

INTRODUCTION

DESPITE THE SEASON—it was the 12th of August—the dawn morning in the little town of Millau in the Larzac was still chilly. This high plateau in the Southwest could have terrible weather. At the town's edge, just where the road descended from the hills, stood an almost completed new McDonald's, done in the company's vivid kiddy-toy colors. It had taken until the summer of 1999 for this omnipresent chain, finally, to reach here. Local farmers began arriving in the parking lot on their tractors, the favored means of travel in the poorer parts of the French countryside. They gathered in clusters at the construction site. They were mostly sheepherders, veterans of the successful struggle of the 1970s to block the planned expansion of the local military base. In their epicenter moved a fellow farmer, José Bové, pulling meditatively on his habitual pipe. The police, who had been alerted by the activists themselves, stood around waiting for a law to be broken.

It was a moment of trade war between the United States and France. The United States was trying to force open the French market for its hormone-fed beef. To bring pressure on its unwilling trade partner it was increasing to prohibitive levels the import duties on selected French products. Now Roquefort cheese, the Larzac farmers' principal market product, had been targeted. Most of the Roquefort is made by a few big companies. But the sheep milk for its making is purchased from the many small farmers in the area. Splendid production values: rough-clad peasants on tractors, a Provençal language, old stone houses, scant urbanism, pastured sheep, cheeses organically cultured in caves in use since the middle ages, a *produit du terroir* which was an integral part of a nation's grand cuisine. Can one imagine a more perfect set of symbols for a threatened French regional identity, which is to say, for an endangered French heritage? What might be the equivalent symbol for the American culinary heritage?

A number of the men entered the “McDo.” They began ceremonially taking it apart, literally de-constructing it. To speed its Big Macs to new customers, McDonald's employs modular construction methods.



1. José Bové speaking from the bed of a construction truck during the deconstruction of the Millau McDonald's. The graffiti on the roof reads, in the local Provençal, "MacDo Get Out." Photo Gilles Gesson.

It was easy to dismantle [démonter] sections already in place without much trouble or even great damage. The morning sun began to warm the air. In shirtsleeves, Bové picked up the prepared microphone and climbed on one of the construction trucks to explain to the small crowd why they were taking this action.

Now the police stepped in and arrested the men in the building, José Bové with them. Overnight, Bové became the most popular man in France, the new Astérix—he has the scrunched-up face and the perfect mustache—defying the Empire.

Neither Bové nor his fellow farmers are hicks. He is the son of research scientists. He attended courses at the University of Bordeaux given by the philosopher Jacques Ellul, the Cassandra of technological

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2. Bové shaking hands with well wishers from the (folkloric) condemned person's oxcart in which his friends were taking him to court to appeal his sentence for the McDonald's action, 30 June 2000. Photo Alexander Alland.

society. And his good command of English comes from the years of his childhood spent in Berkeley, where his parents were for a time doing laboratory research. McDonald's defended itself in its publicity by pointing out that everything—building materials, beef, plastic forks—was made in France by French workers. The firm provided jobs and a desired product.¹

But the issue is clearly not whether Bové is a *real* peasant, nor whether McDonald's is a good guest in France. It is about what French people understand as their cultural heritage in this age of American-driven globalization, and in what historical manner that *imaginaire* came to be. I will offer a history of the intense struggles in the last half-century over the meanings of new, clashing, heritages in France.

The past, where heritages are supposed to come from, is so rich and so contested that we must edit it. Which bygone activity, or event, or personage we wish to see today as related to us, and, more important, precisely how we relate to that past depends entirely on who we think we are *now* and especially on who we *want to be*. Enthusiasts of a certain idea of *the genuine* sometimes judge that once we speak of an activity in the past as part of “a” or “the” heritage, we are speaking of something fixed, a thing perfected in the past. I suppose they have in

mind something like what appears in *American Heritage* and *Figaro Magazine*, or in ads for period furniture.

