

**Kassovitz's "*France d'en bas*" and Sarkozy's "*racaille*":  
Art and the Alienation of Politics in Contemporary France**

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In a persuasive essay published in *Etudes*, Hubert Védrine, former French Foreign Affairs minister, portrays contemporary France as stifling in a climate of relatively unfounded, but undeniable and persistent self-doubt.<sup>1</sup> Even had he wanted to, Védrine is too much of a diplomat to have mentioned the nation's new president, Nicolas Sarkozy, as a factor in the nation's malaise. In left-leaning intellectual circles, however, both before the 2007 presidential elections and since, there have been no such reservations. Sarkozy has been a focus of unremitting and largely hostile scrutiny. At issue is not so much his political program as something more essential, as if Sarkozy were somehow the embodiment of a destructive force that threatens France's very nature.<sup>2</sup> While disinclined to embrace this kind of demonization, the present paper will seek to explore an aspect of French internal division in which Sarkozy had an explicit, prominent and, I shall argue, emblematic role—a role less related to his position as a politician of the Right than to his place in the French political process more generally. The article posits a significant cleavage between the worlds of France's cultural and political establishments, which it will seek to illuminate through an analysis of the late 2005 clash between Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior, and the filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz.

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<sup>1</sup> Hubert Védrine, "La juste place de la France dans le monde," *Etudes* 4081 (janvier 2008), 9-18.

<sup>2</sup> A good set of examples can be found in the special November 2007 number of *Esprit*, subtitled "Qu'est-ce que le sarkozysme?"

On 7 November 2005, Mathieu Kassovitz posted on his website a furious message entitled "La France d'en bas." Kassovitz was—and remains—a cultural superstar. His 1995 film *La Haine*—still considered a landmark for its dramatic exposure of the racial and social issues of the *banlieue*—had generated prestige among his peers and widespread public respect. In addition to maintaining a high-level profile as a successful filmmaker, actor and producer, he had also earned a significant reputation as a conduit of the opinion and sentiment of France's restless youth population. His November blog was a response to the wave of rioting and car burning that had begun in and around France's housing estates a couple of weeks earlier. It directly attacked Nicolas Sarkozy with considerable violence, identifying the main cause of the social conflagration as the Minister's own inflammatory language—Sarkozy, in a widely reported outburst, had described the rioters as "la racaille." Kassovitz went further. Pointing to Sarkozy's overt presidential ambitions, he pilloried the Minister's authoritarianism and his dictatorial tendencies, depicting him as a "petit Napoléon" and even insinuating comparison with the notorious totalitarian leaders of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

In one way, this text could be read as a predictable, if particularly vigorous, attack by a left-oriented artist on a right-wing politician. I would argue, however, that the episode has more general import, pointing to a conflict not just between two individuals, but also between the dimensions of French social life that each incarnated and represented. It is incontrovertible that the world of cinema, in today's France, is a major expression of the nation's cultural self-consciousness and self-projection, and Kassovitz is a central figure in that world. Similarly, the emergence of a new, hard-nosed and aggressively right wing political discourse in post-Mitterrand France was well embodied in Sarkozy's determined push towards France's highest office. One could object that Sarkozy is too idiosyncratic a figure to be used as a representative of the French political class as a whole: at the time of the confrontation with Kassovitz, his relationships with various of his ministerial colleagues, and with President Chirac, were highly conflictual; and his verbal explosions and indiscretions were already legendary. His peremptory, trenchant style provoked as much anxiety as his decisiveness elicited admiration. At the same time, there is no denying that, as a politician, he wielded enormous power within the nation's majority UMP, over which he presided, or that through this office he exercised influence well beyond his own portfolio, or that he was able to do so because of the immense support base he had built among the French voting population. As such, he makes a fitting counterpoint as "the politician" to Kassovitz's role as "the artist." That, certainly, is how Kassovitz envisaged and portrayed him.

