



BRINGING THE EMPIRE BACK HOME

FRANCE IN THE GLOBAL AGE **HERMAN LEBOVICS**

BRINGING THE EMPIRE BACK HOME

RADICAL PERSPECTIVES

A series edited by Barbara Weinstein

and Daniel Walkowitz

BRINGING THE EMPIRE BACK HOME

France in the Global Age HERMAN LEBOVICS

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FOR ETHAN AND RACHEL,

JESSE AND MELISSA

CONTENTS

Illustrations ix

About the Series xi

Preface xiii

Introduction 1

1 Gardarem lo Larzac! 13

2 “What You Did in Africa, Can You Come Back to France and Do It?” 58

3 Combating Guerilla Ethnology 83

4 The Effect Le Pen: Pluralism or Republicanism? 115

5 The Dance of the Museums 143

Conclusion 179

Notes 191

Acknowledgments 219

Index 223

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. José Bové speaking from the bed of a construction truck during the deconstruction of the Millau McDonald's, 2
2. Bové shaking hands with well wishers, 3
3. Poster announcing the harvest festival for the Third World in the Larzac, 14
4. In behalf of the Kanak people, Jean-Marie Tjibaou prepares to sign the documents that transfer a piece of the Larzac to the New Caledonians' Kanaky, 1988, 16
5. Cartoon from the Larzac militants' newspaper showing the oppressed regions of France, 19
6. A later visit of Kanak representatives to Larzac, 40
7. Cheyenne representatives of the American Indian Movement arrive to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Larzac victory, 1991, 40
8. Delegates of the Japanese farmers' movement, whose land was being condemned to build Tokyo's big new airport, visit the Larzac, 41
9. Woman passing out *Gardarem lo Larzac* newspaper to military recruits, 44
10. The militant activist Pierre Burguière confronts a military officer about the camp's extension, 44
11. Local sheep do their bit to deny the country roads to the military, 46
12. Poster for the united regionalists' mobilization of summer 1975, 46
13. Larzac tractors in convoy on a highway adjoining the base, 47
14. Poster calling for support of the occupation of the Champs de Mars by the Peasants of Larzac, 47
15. The Larzac sheep on the Champs de Mars with the Eiffel Tower above them, 1972, 48
16. Poster announcing production of a play by the Groupe de la Cartoucherie on the historical resistance of the peasants of Occitanie against various incarnations of the Beast, 53

- 17.** American demonstrators picket the offices of Air France on Fifth Avenue in New York, 54
- 18.** Orientalist doorway of Colonial School, 62
- 19.** Still from *l'Homme du Niger* (1940), colonial film by Jacques de Baroncelli, 65
- 20.** Festival of Immigration held in Rennes soon after the Socialists gained power in 1981, 130
- 21.** French spectators watching the soccer World Cup match on tv, 1998, 138
- 22.** French World Cup champions embrace, wrapping themselves in their flag, 138
- 23.** A computer-generated aerial view, as if from the Eiffel Tower, of the projected Musée du Quai Branly, 146
- 24.** A computer-generated elevation of the Musée du Quai Branly, 150
- 25.** Northwest Coast totem pole at the entrance of the Musée de l'Homme, 156
- 26.** Totem pole inside the Musée de l'Homme, cut in two to fit space, 156
- 27.** Musée Guimet, specializing in Asian art, 157
- 28.** Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, 165
- 29.** The former Musée des Arts d'Afrique et Océanie, 175

ABOUT THE SERIES

HISTORY, AS radical historians have long observed, cannot be severed from authorial subjectivity, indeed from politics. Political concerns animate the questions we ask, the subjects on which we write. For over thirty years the *Radical History Review* has led in nurturing and advancing politically engaged historical research. Radical Perspectives seeks to further the journal's mission: any author wishing to be in the series makes a self-conscious decision to associate her or his work with a radical perspective. To be sure, many of us are currently struggling with what it means to be a radical historian in the early twenty-first century, and this series is intended to provide some signposts for what we would judge to be radical history. It will offer innovative ways of telling stories from multiple perspectives; comparative, transnational, and global histories that transcend conventional boundaries of region and nation; works that elaborate on the implications of the postcolonial move to "provincialize Europe"; studies of the public in and of the past, including those that consider the commodification of the past; histories that explore the intersection of identities such as gender, race, class, and sexuality with an eye to their political implications and complications. Above all, this book series seeks to create an important intellectual space and discursive community to explore the very issue of what constitutes radical history. Within this context, some of the books published in the series may privilege alternative and oppositional political cultures, but all will be concerned with the way power is constituted, contested, used, and abused.

