.”[39] The Gaullist RPR was divided between those who argued that de Gaulle would have endorsed Maastricht and those, led by Philippe Séguin, biographer of Napoleon III, who argued that he would have rejected it as an affront to French sovereignty and that under the treaty the French would be allowed only “their cheeses, a few of their customs, because folklore doesn’t upset anyone...perhaps the *Marseillaise*, so long as we change the words.”[40] Michel Debré, who had campaigned against EDC in the early 1950s, played on the issue of wartime legitimacy by arguing, “Laval would have said yes, de Gaulle no.”[41] The centrist UDF were mainly in favor of the treaty, but Philippe de Villiers, who had made his reputation during the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989 denouncing it as the perpetrator of genocide in the Vendée, where he was a deputy, and sponsored the medieval fantasy theme park of Le Puy du Fou in the Vendée, led the charge against the treaty from the viewpoint of conservative, Catholic French values.

An analysis of the deeper reasons for the near-rejection of the Treaty was given by Duhamel in his 1993 essay *Les Peurs français*. He argued that instead of seeing Europe as a French idea and indeed French vocation, France was now afraid of

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[38] *Le Monde*, 16 September 1992.

[39] Jean-Pierre Chevènement, *La République, l’Europe et l’universel. Colloque, Belfort, 21-22 septembre 1991* (Belfort, 1993), 255. See also his *France-Allemagne. Parlons franc* (Paris, 1995).

[40] *Journal Officiel. Débats parlementaires. Assemblée Nationale*, 5 May 1992. See also Philippe Séguin, *Discours pour la France* (Paris, 1992).

[41] Debré, *Combattre toujours*, 175-6, 221.

Europe because after German reunification it had lost the power to influence it. And yet, he argued, the worst outcome would be "a turning inward, a closing down, a return to the past, a cold-sensitive protectionism, an archaic irredentism, an anachronistic isolationism represented by each extremity of the political chessboard, the Communist Party and the National Front."[42] Unfortunately, in the years leading up to the referendum of 1992 the cult of eternal France, a sublimation of this defensive reflex, was still very much in evidence.

The reunification of Germany in 1989 provoked fears that a Europe that had once been controlled by France would now be controlled by Germany, posing a threat as in 1870, 1914 and 1940 to the ancestral homeland. Fantasies were nourished of a return of the Bismarckian Reich, with a population of eighty million and a powerful industrial economy, fuelling Pan-German ambitions.[43] In September 1984 Mitterrand had held hands with Chancellor Kohl at Verdun, using memory of the losses on both sides to cement a common friendship and proclaim, "Europe is our common fatherland."[44] In December 1989, however, a Pancho cartoon in *Le Monde* featured an anxious Mitterrand asking Kohl, "You haven't said anything about the Oder-Neisse" line and Kohl replying, "Nor about Alsace-Lorraine."[45] Repressed fears about German claims to Poland and Alsace-Lorraine were again in the open.

Attachment to the land and to rural life was powerfully manifest in the literary and cinematic world of the 1980s. The census of 1982 revealed that for the first time the rural population in France grew faster than the urban population, as people fled the inner cities and suburbs for the delights of the countryside, using cars to commute to work and provisioned by out-of-town supermarkets. A "Brive school" of rural writers from the Corrèze was cultivated by the publisher Robert Laffont and given publicity by the Brive Book Fair from 1981. Consciously constructed against the *nouveau roman* and prestigious prizes of Paris, a gastronomic train was nevertheless laid on for the Paris media to visit the fair, presided over in 1997 by Jacques Chirac's wife, Bernadette, and much was made of the huge publishing success of the school.[46] Its leading light was Claude Michelet, son of Resistance hero Edmond Michelet, who had spent his childhood on the family property in the Corrèze during the war, resented having to go to Paris when his father became a minister in 1945, and returned to raise cattle and sheep in 1960, claiming that "the family farm is the last bastion of liberty."[47] He married a country girl, raised a large family and give birth after 1979 to a fictional Corrézian family, the Vialhe, who maintain their farm and their values in the face of recurrent wars and political, economic and social change throughout the twentieth century.[48] In his *History of French Peasants* in 1996 Michelet told as if to his grandchildren the story of "all the peasants who were your ancestors and who gave you roots" and attacked the Eurocrats who were ordering them now to set aside agricultural land and killing off villages.[49] Meanwhile, on the screen, Marcel Pagnol's tragicomic accounts of families seeking paradise in the Provençal countryside enjoyed a new lease of life through Claude Berri's 1986 *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, starring in the title roles Gérard Depardieu and Emmanuelle Béart, and Yves Robert's dramatizations of his autobiography, *La Gloire de mon père* and *Le Château de ma mère* in 1990.

