

## Nicolas Sarkozy on History and Historians

*Elizabeth Rechniewski*

On 13 January 2009, at the traditional New Year address to the cultural world, the French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced plans for the creation of a museum of the history of France. This initiative – described by the Elysée as the most important of the president’s cultural projects – forms part of a conscious design to foster a certain idea of France and to leave his mark, both material and symbolic, on the cultural landscape of his country, in the course of his presidency, and possibly presidencies. It is the aim of this article to define the vision of French history and of the nation that underlies Sarkozy’s project for the museum, to explore the political and intellectual background of the ideas on which he draws, and to assess the impact of his initiatives and interventions in this area on French historians.

It is of course traditional for each president of the Fifth Republic to leave his mark on the cultural framework and usually the architecture of France through such landmarks as Georges Pompidou’s Centre Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s Musée d’Orsay, François Mitterrand’s Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Jacques Chirac’s Musée du Quai Branly. These monuments are designed to leave a particular kind of legacy that accords with the representations that each has fostered, or claimed to foster, of the nation. Beyond the monumental, the presidents have acted and spoken as though they believe they bear the major responsibility for the interpretation of the national past – it could perhaps be argued that History, like Defence and Foreign Affairs, has become the *domaine réservé* of the president and that it is his prerogative to compose a coherent national narrative, articulating the past and the present in relation to a project for the future.

Analysing the presidential speeches from 1958 to 2007, Patrick Garcia concludes that “all these speeches are characterised by ‘futurism’ – that is to say a regime of historicity, to use Francois Hartog’s term, in which the future that is outlined constructs the meaning of the present and the past.”<sup>1</sup> Garcia identifies two

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major periods in the role of the Fifth Republic presidents as interpreters of French History: 1958-1980, when the long history of France was mobilised as an antidote to the doubts that assailed her after the war and loss of empire;<sup>2</sup> and 1980-2007, when this story was challenged, in the face of new memorial agendas imposed by minorities and interest groups, and at a time when the national dimension seemed threatened by the strengthening of European integration.<sup>3</sup> If this change in orientation was limited under Mitterrand, it was Chirac, according to Garcia, who broke with the tradition that the previous presidents had established, opening the way to a reinterpretation of the past by recognising the errors and crimes that had been committed, whether in relation to the slaves, the Harkis, or the Jews, and promoting the concept of “*mémoire partagée*” (shared memory) as the key to national cohesion.<sup>4</sup> Garcia wonders whether François Hartog’s argument that the contemporary era is characterised by the historical regime of “*présentisme*”<sup>5</sup> – the regime that accords primacy to the present, severing the link between past and future – might offer a way of understanding the evolution in the use of History by the presidents. However as he ends his analysis in 2007 his article leaves open the question of whether Sarkozy’s interpretation of history is still oriented to the future or has closed in on itself.

What the French are to remember, what they are to forget, and how they are to remember the past has been the object of Sarkozy’s close and persistent attention since his presidential campaign of 2007, when he used History as a way of distinguishing himself from his opponents.<sup>6</sup> For example, a central plank of his campaign agenda was his declared intention to roll back the damage done by the values of May 68. In a speech given on 29 April 2007, a few days before the second round of the presidential elections, he declared: “*Il faut liquider mai 68!*” (we must eliminate May 68), accusing the movement of imposing intellectual and moral relativism and of undermining respect for authority across society and, crucially, within the school system, which, as a consequence, is no longer able to transmit French values and identity to new generations. In the first and therefore highly symbolic decision of his presidency, on 16 May 2007, Sarkozy, exploiting the highly centralised education system, ordered that the letter written by Guy Môquet to his parents on the eve of his execution by the Germans in 1941 should be read in class at the beginning of each school year.<sup>7</sup> The values of duty and sacrifice that it expressed would offer a model for the young. Sarkozy also suggested that schoolchildren should bear witness to the memory of individual Jewish children deported during the war, but this proposal was later shelved. Olivier Wieviorka argues that these

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*Intertext*, with Alistair Rolls (Amsterdam, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Garcia, “Il y avait une fois la France: Le président et l’histoire en France (1958-2007),” in *Historicités*, Christian Delacroix, François Dosse and Patrick Garcia, eds. (Paris, 2009), 183-202, 184.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>5</sup> François Hartog and George Lenclud, “Régimes d’Historicité,” in *L’Etat des Lieux des Sciences Sociales*, Alexandru Dutu and Norbert Dodille, eds. (Paris, 1993), 18-38.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Patrick Garcia, “Les Présidents face à l’histoire,” *Le Monde* 2, 20 March 2009: <[www.lemonde.fr/web/imprimer\\_element/0,40-0@2-82](http://www.lemonde.fr/web/imprimer_element/0,40-0@2-82)> (accessed 26 June 2010).

