Une et divisible?
Plural Identities in Modern France

With a preface by Sami Naïr
Introduction: Plural Identities in Modern France

This book offers a selection of the papers presented at the thirtieth annual conference of the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France (ASMCF), held at the University of Manchester on 5 and 6 September 2008 on the theme of ‘French identity/identities’. In line with the Association’s long-standing vocation to promote interdisciplinarity, the conference provided a forum for dialogue among scholars, both established and young entrants, currently engaging with this theme through the disciplinary lenses of political, historical, literary and cultural studies.

This juxtaposition of singular and plural identities in the conference title reflects what has become, perhaps, a dominant trend in Anglophone studies of modern and contemporary French culture and society, which considers France as a country shaped by tensions and divisions, and seeks to identify the multiplicity of ‘identities’ present within it. Whether this concerns the plurality of French ethnicities (regional, immigrant, the white majority), the plurality of gendered and sexual identities (straight, gay, queer), or indeed the conflicting political and religious beliefs that interplay with national identity claims, much recent research has confronted the republican model of citizenship and its claims to a ‘neutral’ universalism, with the presence, discourses and practices of diversity, thereby challenging the conception of the nation as ‘une et indivisible’.¹ The conference keynote

¹ See for instance, in the discussion of ethnic politics, Max Silverman’s Facing Postmodernity. Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) and Alec G. Hargreaves, Multi-Ethnic France. Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); in cinema, see Carrie Tarr’s Reframing Difference. Beurs and banlieue Film-making in France (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); in
Barbara Lebrun and Jill Lovecy

speaker, Sami Naïr, was chosen to offer a reflection on, and a defense of, precisely this historical model of republicanism, with which all the conference papers engaged critically.

Both Naïr and the contributors to this volume take as their premise the perception of a sense of crisis in the articulation of French identities, and this book focuses on those times, places and works of art where this crisis is particularly acutely felt. Accordingly, the notion of identity is here understood as a necessary flexible concept, embracing lived experiences (of attachment to a family, a group, a nation and of distinction from others), as well as being a critical tool with which to comment on these experiences. The fourteen chapters selected for inclusion here deal with ‘identity’ from a range of perspectives, including social history, political history, cultural studies and gender studies, and are divided into three sections: Social and Political History, (Popular) Cultural Studies and French Literature.

Sami Naïr, the well-known philosopher and author of numerous books on the interface between republicanism and the immigrant experience, focuses in his preface on the sense of threat that French society is experiencing today in the realms of public discourse, migration policy, secularism and mediatisation and argues that even though fragilised by economic globalisation, the institutional and normative model of republicanism remains a viable and necessary framework for individual well-being and the collective good. Emphasising the point that ethnic minorities are affected the most by this crisis, Naïr insists that the emergence of Muslim communauteurism in today’s France is not the cause but the consequence of this crisis. Thus for Naïr, when it comes to the integration of minority social and cultural identities in the nation, it is the economic model that needs to be addressed, not republicanism. Reminding us that ‘equality is an always unfinished work’, his text is a plea for the validity of republican ideology (whilst also warning from this perspective against the potentially divisive nature of ethnic monitoring).


The sense of ideological crisis identified by Naïr is picked up by all the contributors to this book, but the first three remind us more especially of the long-standing problematic nature of the republican model. By focusing on socio-historical developments affecting France since the mid-nineteenth century, and revisiting the formation of the contemporary French nation-state, they highlight the challenges posed by the presence of local, regional and alternative national models.

Mark Sawchuk explains how a plebiscite, as a question that forces individuals (men) to ponder matters of cultural and political identity, establishes an official moment for the affirmation and creation of national identity. When Savoyards and Niçois massively plebiscited inclusion of their respective regions within France in 1860, a new sense of loyalty to the nation was both officially condoned and somehow artificially created. Yet, as Sawchuk also demonstrates, with ample use of police archives, receipts and personal diaries, belonging to the nation remains a very elusive process, with tensions, frustrations and feelings of opposition all co-existing with a desire for better governance that seemingly France as a nation can offer. His study also shows that the French nation is built on a succession of loyalties and oppositions and was often born out of plurilingualism, with Niçard and Italian being commonly used alongside French in the Nice area, for instance, throughout the nineteenth century. The French nation, therefore, in some places and at some times, has been experienced as a transitory legal reality.

