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"Crise d'Identite": The Push to Preserve National Identity in France

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"Crise d'Identité": The Push to Preserve National Identity in France

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Katherine Hammitt

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Introduction: France in a shrinking world

In 2010, France's President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed a *"Maison de l'histoire de la France,"* a heritage museum, as reporters began calling it, to be opened in Paris in 2015. President Sarkozy's speechwriter on issues of national identity has cast the museum as an answer to France's "identity crisis".[1] The project's aim, as President Sarkozy has articulated it, is to "reinforce national identity," warning as well, "It is always dangerous to forget your history."[2] It is exactly this fear, the fear of forgetting France's rich history, which has spurred controversy and upheaval within the French republic.

The extent to which President Sarkozy's proposal has struck a nerve in the French population is evidenced by the extensive protest against the *Maison*, notably from the academic sphere. Several historians signed letters that were published in *Le Monde*, speaking against this promotion of "official history" and its propagation as a political tool. One letter points specifically to the creation and promotion of national identity as problematic to academic historical pursuits. The letter states, "Si l'échelle privilégiée est celle d'une France rabougrie, c'est, en conséquence, moins le résultat d'une réflexion pédagogique, savante et critique que de la mise en place d'un projet fondé sur la peur de l'autre et que le pouvoir exprime dans un mouvement de repli sur soi."[3] For the historians who signed this letter, the national identity to be promoted by this museum would represent less a celebration of French history and more the assertion of a French identity

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[1] Michale Kimmelman, "'Cultural Revolt' Over Sarkozy's Museum Plans", *New York Times* (9 March 2011), C1.

[2] Angelique Chrisafis, "French historians rally against Nicolas Sarkozy's 'legacy' museum" *The Guardian* (10 November 2010), 27.

[3] "Maison de l'histoire de France est un projet dangereux," *Le Monde*, October 21, 2010. "If the privileged configuration is that of a stunted France, it is, consequently, less the result of an educated, knowledgeable, and critical reflection than of the creation of a project founded on fear of the other and that power implements in a movement of withdrawal into the self." (My translation)

that diminishes the multitude of different histories that compose an increasingly diverse national identity. Addressing exactly this concern, immigrant organizations have also staged protests throughout Paris, denouncing the propagation of an official French history that they argue fails to incorporate their stories, often with roots in countries beyond France, into the mosaic of French national history. The problem with the proposed museum, from their perspectives, is the legitimization of a singular national history, one that implies a definitive version of the history that defines France, and French citizens, in the past and as they exist today.

The global national identity crisis

The controversy over the *Maison de l'histoire de la France* is but one facet of a search for identity playing out throughout France and in its politics, as well as around the world more generally. The national identity crisis evoked by Sarkozy in his defense of the museum is one felt globally. In an ever more interconnected world, where the role of the nation in international politics is becoming increasingly ambiguous, what it means to be a part of a nation never strays far from world headlines. Identity politics drive current scholarship as well as international interactions. As the issue of state sovereignty provides an undercurrent for much of the discussion in international studies circles today, it is worth considering to what extent the nation continues or ceases to form an important component of personal identity. [4] The issue of identity, especially as it relates to national identity, is further layered with historical importance; greater economic

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[4] See, for instance, Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 2006). Sen discusses the role of multiple layers of identity in much of the violence perpetrated around the world today. This discussion is particularly important, he argues, because of the diminishing role of the nation state as a traditional basis for identity.

interconnectedness has led to greater movement of peoples[5], furthering complications as concerns national identity. We are citizens of a profoundly interconnected world, and nationalism, though still potent, is no longer easily defined within increasingly porous borders.

However, even as national identity is probed and stretched, the phenomenon itself retains its political significance, notably in the example of France. France's experience with national identity has been at once exceptional and emblematic of similar shifts across Europe[6], setting the stage for change on a broader scale. There is no dearth of evidence to illustrate how significant questions of national identity continue to be in French politics; the struggle for national identity in France, from political platforms of presidents to legislation of school dress code, is a pang felt in many facets of both political and everyday life.

Foundations of the crisis: Algeria

To trace the origins of the "crisis of identity" in France, especially as it is playing out today, it is helpful to look at the state's experience of decolonization, a history that literally redefined France and what it means to be French. To do this, we will look at the specific case of Algeria and the Algerian War as emblematic of the broader process of decolonization for France.

Though France had a significant colonial presence around the world, Algeria is

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[5] William Robinson, "Globalization and the Struggle for Immigrant Rights in the United States", in *Globalization: The transformation of Social Worlds, 3rd edtion*, ed. Stanley Eitzen and Maxine Baca Zinn (Belmont: Thomson, 2012), 53.

[6] An example of this is the influence of the so-called "Gayssot Law," implemented in France on 13 July 1990. It declares denying "crimes against humanity" an offense punishable by fine and/or imprisonment. On 20 April 2007, a similar law was passed at the European level: to be discussed further later in the paper. (Liberté pour l'Histoire. "French 'lois mémorielles'").

the logical choice for a discussion of identity in decolonization. In the mid twentieth century, Algeria represented an achievement of international greatness to the French. Having just lost Indochina in a brutal war, Algeria was clearly the most important colony in the dwindling French empire. Algeria was France's greatest export market and home to over one million French citizens. It made up a significant part of France, representing 3 *départements*, and was distinguished from other French colonial possessions in that the Ministry of the Interior instead of the Ministry of Colonies administered it.[7] The native Algerians were not considered citizens but rather subjects, though they too made up an important part of the French population. Many Algerians immigrated to France at the beginning of the twentieth century to provide labor to an expanding French economy. Between 1915 and 1918, 78,566 Algerians came into France (along with 53,755 other North Africans).[8] This labor became even more necessary after the First World War and the loss of thousands of French lives. Despite the important connections between the Metropole and Algeria, the waves of immigration led to increasing discontent after the First World War. Algerian soldiers returning home after the war could not have missed the discrepancy between the opportunities available in France and the hardships faced in its colony. Algerian nationalist movements sprang up in France and Algeria alike, and by the end of the Second World War, these Algerian nationalists were calling for independence.