The title of Kassovitz's blog, "La France d'en bas," had a clear symbolic purpose. This was not an individual perspective, nor even, simply, a grass-roots angle on France with which he identified. He was suggesting the existence of two distinct Frances and of a cleavage between them: one, occupied and represented by the Minister of the Interior, being "la France d'en haut," and the other, "la France d'en bas," peopled by those Sarkozy had dismissed as "la racaille," as well as by those who, like Kassovitz, are artists or intellectuals with some claim to a moral and social conscience. From Kassovitz's viewpoint, it was the political establishment that had created the disjunction and, in doing so, had split the political process away from the realities of social and cultural life. The identification of the artist with the injustices

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<sup>3</sup> Mathieu Kassovitz, "La France d'en bas..." (7 November 2005). <http://www.mathieukassovitz.com/blog>, accessed 8 November 2005.

and suffering inflicted on the people is a romantic paradigm whose genealogy can be traced back via Malraux and Bernanos to Zola, Victor Hugo, and beyond. But it is also very much a characteristic of what Jean-Pierre Jeancolas has described as the contemporary “cinema of responsibility,” in which the filmmaking community of France has come to engage itself in various forms of political activism in the name of justice and communal values.<sup>4</sup> The key point in Kassovitz’s position was not so much that a particular power-hungry politician had been responsible for alienating the disenfranchised youth of France’s suburban ghettos, but rather that the political sphere had removed itself from the people who give it meaning and legitimacy.

Nicolas Sarkozy is no armchair politician. As early as 1993, he had attained national hero status as mayor of Neuilly, for his direct and undeniably courageous part in the rescue of kindergarten children held hostage by a crazed man wrapped in dynamite. As Interior Minister, as he frequently boasted, he visited the troubled housing estates many times, seemingly relishing both the confrontation with those he called “voyous” and the direct contact with the other residents of the *cités*. In June 2005, in another verbal lapse, he was reported as promising to “nettoyer au Kärcher” the suburb of Courneuve, which had just witnessed the shooting death of an eleven-year-old boy. It is therefore not surprising that he chose to reply directly to Kassovitz, posting on the filmmaker’s own website, on 22 November 2005, a defense of his actions in the name of “republican order,” praise for the police whose calm and discipline he saw as bringing honor to France’s democracy, and a challenge to Kassovitz to a public debate.

Sarkozy has confessed his temperamental attraction to a public quarrel and put on record his enjoyment of television debates with a range of political leaders from Robert Hue and François Hollande to Bruno Maigret and Jean-Marie Le Pen.<sup>5</sup> In the head-to-head with Kassovitz, one can readily see how this idea—once again, a highly romantic one—of a public duel between a political leader and an iconic artist would have appealed to a publicity-sensitive presidential candidate. Kassovitz’s rejection of it, which closed the exchange on 29 November 2005, was almost certainly motivated in part by reluctance to help Sarkozy further his campaign. There was, however, another reason, which was to try to nudge Sarkozy towards a direct dialogue with the people concerned by the oppressive conditions of life in the *cités*. In other words, Kassovitz saw his role as not so much as a representative of those people but as a mediating voice that could bring their grievances to ministerial attention, and bring the Minister to open dialogue with them. His idealism was mixed with skepticism, based on his assessment that Sarkozy’s disclaimer of responsibility for the continuing malaise was in fact a statement of *irresponsibility*.

Kassovitz saw the riots both as a legitimate expression of anger and frustration by its participants and as a symptom of what he called “la perte totale de l’autorité politique.” Sarkozy, on the other hand, acted and spoke in the way that he did precisely in order to assert both his own political authority and the authority of the political sphere. On the face of it, in pragmatic terms, one would have to think that Sarkozy’s position was the stronger. Even if his critics reproach him with assimilating some of the tendencies of Le Pen and the extreme Right, there can be no doubt that

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, “Un cinéma de la responsabilité: esquisse de cartographie du cinéma français vivant en 1998,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 36:1 (January-April 1999): 12-25.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, *Libre* (Paris, 2001), 95.

his pugnacious forcefulness had wide popular approval.<sup>6</sup> But does this mean that Kassovitz was merely indulging in sentimental wishful thinking? Not necessarily, for it can be argued that the cause that he was defending does indeed go to the heart of the French identity question. In stepping up as the champion of a multicultural and anti-racist France, he was proposing an inclusive notion of French identity; more than that, the idea of inclusiveness as synonymous with Frenchness. Sarkozy, on the other hand, and the political trend which he articulates, was portrayed by Kassovitz as constructing a French order based on exclusion, a France that defines itself by rejecting what it is not. By aligning himself as an artist with those who are most vulnerable in French society, Kassovitz was making an important political claim for art as a critical factor in the French ethos, a stance that obviously carries high risk in relation to a government apparently more interested in social order than in social justice.