Louisa Zanoun’s chapter places exactly the same emphasis on the elusivity of the French nation and on the arbitrariness of national identification dependant on changing military and political circumstances. With reference to the department of Moselle, she demonstrates that local and regional levels of loyalty can often be more meaningful in people’s daily lives than the knowledge of also belonging to one nation-state or another, as this parcel of land moved between France and Germany, and back again.

Both Zanoun and Sawchuk provide a full picture of sentiments of belonging to the nation by taking into account private sources as much as official party and elite stances on such issues. In doing so, they demonstrate the diversity of perspectives informing understandings of the nation, as they operated both from the top down as well as from the bottom up. The
case-study of Moselle, too, is a healthy reminder that not all French regions are, or have been, equal before republican law, and that the Republic is quite capable of flexibility and of being ‘divisible’ when it sees fit or meets enough resistance. The department of Moselle remains under Concordat law to this day, meaning that the separation of Church and State has never been effective there. Meanwhile, even if a Mosellan particularism exists which contrasts and challenges the French nation, the study notes that competing voices have upheld this identity for different and sometimes completely opposed political purposes, from pro- to anti-communist, and pro- to anti-fascist.

The role played by the Catholic Church in the emergence and consolidation of republicanism since 1789 is surveyed by Jean-Christophe Penet, who provocatively argues that the beginning of the contemporary period has witnessed the rise of a ‘republican-Catholic’ identity and signalled the weakening of the republican ideology. Republicanism gradually replaced the Church, throughout the long nineteenth century, as purveyor of symbolic and spiritual unity for the people. The end of the Second World War, however, charted a different relationship between the republican state and the Church – whereby the triumph of communism after the war, the realisation that, with the loss of Algeria, the state could be split and divided, and a growing sense of crisis among the general public towards state education and the elite system – generated widespread disillusion with the adequacy of republicanism itself. Penet contends that like Catholicism before it, the future-oriented, utopian nature of republicanism now leads to disenchantment for its failure to achieve its stated goals. Just as the Church managed to evolve by recognising political pluralism among its members in the 1970s, so the republican state, Penet argues, should recognise individual pluralism in society. This would follow through the intellectual argument at the heart of republicanism, namely that since republicanism is the triumph of the individual, valorised in the act of political participation, so the state should redefine itself by taking greater account of plural individualities, especially in their social and ethnic dimensions.

Moving on to the subject of the insertion of France within Europe, both Maura Stewart and Philippe Marlière demonstrate that further tensions exist regarding the republican project, the hope of achieving and
controlling a ‘France unie’ and its reshaping within a changing international political and economic landscape. Stewart recalls how innovative it was in 1988 for a presidential candidate, namely François Mitterrand, to put Europe at the centre of his political preoccupations, displacing the future-oriented nature of France towards a future outside of France’s borders into Europe. Her analysis paradoxically emphasises the central role that Mitterrand’s focus on a broader European identity could play in sustaining the Fifth Republic’s highly personalised style of presidential politics, in the unusual context of the first cohabitation government. Marlière in contrast examines in some detail the tensions that have arisen between French and European identities, and how these have played out within the Socialist Party over a longer period, starting in 1983 and running to the aftermath of the French referendum on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. In one important respect, his analysis here rejoins that of Naïr, in the dominance that he ascribes to neoliberalism within the European economic project. It is this dominance which Marlière sees as having critically undermined the synergies that Socialists in France had previously expected to operate between France and Europe.

Referring to the practice of plurilingualism in the French regions (Moselle, Savoy, Nice), the existence of non-secular policies within the Republic (Moselle), and the tensions between the French state and para- or supra-national institutions like the Catholic Church and the European Union, these opening chapters paint the picture of a decidedly multifaceted and frequently contradictory French ‘identity’. The second and third parts of the book explore further the plural dimension of identity in France, primarily by examining works of art that focus on notions of flexibility and fluidity and on sentiments of struggle and ill-fittingness. Looking at film, music and literature, as well as the discipline of French Studies itself, it becomes apparent that an awareness of, and possibly a delight in, the sense of crisis is widespread in France today – witness the popularity of some works discussed here, for instance, the music of Faudel and the novels of Darrieussecq, which centre around the theme of identity conflict and have achieved mainstream success.

In his chapter, Keith Reader shares his methodological preparations for his next project, a cultural topography of the Bastille quartier in Paris,