The Algerian War itself lasted from 1958-1962, triggering the fall of the Fourth Republic and the creation of the Fifth. Beginning with the official pronouncement from Paris that French troops were being sent to fight a terrorist insurrection in the colony, the

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[7] Benjamin Stora, *Algeria 1830-2000: A Short History* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2001), 30.
[8] Ibid, 14.

war soon embroiled both France and Algeria in a military and political quagmire. The war saw atrocities committed on both sides; the French used systematic torture techniques to gain information from prisoners and the Algerian nationalists (who split into competing factions) targeted civilians (of European descent) in highly visible, public places to stage attacks meant to capture the world's attention. Amidst all the fighting, however, Algeria was still considered an important part of the French empire; when then-President Charles De Gaulle expressed his backing of "self-determination" for Algeria in the early 1960s, two assassination attempts were made against him, one conducted by four of his own generals.[9]

The war and subsequent loss of Algeria represented a rupture in national identity. Pierre Nora, in the introduction to his extensive work *Les lieux de mémoire*, writes that, "the Algerian War… was truly our War of Secession -- a civil war and an intense crisis in the national conscience."[10] In the aftermath of war, politically-recognized identities changed as the Algerians lost their status as "subjects"[11] in France, a complication for the thousands of immigrants living in French cities. Furthermore, the French of Algeria -- the *pieds-noirs* -- returned to France, a country some of them had never seen, as their families had lived in Algeria for generations. Finally, the Algerians who had remained loyal to the French and who had fought against the nationalists in the war -- known as *harkis* -- faced certain death in Algeria from the newly formed government, and as many as could get out fled to France. The face of both nations changed quickly and

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[9] The generals justified their plot by accusing President De Gaulle of treason in supporting the secession of French territories.

[10] Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire, Vol. I* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2001), VIII.

[11] As subjects, Algerians were legally permitted to be in France. In losing this status, they also lost legal legitimation for residing in France.

dramatically, a change with which French society continues to struggle in its quest for a cohesive identity.

Historical disconnect

France was physically diminished following this brutal episode of decolonization; no amount of political spin on the part of then-President Charles De Gaulle could erase the sense that France had fallen from a place of imperial power. Algeria was the colony most linked to France's identity in the international realm not only because of its economic importance, but also because of the prestige that its administration leant to the French empire. Its severance from the republic was a true loss in land, economy, population, and the prestige that comes with the position at the head of an empire. Even more humiliating was the fact that France had been beaten by its own colony in this bitter war. Such a loss was a much greater blow to national pride than would be a loss to another European country like Germany. The natives that the French missionaries had set out to civilize over a century before had finished by brutally rejecting their political and ideological influence. Much was lost for France in the Algerian War, and the blow it represented to France's pride at the head of an empire was never overcome.

Furthermore, the values of the nation were thrown into question even as the war was still raging. France was violating the very national values upon which it was built following the revolution of 1789, which was pointed out by contemporary intellectuals, such as Jean Paul Sartre.[12] The most obvious of these values was the right to self-rule; a concept we have seen was viewed as treasonous in the midst of the war. The republican

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[12] One example of Sartre's response to the Algerian war can be seen in the preface he wrote to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, to be discussed in greater detail later.

ideals so important to the creation of France as it was at the beginning of the Algerian War were not extended to the "subjects" in Algeria whose representation in Paris was very limited. Also foundational to the French republic as it projects its image is its status as the *nation des droits de l'homme*. With the *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* in 1789, France cast itself as the nation defending human rights, a stance that was profoundly violated with the authorization of torture in the Algerian War. If France could treat its own subjects in such a way, how could the old claim to human rights be maintained?

The historical discontinuity so starkly evidenced in the Algerian War continued throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Pierre Nora engages this concept in *Les lieux de mémoire*, in which he looks to the late 1970s and the 1980s to trace the current wave of national identity crisis, and it is in this crisis that he finds "France in thrall to memory": national, collective memory, dating back to the days of the monarchy.[13] It is in this setting that Nora begins his investigation into the development of national memory in France; reconnecting with the past by reevaluating its representation in and in connection to the present: re-imagining the possibilities of the future by recasting the idea of France. From this perspective, the creation of national identity through the formation, even standardization, of national memory is not a phenomenon as old as France itself. It was born out of necessity from an identity crisis provoked by France's changing values.

The Algerian War is an important component of this crisis, but certainly not the only contributing factor. In *Les lieux de mémoire*, Nora points to three distinct phenomena in connection with the historical disconnect at the heart of the current identity

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[13] Ibid, X.

crisis: the economic downturn beginning with the oil crisis of the 1970s, the move away from agriculture in the decades after World War II, and the challenge to the revolutionary spirit represented by the fall of the Soviet Union. These all contribute to the historical disconnect in question and are important to Nora's purpose in *Les lieux de mémoire*. Though Nora has been criticized[14] for not placing emphasis on the role decolonization played in the broader historical break he addresses, it does bear consideration that it was no one factor that led to the current identity crisis in France, but rather a perfect storm of historical shifts. Furthermore, Nora has more recently addressed separate factors contributing to this break, factors that fit into the puzzle of the "identity crisis" as it is playing out on the national stage in France currently, and which will be discussed later.

History, memory, and identity

It is the issue of the idea of France as preserved in national memory that is being touched by the present proposal for a *Maison de l'histoire de la France*. President Sarkozy's cautioning that it is "dangerous to forget your history" is an actualized situation in France. The history of which he is speaking, however, is not the history of the individuals of France, but the image of France in history as foundational to the creation of a cohesive idea of France from which to derive national identity. In fact, it is particularly ironic that President Sarkozy should speak thusly about forgetting one's own history, as he himself is a second-generation immigrant from Hungary.[15] His strong stance on immigration issues first as Minister of the Interior and now as President embodies the

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[14]See, for example: Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom, eds., *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2009), 124.

