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Identity Crises

France, Culture, and the Idea of the Nation

Lawrence D. Kritzman

An American who comes to understand France is so profoundly stirred that he finds himself forced to stay there always.

—Paul Morand

If a little day-dreaming is dangerous, the cure for it is not to dream less but to dream more, to dream all the time.

—Marcel Proust

THE IDEA OF THE NATION

Much has changed in France over the last twenty years. We hear amongst those lugubrious Gallic harbingers of doom that France is undergoing an identity crisis that is symptomatic of a feeling of decline. The French are experiencing what Stanley Hoffmann has termed “a new disillusionment resulting from a series of blows to French pride and hopes in our own time.”¹ But this is only a recent phenomenon in the postwar period, perhaps a delayed but final act of mourning for the loss of the last great architect of the French nation-state, Charles de Gaulle. The defeated nation of World War II had emerged in the postwar period, thanks to the Gaullist politics of the 1960s, as a major

industrial power that once again played an important—albeit sometimes mythical—role on the international scene. To a certain extent, de Gaulle's masterful statesmanship helped reinforce the image that France was still a great power, one whose cultural mission and idea of "the nation" was associated with a universalism based on the exigencies of centralized power and the transmission of an imperative with which all were meant to identify. De Gaulle's vision that French nationhood represents universal values was certainly not a new phenomenon. Already in Ernst Robert Curtius's 1932 *Essai sur la France*, the author opposes the French concept of the nation to that of Germany, and thereby establishes France's paradoxical particularity amongst the nations of the world:

If we compare the development of France and Germany we see that in Germany the idea of nationality and the idea of the universal are constantly opposed to each other, whereas in France they are constantly united (27–28).²

More recently, in his 1987 polemic against what he calls "*la défaite de la pensée*," Alain Finkielkraut takes up Curtius' s proclamation and makes a useful distinction between the national community as the product of a nodal contract, versus one that functions as the sociological expression of a preexisting *Volksgeist*. According to Finkielkraut, the French Enlightenment's privileging of human freedom is revealed in the very idea of a social contract, with its vision of a community created by the prior, rational consent of its future citizens.

France's difference from other European powers (such as Germany) thus derives from the tradition of thought that produced the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. For if the great line of demarcation for French cultural identity is the divide between monarchical and republican France, it is because, as Marcel Gauchet suggests, the "one and invisible will" of the absolute monarch was replaced by the absolute will associated with national sovereignty.³ The distinctly French concept of *fraternité* was used to ensure the creation of the universal in terms of cultural and political issues; it established France's place in the community of nations as a country capable of realizing the legitimate representation of the "general will." Endowed with a mission similar to that of ancient Rome, France's role was, as Curtius suggests, to affirm everywhere the essential traits of its national tradition as one based on the desire for assimilation:

All the claims for universalism were transferred to the national idea, and it is in serving its national idea that France claims to achieve

a universal value. In the course of its historical formation we see it engender a new universalism whose ambitions are pitted against those of other powers. In annexing the ideas of universality potentially contained in the Roman heritage, the French nation annexed the Roman idea itself; and in so doing it carried over in its own name the totality of the claims of Rome (28–29).

The traditions associated with the French Revolution put their stamp on the concept of the nation, which created a civic religion joining freedom with equality, as they were to be lived in an ideal community of citizens. What Etienne Balibar has termed in another context “the proposition of equaliberty” sees man as citizen defending his common interests as the constituting force of this shared universality (47).

The “truth” contained in the text of the *Déclaration* of 1789 opens the right to politics to humankind, producing the illusion of universalism.⁴ With this concept came a series of assumptions associated with such Enlightenment values as progress, rationalism, justice, and tolerance. Later, a number of theoretical meditations were added to this, such as Ernest Renan’s “What is a Nation?” (1882) in which the author describes in quasi-religious terms how universality is transformed into a kind of national superiority. In Renan’s discourse, France is represented as having founded “nationhood,” having invented it with the French Revolution; all other models of the nation are described as mere imitations, and somewhat inferior. He writes:

France can claim the glory for having, through the French Revolution, proclaimed that a nation exists of itself. We should not be displeased if others imitate us in this. It was we who founded the principle of nationality. (12)

French culture was thus seen as the mediator of the values of the nation and the French language, as Gustave Lanson put it during the prime of the Third Republic, would be “the language of culture, the language that can liberate the civilized man of today” (203).