We are pleased to inaugurate the series with Herman Lebovics's intriguing and challenging study of postcolonial France and the roots of contemporary anti-globalization movements. *Bringing the Empire Back Home* demonstrates how the colonial heritage—both that of overseas colonies and of exploited regions within the colonizing nations—is still alive in the practice of the great powers. Focusing on the sharp political and cultural struggles during the last fifty years over what was, or should be, the French national heritage, Lebovics traces how postcolonial globalization continued (and continues) the drive

for empire in other forms. Among the different episodes of postcolonial struggle highlighted in the text, Lebovics writes about the Peasants of Larzac, the movement in southwestern France that defeated a conservative government's effort to expropriate farmers' land for a military base on which to train a new postcolonial strike force. The Larzacians owed their victory in large part to a heterogeneous coalition of supporters, including left regionalists in other parts of France, post-'68 radical groups, members of the American Indian Movement, New Caledonian freedom fighters, and José Bové, now a prominent figure in the international movement against neoliberalism.

Lebovics also considers the debates about the place of immigrants from the former colonies in French society, the rise of organized racist politics under Jean Marie Le Pen, and the impact on popular attitudes about French heritage and identity of the victory in the World Cup in 1998 by an ethnically diverse French national team. Yet this (rare) national moment of multicultural celebration and anti-racist affirmation, however inspiring, is hardly a "happy end" to Lebovics's story. New museums of immigration, popular culture, and the art of the once-colonized are going up, but historians—including radical historians—continue to struggle with the meanings of the past for the present and the challenge that an increasingly diverse French population poses for any unified vision of a national or (increasingly) international heritage.

PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS about the struggles in the last third-century of the millennium about what is the true heritage, so the right future, for France. In these years left and right held perhaps the most fundamental debate since the Dreyfus affair on the contents of the French *patrimoine*, as it is called in French. There have been many other such struggles. I wrote about some of them in both *True France* and *Mona Lisa's Escort*. In one sense, the present book is a continuation of that history of conflict.

But in another sense, the past thirty years were the unique moment when France transcended its historic sense of nationhood to reassess how its regions and its former colonies had entered into the nation's cultural heritage. In this period France accepted its decline as a world power, and became the birthplace for the new attitudes and politics that today we call anti-globalization. So, this is a book, too, about how peasants, people of and from the colonies as well as old colonial hands, *gauchistes*, left Christians, ecologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, soccer players, their teenage fans, and, yes, the governors of France—locked in overlapping struggles—made, are still making, contemporary France.

Let me be up front with you. I want this book to contribute to an international project of liberation. But it is at the same time what my French colleagues call “a scientific investigation.” I do not like abusive words like “objective,” “value-free,” and “factual” in historical writing. I have not read many works which wrap their claims in these packages that were worth thinking about later. Not even a dictionary. I have read studies that do not give the reader enough information to judge for herself, that claim to be based on evidence and are nothing of the sort, or ones that take a rhetorical position “above the combat”—so better to push a tendentious line.

If in fact we wish to write better histories we have to write more inclusive ones. And that is not primarily a theoretical question. It is a social one. To the degree that all participants in a history can tell their own stories—are in a social position to be able to tell their stories—the regionalist and the cultural administrator, the colonialist and the colo-

nized, the social scientist and those she studies, the museum administrator and the peoples whose cultures are on display, to that degree we have richer, truer, fairer, and more passionate histories.

My political hopes have driven my research on the French cultural heritage of the future. I follow Jürgen Habermas's vision of the past as "future-oriented memories."¹ So, I have learned, do the major actors in this book. I write about the struggles in contemporary France over the meaning of nation, of region, of the empire both at home and abroad, and, finally, over its situation in an American-dominated globalization. In writing about France's future-oriented heritage I hope to make clearer what is at stake and what good, progressive, humane, outcomes are possible in the world.

So, essential to my argument—if not always foregrounded—is that this French debate is not unique. In many other parts of the world—Britain, Germany, eastern Europe, Latin America, and my own America—such issues have been, are, and will continue to be fought over. And in some places like Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, ex-Yugoslavia, and Africa, they have been fought out in horrible violence. Because of its local, national, and international dimensions, and because historical evidence of high quality is available, the French story is good to think with. Although I appreciate complexity—of motives, of situations, of moments, of outcomes—as much as the next academic historian, the reader will always know where, or more precisely, with whom, I stand in any place in the book. It will be against the deadness of the past. It will be with the forces trying to constitute a better future for humanity. That's my *parti pris*.

