Birnbaum Revisited*

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Abstract: "Birnbaum Revisited" discusses a suggestive book and the idea of France that it evokes, as an arena of consistent conflict and contention. It surveys the country's personality and problems as they evolved yet showed little change in the years leading up to 1998, when *La France imaginée* was published, and since then.

Key Words: Pierre Birnbaum. *La France imaginée.* Modern History of France. Historical memory.

Resumen: "Birbaum Revisited"analiza un sugerente libro y la idea que evoca de Francia como un ruedo de disputa y conflicto. Examina la personalidad y los problemas del país tal y como han evolucionado, a pesar de que ha habido pocos cambios desde entonces hasta 1998, cuando *La France imaginée,* fue publicada, y en años posteriores.

Palabras clave: Pierre Birnbaum. *La France imaginée.* Historia Contemporánea de Francia. Memoria histórica.

Visions of an exceptional land and an exceptional nation that incarnates liberty, progress, glory, and compels instinctive allegiance have long been a force in France. Yet, as the 20th century lurched and blundered on, the pride became more anxious, the glory more dubious, the progress insufficient or unsatisfying, the brilliant identity more threatened. The French have reacted, as folk in such straits will, by a fever of introspection. Self-satisfied solipsism has turned nervous and critical; and Pierre Birnbaum's *France Imagined* was part of a copious fallout. It is also part of a current cottage industry that explores the nature and manufacture of national identities.

Few nations, Birnbaum tells us in his preface, "are more preoccupied by historical memory, by the permanent rereading of

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* Pierre BIRNBAUM, *Les fous de la République,* Gallimard 1992; *Destins Juifs*, Gallimard 1995; *La France imaginée*, Gallimard, 1998.

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their past". But (here's his twist) the past that the French have in common is one of conflict and contention, always bickery and often bloody. French congruence, he argues, is based on a blistering community of cross purposes, discord, factiousness and violence. Can "the old passions for murderous contradiction" give way to plurality, tolerance and respect of differences? We shall come to that in a moment.

To begin with, the book etches a confrontational society, repeatedly torn by the clash of radically opposed principles: a succession of ruptures that have done little to advance tolerance, internal diversity, or liberalism. There were Jews in France, for example, before there were Franks. But St. Louis made them wear a special badge of infamy, forerunner of Hitler's yellow star; and, in 1182, St. Louis's successors made theirs the first country to banish its Jews, long before England, Spain or Portugal followed suit. Four hundred years later, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre sent ten thousand Protestants to meet their God, and ushered in twenty years of religious wars. The strife that Henri IV appeased was reopened in 1685 by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which condemned over 200.000 Huguenots to exile, and others to revolt. Then came the French Revolution, more internal conflict, and more searing memories.

In quest of the unanimity that it never ceased proclaiming, the Revolution spurred exclusion and extermination. A manichean exercise, painting all in black and white, made sure that national predispositions would be fed on conflict and on cant. The Place de la Concorde where Louis XVI was beheaded along with many others, reflects the triumph of wishful euphemism: the abattoir of the guillotine proclaimed a site of concord.

As Tocqueville observed when he wrote the history of those times, it's easier to remain constant in hatred than affection; rancor still stokes the fires of memory. Tocqueville is Birnbaum's first witness for the prosecution of "a society that fed to an unusual degree on hatred". The 19th century liberal was struck by "a society ruled by

inexpiable hatreds", by provinces experiencing a "permanent" war, by local civil wars where "hatred of one's neighbor is stronger than hatred of the master"; and where for generations "fiercely hostile clans" frequenting each its own grocer, butcher, ballroom, bistro, school, "have sworn eternal hatred for each other".

