

La France Eternelle: A Contested Ideal, Vichy and the Present

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The memory of Vichy is ingrained in French political culture. In the early 1990s Henry Rousso in *The Vichy Syndrome* traced in detail how France has repressed, revived and reinterpreted its memory in a long struggle to reconcile itself with the *années noires*. The German occupation of France during the Second World War has become the most closely studied of all foreign occupations. Since the 1970s the historiography of the Vichy regime has established, above all, that it was French, a product of its own history and not imposed by the occupier. We know that the origins of Vichy lie largely in the crisis years of the 1930s, though it drew on deeper traditions. We know that the regime, at least in its first years, was no simple German puppet and that its leaders saw the defeat as an opportunity to bring about its own ambitious program of reform. Vichy was inspired above all by an aim to regenerate France; to restore the strengths that its leaders believed formed an essential core or national essence. Vichy's National Revolution foundered for many reasons and it failed above all in its most ambitious ideals of regeneration, but its individual reforms were in many ways a continuation of pre-war trends and its technocratic and social policies in particular survived the Liberation and leave a legacy today.¹

Despite all we know about the regime, France's process of reconciliation with its Vichy past is ongoing and complex. Contemporary political culture is peppered with references to Vichy and to the crisis decade of the 1930s from which it was born. Such comparisons are difficult to measure, particularly when they emerge from the type of

¹ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA, 1991). Rousso identifies four vectors of memory: official, organizational, cultural and scholarly. Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York, 1972) is the seminal work that opened the floodgates to the study of Vichy and established its historical continuities. Paxton, in a recent review, reminds us of Vichy's technocratic modernization, its largest legacy and its social reform, its most forgotten, and comments that it is surprising today that such continuities can still be represented as a new discovery: see "Vichy Lives! – In a Way," a review of Cécile Desprairies, "*L'Héritage de Vichy: Ces 100 mesures toujours en vigueur*," *New York Review of Books* 60, no. 7 (25 April 2013). Continuities in ideals of regeneration are also covered in Debbie Lackerstein, *National Regeneration in Vichy France: Ideas and Policies, 1930-1945* (Farnham, 2012). For reference to Vichy in current disputes over national identity see Debbie Lackerstein, "Death in the Cathedral: The Long Battle over French National Identity and the Legacy of Vichy," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 60, no. 3 (2014): 373-83.

heated division that has afflicted France in recent years. It is not easy to assess whether they have real substance, whether they are imagined fears or if they are merely political rhetoric in a volatile climate. Vichy, a regime built on rhetoric has itself become a rhetorical weapon. Nevertheless, memory of Vichy taps into profound differences over national identity and fuels the old *guerre franco-française*. In times of malaise France shows itself still preoccupied with one of Vichy's powerful legacies – the question of the eternal France. Vichy and its National Revolution raised the question of what constituted and how to build and protect the real or authentic France. This legacy is less examined than Vichy's other continuities, perhaps because it is less concrete but also because it is so complex. Political parties from across the spectrum, right and left, exploit the ideal of an eternal France but with varying and sometimes surprising degree of success and failure.

La France éternelle is a term widely understood but not easily explained; a literal translation into another language cannot capture its full meaning. It is a trope that describes the quintessential France, the essence or core that is solid and steadfast. It suggests qualities that run deeper than the ephemeral surface of society: they are the opposite of and a counterbalance to the continually shifting and turbulent currents of politics and economics. *La France éternelle* can evoke the national genius, an *esprit* that emerges from French culture and heritage: its art, literature, philosophy, intellectual life and gastronomy. In this sense, the term is used to suggest a united, inclusive, utopian society.² However, the term is also resurgent in political discourse as both a challenge to define core values or vision and, contrarily, as a resistance to such a definition: the resurgence is recognition of the sense of crisis that is once again fuelling the questioning of French identity; the resistance is on the basis that such a definition is reductionist, lacking vision and a denial of the divisions that have long characterized France. Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, head of the Socialist Party, recently announced, “There is no eternal France, there is only a France that reinvents itself eternally.”³ The two current uses of the term illustrate Pierre Nora's analysis of how collective memory has dealt with the “powerful polarities” in French history: unity and diversity make, he claims, an “antithetical yet complementary pair”; when they fall apart, so too does a “comprehensive perception of France.”⁴

Historically, as Philippe Burrin has pointed out, *la France éternelle* was an invention of nineteenth century nationalists. Their creation of a timeless ideal was essentially to fill a void: the Republic was unequal to the task of representing France and the monarchy was no longer viable.⁵ Vichy – or at least the Vichy of Pétain and his supporters; sought to fill a similar void in 1940. However, its defense of *la France*

² Edouard de Praron, “Nous sommes tous les gardiens de la France éternelle,” *Nouvelles de France* (6 December 2013), <http://www.ndf.fr/poing-de-vue/06-12-2013/sommes-les-gardiens-france-eternelle#.VAXna0vjh8E>. Praron declares “La France éternelle ... ne se réduit ni à une géographie ni à des institutions. Elle est du domaine de l'imaginaire, de l'émotion, du sensible.” An anonymous blog site entitled *France Eternelle* uploads information from diverse sources: it claims to be “anti-conformist” and dedicated to “freedom of expression,” although most contributions appear to be more right wing than left or neutral: *FE* (January 2011), france.eternelle.over-blog.com.