<sup>7</sup> This decision provoked considerable opposition from teachers and others. Alain Ruscio comments that other letters might have been more appropriate but were not selected, perhaps because they were not written by a *Français de souche*. Môquet was in fact arrested by the Vichy police because he was a Communist, and not for acts of resistance. Ruscio cites as an example the letter by Huynh Khuong An, a Vietnamese Communist also shot at Montreuil on 22 October 1941. Alain Ruscio, “Lecture de la lettre de Guy Môquet,” 22 October 2007:

<[www.amnistia.net/news/articles/guymoquet/guymoquet\\_110.htm](http://www.amnistia.net/news/articles/guymoquet/guymoquet_110.htm)>

proposals illustrate the two themes that Sarkozy wishes to place at the centre of memory of the Second World War: the Resistance and the Shoah.<sup>8</sup> The Resistance is a constant theme of memorial and symbolic interventions by the president, illustrated by the drama of his solitary walk across the plateau de Glières to honour the *maquisards* (4 May 2007), a gesture which he promised to repeat, and has repeated, every year.<sup>9</sup>

Another important characteristic of his recourse to history is the diversity of the historical references he cites and the curious juxtapositions this creates. This “discours attrape-tout” (catch-all discourse)<sup>10</sup> is perhaps the most arresting feature of Sarkozy’s use of history. He can find material for his exegeses on the nature of the French nation in allusions to Saint Louis and Carnot, the crusades and the Battle of Valmy,<sup>11</sup> the cathedrals and the *Encyclopédie*, often including such apparently antithetical references in the same speech. Moreover he has no hesitation in incorporating into his pantheon personalities of the Left: if he often invokes the name of de Gaulle, as might be expected, the name which appeared most frequently in his speeches of 2006-7 was that of Jean Jaurès, the historic socialist leader assassinated in 1914.<sup>12</sup> Another frequent reference is to Léon Blum, socialist and Jew, leader of the radical Popular Front of 1936. One of Sarkozy’s aims was certainly to use these leaders to discredit the socialist leadership, guilty according to him of “immobilisme,” of having betrayed the workers they are supposed to represent – and whose interests he therefore is best placed to serve. There are also frequent references to Jules Ferry, used as a stick with which to beat the Left of today, the inheritors, according to Sarkozy, of the ills of May 68 and particularly its nefarious effects on education.<sup>13</sup> Sarkozy’s use of history is both an expression and a tool of his aim to represent himself as the man able to reconcile Left and Right and to transcend the divisions of the past; Gérard Noiriel summarises his representation of the nation as: “L’identité de la France c’est Barrès et Jaurès enfin devenus amis” (The identity of France is Barrès and Jaurès at last becoming friends).<sup>14</sup> It is the counterpart of his “politique d’ouverture” (inclusive politics), his strategy of integrating, and thus disarming, his opponents through the inclusion in his government of former socialists such as Eric Besson and Bernard Kouchner and community activists such as Fadela Amara.

In this sense his aim in setting up the museum is not perhaps so different from that of the last ruler to set up a museum dedicated to the history of France: Louis-Philippe, the *roi bourgeois*. Louis-Philippe, who had been brought to power on the overthrow of the autocratic Charles X in 1830 to head a constitutional monarchy, inaugurated in 1837 at Versailles a museum dedicated to “all the glories of France.” Like Sarkozy, Louis-Philippe sought to reconcile symbolically the partisans of the

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Wieviorka, *La Mémoire désunie: le souvenir politique des années sombres de la Libération à nos jours* (Paris, 2010), 269-70.

<sup>9</sup> Wieviorka argues that this act offers Sarkozy identification with a symbolic place, mimicking the role of Colombey-les-deux-Eglises for de Gaulle or La Roche de Solutré for Mitterrand. *La Mémoire désunie*, 272.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Garcia, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Congrès UMP, 14 January 2007, quoted in *Comment Nicolas Sarkozy écrit l’Histoire de France: Dictionnaire Critique*, Laurence De Cock, Fanny Madeline, Nicolas Offenstadt and Sophie Wahnich, eds. (Paris, 2008), 64.

<sup>12</sup> *Comment Nicolas Sarkozy écrit l’Histoire*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> “Le nom de Jules Ferry est une référence centrale des discours de Nicolas Sarkozy: pas moins d’une cinquantaine de références réparties dans 23 discours, entre l’automne 2006 et le printemps 2007, jusqu’à la veille du second tour. Seuls Jaurès et de Gaulle sont davantage cités.” Olivier le Trocquer, “Jules Ferry,” in *Comment Nicolas Sarkozy écrit l’Histoire*, 84.