Birnbaum too is struck by habits of the heart that turn so much of life, let alone politics, into confrontations of true believers inspired by different dreams that color different mental worlds. Two ways of imagining society, two ways of imagining the nation and its personality, confront each other. In the name of reason and faith respectively, says Birnbaum. Why not in the name of rival faiths, comforted by rival local or family traditions? In the Revolution two great beliefs opposed each other: the religion of the sovereign people and that of the sovereign Christ: the church of the Republic promising salvation here on earth challenged the church of Rome, denounced as the Right at prayer. Each functioned as inspiration and as bond (*religio*) for rival parties.

Birnbaum, who begins his survey in the Vendée, quotes Maurice Agulhon about the war of religions that long marked life in France. He also dedicates a chapter to Joseph de Maistre, devotee of the martyred king and of Christ the King, who "assigned hatred a special place among human sentiments"; but, in one respect, he gets Maistre wrong. The violence of Maistre's reactionary beliefs was the antithesis not of revolutionary exclusivism (which his own passion matched), but of the liberal tolerance of Tocqueville. Like Robespierre and Marat, Maistre the intolerant fanatic declared fanaticism and intolerance "ingredients necessary to French greatness". He excommunicated revolutionaries as heretics, that is as wrongheaded rival religionists. That was why Maistre loathed them, and loathing loomed large in his vocabulary too: hatred of revolution, of course, but also of Protestants, of Voltaire, of enemies of religion (meaning his brand of religion), and of monarchy. He praised salutary hatreds: that of Louis XIV for Huguenots, that of Fénelon against Jansenists and, more generally, that bracing kind of hatred "that is certainly French and politically good".

To go no further back than the revolutionary watershed whose violences were stoked by anterior aversions, hatred was one gift that a malevolent fairy left in the cradle of a newly-sovereign folk. But let us not forget what Tocqueville called "the democratic disease of envy", with all the "base jealousy and thoughtless mischief" that follow in its train. And the equally democratic pretentions that left their mark on manners, and on economy too. Voltaire had praised an England where trade kept people from flying at each other's throats, Montesquieu equated commerce and civility, Tocqueville praised Americans more interested in making money than in political squabbles. But it was Napoleon's dismissal of England as a nation of shopkeepers that went straight to French hearts.

The Revolution was against privilege; its success was taken to mean that there would be privileges for everybody. And honor. Equality asserted, at least in principle, meant that service, with its demeaning overtones, would be tendered grudgingly and with reluctance. Once the preserve of a privileged class, arrogance and condescension would be paraded by all who could reach that far; shopkeepers approached clients with curled lip, counter-jumpers challenged unforthcoming customers to duel, all who could afford it dreamed of living nobly, shunned menial trade for investment income, fled grubby money-making for the more honorable conditions of a country estate. The emphasis on quality against quantity, artisanry against mass production, skill against sales and service, made for more elegant handiwork, more relaxed living and, sometimes, more cultivated minds. But it also fueled spite of comforts and affectations unfounded on traditional convention. Tocqueville again, in 1847: "indifference will give way to envy and hatred. Future danger: class war".

Catholicism was hierarchic and monarchic; so, in its own way, was authoritarian and centralizing Jacobinism. Whatever the rivalry between the two, the mindset both promoted was intransigent and omnicompetent; the society it engendered would be "naturally oriented towards rival authoritarianisms". Which may be why "moderate" long remained a pejorative —especially in politics.

The cut and thrust of contending faiths invigorated both, and also made it easier to doubt either. How does this relate to that government of the sovereign people we call democracy? It means that the French believe in monarchy and have recreated it in their political system: the people is sovereign, but power is exercized top down, not bottom up. They also believe in resisting authority energetically, which they do sporadically all the time. As Alain put it, to think is to say no. The French think a lot, and one of their conclusions is that dissent attracts more attention than chiming in with everybody else.

As nay-sayings and their rationalizations piled up, French political memory became less historical than geological. Successive eschatologies did not nudge each other out of court; they lived on, one superimposed on another, until Jacobinism, Socialism and Communism (long used indifferently), Anarchism and Monarchisms became harder to tell apart. Then, in the 1870s, after several revolutions and seven different regimes over four score years, it was determined that the republican system least divided the French. And still the French remain divided.