The teaching of French in the United States (by this I mean literature, language, and culture) from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-1970s was dominated by *une certaine idée de la France*, and the impact of its culture. The study of French was not just that of its national literature in an American setting; it was based on the Platonic ideal of a cultural model whose universal imperative was derived from a discrete chauvinism, disguised as a form of public virtue. Thus, the teaching of French culture was based on a highly aestheticized model of the nation, one that balanced heart and intellect, particular and universal, and seemed to emanate from a kind of instinctive conscience.

Today we find ourselves in a predicament that requires a pedagogical rethinking of the teaching of French culture. We have finally recognized (in this our own *fin de siècle*) how models such as Renan's were constructed in the image of a harmonious equilibrium for which Renan and *la France* have composed the "text" and established an idealized history by ignoring "dissonance" and forgetting violence. Renan writes:

Forgetting—I would even go so far as to say historical error—is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation. The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century. (11)

For Renan, the conflicts and struggles associated with the founding of the nation became invisible in the seamless rhetoric of the accomplished, reified object known as *la France*. In our own times, both in France and here at home we have witnessed, to a certain extent, the undoing of the nineteenth-century idea of the nation: for the past decade, it has been undercut throughout Europe by phenomena as diverse as the creation of the European community, the growth of a transnational global economy, and the influx of immigrants from former colonies who have failed to assimilate easily, paradoxically engendering new forms of xenophobic nationalism. Particularly because of the latter situation, we have finally come to realize that the irrational and the violent cannot be forgotten, and indeed must be taken seriously into account. In studying culture and the idea of the nation we must recognize that the aesthetic of civilization is often the result of forced consent, and that the "national contract" has an unpleasant side that forces an insidious means of cohesion on the nation. As Renan put it, "unity is always effected by means of brutality"(11). The questions are indeed now obvious: how do we displace the orthodoxy of the universal in order to uncover a multiplicity of discrete and singular truths? Can we still adhere to the concept of "equaliberty" within the parameters of a disunified totality? How do the conflicts amongst the various networks of power, and the dynamics of multiculturalism undo the quintessentially French ideal of the nation and affect the transmission of French culture? Let us now reflect briefly on the history of what we today term the study of culture within the discipline of French in the American university.

FRENCH STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

In the 1920s, when French became a major discipline in leading American universities, culture was linked to the study of this foreign culture in particular. The study of French was regarded primarily as *belles lettres* or fine arts (high culture). Dartmouth College, for example, was somewhat in the avant-garde in this respect; the 1876 Dartmouth catalogue reveals that the study of French began in the sophomore year with Knapp's *Grammar* and a text entitled *La France littéraire*. Nevertheless, from the 1920s on the study of French had a special function in the American university. First, because it signified a certain elitism due to its supposed cosmopolitanism and to the elegance of its culture (this being a mark of distinction, upward mobility, or the habitus of culture—as Pierre Bourdieu might describe it), and second, because of this very association, it was widely regarded as superior to the other European languages. To be sure, the study of French was then, as it still is today in many universities, founded on the assumption that high culture and literary studies are interrelated. Beyond that, teaching French meant introducing students to the *belle lettriste* context of literature and deducing from the study of those texts a somewhat instrumentalist ethic that identified its theoretical humanism with the cultural patrimony. The study of French was thought to represent something beyond itself, for engaging in it meant glowing with the torch of civilization.