³ Cambadélis was introducing the Prime Minister Manuel Valls at the Socialist Party's “Summer University” on 31 August 2014. He concluded his speech with his vision for the future: “Il nous faut retrouver le chemin de l'utopie, de l'égalité réelle.” For a video and transcript of the speech see: <http://www.parti-socialiste.fr/articles/retrouvez-le-discours-de-cloture-de-jean-christophe-cambadelis-lors-de-luniversite-dete>

⁴ Pierre Nora, “Conflicts and Divisions,” in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, Pierre Nora, ed. (New York, 1996), 21-23, 21. Nora writes that French identity has been “sustained by an enduring sense of its own divisions” (21).

⁵ Philippe Burrin, “Vichy,” in *Realms of Memory*, Nora, ed., 181-201, 193.

éternelle was more than a promise of survival or reassurance for a nation suffering the shock of defeat and foreign occupation: it defined a central mission. Pétain and the traditionalists who, in the main, directed the National Revolution aimed to restore the essential qualities and natural communities that they believed had once made France great. As part of this process they would purge the foreign elements – physical and ideological – that they said had weakened it. Their ultimate aim – certainly a fanciful aim under Nazi occupation – was to restore the authentic France.⁶

Vichy conveyed the values of *la France éternelle* in several ways. First and foremost was through Pétain, his representation in official propaganda and through his speeches. Second, the general thrust of the National Revolution's rhetoric promoted eternal values, but they emerged most strongly in its often-stated aim of the restoration of the 'real' France – a *retour au réel*. Vichy's main policies in this regard were presented under the banners of *Retour à la Terre* and *Retour au Foyer*. They promised a return to the traditions that were embedded in the soil and the family (represented as hearth and home) and that were the foundations of the resilient, unified and healthy society that had been undermined by the decadence of the modern world. Such policies were soon exposed as unrealistic in the context of the war and the economic demands of the Occupation but, from their very inception, they promoted ways of life that had already largely disappeared. Nevertheless, it was a feature of Vichy's 'unreality' and its constant self-reference in opposition to decadence and the Third Republic that its mythology of return to a golden past persisted throughout the Occupation. Vichy sought to represent the timeless values of *la France éternelle*.

An industry of Pétainography disseminated Pétain's image throughout the country in posters, photographs, postcards and busts. They portrayed him in uniform, in formal civilian dress, sometimes stern and sometimes grandfatherly, but not as a politician. Official propaganda created a *mystique* that placed him above the partisan and turbulent game of politics. Pétain was the quintessential Frenchman, the embodiment of France. In an iconic poster, he looks directly at the observer above a challenge written in large capital script, "Are you more French than he?"⁷ Other posters advised "Think Pétain and you will live French."⁸

Pétain's image and his speeches were designed to reassure the nation. His immense and enduring popularity rested in large part on his promise of protection and on the survival and unity of France. He asked in return for the nation's trust. The timeless message of *la France éternelle* was central to this mission. The first point at which Pétain tested the people's trust and confidence was his meeting with Hitler at Montoire on 24 October 1940. Photographs of the two men together, and particularly shaking hands, were a shock, one that many early resisters have since identified as the point at which they chose their different path. Pétain's speech to the people of France explaining the meeting and the policy of collaboration was momentous and carefully crafted: he delivered it a full six days after the event; he acknowledged that it had caused

⁶ The policies of the National Revolution that aimed to build the national character through physical and moral transformation as well as those that aimed to exclude "harmful" elements are covered in more detail in Lackerstein, *National Regeneration*, Chapters 9-11. W. D Halls, *The Youth of Vichy France* (Oxford, 1981) remains an outstanding analysis of policies to reshape youth. For exclusion see Denis Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944: contrôle et exclusion* (Brussels, 1997).

⁷ Laurent Gervereau and Denis Peschanski, *La Propagande sous Vichy 1940-1944* (Paris, 1990), 238. The poster is also viewable at Getty Images: "Propaganda Poster for Marshal Petain, 'Are you more French than him?'," *Getty Images*, www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/news-photo/propaganda-poster-for-marshal-petain-are-you-more-french-news-photo/152245700.