I love my participation in the scholarly world of France. There, like the other social scientists I am a "scientifique." I have friends who are attached to "laboratoires." And I have taught in the *École des Hautes Études en Science Sociale*, which is located in the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*. This science-discourse is of course a heritage of French academic positivism. But it is also an ongoing challenge to any absolute truth claims that contemporary science ideologues like social biologists, neoliberal economists, or government policy wonks may advance. Yet I refuse certain defeatist responses to such scientific imperialisms. I think there are better ways to turn back an overweening science discourse than, for the sake of shutting out a cruel world, raising an invincible fortress of "texts" to protect the human heart and mind. What my French colleagues are claiming, and I with them, is

that we (historians) work with methods that systematically analyze human situations. Our arguments are both verifiable and—in a reasonably accessible language—communicable. The work must withstand criticism both honest and, even, dishonest. Others looking over my arguments and the evidence I offer should find what I write persuasive, or—if they do not agree with me—at least plausible because done in a workmanlike manner. Otherwise, I have not done my job well. I use the words “arguments and evidence” in the sense of theory-embedded data. I mean more than just having a hypothesis. To do history we need both information and the frames to make sense of what we have dug out. The use of “facts,” as a word equivalent to “truth,” has reconfirmed Orwell’s prescient critique. I leave it to those in academia who believe that the stick we lower into the water is really bent, and to our president’s and his allies’ press agents.

Bad Old History explained the world as radiating out from national centers of political, military, or economic power. The New Social, Cultural, and Linguistically turned Histories resolutely studied the marginal and the excluded to redress this myopia of the powerful. Paradoxically, both kinds of history writing assumed the framework of the nation state, even if social and cultural historians did not always thematize it.

In one of his last pieces of writing before his death in 1994, Robert Lafont, Occitan intellectual and one-time candidate for the presidency of France, wrote, “We have entered a phase in which the Nation-State necessarily appears archaic, for the new spaces under construction today are transnational and cultural. Occitanie and Catalonia are, in certain ways, an old cultural unity, remaking itself in the frame of today’s modernity.” The cultural anthropologist Claude Liauzu puts his own sense that cultural spaces need redefinition this way: “To understand our society as it is today, is to return to the colonial.”² I think Lafont and Liauzu have each grasped a piece of that new France. We need to connect these still pictures, and to put them in motion.

I do not share the view that with globalization, the state is no longer a useful category, nor a powerful institution, in contemporary history. But I do think we have to frame our discussions of its place differently from past efforts. In the spirit of Lafont and Liauzu, I propose that the apparent thingness of the contemporary state needs to be deconstructed.

A new epistemology of our historical knowledge is necessary and

overdue. I will imbed my account in the emergent global episteme. That is to say, I wish to write so as to aid the reader to keep in mind at any important moment (1) the local, the national, and the global, as well as (2) the effects of their mutual *reflexivity*.³ The French actors in my account did. I will show, for example, how the economic and cultural griefs of a hundred sheep farmers in a distant corner of France impacted on France's place in the larger world of international power politics. The farmers, their activist allies, and the politicians understood this. Their nastiest enemy, Minister of Defense Michel Debré, understood it very well. Often complex, seemingly unrelated local events turn out to have large causal consequences. This is why, I think, taking down a few of the modular pieces of the new McDonald's under construction in the little Larzac town of Millau—a first in the nonliterary application of deconstruction—became so important in the world debates for and against current trends in globalization. The magistrate who sentenced José Bové to a harsh three months in prison—for trespassing and vandalism—clearly understood, too, how lines of force link the local, the national, and the global. Perhaps we might begin with a visit to that “McDo.”

INTRODUCTION

DESPITE THE SEASON—it was the 12th of August—the dawn morning in the little town of Millau in the Larzac was still chilly. This high plateau in the Southwest could have terrible weather. At the town's edge, just where the road descended from the hills, stood an almost completed new McDonald's, done in the company's vivid kiddy-toy colors. It had taken until the summer of 1999 for this omnipresent chain, finally, to reach here. Local farmers began arriving in the parking lot on their tractors, the favored means of travel in the poorer parts of the French countryside. They gathered in clusters at the construction site. They were mostly sheepherders, veterans of the successful struggle of the 1970s to block the planned expansion of the local military base. In their epicenter moved a fellow farmer, José Bové, pulling meditatively on his habitual pipe. The police, who had been alerted by the activists themselves, stood around waiting for a law to be broken.