In the postwar years, the function of the French department in the American university became somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, its role was to represent the "target culture" in a nondomestic context so that its "consumers" or students could become part of an "imaginary aristocracy." The study of French was first a mark of class status (the unfortunate syndrome of associating French with finishing school); later it became a sign of intellectual difference. Here one can think of the prestige associated with figures such as Sartre and Camus, Beauvoir, Barthes, and Lévi-Strauss, and, since the 1970s, the more "boutique"-oriented theories such as deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and feminism. On the one hand, the role of the French department became far more pragmatic after World War II, when the American university became democratized through the GI Bill, and emphasis shifted away from *les grandes étapes de la civilisation française* to the more mundane practices of language acquisition.

In the 1960s, much of the approach to foreign language teaching was based on sociological and anthropological models that studied people's daily lives and value systems, as a way of displacing the contextual historicism that dominated conceptions of the nation as a

cultural force. (Here I am thinking of the work of Jean Carduner, Michel Benamou, and Jacques Ehrmann). Some of this work was quite important, since it helped us to see that there were indeed many languages within a particular "target culture." This study of daily life authenticated a social tradition based on the "real" experiences of a so-called collective body, functioning in the name of the nation. Yet the idea of living the locality of culture was more mythological than ideological. Accordingly, the complex strategy of cultural identification was seen as an attempt to conflate meaning and community in a totalized whole, secured through the undisputed authority of a projected, sublime Ideal.

This intuitive approach to the study of French culture was not welcomed by the more parochial traditionalists. But sometimes their critiques of the more vulgarized versions of this method were highly justified, since the latter often degenerated into "wine and cheese"—*son et lumière*, preparing crêpes, or the more archaic practices of learning to buy a telephone *jeton* or how to use a *pissoir*. In reaction to this anecdotal study of French culture, which overemphasized individual freedom and autonomy, there developed another approach based on factual knowledge (the kind of historical and geographical information found in the green *Guide Michelin* or the patterns of behavior reduced to sometimes meaningless formulations in the omnipresent *Guide de France*). Often these courses squeezed into a single semester selective information about history from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, French art (cathedrals and slide shows), and a smattering of sociological data. In fact, the troubling presupposition underlying this kind of curriculum was that integration would somehow become automatic, the result of some magical thinking. This kind of course was conceived of mostly as a passive activity that degenerated into transforming the target culture into a series of "facts" and cultural stereotypes.

The first person to really challenge these approaches in a serious way was Lawrence Wylie of Harvard. He developed what could be termed a comparative, intuitive approach to teaching French culture based on a secularized anthropological model that displaced the sclerotic demands of purified historicism. Wylie asked questions such as: how do French and Americans differ in their conception of the past and their physical environment? How do these differences explain certain differences in the behavior of the French nation? Wylie helped develop French cultural studies in a significant manner by moving it away from cultural stereotypes, to more clearly measured generalizations. In his own department at Harvard, where the study of *belles lettres* was still the order of the day, Wylie was forced to pursue his unconventional

approach in exile, in the general education program of social sciences at that university. But, however innovative Wylie was in his approach, he nevertheless focused his attention on the *singularity* of France—a national characteristic that has since been addressed by Fernand Braudel, Theodore Zeldin, and Eugen Weber, to name but a few.⁵ Without a doubt this method had its implicit dangers: for the nation to be itself, it has to be culturally *singular*. The imperative to create the object known as *la France* meant that exogenous elements had to be isolated and perhaps even obliterated from view.

Yet, in most French departments throughout the 1970s and beyond, the stereotypical approach to the teaching of French culture still dominated. It tended to be anecdotal, by presenting everyday life situations—often dehistoricized—through the study of current events found in magazines, newspapers, and, more recently, video clips. Students reified already existing clichés, and the result was disastrous. In many French departments, the weaker students were attracted to this brand of cultural studies, so often lacking in analytic rigor.