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[42] Alain Duhamel, *Les Peurs françaises* (Paris, 2003), 72.

[43] Edmond Marc Lipinasky, *L'Identité française. Représentations, mythes, idéologies* (Paris, 1991), 263.

[44] *Le Monde*, 25 September 1984.

[45] *Le Monde*, 10-11 December 1989.

[46] William Cloonan, "Marketing *La France profonde*: l'École de Brive," *Modern & Contemporary France* 7:2 (1999): 225-34; and Sara Poole, "'*Mais le vieillard est grand*': positive ageing in the modern *roman du terroir*," *Modern & Contemporary France* 10:2 (2002): 177-86.

[47] Claude Michelet, *J'ai choisi la terre*, 148.

[48] Claude Michelet, *Des Grives aux loups,* 4 vols. (Paris, 1979-1987).

The election of a socialist president in 1981 should have made a great difference to the heroes who were now celebrated. On the day of his inauguration, 21 May 1981, François Mitterrand laid wreaths at the Panthéon at the tombs of the socialist Jean Jaurès, the resister Jean Moulin, and the slavery abolitionist Victor Schoelcher. Yet as if to reassure a population that could not believe that French national unity was safe with socialism, Mitterrand also resumed the cult of France's great ancestors. On 8 May 1982 he celebrated Joan of Arc Day at Orléans, hailing her "lesson of resistance" and "lesson of national unity" as left-wing councilors and activists shuffled uneasily in the right-wing town.[50] Three years later, on 17 September 1985, he commemorated the first act of the nation's history and demonstration of "national cohesion," the election in 52 B.C. of Vercingétorix as chief of the combined armies of Gaul and beginning of the Gallic uprising, at Bibracte in the Morvan, close to his electoral base in the Nièvre.[51]

The European Constitutional Treaty Debate

The close call of the Maastricht vote might have reflected a momentary loss of confidence, after which France recovered her self-belief and openness. This was not to be. From the mid-1990s a new threat to the French nation and its way of life came from globalization, which was commonly perceived to be an instrument of Anglo-American power. The cult of eternal France received additional impetus, although the image did not always remain the same.

The French ancestral homeland was still seen as a graveyard, but what was remembered about the Great War was less honorable death for the fatherland than the suffering of the ordinary soldiers and their families. At Biron in the Dordogne a new monument designed by the German sculptor Jochen Gerz was unveiled in 1996, covered in red brass plaques on which villagers' thoughts were transcribed. "All my childhood I saw my grandmother cry for her sons," ran one. "She lost two, the third had only one foot and the fourth had to go. She nearly lost her mind, the poor woman. She cried with grief, anger and fear."[52] During commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of the armistice in November 1998, socialist premier Lionel Jospin visited Craonne, site of huge losses in the battle of the Chemin des Dames in April 1917, which until then had been avoided by official celebrations. Jospin argued that those who had been shot for mutiny, objecting to mindless massacre, as an example to others, should be integrated into the "collective national memory," while the mayor of Craonne, presenting him with a scarf of a soldier who had died at the Chemin des Dames, called the suicidal offensive of 1917 "the first great crime against humanity."[53]

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[49] Claude Michelet, *Histoire des Paysans en France* (Paris, 1996).

[50] *Libération*, 10 May 1982; *Le Monde*, 11 May 1982.

[51] *Le Monde*, 19 September 1985; Dietler, "Our Ancestors the Gauls," 592-3.

[52] Annette Becker, "Politique culturelle, commémorations et leur usages politiques. L'exemple de la Grande Guerre dans les années 1990," in Claire Andrieu, Marie-Claire Lavabre and Danielle Tartakowsky, *Politiques du passé. Usages politiques du passé dans la France contemporaine* (Aix-en-Provence, 2006), 30-5.