⁸ Marc Olivier Baruch, "Charisma and Hybrid Legitimacy in Pétain's État Français," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 2 (2006), 215-24, 218.

disquiet; and he ended by saying that whereas he had hitherto spoken to them as a father, he was now speaking as their leader. He ended with an exhortation, “Follow me. Maintain your confidence in the eternal France.”⁹ The phrase was reproduced in posters throughout the Occupation below a photograph of Pétain, this time dressed in uniform, his gaze averted into the distance – into the unknown future.

Vichy propaganda promoted Pétain as the archetypal realist: he embodied the virtues of truth, common sense, simplicity, tenacity and hard work; he was without guile or artifice, the man who would tell France what it needed to hear, not what it wanted to hear; he was worthy of their confidence. But Pétain represented the real France in two contradictory senses. First, in the sense of the Maurassian *pays réel*, the realm of family, locality and work and all the ties that bound them as opposed to the false and corrupt *pays legal* that undermined them. Second, Pétain claimed to represent the real in the sense that he and his regime were grounded in concrete needs. There was, of course a glaring contradiction between the two since the concrete needs of the Occupation and collaboration soon impacted on the realm of the *pays réel*. The eternal and real France was beyond time and history. Everyday needs were a constant reminder of the present. Vichy’s propaganda ignored the contradiction, promoting Pétain in his image and speech as standing against the ‘abstractions’ of the Republic that had led France into decline and decadence: equality, individualism, intellectualism and more.

Official propaganda promoted a vision of the eternal France that is best summed up in a poster promoting the National Revolution.¹⁰ On the right of the poster is an image of the solid and healthy house of Vichy. A woman throws open the shutters as an act of final cleansing: a child sits in the window; a fire is burning in the hearth. The house is located on a bedrock of the state’s new national motto “Travail, Famille, Patrie”; built on foundations of Discipline, Order, Saving and Courage; supported on columns of the school, craftsmen, peasantry and the Legion; and overlooked by the seven stars of Pétain. On the left of the poster is an image of the tilted and crumbling house of anti-France – the Third Republic: its bedrock is Laziness, Demagoguery and Internationalism; its foundations and supports are collapsing as a rubble of ‘abstractions’ and vices erupts from below; overhead, the Red cloud of Communism engulfs it and the star of David, marked by Freemasonry, shines through.

If Vichy had an overall philosophy it was ‘return to the real’: the deep foundations of national strength. Its propaganda maintained a belief in the fundamental strength of France based on the ‘immutabilities’ of land, from which sprang family and tradition. Pétain and the National Revolution borrowed most of their mottos and rhetoric from elsewhere, usually without acknowledgement. Vichy’s ‘return to the real’ rhetoric was taken from the work of the philosopher Gustave Thibon. Thibon was not well known before the defeat but his collection of essays, *Diagnostics*, written in the 1930s and published soon after the defeat was widely read by a nation looking for a diagnosis and cure for its ills. His later book, *Retour au Réel: nouveaux diagnostics*, was praised by the broad spectrum of Vichy’s supporters, despite its appearance in 1943 when the National Revolution’s reformist rhetoric had lost touch with reality.¹¹ Thibon

⁹ For Pétain’s speeches, see Jean Claude Barbas, ed., *Discours aux français, 17 juin 1940-20 août 1944* (Paris, 1989).

¹⁰ Lackerstein, *National Regeneration*, cover image. The poster is undated but signed R. Vachet and produced in Avignon. Also viewable at: “Revolution Nationale 1942,” *Digital Poster Collection* (22 October 2013), <http://digitalpostercollection.com/propaganda/1939-1945-world-war-ii/france/revolution-nationale-1942/>.

¹¹ Gustave Thibon, *Diagnostics: essais de physiologie sociale* (Paris, 1940) and *Retour au réel: nouveaux diagnostics* (Lyon, 1943). For reviews see: Thierry Maulnier, *Revue Universelle*, Nlle. Série, no. 57 (May

was Vichy's savant: portrayed as a simple man, an autodidact who drew his wisdom from the soil and the men who worked it; he was no "mere intellectual"; his message betrayed no "modernist deviation."¹² Thibon's healing message was to maintain contact with "eternal truths" and the slow, "primordial rhythms of existence."¹³ His philosophy of organic realism was built on immutable, eternal principles and "good sense rooted in the concrete": stability and stoicism in the face of fate. Mass civilization, materialism and intellectual abstractions had, he wrote, separated the nation from the "profound realities" of blood, nation, work, religion and, above all, land – the soil of France.¹⁴

Thibon's tone and imagery lent much to a fundamental mythology of the National Revolution – the return to the soil. In his first speech to the nation Pétain linked the soil of France to timeless, eternal truths. The soil, he proclaimed, "did not lie" and he would never abandon it. Pétain also used Thibon's rural metaphors of ploughing and sowing in the face of the often brutal force of nature to convey a message of perseverance: "it might be that one of our peasants sees his field devastated by hail. He doesn't despair of the next harvest. He ploughs with the same faith the same furrow for the future grain."¹⁵ The soil signified certainty, integrity and stability; it was the people's refuge; it contained the seeds of the nation's true force and therefore its hope for regeneration. The soil, according to one Vichy promoter, was the "permanent living symbol of continuity and unity."¹⁶ Despite disaffection for his regime, Pétain clung to the rhetoric of the soil to the bitter end.