"So it was, then, that France turned away from liberalism", begins Birnbaum's chapter devoted to the difficulties which prevent that creed from taking root in France. It is not clear that there was much to turn from; but Birnbaum is right to stress its failure to catch on. In the plebiscite of daily life, the French accepted the nation, but not their foes' version of it. The cult of ancestors involved the cultivation of their hatreds too. Liberal polities supposed disagreement taken in good part: civil debate, courteous contention, blunted loggerheads. That was not how things turned out whilst, for a long time, democracy remained no more than a gleam in the eyes of believers; then, evolving, came to look more like bureaucracy tempered by bungling.

Voltaire compared democratic republicanism to a dragon with several heads and several tails: the heads, he said, get in each other's way, the tails obey a single head that tries to devour all. In republic as in monarchy, the devouring head was the state: autocratic, centralizing, omnicompetent. Everything began and ended in its

bureaux, everything does so still; and the men and women who serve it, elected officials, magistrates, high civil servants, are the new nobility, their symbiotic relation with the state crucial.

High bureaucrats who combine authority and probity long represented durable professionalism in a fickle political jungle. Austere, aloof, credited with the economic miracle that turned the economy around after 1945, they projected the image of a state that was neutral, cold, responsible and efficient, a model of continuity amid incoherence. Trained in elite *grandes écoles* and especially in the grandest, the ENA and the Polytechnique, they belong to an old boy network whose members rise and revolve through the seats of power. And despite denunciations of ENA graduates as an elitist nomenklatura, all four candidates in the 1995 presidential elections, not least the present President, were *énarques*.

Unfortunately, the technocratic elite and their "society of connivance", are blotting their copybooks. Situated as they are at the lucrative interface between state enterprise and private profit, corruption, favoritism, grubby grazing on public enterprises, slush funds and stock options are bringing public officials closer to the spoils system from which they stood apart. Most of the French look upon their political representatives as corrupt. But politicians have been discredited so long that it no longer matters; scapegoats of ambient populism, meritocrats now follow in their wake.

Yet they continue more respected, or more intimidating, than other civic figures. Competent, articulate and unaccountable, these earnest, vain, highly-trained achievers set the country's standards still; and the state they run proves not only resilient, but insistently dominant. It owns the post office, the rail system, the Paris airports, the gas, electricity and nuclear industries, most of Air France and the telephone service; and it accounts for a quarter of the workforce and one third of the industrial output. Yet a growing proportion of the French (53% in 1994) think that the state does not intervene enough in economic life. So much for democracy.

Identification with a new-model nation where everyone was supposed to be free and equal proved laborious too. The France of 1789, and even that of mid-19th century, was a congeries of mostly local identities preserved by particular privileges, cultural references and kinds of speech. Incongruous regions, insular peasants (potatoes, Marx called them, in a sack of potatoes) mostly illiterate, had to be civilized, nationalized, homogenized, Frenchified. "France must cease to be a tower of Babel", proclaimed one revolutionary progressive. Heterogenous identities and forms of speech foreign to each other had to be "exterminated" so that the national body should live. Henceforth equal as citizens, Bretons, Basques, Alsatians, Jews, Flemings, should be taught and learn to speak French, to be French and only French.