But I think this is to miss the *utopian* aspect of heritage-talk, the hope it carries of a better, a more humane time and place. Ernst Bloch understood the dream of community, his special sense of *Heimat*, not as going home again—an impossible itinerary in any case—but rather as a passage to a future better place. Such utopias made from the past can be, in our own personal lives, metaphors of childhood retrojected into history. The hope of community and a time of happiness, perhaps that is why heritage-talk is so fraught with passion. To see heritages as invented things is too instrumentalist a view of utopic historicity. We find hopes for the future formed from elements selected from the past in every culture in the world. To insist that this way of thinking is simply manipulations of the powerful or the nostalgia industries—which it can be—also obscures the plain truth that cultures always offer a wide spectrum of possible heritage points about which their members may fight, but which they find are good to think with as they make their futures. “Heritage,” or in French the *patrimoine*, is a fighting word, and the most commonly used weapon—for all sides—in such historical struggles has been to *naturalize their* certain idea of the past. Heritage is national identity claims read back into history.

Jean-Pierre Chevènement has proposed, in effect, a return to the values that were alive in the Third Republic as a solution to today’s “immigrant problem.” Chevènement, the unsuccessful presidential candidate of republican renewal in the elections of 2002, was himself brought up in the principal’s apartment of a schoolhouse. His campaign speeches exhorted his fellow citizens to act responsibly, morally, honestly. He sounded to many in France, as a friend characterized it to me, “like my preachy junior high school teacher.” Chevènement wishes to return to the old republican values of discipline, leveling, and complete cultural assimilation to *the* culture of France. He wants the African and Maghrébin immigrants—and the Corsicans for that matter—to accept being melted down and recast by the French state-school as real French. It happened with the earlier waves of immigration; it is a tried and true entry into Frenchness. Why not again?

Le Pen wants the immigrants to disappear too. He loves a France that he dreams existed before becoming the major country of immigration in Europe. In ideal and in language, he consciously roots

himself in the racism and xenophobia of the right-radical nationalism of the early Third Republic. A parachutist (“para”) in Indochina, the Suez intervention, and Algeria, Le Pen had spent much of his adult life fighting, and torturing, rebellious colonials, only to see “them” come to France. Descendants of former native peoples of the colonial empire, the current immigrants are incapable of becoming French, in his judgment. So if he had been elected president of the Republic, his slogan “France for the French” would have translated into massive deportations.

Each man cherished a certain idea of the heritage of the last third of the nineteenth century. Neither would admit that republican government without enhanced *democracy* was unjust, a soft authoritarianism. Neither wanted to understand that French republican universalism has only worked when it took the form of a *negotiated* participation. Most important, neither was willing to confront two key linked legacies of France. One was that historically, republics—especially the paradigmatic French Revolutionary one—defined themselves *against* their enemies: the monarchy, the aristocracy, the church, and—the place where these were often strongest in much of the history of the country’s five republics—*against* the provinces. Second, the colonial empire was mostly made and completely consolidated by the leaders of France’s Third Republic as a continuation *at home* of this drive for unity-against-enemies. The praxis both of the centralizing republic and of making the colonial empire produced a systematic and entirely false sense of the cultural homogeneity of the French people. Today, some ideologues and a changing fraction of the French population see the immigrants from that former empire as a “problem.” That is a prime symptom of the continuing workings of a certain imperial-republican syndrome.²

Each man’s movement temporarily enjoyed a spurt of popularity in polls and early electoral rounds in 2002. But when real choices had to be made, the voters stopped using their votes as protests against exhausted Socialist policies, and, for safety’s sake, chose mainstream conservatives. Le Pen’s and Chevènement’s thorough rejection by the voters in both the presidential and the legislative elections made clear that the overwhelming majority of the nation wanted to move beyond their respective antique utopias of complete assimilation or racist exclusion.