The National Revolution tied a concept of a return to the hearth or home to the mythology of the soil, using similar language of security and resilience. Little of actual government policy in this regard was new; in the main it merely reinforced the pro-natalist Family Code of the pre-war Daladier government. This again demonstrates the elasticity of such 'eternal' values across time and attachment. The National Revolution stretched pro-natalism to portray the family as the 'initial cell' of society, the repository and transmitter of eternal traditions and virtues. An avalanche of propaganda promoted the idea of the family as the fundamental building block of the New France. Film, radio, exhibitions and posters (which invariably depicted extended families in rural settings), reaffirmed the message that the family, not the individual, was the real foundation of society.¹⁷ Family propaganda also conveyed a strong moral message. At the heart of the family was the 'real woman', or the 'eternal woman', virtuous and, above all, fecund: Vichy passed legislation to limit women's access to divorce and to punish

1943), 710-13; Jean-Pierre Maxence, *La Gerbe* (17 Juin 1943), 6; "École de cadres de la Milice," *Documentation des cadres* 5 (Château d'Uriage, Isère, 1944), 42-43; René Vincent, *Idées* (January 1944), 55.

¹² Vincent, *Idées*, 55.

¹³ Gabriel Marcel, preface to Thibon, *Diagnostiques*, 3.

¹⁴ Thibon, *Retour au réel*, 7. See also his "De l'irréalisme," *Revue Universelle*, Nlle. Série, no. 57 (May 1943), 641-51 and Nlle. Série, no. 58 (May 1943), 744-55.

¹⁵ Pétain, speech of 23 June 1940, reproduced in Monique Paillard and Jean Paillard, *Messages d'outre-tombe du maréchal Pétain: textes officiels, ignorés ou méconnus, consignes secrètes* (Paris, 1983), 18.

¹⁶ F. Allengry, *La philosophie sociale et politique du Maréchal* (1942), 8.

¹⁷ For family propaganda see: Pétain's speeches 11 July 1940 and 25 May 1941 (Mothers' Day); and Archives Nationale de France [AN], 72AJ 1080, 72AJ 1081, SAN 7730. Government legislation sought to give fathers of families some power in local government and in the Peasant Corporation, and tried to spread the influence of family associations to the national level: Laws of 16 November 1940 (*Journal Officiel* [JO], 12 December), 30 July 1942 (JO, 22 August), 29 December 1942 and 12 February 1943 (JO, 20 February). In June 1943, the government created a Commissariat for the Family, an indication of the struggle to balance its aim of creating a new moral and political climate beneficial to the family the practical need to address the growing hardships of the Occupation: much of its social legislation survived the Liberation.

abortion as a crime akin to treason, a capital offence.¹⁸ Although its moral message was aimed primarily at women, family propaganda also sought to characterize fathers as moral heroes “the great adventurers of the modern world”.¹⁹

For the pursuit of pleasure, we want to substitute joy. For immediate concerns, future perspectives; for sterile functions, for ‘me’ satisfaction, the joy of the common good and of the profound attachments that harbour the future ... it is the family that will teach man the craft of being a man.²⁰

Vichy’s claim to represent the eternal France was strengthened by its presence on French soil and through Pétain’s promise never to desert it, but we should not neglect the fact that many Resistance groups also espoused values that they claimed defined the true nation. Though Charles de Gaulle and Pétain were very similar in background, de Gaulle in 1940 chose to represent another France; this was the France that stood for democratic tradition and resistance to tyranny. From his first speech broadcast by the BBC on 18 June 1940 – a speech that few in France heard at the time but which nonetheless came to symbolize the spirit of the Free French – de Gaulle laid claim to an eternal flame of French resistance that he proclaimed “would never die.” Four years later, on his triumphal entrance to liberated Paris, his speech delivered at the Hôtel de Ville was a direct challenge to Vichy’s claim of legitimacy and, no doubt, a message to the many former Pétainists. His words established the Resistance myth and entrenched its claim to represent the one, true and eternal France:

Paris! Paris outragé! Paris brisé! Paris martyrisé! Mais Paris libéré! Libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France, avec l’appui et le concours de la France tout entière, de la France qui se bat, de la seule France, de la vraie France, de la France éternelle.²¹

