

# The Construction of National Memory in the 'Era of Commemoration'

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The construction of the French nation through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offers a case study in the attempt to found the legitimacy of one or other political regime on the appropriation or suppression of memory. From the counter-revolutionaries de Bonald and de Maistre at the turn of the century, to the liberal historians of the 1820s (Constant, Guizot, Tocqueville), to the radical republican Michelet, historians and social scientists sought to channel memory and re-write history: historians engaged in the political pedagogic task of writing narratives of the nation, social scientists and philosophers in theorising concepts such as "nation", "society" and "collective consciousness". Their works were so many stakes in the ideological battles also being waged in the streets, on the barricades. With the victory – but not an assured one – of the Republic in 1875, the most ambitious and self-conscious project of national construction found its site in the schoolrooms of the Third Republic, where the geographical and historical text-books, the readers in the new courses in *Instruction Civique*, fostered a certain idea of the Republic and a nationalistic spirit in the minds of generations of children. It might be thought that in the current era, when nationalist fervour has been tempered by European integration, the struggle to turn memory and history to nationalistic ends would have died away – and yet, though pacified, it turns out still to have ideological significance. Indeed, the practice of commemoration and the vogue for cultural memory to be found in France today provide an interesting case study of the role that they continue to play in national life.

To trace the evolution of French historiography in the twentieth century is far beyond the scope of this article. Let us simply note that the dominance of the *Annales* school has been challenged, particularly since the 1970s, by what has come to be known as the "new history", including an important

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current of what might loosely be described as "cultural history". Postwar historiography had assumed that economic and social realities were paramount in the understanding of social processes. By the mid 1970s, however, the number of books and articles devoted to socio-cultural questions had tripled, including studies of the imagination, dreams, festivals and – going beyond the *Annales* concern with *mentalités* – a renewed attention to the social representations that provide the frameworks of significance within which historical actors play out their lives.<sup>1</sup> One aspect of this attention to social representation was to recognise and seek to integrate into historical research the social role of memory. It is certain that this new turn was strongly influenced by the alternative representations of the past – notably those of the regions, women and the working class – which since the 1960s had gradually brought into question the official history, until then controlled by national institutions and professionals. Memory – which had long been subordinated to history as unreliable, folkloric and unscientific – came back into its own: one might speak of the "revenge" of repressed memory, as previously dominated groups demanded their right to remember. History was "invaded" then by these memories: the article on "Mémoire collective" in *La Nouvelle Histoire*, 1978, noted that history "is now written under the pressure of collective memories".<sup>2</sup> History's "revenge" was in turn to subject these memories to scrutiny as memory was made the object of study, in order to identify the successive uses that the present made of the past.

It is the author of the entry on "Mémoire collective", Pierre Nora,<sup>3</sup> who has perhaps explored most deeply the nature of this "moment-mémoire" that characterises both historiography and French society today, and who has, this article will argue, become most closely involved in reformulating national memory for present times. In the introduction to his highly influential *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992),<sup>4</sup> Nora pens a paean to memory: concrete, "affective and magical", it is "life" itself.<sup>5</sup> It is with regret, even nostalgia for what has been lost, that Nora argues that we are

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (eds): *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer et al (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques le Goff, Roger Chartier and Jacques Revel (eds): *La Nouvelle Histoire* (Paris: Retz, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Nora is one of the best-known historians in France today. He occupies a central place in the network of journals and institutions which define the field of historical study: Director of Studies at the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) since 1976; Director of the review *Le Débat* since 1980; Editor of the Gallimard collections: *Bibliothèque des sciences humaines* and *Bibliothèque des histoires*. He was elected to the French Academy in 2001. He is also a member of the Haut comité des célébrations nationales (since 1998).

<sup>4</sup> The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the translation by Marc Roudebush of Pierre Nora's Introduction to *Les Lieux de mémoire*, "Entre Mémoire et Histoire", which appeared in *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-24, under the title "Between Memory and History. *Les Lieux de mémoire*"

<sup>5</sup> "Between Memory and History", p. 8.