[15] Sophie Pedder, "Atypically French: Sarkozy's Bid to Be a Different Kind of President" *Foreign Affairs* , Vol. 86, No. 3 (May - Jun., 2007), 124.

insistence of the State that the primacy of the population's identity with France be paramount. By taking such a controversial stance, President Sarkozy presents his own identity as first and foremost French, a move that allows him to appeal at once to the liberal and immigrant communities as an immigrant himself as well as to the more conservative voters who promote the absolute primacy of French citizenship in identity. Nevertheless, as noted above, a historical disconnect makes the maintenance of such an identity difficult.

However, just what image of France is being challenged is worth consideration. The challenge of both an imperial image and republican ideals reveals the importance of these factors in the example of the Algerian War. These are not the only aspects contributing to the national memory that translates to identity: every nation forms its identity to some extent from events or ideals that are translated into national myth. For the United States, the "American dream," the founding fathers and the Revolutionary War, and the promotion of democracy all act in this way. The historic reality of these events or ideas is not as important as their contribution to how the United States' populace understands itself as Americans; it is the fact that Americans see themselves as the inheritors of this history that builds and maintains the national identity. France has its own set of ideals and events that contributes to national identity. The long and glorious history of the country from the Roman era through the monarchies as well as the connection to the land through farming are such elements. National heroes like Joan of Arc and traditions rooted in Catholicism (such as Mardi Gras parades or Christmas celebrations) also contribute to the store of national memory. For France, however, the mythic versions of these memories do not translate as easily to the current state of

France: the long monarchical tradition was cut by the Revolution, farmers make up a relatively small proportion of the population today, and Catholic traditions are at odds with the stringent form of secularism France embraces. France struggles with historic memory and identity more than other countries because of a greater disconnect from its long (if mythic) history as a homogeneous nation to its current reality of increasing diversity. This diversity has come to France in the form of immigration.

Competing identities: Immigration

Immigration has been prevalent in France the length of its long history; the difference today is that the majority of the immigrants are not coming from other European countries. In 1900, 98% of immigrants to France were from Europe; in 2000, that figure had dropped to 40% -- 1% less than immigrants from Africa.[16] The decolonization of North Africa had profound effects on the makeup of the French population. As noted above, many colonial subjects were living in France at the time of decolonization as a much-needed contribution to the workforce after World War I. Such immigration was important to the function of the nation at that time, and was not seen as an inundation of foreigners as immigration from the same region is seen today.[17] After all, these immigrants were only moving between an overseas extension of the French territory and the country over which it was already sovereign. However, with Algerian independence, these same subjects became foreigners, politically.[18]

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[16] Jonathan Laurence and Jestin Vaisse, *Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France* (Brookings Institution Press: Washington, D.C., 2006), 17.

[17] Furthermore, most of the French population at the time hoped the immigrants' stay in France would be temporary and they would eventually return to their countries of origin.

[18] This political estrangement was intensified in the next decade by an economic downturn that saw an increase in unemployment throughout France, and with it an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Furthermore, in the decade after independence, two distinct waves of immigration from Algeria specifically and North Africa in general came to France. Immediately following the war, the so-called *harkis* who were able to escape from Algeria made up the first wave. The immigrants in this group were granted the choice of becoming French citizens upon arrival for their loyalty and time served in the war. However, no guarantee of citizenship could spare them from the institutional and societal obstacles that awaited them. Institutionally, France was unprepared to accept the wave of *harkis* and *pieds-noirs*[19] as they fled to the country simultaneously following the war; both these groups faced immediate immersion into a nation many of them had never before seen. While the *pieds-noirs* were aided through government-funded housing and job placement, the *harkis* were placed in resettlement camps in impoverished conditions where they effectively stayed until the mid-1970s. From a societal perspective, while the *pieds-noirs* were able to integrate, to a certain extent, as French citizens who had always been citizens, the *harkis* were faced with the difficult situation of integrating to the society that had until very recently ruled over their country of origin as a colonial power. They were racially distinct from most of the rest of the French population, and thus faced challenges that did not hamper the *pieds-noirs* in the same position.

The second wave of immigration occurred over a longer timespan, though statistically it had a greater effect on the population living in France. Immigrants continued to move to France as a part of the labor force throughout the decade following independence, although their numbers were greatly reduced by the French government after the economic downturn in the early 1970s. However, the reunification of families

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[19] The *pied-noirs* were the French citizens (of French descent) living in Algeria at the time of independence who fled the country *en masse* at the conclusion of the war.

continued to contribute to the immigrant population into the early 1980s. In the late 1960s, the rate of immigration from family reunification from all countries was 55,000 per year; this number grew to 81,000 in 1973.[20]

As these two important movements of immigration came to France, national identity was challenged as the face of the nation physically altered. As national memory and mythic history made up an important aspect of national identity, this identity was essentially destabilized by the competing memories of immigrants: memories of their own countries of origin as well as memories of France. Immigrants, especially immigrants from North Africa, had memories from their own lives that challenged the long-held historical memory that had bound the French population to its identity as a nation. While certain groups within France were questioning the use of torture during the Algerian War, immigrants to France after the war held their own memories or shared memories of family or friends who experienced such torture personally, shattering their belief in the legitimacy of France's claim of its commitment to the preservation of human rights. Furthermore, the presence of immigrants from many former colonies served as a reminder of history and memories most of the French population would gladly forget, a conflict to be discussed later.

Laïcité and religion

While immigration itself acted as a challenge to national identity, many of the immigrants brought with them more than personal memories at odds with the official memories upon which the state sought to build a cohesive history. As the immigrant

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[20] Laurence and Vaisse, 17.

communities in France increased, so too did the diversity of religion in France, particularly in the size of the Muslim population.