More complicated still, there was no one concept of the ideal France within Vichy or even amongst supporters of Pétain or the National Revolution. The most complex resistance to – or at least disillusionment with – Vichy’s vision of future France emerged from the most dedicated supporters of national regeneration. The National Leadership School, the *École des Cadres d’Uriage*, is the most pertinent example of this disillusionment. The aim of the school was to educate the elites who would exemplify the eternal qualities of the national character and carry forward Pétain’s vision in the National Revolution. But its monastic and neo-medievalist concept of a

¹⁸ The law of 2 April 1941 made divorce more difficult: JO, 13 April. For anti-abortion laws see: JO, 2 April 1941, 23 July 1942, 15 February 1942, and 23 December 1942; Miranda Pollard, “Vichy and Abortion: Policing the Body and the New Moral Order in Everyday Life,” in *France At War*, Fishman et al., eds, 191-204. For a discussion of the ideal of the “eternal woman” and policies of control see Lackerstein, *National Regeneration*, 219-29.

¹⁹ Jean Guibal, *La famille dans la Révolution Nationale* (Paris, 1941), 2-5, quoting Charles Péguy. See also J. Picavet, *La Révolution Nationale est un fait* (Amiens, 1941), 148-56.

²⁰ Speech by Jacques Chevalier, Secrétaire d’état à la famille et à la santé, 14 April 1941, reported by *Agence française d’information de presse*, AN 72 AJ 1854.

²¹ Speech of 25 August 1944. For a transcript see Charles-de-Gaulle.org: “Discours de l’Hôtel de Ville, 25 août 1944,” *Charles-de-Gaulle.org* (accessed 26 February 2015), <http://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/pages/espace-pedagogique/le-point-sur/les-textes-a-connaître/discours-de-lrsquohôtel-de-ville-25-aout-1944.php>.

spiritual and intellectual community led it into increasing opposition to and disfavor with the regime's more pragmatic supporters of collaboration: Laval closed the school at the end of 1942; some of its leaders later fought with the Resistance.²²

The concept of an eternal France was always complex and contested. The fact that quite opposed groups can lay claim to the ideal does indeed attest, as Pierra Nora has said, to France's consciousness of its own divisions. It is not surprising that in times of uncertainty, people take comfort in what they believe to be core values. Nor is it surprising that in times of perceived crisis or hardship, national identities can narrow and become partisan and even xenophobic. And yet, recent attempts at social and moral reform in France have seemingly opened deep divisions over national identity and core values: this, and especially the level of violence generated, has surprised everyone. In this conflict, references to *les années noires* have surfaced frequently, if only as a rhetorical grenade to demolish and discredit opponents.

Any references to national core values and moral reforms have proved difficult in contemporary French political culture in part because they must avoid the memory of Vichy. This can be seen in a recent dispute over education policy. Both Luc Chatel, Minister for Education in the centre right Sarkozy UMP Government, and Vincent Peillon, his successor in Hollande's Socialist Government, sought to expand the teaching of morality classes in schools. In 2011, Chatel used words that might have been employed to sell Vichy's 'real' and 'timeless' message when he promised to develop a strong moral conscience in "concrete situations, in reference to values common to every honest man."²³ However, one year later Peillon caused a storm of protest, albeit one fuelled by Chatel, when he promised "intellectual and moral re-education": the words unwittingly, though quite astoundingly, echoed those of Pétain in his first speech of 25 June 1940 when he invited the nation to "an intellectual and moral recovery."²⁴

Yet the traditional right has not benefitted from any narrow or overt appeal to eternal, rural values. In 2007, Sarkozy's election poster placed a photograph of his head to the right of a long, rolling landscape with the slogan "together everything becomes possible." Its appeal to rural values echoed Vichy propaganda and slogans, but the promise of the fruits of unity also recalled the left wing Popular Front of the 1930s and its rallying cry of "everything is possible."²⁵ But in 2009 Sarkozy tried to exploit growing rural dissatisfaction and recalled Vichy too closely. He repeated a speech in

²² John Hellmann, *The Knight-Monks of Vichy France: Uriage, 1940-1945* (Montreal, 1997) is particularly strong in conveying the ethos of the leadership.

²³ Marie-Estelle Pech, "French Education Minister Wants to Bring Back Morality Lessons," trans. Eve Zuckerman, *Le Figaro* (1 September 2011), <http://plus.lefigaro.fr/note/french-education-minister-wants-to-reintroduce-morality-lessons-in-primary-school-20110901-538957>.

²⁴ Chatel claimed to find the words "frightening" as a reminder of "the darkest period of the nation's history." For an account of the ensuing firestorm see: Ben McPartland, "French Minister in Unholy Row over Morality Classes," *France 24 International News* 24/7 (4 September 2012), www.france24.com/en/20120904-france-schools-chief-accused-echoing-vichy-leader-secularism-laicite-education-religion.