witnessing in the present day the “fundamental collapse of memory” and of the “milieux-mémoire” that carried it, above all as a result of the disappearance of peasant culture: “that quintessential repository of collective memory”.<sup>6</sup> Collective memory, that is to say unitary national memory, is fragmenting, disappearing as a coherent consciousness, along with a sense of history: we are witnessing, writes Nora, the “tremendous dilation of our very mode of historical perception”.<sup>7</sup> History – having become self-reflexive and critical – has abandoned the task of defining national identity: “in disclaiming its national identity, it has also abandoned its claim to bearing coherent meaning and consequently lost its pedagogical authority to transmit values”.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the apparent paradox of our era, writes Nora, is that memory and history have become a dominant preoccupation in France: the French have entered since the 1970s the “era of commemoration”. This era marks, he writes in the conclusion to the final volume, the passage from the national and historical to the commemorative and the patrimonial.<sup>9</sup> Commemoration has come to rival history in terms of its public role in keeping alive and interpreting the past. Collective memory today is the effort to remember, the attempt to keep alive something from which we are now irrevocably separated. It is the semi-awareness of what has been lost forever that has sent us rushing back to the past, to preserve any and every facet of it in an eclectic jumble of commemorations.

In his most recent articles Nora seeks to identify the reasons for and characteristics of this era of commemoration, which he dates from the mid to late 1970s in France.<sup>10</sup> Amongst the general factors he cites are those linked to modernisation: the crisis of the ideology of progress, of universalism, of linear time, of the autonomous subject; the collapse of communism/Marxism; the end of teleological views of history, whether national or political. The unification of Europe also imposed the necessity to re-think histories based on national destiny and sovereignty. Amongst the specifically French factors Nora cites the end of the “trente glorieuses” in the mid 1970s: the end of the era of rapid post-war expansion when social, technological and economic progress could substitute for the absence of political goals and ideals; the rapid demise of rural society, leading to the fragmentation of traditional close-knit communities; the loss of colonies and

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Nora, “L’ère de la commémoration”, *Les Lieux de mémoire III. Les France*, vol. 3. *De l’archive à l’emblème* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992), p. 997

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Nora, “The Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory”, *Eurozine* [www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com), 19 April 2002. English text at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-04-19-nora-en.html>

the challenge to the national project this entailed; the demotion of France to a second-class power, particularly after the withdrawal from the presidency of de Gaulle in 1969 and the end of the myth he had maintained – almost through sheer force of personality – that France still played a major independent role on the international scene. And not unconnected to his death in 1970, the return of the repressed memory of Vichy, the collapse of the “resistentialist” narrative of the Second World War and the re-emergence of memories of the victims of the war, notably the Jews.

All these factors, then, combined to create a climate in which attention turned towards the past in search of a meaning which the future no longer seemed to hold. The current era is characterised, writes Nora, by a frenzy of conservation and commemoration, both celebratory and exculpatory. The task of commemoration – sometimes presented as the “devoir de mémoire” or the duty to remember – has been taken up with enthusiasm by the State, which has provided extensive funds and institutional support, as well as by ordinary citizens: Nora emphasises that the impetus for many of the commemorations has come “from below”, from local volunteer groups and associations.<sup>11</sup> The State, for its part, declared 1980 as the first “année du patrimoine” – “patrimoine” thenceforth acquired a new meaning and resonance, referring not simply to the spoils of personal inheritance but to the legacy of the nation’s cultural riches.<sup>12</sup> The significance of this term was enshrined institutionally in the creation of the *Ecole Nationale du Patrimoine* in 1990. Since 1980, the pace of commemoration has quickened and its institutional support been greatly extended through the formation of *Le Haut comité aux célébrations nationales* attached to the Ministry of Culture. Each year has had its commemoration: in 1985, Victor Hugo; 1987, the Capetians; 1989, the Revolution; 1996, Clovis; 1998, the Edict of Nantes; 1998, the end of the First World War. Whilst by far the majority of these commemorations have been celebratory, Jacques Chirac’s apology in 1995 on behalf of France to the Jews rounded up and deported by agents of the Vichy régime illustrates the broader implications of the “duty to remember”.

Each commemoration is accompanied by what Nora describes as its “fatidique colloque”<sup>13</sup> – its inevitable conference – and by exhibitions, publications, t-shirts, and spectacle. Characteristic also of this era is the founding of many museums, including regional museums devoted to local

<sup>11</sup> “L’ère de la commémoration”, p. 996.

<sup>12</sup> In a footnote Nora quotes the evidence of an opinion poll published in *Le Figaro* in January 1981, which showed that whereas in December 1979 only 12% of French people understood the term “patrimoine” with this extended meaning, by December 1980 the proportion had risen to 36%. “L’ère de la commémoration”, p. 995.