How could and should we begin to remedy this? How can we get beyond the old civilization studies derived from the ideology of (or perhaps the nostalgia for) the civilizing mission of the nation, and the more mundane “wine and cheese” approach? To transcend the universal and uncritical (albeit empirical) approaches, we need to emphasize the students’ ability to explain and understand cultural information and patterns—beyond nineteenth-century French nationalism and the belief that there existed a seamless consubstantiality between national unity and the unity of culture. This form of thinking was not only essentialist in tone; it was based on a conception of national character derived from the republican tyranny of conformity. Our students need to gain *cultural competence*—the ability to comprehend cultural patterns in terms of their multiple meanings, their syntax and their interrelationships within a global context. We need to train our students to read the signs of culture in its many manifestations, so that they can account for the strangeness and the perceived incoherence they may encounter in certain cultural representations (French or other). At the very least, the interpretation of culture must be practiced by those who are cognizant of the cultural field and have assimilated it so that they can bring it into contact with various models of intelligibility. In our attempt to engage in cultural hermeneutics concerning the identity of France, can’t we get beyond our overdetermined ideology of what France *should* be and what Gérard Noiriel has termed “the [French] construction of the ‘sense of belonging’”? (320).

The professor of French should prepare students to become more culturally competent by drawing on various analytic models and critical conceptions that focus on the following hypothetical areas: 1. *the semiotic*; 2. *the socio-epistemic* (the examination of social fields and the problematics of power); 3. *the memorialist* (the relationship between history and memory); and 4. *the ethno-cultural*. What I am urging, at the very least, is the creation within French departments of an undergraduate course such as “Approaches to the Study of French and Francophone Cultures,” which would be methodological, and would make students more attentive to how and why they read the signs of culture.

The Semiotic

As analysts of culture, we must be trained and we must train our students to decode what Clifford Geertz calls “catalogued expressions of social experience.” These are essentially our constructions of other people’s constructions of what they believe they are doing. Cultural analysis in a semiotic vein is the sorting out of structures of signification—how meaning is made within a particular social context. As Philip Schlesinger has suggested, “national cultures are not simple repositories of shared symbols to which the entire population stands in identical relation” (260–261).⁶

Let us therefore begin with the hypothesis that culture is a socially symbolic activity with forces and purposes of its own. It is played out over definitions of symbolic value. For cultural theorists such as Clifford Geertz and Roland Barthes, culture must be viewed as a public phenomenon because the production of meaning is observed from that perspective. As Geertz puts it in *The Interpretation of Cultures*:

Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning (5).

Following this line of thought, our students must become more attentive to the flow of behavior within French culture; they must learn how to specify how cultural forms find articulation in a heterogeneous social space. In examining the representational modes that constitute the substance of culture, we should become more aware, as Barthes suggests in *Mythologies* (1957), of how the generation and reification of a particular world view is far from innocent, and how contemporary mass culture presents homogenized bourgeois values as natural and universal.

The Socio-Epistemic

Highly different from the Anglo-American school of cultural studies (Hogarth, E. P. Thompson, Stuart Mill) based on empirical data and the phenomenological experience of subordinate groups, “the socio-epistemic” enables students to gain cultural competence by teaching them to decode the signs of culture and the symbolic capital they incarnate as mediators of power. To do this, we must start with the premise that all social systems owe their existence to relations of power, and that they embody the inclination of various sectors of society to dominate and exclude other sectors. If the idea of the modern nation seeks to represent itself according to certain aspects of Enlightenment thought, one must never forget that its universal ideal necessitates the exclusion of any excess (the nonhomogeneous) so that the autonomy of the universal may be affirmed. Accordingly, the sovereignty of political rationality sustains the status of those who are included, to the detriment of those who are destined to remain on the fringes of the social order.