Reference to the crisis years of the 1930s and to Vichy proliferated further in 2013-14 during the public protest over the introduction of same-sex marriage and adoption laws. Manuel Valls, then Interior Minister, claimed that the divisions recalled the "darkest days of our history" and compared extremist groups to pro-Nazi, ultra collaborationists. John Lichfield, "Last-Ditch Protest in Paris against Gay Marriage Law," *The Independent* (7 September 2014), www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/lastditch-protest-in-paris-against-gay-marriage-law-8581917.html.

²⁵ For an image of the poster see "Nicolas Sarkozy," *Public* (2007), actu.ados.fr/Nicolas-Sarkozy/photos/11357-sarkozy-affiche-ensemble-tout-devient-possible-presidentielle-2007.html.

several provincial towns in which he said “the soil is part of French national identity.” His words backfired and were parodied, his facility with the truth compared unfavorably to that of Pétain when he had reassured the French nation in 1940 that “the soil did not lie.”²⁶ Discredited in the polls and by financial scandals, the UMP’s position as the most vociferous, if not the most powerful, opposition was and still is threatened.

The last political leader to flirt successfully with an appeal to rural, eternal values was, ironically, the future Socialist president François Mitterrand. His election slogan in 1981, “*la force tranquille*,” carried a “parfum de pétainisme”; it also recalled the quiet strength of Thibon’s philosophical message.²⁷ Mitterrand’s election poster was reminiscent of so many images of Pétain with his exhortations to remain confident in the eternal France and in the truth of its soil. It was also virtually the same as Sarkozy’s later poster, placing his head to the right of a long, rural scene. The scene contained a church, a risk that Catholic Sarkozy and his UMP party could not take. Mitterrand escaped any taint of association with Vichy, in part because his own Vichy past was not widely known in 1981. He was also shielded by his own family history – the rural architecture is indicative of his provincial origins – and by his Resistance lineage: these were foundations that Sarkozy, and indeed later presidents, could not claim.²⁸ However, Mitterrand’s political propaganda also indicates the elasticity of the ideal of the eternal France, that it is patriotic but not exclusively a right-wing concept.

Disillusionment with the two major political parties has led to a growth in support of the radical right. This in turn has led many commentators to make frequent comparison to the politics of the 1930s and the divisions that led to Vichy. The *Front National* is to some extent filling the political void, but Marine Le Pen has been forced to work hard to rid herself of the toxic legacy of her father and founder of the party, Jean-Marie Le Pen (who nevertheless gives frequent reminders of his anti-Semitic and pro-Vichy views). Marine Le Pen has managed to downplay the racist and anti-immigration elements of her platform to take the party into the mainstream by championing a protectionist form of nationalism. Her growing support can be seen in the results of the 2014 European Parliament elections where she achieved a historic twenty-five per cent of the vote on a platform of protecting the “sovereign nation” and essentially undermining the European Union from within.²⁹

²⁶ Mac Guffin, “L’identité nationale et la terre interprétées par Philippe Pétain et Nicholas Sarkozy,” *LePost archives* (27 October 2009), archives-lepost.huffingtonpost.fr/article/2009/10/27/1762235_1-identite-nationale-et-la-terre-vues-par-petaain-et-sarkozy.html.

²⁷ François Bazin, “Derrière l’affiche ‘La Force Tranquille,’” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 10 May 1981.

The article and an image of Mitterrand’s election poster are available online at:

<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/10-mai-1981/20110506.OBS2536/derriere-l-affiche-la-force-tranquille.html>

²⁸ In an interesting parallel, in June 2014 at the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane, the Prime Minister Manuel Valls was heckled from the crowd by a man who called out that he was the grandson of a resister and great nephew of Second World War veterans. He asked if Valls could say the same, knowing that he could not (Valls was born in Spain of Spanish and Swiss parents): the man then called Valls an imposter. Video footage of the event was uploaded to the France Eternelle website (cited above).

²⁹ Marine Le Pen attracted twenty per cent of the vote in the presidential elections in 2012, only one year after taking the leadership of the party. Despite the possibility of a charge for inciting racial hatred for remarks made in Lyon in December 2010 comparing Muslims praying in the streets to the German Occupation, her support has increased. Le Pen declared 2014 to be “year zero” for French politics, marking the end of the two party system and the vote in the European Parliament elections makes the FN the largest French party. It should be remembered, however, that only forty-three per cent of those eligible voted in the election. Kim Willsher, “Marine Le Pen’s Confidence Cindicated by Front Nationale