At the end of three decades of toasting the new modernized France,

some of the more thoughtful began to feel the morning-after hang-over. After the massive economic development begun in the 1950s, the decolonizations in the 1960s, the Great Refusal of the young in 1968, and finally the beginning of economic depression in 1974, the fête came to an end. It was time for the French to assess what their society had become. In those years of growth the United States and the various cultural horrors collectively labeled “Americanization” served as the prime negative standard by which both intellectuals and policy makers measured the damage being done to the historic identity of the nation. But then, as Richard Kuisel demonstrated in his *Seducing the French*, the American menace receded into the background. The new identity crisis of the 1970s was literally historic. French leaders, rebels, and their intellectuals looked back to the past for the materials with which to construct present-day France.³ Specifically, from the rise of new regionalist movements in the early 1970s to the 1981 electoral sweep of the left, various new voices in France began to dispute what should be understood as the regional, national, industrial, and colonial heritages. In the last decades of the twentieth century, a new usage of the word *Patrimoine*—now meaning a national heritage made up of people and their customs, rather than of inherited family wealth or the state’s treasures—came into common use, and with the word, a new contested imaginary of what was France began to take shape.

In the aftermath of more than ten years of intense social contention of the decade before, the self-searching made the 1980s the great era of what-is-France books. The most authoritative of these was Pierre Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoire*. In 1984 Nora felt that it was time to sum up the common places and events of national memory. He thought it could be done in a one-volume collection of essays. It might be equally accurate to say that after the decades of France’s Second Revolution, he thought he could fix a certain idea of France in print. He wanted to document his vision of a modern, secular, and tolerant republic. But after publication, while praising the work, critics reproached him for his omissions. What about the Catholic heritage? The immigrants? And, oh yes, what about the colonies? Weren’t they worth remembering too? With good will, Nora responded to his critics by adding to his original still life of France more and more places of memory. Volume followed volume, until by the mid-1990s three volumes bound in seven fat books had come out, filled with essays by over 120 historians reminding readers not to forget this or that legacy or heritage of

France. Intending to sum up, Nora was obliged, finally, to perform multiplicity.

My work can neither aspire to the totalizing effort of Nora's first book nor employ the additive approach of the six that followed. Rather, I'm interested in two questions that seem to me fundamental: (1) Why in the late 1960s and 1970s did certain stories told about the French past become especially bitterly fought-over battlefields in contemporary society; and (2) Why and how did certain of these histories become enmeshed when in the past they had made up separate chapters, as it were, in the tale of national memory?

To try to answer these questions, I will trace how new understandings of French regionalism became intertwined with a new history of French colonialism, how Paris became intertwined with the provinces, industrial workers with regionalism, decolonization with re-founding the social sciences, new ideas about republican solidarity with a multicultural population; how a new museum of civilizations was created which is at the same time about France, Europe, and North Africa; finally, how the European treasures in the Louvre relate to the art of African peoples. Together, this new web of historical meaning has profoundly changed, is still changing, the dominant common sense of what France is and will be.⁴

What holds these apparently separate story lines together? Each of the chapters that follow describes a different aspect of the nuanced and complex cultural-power relationship between, and among, *Paris*, *the provinces*, and *the colonies*. Thus the handful of farmers who refused eviction so that a military base could expand in the Larzac in the Southwest sparked a movement in the 1970s that allied regionalists, anti-colonialists, socialist utopians, left Catholics, trade unionists, French Gandhians, and ecologists, creating what, in hindsight, we can see as the beginnings of the anti-globalization movement. The alert conservative leaders of French governments quickly sensed the development of a dangerous situation and tried to co-opt local discontents by sending the recently downsized colonial administrators into the provinces on domestic civilizing missions.

