

The French Identity Crisis

For the Soul of France: Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus

BY FREDERICK BROWN
Knopf, 304 pages

Reviewed by MICHAEL McDONALD

WHAT DOES IT mean to be French? A simple enough question, and one that has exercised many minds over the centuries, but to ask it these days in Paris seems akin to drawing swords. Consider what happened to President Nicolas Sarkozy when at the end of 2009 he launched a nationwide series of “town hall” discussions on the issue of French identity. With France home to some five to six million Muslims—the most of any country in Western Europe—Sarkozy’s desire for an open exchange of views on the elusive quality of “Frenchness” touched a nerve. His aim, it appeared, was to siphon off support from the anti-immigration, far-Right National Front in the March regional elections (a failed aim, as it turned out). Still, the vehemence of the criticisms leveled at Sarkozy—himself the son of a Hungarian immigrant—verged on hysteria.

Many in the media and on the French Left deemed the topic altogether taboo because of its “sinister

MICHAEL McDONALD is an attorney and a writer in Washington, D.C. His writing is archived at www.michaelmcdonaldweb.com.

nationalistic undertones.” According to his gentler critics, Sarkozy was guilty of “gross political irresponsibility.” Others went further, comparing the French president to the head of the Nazi-created Vichy state. To them, the “grand debate” reeked of “the most nauseating kind of Pétainism.”

An identity crisis is something we normally associate with teenagers or middle-aged men, not with sovereign states and certainly not with a nation like France, with its cultural heritage and unbroken history of central government reaching back to the early Middle Ages. But in fact, the ferocity and venom of the present debate has deep roots in Gallic society. As Frederick Brown explores in *For the Soul of France*, a timely and important work of cultural history, the very notion of French national identity has always been fraught.

Despite the longevity of the French state, in an important sense France has never been unified. The *ancien régime* was hardly a monolithic entity, given the mixture of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, and the diversity of regional and linguistic traditions throughout the countryside. When the French Revolution of 1789 broke definitively with the political traditions of the old monarchy, it also generated a further layer of ambivalence about what it meant to be French.

Perhaps inevitably, the Revolution failed to integrate individuals into a unified community under the banner of one secular repub-

lic. The Jacobins who ascended to power obliged all citizens to choose to stand with or against the newly inaugurated republic. The country divided into two warring camps. On one side were those who saw only the pre-Revolutionary ways as representing the true France; 1789 was for them a conspiracy of atheists, Protestants, and Jews. Fervent Catholics, they saw the hand of divine retribution whenever misfortune befell the nation and would hasten to call for a return to hierarchy, tradition, and blood-and-soil notions of an organic French race.

On the other side stood those who saw the true France as the modern, secular herald of the Enlightenment. They viewed French history as a progression toward the nation’s emancipation from its servitude to reactionary aristocrats and obscurantist priests. The descendants of the victors of 1789 fervently embraced science and cosmopolitanism. But they never rested easy, believing that reactionary forces were forever lurking. Accordingly, whenever in power, the republicans fanatically declared war on Catholicism, seeking to banish its influence on education in particular but more broadly throughout the public sphere. Thus were “science” and “supernatural intervention” the competing descriptions of what ailed the French nation, and never was a comfortable *modus vivendi* established.

FREDERICK Brown presumes that readers who pick up his book will possess a basic understanding of this history, and of the fact that “for everyone, 1789 was the inevitable reference point.” The author of richly detailed and widely acclaimed biographies of Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola, Brown is a cultural historian of 19th-century France. His aim in this work is to explore how

Help Secure Our Future

Please consider
a long-range gift
by means of bequest.

Your enduring
commitment will
help sustain and
broaden the
advancement of the
Commentary
tradition for the
future.

**For more information
about special legacy gifts
in your will or real estate,
please contact:**

Commentary, Inc.
Stephanie Roberts,
165 East 56th Street
New York, NY 10022
Phone: (212) 891-6738
Email: [sroberts@
commentarymagazine.com](mailto:sroberts@commentarymagazine.com)

Commentary

the post-1789 culture wars played out in the first stable democracy to take root on French soil: the Third Republic, which came into existence with the Prussian military victory over Napoleon III in 1870.

The narrative begins in the spring of 1871. At the end of the Franco-Prussian War, France ceded a huge chunk of its territory (Alsace and a part of the province of Lorraine) to the victor. A reactionary government was in power in Versailles; it confronted a rival left-wing government, the Commune, which controlled Paris. "It was France's misfortune and originality," a journalist noted at the time, "that since the Revolution every form of government had been regarded as a usurpatory improvisation by one camp or another." The standoff between Versailles and Paris led to civil war, ending with the suppression of the Commune.

The Third Republic took root, appearing to offer both stability and progress. Certainly the flowering of the arts testified to the republic's considerable cultural and technological achievements. But these masked a tenuous social foundation. The problem was that the country was overwhelmingly religious in nature—by most estimates more than 80 percent of the citizenry professed allegiance to Roman Catholicism—and leavened by a solid minority of monarchists, yet it was governed by a much smaller secular, republican elite. In one political and cultural institution after another, the champions and foes of the Enlightenment clashed.