<sup>13</sup> “L’ère de la commémoration”, p. 995.

figures or even products (the *sabot*...), and an increased popular interest in genealogy. Nora writes of these developments with some disdain for the role of the general public:

In a few years then, the materialisation of memory has been tremendously dilated, multiplied, decentralised, democratised [...] who today does not feel compelled to record his feelings, to write his memoirs – not only the most minor historical actor but also his witnesses, his spouse and his doctor. The less extraordinary the testimony, the more aptly it seems to illustrate the average mentality.<sup>14</sup>

*Les Lieux de mémoire* and its editor have played a key role not only in defining the fate of memory and history in the present day but in contributing perhaps unwittingly to the fervour of commemoration. Certainly the most influential product of this era in the intellectual field, the monumental seven-volume collection of *Les Lieux de mémoire* comprises more than 130 articles by many collaborators. Nora's theoretical justification for the book is that it offers a history of memory ("une histoire de France par la mémoire"), a detailed analysis "de nos représentations et de notre mythologie nationales" ("of our national representations and mythology").<sup>15</sup> It identifies and traces the evolution of the key *lieux de mémoire* that make up the Republic, the Nation, and France (the seven volumes are organised under these three headings). These sites have become the fixed, externalised locations of what was once an internalised, collective memory. Nora thus identifies a shift from *milieux de mémoire*, or naturalised collective memory, to *lieux de mémoire*, which represent self-conscious, deliberate attempts to preserve memory, attempts which had to be undertaken because spontaneous collective memory had ceased to function. Archives, museums, monuments, anniversaries, histories of France, schoolbooks, all represent the "will to remember" which defines a *lieu de mémoire*. Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities* was published in 1983, the year before the first volume of *Les Lieux*.<sup>16</sup> We might understand Nora's project as the attempt to identify the parameters of the "imagined community" that is France, to write the history of the "French imaginary", the "unconscious organisation of collective memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness".<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Between Memory and History", p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Nora, "Préface", Quarto Edition of *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 3031.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> "Between Memory and History", p. 23.

*Les Lieux de mémoire* undertake, writes Nora, "second-degree history", a history of the symbols that have evolved or were imposed in the course of French history: "une vaste typologie de la symbolique française" ("a vast typology of the symbolism of France").<sup>18</sup> What is at stake in this undertaking? Nothing less than to save the vestiges of French unity, specificity and continuity in opposition to the fragmenting tendencies of the present.<sup>19</sup> Nothing less therefore than to bolster the survival into the modern day of the idea of France itself and its particular identity, as older models of French singularity (universalist, militant, revolutionary...) have faded away. La France "est sa propre mémoire ou elle n'est pas" ("France is her own memory or she does not exist").<sup>20</sup>

It is worth spending a little time reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of this project – which has provoked both imitation and criticism outside of France – for they have something to reveal about the problematic use of the concept of cultural memory today. The first comment has to do with the content of *Les Lieux de mémoire*: even 135 articles suppose a choice, the stark choice of inclusion or exclusion. Critics of *Les Lieux* have drawn attention to the lack of a clear framework for choosing the topics addressed; they are defined, writes Nora, by the "will to remember"<sup>21</sup> – but whose will has been exercised on these sites of remembering? Sometimes Nora seems to attribute agency to memory itself, referring to the *lieux de mémoire* as places "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself",<sup>22</sup> as though a disembodied national consciousness were dictating the choices of the editor. Or France itself is personified in phrases such as: "Les lieux [...] auxquels la France a confié le soin de sa propre représentation" ("The sites [...] to which France has entrusted the care of its own representation").<sup>23</sup> The structure of the work, its division under the headings Republic, Nation and France, and the decision to include topics under one or other of the headings and sub-headings, the order of their presentation and the juxtaposition of articles, all these necessary decisions suppose editorial choice.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Nora, "Comment écrire l'histoire de France", *Les Lieux de mémoire*, III, *Les France* vol 1, *Conflits et partages*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Nora, "La nation-mémoire", *Les Lieux de mémoire* II, *La Nation*, vol 3, p. 655 "La nation-mémoire" is Nora's conclusion to *Les Lieux de mémoire*, II *La Nation*.