Then when the work of pacifying the backcountry seemed not to have worked, the state started on a different tack. Paris created a new office and new agents to manage the regional heritages on the ground, and to protect them from what some people in the Ministry of Culture termed "*ethnologie sauvage*." I will render this term "guerilla ethnol-

ogy,” in the sense of uncontrolled or insurgent. Decolonization had closed terrains of study to many social science projects and their French researchers. Why not shift scholarly interest to France, proposed the archaeologist Jacques Soustelle, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the ethnologist Isac Chiva.

Good idea, responded President Valérie Giscard d’Estaing, who had been harassed by Larzac militants and their sympathizers when he tried to dine quietly with friends in Rodez, in what he considered his own *petite patrie*. French social sciences were refounded in the 1970s in the wake of the angry new regionalist movements, such as those of Brittany, Occitanie, Corsica, and the Larzac, and as a direct consequence of decolonization. In 1980 Giscard d’Estaing capped the state’s offensive against guerilla ethnology by sponsoring elaborate official celebrations of the Year of the Heritage everywhere in France. It didn’t work, or at least, not well enough.

Elected President in 1981, François Mitterrand killed the plan to expand the region’s military base after nearly eleven years of locally organized resistance. He told the activists that their causes were now safe with the new Socialist government. They could go home. And in carrying out its promise to honor regional longings, for example in a law empowering real decentralization in 1982, the just-elected regime did quiet these troubles. The new government began then to turn its attention to the culturally ignored new immigrants—to that point groups with no heritages, at least no officially recognized ones.

But when, at the same moment, the movement of Jean-Marie Le Pen grew to be a force in politics, the pluralist opening of the society stopped. After all, Le Pen was in his own way a multiculturalist. He just thought that only one culture truly belonged to France and the rest should leave. In 1985 pluralists and republicans in the majority Socialist party fought out which would be the best riposte to the large following that Le Pen was attracting by his attacks on the immigrant population from the ex-colonies. Outside the government, in 1985 Harlem Désir founded the civil rights organization *sos Racisme* with some friends. Désir was metropolitan France’s first national *ethnic* charismatic leader. His own mixed Alsatian and Caribbean ancestry united in his person the margins of the nation. The movement’s message of *fraternité* and tolerance quickly drew wide support, especially among the young. But the specifically multiculturalist content of its message was not heard by France’s new governors.

Rather, after 1985 the almost instinctual response of the left to the Republic-in-danger recurred. Georges Clemenceau at a moment of danger to the Third Republic had proclaimed that the Revolution was a bloc. Now many anti-racist republicans declared that the society of the Fifth Republic was a bloc. The republican left closed ranks in a Jacobin–Chevènementist unitary front. No more talk about regions, colonies, or French minorities. So things remained, at least on the surface.

The growing split within the Front National in the late 90s debilitated these ferocious enemies of the immigrant minorities. The French national soccer team—a rainbow of ethnicities—defeated Brazil to win the World Cup on the eve of the fete of the Revolution in July 1998. While the team was training for the match, Le Pen had jeered at its diversity; this mixed bunch of foreigners could not win for France. But they did, embarrassing LePenism more than a hundred civil rights speeches could have done. Then the next year, Le Pen’s son-in-law and rival, Bruno Mégret, and some of his supporters finally broke with the FN to found their own organization. The split immobilized the radical right.

The embers of popular multiculturalism suddenly burst into flame. The very mixity of the team, both the coach and the progressive Paris press declared, had brought sports victory to the nation. The immigrants and their children were a source of strength not of weakness. Everyone had witnessed the demonstration of this truth on the football field.

But the persistent if relatively low-level depression that France suffered in the decade of the 1980s and 1990s did not afford the means for the schools or other institutions of society dependent on the state’s fiscal health to do much to help the new French live well in the land of their descendents. The outcome of that part of the story of French heritage(s) lies farther in the future than this work can go.