The opposing paradigms of the Kassovitz-Sarkozy exchange correspond to deep tensions in France. In order to understand them more clearly, it will be helpful to establish a historical framework for mapping the breakdown between the cultural and political sectors. I would suggest three major components for the historical framework. The first is the evolution of the culture/politics compact initiated by de Gaulle in 1959. The second is the series of sharp and even violent confrontations—covering almost every sector of French society—that have occurred since 2002. The elections of that year, it will be remembered, saw the elimination of the Socialist Jospin by the leader of the Front National, which in turn led to the pro-Chirac right-wing landslide in which much of the divided and shame-faced Left found itself obliged to vote for Chirac in order to prevent a Le Pen presidency. And the third is the development of two large-scale issues affecting contemporary France's self-definition—namely the immigration question and France's relationship with Europe.

### The Evolution of Cultural Policy

From the beginning of the Fifth Republic, de Gaulle articulated a special and prominent place for culture in both the projection of national identity and in the French political process through the creation of a separate ministry, with André Malraux at its head. As well as being a determined effort to restore France's cultural *grandeur*, this provided an essentially collaborative model for the relationship between politics and culture, and the evolution of this model is essential for understanding the more conflictual situation represented in the Kassovitz-Sarkozy clash. As Kim Eling has demonstrated in his excellent analysis of the development of French cultural policy, the central principle since Malraux has been the democratization of culture, although democratization meant vastly different things for Malraux than for his successors such as Jack Lang.<sup>7</sup> The former sought to make high culture more widely accessible to the French people; the latter emphasized the importance of conceiving cultural activity in a way that included, and even foregrounded, popular culture forms. Eling points out that the model that gradually

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<sup>6</sup> During the 2005 riots, his hard-line approach received solid majority approval in various polls. See for example the IPSOS report, "Banlieues: l'opinion adresse un satisfecit à Nicolas Sarkozy" (16 November 2005), <http://www.ipsos.fr/CanalIpsos/articles/1723.asp>, accessed 31 May 2006. See also Jean-François Achilli, *Sarkozy: Carnets de campagne* (Paris, 2006), 241, 253.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Eling, *The Politics of Cultural Policy in France* (London, 1999), 8.

established itself was one in which decision-making processes, particularly in relation to financial support, have been strongly influenced by artistic practitioners.<sup>8</sup> In fact it is not an exaggeration to argue that it was the practitioners (that is, the artists themselves) who guided the formation of government policy and that the political was fundamentally in a position of service in relation to the cultural. Eling also points out the weaknesses of this system, in that its democratization goals were to a considerable extent constrained by the corporatist tendencies of its functioning: groups of particular artists have tended to ensconce themselves in positions of influence, thus stifling, or at least limiting the influx of new ideas and talent.<sup>9</sup> However, the main virtue of the model was its “bottom-up” nature—a situation that was somewhat anomalous in an otherwise strongly hierarchical state apparatus. It was from within this model that Mathieu Kassovitz emerged, and it clearly informs his rhetoric when he speaks of “la France d’en bas.”

At the UMP’s Cultural Convention in January 2006, Sarkozy announced a dramatic break with previous French cultural policy.<sup>10</sup> Although the party’s preamble to Sarkozy’s speech reaffirms the French ambition to be at the forefront of the arts and acknowledges the necessity of strong public support for artistic creation, the party president himself announced a radical new approach. His line of thought was based on an analysis purporting to show that previous policy was bankrupt, both financially and in terms of artistic creation and diffusion, and he proposed the following measures. Culture would be merged with education in a single ministry (as, incidentally, was the case before Malraux)<sup>11</sup>; more emphasis would be given to private investment in cultural activity; high culture and tradition would be given more prominence in education programs and on television; and finally, support funding for cultural production would be tied to export potential.