For example, in drawing upon some of the theoretical material articulated by Pierre Bourdieu in *La misère du monde* (1993), one may examine how the issue of domination is inextricably linked to that of cultural power and legitimacy. Here we may wish to have our students see how symbolic capital functions within French society and acts as a mark of distinction. The act of making distinctions and the cultural competence acquired by the student in elucidating this process enables him or her to see how dominant sections of society reinforce institutionalized fields of power. As Homi Bhabha has observed in *The Location of Culture*, if we start with the premise that culture is not a holistic entity, it is because the modern French nation can no longer be observed from the perspective of a “horizontal gaze” that overdetermines the existence of an undifferentiated social conglomeration. Instead of conceiving of French culture in the Hegelian tradition, as a monolithic entity of synthesized contradictions, we must regard it as an ongoing series of agonistic relationships founded on the competition for symbolic values—symptomatic of the war over competing cultural entities.

The Memorialist

Perhaps more than anyone else, Pierre Nora has directed our attention to the identity crisis France is currently undergoing in terms of the traditional idea of the nation and its relationship to the past. In his

monumental seven-volume *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1992), Nora and his 130 colleagues, drawing on the epistemological models put forth by Maurice Halbwachs and Frances Yates, seek to locate the “memory places” of French identity that have been elaborated since the Middle Ages.⁷ Starting with the classical rhetorical assumption that the art of memory functions as an inventory of *loci memoriae*, Nora represents the concept of the *locus* in a rather broad perspective. He extends it to specific geographical places (Vézelay and Paris), monuments and buildings (Versailles, the cathedral of Strasbourg, the Eiffel Tower), historical figures (Charlemagne, Jeanne d’Arc), national institutions (the educational system), literary and artistic objects (Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*), rituals (the coronation of the kings at Reims), emblems, commemorations, and symbols (the French flag, “La Marseillaise,” the Republican calendar) and ideas signifying Frenchness (conversation, gallantry, gastronomy), all of which are the result of an imaginary process that codifies and condenses a national consciousness of the past.

According to Nora, modern French history derived from the tradition of Comtean positivism, of definable causes and effects—and the idea that the progressive movement of time produces positive knowledge—is no longer possible. Furthermore, adherence to the belief that an organic relationship exists between internalized national values and the places of their external commemoration has been relegated to a distant past. The already somewhat anachronistic idea of the European union has pushed national sentiment to the fore, but this time expressing itself as a form of cultural melancholia. “It is no longer genesis that we seek,” Nora suggests, “but, rather, the deciphering of who we are in light of who we are no longer” (I, xxxii). As a postmodern historian of sorts, Nora is keenly aware of the discontinuities that exist today between the present and the past. Memory has been dislocated; in the places where historical continuity with national identity might once have existed, memory’s very embodiment is problematic. If, as Nora claims, there are no longer any spontaneous memories, it is because memory can now only be evoked artificially, through the rituals of a society without memory. In recognizing that the ties with the past have been broken, Nora affirms that history can no longer be a simple mnemonic reconstruction. “One looks for *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory,” claims Nora, because “there are no longer *milieux* of memory, real environments of memory” (I, xxv). Actually, the idea of nationhood is engendered by a nostalgic reflection, articulated through the disjunctive remembrance of things past. The quest for memory is therefore an attempt to master the perceived loss of one’s history.

The Ethno-Cultural

We have learned in recent years that the concept of the modern nation can no longer be viewed from a monocultural perspective. To begin with, the idea of unity or social cohesion underlying the discourse of the nation must be interrogated and displaced. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, Western nations—and France in particular—experienced, on the one hand, mass migration from other European countries, and, on the other, colonial expansion in Africa and Asia. While these changes took place more than one hundred years ago, paradoxically, in the name of republican patriotic ideals, many of us working in French cultural studies in the United States were still entranced by the horizontal development of the modern nation-state, or the so-called homogeneity of its identity. Forgotten were the voices from the other spaces of Francophone culture, from Senegal to Hanoi and from Algiers to the Caribbean (those colonial and postcolonial identities), not to mention the voices of migration within France itself (immigrants from Europe or the Third World). Our students need to ask who were and are “we the French” in their diversity, but also “who are *they*”—their supposed cultural others. But the imperative to recognize the *étranger* can lead to idealizing such constructions in the pieties of a naive multiculturalism, tending toward an unreflected Stalinist humanism. The case of Tahar Ben Jelloun, the francophone Moroccan writer, is a good case in point, and may be used for a variety of pedagogical goals, including the deconstruction of ethnic and national stereotypes.

