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The French Case

France and its controversial historical memory

by Jules Soupault and Francesca Tortorella

Jean Monnet Network : **European Memory Politics**

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Each nation develops its own version of nationalism with its specific characteristics. Therefore, it is challenging making general assumptions about these iterations of nationalism as they may miss the specificity of each. Yet, from a historical perspective, nations and nationalism must be understood as social constructions made by individuals and institutions, in a particular period and spatial context. Hence, we will consider that nationalism is “primarily a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner 1983:1).

The influence of such political principles necessarily undermines the European Union, as they promote national sovereignty and exceptionalism against supranational democracy and integration. Since the 2000’s, the electoral progression of a political party like *Le Rassemblement National* (RN) is taking part in a global context where national populists get elected on ‘nation first programs’. In 2002 and 2017, the RN candidate running for President made it to the second round. The impossibility to governing without taking into consideration their electorate has incited French political parties to challenge the RN on its themes. Since 2007, the right, the left and the center have been in power, and despite their diverse political identities, they all adopted themes and policies that used to be considered as “far right repertoires”.

Therefore, French nationalism cannot be understood by only looking at its most radical expression because nationalistic worldviews are promoted by every major political party in France. As the *national* election is the most significant political event in French politics (in regard to participation, media coverage and campaign spending) it is not so surprising that national political parties energetically invest in the “*invention of*[national] *tradition*” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). From the far left to the far right, national figures and events are used as political tools to promote a particular reading of the past with the intention of creating a collective memory suitable for their political objectives. These forms of *memory politics* are challenging the credibility of a transnational, European sense of identity and community because it turns every historical event into a national one. As a consequence, political parties have no interest in distancing themselves from the French history, even its darkest hours, rather they have entered into a competition to find the best way to celebrate it.

In 2009, President Sarkozy launched a “debate on national identity”, which became one of these moments when the social construction of history takes place in broad daylight (Bantigny 2013:86–90). Each party delivered its respective interpretation of what French national identity is supposed to be, based on their political agendas. Historical events, characters and symbols were mobilized and, contrary to what one might have expected, rather than revealing the deep

political divisions within the French political class, it revealed a certain consensus, which one could call the French “national novel”. This notion was popularized by historian Pierre Nora (1984) and is often mobilized by politicians of both right- and left-wing parties. Interestingly, it finds its origins in the “national story promoted by the school textbooks of positivist historian Ernest Lavisse in the years 1880-1900 (De Cock, Picard, and Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l’histoire 2009), but now we are speaking of a “*novel*” as we know that the story is embellished.

It would be delicate to speak of a rise of populist parties in France, as the Yellow Vests protests (2018-2020) and other recent social movements revealed how deep the gap is between what the political establishment is willing to offer politically and citizens’ demands. Considering these shifts in the country’s landscape, we will examine the re-nationalization of memory through the construction of the French “national novel” and the state’s central role in school programs, memorial ceremonies and public relations, as well as memory’s appropriation by political parties.

A historical excursus of the French “national novel”

After the Second World War, historical memory was channeled by all political parties to regain lost *grandeur* and affirm France’s role as a victorious country against the Nazi Fascist Axis. The myth of De Gaulle and the Liberation swept away the memory of collaboration and the Vichy regime. Therefore, France recognizes itself in the Resistance, particularly in the *France libre*, and De Gaulle is the national hero. France is elevated to a homeland of human rights, bearer of the universalist civilization that recognizes itself in the unity of the indivisible and secular Republic.

The “glorious” post-war period was soon overshadowed by the long and bloody period of decolonization: from Indochina to Africa, France lost its empire. And the memory of the wars of independence, not only the seven years of the Algerian war but also the assassination of Ruben Um Nyobe in Cameroon or the 1967 massacre in Guadeloupe and numerous other history events, fell into oblivion.

Beyond stances taken by some intellectuals and activists, in particular the communists, colonialism and collaborationism do not appear in official political speeches in an attempt not to smear the image of the civilizing nation, the revolutionary nation at the forefront of freedom and human rights. The highest French authorities only began assume responsibility for collaboration and colonization/decolonization in the 1990s.

The Horror of Collaboration: Vel’ d’Hiv Roundup

Jacques Chirac decided to break with the position of his predecessors Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand, whose positions were clear: France and the Republic should not be confused with the Vichy regime. On July 16, 1995, President Jacques Chirac acknowledged in front of the memorial that “*the criminal folly of the occupiers was seconded by the French state*”.