It could be argued—and Sarkozy would certainly do so—that these shifts, in their reduction of the role of the State in the creation and diffusion of culture and their devolution of responsibility for cultural production towards the private sector, are an extension and acceleration of the democratization process apparent in earlier cultural policy. However, independently of its content, what is striking about this initiative is how emphatically it is “top-down” in its elimination of the cultural corporative and practitioner roles in policy making. Even more contentious is its *de facto*, if not explicit, ambition to revolutionize not only French culture but also France as a culture, through its claim for the primacy of the political over the cultural. This stance is consistent with Sarkozy’s overall position on leadership. While he often speaks of the necessity of consultation, he has no qualms about his belief in leading from the front. As he put it in his reflective memoir, *Libre*, published in 2001:

En période de crise, le slogan: “Il faut donner la parole à la base” est bien commode pour les responsables politiques en panne d’imagination et n’ayant plus grand-chose à dire. Il est certain que l’on gagne toujours à

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30ff, 174 and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the case of the composer and conductor Pierre Boulez and his relationship with François Mitterrand. *Ibid.*, 38-69.

<sup>10</sup> It needs to be noted that Sarkozy’s positions on cultural policy had already been formulated by 1999. See Sarkozy, *Libre*, 268-77.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, in a gesture widely interpreted as pragmatic and conciliatory, after his election, he maintained Culture and Communication as a separate ministry. See *infra*.

écouter, mais la première fonction du politique est de montrer le chemin afin d'imaginer ce que sera ou du moins ce que devrait être l'avenir.<sup>12</sup>

In respect to culture specifically, Sarkozy does not appear to be excessively steeped in it. During the build-up to the presidential elections, his references to French cultural icons became notably more frequent; this was widely (and plausibly) attributed to the impact of his speechwriter and close advisor Henri Guaino. In *Libre*, Sarkozy claims to have once had a literary conversation with François Mitterrand in which he confessed to the former President his preference for Hemingway over Malraux.<sup>13</sup> Although one can hardly pick fault with the books he nominates as his favorites—Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and Cohen's *Belle du Seigneur*—there is no evidence of any personal engagement with the wider French literary tradition. As for the cinema, references are rare and largely without substance, except for his attack on the anti-censorship flurry that occurred over *Baise-moi* in 2000<sup>14</sup> and his desire, during a holiday in Normandy, to indulge in the "consommation sans modération de films du festival américain de Deauville."<sup>15</sup> He likes action films and comedies.<sup>16</sup> He is an avid jogger and sports fan—a daily reader of *L'Equipe*—and he watches a lot of television. The prose in which he describes his visit to Euro-Disney is every bit as tritely lyrical as that recounting his visit to Venice.<sup>17</sup> France's cultural creators thus felt justified in their concern about Sarkozy as a formulator of cultural policy. Scathingly sarcastic about intellectuals, academics and philosophers whom he accuses of being completely out of touch with reality,<sup>18</sup> he tends to limit his definition of reality to political efficiency and practicality. Although a self-proclaimed political inheritor of Gaullism, Sarkozy would appear to have largely emptied that ideology of its historically rich cultural focus. As a result, the cooperation between the political and the cultural that had guided French State policy since de Gaulle has come to appear as a potentially more adversarial relationship.

### Social Conflict

Since 2002, the number and intensity of politically-provoked social conflicts have increased quite markedly. The most salient ones have involved "les intermittents du spectacle," research funding, the teaching of France's colonial past in the national history curriculum, and Dominique de Villepin's ill-fated proposal for young people's employment contracts. If any one of these could theoretically be dismissed as an exception or an anomaly, their accumulation inevitably suggests more serious fracturing. They cannot be dismissed simply as a set of failures by the government to

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<sup>12</sup> Sarkozy, *Libre*, 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>14</sup> *Baise-moi*, a film made by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, was the subject of an extended controversy over pornography and censorship. Just as Kassovitz, in his blog, doubts whether Sarkozy ever saw *La Haine*, so one can doubt whether he ever saw *Baise-moi*.

<sup>15</sup> Sarkozy, *Libre*, 205 and 102.

<sup>16</sup> Achilli, *Sarkozy: Carnets de campagne*, 150-53.

<sup>17</sup> Sarkozy, *Libre*, 44 and 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 176; also 241.

impose reasonable reforms on a public too comfortable to accept change. Although the argument for change is compelling—the evidence of the need for budgetary contraction is overwhelming—what has provoked conflict is not reform in itself so much as the fact that the changes proposed have been perceived as assaults on things that are fundamental to France’s cultural and social fabric.