<sup>20</sup> "La nation-mémoire", p. 655. See also p. 651: "La mémoire est en effet aujourd'hui le seul tremplin qui permet de retrouver à 'la France' comme volonté et comme représentation l'unité et la légitimité qu'elle n'avait pu connaître que par son identification à l'Etat." ["Memory is in effect the only springboard today that makes it possible for 'France' to rediscover, as will and representation, the unity and legitimacy that she had known only through her identification with the State."]

<sup>21</sup> "Between Memory and History", p. 19

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Nora, "Présentation", *Les Lieux de mémoire* III: *Les France*, vol 2. *Traductions*, p. 13.

In relation to these choices, critics have noted the omission of apparently significant aspects of French history. For example, there is little on France's overseas empires, on colonialism or the slave trade.<sup>24</sup> Charlemagne has a chapter to himself, but not Napoleon. Moreover – unsurprisingly – the nineteenth century is considered by Nora as the privileged century for the crystallisation of national memory;<sup>25</sup> there is comparatively little on the twentieth century and only one article on the post second world war period (“Gaullistes et communistes”, by Nora himself). Later memories such as the Algerian war – which would be more controversial – are excluded. A fascinating intellectual parlour game could of course be played discussing what should be included (why Vichy but not the Resistance?), but more significantly Nora's choice offers revealing insights into the current state of quasi-official national memory. It is rather clear that only those memories which have been stripped of controversy can become a *lieu de mémoire*. Todorov warns of the danger of depoliticising memory when it is evoked in a ritual that bears no relation to the debates of the present.<sup>26</sup> This is a danger to which nostalgic accounts of cultural memory may unwittingly contribute.

The editorial choices raise further questions: whose memory is included and who is allowed to speak of these memories? The list of famous contributors ensures that the interpretation of the Parisian élites is privileged, as so often in the past. And whose memory is omitted? Counter-memories are rare in the work. Two counter-memories are included in the volume devoted to the Republic, and are identified as such with a heading of their own: they concern the Vendée revolt and the Mur des fédérés, a choice which seems to reflect a desire to balance the claims of right and left. The other volumes on the Nation and France have no such section. On the one hand, the absence of counter-memories is understandable, since Nora is including what has survived: the winners' memories. Memory does not reveal its own forgetting, its voluntary silences, unless forced to by the intervention of the critical historian: as Renan said in 1882, to exist, a nation not only has to remember but to forget.<sup>27</sup> But should the contemporary historian connive in this forgetting? Should there be a companion volume,

<sup>24</sup> Robert Aldrich's *Vestiges of the colonial empire in France. monuments, museums and colonial memories* (Basingstoke, Hants/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) might be viewed as a corrective to the absence of reference to France's colonial sites of memory in Nora's work.

<sup>25</sup> “C'est le XIXe entier, le grand siècle de la mémoire française, qui a inventé ‘la France’ dont cet ouvrage est l'inventaire” [“It is the 19th century as a whole, the great century of French memory, that invented ‘la France’, of which this book is the inventory”]. “Présentation”, *Les Lieux de mémoire III. Les France, vol 2 Traditions*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Abus de la mémoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1995), p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une Nation?* (Paris: Presse-Pocket edition, 1992), p. 41.

*Les Lieux d'oubli* (Realms of forgetting) asks James Leith, in his review of the work.<sup>28</sup>

Alon Confino questions more broadly the topic-based approach that has come to characterise so many studies of cultural memory: “The history of memory defined topically becomes a field with neither a center nor connections among topics. It runs the danger of becoming an assemblage of distinct topics that describe in a predictable way how people construct the past.”<sup>29</sup> This criticism – not specifically addressed to *Les Lieux de mémoire* – nevertheless applies to it rather well: it is indeed an assemblage, a juxtaposition of the most diverse topics; their differences are “flattened out” in time and space by their co-existence within the covers of the project. Indeed, Nora states that his object is to reveal the “invisible thread” that links objects as different as a museum and a slogan.

For the very possibility of a history of *lieux de mémoire* demonstrates the existence of an invisible thread linking apparently unconnected objects. It suggests that the comparison of the cemetery of Père-Lachaise and the Statistique générale de la France is not the same as the surrealist encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine. There is a differentiated network to which all these separate identities belong, an unconscious organisation of collective memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

In another metaphor he refers to the sites as embedded in one another with the solidity of geographical strata: they provide the deep substructure of the collective identity of France.<sup>31</sup> Yet his claim of an unconscious network of relationships, of a “parenté secrète/secret kinship”<sup>32</sup> between disparate objects is surely problematic, attributing as it does some objective existence to collective memory.