It is difficult to accurately state the size of the Muslim population in France because national censuses do not ask for data on religious affiliation. This is one manifestation of French secularism, *laïcité*. Current estimates place the figure of Muslims living in France between 4 and 5 million.[21] By all estimates, though, Islam is the second largest religion in France, behind Catholicism, a statistic declared by both Islamic advocacy groups wishing to emphasize the size of the group they represent as well as alarmists looking to incite concern over this growing demographic. The growth of Islam is due in great part to immigration after decolonization, yet it is nevertheless incorrect to conceive of the Muslim population in France as a homogeneous group. Country of origin, language, strictness of adherence to Islamic principles, and depth of personal identification with their religion are just some of the manners in which this group is diverse. However, two characteristics common to most of this population are their geographic location and their marginalization by much of French society. Geographically, most of the Muslim population in France is located within large cities or in their *banlieues*: Paris is home to thirty-five to forty percent of all Muslims with another fifteen to twenty percent living around Marseille and Nice.[22] Muslims are more likely to suffer discrimination and unemployment, two factors that contributed to riots in the *banlieues* of Paris in 2005, to be discussed in the next section.

The challenge religious diversity presents to France's national identity as it is formed through historical memory directly relates to the tension formed between strict

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[21] Ibid, 19.
[22] Ibid, 22.

French secularism and lingering Catholic national traditions. The French republic is secular by law; as much is said in the first section of the French constitution. Unlike in the United States, there is no serious discussion of the viability of prayer in schools or decoration of government buildings with depictions of the Ten Commandments. However, this has certainly not been the case throughout all of French national history; in fact, for much more of its history than it was secular, France's government was intrinsically connected to religious authority. Throughout the history of the monarchy in France, steps towards religious tolerance were exceptional events. France, as a nation, was uninterruptedly Catholic until the revolution of 1789.[23] Even then, lasting laws of separation between church and school would not be enacted until the turn of the twentieth century with Jules Ferry and his laws. Though France is doggedly secular today, such determined secularism is a relatively new development.

Nevertheless, Catholic tradition survives and thrives in France, and even has limited governmental manifestations. As relates to schools, French public (thus secular) schools have breaks scheduled to accommodate Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Having a shortened day one day of the week (usually Wednesday) is a vestige of a law allowing Catholic children to attend catechism classes. Catholicism has historical roots in France that are old and deep enough to continue despite a fierce turn to secular ideals. Such roots form an important part of French memory and identity, down even to its architecture. Some of the most visited sites in France (which is the nation that receives the greatest number of tourists in the world) are religious in nature, especially old cathedrals such as Notre Dame de Paris. In fact, Catholic churches constructed before

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[23] Though the Edict of Nantes in the sixteenth century provided one of the exceptional eras of relative religious tolerance, the country remained overwhelmingly Catholic.

1906 are supported with government funds that provide for the upkeep of the buildings themselves.

The justification for such an allocation of financial responsibility comes from a law enacted in 1906 and the Catholic backlash that ensued thereafter. In 1906, a law was passed declaring that the state would neither recognize nor allocate funds to any religion. This meant churches that had been paid for by the state had to be paid for by congregations or be confiscated. Catholic congregations, with the backing of Pope Pius X, refused to comply and staged widespread protests throughout France when police attempted to take possession of the buildings by force. The government relented with a compromise stipulating that Catholic congregations would pay rent to the state for use of their buildings, though this payment has become almost completely symbolic over the years. Because this law applied only to religious buildings in built before 1906, no mosques could benefit from the same support, as no mosques existed in France at the time.[24] Catholicism maintains a place of privilege in France simply because it plays such an important role in national history, memory, and identity. However, with an increasingly diverse population, the Catholic shared identity comes under pressure both from the rise of a competing religious identity -- Islam -- and the push towards secular identification that has resurged with new force in light of the rise of Islam. As the republican ideal of secularism is continuously invoked in issues of Islamic religious manifestations, the exception Catholicism has enjoyed within the republic comes under closer scrutiny and its status in the formation of national identity becomes increasingly untenable.

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[24] Even Protestant and Jewish places of worship are denied the same arrangement as the Catholics because neither the Protestant nor the Jewish congregations staged protests with as much force as did the Catholics.

Race and racism in France

Just as religious diversity has been brought to France with immigration, so too has racial diversity, and racial tensions and prejudices make up an important part of the current identity crisis in France. In fact, the thrust of immigration issues in France currently is distinct from questions of mere legality of population movement across borders: the issue is layered with racial identities and prejudices. In 2000, 41% of foreigners living in metropolitan France were of African origin. Another 40% were of European origin.[25]

The importance of these two groups, however, is not how they are similar (in proportion and status as immigrants) but rather how they are different, and their paths towards integration into French society are tellingly dissimilar. In considering issues of identity, especially national identity, we must consider not only in what manner identity is positively formed, such as in fostering a sense of community around certain events or values, but also how identity is negatively formed in contrast to what is not acceptable. This second identity is an identity formed in contrast to an "other" in society, one whose existence beyond the limits of a society's identity indicates exactly where those limits lie. The French identity is made evident by defining what is *not* French, and those who fit into this identity are necessarily not part of this "other". In France, race makes up an important component of this second, negative identity. The non-European immigrant population in France forms an other to the European immigrants, a demographic that is therefore more easily accepted into French society and identity. Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse address the difference in integration between European immigrants and North African immigrants stating that the former, "encounters strong and even violent

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[25] *Integrating Islam*, 17.

resistance from 'native' ... residents... before, despite such protestations, eventually being successfully integrated."[26] This treatment they contrast with, "Recent immigrants from North Africa [who] are facing the same challenges as previous immigrants, except that they tend to accumulate even more negative points with respect to acceptance by French society."[27] The non-European immigrants are even more foreign in France, and thus integrate with the French with even more difficulty.

