
H-France Review Vol. 12 (October 2012), No. 133

Barbara Lebrun and Jill Lovecy, eds., *Une et divisible? Plural Identities in Modern France*. Preface by Sami Nair. Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010. 250 pp. \$55.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-3-0343-0123-7.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

The title of this volume raises the question of how *one* official identity coexists with multiple others in modern French life. The “une” in the title, the reader quickly discovers, turns out to be two. First there is the one republican body of all citizens enjoying equality and liberty—the ideology of the three republics since 1870. A second “one” refers to the unity of the French *nation*, an ideological construct older than the republics. The book’s thirteen chapters, in sum, examine how individuals and groups in France have accepted or negotiated multiple identities, including one or both of those official state-supported ones.

Emphasis on the “plural” has been particularly timely in recent years, as a response to conservative leaders’ efforts to define and impose a single unifying identity for all the French—in a context of anti-immigrant reaction. The subject of myriad identities lends itself readily to the open-ended nature of a conference—in this case a gathering of scholars at the University of Manchester in September 2008 for a meeting of the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France. This collection of papers from that conference, accordingly, covers a wide scattering of topics and periods, examined through a variety of lenses. No overall argument or revisionist conclusion emerges from the disparate chapters.

Although the conference was interdisciplinary, the editors have organized the papers along established disciplinary lines in three sections: political and social history, popular cultural studies, and French literature. But, as we would expect from interdisciplinary work, most of the papers do not fall neatly into one section. Keith Reader’s chapter on the *quartier* of La Bastille and its historical identities, for example, is as much political and social history as a work of popular cultural studies.

The editors’ introduction offers a big unifying theme: the crisis of identity in contemporary France. The more substantive preface by political scientist Sami Nair focuses on a crisis for the Republic, stemming from the state’s refusal to recognize and support the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic realities of French society. Nair’s essay helps explain why, despite the Republic’s promise of equality to all French citizens, so many children of immigrants find themselves marginalized and excluded.

Jean-Christophe Penet fills in some historical background on “the crisis of identity.” His paper spotlights the efforts of republicans since the French Revolution to establish a secular cult of the Republic, designed to supplant people’s identification with the Roman Catholic Church. The current Republic, Penet argues, suffers from its own success at undoing France’s *civilisation paroissale*. That is, it has eroded the foundations of a locally-based civilization by exalting individual choice to the detriment of tradition and by insisting on the singular republican identity to the exclusion of all forms of *communitarisme*.

Most of the papers, however, do not develop this theme of the republican model’s failings and social exclusion, nor do they examine a current crisis of either republican or national identity. Several

chapters, however, do recount conflicts over national identity in earlier eras, treating issues reminiscent of those illumined by Peter Sahlin's work on the Pyrenees.[1] Mark Sawchuk's paper recounts local resistance to France following the French annexation of Nice and the Duchy of Savoy in 1860. There the question of regional versus national identity divided the population for years, he shows, as some of the annexed preferred neighboring Switzerland or Italy to the authoritarian France of the Second Empire. Louisa Zanoun's study of the Moselle department traces shifts of political opinion in another borderland population with deeply rooted regional loyalties. In that part of Lorraine annexed by Germany in 1871 and returned to France after the First World War, Mosellan opposition to the French Republic and its national identity in the 1920s faded and yielded to new political realignments in the 1930s. That is, regionalist priorities gave way, on the one hand, to hopes stirred by the Popular Front and, on the other, fears of Communism and National Socialist Germany.

Two papers treat the process of adjusting French identity in the context of European integration since the 1980s. Maura Stewart recounts President Mitterrand's embrace of a "European vision" as a central theme of the Socialist party's program in the presidential election campaign of 1988. While reaffirming continuity with the Fifth Republic's traditions of strong presidential leadership and French nationalism, he placed new hopes on a "United States of Europe" as a vehicle of economic growth and international power for France. Philippe Marlière's chapter, in contrast, reviews the misgivings of French Socialists since the 1990s toward a Europe that they judged neo-liberal and too hastily enlarged with weak economies that could drag down the rest (as Laurent Fabius warned).

In the section on popular culture, Keith Reader sketches the Bastille quarter's historic identity as a stronghold of activist artisans--centered in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine--and its transformation in the late twentieth century to a gentrified entertainment district around the new Opéra Bastille.[2] The mutations that this famous *quartier* has undergone, he maintains, reflect changes in Paris and its identity generally. On popular music, David Looseley traces the rise of a discourse about *chansons* as a response by "defensive cultural nationalism" (p. 135) to foreign music--from jazz and international pop to rock'n'roll--with Edith Piaf as the key example. A well-chosen pendant to the nostalgic Parisian populism of Piaf is the contemporary singer Faudel. Some of his best-known songs, Ellie Sutcliffe shows, reflect his struggle to understand and articulate his dual identity--Algerian *Beur* and French. Concluding this section on popular culture is film scholar Franck Le Gac's paper on "citation citizenship" as a function of the French fiction movie. Le Gac's highly theoretical argument is that the inclusion of cited excerpts in fiction films might spur citizens to interpret official identity constructs critically. Spectators following a film's narrative also attend to the inserted citations, which prompt them to reflect on their own evolving identity independently of dominant social models.