The most surprising source of passion and division in recent times has been, not politics, but moral and civil values. A proposed law to legalize same-sex marriage and adoption was initially not thought to be controversial: it had been part of the Socialist Party's platform in the 2012 presidential elections and sixty per cent of the population were said to be in support of it. But opponents of the law began a campaign of opposition and protest that rapidly gained in force and intensity, resulting in a series of mass demonstrations, the largest of which in May 2013 was 400,000 strong and led to several days of violence in the streets of Paris.³⁰ The most shocking act of protest came from Dominique Venner, a seventy-eight-year-old historian and right-wing political commentator who shot and killed himself in the cathedral of Notre Dame in protest against the law. Venner had grown up under the Occupation, the son of an avowed fascist member of *Parti Populaire Français*. In the suicide note that he left on the altar, he declared that he was sacrificing himself at the symbolic heart of France in order to alert the nation to the "immense dangers" to its heritage and to reawaken the "memory of its origins."³¹

Opposition to the law from traditional conservative and religious groups supporting family values was perhaps predictable. Less so was the degree to which it roused anti-immigration and particularly anti-Islamist sentiments. Most unexpected, however, was the degree to which the law, and particularly the permission for same-sex couples to adopt, tapped into complex and deep-seated divisions over core national values and identity. Opponents felt that the law attacked, not merely the right to individual identity, but knowledge of origins and that it undermined the roots that gave society its stability and depth. Some opponents, even on the left, saw the law as contrary to French tradition. Others, mostly on the conservative right, feared it as an apocalyptic change in civilization.³² Even allowing for criticism that the government mishandled the issue, the malaise over core values and identity was clearly deeper than predicted. In February 2014 the government staged a tactical withdrawal, announcing that it would not table the bill until 2015.

A recent enquiry into the social health of contemporary France begins with the arresting opening sentence, "France is not feeling well." The authors, Hervé Le Bras and Emmanuel Todd, have undertaken a demographic and anthropological analysis and have diagnosed a national malady without apparent cause: they call it *Le mystère français*.³³ France, they conclude, is suffering a discomfort or moral crisis that is manifest in a series of strange paradoxes. In "its depths," and by many measures of social well being, the nation is "not doing so badly."³⁴ France has high levels of education; its birth rate and life expectancy are healthy; and most people maintain a reasonable work-life balance. The nation, they claim, resisted the global financial crisis better than many of its neighbors; it supports less material inequality; and is adapting

Election Triumph," *The Guardian* (26 May 2014), www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/25/marine-le-pen-confidence-proves-vindicated-front-national.

³⁰ The divisions caused by the same-sex marriage and adoption laws are covered in more detail in Lackerstein, "Death in the Cathedral."

³¹ "Le Suicide de Dominique Venner, un 'appel au sacrifice' à la veille de la manifestation du 26 mai," *Le Monde: Politique* (22 May 2013).

³² The largest banner in the protest of 26 May carried the slogan, "No to a change in civilization." John Litchfield, "France: Huge Gay Marriage Protest Turns Violent in Paris," *The Independent* (26 May 2013). Marc Olivier Baruch, "Gay Marriage and the Limits of French Liberalism," *Dissent: A Quarterly of Politics and Culture* (Fall, 2013), www.dissentmagazine.org/article/gay-marriage-and-the-limits-of-french-liberalism.

³³ Hervé Le Bras and Emmanuel Todd, *Le mystère français* (Paris, 2013).

³⁴ Le Bras and Todd, *Le mystère français*, 301.

as well as can be expected to economic globalization. And yet they admit that the middle class is increasingly anxious; the political spectrum is moving towards the right; extremism is on the rise; and the media portrays the nation as moribund and increasingly ungovernable.

The sense of crisis, the authors contend, is the result of political leaders' focus on "abstract visions" of France.³⁵ These visions indicate a fundamental misunderstanding, they say, of a deeper social order and historical dynamic. It is true that what is often called 'deep France' – France of the peripheries – remains staunchly conservative and strongly protective of a concept of national identity that is rooted in tradition, family structures and place. It was certainly to this France that Pétain appealed in 1940 and this France that supported Pétain long after his promise of regeneration became unrealistic, and collaboration became a one-way street. An insightful element of Le Bras and Todd's analysis is that they attribute the rejection of abstractions and adherence to natural or eternal values to "zombie Catholicism" – the social and moral form of the religion without the belief.³⁶ This, they say, contradicts and sometimes triumphs over the broader diversity and acceptance of liberal and progressive values. National attachments are more anthropological and historical than political or ideological: that political leaders are too often blind to this, the authors say, has led to the apathy, alienation and anti-liberal catastrophism that are currently challenging French political culture.³⁷

While Le Bras and Todd identify the traditional ties of moral conservatism that might become more identifiable in times of crisis and division, they do not account for the significant generational component in contemporary arguments about core values and heritage. Nor do they account for more diverse and radical responses. Some would contend that globalization, economic downturn and de-industrialization have had a greater impact than they allow: they have certainly had a greater negative and uneven impact on the young and, especially, on disadvantaged youth.³⁸ Youth discontent and right-wing youth activism have become features of the current identity wars, and along with arguments over core French values has fuelled many comparisons with the 1930s and Vichy.