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *A quoi sert l’Identité Nationale* (Paris, 2007), 87.

various regimes that had riven the country since 1789 as a means to promote his own legitimacy. Through the reconstruction of the galleries housing the exhibition that transformed the architecture of privilege and hierarchy into an open public space, and through the selection and commissioning of paintings and sculptures that celebrated notable events from French history, Michael Marrinan suggests that the museum can be seen as “an arena of political reconciliation.”<sup>15</sup> Victor Hugo, invited to the opening, saluted the transformation that had been accomplished from a royal to a national monument.<sup>16</sup> The museum’s collections were extended under Napoleon III and an active policy of acquisition continued during the Third Republic, particularly under the dedicated governance of the distinguished historian Pierre de Nolhac, who gave long service as conservator from 1887-1920.<sup>17</sup> The role of the museum was wholly consonant with the Third Republic’s promotion of national history as a pacified and teleological story of linear progress. It was one element in a network of institutions, including the new school system established by the Ferry laws of 1881-2, that sought to inculcate in the citizens an uneasy combination of republican and nationalist sentiments, civic virtues and national pride.<sup>18</sup>

Another figure associated with the Third Republic who offers a way into understanding Sarkozy’s approach to French history is Maurice Barrès (1862-1923). Barrès moved across the political spectrum from Left to Right and by the end of the nineteenth century had become an anti-Dreyfusard and one of the first writers to capture for the Right the nationalist sentiment that had been carried by the Jacobin republican tradition throughout the century, through a powerful synthesis of conservative principles, socialist policies and nationalist ideas. The socialist strands in Barrès’ thinking included the protection of workers through a superannuation fund and the development of public education, but he combined these policies with positions that we would now identify with the Right: the conceptualisation of the nation as a unique and unitary cultural, religious and spiritual entity, which was weakened by the influx of foreign elements (Jews and immigrants). He wrote in novel and essay form that the nation was in crisis, threatened by “decomposition,” that national consciousness was fracturing under the influence of deracinated urban elites who had lost touch with the “real” France to be found in the regions. To combat this threat, the nation had to ensure the transmission to the younger generation of the spiritual and cultural values inherited from the past. Barrès’ most famous expression – that the nation consists of “la terre et ses morts” (the land and its dead) – conjures up the sacred legacy left by those who sacrificed themselves for the nation, especially in war; the dead weigh more heavily in the balance of national life than the living: “le mort tient le vif” (the dead enfolds the living).

Believing that “instinct, intuition and irrationality, emotion and enthusiasm are the deep forces that determine human behaviour,”<sup>19</sup> Barrès argued that powerful myths are needed to mobilise and unify the population. He extolled the “persuasive

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Marrinan, “Historical Vision and the Writing of History at Louis-Philippe’s Versailles,” in *The Popularization of Images: Visual Culture under the July Monarchy*, Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Gabriel P. Weisberg, eds. (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 113-43, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Dominique Poulot, *Musée, nation, patrimoine: 1789-1815* (Paris, 1997), 389.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre de Nolhac, Christophe Pincemaille, Olivier de Rohan, *La Résurrection de Versailles: Souvenirs d’un Conservateur (1887-1920)* (Paris, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> The contribution to this task of historians, notably Ernst Lavisse, and geographers such as Vidal de la Blache, was exemplary.

<sup>19</sup> “L’instinct, le sentiment intuitif et irrationnel, l’émotion et l’enthousiasme sont les forces profondes qui déterminent le comportement humain.” Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le Nationalisme français* (Paris, 1985), 271.

virtues of heroic personifications, icons, relics and emblems” in inculcating patriotic fervour and argued that these symbols of the nation are particularly powerful when brought together in the “live spectacle of public ceremonial.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike the monarchist Charles Maurras, who wanted to eliminate the legacy of the Revolution, Barrès sought to weave together in a grand narrative of national progress the apparently contradictory elements of French history: Monarchy and Republic; Church and Enlightenment. Only through overcoming past schisms would France overcome the threat of national decadence. Barrès’ strong sense of the need to preserve all aspects of the French past led to his long and ultimately successful campaign to force the State to finance the upkeep of the nation’s churches after the separation of Church and State in 1905. In a series of impassioned speeches to the Assembly he spoke of “le magnifique patrimoine de notre architecture religieuse” (the magnificent legacy of our religious architecture)<sup>21</sup> and, just as significantly, of the crucial role of the Church in the spiritual life of the nation, a theme that Sarkozy explored in the book he co-wrote in 2005, *La République, les religions, l’espérance*.<sup>22</sup>

Sarkozy shares with Barrès the view that the nation is in crisis; it is above all a moral crisis: “a crisis of values, a crisis of norms, a crisis of meaning, a crisis of identity. The denigration of the nation is at the heart of this crisis” (Caen, 9 March 2007).<sup>23</sup> The responsibility for this denigration lies in large part with the intellectuals who have betrayed the people by favouring notions such as multiculturalism and respect for difference, ideas that threaten national cohesion and undermine France’s self-confidence. Furthermore, historians insist on raking over the dark side of French history, exploring topics such as colonial crimes, the conduct of troops during the Algerian War, slavery, Vichy and collaboration. Sarkozy has relentlessly criticised what he terms “repentance” – known in Australia as “the black armband view of history” – namely the exploration and expiation of the less glorious episodes of the nation’s past. In a rhetorically powerful speech delivered in Lyon on 5 April 2007 he declared: “I detest this fashion for repentance that expresses hatred of France and her history. I detest the repentance that wants to prevent us from taking pride in our country.”<sup>24</sup>