The cult of the land and the farming families who produced traditional French food and maintained traditional values was no less powerful than before. Globalization meant that the United States could impose prohibitive duties on French produce such as Roquefort cheese in retaliation for EU restrictions on the import of hormone-treated beef used by McDonald's. In defense of the Roquefort-producing sheep-farmers of the Causses, Larzac veteran José Bové and his friends from the Peasant Confederation dismantled the McDonald's restaurant at Millau in southwest France in August 1999. Refusing to pay bail, he went to prison until popular subscription fired by his stand against industrial junk food, colloquially known as the *mal-bouffe,* secured his release. Photographed outside the courtroom with blue eyes and Gallic moustache, chained fists held above his head, he was instantly recognized as a modern-day Vercingétorix.[54] Meanwhile winegrowers from the extreme southwest Languedoc-Roussillon, suffering competition from the industrial wine production of the New World which the European Union did nothing to stop, resorted to direct action in 2001-2 against the import of foreign wines. Their predicament was dramatized even more effectively by Jonathan Nossiter's *Mondovino,* which premiered at Cannes in 2004, and set the traditional wine producers of Bordeaux and Burgundy, where the wines developed over years in family vineyards were defined by the particular *terroir* in which they grew, against the giant producers of California's Napa Valley, who scientifically matched their wines to the changing taste of the mass market.[55] The cult of the land was maintained by new generations of the rural novel edited by Robert Laffont. Bernard Blangenois, whose *Une Odeur de neige* (1997), featuring a prostitute saved by an honest but damaged man of the woods, won the "Terre de France" prize, was hailed in *Libération* as "the heir of Giono."[56] Meanwhile the defense of France's rural way of life was politicized by the 1.4 million strong hunting lobby, whose own political party, Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Traditions, headed by Jean Saint-Josse, a mayor of the Pyrénées-Orientales, battled against European attempts to limit the hunting season. Broadening its mission to "the defence of the values of rurality and the interests of the rural world," it won 6.8 per cent of the vote in the 2002 European elections.[57]

France's grand ancestors, meanwhile, successfully made the move to France's blockbuster culture. Former Gaullist premier Edouard Balladur complained in his *Jeanne d'Arc et la France: le mythe du sauveur* that Joan of Arc was no longer "a central figure in the national imagination," but he must have missed *The Messenger:*

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[53] Nicholas Offenstadt, *Les Fusillés de la Grande Guerre et la mémoire collective, 1914-1999* (Paris, 2002), 212-37.

[54] Bové, *La Révolte d'un Paysan,* 78; José Bové and François Dufour, *The World is not for Sale. Farmers against Junk Food* (London and New York, 2002), x, 13, 53. The comparison with Vercingétorix was made in *Le Monde,* 19 June 2002.

[55] *Le Monde,* 17 May 2004.

[56] Bernard Blangenois, *Une Odeur de neige* (Paris, 1997); *Libération,* 3 April 1997.

[57] Andrew Knapp, *Parties and the Party System in France. A Disconnected Democracy?* (Basingstoke, 2004), ch. 10: "From the Barrel of a Gun: Chasse, Pèche, Nature, Traditions."

the Story of Joan of Arc made in 1999 by Luc Besson, director of *Le Grand Bleu*.[58] Rivalry over the site of the battle of Alésia continued with the decision of the Conseil Général of the Côte d'Or in 2001 to establish an archaeological park at Alise-Sainte-Reine, finally to see off the claims of Alise in the Doubs. Christian Goudineau, a professor at the Collège de France with media exposure, confronted myth and reality with his *Dossier Vercingétorix* (2001) and played on the *Astérix* reflex with his *Par Toutatis, la belle querelle! Que reste-t-il de la Gaule?* (2002). Meanwhile Astérix and Obélix, with Gérard Depardieu as Obélix, hit the big screen in 1999 with Claude Zidi's *Astérix et Obélix contre César*, which played to 8 million viewers in twelve weeks, and Alain Chabat's even more successful 2002 *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre*, which attracted eleven million viewers in only four weeks.[59]

As with the Maastricht Treaty, the rejection of the European Constitution by the French electorate on 29 May 2005 by a dramatic 55 per cent against to 45 per cent can be interpreted at different levels: at one level simply a way of opposing the Chirac government and at another a sign that political class had lost touch with the country at large. It was a rejection of a European project that was seen to be a slave to the free market, the vehicle of globalization rather than defending against it, dissolving the original western European core of Europe in a vast area extending to eastern Europe, the Balkans and soon Turkey, sources of cheap labor, unfair competition and immigration. It was denounced as an ultra-liberal Anglo-Saxon model, fear of which now replaced the fear of Germany that had surged up in 1989. It was informed by the a desire to preserve eternal France, an image which was refashioned in the light of each crisis and recycled across the full range of media, but always reflected the desire of the French people to hand on a history that had ensured their survival.