That program of emancipation fills Birnbaum with indignation. "The furious campaign of assimilation", he writes, "reproduced the intolerance of an earlier age... regeneration... was symbolized by the eclipse of the Jews" who were made to disappear "behind their new dignity as citizens". Historian of *Jewish Destinies* and other works about the state of Jews in France, Birnbaum has honed his view of ethnic quandaries on antisemitism, and he treats what was for its time a deliverance as a tyrannical imposition. The fact is that the abbé Grégoire, cited as a major advocate of assimilation, was a friend and champion of Jews (and of Blacks). Few beside Grégoire gave much thought, even hostile thought, to Jews who were admitted to civil rights along with other groups that had been deprived of them until then; and Frenchifying Jews proved quicker and easier than Frenchifying peasants —mainly because most Jews welcomed assimilation. The peasants, meanwhile, without access to press, maps, imagery or, until the 19th century, to schools, found it hard to conceive the unfamiliar abstraction, France, let alone to speak its language. They have learnt it by now, and it includes the rhetoric, the demonstrations, and the forceful forms of self-affirmation common to public life.

Church and State, meanwhile, once at loggerheads, have learned to tolerate each other. And, for most French, differences that once set them apart have become irrelevant. By 1994, 72% of the French did

not believe that there was one single true religion, 71% thought that everyone must define their own religion independently of churches, less than 30% believed in God, only 19% in the Devil —fewer than believe in astrology, telepathy, spiritualism and parascience. Religious identities now look to be both partial and plural. Catholicism *á la carte* has comfortably adjusted to what Birnbaum calls "modalities of belief". And there's the beginning of an answer to one of Birnbaum's opening questions: can the French learn to live with the challenges of multiculturalism and diversity? They are doing so, but *á la française.*

Jews, for example, are now only one minority among others. An official poll of 1978 recorded 9% doubting that French Jews were really French; but 11% believed that Corsicans were not really French either, 8% felt the same about Alsatians, 4% about Bretons. A few years later, 12% believed that there were too many Jews in France; but 16% thought that there were too many Spaniards, and 50% felt that there were too many foreigners in general. In 1997, Le Pen's National Front garnered 15% of the vote by openly declaring itself to be racist. Thirty per cent of employed workers voted in favor of its xenophobic populism. And now two thirds of French adults believe that there are too many Arabs in France. In this perspective, Jews are less exceptional than sometimes presented or self-presented; especially when another official poll, in 1999, found two fifths of respondents declaring themselves racists. So the fact that some French do not particularly like Jews seems less relevant, when the French do not particularly like anybody.

Large and underpopulated by European standards, modern France has always been a country of immigration. Bled white of working males by the First World War, it became more so. By the 1920s, the foreigners it sheltered and employed —Italians, Poles, Belgians, Armenians— accounted for 7% of the population compared to 6% today. In 1930 the immigration rate was higher than North America's. In the 1960s the immigrant flow resumed, mostly from Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia and, especially, North Africa. The children of those immigrants are now French citizens. But are they French? Or

merely the sediment of an invasion contaminating national identity, as the National Front contends aloud and others *sotto voce*?

Today, multiculturalism and opposition to it are mainly viewed in relation to the substantial Muslim presence, and to its concentration in suburbs that, in the name of ethnic and religious difference, become virtual Muslim enclaves. But it is not yet clear how a nation can subsist as a nation while sharing loyalties with some other nation or with several. Nor is it clear how a cultural identity can survive the siren calls of multiple rival cultures. Conflicting loyalties, multiple allegiances, pose problems that good intentions prefer to ignore. And yet we know that national identities were themselves crafted, not immaculately conceived. Perhaps as identitarian enterprises evolve and multiply, participants will become not more different but more indifferent. And indifference is the best guarantee of tolerance.

Are the French, then, learning to live with the challenges of multiculturalism, as Birnbaum began by asking? And (to quote his preface) will the new idea of France bring forth a society that welcomes foreigners and respects differences? Much depends on whether the insensitive masses will come to share the sensibilities of their politically correct betters. They certainly accepted with enthusiasm the multicolored team that won the World Football Cup in 1998 —the most ethnically diverse of all competing countries and heavily loaded with North Africans. But where does this hopeful metaphor for national harmony leave multiculturalism, when the heady exaltation wanes? Writing in the late 1990s (his book came out in 1998), Birnbaum credited Britain with a less confrontational, more decentralized and welcoming public sphere that affords greater political and cultural autonomy to Asian immigrants than the French afford their own. Recent tensions and race riots in many parts of England show up this wishful thinking. Nor could Birnbaum guess that, in October 2001, the first ever Franco-Algerian football match would end when, in the 74th minute of play, with France leading 4-1, hundreds of young Algerians (who, having grown up near the Seine, ignored the words of the Algerian anthem but copiously booed the *Marseillaise*) surged onto the ground and stopped the game.