The responsibility of the “French State” in the roundup and the Shoah is officially recognized: “*These dark hours forever sully our history and are an insult to our past and our traditions [...] France, the homeland of the Enlightenment and of the rights of man, a land of welcome and asylum, on that day committed the irreparable. Breaking its word, it handed those who were under its protection over to their executioners*” (Chirac, 1995; <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/17/world/chirac-affirms-france-s-guilt-in-fate-of-jews.html>)

The theme of the betrayal of the “true” France was also taken up by the President of the Republic François Hollande. He declared that “the truth is that this crime was committed in France, by France”, but he also stressed that:

“the truth is also that the crime of the Vel d’Hiv was committed against France, against her values, against her principles, against her ideal” (Hollande, 2012; <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2012-jul-27-la-fg-france-vichy-20120728-story.html>)

This speech, like Chirac’s, is the object of criticism. For example, Henri Guaino recognizes the horror of the Vel d’Hiv but (his) France was in London, so he asks “what does France have to do with it?” On April 9, 2017, Marine Le Pen, candidate for the presidency of the Republic, rejected the speech of Chirac and Hollande: France “is not responsible for the Vél d’Hiv”. It is important to note, especially about Guaino’s criticisms, this rejection of the complexity of the nation and this simplistic and therefore distorted vision of the national memory. On the contrary, the speeches of Chirac and Hollande broke the myth of a France united against crime and recognized the responsibility of the French state while recalling the Righteous, De Gaulle, the Resistance, Free France, and the Jewish institutions that save the honour of France. During the 75th anniversary of the roundup, on July 16, 2017, President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed France’s responsibility:

“I say it again here. It was indeed France that organized the roundup, the deportation and thus, for almost all, death” (Macron, 2017; <https://newyork.consulfrance.org/Speech-by-the-President-of-the-French-Republic-at-the-Vel-d-Hiv-Commemoration>)

Wars and massacres: colonialism

It was only in 1999 that France, through the unanimous voice of its deputies, recognized *la guerre d’Algérie*. The Assembly adopted the socialist proposal and “Algerian war” replaced the term “operations to maintain order in North Africa” in the documents of the Republic: “Yes, with Jean Jaurès, I affirm that courage is to seek the truth and to live it” said the rapporteur of the text, Alain Néri.

It was Chirac again on July 21, 2005 who, on the first day of his official visit to Madagascar, spoke for the first time about “abuses of the colonial system” and joined in the tribute of several tens of thousands of Malagasy people who were killed following the revolt against the French colonizer in 1947.

This ambivalent discourse, forgetting the heavy responsibilities of the present and the past, is still widely debated in France, both in civil society and in political parties. The dominant discourse is the persistent desire to show a united France as the bearer of the universalism of the ideal of the Republic and of secularism. Three elements of the history of France are widely emphasized to affirm the greatness of the human rights nation:

- the French Revolution and the “birth of democracy”;
- the “victory” in the two world wars;
- colonization as a “civilising mission”.

The “mémoire” today

These themes are largely present in the discourse of political parties even today, but their underlying values (liberty, equality, fraternity, secularity) are defended in different if not contradictory ways. “Believe in a France strong of its heritage, its independence and its greatness” is the first creed of the *Charte des principes fondamentaux des Républicains* (October 2019). Even the program of France *insoumise*, certainly at the opposite end of the political spectrum, strongly calls for the independence of France, although within a framework of peace and internationalist cooperation. In the face of decline, there is a push to place France at the head of the humanist progress.

The belief in France’s historical greatness and the importance of the “national romance” are nowadays so strong that they are personified in monuments and symbols. Any attack against them would be considered an attack on France itself.

There are attempts to re-politicize history by confronting the “national novel” with the history of colonies, women, LGBTQIA+, poor workers and historical regions. However, these efforts remain outside the arenas of professional politicians (primarily in networks of activists and academics) and are widely rejected or ignored by them. Worse, since the debate on national identity in 2009, the victories of the “reconciliation and recognition camp” have been undermined by the omnipresence and success of extreme nationalist views on television, such as the programs of Eric Zemmour (who received multiple condemnations for hate speech but is the star journalist of CNews and potential candidate for the 2022 election). The growing influence of these theories on private TV networks undermines the efforts made by some state officials. Moderate left and center parties are increasingly sensitive to their views, as shown by the creation of the movement “*Printemps Républicain*” with members of the Socialist party, or the President Macron’s government’s “illiberal turn”.

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Slavery, Anti-Semitism, Collaboration, Colonialism, Racism: “How do you turn a page when it is not written?” asks Hacène Arfi, whose parents are harkis in the documentary *La décolonisation française: du sang et des larmes*, written by Pascal Blanchard and David Korn-Brzoza and narrated by Lucien Jean-Baptiste.

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The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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