Thus, the clerical establishment called for the re-Christianization of the country following the Franco-Prussian war and launched plans to build a grand national shrine, the basilica of the Sacré Coeur. When its cornerstone was laid, Catholic speakers claimed it would mark the gravestone of the revolt of

1789. Ardent republicans like Zola called the church "a monument of provocation" and "an insult to freedom of conscience." The secularists had their revenge with the construction of the Eiffel Tower in 1889, which contested the Sacré Coeur's command of the sky over Paris. Needless to say, the Eiffel was disparaged by conservatives as a thousand-foot "tower of Babel" that was so anti-French as to be purely "American in spirit."

The politics of the Third Republic were plagued by scandal after scandal. Some of these were of the comic-opera variety, such as when President Félix Faure died in the presidential palace in the arms of his mistress, the appropriately named Mme. de Bonnemains. But others were more serious, involving graft and destructive business dealings. Tens of thousands of people were ruined by the 1882 crash of the Union Générale bank, which had pooled the financial resources of Catholics in order to challenge "opponents of their faith," and not long thereafter by the collapse of the fraud-ravaged Panama Canal Company. Although the fault lay with the men who had run the two enterprises, their champions in the right-wing press indignantly blamed rival Jewish bankers and financiers. The crises were seized upon by such leading anti-Semites as Édouard Drumont, who published two bestselling books accusing a malevolent Hebrew syndicate of undermining France's soul. Prominent newspapers, Catholic newsletters, and mass organizations like the Ligue des Patriotes raised concerns about the infiltration of "foreign elements." Collectively, these events set the stage for the most explosive event of the Third Republic, the Dreyfus Affair.

It unfolded between 1894, when the Alsatian Jewish military officer Alfred Dreyfus was court-

martialed for espionage, and 1906, when the High Court of Appeals annulled Dreyfus's conviction and restored him to his rank. According to recent estimates, well over a thousand books have been written on the case. This may be too low a number given how the case launched the phenomenon of the intellectual in politics (in addition to the very notion of the "intellectual") and pitted two sacred French institutions, the church and the army, against the innocence of one man. It shook the country to its foundation. Brown's intimate familiarity with and mastery of the vast literature—both pro- and anti-Dreyfusard—is apparent, yet his synthesis is no mere *réchauffage* of the facts. Brown's presentation—intelligent, concise, and well-paced—is utterly gripping and by itself worth the price of the book.

The affair began with the discovery of a memorandum conveying French military secrets in a wastebasket at the German Embassy. After a shoddy investigation, the French High Command decided that Dreyfus was the spy. Confronted with the obvious discrepancy between his script and that of the memo, a handwriting expert reasoned that Dreyfus had "forged his own handwriting with calculated discrepancies." Dreyfus was duly accused of high treason. The right-wing papers and the Catholic press bayed their approval. He was tried, found guilty, and sent to Devil's Island. Even after it was discovered that pieces of evidence implicating Dreyfus had been forged and the real spy had been arrested, it was years before Dreyfus's innocence was officially acknowledged. The affair was much larger than a case of espionage and justice miscarried; it became the principal litmus test of French identity and political allegiance for the first half of the 20th century.

The Dreyfus Affair was much larger than a case of espionage and justice miscarried; it became the principal litmus test of French identity and political allegiance for half a century.

THE THIRD REPUBLIC lasted for 70 years, from 1870 to 1940, but Brown abruptly ends his study in 1910, noting that the exonerated Dreyfus went off to fight in World War I. This is unfortunate, since it was precisely France's victory in the Great War that heightened the internal contradictions of the Third Republic to the point where they would eventually burst. The republic was held together only by sentiments common to both Left and Right—a hatred of Prussia and a desire to recover Alsace and Lorraine. But when the war was won, with Germany in ruins and Alsace and Lorraine recovered, the Third Republic was bound to disintegrate because of the sharp fissures over French identity.

For the Soul of France falls short of being a comprehensive cultural history in a second respect. Prodi-

giously well informed and skilled in working on a large canvas as he is, Brown focuses almost exclusively on politics, to the exclusion of art and literature. An examination of the pitched battles in musical circles over the music and ideas of Richard Wagner would have shed light on the divisions in the French soul and the paranoid fears aroused by decadence and cultural invasion. Moreover, although today we tend to think that artists are naturally on the political Left, it is noteworthy that several of the great Impressionist painters (including Renoir, Cézanne, and Degas) were anti-Dreyfusards.

There are other curious omissions. There is not nearly enough in the background about French political thought. Brown excludes from consideration the role of Georges Sorel's revolutionary anarchism and the concomitant rise of statist ideology in France. (The historian Zeev Sternhell identified France as the "birthplace of fascism.") Brown also says nothing about France's acquisition of an enormous colonial empire under the Third Republic. This oversight is particularly lamentable, because immigration from former colonies has set the stage in our own day for another confrontation between religious belief and secular republicanism.

But these are minor cavils. Anyone wanting to explore the travails of the French soul will benefit greatly from reading Brown's vivid and fascinating work. Sarkozy's proposal to debate French national identity is intended in part to get the French to take responsibility for their future. Brown offers lessons from France's past. Both are correct in presuming that the soul of France is a subject of great consequence and that its salvation or damnation will tell us a great deal about the direction of Western civilization in the 21st century. 📖