The issue of racism in France came to a boiling point in 2005 with riots in the *banlieues* of Paris. The riots began in October after two teenagers of North African origin died in their attempts to escape police in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. In the three weeks that followed, riots erupted in nearly all major cities in France. The conflict was waged between disenfranchised young immigrants in the suburbs and the police whom the youth accused of discriminatory brutality against young immigrants. The riots marked a period of unrest unseen in France since the 1960s. On November 8, a state of emergency was declared by the French government, invoking a law from 1955 used to quell unrest in France during the Algerian War. In its first manifestation, the law gave police authority to suppress demonstrations by Algerian nationals and ultimately served as justification for the deadly suppression of Algerian nationals in Paris in 1961.[28] The 2005 unrest garnered international attention, and sparked the resurgence of the "immigrant question" as a pivotal political position. Nicolas Sarkozy, then-Minister of the Interior, famously called the youth involved in the riots "rabble", and the incidents were construed as an issue of upset caused by illegal residents followed by a cry from the

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[26] Ibid, 49.

[27] Ibid, 49.

[28] Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom, eds., *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2009), 5.

political right for their expulsion from France. The discontent of the rioting youth was certainly grounded in high rates of poverty and unemployment, but it is the source of both those conditions that really speaks to the issues of identity manifested in the 2005 riots. As Joan Scott argues, "The riots in the fall of 2005 revealed the enormous discrepancy between the lives of 'immigrants' and 'French,'... And the response of the government officials... signals once again a refusal to face the fact that this is a French problem. It is, moreover, a postcolonial French problem, not a foreign import." [29] These riots revealed the continuation of the old problem of integration as well as the contradiction inherent in its administration: even as the State demanded integration from its immigrant populace, it persisted in marginalizing members of the same population. The riots of 2005 stand as a symbol of the failure of integration in the French population, and this failure is a further manifestation of the French "crisis of identity".[30]

Mending the disconnect: Creating an official history

As immigrant issues present challenges to French identity, the historical disconnect described by Nora becomes evermore prevalent, a situation evidenced in the passage of legislation that effectively seeks to control history as it is studied and understood within France. The proposed *Maison de l'histoire de la France* seeks to establish an official version of France's history and the nation's place in a broader historical context. Its purpose is to promote a particular historical tradition and thus ease the disconnect described above. This proposal, however, is preceded by legislation that criminalizes certain histories, making them wholly unaccepted and unacceptable within

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[29] Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press: Princeton 2007),180.

[30] An artistic rendering of the tension between immigrant youth in the *banlieues* and French police is the subject of Mathieu Kaswsovitz's film *La Haine*, produced in 1995.

France. The aim here is to disallow certain histories. Though this construction is certainly not limited to France, laws concerning the criminalization of denying official histories point to history in France as a more highly contested and regulated topic than elsewhere in the world. Such regulations can be seen in the 1990 law criminalizing the denial of crimes against humanity as defined in article 9 of the London Agreement from 1945. Further legislation was passed in 2001 recognizing the Armenian genocide of 1915 and defining the slave trade and slavery as practiced in the 15th century to be crimes against humanity.

In one of three "fundamental texts" for *Liberté pour l'histoire* (an association created under the signatures of one thousand historians in response to the aforementioned laws), Pierre Nora stands firmly opposed to the "memory laws" of the past two decades, declaring them symptomatic of a broader "guilty conscience" from which the world, especially France, suffers. His contribution to the association's manifesto reiterates the position that "history is neither a religion nor a moral doctrine; that it should not be a slave to current affairs, nor dictated by memory."[31] Such strong reactions against laws as innocuous as those affirming the existence of crimes against humanity is certainly symptomatic of more complicated issues in French politics, from Nora's perspective. While he argues in this forum against reconstructing history as penance for past crimes, Nora is immovable in his quest to liberate historical inquiry from political interference. France, he says, is particularly susceptible to such traps. He states:

> After the upheavals of the last century, every country has scores to settle with its
> past. None is more ill at ease with its history than France; this is one of the most

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[31] Nora, *Rethinking* X.

obvious symptoms and one of the underlying causes of our current national malaise. No other country has so deeply internalized the shock of historical memory, which has affected the whole world over the last thirty years, as to feel that its own historical identity is undermined.[32]

France, then, is at once particular and representative of issues of national identity in other countries. As Nora states later in the same piece, France's "shock of historical memory" comes from the nation's experience as the antagonist of history, especially after World War II and the Vichy regime and then decolonization, with specific reference to the Algerian War. Yet Nora construes this guilty reexamination, too, as a manipulation of history to serve political purposes, an official *mea culpa* in the face of tensions in an increasingly multicultural country. Jean-Paul Sartre addressed this "very Christian sentiment of guilt" in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wrethched of the Earth*. Speaking of Europe in the age of decolonization, Sartre states, "l'on ne prétend plus nous sauver du naufrage que par le sentiment très chrétien de notre culpabilité... Que s'est-il donc passé ? Ceci, tout simplement, que nous étions les sujets de l'histoire et que nous en sommes à présent les objets."[33] The laws concerning official history, however, do not fall merely on the side of the victim, as Nora observes.

A law passed in 2005, but since revised, addresses France's colonial past in a manner unlike the "memory laws" before it. It first recognizes the "positive" influence French colonial presence had in North Africa and mandates that ,"Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer,

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[32] Pierre Nora, "Historical Identity in Trouble" *Liberté pour l'histoire* (CNRS Editions, 2008).

[33] Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963) 27. "The only chance of our being saved from shipwreck is the very Christian sentiment of guilt... What then has happened? It simply is that in the past we made history and now it is being made of us."

notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l'histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l'armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit."[34] This certainly falls under the instances of official history with which Nora is concerned, but decidedly not under the category of history for the victims. Nora's expressed worry is that history will be diminished to memory in France, and used to construct a regulated image of the France of bygone eras; unfortunately, he agrees, it has already become an important component of national memory and informs national identity even as the "crisis" continues. Memory cannot be extracted from French identity as it is currently expressed.