Arguing for the constitution, Jacques Chirac said that it was not only the "daughter of 1989," the inevitable result of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also the "daughter of 1789," a "Europe with a social vocation."[60] The opposition of the Far Right, whether the National Front or Philippe de Villiers' Mouvement pour la France, was predictable, but it was opposition on the left that destroyed the constitution. While most of the Socialist leadership backed it, Laurent Fabius, who had supported Maastricht, came out against the "English-style constitution" that would rip up France's social protection and solidarity in the name of free trade.[61] He went as far as to meet José Bové in his Rouen constituency, and his supporters attended the huge "Fête du non de gauche" at the Place de la République on 21 May 2005 which included Marie-George Buffet's PCF, Olivier Besancenot's Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), the Greens under Francine Bavay, José Bové's Confédération Paysanne, and the Association pour une Taxation des Transactions pour l'aide des Citoyens et Citoyennes (ATTAC), campaigning for a tax of global speculation for the benefit of its victims, which claimed 30,000 members by 2003.[62]

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[58] Edouard Balladur, *Jeanne d'Arc et la France: le mythe du sauveur* (Paris, 2003), 9.

[59] *Le Monde*, 21 April 1999, 27 February 2002.

[60] *Le Monde*, 5 May 2005.

[61] Laurent Fabius, *Une Certaine idée de l'Europe* (Paris, 2004), 58-62.

[62] Nick Hewlett, "New voices, new stage, new democracies?" *Modern & Contemporary France* 12:1 (2004): 9, 11; Sarah Waters, "A l'attac: globalisation and ideological renewal on the French Left," *Modern & Contemporary France* 14:2 (2006): 141-52.

The verdict of the electorate was welcomed as a victory of “the people” by Marie-Georges Buffet and of “the depths of the country” by Philippe de Villiers.[63] But what was the deep meaning of the vote? Essentially, it took place in a country that had lost confidence in itself, its greatness and its mission, unable to adjust to the shocks of globalization and Anglo-Saxon dominance, and had retreated into the closed, fearful nationalism we have been exploring, nurtured by fantasies of an eternal France. In 2003 France had been rocked by a debate triggered by Nicolas Bavarez’s *La France qui tombe*. France, for Bavarez, had suffered a “diplomatic Agincourt” over the Iraq war, opposing the conflict in line with public opinion but losing any ability to count in world affairs alongside the United States and Great Britain. Similarly, she had become the “weakest link of Europe,” failing to make connections with the new eastern European members of the European Union. She had retreated behind the “Maginot line” of “French exceptionalism” and was at risk of becoming “a museum and a centre of distribution, research and high value-added production.”[64] During the debate on the constitution in 2005 this loss of confidence was deplored by German intellectuals including Günter Grass, who sent an open letter to their “French friends” in “the classic country of the Enlightenment” asking, “do the majority of French people want to bury themselves in the same bunker as the left-and right-wing nationalists?”[65] At a meeting of Mitterrandists commemorating the anniversary of the Socialists coming to power on 10 May 1981, Jack Lang declared, “French navel-gazing is not in the tradition of François Mitterrand,” but it was clearly the reflex of the moment.[66] Meanwhile Dany Cohn-Bendit, veteran of May 1968 and co-leader of the Green MEPs in the European Parliament, having been pelted with tomatoes while campaigning for the constitution in Montpellier, attacked what he called the “Astérix complex” of the French people.[67] In this epithet, recycled from Duhamel’s book of 1985, he castigated the retreat of the French into their embattled national village, in which they could eat wild boar to their heart’s content and dismiss the rest of the world as “fous.”

A final question must be: is there a way out of France’s introspection, some escape from the myth of eternal France that has provided succor and yet which the French must relinquish for one of the other two models of national identity, greatness or the universal mission of liberation. Greatness is a difficult option: it is thirty years since Giscard d’Estaing asserted that France was only a medium-sized power. More inviting is a return to the liberating mission, which France has in fact begun by recognizing the victim status of persecuted minorities. President Chirac led the way in 1995 by accepting the responsibility of the French state for the deportation of Jews from Vichy France in 1942. A number of “lois mémorielles” have been passed from the loi Gayssot of 13 July 1990, which outlawed racial and religious discrimination and especially the denial of the Holocaust, to that of 21 January 2001 recognizing the Armenian massacre and that of 21 May 2001, which condemned slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, the law of 23 February 2005, which recognized the wrongs done to *pieds noirs* and *harkis* when the French left Algeria in 1962, also called on French schools to “teach the positive role of the French presence overseas and notably in North Africa.” This attempt to rehabilitate France’s colonial greatness and to dictate what teachers should teach unleashed a storm in French academic circles and was later repealed. But that is another story.

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[63] *Le Monde*, 31 May 2005.

[64] Nicolas Bavarez, *La France qui tombe* (Paris, 2003), 20, 49-55, 61, 120.

[65] *Le Monde*, 3 May 2005.

[66] *Le Monde*, 12 May 2005.

[67] *Agence France Presse*, 12 April 2005.