Thus the *intermittents du spectacle*, a system on the point of bankruptcy and widely known to be abused, was defended not only by the people concerned but by many cultural practitioners, and indeed supported by the public at large, because the proposed reforms were seen as a wedge being driven by the government into an organic part of the nation’s cultural life. In the now famous incident in which actor-filmmaker Agnès Jaoui, during the 2004 César presentations, directly attacked the Minister for Culture Jean-Jacques Aillagon for his laws restricting the rights of the *intermittents*, she accused him of exploiting the economic weakness of the cultural sector in order to make budgetary savings and, above all, of undermining the principle of the exceptional nature of culture in French society. “A coup de lois absurdes,” she fumed, “vous êtes en train d’anéantir l’exception culturelle.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the government’s attempts to reduce and more tightly regulate research funding was elevated, via a petition initiated by the intellectual journal *Les Inrockuptibles*, to a “guerre à l’intelligence,”<sup>20</sup> and the government was painted as committed to dumbing down the rigor and excellence of French research in science and the humanities.

Government backdowns in these cases were embarrassing, as they were with the retraction of a section of law requiring the nation’s history curriculum to include teaching of the “positive aspects” of French colonialism<sup>21</sup> and the law allowing employers to fire without explanation any person up to the age of twenty-six being employed for the first time. Once again, at issue is not the particular failure so much as the evidence that each of these cases brings of the increasing gap between government action and voices of dissent across a broad social spectrum. Reaction against the “*Contrat de première embauche*” proposal was large-scale and violent beyond any government anticipation, obscuring any merit the initiative may have had for reducing unemployment and underlining the breakdown of communication mechanisms between the political sphere and the public at large.

Resistance to government action was not limited to the folios to which any of these particular cases refer—education, immigration or industrial relations. It was more organic and more widespread. One can in fact argue that, well in advance of the 2007 presidential campaign, there was a growing *culture of resistance* which can be read as the opposition of acquired cultural values to a political will seen as threatening to dilute or dissolve them. From the viewpoint of a Sarkozy, this was noise created by a State-subsidized vocal minority to the detriment of the majority of French people and the nation. For the protestors, the presence of State support for cultural activities was a sign and a guarantee of community cohesion that policies like those of Sarkozy

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<sup>19</sup> “Jaoui fustige Aillagon aux César,” *Le Nouvel observateur* (23 February 2004).

<sup>20</sup> *Les Inrockuptibles* (17 February 2004).

<sup>21</sup> The law of 23 February 2005 sought to provide recognition of the French who were repatriated after the colonial conflicts. Its article 4 required teaching programs to stress “le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du nord...” After animated attacks by historians and various prominent politicians, President Chirac moved to have the offending clause annulled, which occurred in January 2006.

would inevitably atomize. At stake was the essence of what constitutes French identity.

### Immigration and Europe

The identity question is clearly present in the final historical dimension that needs to be taken into account—the developments concerning immigration and the movement towards the unification of Europe. In respect to the first, the government, with its emphasis on its right to determine the rules for immigration and citizenship and its adoption of hard-line responses to social unrest, has been clearly supported by a majority of the French population, the protests of a Kassovitz notwithstanding. Sarkozy demonstrated his ability to annex some social justice territory when he moved in 2003 to abolish the infamous *double peine* laws (by which migrant criminals could be both obliged to serve a prison sentence and on release be subjected to deportation); but the main thrust of his approach to migration has been consistently and profoundly informed by the *seuil de tolérance* concept shared with both Mitterrand and Le Pen. In a speech to the National Assembly in 2003, he argued that it was the failures of previous governments to control migration that had caused increased xenophobia and racism in France.<sup>22</sup> His policy—including the June 2006 law and continued in the post-election period with the Hortefeux law of October 2007—is congruent with the overarching goals of his predecessors since 1974: aiming to control the number and type of immigrants reaching France and to integrate those who have permanent residency.<sup>23</sup>