Sarkozy crucially and successfully made the question of national identity the central plank of his campaign for the presidency; many commentators believe that his announcement on 8 March 2007 that he would create a “Ministry of Immigration and National Identity” helped to turn the tide of the election in his favour, placing the issue of national identity at the forefront of his electoral campaign and ensuring widespread media coverage.<sup>25</sup> Sarkozy declared that the subject of immigration and integration was no longer taboo (Caen, March 2007), implying that he alone had the courage to speak the truth, to say aloud what the French were thinking, a tactic that

<sup>20</sup> Philip Ouston, *The Imagination of Maurice Barrès* (Toronto, 1974), 163.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Barrès, *La Grande Pitié des Églises de France* (Paris, 1913), 287.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Thibaud Collin, Philippe Verdin, *La République, les religions, l’espérance* (Paris, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> “Une crise des valeurs, une crise des repères, une crise du sens, une crise de l’identité. Le dénigrement de la nation est au cœur de cette crise.” Quoted in Noiriél, *A quoi sert l’Identité Nationale*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> “Je déteste cette mode de la repentance qui exprime la détestation de la France et de son Histoire. Je déteste la repentance qui veut nous interdire d’être fiers de notre pays.” Quoted in Wiewiorka, *La Mémoire désunie*, 270.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Jean-Marie Le Pen used for many years to lay claim to popular legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> The target of his discourse on the threat to national identity is not, as in Barrès' case, the Jews but the Muslims and the generations of young *Beur*, even if the enemy is rarely explicitly identified but named rather as “communautarisme,” the term that encodes the reference to these populations.<sup>27</sup>

As well as his many speeches around the issue of history and identity, the revised commemorative calendar (with a renewed focus on 8 May, VE day)<sup>28</sup> and invented traditions such as the pilgrimage to the plateau de Glières, we can cite two further major examples of the deliberate intertwining of history, identity and politics in his presidency: one is “le grand débat sur l'identité nationale” (the great debate on national identity) that was launched in November 2009, perhaps with an eye to the regional elections, and which provoked an escalation in community tensions and xenophobia before it was brought to an end the following February. The other was Sarkozy's announcement in January 2009 of his decision to set up a museum of the history of France.

This project had been set in motion in September 2007 by a *lettre de mission* issued by the Ministries of Defence and Culture and Communication, commissioning a report into the feasibility of setting up a centre for research and permanent collections dedicated to the “military and civil history of France.” The mission was assigned to Hervé Lemoine, then in charge of the archives and libraries of the Ministry of Defence, who completed his report in April 2008.<sup>29</sup> As he was specifically charged to report on the feasibility of establishing the museum at the Invalides, many of his recommendations concern the challenges presented by this site. However the first chapter canvasses a range of issues associated with the project of curating a national history.<sup>30</sup> Although he consulted many curators and historians, listed in the appendix, the views expressed are of course Lemoine's own, but he does take up the themes – even the vocabulary – that correspond to the president's views on the ills flowing from “la récusation de l'histoire” (the impugning of history): the failure of the school system and of historians to transmit a clear legacy; the fragmentation of identity provoked by the demands of minorities to record their experience; and the *lois mémorielles* which have sought to impose recognition of sectorial memories. Lemoine writes:

The deconstruction of what constituted the ‘legacy of memories’ dear to Renan, necessary certainly in view of the social changes and the history of the past century, included in its fall any possible history of the Nation, expression too of a collective memory which seems, even to the best minds, pointless and even suspect.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Isabelle Cuminal, Maryse Souchart, Stéphane Wahnich, Virginie Wathier, *Le Pen, les mots: Analyse d'un discours d'extrême droite* (Paris, 1998), 138-39.

<sup>27</sup> Noiriél, *A quoi sert l'Identité Nationale?*, 95-96.

<sup>28</sup> Giscard d'Estaing removed this day from the national calendar; it was restored by Mitterrand.

<sup>29</sup> “‘La Maison de l'histoire de France,’ Pour la création d'un centre de recherche et de collections permanentes dédié à l'histoire civile et militaire de la France,” <lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/BRP/094000029/0000.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> The chapter is titled: “Un constat paradoxal: Clio, la muse préférée des Français est malade: elle souffre de son histoire et donc de son identité.”

<sup>31</sup> “La déconstruction de ce qui constituait le ‘legs de souvenirs,’ cher à Renan, certes nécessaire eu égard aux évolutions sociales et à l'histoire du siècle passé, a entraîné dans sa chute une possible histoire de la Nation, expression aussi d'une mémoire collective, et qui semble, même à des esprits éclairés, vaine, voire suspecte.”

The existence of a crisis in national identity, assumed to result from the “withering away of history,” is presupposed in the report.<sup>32</sup>

A second report, to consider other suitable sites for the museum, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and written by the historian Jean-Pierre Rioux, was submitted in May 2009. Rioux focused on five possible sites: Vincennes, the Invalides, Fontainebleau, the Grand Palais and the Palais de Chaillot. In the end, none of these was selected. The site chosen, by presidential fiat, provoked, as we shall see, further protest. The appointment of Jean-François Hébert in September 2009 to oversee the project confirmed in their opinion those who believe that this was above all a political assignment. Hébert is an *haut fonctionnaire*, a senior civil servant, who has served in a number of government departments; he was secretary-general of administration in the Ministry of Defence, then president of the Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie, before becoming *directeur du cabinet* for Christine Albanel, former Minister of Culture. There is little in his background to fit him for the role of museum curator, and his appointment has met with criticism from professionals in the sector.