Indeed, Nora's commentaries are replete with references to the past reality of a “general memory”<sup>33</sup> and to “the common knowledge of our national memory”,<sup>34</sup> but the question of the spread and reception of this memory is not discussed. Where is this “collective memory” located? To

<sup>28</sup> James A. Leith, “Review of Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory the Construction of the French Past*, vol III. *The Symbols* (ed. Laurence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer)” in *H-France* (April 1999), [http://www.h-france.net/reviews/leith.html].

<sup>29</sup> Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 102, no. 5 (December 1997), pp 1386-1403; p 1387.

<sup>30</sup> “Between Memory and History”, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> “Présentation”, *Les Lieux de mémoire III, Les France, vol 2*, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Nora, “Préface”, Quarto edition, *Les Lieux de mémoire, vol 3*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) p 3031.

<sup>33</sup> “Between Memory and History”, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 18.

claim it is secreted in the *lieux de mémoire*, as he writes in the Introduction,<sup>35</sup> is clearly fanciful. The theorisation of collective memory involves analysis of the institutions, the élites and the professionals that have fostered, repressed and transmitted memory - and continue to do so. But in Nora's account of the workings of memory and history, human agents and institutions tend to disappear, while abstract nouns and objects are personified and acquire will and intention: for example, he writes that we live in "a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it";<sup>36</sup> or again "it is memory that dictates while history writes".<sup>37</sup>

There are overtones of nostalgia in Nora's characterisation of the rural communities which represented the "real" or "true" memory of France: "in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral".<sup>38</sup> Nostalgia for a golden age of national unity before Corsicans and Bretons listened to the inner voice urging them to assert their particular identities.<sup>39</sup> "[R]eal memory - social and unviolated" is "an integrated, dictatorial memory - unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualising".<sup>40</sup> He writes rather elegiacally of collective memory as under attack, encircled and undermined by history which: "besieges memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it".<sup>41</sup> But what are the origins of this collective national memory if not the institutions of monarchy, church and state which "violated" the folk and regional memories of the people? There seems to be an elision in Nora's categorisation of memory between 'civic' memory (sustained by state institutional support) and genuine folk or popular memory based on oral culture.<sup>42</sup>

There is thus a certain irony in Nora's project. Perhaps in few other countries were traditional, local cultural memories more systematically repressed, together with the regional dialects and languages, than in the primary schools of the Third Republic. In few other countries was such a coherent and all-eclipsing national memory foisted on the young, through the history and geography school textbooks, the dictionaries of Lavissee and others. The memories which Nora lists, the symbols, events, personalities, almost invariably owe their existence in the public imagination to the school

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> The distinction between 'civic' and 'popular' memory is made by Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) Introduction.

system, not to transmission by some unmediated authentic collective memory. This reminds us more generally of how hard it is to even conceive of what "real" cultural memory might mean in the modern world - how far back would we need to go to find cultural memory transmitted popularly, not mediated by institutions led by educated elites: first by the Churches, then by the State, and most recently by the media. As Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn argue: "Collapse the Nature-Culture distinction, as poststructuralist criticism has done in various ways, and both memory and history look like heavily constructed narratives with only institutional differences between them".<sup>43</sup>

We need to be more suspicious of the claims made for collective memory; in the contemporary world memory is often associated with authenticity. We have all experienced the immediacy and vividness of individual memories and so the memories of actual participants, or traditional accounts handed down, spontaneously, in direct line from generation to generation, seem to offer a link to a sphere of certainty. The use of the term "memory" in phrases like cultural, collective or national memory, therefore, acquires an aura of legitimacy in a world where few foundations of knowledge remain unchallenged. Yet collective or cultural memory is not of the same nature as individual memory, and the term "collective memory" can only ever be metaphorical, as Pieter Lagrou points out.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the accuracy of individual memory is as open to question as is that of collective memory.