National memory to nationally forgotten

Equally important to the discussion of national identity is not only what histories are celebrated but those that are forgotten. As Robert Aldrich states in his investigation of monuments to the colonial era in France, "Memories can be kept alive, forgotten or repressed, acknowledged or reconstructed."[35] It is the second half of the remembering/forgetting dichotomy that is important here. The drive to "official history" described above outlines the manner in which the state wishes to control how certain events are remembered. Equally important in this formulation is the manners of remembering these particular events that are not condoned, and thus necessarily repressed, by the state through these same laws.

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[34] LOI n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés (1) "Scholarly programs specifically recognize the positive role of France's presence in its colonies, particularly in North Africa, and grant the soldiers of the French army their stories and their sacrifices the eminent position they deserve." My translation

[35] Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums, and Colonial Memories* (Palgrave Macmillan: Gordonsville, 2005), 6.

There are certain events in France's history unacknowledged by much of France's "official" history. The period of decolonization, especially as concerns the war in Algeria, largely falls under this selective amnesia. Relatively recent instances of more open and official commemorations of conflicts in North Africa reveal their absence since the end of the conflicts. It was not until 1999 that the Algerian War was officially considered a war.[36] In 2001, then-President Jacques Chirac unveiled two plaques pertaining to the Algerian War and, significantly, to the experience of certain groups of Algerians during the conflict. One was to the *harkis* for their contribution to the French effort in the war. In a far more controversial move, the second plaque was dedicated to the Algerians killed by French police in a 1961 protest in Paris against the Algerian War. A year later, a monument was dedicated to those who died in the wars in North Africa, specifically Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.[37] Despite these developments, the Algerian War and colonial history more broadly are pointedly glossed over in expressions of France's "official" history. In a telling contrast to the proposed *Maison de l'histoire de la France*, discussions of a museum to colonial history begun two decades ago have yet to produce such a site.

Though scholarship regarding France's colonial history has seen a resurgence in recent years, particularly as we approach the 50th anniversary of the end of the Algerian War this year, the discussion of the place of colonial history in France's broader historical memory is certainly not restricted to the academic sphere. Historical memory, especially selective historical memory, has been and continues to be a highly politicized issue in France, and the oscillation of public opinion is continually reflected in election results, a

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[36] Robert Aldrich, "Colonial past, post-colonial present: history wars French-style." (*History Australia* 3.1 2006).

[37] Aldrich, *Vestiges*, 3.

topic to be further explored in the next section. In his hopeful conclusion to his work on sites of colonial memory in France, Aldrich posits, "Perhaps the sites that refer to France's links with the rest of the world can now play a part not only in the comprehension of the past and reconciliation of diverse groups who have carried a colonial legacy into the present day, but also in the articulation of a political, social and cultural vision for a post-colonial future."[38]

Nationalism politicized

Just as historical memory has been extensively addressed in legislation, so too has it become an oft-debated issue in political battles. As a means of courting popular public opinion, issues relating to the colonial experience and its vestiges in France today are regularly invoked and spun into crucial elements of the platforms of political parties. While most political parties include some stance on issues like immigration in their official platforms, none has structured their party's philosophy so concretely around this issue more than the extreme right nationalist party, the *Front National*. In the actions and successes of this party, the story of immigration legislation and public opinion finds a particularly dramatic telling.

The *Front National* has made headlines throughout its almost fifty years of existence both for surprising support during elections and for the personalities within the party and the negative attention they garner. The founder of the *Front National*, Jean-Marie Le Pen, is infamous for his racist and inflammatory remarks for which he has been prosecuted more than once. His political platform, and now the platform of his daughter, Marine Le Pen, who has succeeded him at the head of the party, concerns national

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[38] Ibid, 334.

identity, targeting immigration especially. The *Front National* falls to the extreme right in France's political spectrum, but it has gained remarkable support in certain elections, most recently in the 2011. Not only does the popularity of the nationalist party serve as a barometer of the population's position regarding immigration, it also influences how more moderate parties conduct their campaigns. After the *Front National* gained almost 20% of the vote in 2011 elections, President Nicolas Sarkozy's own party sought to throw in support with the *Front National* as a means to bolster his campaign for presidential elections this year. Though President Sarkozy's decision met with opposition, most notably from his own Prime Minister, it is illustrative of more general tendencies in France's political environment. In fact, as the presidential elections for this year draw closer, President Sarkozy has attempted to court the conservative vote by playing to issues of identity and immigration. In March of this year, President Sarkozy declared that "Il y a trop d'étrangers sur notre territoire" and that methods of assimilation were working more and more poorly. He vowed to cut annual immigration by almost half and make certain social benefits unavailable to immigrants except those who had lived in France for at least ten years and worked there at least five.[39] This strategy harmonizes with the political platform of the *Front National* and Marine Le Pen who is also a presidential candidate this year. Though the *Front National* is still considered an extremist group in France, it has also recently been seen as increasingly representative of the population's position, especially its insecurities and frustrations regarding immigration. This is especially true in large cities and in the south of France where large immigrant populations reside.

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[39] Elise Vincent, "Immigration : Sarkozy durcit le ton" *Le Monde* (7 March 2012).

Identity in the classroom: The headscarf controversies

On September 14, 1989, three girls were expelled from a public middle school in France for refusing to remove their hijab in the classroom. Thus began *l'affaire du foulard*, a political debate that engulfed France, putting a specific face to the growing tension between Islamic traditions and French secular practices. The *foulard*, or veil, was construed as having a number of symbolic meanings and intentions. It was seen as a rejection of French secularism and, thus, French republican values. The girls who wore it were construed as threats to the sanctity of the secular schoolroom and victims of the oppressive religion that stripped them of their agency to refuse the garment. It was widely considered that male relatives were forcing the girls to wear the veil against their will. Furthermore, the veil was viewed as a means of concealing one's identity, especially troublesome in a post-9/11 world, where terrorism was a very real concern for much of the West.[40] Above all, the veil symbolized foreignness and the unknown, which separated certain members of the population from the group of citizens meant to be identical in the eyes of the State. It therefore also represented a blow to the concept of French universalism.

