

# *Editor's Introduction*

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The five essays in this Special Issue are expanded versions of papers presented at an International Conference held at the University of Birmingham, 1–3 July 1999, entitled *France: History and Story*.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the conference was to review constructions and representations of the concept of French national identity, from the early modern period to the present day. Around fifty workshop papers reviewed the topography of nationhood, the conflicted evolution of regional identities, the constitution of Frenchness in language, in the press, in novels, memoirs, autobiography and history, the iconography of nationhood (images literary and cinematic, on broadsheets and posters, in paintings, photographs, coins and stamps), the nature and function of commemoration, the inscription of national identity in popular consciousness, the politics of education, and transformations of national identity in revolution, counter-revolution, and time of war. Plenary papers were presented by Douglas Johnson, Roger Magraw, Siân Reynolds and Anne-Marie Thiesse. Paul Spencer-Longhurst, of the University's Barber Institute, mounted a special exhibition of French prints and drawings from the Barber collection for the duration of the conference: 'Images of France from Callot to Cézanne.'

The essays here explore a variety of representations of the French nation-state, from the 1789 Revolution to the early 1960s. All, perhaps not unexpectedly, are related to moments of violence – the Seven Years' War, the Revolution of 1789, its aftermath of counter-revolution and revolt, the Second World War, the Algerian War. They show the continuing reformulation, and re-presentation, of the concepts of the nation and national values,

under the pressure of competition from external rivals on the European scene (England, in two of the instances here, playing a major role), or of internal struggles between the ideologies and interests of groups of diverse classes, gender, race.

The insights and information they have to offer enter a field of study which recent scholarship has developed in two perspectives, each with a very different political thrust. The three-part project directed by Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire*,<sup>2</sup> which has explored the ways in which national memory works as an instrument of cultural construction, concluded with the recognition that the cult of commemoration represents a watershed not just for France but for the other nation-states of Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. It signals for Nora the final disintegration of a consensus that had never, as the essays in his collections indicate, been more than imagined. The construction of national identity viewed in this light is an elegiac, nostalgic process, an attempt at consolidation which tacitly confesses that there is no way forward. The present, at best, is seen as an interregnum, but one which can identify no successor. Nora, as an act of faith, identifies the energies which will constitute that future in the various fragmented, discontinuous groups into which French society has now conspicuously broken, each of which seeks to constitute by commemoration a past of its own. For Homi K. Bhabha,<sup>3</sup> in contrast, in the essays collected in *The Location of Culture*, it is in that congeries of energies that the idea of a nation should always be sited. Responding explicitly to Benedict Anderson's focus on the common representation of national identity in the form of a monoglot consensual community, he urges that identity should never be considered as a state, always as a process. If it must be thought of as a state, then it is a state of hybridity. Bhabha's centre of interest is 'the hybridity of imagined communities' (*Location*, 5), and his nation is not one projected back into the past but living in the present, Walter Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, sparkling with both past and future. An even better, if still necessarily imperfect image of 'identity', is Martin Heidegger's bridge, which Bhabha cites to evoke the idea of identity as process, not a closed site determined by fixed boundaries, but a form shaped by and for the passage of currents of movement to an undefined and indefinable somewhere else:

The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities. For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees. It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing* in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond that I have drawn out: 'Always

and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks. ...The bridge *gathers* as a passage that crosses.<sup>4</sup>

The study of national identity is the study of 'the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective' and 'It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated' (*Location*, 2).

The role of minorities in the making and breaking of ideas of the nation, the invocation of the past to fix the present, the role of symbolic form, consciously or unconsciously applied, in creating a public mind, all enter into the essays published here. The sequence begins with Katherine Astbury's account of the late eighteenth-century moral tale, a popular genre which, she argues, should be read as mirroring public opinion, not taking a lead, but ultimately playing a part in its mobilisation. Literary form in this instance works with the grain of historical change, to broaden the public's recognition of its changing identity. English military success in the Seven Years' War prompts an examination by French writers of the social and moral values that produced it, and a corresponding shift from the representation of aristocratic characters and values to a broader social base. The problem emerges of whether these shifting values can be thought as French, when Frenchness is associated with monarchy. As early as the late 1760s, the tales present a new version of French patriotism disassociated from monarchy and aristocracy, where the citizen replaces the subject.<sup>5</sup> By 1780s, writers such as Rétif de la Bretonne are producing full-blown redefinitions of the national community, its vitality centred in the labouring classes.