What is the rationale for the museum in a country that counts, according to the history website *Hérodote*, some 800 to 900 museums devoted to aspects of the history of France?<sup>33</sup> Indeed two sites already lay claim to the title of “Musée de l’Histoire de France”: the galleries in the Château de Versailles, now refurbished and with a website that offers extensive information and a virtual tour of its collections;<sup>34</sup> and the Archives Nationales located in the Hôtel de Soubise in the Marais – of which more later. In the most important speech he has made on the subject, in January 2007, Sarkozy declared a museum necessary because “il n’existe aucun lieu pour questionner notre histoire de France dans son ensemble” (there is nowhere to question our history of France in its entirety).<sup>35</sup> The essential unity of France is a given in his discourse: “l’histoire de France c’est un tout, c’est une cohérence” (the history of France is a coherent totality); the museum will contribute to strengthening “l’identité qui est la nôtre, l’identité culturelle” (the identity that is ours, cultural identity). His vision of the French past to be represented in the museum is close to that of the man who has become what might be termed the official historian of the current presidency,

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<sup>32</sup> “Ces excès, dénoncés par la suite, sont la source du manque de référents historiques d’une génération marquée par un ‘affaissement de l’histoire’ qui a nourri la crise identitaire actuelle...”

<sup>33</sup> “Quel musée pour l’Histoire de France?” *Herodote* 5 July 2009, <[www.herodote.net/articles/article.php?ID=564](http://www.herodote.net/articles/article.php?ID=564)> (accessed 26 June 2010).

<sup>34</sup> <[www.museehistoiredefrance.fr/index.php](http://www.museehistoiredefrance.fr/index.php)>

<sup>35</sup> “Un mot sur la connaissance de notre histoire. Là-aussi, on ne connaît notre histoire que par les moments où les Présidents de la République successifs s’excusent des périodes où, hélas, l’histoire a été tragique. Or je suis fasciné par l’idée que la France est riche de ses musées d’art, mais qu’il n’y a aucun grand musée d’histoire digne de ce nom! Il n’existe aucun lieu pour questionner notre histoire de France dans son ensemble. Nous avons donc décidé la création d’un Musée de l’Histoire de France. Ce musée sera situé dans un lieu emblématique de notre histoire, un lieu qui reste à choisir et qui sera choisi: il y a plusieurs idées qui font sens mais il faut en débattre, échanger, il faut que cela polémique un peu, que chacun fasse valoir ses arguments. Parce que l’histoire de France, c’est un tout, c’est une cohérence. En général, on l’attaque par petit bout, les pages glorieuses, les pages un peu plus délicates, alors qu’on devrait l’affronter dans son ensemble. Aussi je souhaite qu’il y ait un musée de l’histoire de France, qui pourrait d’ailleurs être une fédération de musées et des monuments, qui travailleraient en réseau et collaboreraient avec de grandes institutions étrangères. Un musée doté d’un Centre, situé dans un endroit symbolique. Il me semble que cette initiative renforce aussi l’identité qui est la nôtre, l’identité culturelle: c’est une autre initiative que je laisse à votre réflexion.” Discours de Nicolas Sarkozy, 13 January 2007.

Max Gallo, one of the few major historians to welcome unequivocally the announcement of its establishment.<sup>36</sup>

Gallo's essay *Fier d'être Français*, published in 2006, is closely aligned with Sarkozy's ideas. The similarity of his vocabulary to that used by Sarkozy is striking: Gallo too condemns the vogue for "repentance;" he blames the "elites" for their "pedagogy of renunciation": indeed the expression "pédagogie" or "pédagogues du renoncement" is a constant refrain in *Fier d'être français*. His section on the Fifth Republic critically explores the role of the presidents. Despite his own service as Secretary of State in Pierre Mauroy's government between 1983 and 1984, he writes that all the presidents after de Gaulle (except Pompidou) contributed through their short-sighted and self-interested political manoeuvrings to "défaire la France" (to unmake France).<sup>37</sup> They undermined her sense of identity and national pride: Giscard d'Estaing called into question France's role in the world; Chirac dwelt on the dark side of her history and encouraged the vogue for repentance. Gallo is particularly critical of Mitterrand, condemned for his hypocrisy and deception.<sup>38</sup> In *L'Ame de la France*, published in 2007, Gallo analyses the evolution of the French nation "from its origins to the present," offering a biography of the nation's "soul."<sup>39</sup> The idea that a nation has a "soul" seems strangely dated, evoking nineteenth-century "psycho-histories" of the nation, but it accords very closely with Sarkozy's view of France as a coherent spiritual and cultural entity, unique in its particular elements and in their totality.