The foreignness of the veil was not soon eradicated, despite the longevity of the affaire. The controversy has endured through the 1990s into the new millennium when then-President Jacques Chirac created a specific commission -- known as the Stasi Commission -- in 2003 to "Reflect on the Application of Secularism" (the commission's official title). After the recommendations of the Stasi Commission, a law was enacted in March 2004 banning students from wearing "conspicuous" signs of religious affiliation in

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[40] "Terrorist" provided another umbrella classification for the Arab population of France (as well as many other European countries).

public schools.[41] Though the law applies to all religious symbols, it has been widely seen as a means of controlling public manifestations of a growing Muslim community and their adherence to Islamic traditions. This controversy is interesting here for two particular reasons. First, the 2004 law is another area in which legislation effectively controls how religion is displayed within France, a struggle renewed in the face of increasing immigration from North Africa, as noted above. Secondly, that this law targets schools particularly allows a glimpse into the importance of schools in maintaining national identity by educating children to become good citizens. This second reason merits further exploration.

As with so much else in the formation of French identity, the role the public school plays is important in many nations, but it is in France that the public school forms a crucial component. As Bronwyn Winter argues, "More than in many other countries, the education system in France is the place where national identity and the individual's sense of herself or himself as a citizen is forged. It is the place where the battle for the Republic has always been waged, on several fronts."[42] This returns to collective memory in France that goes back to the Revolution and follows the story of the painful extrication of the Church from the State, officially accomplished in 1905. As the republicans restructured society into its new democratic shape, education provided a systematic medium for molding young minds into the desired, republican shape. These children would grow up in the new republican fundamentals of French society, developed through an institution systematically monitored by the State. The public school was a tool for building a new nation, and national identity, from the children up. Joan Scott describes

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[41] Bronwyn Winter, *Hijab and The Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate* (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2008), 6-7.
[42] Ibid 8.

public schools in France as, "the sacred space of the schoolroom, the crucible in which French citizens are formed."[43] It is, thus, particularly poignant that the controversy over displays of religious affiliation, especially affiliation to Islam, was "waged" in the "sacred space" of public schools. The importance of the space of public schools is important to the overall discussion of the veil controversy because it provides insight into one facet of how national identity is formed, maintained, and challenged. To construe the legislation against conspicuous religious symbols in schools as one of innumerable small acts of rejecting foreign influence is to miss the real and symbolic importance of the role of secular education in the formation of French identity.

L'affaire du foulard is symbolic of much of the French "crisis of identity" as it has thus far been discussed. In one aspect, it is a symptom of former colonization. The portrayal of the girls involved as being forced to wear the veil by controlling male relatives casts them as victims for the Republic to save: a renewal of the call to action of the civilizing mission that served as a justification for colonialism. This idea pits the liberating, republican, French ideal of secularism against the oppressive, dogmatic, foreign control of Islam, reinforcing the idea that Islam is simply incompatible with French republican ideals. In this way, the law allowed the State not only to "liberate" the girls from the veil, but also to eliminate this symbol of Islam from the French public eye. As Joan Scott states, "Here was the paradox of the civilizing mission, and it persists to this day: the stated goal was to civilize (to assimilate) those who finally could not be civilized."[44] This hints at one reason the headscarf affair became so important in France: the demographic connection between a large portion of France's recent immigrant

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[43] Scott, *Politics*, 90.
[44] Scott, *Politics*, 47.

population and much of France's Muslim population allowed this latter characteristic to serve as justification for ostracism of the immigrant population as a whole. By conflating the Muslim, Arab, and immigrant populations in France, politicians were able to extrapolate from the headscarf affair to reject resistance to assimilation in all of these groups. It was decided that headscarves could not be worn in public schools: *laïcité* legally won out over what was perceived as oppressive Islamic requirements. With this reaffirmation of the primacy of French republican values, demands for assimilation were renewed, a demand used today as a political tool.

Continuing the affair: Face coverings in public

The public school was not to be the only stage upon which the issue of women wearing veils would be fought. A law passed in October of 2010 but put into effect in April 2011 prohibits everyone in a public space in France or in French territories from covering his or her face to the point of obstructing recognition. The reasoning behind the ban invokes another founding republican ideal in France: equality. Equality is trespassed upon in covering the face beyond recognition, the reasoning goes, because it is by seeing the faces of others and showing one's own face that one takes part in society. Thus, to cover your face in public prohibits you from equally taking part in French society as well as it prevents others from seeing you, creating inequality between you and those who cannot see you. Furthermore, equality is hindered when certain members of the population are prohibited from showing their faces, as when someone is forced to wear a face covering. In fact, Article 3 of the law outlines the punishment for those found to have forced others to cover their faces in public, with a higher fine for forcing such an

activity onto a minor. Indeed, the punishment for violating the law as the perpetrator is revealing in itself: either the violator must pay a fine, or complete a course on citizenship. The law applies to everyone in France: citizens and foreigners alike. With this, all public spaces in France take on a similar role as the "sacred space" of the schoolroom in forming good, republican citizens, and visitors. Furthermore, the law targets the face coverings worn by Muslim women more explicitly by singling out the oppressive males who are perceived to force the coverings on women. There are, however, a few notable exceptions to the ban, including wearing helmets on motorcycles, construction workers wearing helmets, and "en cas de... fêtes ou de manifestations artistiques ou traditionnelles, processions religieuses notamment."[45] The only religious manifestations in France that truly reflect French traditions are Catholic, not Muslim. The text of the law makes clear its aim to protect French traditions and thus maintain those celebrations in the collective memory that shapes French identity. It further makes clear its refusal to accept Islam into those traditions.