The general direction of these policies constituted a strong electoral platform that, in the political spectrum, not even the Socialists would seriously contest. The 2006 law on “chosen immigration” did, however, generate considerable opposition from the churches as well as from politicians, concerned that the new regulations would lead to greater uncertainty rather than to increased security. In an open letter to Sarkozy published in *Esprit*, Patrick Weil accused the minister of inconsistency and contradiction and of choosing to exacerbate tension among the French people for his own political ends.<sup>24</sup> Former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius remarked wryly that having to pass two immigration laws in the same parliamentary session was hardly convincing evidence of Sarkozy's effectiveness.<sup>25</sup> This resistance is convergent with the longer-standing position of a range of prominent cultural creators—writers, filmmakers, musicians—whose choice of focus is not the immigration problem but, rather, the problems faced by immigrants in their struggle to find work and ways of integrating themselves into French republican life. In choosing to identify with the cause of the isolated and the excluded, they saw, and continue to see, Sarkozy and his allies as alienating themselves not just from everyday life but from what is most dynamic and creative in the French social crucible. In an interview about his most recent film (*Angel-A*), Luc Besson—another cult figure for France's youth population—articulated this position with admirable clarity and potency. Mocking Sarkozy as “Kärcher 1<sup>er</sup>,” he proclaimed his admiration for the life of *la banlieue*:

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<sup>22</sup> See Jane Freedman, *Immigration and Insecurity in France* (Aldershot, 2004), 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Weil, “Lettre ouverte à Nicolas Sarkozy sur sa politique d'immigration,” *Esprit* 324 (May 2006): 79-88.

<sup>25</sup> Laurent Fabius, “Précarité: après les jeunes, les étrangers!” *Le Monde* (25 April 2006).

“l’avenir économique de la France, c’est la banlieue. C’est une pépite, ça fourmille, c’est un mélange culturel, artistique, religieux. Ils ont faim, ils ont l’énergie.”<sup>26</sup> And he places the blame for France’s crisis squarely at the feet of what he considers to be a disconnected political class:

Depuis près d’un demi-siècle, nous sommes gouvernés par des énarques, et depuis près d’un demi-siècle, notre pays ne cesse de s’endetter, de s’appauvrir, de voir son chômage augmenter et le fossé entre les classes sociales s’agrandir. Les énarques gouvernent entre eux et pour eux, ils ne savent pas ce qu’est le peuple, la rue. Ils croient bien faire, mais ils laissent le pays glisser vers sa faillite.<sup>27</sup>

There is considerable irony, and some injustice, here. Sarkozy is in fact not an *énarque* but a lawyer and a former student of Sciences-po. Further, at least in his rhetoric, Sarkozy would entirely agree both on the drastic needs of *banlieue* communities and on their significance as a potential source of renewal and creativity in French society. In his book *La République, les religions, l’espérance*, published just a year before the riots, Sarkozy returns again and again to the importance of recognizing that France has become multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious. He acknowledges the youth, dynamism, and creativity of the Islamic suburban communities: “je suis persuadé que les musulmans peuvent être une grande force pour notre pays, car il y a beaucoup de dynamisme dans cette communauté, beaucoup de nouveauté. Il n’y a pas d’usure.”<sup>28</sup> His record on cultural diversity was strongly and very publicly established by his creation in April 2003 of the French Islamic Council—le Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM), which constituted for the first time a peak body capable of providing a unified forum for the various Muslim organizations in France and an effective interlocutor for the government.<sup>29</sup> And in contradistinction to President Chirac and most of the French political class, Sarkozy was for a long time vocal in his support of affirmative action to help disadvantaged members of French society overcome obstacles to their integration into the social and political processes.<sup>30</sup> He has frequently challenged the axiomatic desirability of the so-called French social model, and even its viability, pointing to the high levels of immobilism and unemployment that that model has produced. Unfortunately for him, even though some of his positions may coincide with those of the artistic community, the latter—and indeed the youth of the *banlieue*—seem unaware of them and continue to see Sarkozy as an especially reprehensible representative of an essentially repressive *France d’en haut*.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of disjunction between the political class and the French population was the refusal by the latter in May 2005 to endorse the

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<sup>26</sup> Ghislain Loustalot, “Ça aurait pu se passer comme ça... mais il a décidé de tout dire,” *Première* 1 (2006), 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. Other examples of major cultural figures resisting Sarkozy include the writers from the French Antilles Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. See Achilli, *Sarkozy: Carnets de campagne*, 290-91.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, *La République, les religions, l’espérance* (Paris, 2004), 118; see also 22, 77, 107, 109-10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-120.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance his speech to UMP members in Paris, 19 November 2005. As President of the Republic, he seems to have retreated from these views.