In *Hospitalité française* (1984), Ben Jelloun presents a quasi-journalistic account of racism in contemporary France, through a dazzling juxtaposition of the anecdotal and the historical in a multiplicity of individual testimonies.⁸ Curiously, Ben Jelloun demystifies the idealized space known as the country of origin, and underscores the impossibility of a return to a place (“la patrie”) that perhaps only exists within the confines of the imagination. By citing the countries of origin and inscribing some of them in the paradigm of oppressor state, Ben Jelloun ironically refuses to reduce France to the evil colonizer—the unique instigator of social and political malaise. The author represents cultural diversity through many individual narratives, drawn from the *fait divers*, to illustrate the process of “othering” of North Africans living in France. The North African voices in the text are sometimes those of ordinary French citizens; others have never been to North Africa, or even travelled outside of France; some, as Ben Jelloun claims, have been alienated from Islam; some do not speak any Arabic

language, while others do not speak French at all. Consequently, there is a great deal of indecision concerning what constitutes the idea of the homeland, the native language, or the immigrant—who we discover is sometimes required to become one in spite of being a French citizen and “never having made the journey” (144). Nevertheless, Ben Jelloun suggests that the category of “immigrant” is an essentialized trope of difference, representing everything resisting assimilation to a national consciousness that it perceives as lacking in subjectivity. Racism becomes “blind, reactive and instinctive” (36). In a way, Ben Jelloun’s text uncovers an archeology of buried stories so as to avoid condensing the immigrant subject and entrapping it in a discursive network where one always speaks anonymously in the name of the Other. As antidote to the universalizing gesture of racism, Ben Jelloun engages in a rhetoric of nomination that essentially becomes a political act of differentiation. By naming a murder victim, seventeen-year old Algerian Ahmed Binkhidi, Ben Jelloun chooses to represent in his text an individual whose death embodies anti-Arab sentiment and whose story is yet to be told.

Through texts such as Ben Jelloun’s, we need to teach our students to be more critical in their ethno-cultural analyses, and less judgmental—however correct those judgments may be. As Homi Bhabha suggests, the study of difference “must not be read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (2). The danger of the naive differentialism practiced by many today stems from classificatory activities derived from “anthropological universals” that prioritize certain concepts of authenticity. By reverting to this cultural practice we reify, however unconsciously, the ideology of homogenization and the artificial notions of authenticity that limit the very parameters of true diversity. We need to be able to analyze the multiple spaces of culture within and external to the nation so as to provoke a crisis in the representation of a unified national subject. We must get beyond the delusions of a totalized identity and the oversimplifications produced by the practitioners of a born-again, politically correct humanism. Here the study of ethno-cultural issues from the perspective of the politics of commemoration might uncover how history may have oppressed differences within national identity. Oral histories by deportees concerning the memory of the 1942 *Rafle du Vel d’hiver* might be contrasted with French secondary school “official” textbook renditions of Vichy, to demonstrate how the ethnography of the past might be remembered in counternarratives that deprive the nation of the unity of its historically “imagined community.”⁹