In the last section four literary scholars show how notable writers of fiction have dealt with issues of identity in their characters and storytelling. Penny Brown examines the identity problems and traumas of child characters in children's books about the Holocaust (e.g., Jewish children in hiding) and immigrant experience in France since the Algerian war. Three other contributors put spotlights on the *bricolage* of personal identities that novelists Marie Darrieussecq, Marguerite Duras, and Éric Jourdan worked through in their imagined narratives. Resisting essentialist and official constructions (gender and sexual, republican and French), those writers have treated identity as "mutable, fluid, and plural" (Renate Günther's phrase, p. 211). Altogether, this section is the most theoretical and the most focused on individual identities as opposed to collective constructs. For historians it would be useful if the papers treating fiction brought in more about the context as it is understood from historical research. For example, works like Asher Cohen's *Persécutions et sauvetages: Juifs et Français sous l'Occupation et sous Vichy* would provide a basis for comparisons with the fictional accounts of children of the Holocaust.[3]

One good reason for the publication of collections like this one is that they offer a diversity of takes on an important subject. One drawback is that too often the papers are small fragments extracted from larger projects by the specialist researchers. The specialized content--and such terms as

“discursivisation” and “authenticise”--would not limit the readership so much if the authors had included some more synoptic views in their essays. Why so little (or no) engagement with major works of macro-history: Fernand Braudel on long-*durée* structures of French identity, Eugen Weber on the centrifugal process of making peasants French, Pierre Nora on the memory bases of French identity, and Patrick Weil on the history of French nationality? [4]

Specialists who can bring that background to their reading will likely find much of interest in chapters relating to their specialties. Others--or rather just about anyone interested in contemporary France--will find a number of pieces well worth reading as stand-alone essays; in particular, the preface for its analysis of the Republic's failings to assure equality, the piece on Faudel's search for a reconciled French-*Beur* identity, and the chapters on French Socialist approaches to European integration. Altogether, the volume makes a contribution best described as a 2008 sampler of scholarly thinking on an ever-evolving subject of first-order importance.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Barbara Lebrun and Jill Lovecy, “Introduction: Plural Identities in Modern and Contemporary France”

Sami Nair, “Preface: Reflections on the Republic and Ethnicity”

Part I: Social and Political History

Mark Sawchuk, “After the Plebiscite: Cafés and Conflict in Nice and Savoy during the 1860s”

Louisa Zanoun, “From the Second Reich to the Third Republic: Identities and Politics in the Moselle *département*, 1918-1936”

Jean-Christophe Penet, “*Laïque et indivisible?* Secularisation and the Crisis of Republican Identity in Contemporary France”

Maura Stewart, “*Lettre à tous les Français*: ‘European Vision’ in the 1988 French Presidential Election”

Philippe Marlière, “A Soured Relationship: The French Socialists and European Integration”

Part 2: (Popular) Cultural Studies

Keith Reader, “Cultural Topography: A New Growth Area?”

David Looseley, “Making History: French Popular Music and the Notion of the Popular”

Ellie Sutcliffe, “‘Un peu d’ici, un peu de là-bas; ça me revient’: Identity Struggle in the Music of Faudel”

Franck Le Gac, “Citation Citizenship and the French Fiction Film”

Part 3: French Literature

Penny Brown, “‘Is this my war?’ Identity Crises in French Children’s Literature after World War Two”

Helena Chadderton, “Identity Negotiation in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Le Bébé* and *Le Pays*.”

Renate Günther, “‘Étrangers à nous-mêmes’: Identity as Alterity in the Work of Marguerite Duras”

Owen Heathcote, “Queering French Gay Identities? Eric Jourdan’s *Aux Gémonies* (2007)”

NOTES

[1] Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[2] Keith Reader’s paper is a short sketch for a book he published several years later: *The Place de la Bastille: The Story of a Quartier* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

[3] Asher Cohen, *Persécutions et sauvetages: Juifs et Français sous l’Occupation et sous Vichy* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993). Among others on the subject are Sabine Zeitoun, *Ces enfants qu’il fallait sauver* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989) and more recently (after the conference) Danielle Bailly, ed., *The Hidden Children of France, 1940–1945. Stories of Survival* (Albany: Excelsior Editions, State University of New York Press, 2010).

[4] Fernand Braudel, *L’Identité de la France: Espace et histoire* (Paris: Arthaud-Flammarion, 1986), also available in English: *The Identity of France*, trans. by Siân Reynolds (New York: Perennial Library, 1990); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1976); Pierre Nora, ed., *Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992). A more recent valuable account is Patrick Weil’s *Qu’est-ce qu’un Français: Histoire de la nationalité française* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2002). See also the excellent collection of succinct overviews in Philippe Tronquoy, ed., *L’Identité nationale, Cahiers français* 342 (January–February 2008).

Charles Rearick
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
rearick@history.umass.edu

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172