It can be argued that Pierre Nora – prominently cited in Lemoine's report – also provided an intellectual framework for Sarkozy's representation of French history, through his three-volume *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-92). Offering a critical analysis of the tryptich "identité, mémoire, patrimoine," "the keywords of contemporary consciousness," Nora seems to lament the loss of a unitary, national historical consciousness that has fragmented under the impact of demands to recognise sectorial memories.<sup>40</sup> The object of *Les Lieux*, though its many contributors adopt a range of approaches to their topics, is to catalogue the iconic events, personalities and symbols that have been associated with France as a nation and as a Republic, in an attempt to record and defend the "cadre proprement historique de la nation" against the threat of "éclatement" (disintegration). It is ironic that while Nora criticises the tendency to focus on "the present and memory," instead of on the "solidarity of past and future,"<sup>41</sup> the *Lieux* have been analysed by François Hartog as the symbol and vector of "présentisme": the historian is no longer a "pontife," constructing a bridge between past and future, but simply a recorder of the national *patrimoine*.<sup>42</sup> The past offers no path to the future, but an inexhaustible emotional resource. The historian Henry Rousso mounts a similar argument. Referring directly to Sarkozy but clearly taking more general aim too, he laments that "Le passé est devenu un entrepôt de ressources politiques ou identitaires, où chacun puise à son gré

<sup>36</sup> Questioned by AFP, Gallo commented: "Il manque un musée de la construction de la nation. Il serait très utile sur le plan de l'intégration en montrant que l'histoire était antérieure à notre venue." "Sarkozy et l'Histoire," Points d'actu! Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon, <pointsdactu.org/article.php?id\_article=1295> (accessed 10 June 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Max Gallo, *Fier d'être français* (Paris, 2006), 88.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>39</sup> Max Gallo, *L'Ame de la France, t.I, Des origines à 1799; t.II. De 1799 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Pierre Nora, "L'ère de la commémoration. III Le moment-mémoire" in *Lieux de mémoire, t. III Les France. 3 De l'Archive à l'emblème* (Paris, 1992), 1010.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1009.

<sup>42</sup> François Hartog, *Régimes d'Historicité - Présentisme et Expériences du Temps* (Paris, 2003), 156.



ce qui peut servir ses intérêts immédiats (The past has become a stock of political resources where everyone takes whatever he likes that can serve his immediate interests).”<sup>43</sup>

Sarkozy’s focus on the glories of the past, on the pantheon of great men and their deeds, on the cultural identity of the nation, was not of course untypical of the discourse of the previous Fifth Republic presidents. But in their case there were nevertheless elements of their vision for France that proposed a project and pointed towards a future, whether as an economically and militarily powerful nation or as leader of the Third World, of the Francophone community, or of Europe. If this vision began to falter under Chirac, his gestures toward the recognition of past misdeeds could nevertheless be seen as clearing the way for new forms of national and indeed international solidarity based on “l’histoire partagée” (shared history), an expression that he used on several occasions, including in speeches to the Harkis and to the Armenians. In Sarkozy’s case, the vision has shrunk to a restatement of past glories that makes the acceptance of evolution and change in national life more difficult. The denial of difference and conflict in the past, through the insistence on a unitary and positive national narrative, tends to delegitimise difference and disagreement in the present. The definition of national identity in cultural and even spiritual terms also offers little clear guidance for the future, in comparison to a definition in terms of citizenship, human rights, and democratic institutions, that would offer a political project in the traditional republican sense. Spiritual identity is ambiguous, perhaps indefinable, it offers no programme for social action nor a clear route to belonging.

Ambiguity is created too by the apparent contradictions between presidential discourse and government action in relation to the nation’s heritage. One example is provided by the proposed Article 52 (later 116) of the 2010 Budget that would allow for state-owned patrimonial property to be transferred to “collectivités territoriales” and ultimately for the possibility of onward sale into private hands. This measure, opposed in the Senate only by Jack Ralite, Communist senator for Seine-Saint-Denis, was invalidated by the Constitutional Council, which ruled that it should not be included in the budget papers. The government proposes, however, to reintroduce this law that would loosen the state’s control over the nation’s *patrimoine* and would seem therefore to contradict the aims of the museum to preserve this legacy. The proposed sale by the government of the Hôtel de la Marine at the Place de la Concorde has incited furious debate and the circulation of a petition questioning the use to which the building might be put if allowed to pass into private hands.<sup>44</sup>

Although some of the earlier presidential monuments created controversy and underwent revision (notably the Musée du Quai Branly),<sup>45</sup> the polemic that Sarkozy’s proposal for a Maison de l’Histoire de France has provoked may yet see the project end with his presidency. His interpretation of national history has come under intense scrutiny and analysis from an intellectual class that has long been suspicious of his motives and intentions and feel they have had their worst fears confirmed by his discourse and actions during his presidency. The content of the museum and the form that its collections will take have so far received only the most general of explanations. Controversy will surely beset the museum’s every gallery and display,

<sup>43</sup> Henry Rousso, “Un marketing mémoriel,” *Libération*, 15 February 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Signatories include Régis Debray, Pierre Nora, Jacques Le Goff, Jean-Noël Jeanneney, Alain Decaux, Mona Ozouf and Michel Winock.