Ceri Crossley evokes a very different, post-revolutionary approach to writing, in which discourse is consciously seized and adapted, not to imitate or follow reality but to transform it. His essay reviews a key period in the history of French historiography: the emergence of the Romantic movement in the early years of the nineteenth century. The renegotiation of genre boundaries produced a situation in which historians, philosophers, and creative writers shared an understanding of truth as essentially visionary, a privileged insight into the movement and significance of historical 'fact', a synthesising of past and present aimed at legitimating an ideological grasp of the future. Radicals and counter-revolutionaries sought to harness the power of symbolic form to legitimate their own versions of unified national identity. Identical forms – epic narrative (national history, Christian eschatology), and natural imagery (the cycle of the seasons, the rural landscape) – are worked to very different ends for 'authorising action and confirming models of social belonging'.

If the Revolution is traditionally taken as the founding moment of modern France, the Third Republic is the next great moment of national self-definition, discovering, or inventing, many of our present-day icons of Frenchness.

Siân Reynolds's analysis of the *Belle Epoque* offers another instance of England's role in cracking the mask of consensus. More precisely, it is the Anglo-American creation of the New Woman, arriving on the scene as the Third Republic puts together its distinctive, would-be definitive blend of nationhood, republicanism and fraternity, who gives impetus and support to emergent, subversive second-wave French feminism. The women of Proust's fictions, representing the kaleidoscope of identities that constitutes 'the Frenchwoman', bring into relief the different political, gender and generational perspectives that divide and fragment the nation. Inside this archetypal narrative reconstruction of time past, Albertine wheels her bicycle, disrupting her narrator's dreams of wholeness with her raucous demands to 'live her own life'.

Kathryn Hamer's study of the use and abuse of culture in the Second World War focuses on the relatively neglected journal *Comoedia*, which over its three years of publication, through its commentary on artistic and literary production, not only witnessed but actively contributed to some significant reconceptualisations of France and its national cultural identity. In a nation defeated and occupied, the clerisy still has to earn its daily bread, and many of *Comoedia's* contributors, including Sartre, Camus and Duras, had impeccable reputations for resistance; but difficult questions arise, mixed messages abound, and ambiguity, at best, is the hallmark of editorial policy and practice. Appeals to French cultural renewal in a new Europe, coexisting with adulatory comment on leading German artists and musicians, living and dead, and with nostalgic fascination for the French cultural past, must be read in the context of such regular features as *Connaître l'Europe*, a column imposed by the Occupation authorities, as participating in 'official attempts to lend credibility to the notion of the birth of a new cultural Europe dominated by Nazi Germany, and the place of France within it'.

For Susan Bainbrigg's Simone de Beauvoir, being a woman, and being an intellectual, involves prolonged, frustrating engagement both with the insecurity of her own identity and the problems of a France that, in her lifetime, sees itself swing from the centre to the margins of History, and back. Bainbrigg's study of Beauvoir's autobiographical texts presents them as both textual constructions of self, whether as writer, lover or activist, and as narrative representations of key historical events in France. Beauvoir's own imperialising gaze turns the fate of the nation into a mirror for her own concerns. At the same time, her own gendered sense of marginality, variously manifested in the range of narrative voices she adopts ('je', 'nous', 'on'), produces a keen sensitivity to the conflicts that splinter the postcolonial Republic. Appropriately, Beauvoir finds her clearest voice calling for justice for Djamilia Boupacha, the tortured Algerian activist who will not be silenced by the violence of colonial France.

There is a nice irony in the conclusion of the story, as far as the present collection takes it. It is of course the iconic values of Frenchness – Enlightenment

and Revolutionary values, justice and equality – that Beauvoir turns against the Republican State, to speak out on behalf of the victim of another, less reputable face of France. The limits of identity, as these essays show, are malleable forms, potential markers not of closure but a new beyond; the story history tells is the capacity of a people to negotiate with the forms of inherited identity.

#### Notes

1 The Conference was organised by Jennifer Birkett, Martyn Cornick and Paul Rowe on behalf of the Department of French Studies, with advice from a Consultative Committee including colleagues in Modern History and History of Art, Philip Dine (European Studies, Loughborough University), and Sarah Capitanio (School of Languages and European Studies, University of Wolverhampton), and with support from the French Embassy in London.

2 Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols (Paris, 1986–92); English version ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman and tr. Arthur Goldhammer, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 3 vols (New York, 1996–98). Volume III is reviewed in this issue. See pp. 78–9.

3 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, 1994).

4 Bhabha, p. 5. Bhabha quotes Martin Heidegger, 'Building, dwelling, thinking' in *Poetry, Language, Thought, Location* (New York, Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 152–53.

5 This use of another nation to project a desired alternative set of values or hierarchy is neatly expressed by Bhabha: 'This side of the psychosis of patriotic fervour, I like to think, there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities' (*Location*, p. 5). The eighteenth-century moralists may not have been up to speed with the theory, but they had a good grip on the practice.

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