European constitution project, despite strong campaigns in favor by most political leaders Left and Right. It is difficult to assess the role played in this outcome by artists and other cultural practitioners. Pascal Rogard, a key such figure as head of the influential Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques (SACD) and President of the umbrella Coalition Française pour la Diversité Culturelle, campaigned strongly for a "yes" vote. He believed that the terms of the constitution gave adequate protection to the French cultural industry and activities.<sup>31</sup> His point of view was not shared by all, and notably the organization which he had previously directed, the Association des Réalisateur et Producteurs (ARP), had expressed grave concerns about the dominance in the draft constitution of free trade regulations over the articles protecting cultural diversity.

More broadly, exit polls after the referendum showed that the "no" vote demonstrated a breakdown of the traditional political guidance mechanisms, the plebiscite taking the vote outside party political structures and even outside traditional left-right leanings.<sup>32</sup> For a variety of reasons, which include cost of living raises associated with the introduction of the euro, identity uncertainties deriving from the rapid expansion of European union membership, and the prominence of the debate over Turkey's entrance into the E.U., Europe became, for a significant majority of the French population, a source of insecurity rather than a protection against insecurity and a threat to prosperity rather than a promise of increased well being or a bulwark against globalization.<sup>33</sup>

This leads us back to the notion of crisis with which we began. The late sociologist Henri Mendras might well have been surprised by its intensity. In his 1988 *La Seconde Révolution Française* he painted an optimistic picture of a France in which major social and religious conflicts had subsided and broad consensus had been reached on a tolerant, open way of life. In his 2001 *La France que je vois* he continued to defend this general understanding but acknowledged the growth of clusters of discontent, notably in the zones of unemployment and social exclusion in the ex-urban housing estates. Like many at the time—and I must confess to having been one of them—Mendras thought of these problems as being accidental rather than systemic, as things that could be fixed without unduly troubling the nation's serenity.

The Kassovitz-Sarkozy conflict shows, in the significant field of cultural politics, how knotty the dilemma is. There has been the odd, recent hopeful sign of cooperation between the French State and the artistic milieu. One of them was the French-initiated, Europe-led campaign in UNESCO to create an international convention defining cultural diversity as an inalienable human right. As has been shown elsewhere, this initiative, which reached fulfillment in 2005, very probably had its origins in earlier debates launched by ARP.<sup>34</sup> If this were true, it would be evidence that the upward flow of ideas from cultural practitioners towards policymakers is still functioning in the French situation. In any case, there is clear congruence between the positions taken by these cultural practitioners and the efforts

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with the author, 11 October 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Stéphane Rozès, "La renationalisation du débat européen," *Le Débat* 136 (September-October 2005): 29-43.

<sup>33</sup> See Paul Thibaud, "Europe manquée, Europe à faire," *Le Débat* 136 (September-October 2005), 70.

<sup>34</sup> See Colin Nettelbeck, "Keeping It All in the Family? French Cinema and the Rencontres de Beaune, 2000-2004," *Modern and Contemporary France* 14:1 (February 2006), 96-7.

provided by the conservative French government to steer this very radical program to a successful conclusion. This is an instance of *la France d'en haut* not only being open to the ideas and creativity of *la France d'en bas*, but of it being in service to them to the benefit of the nation as a whole. However, it needs to be noted that this example of cooperation has occurred in the international sphere, where the conditions of competition for prestige and influence encourage the State to foreground French cultural distinctiveness. In the internal French framework, the situation is more conflictual.