France as European synecdoche

As mentioned near the beginning of this paper, France is not the only country experiencing a sort of "identity crisis" in the twenty-first century. Throughout Europe, similar struggles play out in the search to establish identity as increasing diversity, as well as the diminishment of national sovereignty challenges the role of the nation. France is particular amongst this group in that it is the country experiencing an identity crisis in perhaps the most overt fashion. France has the largest immigrant population in Western

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[45] Pauline Fréour, "Voile, signes religieux: ce qui est interdit en France" *Le Figaro* (8 April 2011). "in the case of celebrations or demonstrations of artistic or traditional nature, notably religious processions." (my translation)

Europe, including both the largest Muslim and Jewish populations. The *Front National* in France acts as more than a small, if persistent, voice on the margins of the political spectrum. France's rupture with the past, epitomized in the French Revolution but continued into the twentieth century, falls particularly heavily on the national consciousness. For all the factors explored above, the identity crisis in France affects the population and its self-perception with particular force. However, the identity crisis in a European context merits further discussion.

The European example is bound together by a common threat to national sovereignty and, consepuently, national identity: namely, membership in or influence of the European Union. As Seyla Benbabib argues, membership in the European Union represents more than mere economic or even political ties: "It is intended to designate not just a passive status, but an active civic identity."[46] She continues by outlining the porous nature of national borders to those states within the European Union as well as how immigrants within the EU can exercise political influence by voting and running for office in local elections. Furthermore, debates are being held throughout Europe concerning whether or not the EU should create a set of social rights guaranteed to citizens of the Union. Clearly, the supranational power wielded by the European Union has replaced or challenged decisions and policies traditionally made on the national level.

The role of the nation in Europe (and around the world, for that matter) is not only being challenged by the existence of international organizations such as the European Union. Beyond the reaches of such organizations, globalization has taken an increasing toll on national identities as it challenges not only economic and political boundaries, but

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[46] Seyla Benbabib, "Citizens, Residents, and Aliens" in *The Postnational Self*, Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 92.

cultural boundaries as well. The ever-increasing rate of cultural exchange between societies that has been facilitated by the forces of globalization (such as global capitalism) makes the boundaries of those societies more porous and less-easily defined. In his discussion "The Paradox of Nationalism", Mark Juergensmeyer posits: "[The globalization of culture] has undermined the modern idea of the nation-state by providing nonnational and transnational forms of economic, social, and cultural interaction... In a global world, it is hard to say where particular regions begin and end. For that matter, it is hard to say how one should define the 'people' of a particular nation."[47] He goes on to argue that ethnic and religious identities have come to prominence as the decline in the importance of national identity leaves people with a sense of placelessness and loss of the power one derives from being a part of a group. Because of this, ethnic and religious tensions and violence have become increasingly prevalent around the world.

Understanding that the place of national identity is slipping in nations throughout Europe and around the world, there emerges a global identity crisis. Therefore, the identity crisis experienced in France is a crisis not bound to national borders in any particular sense. What makes the crisis in France exceptional is the manner in which politicians have situated it within national boundaries to be dealt with as a nation. The French identity crisis is *actively* made to be French as a means of maintaining a sense of national cohesiveness even if that cohesion comes from a shared experience of crisis. The French experience identity differently from the rest of the world because they actively strive to do so.

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[47] Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Paradox of Nationalism" *The Postnational Self*, Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 8.

Conclusion

As the presidential elections draw near, the identity crisis evoked by President Sarkozy in his proposal for the *Maison de l'Histoire de la France* imbues much political debate. However, beyond the realm of new political promises and positioning, the French are experiencing a crisis of identity in very real episodes, particularly violent episodes. Recently, in southwest France, seven people were killed in a weeklong shooting spree committed in three bursts by 23-year-old Mohamend Merah. The first two attacks targeted French military personnel, all three of whom were North African in ethnic origin. The third attack occurred outside a Jewish school in Toulouse where the shooter killed three children and one teacher at point-blank range. After a manhunt that mobilized all of French society, and a 32 hour siege which finally ended in the confession and death of the attacker, France was left reeling in the wake of such violence. Merah has been portrayed in international news coverage as having ties to al-Qaeda. He claimed to be acting in reprisal for Palestinian children (in the attacks on the Jewish school) and in protest of the French military presence in Afghanistan. The presidential hopefuls suspended their campaigns for a few days in the midst of the crisis, and all attended the funerals of the fallen soldiers.[48] In the days following the school shooting, President Sarkozy called for the French people to remain united and refrain from extrapolating the actions of one man to represent the whole of the Muslim population in France. Time will tell how this tragedy will weave into the French consciousness of identity. Most immediately, the next two months will reveal how this episode, and the political reaction to it, will affect this year's presidential campaign. Though the shooter's motivations were not overtly caused by the French identity crisis, it is safe to say that many factors

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[48] The four victims of the school shooting were buried in Israel.

addressed above contribute to the environment in which these attacks were perpetrated and in which the public reaction will play out.

Episodes of national identity crises continue to erupt in violence around the world. International headlines will continue to draw attention to an increasingly fractured world as societies and individuals adjust to the interpenetration of cultures through globalization. The prominence of international organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations is unlikely to diminish in any substantial fashion in the coming years, allowing the further erosion of national sovereignty and, accordingly, national identity. However, this situation does not necessarily have to yield a world rocked by violence attached to identity politics. The diminishing role of the nation-state opens up the opportunity, and need, for other forms of identity and understanding of the world. Instead of allowing such a role to be taken by divisive religious and ethnic factions, this situation could be seized by forces of increasing acceptance based on a sense of shared humanity. The solution to the issues outlined above can be derived from the discussion of the problem. Mark Juergensmeyer writes, "Secular nationalism -- the ideology that originally gave the nation-state its legitimacy -- contends that a nation's authority is based on the secular idea of a social compact of equals... a compelling idea, one with pretension of universal applicability."[49] As nationalism loses its foundation (the primacy of the nation), the world opens itself to the possibility of a much broader social contract and, therefore, even greater acceptance of individual identity. The French, European, and global identity crises, thus, could be paths to greater acceptance, if only we decide to forge them that way.

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[49] Juergensmeyer, "Paradox", 5.

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