

PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS about the struggles in the last third-century of the millennium about what is the true heritage, so the right future, for France. In these years left and right held perhaps the most fundamental debate since the Dreyfus affair on the contents of the French *patrimoine*, as it is called in French. There have been many other such struggles. I wrote about some of them in both *True France* and *Mona Lisa's Escort*. In one sense, the present book is a continuation of that history of conflict.

But in another sense, the past thirty years were the unique moment when France transcended its historic sense of nationhood to reassess how its regions and its former colonies had entered into the nation's cultural heritage. In this period France accepted its decline as a world power, and became the birthplace for the new attitudes and politics that today we call anti-globalization. So, this is a book, too, about how peasants, people of and from the colonies as well as old colonial hands, *gauchistes*, left Christians, ecologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, soccer players, their teenage fans, and, yes, the governors of France—locked in overlapping struggles—made, are still making, contemporary France.

Let me be up front with you. I want this book to contribute to an international project of liberation. But it is at the same time what my French colleagues call “a scientific investigation.” I do not like abusive words like “objective,” “value-free,” and “factual” in historical writing. I have not read many works which wrap their claims in these packages that were worth thinking about later. Not even a dictionary. I have read studies that do not give the reader enough information to judge for herself, that claim to be based on evidence and are nothing of the sort, or ones that take a rhetorical position “above the combat”—so better to push a tendentious line.

If in fact we wish to write better histories we have to write more inclusive ones. And that is not primarily a theoretical question. It is a social one. To the degree that all participants in a history can tell their own stories—are in a social position to be able to tell their stories—the regionalist and the cultural administrator, the colonialist and the colo-

nized, the social scientist and those she studies, the museum administrator and the peoples whose cultures are on display, to that degree we have richer, truer, fairer, and more passionate histories.

My political hopes have driven my research on the French cultural heritage of the future. I follow Jürgen Habermas's vision of the past as "future-oriented memories."¹ So, I have learned, do the major actors in this book. I write about the struggles in contemporary France over the meaning of nation, of region, of the empire both at home and abroad, and, finally, over its situation in an American-dominated globalization. In writing about France's future-oriented heritage I hope to make clearer what is at stake and what good, progressive, humane, outcomes are possible in the world.

So, essential to my argument—if not always foregrounded—is that this French debate is not unique. In many other parts of the world—Britain, Germany, eastern Europe, Latin America, and my own America—such issues have been, are, and will continue to be fought over. And in some places like Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, ex-Yugoslavia, and Africa, they have been fought out in horrible violence. Because of its local, national, and international dimensions, and because historical evidence of high quality is available, the French story is good to think with. Although I appreciate complexity—of motives, of situations, of moments, of outcomes—as much as the next academic historian, the reader will always know where, or more precisely, with whom, I stand in any place in the book. It will be against the deadness of the past. It will be with the forces trying to constitute a better future for humanity. That's my *parti pris*.

I love my participation in the scholarly world of France. There, like the other social scientists I am a "scientifique." I have friends who are attached to "laboratoires." And I have taught in the *École des Hautes Études en Science Sociale*, which is located in the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*. This science-discourse is of course a heritage of French academic positivism. But it is also an ongoing challenge to any absolute truth claims that contemporary science ideologues like social biologists, neoliberal economists, or government policy wonks may advance. Yet I refuse certain defeatist responses to such scientific imperialisms. I think there are better ways to turn back an overweening science discourse than, for the sake of shutting out a cruel world, raising an invincible fortress of "texts" to protect the human heart and mind. What my French colleagues are claiming, and I with them, is

that we (historians) work with methods that systematically analyze human situations. Our arguments are both verifiable and—in a reasonably accessible language—communicable. The work must withstand criticism both honest and, even, dishonest. Others looking over my arguments and the evidence I offer should find what I write persuasive, or—if they do not agree with me—at least plausible because done in a workmanlike manner. Otherwise, I have not done my job well. I use the words “arguments and evidence” in the sense of theory-embedded data. I mean more than just having a hypothesis. To do history we need both information and the frames to make sense of what we have dug out. The use of “facts,” as a word equivalent to “truth,” has reconfirmed Orwell’s prescient critique. I leave it to those in academia who believe that the stick we lower into the water is really bent, and to our president’s and his allies’ press agents.

Bad Old History explained the world as radiating out from national centers of political, military, or economic power. The New Social, Cultural, and Linguistically turned Histories resolutely studied the marginal and the excluded to redress this myopia of the powerful. Paradoxically, both kinds of history writing assumed the framework of the nation state, even if social and cultural historians did not always thematize it.

In one of his last pieces of writing before his death in 1994, Robert Lafont, Occitan intellectual and one-time candidate for the presidency of France, wrote, “We have entered a phase in which the Nation-State necessarily appears archaic, for the new spaces under construction today are transnational and cultural. Occitanie and Catalonia are, in certain ways, an old cultural unity, remaking itself in the frame of today’s modernity.” The cultural anthropologist Claude Liauzu puts his own sense that cultural spaces need redefinition this way: “To understand our society as it is today, is to return to the colonial.”² I think Lafont and Liauzu have each grasped a piece of that new France. We need to connect these still pictures, and to put them in motion.

I do not share the view that with globalization, the state is no longer a useful category, nor a powerful institution, in contemporary history. But I do think we have to frame our discussions of its place differently from past efforts. In the spirit of Lafont and Liauzu, I propose that the apparent thingness of the contemporary state needs to be deconstructed.

A new epistemology of our historical knowledge is necessary and

overdue. I will imbed my account in the emergent global episteme. That is to say, I wish to write so as to aid the reader to keep in mind at any important moment (1) the local, the national, and the global, as well as (2) the effects of their mutual *reflexivity*.³ The French actors in my account did. I will show, for example, how the economic and cultural griefs of a hundred sheep farmers in a distant corner of France impacted on France's place in the larger world of international power politics. The farmers, their activist allies, and the politicians understood this. Their nastiest enemy, Minister of Defense Michel Debré, understood it very well. Often complex, seemingly unrelated local events turn out to have large causal consequences. This is why, I think, taking down a few of the modular pieces of the new McDonald's under construction in the little Larzac town of Millau—a first in the nonliterary application of deconstruction—became so important in the world debates for and against current trends in globalization. The magistrate who sentenced José Bové to a harsh three months in prison—for trespassing and vandalism—clearly understood, too, how lines of force link the local, the national, and the global. Perhaps we might begin with a visit to that “McDo.”