Génération Identitaire is a youth group that has been highly active since 2012 in protests against immigration, the presence of mosques and Islamic schools and in the demonstrations against the same-sex marriage laws. The organization's stated aim is to protect national heritage and to revive native and regional cultural identity: it, or perhaps its parent group *Bloc Identitaire*, has set up similar groups in other European countries to achieve the same goals. The group claims to be motivated by patriotism, rather than any party or racial politics. Its symbolism is nevertheless fascist and a video presentation of its creed is a "*Declaration of War*," characterized above all by anger.³⁹ The anger is directed in three directions. First and foremost against the baby-

³⁵ Le Bras and Todd, *Le mystère français*, 302.

³⁶ Le Bras and Todd, *Le mystère français*, 246-251 and *passim*.

³⁷ Le Bras and Todd, *Le mystère français*, 302.

³⁸ Youth unemployment has reached all time highs in recent years, nationally over twenty-five percent and currently more than twenty-two percent: "France Youth Unemployment Rate," *Trading Economics* (accessed 26 February 2015), www.tradingeconomics.com/france/youth-unemployment-rate. In disadvantaged areas, it is, of course, much higher.

³⁹ "Home Page," *Génération Identitaire* (accessed 26 February 2015), www.generation-identitaire.com. The group's video "Declaration of War" and the text from which the quotes below are taken can be found at: "A Declaration of War – From the Generation of National Identity," *LiveLeak* (7 October 2012), www.liveleak.com/view?i=aea_1349608822.

boomers who stole their generation's future by destroying its heritage. They accuse the "68-ers" of irresponsibility for taking the profits of post-war prosperity to create benefits for themselves, while leaving their generation with debts. *Génération Identitaire* rejects the history that the older generation has imposed on them; its trajectory of globalization, ethnic mixing and multi-culturalism. Secondly, their anger is directed against "foreigners" who take generous state benefits and who threaten and inflict violence. Finally, there is anger against social elites and rejection of their charity. Bernard Kouchner is the only person named in the video. He is a politician, a doctor and co-founder of *Médecins Sans Frontières*. An ex-Communist, he served in the Socialist Government but was expelled from the party after accepting a post as Minister of Foreign and European Affairs in the Sarkozy government in 2007. He is also Jewish. He is a symbol of all that *Génération Identitaire* rejects.

There are clearly new and immediate causes of this generational anger that do not consciously reference Vichy, but its adherence to heritage and tradition ties it still to the same rhetoric: "We have roots, ancestry and therefore a future, Our heritage is our land, our blood, our identity," are words that could have been uttered under the Occupation.

La France éternelle is an enduring ideal. It is also complex, contested and conflicted. These qualities become obvious in times of crisis, such as under the Occupation, or unease, as today, when France is 'not feeling well'.

The idea that France can be defined by quintessential qualities or has an essential core predates Vichy, but today it remains complicated by the cultural memory of those 'dark years'. As a descriptor of national identity, *la France éternelle* draws heavily on a tradition of attachment to the land and of moral conservatism. Such a timeless ideal was useful to Vichy and especially to Pétain in 1940. Pétain sought to take the nation above the flux of history. He recalled *la France éternelle* to reassure the nation of its future but, paradoxically, he did so by promising a return to the past, to the 'real' or authentic France. He sought to preserve France (as he famously claimed in his trial) but at the same time to 'save' it by taking it back to its roots. He preached realism through a mythology – the return to the soil and family – while at the same time pursuing the *realpolitik* of collaboration. Pétain claimed, through the rhetoric of *la France éternelle*, to represent unity, but Vichy itself was not unified and the nation was increasingly divided and attracted by another vision of France – that of the Resistance. Vichy pursued policies of exclusion and persecution to deny the "powerful polarities" that were already deeply ingrained in its national fabric. Those polarities are a part of *la France éternelle*.

Memory of Vichy's national vision persists in French political culture. References to the soil or moral regeneration cannot be used today in the political mainstream without invoking the memory of Vichy, wielded as a weapon. Nevertheless, disillusionment with traditional parties, a rejection of 'abstractions' and increasingly partisan and xenophobic politics perpetuate many of the threads – disconnected though they may be – of Vichy's memory and of its preoccupation with *la France éternelle*.

The video says: "We reject your history books ... We no longer believe that 'Khader' could ever be our brother, we have stopped believing in a 'Global Village' and the 'Family of Man'. We discovered that we have roots, ancestry and therefore a future. Our heritage is our land, our blood, our identity. We are the heirs to our own future."