The British, like the French, know that most of their problems are caused by one another; but the French, like the British, find blaming others more consoling. Mutual mistrust, competing prejudices, rival rigidities, ghettoes meant to avoid friction but better at generating it, are only some of the reefs on which diversity can founder. If societies define themselves by what they reject, present French rejection of "Americanism" reflects long-standing scorn for materialism, commercialism, massification; perhaps for modernity too. And current multicultural pieties also come under suspicion because they appear tarred with an American brush. Nearly two thirds of the French find American cultural influence too great; more than two thirds worry about hubristic American hyperpower. And now they need to worry about a Texan winning the tour de France too many times in a row.

Yet the state —"that great fictitious entity by which everyone seeks to live at the expense of everyone else"— the state still giveth and the state taketh away. Large French companies are enterprising, creative and profitable. Labor productivity is high, but businesses do not employ a lot of people. Competitive advantages are eroded by regulations, and a wasp 's nest of taxes accounts for 45% of gross national product. Public spending crowds out private spending, hobbles job creation, costs big firms money and discourages small ones. The 35-hours week doesn't help much either. The economy is ill-flexible, the labor market is sticky, high taxes for social security and high penalties for layoffs discourage hiring, protract structural unemployment, and keep a quarter of the work force on unemployment benefits or subsidized jobs. The Ministry of Labor affirms its preference for quality employment over the low-paying sort. Distrust of the American model discourages any admission that McJobs could lower unemployment, raise growth and save taxpayers some of the hard-earned cash they pay in taxes. No wonder that the French consume more tranquilizers, sleeping pills and antidepressants than any other people in the world.

This is not what troubles Birnbaum, who does not mention it. What bothers him is the excess of "gentle tranquility", the "unexpected triumph of a passionless consensus", the "banalization", of once-

dramatic politics. The passions of a distant past have been extinguished, the enmities that stoked their fires are *passées*, even the boredom that sparked rebelliousness into the 1960s is missing. Birnbaum seems to agree with François Furet that France has closed its political theatre of the exceptional, and become a democracy like any other. Or perhaps not.

Now that common descent, language, culture, historical memories are in shorter supply, Society, "a crowd of individuals alike in their desire not to resemble one another", is supplanting the Nation. And still the French State soldiers on, "a model (as one interior minister declared) not only for France but for the world". Integration and assimilation lurch ahead, and so do distinctive ethnic identities. As state-subsidized schools strive to revive regional speech, the time when ambitious revolutionaries vowed to destroy dialects seems far away. Prestigious business schools offer bilingual courses in English as well as French. Nevertheless, the Gallic cock has not ceased to affirm the radiance of national culture while clucking about its relative decline. The political opposition of dextrism and sinistrism appears increasingly formal, but generational, professional and economic conflicts continue divisive. Consensus is not so passionless as to discourage confrontation. Disgruntled farmers, postmen, teachers, public transport workers, medical personnel, schoolchildren, women, pensioners and telephone workers take to the streets, jam traffic and complicate life, evoking timid reserve or, more often, approval. Strikes are the national sport: however disruptive, few will criticize them.

So things have been changing, but nothing much has changed. Birnbaum sighs over an impotent state (really?), corrupt elites (what else is new?), and Scotch supplanting Pernod. If I were he, however, I wouldn't worry much about the end of French exceptionalism. Time will tell. But time, who is an honest judge, (Tocqueville said that too), always arrives, alas, too late.

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