It was a moment of trade war between the United States and France. The United States was trying to force open the French market for its hormone-fed beef. To bring pressure on its unwilling trade partner it was increasing to prohibitive levels the import duties on selected French products. Now Roquefort cheese, the Larzac farmers' principal market product, had been targeted. Most of the Roquefort is made by a few big companies. But the sheep milk for its making is purchased from the many small farmers in the area. Splendid production values: rough-clad peasants on tractors, a Provençal language, old stone houses, scant urbanism, pastured sheep, cheeses organically cultured in caves in use since the middle ages, a *produit du terroir* which was an integral part of a nation's grand cuisine. Can one imagine a more perfect set of symbols for a threatened French regional identity, which is to say, for an endangered French heritage? What might be the equivalent symbol for the American culinary heritage?

A number of the men entered the "McDo." They began ceremonially taking it apart, literally de-constructing it. To speed its Big Macs to new customers, McDonald's employs modular construction methods.



1. José Bové speaking from the bed of a construction truck during the deconstruction of the Millau McDonald's. The grafitto on the roof reads, in the local Provençal, "MacDo Get Out." Photo Gilles Gesson.

It was easy to dismantle [démonter] sections already in place without much trouble or even great damage. The morning sun began to warm the air. In shirtsleeves, Bové picked up the prepared microphone and climbed on one of the construction trucks to explain to the small crowd why they were taking this action.

Now the police stepped in and arrested the men in the building, José Bové with them. Overnight, Bové became the most popular man in France, the new Astérix—he has the scrunched-up face and the perfect mustache—defying the Empire.

Neither Bové nor his fellow farmers are hicks. He is the son of research scientists. He attended courses at the University of Bordeaux given by the philosopher Jacques Ellul, the Cassandra of technological

2 Introduction



2. Bové shaking hands with well wishers from the (folkloric) condemned person's oxcart in which his friends were taking him to court to appeal his sentence for the McDonald's action, 30 June 2000. Photo Alexander Alland.

society. And his good command of English comes from the years of his childhood spent in Berkeley, where his parents were for a time doing laboratory research. McDonald's defended itself in its publicity by pointing out that everything—building materials, beef, plastic forks—was made in France by French workers. The firm provided jobs and a desired product.¹

But the issue is clearly not whether Bové is a *real* peasant, nor whether McDonald's is a good guest in France. It is about what French people understand as their cultural heritage in this age of American-driven globalization, and in what historical manner that *imaginaire* came to be. I will offer a history of the intense struggles in the last half-century over the meanings of new, clashing, heritages in France.

The past, where heritages are supposed to come from, is so rich and so contested that we must edit it. Which bygone activity, or event, or personage we wish to see today as related to us, and, more important, precisely how we relate to that past depends entirely on who we think we are *now* and especially on who we *want to be*. Enthusiasts of a certain idea of *the genuine* sometimes judge that once we speak of an activity in the past as part of "a" or "the" heritage, we are speaking of something fixed, a thing perfected in the past. I suppose they have in

mind something like what appears in *American Heritage* and *Figaro Magazine*, or in ads for period furniture.

But I think this is to miss the *utopian* aspect of heritage-talk, the hope it carries of a better, a more humane time and place. Ernst Bloch understood the dream of community, his special sense of *Heimat*, not as going home again—an impossible itinerary in any case—but rather as a passage to a future better place. Such utopias made from the past can be, in our own personal lives, metaphors of childhood retrojected into history. The hope of community and a time of happiness, perhaps that is why heritage-talk is so fraught with passion. To see heritages as invented things is too instrumentalist a view of utopic historicity. We find hopes for the future formed from elements selected from the past in every culture in the world. To insist that this way of thinking is simply manipulations of the powerful or the nostalgia industries—which it can be—also obscures the plain truth that cultures always offer a wide spectrum of possible heritage points about which their members may fight, but which they find are good to think with as they make their futures. “Heritage,” or in French the *patrimoine*, is a fighting word, and the most commonly used weapon—for all sides—in such historical struggles has been to *naturalize* their certain idea of the past. Heritage is national identity claims read back into history.

