
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 Naïr 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. Naïr’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 Sahlins’ 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 Marlèrè’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-

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 Naïr, “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, “Làïque et indivisible? Secularisation and the Crisis of Republican Identity in Contemporary France”


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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”


NOTES


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