<sup>45</sup> Many of these issues are discussed by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Enjeux politiques de l’histoire coloniale* (Paris, 2009).

whether led by minority groups or amateur or professional historians. Even the choice of the site for the museum has provoked dissension and protest action: the original suggestion that it be installed at the Invalides met with the criticism that this building is the exclusive site of military history; another possibility, the Château de Fontainebleau, was perhaps too closely associated with the monarchy. For a while the Château de Vincennes seemed the favourite choice, but then on 12 September 2010 the Ministry of Culture announced that the museum would be housed at the National Archives in the 3rd arrondissement of Paris, in the Hôtels de Rohan and Soubise, and that it would consist of a federation of nine museums, the central museum acting as the “tête de réseau” (the head of a network).<sup>46</sup> The negative reaction to this announcement was not slow in coming: the archivists, who had their own long-cherished project of transforming the National Archives into a space of public access and research, went on strike and occupied the building. Others objected to the omission of the *Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration* – the museum devoted to the history of immigration – from the list of the nine museums to be federated: this could be seen as a further snub to a museum that has yet to be officially inaugurated and, writes Vincent Duclert, an indication of the attempt to give a particular orientation to the national narrative “sous l’offensive récurrente de ‘l’identité nationale’ et du sécuritaire anti-immigrés” (in the ongoing offensive [to promote] ‘national identity’ and a law and order campaign against immigrants).<sup>47</sup> The calendar for the realisation of the first public exhibitions was given by the Ministry at the end of 2011, just in time, as Duclert points out, for the presidential elections in 2012.

The museum may never open, yet it has proved a *révélateur* of the issues surrounding the use and abuse of history in France today. It can be argued that over the last fifteen years or so historians have constituted the most active group of *intellectuels engagés*, though their *engagement* has been concerned less with political or social issues than with the defence of their profession against a series of political interventions in their field. The *lois mémorielles*, the laws passed by the Assembly on a number of historical issues to legislate what must be written (that slavery was a crime against humanity, *loi Taubira*, 2001) or cannot be written (negation of the Holocaust, *loi Gayssot*, 1990), and above all the *loi Mekachera* of 2005, which amounted to a defence of French colonisation and the action of settlers and soldiers in Algeria, provoked protest and petitions from historians anxious to defend their freedom to research independently from political pressure or legal constraint.<sup>48</sup>

Although the most contested article of the *loi Mekachera*, the article that compelled the school system to teach the “bienfaits” of colonisation, was annulled by President Chirac, it is sometimes overlooked that the other provisions of the law remain in place and the measures it enacts have been pursued by Sarkozy. The ideas expressed in the law correspond closely to the views he has expressed on colonisation

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<sup>46</sup> The National Museum of Prehistory at Eyzies de Tayac; the Museum of National Antiquities at the Château de Saint Germain-en-Laye; the National Museum of the Middle Ages at the Hôtel de Cluny; the National Museum of the Renaissance at the Château d’Ecouen; the National Museum at the Château de Pau; the National Museum at the Château de Fontainebleau; the National Museum at Malmaison; the National Museum at the Château de Compiègne; the Museum of Relief Maps at the Invalides.

<sup>47</sup> Vincent Duclert, “‘La Maison de l’histoire de France,’ l’avant poste de la présidentielle?,” *Le Monde*, 21 October 2010.

<sup>48</sup> The debate around the issue of the *lois mémorielles*, impossible to summarise here, crystallised in December 2005 with the launching of the petition “Liberté pour l’histoire,” now a collective led by Pierre Nora. Other historians responded to the petition by defending certain laws, notably those prohibiting denial of the Holocaust and of the Armenian massacre.

(which he has argued was inspired by a “dream of civilisation and not of conquest”)<sup>49</sup> and on “repentance.” In March 2007 the then presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy assured representatives of the Harkis that he would set up the “Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Guerre d’Algérie” envisaged in Article 3 of the law and that it would be run by and in the interests of those who had lived and fought in the colony. Once elected president, he assigned to Hubert Falco, Secretary of State for Veterans’ Affairs, the task of setting up the Foundation, which was inaugurated at the Invalides in October 2010, financed in part by the State and in part by those organisations wealthy enough to be able to contribute funds. The polemic over the nature, representativity and function of this organisation is ongoing. Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison and Linda Amiri point out that the administrative council of the Foundation includes three generals involved in various ways in defending the role of the army in the Algerian war.<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Stora and Jean-Pierre Rioux have refused to participate, Stora arguing that although the stated objective of the Foundation is to reconcile the different memories of the war, it is impossible to do so without including the Algerian perspective.<sup>51</sup>