Jean-Pierre Chevènement has proposed, in effect, a return to the values that were alive in the Third Republic as a solution to today’s “immigrant problem.” Chevènement, the unsuccessful presidential candidate of republican renewal in the elections of 2002, was himself brought up in the principal’s apartment of a schoolhouse. His campaign speeches exhorted his fellow citizens to act responsibly, morally, honestly. He sounded to many in France, as a friend characterized it to me, “like my preachy junior high school teacher.” Chevènement wishes to return to the old republican values of discipline, leveling, and complete cultural assimilation to *the* culture of France. He wants the African and Maghrébin immigrants—and the Corsicans for that matter—to accept being melted down and recast by the French state-school as real French. It happened with the earlier waves of immigration; it is a tried and true entry into Frenchness. Why not again?

Le Pen wants the immigrants to disappear too. He loves a France that he dreams existed before becoming the major country of immigration in Europe. In ideal and in language, he consciously roots

himself in the racism and xenophobia of the right-radical nationalism of the early Third Republic. A parachutist (“para”) in Indochina, the Suez intervention, and Algeria, Le Pen had spent much of his adult life fighting, and torturing, rebellious colonials, only to see “them” come to France. Descendents of former native peoples of the colonial empire, the current immigrants are incapable of becoming French, in his judgment. So if he had been elected president of the Republic, his slogan “France for the French” would have translated into massive deportations.

Each man cherished a certain idea of the heritage of the last third of the nineteenth century. Neither would admit that republican government without enhanced *democracy* was unjust, a soft authoritarianism. Neither wanted to understand that French republican universalism has only worked when it took the form of a *negotiated* participation. Most important, neither was willing to confront two key linked legacies of France. One was that historically, republics—especially the paradigmatic French Revolutionary one—defined themselves *against* their enemies: the monarchy, the aristocracy, the church, and—the place where these were often strongest in much of the history of the country’s five republics—*against* the provinces. Second, the colonial empire was mostly made and completely consolidated by the leaders of France’s Third Republic as a continuation *at home* of this drive for unity-against-enemies. The praxis both of the centralizing republic and of making the colonial empire produced a systematic and entirely false sense of the cultural homogeneity of the French people. Today, some ideologues and a changing fraction of the French population see the immigrants from that former empire as a “problem.” That is a prime symptom of the continuing workings of a certain imperial-republican syndrome.²

Each man’s movement temporarily enjoyed a spurt of popularity in polls and early electoral rounds in 2002. But when real choices had to be made, the voters stopped using their votes as protests against exhausted Socialist policies, and, for safety’s sake, chose mainstream conservatives. Le Pen’s and Chevènement’s thorough rejection by the voters in both the presidential and the legislative elections made clear that the overwhelming majority of the nation wanted to move beyond their respective antique utopias of complete assimilation or racist exclusion.

At the end of three decades of toasting the new modernized France,

some of the more thoughtful began to feel the morning-after hang-over. After the massive economic development begun in the 1950s, the decolonizations in the 1960s, the Great Refusal of the young in 1968, and finally the beginning of economic depression in 1974, the fête came to an end. It was time for the French to assess what their society had become. In those years of growth the United States and the various cultural horrors collectively labeled “Americanization” served as the prime negative standard by which both intellectuals and policy makers measured the damage being done to the historic identity of the nation. But then, as Richard Kuisel demonstrated in his *Seducing the French*, the American menace receded into the background. The new identity crisis of the 1970s was literally historic. French leaders, rebels, and their intellectuals looked back to the past for the materials with which to construct present-day France.³ Specifically, from the rise of new regionalist movements in the early 1970s to the 1981 electoral sweep of the left, various new voices in France began to dispute what should be understood as the regional, national, industrial, and colonial heritages. In the last decades of the twentieth century, a new usage of the word *Patrimoine*—now meaning a national heritage made up of people and their customs, rather than of inherited family wealth or the state’s treasures—came into common use, and with the word, a new contested imaginary of what was France began to take shape.