It is hard to foresee any easy resolution, especially if Sarkozy himself continues to exercise his present level of influence. There are genuine paradoxes involved, as well as issues of perception. On the one hand, Sarkozy is one of the rare members of the political establishment to have voiced openly and forcefully his belief in the need for fundamental renewal of the democratic process in France and for revitalizing the connections between the political process and the social and cultural life of the nation.<sup>35</sup> For the historian Frédéric Lazorthes, this was one of the keys to Sarkozy's popularity:

En somme, ce n'est pas l'adhésion idéologique qui vaut à Nicolas Sarkozy les faveurs de l'opinion, mais quelque chose de plus profond, de plus instinctif, de plus désespéré peut-être: une dernière croyance en la *politique* comme *force active et ordonnatrice au sein d'un corps social*.<sup>36</sup>

But Lazorthes also rightly observes that "si Nicolas Sarkozy choisit de parler la langue du peuple, c'est pour restaurer celle de l'Etat et la figure de l'homme politique."<sup>37</sup> This identification with a strong French State, together with his aggressive stances on social disorder and immigration, are what allow people like Kassovitz to type Sarkozy as a conventional right-wing political manipulator out of touch with reality and to ignore the more radical aspects of Sarkozy's program. They may also account for Sarkozy's limited appeal among the young.<sup>38</sup>

But it needs to be pointed out that the constituency represented by Kassovitz, as Eling has demonstrated, is also affected by vested interests (notably in State support of its activities) and in acquired privileges. The artistic establishment can justifiably claim a measure of moral high ground in its generous defense of the needs and rights of people marginalized or excluded by social injustice, racism or the inequities of the immigration system. But the level of popularity that led to Sarkozy's election to France's presidency was far from being limited to traditional right-wing voters, and it is evidence enough that the cultural establishment must question its own connections with the French people of *la France profonde*. In some ways, Sarkozy seems to have been more in touch with a certain *France d'en bas* and Kassovitz more an emanation of a certain *France d'en haut* than their debate would lead us to suspect.

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<sup>35</sup> It is interesting that Ségolène Royal, on the political Left, the other main candidate in the 2007 presidential elections, should have shared a similar ambition.

<sup>36</sup> Frédéric Lazorthes, "L'attente confuse d'un pays en mal d'avenir," *Le Débat* 136 (September-October 2005), 67.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> It is symptomatic that the two hundred thousandth member of the UMP was also the organization's fifteen thousandth young member. Achilli, *Sarkozy: Carnets de campagne*, 315.

By way of conclusion, we can see that the major issues in the Sarkozy-Kassovitz conflict were two-fold. The first had to do with the power relationship between an articulate and well-ensconced cultural lobby, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a strong push to reassert, in the French setting, the primacy of the political. The second had to do with the social inclusion of the disenfranchised youth of the nation's housing estates. It seems rather ironic—given the bitter opposition of the Kassovitz camp to Sarkozy's candidacy—that the election of the former Minister of the Interior to the presidency of the Republic may have offered an opportunity to bring the sides closer together, rather than, as one might have expected, to exacerbate the tensions. President Sarkozy's gesture in maintaining a separate Ministry of Culture (and Communication), at the very least, keeps a channel open for potential further dialogue. Of course, it may be that he has simply put his plans for major cultural reform on the back burner, saving that battle until other more urgent economic and social changes have been completed. Only time will tell. As for the matter of social inclusion, Sarkozy's victory speech on the night of the election, far from exemplifying the irresponsibility that Kassovitz had taxed him with, assumed both responsibility and the determination to achieve major improvement:

... la volonté que chacun puisse trouver sa place dans notre République, que chacun s'y sente reconnu et respecté dans sa dignité de citoyen et dans sa dignité d'homme. Tous ceux que la vie a brisés, ceux que la vie a usés doivent savoir qu'ils ne seront pas abandonnés, qu'ils seront aidés, qu'ils seront secourus. Ceux qui ont le sentiment que quoi qu'ils fassent ils ne pourront pas s'en sortir doivent être sûrs qu'ils ne seront pas laissés de côté et qu'ils auront les mêmes chances que les autres.<sup>39</sup>

To dismiss these sentiments as mere fine words or political expediency would, it seems to me, be churlish; but in view of the continuing extreme hostility and distrust manifested towards Sarkozy by the intellectual and cultural left, it seems unlikely that the president's desire to govern for "all the French people"<sup>40</sup> will be achieved without a long and serious struggle, nor without some palpable improvements in the daily lives of those who, in the present working of the Republic, have the least access to advantage.

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<sup>39</sup> "Le discours de Nicolas Sarkozy", *Libération* (6 May 2007), [http://www.libertation.fr/actualite/politiques/elections\\_2007/252080.FR.php](http://www.libertation.fr/actualite/politiques/elections_2007/252080.FR.php) (accessed 7 May 2007).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*