## Conclusion

The fervour for commemoration has proceeded apace in France, as elsewhere. In French secondary schools, the teaching of "civic instruction" has since 1995 returned to the classroom, the curriculum emphasising not only the traditional intellectual, civic and social virtues, but the importance of the "patrimoine français". Memory has been institutionalised, officialised for purposes of legitimation, recuperation, exculpation: governments and political parties have used anniversaries as so many empty vessels into which can be poured vague but useful sentiments. In 1998, the Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin seized on the occasion of the double commemoration of the abolition of slavery and the publication of Zola's "J'accuse" to characterise the right as pro-slavery and anti-Dreyfusard - greatly simplifying the historical record in order to represent the current Left as part of an emancipatory mission transmitted from generation to

<sup>43</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, "Introduction", *Representations*, no. 26, Special Issue . Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Pieter Lagrou, "History and Memory. the example of the two world wars", proceedings of CNRS cross-disciplinary event on "Memory" (25 January 2000) in the series "Les Transversales du CNRS" Online at [<http://www.cnrs.fr/cw/fr/pres/compress/memoire/lagrou.htm>].

generation, at precisely the time when the electorate no longer saw much difference between the major parties.<sup>45</sup> At the other end of the political spectrum, Philippe de Villiers' *son et lumière* commemoration of the history of the Vendée region, at the spectacle of Puy du Fou held every year since 1978, has become a massive local industry and tourist attraction; apparently a celebration of regional and counter-revolutionary memory, it has been paradoxically instrumentalised by de Villiers as a support base for his platform as a national politician, as leader of the conservative and anti-EU *Mouvement pour la France*, founded in 1994.<sup>46</sup>

These examples serve to demonstrate how politicised the practice of commemoration remains in France today. Nora's project, ironically, has its own contribution to make in this regard – Perry Anderson considers *Les Lieux* “one of the most patently ideological programmes in post-war historiography anywhere in the world”. Even more memorably, he asserts that the “underlying aim of the project, from which it never departed, was the creation of an *union sacrée* in which the divisions and discords of French society would melt away in the fond rituals of postmodern remembrance”.<sup>47</sup> By recapitulating the *lieux communs* of French memory, it can be argued, the work has become a contributor to the trend of commemoration which Nora intended to deconstruct, a tendency which he himself recognises in the conclusion to the French edition, where he emphasises that his work was not meant to be celebratory but reflective, was not meant to hoist memory to an unchallenged status but to record its workings in the context of the death of traditional collective memory.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Nora's declared intention to provide a basis for re-thinking France in the modern era, the era of transnational solidarities and European integration, he achieves a surprisingly traditional recapitulation of some of the key phases in the nineteenth century conceptualisation of the French nation. The authors of past narratives of the nation have returned to haunt the spectral halls of Nora's mnemonic palace. We find there Michelet, who gave us the metaphor of the nation as a thinking, remembering being, and who is described as the “soul” of the project: Michelet, writes Nora, has no chapter of his own because his presence is everywhere.<sup>49</sup> Guizot is another

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Garcia, “Exercices de mémoire? Les pratiques commémoratives dans la France contemporaine”, *Cahiers français*, no. 303, *La mémoire, entre histoire et politique*, (juillet-août 2001), pp. 33-39; p. 35.

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Rechniewski, “The Vendée myth in Contemporary French Politics: the case of Philippe de Villiers”, in John Perkins and Jürgen Tampke (eds), *Europe: Retrospects and Prospects*, (Manly, NSW: Southern Highlands Publishers, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> Perry Anderson, “Union sacrée”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 26 no. 18 (23 Sept 2004), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> “L'ère de la commémoration”, p. 977.

<sup>49</sup> Michelet “n'est nulle part ici individuellement localisé parce qu'il est partout. Michelet, qui transcende tout lieu de mémoire possible parce que de tous il est le lieu géométrique et le dénominateur commun, l'âme de ces *Lieux de mémoire*” [Michelet “is not located individually anywhere, because he is

key reference for Nora, Guizot who organised the mobilisation of memory in the national interest on an institutional basis<sup>50</sup> but who, we might also remember, mistrusted democracy and became Louis-Philippe's hated first minister. Is Nora's project in the end so different from the nineteenth century histories of France written by these authors? The heterogeneous chapters of *Les Lieux de mémoire* do not provide a coherent, progressive narrative of the nation, it is true, but they provide instead a modernist substitute for narrative: a collage of memories claimed to be constitutive of national identity.

These comments suggest no criticism of the quality of the individual articles in *Les Lieux*; it is the framework imposed on them and the nature of the project which raise interesting questions about the uses of cultural memory and the role of the historian today, and which illustrate the continuing difficulty for the latter in maintaining a critical dialogue with the *patrimoine* national.

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everywhere. Michelet, who transcends any possible site of memory because he is the focal point and common denominator of them all, the soul of these *Lieux de mémoire*”, “La nation-mémoire”, p. 649.  
<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 648.