To vary a word of Charles Péguy, I found that the recent history of the state discourse of heritage started in politics and finished in aesthetics. I devote the last chapter to the projects of President Jacques Chirac and his conservative allies to end—or at least upstage—all the divisive debates about what properly belongs to French culture by locking a new definition of the French heritage within new aesthetic monuments. The new meaning that conservatives intend for what is France and what belongs to its patrimoine in the new millennium will

be elaborated in a huge and unprecedented exhibitionary transvaluation now in process.

In the near future France will create, reposition, or close eight major national museums. Against the wishes of its director and many of the curators, the Louvre has newly added a permanent hall dedicated to African, Oceanic, and New World art. President Jacques Chirac made it happen. Two grand museums of the French cultural heritage—writ large—are under construction. When completed on its site adjoining the Eiffel Tower, the Musée du Quai Branly will display the art of the former colonial empire. In Marseilles, France's gateway to the South, a Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée will show the regional, European, and North African heritages of France. To make these changes, three existing museums will close, or take on—from the point of view of the heritage muddle—new roles. The Musée de l'Homme closed its doors in 2003. The natural history museum is refitting it to reopen as a museum of physical anthropology. The Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie near the Bois de Vincennes, which in 1931 had originally been built as France's first colonial museum, will be dedicated to the departments and territories of overseas France (DOM-TOM). The Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, dedicated now to the history of French regions and their popular cultures, will surrender its collection to Marseilles and close. The future of the building next to the Jardin d'Acclimatation, a colonial legacy itself, in the Bois de Boulogne has not yet been decided. Finally, the Chirac government plans to revive an idea that the Socialist Ministry of Culture had turned down, a new museum dedicated to immigration.

When these changes have been accomplished, France's new official definition of the national heritage will henceforth incorporate something of its ex-colonial empire (as well as those of other imperial nations) in the Musée du Quai Branly. That "something" remains to be determined. The heritages of French provincials, immigrants, and close neighbors in a new Europe and from the fringes of Europe, and of North Africa will be on display in Marseilles, and perhaps in the museum of immigration. And finally, there is the strange decision to make a museum solely dedicated to the French who do not live in Western Europe. One more time, in this vast museum transformation, invoking at the same time France's cultural universalism (as the protector now of the art of both the West and the developing world) and

its cultural specialness (the centrality of culture in the life of the nation), the nation's leaders are preparing their cultural challenge to the United States in the globalized world.

A culture is not a prison-house, with its rules engraved in the souls of its participants. The notion that it is one is the prime assumption, and error, of conservative cultural determinists of whom currently Samuel Huntington—with his clash of civilizations—is perhaps the best known.⁵ Nor, as some cultural nationalists seem to want, is it a cocoon. I think, rather, that Ernst Cassirer's insight is still right: certainly, we frame our understanding of our worlds with the symbolic forms that our cultures supply to us. But—long before today's clash-of-civilizations syndrome—this refugee from Nazi essentialism responded to conservatives who ontologize cultures and make symbols and relationships into things. “The various forms of human culture, *are not held together by an identity in their nature* but by conformity in their fundamental task [of providing us the means of understanding our world]. If there is an equipoise in human culture it can only be described as a dynamic, not as a static equilibrium; it is the result of struggle between opposing forces.” Contrary to Huntington's reheated cold war Manichaeism, these are conflicting forces within cultures, not between them.⁶

Cultures are about freedom, options, and learning new ways of living. Make no mistake: this judgment is not a statement of political advocacy. It is based on a great deal of study on why people in modern societies expend so much time and energy in both cultural commerce and conflict with their fellows. Cultures make available to participants strategies of changing material life, social connections, feelings, and thinking for new situations. The strategies for social change or social conservatism chosen from this treasury depend on history, circumstance, and desire. The evidence that a culture is still living is not its classicisms, but that it changes.⁷ But all this is very abstract. We need an interesting place to test our ideas of cultural vision and cultural antagonism.

Let's leave the McDo at the edge of this little mill town. The Larzac countryside, although the Michelin *Guide* doesn't much recommend it, is worth a visit, especially at harvest time.