The involvement of historians in debates on these issues in the public arena has intensified since Sarkozy, during his presidential campaign and presidency, has made History the tool of his political ambition and the object of his persistent criticism. In the context of this ongoing assault on their practice, the project for a Maison de l’Histoire de France has become the most recent battleground for historians to protest against the instrumentalisation of history and political interference in cultural affairs. A petition in support of the occupation of the National Archives by the staff had garnered over 3000 signatures by 6 October 2010 including those of many prominent historians, curators and museum directors.<sup>52</sup> Nine well-known historians wrote an open letter to *Le Monde* in October 2010 describing the project as “dangerous,” “narrow and retrograde” in its conception, since its main *raison d’être* seemed to be to put on display a so-called “national identity.” They put forward three main criticisms: that in the era of globalisation and the construction of Europe, the focus on national history cannot be justified; that this focus reflects not intellectual but ideological and political priorities; and that the site chosen frustrates the aim of the Archives, which is to provide access to historical material to promote debate and discovery rather than to recount the “roman national.”<sup>53</sup> Pierre Nora, who had remained until then distant from the fray, wrote an open letter to the Minister of Culture in November also advancing three arguments against the museum.<sup>54</sup> The first

<sup>49</sup> “Ce rêve ne fut pas tant un rêve de conquête qu’un rêve de civilisation,” Nicolas Sarkozy, Toulon 7 February 2007. His now notorious speech in Dakar on 26 July 2007 reiterated the positive effects of colonisation while also revisiting some of the clichés of nineteenth-century racialist thought, including reference to an unchanging African civilisation and “immobile” mentality.

<sup>50</sup> Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, “Le passé colonial à l’heure du révisionisme et de l’histoire officielle,” Médiapart, 19 February 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Stora interviewed on Arte, 19 October 2010:

<[http://videos.arte.tv/fr/videos/l\\_impossible\\_memoire\\_sur\\_la\\_guerre\\_d\\_algerie-3490216.html](http://videos.arte.tv/fr/videos/l_impossible_memoire_sur_la_guerre_d_algerie-3490216.html)>

<sup>52</sup> Signatories include Roger Chartier; Arlette Farge; Nicolas Offenstadt; Daniel Roche. The petition can be viewed at:

<[fr-fr.connect.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=109567349104685&topic=29](http://fr-fr.connect.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=109567349104685&topic=29)>. (Accessed 16 October 2010)

<sup>53</sup> “La Maison de l’histoire de France est un projet dangereux,” *Le Monde*, 22 October 2010. The letter is signed by Isabelle Backouche, Christophe Charle, Roger Chartier, Arlette Farge, Jacques Le Goff, Gérard Noiriel, Nicolas Offenstadt, Michèle Riot-Sarcey and Daniel Roche.

<sup>54</sup> “Lettre ouverte de Pierre Nora à Frédéric Mitterrand sur la Maison de l’histoire de France,” *Le Monde*, 11 November 2010.

and main reason he cited was that the museum is costly and pointless, a waste of the time and energy of “serious historians;” the history of France has since the Revolution been riven with tensions and divisions, why try to impose a single narrative, he asked, when “every attempt to set up a unified national museum has failed”? His second argument concerned the origins of the project, “impure and strictly political,” obeying the dictates of electoral strategy rather than those of history. Finally, he asked, what is to be the content of the museum? The choice of collections to be included in a “general museum” such as the Maison de l’Histoire de France must reflect an overall interpretation, a “message” to be conveyed, yet the nature of this message is clouded in uncertainty.

Not all historians, however, share these criticisms or refuse to be associated with the project. An advisory committee of nineteen members, chaired by Jean-Pierre Rioux, was appointed to oversee the museum by the Minister of Culture on 13 January 2011.<sup>55</sup> Jean-François Hébert had originally announced that the advisory body would consist of “30 to 40 members”<sup>56</sup> – it is not clear whether the lower number actually appointed reflects some difficulty in recruiting participants. What is clear is that this issue has contributed to a new episode in the History Wars, deepening divisions between historians and fostering the already widespread mistrust of many professionals towards the intentions and the actions of the president. In his open letter to the Minister of Culture, Nora offers a bleak summary of the president’s engagement with history, although his censure might be considered too mild by Sarkozy’s more trenchant critics. Citing the initiatives referred to in this article, Nora concludes: “Nicolas Sarkozy certainly has no luck with the history and the past of France. He is a man who wants political decisions to be judged only on results, [but] all his initiatives, in this area, have shown themselves to be unfortunate, even though sometimes with the best of intentions.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The committee includes Jacques Berlioz (director of l’Ecole nationale des chartes), Dominique Borne (dean of l’inspection générale de l’Education nationale) as well as Eric Deroo, Etienne François, Paule René-Bazin and Anne-Marie Thiesse.

<sup>56</sup> “Réserves et incertitudes autour du projet de la Maison de l’Histoire de France,” *Le Monde*, 19 October 2010.

<sup>57</sup> “Décidément, Nicolas Sarkozy n’a pas de chance avec l’histoire et le passé de la France. Lui qui veut qu’une décision politique ne se juge qu’au résultat, toutes ses initiatives, dans cette direction, se sont révélées malheureuses, avec pourtant parfois les meilleures intentions.”