In the aftermath of more than ten years of intense social contention of the decade before, the self-searching made the 1980s the great era of what-is-France books. The most authoritative of these was Pierre Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoire*. In 1984 Nora felt that it was time to sum up the common places and events of national memory. He thought it could be done in a one-volume collection of essays. It might be equally accurate to say that after the decades of France’s Second Revolution, he thought he could fix a certain idea of France in print. He wanted to document his vision of a modern, secular, and tolerant republic. But after publication, while praising the work, critics reproached him for his omissions. What about the Catholic heritage? The immigrants? And, oh yes, what about the colonies? Weren’t they worth remembering too? With good will, Nora responded to his critics by adding to his original still life of France more and more places of memory. Volume followed volume, until by the mid-1990s three volumes bound in seven fat books had come out, filled with essays by over 120 historians reminding readers not to forget this or that legacy or heritage of

France. Intending to sum up, Nora was obliged, finally, to perform multiplicity.

My work can neither aspire to the totalizing effort of Nora's first book nor employ the additive approach of the six that followed. Rather, I'm interested in two questions that seem to me fundamental: (1) Why in the late 1960s and 1970s did certain stories told about the French past become especially bitterly fought-over battlefields in contemporary society; and (2) Why and how did certain of these histories become enmeshed when in the past they had made up separate chapters, as it were, in the tale of national memory?

To try to answer these questions, I will trace how new understandings of French regionalism became intertwined with a new history of French colonialism, how Paris became intertwined with the provinces, industrial workers with regionalism, decolonization with re-founding the social sciences, new ideas about republican solidarity with a multicultural population; how a new museum of civilizations was created which is at the same time about France, Europe, and North Africa; finally, how the European treasures in the Louvre relate to the art of African peoples. Together, this new web of historical meaning has profoundly changed, is still changing, the dominant common sense of what France is and will be.⁴

What holds these apparently separate story lines together? Each of the chapters that follow describes a different aspect of the nuanced and complex cultural-power relationship between, and among, *Paris*, *the provinces*, and *the colonies*. Thus the handful of farmers who refused eviction so that a military base could expand in the Larzac in the Southwest sparked a movement in the 1970s that allied regionalists, anti-colonialists, socialist utopians, left Catholics, trade unionists, French Gandhians, and ecologists, creating what, in hindsight, we can see as the beginnings of the anti-globalization movement. The alert conservative leaders of French governments quickly sensed the development of a dangerous situation and tried to co-opt local discontents by sending the recently downsized colonial administrators into the provinces on domestic civilizing missions.

Then when the work of pacifying the backcountry seemed not to have worked, the state started on a different tack. Paris created a new office and new agents to manage the regional heritages on the ground, and to protect them from what some people in the Ministry of Culture termed "*ethnologie sauvage*." I will render this term "guerilla ethnol-

ogy,” in the sense of uncontrolled or insurgent. Decolonization had closed terrains of study to many social science projects and their French researchers. Why not shift scholarly interest to France, proposed the archaeologist Jacques Soustelle, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the ethnologist Isac Chiva.

Good idea, responded President Valérie Giscard d’Estaing, who had been harassed by Larzac militants and their sympathizers when he tried to dine quietly with friends in Rodez, in what he considered his own *petite patrie*. French social sciences were refounded in the 1970s in the wake of the angry new regionalist movements, such as those of Brittany, Occitanie, Corsica, and the Larzac, and as a direct consequence of decolonization. In 1980 Giscard d’Estaing capped the state’s offensive against guerilla ethnology by sponsoring elaborate official celebrations of the Year of the Heritage everywhere in France. It didn’t work, or at least, not well enough.

Elected President in 1981, François Mitterrand killed the plan to expand the region’s military base after nearly eleven years of locally organized resistance. He told the activists that their causes were now safe with the new Socialist government. They could go home. And in carrying out its promise to honor regional longings, for example in a law empowering real decentralization in 1982, the just-elected regime did quiet these troubles. The new government began then to turn its attention to the culturally ignored new immigrants—to that point groups with no heritages, at least no officially recognized ones.

But when, at the same moment, the movement of Jean-Marie Le Pen grew to be a force in politics, the pluralist opening of the society stopped. After all, Le Pen was in his own way a multiculturalist. He just thought that only one culture truly belonged to France and the rest should leave. In 1985 pluralists and republicans in the majority Socialist party fought out which would be the best riposte to the large following that Le Pen was attracting by his attacks on the immigrant population from the ex-colonies. Outside the government, in 1985 Harlem Désir founded the civil rights organization *sos Racisme* with some friends. Désir was metropolitan France’s first national *ethnic* charismatic leader. His own mixed Alsatian and Caribbean ancestry united in his person the margins of the nation. The movement’s message of *fraternité* and tolerance quickly drew wide support, especially among the young. But the specifically multiculturalist content of its message was not heard by France’s new governors.