FRENCH CULTURE UNDER SIEGE

At the end of the twentieth century, French Studies in the United States finds itself challenged by momentous changes, such as the emergence of Spanish as our second language (perhaps no longer classified as “foreign” at all), and debates within the university on the nature of culture itself. Until very recently France has held a special distinction among nations (equivalent to the prestige associated with the stereotypes of American “fair play” and Japanese “know-how”) concerning the civilizing mission of its culture, the humanistic ideals of the French Revolution, and the secular imperatives of the Third Republic. *Hélas*, French is no longer the preeminent language of culture. However, the simple memory of that myth has left French Studies open to attacks from those who see it as a mere symptom of European elitism. Some have unjustifiably targeted it and sought refuge in the construction of a reductive image representing France as the exemplar of European culture’s desire for political hegemony and social malice. Others, representing either the Reagan Right or the traditional humanist Left, have engaged in personal and sometimes xenophobic attacks against the French in general and the major French intellectuals of the past quarter-century in particular: Bourdieu, Derrida, and Foucault. Witness the sheer stupidity of Camille Paglia’s writing, which intermittently graces the pages of the *New York Times* with news that is unfit to print. On May 5, 1991, the *Times Book Review* gave us a preview of Paglia’s forthcoming *magnum opus*, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, in a front-page article entitled “Ninnies, Pedants, Tyrants and Other Academics.” In this so-called essay, Paglia displays a xenophobic violence that suggests a problematic relationship between French and European cultures, and a lack of understanding of the difference between popular culture and genuine intellectual endeavor. Paglia naively asks us to choose between Deneuve and Derrida, Foucault and Dylan, French theorists and black Gospel choirs. She refers to “Warhol and Oldenburg *kill*ing the European avant-garde forever,” “the French . . . *crushed* by Germany,” and France “*lying flat on her face* under the Nazi boot” [my emphasis]. But the violence does not end here. In her book she states:

Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault are termites compared to the art, culture and archaic topography of India. One remedy for today’s educational impasse: more India and less France. The followers of Derrida are pathetic, snuffling in French pockets for bits and pieces of a deconstructive method. . . . Our French acolytes, making them-

selves the lackeys of a foreign fascism, have advertised their intellectual emptiness to the world The American Sixties already contained every revolutionary insight. We didn't need Derrida: we had Jimi Hendrix. . . . The French theorists are eros-killers. The smoldering eroticism of great European actresses like Jeanne Moreau [is] completely missing from the totalitarian world-view of the misogynist Foucault. For me, the big French D is not Derrida but Deneuve. (215–218)

Critiques such as these characterize France (and French Studies) as politically retrograde, opposed to the discourse of empowerment and liberation, and therefore ironically align themselves with some of the concerns that have dominated much of American and British cultural studies. Certain unreflective critics have vehemently adapted this stance, seeing French culture as quintessentially elitist and the epitome of “boutique” theoretical abstraction—culture with a capital C—a luxury item from Saks, easily disposable. Without a doubt some French figures and teachers of French have continued to perpetuate an anachronistic narrative of high culture, which can be seen as derived from an impetus to create an imaginary aristocracy. But what some have failed to see is that while France is perhaps waning in its universal aspirations, it is nevertheless rich in diversity, and multiple in its signs of identity. It is a culture that must be studied as an ongoing social process, located on the precipice of the present, and situated in the timelessness of a new postmodern global context. Can French Studies survive the death of the traditional idea of the nation, and the teleology of its progress? Does France's own identity crisis—the loss of its exceptional status, its role as an imperial messianic nation, its integration into the European community—endanger our own discipline of French Studies? By enabling our students to gain cultural competence through new hermeneutic paradigms for the study of a multiplicity of cultural representations (literary or otherwise), we can begin to get beyond the stereotypical quagmire we now face, and to explore the imaginary sites where the nation was once conceived, and the sites where we have invested the energy of our own desires. There is, indeed, a bright future for French, but we must work diligently to reflect on what we are doing, and on how the climate we once worked in has changed.

Notes

1. See Hoffmann, “France: Keeping the Demons at Bay;” “French Dilemmas and Strategies after the Cold War.”

2. All translations from French to English are my own.
3. See Gauchet, *La Révolution des droits de l'homme*. Also consult Schnapper, *La Communauté des Citoyens*.
4. See Schor on the concept of the "universal" in French thought in "Lanson's Library."
5. Zeldin, *The French*; Braudel, *L'Identité de la France*; Weber, *My France*.
6. On this issue, see Lebovics, *True France*.
7. See Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*; Yates, *The Art of Memory*.
8. On this subject see Taguieff, *La Force du Préjugé*.
9. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

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