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**Summary :** *France emerged wounded from the dark days of the Second World War but the rebuilding of France offers one of the most successful examples of managing the aftermath of war. This article examines the process of 'bricolage' through which the French elites carried out an urgent programme of nation building, with the cultural and intellectual rebuilding of French national identity playing a key role. The emerging national synthesis subordinated the demands of other identities, especially those of class and gender, to the dominant forces in the national society. The powerful consensus to rebuild a new national identity in 1944-7 helped to secure the future for a free and prosperous post-war France. The success with which they rebuilt their nation may hold lessons for other countries in the present day, where embattled national elites confront the strategic task of building or rebuilding a nation after conflict and regime change.*

**Keywords :** *France, Second World War, Liberation, nation building, national identity, language, culture, dominance, bricolage.*

**Résumé :** *La France est sortie blessée des années noires de la deuxième guerre mondiale, mais sa reconstruction présente un exemple des plus réussis de la gestion des conséquences de la guerre. Cet article examine le processus de bricolage par lequel les élites françaises ont conduit un programme urgent de construction nationale, dans lequel la reconstruction culturelle et intellectuelle a joué un rôle de pointe. La synthèse nationale qui en résulte a subordonné les exigences d'autres identités, et notamment celles de classe et de genre, aux forces dominantes de la société nationale. Le consensus puissant qu'il fallait reconstruire une nouvelle identité nationale pendant les années 1944-1947 a contribué à assurer l'avenir d'une France d'après-guerre libre et prospère. Le succès de cette reconstruction nationale pourrait offrir des leçons pour d'autres pays de nos jours, où des élites nationales assiégées font face à la tâche stratégique de reconstruire une nation après le conflit et le changement de régime.*

**Mots clés :** *France, Seconde guerre mondiale, Libération, construction nationale, identité nationale, langage, culture, dominance, bricolage.*

## Learning from the past

Learning from our own past is difficult: it is one of the benefits of neighbours that we can learn from theirs. France is Britain's nearest continental neighbour, and part of the fascination of France for a British observer is that its history holds endlessly instructive lessons for us. In many cases, the examples we take are drawn from the most turbulent episodes in French history, and there is always a temptation to be glad that Britain has escaped some of the travails that have afflicted our neighbour. All the more reason, then, to look at the occasions on which France has successfully overcome the difficult moments it has faced. The rebuilding of France after the Second World War is a remarkable example of how our neighbour rose to the challenge of emerging into the sunshine of peace and prosperity after the dark years of the war. And with very little imagination, the reconstruction of post-war France can be seen to offer lessons that might illuminate some of the darker regions in the twenty-first century world.<sup>1</sup>

Europe in the early twenty-first century has rediscovered war and its aftermaths. More than at any time in the last forty years, European governments have been obliged to confront war on their home territory, though not always in the forms in which it became familiar in the mid-twentieth century. As a result, they have once more been obliged to engage, willingly or not, with the consequences of wars in far away places. Conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and the heart of Africa have absorbed increasing resources abroad and have brought their implications home. In the context of asymmetrical warfare and 'soft power', it has become evident that culture is a more unforgiving battlefield than the deserts and mountains of Asia.

Cultural struggle and the battle for minds were familiar to an earlier generation, and the importance of these domains in winning wars has frequently been studied. Less attention has been devoted to the role of culture in managing the aftermath of wars, though it is a recurrent theme of political strategists, as distinct from military strategists, that winning the peace is at least as important as winning the war. These are not new issues, then, and it is one of the tasks of researchers in the domain of culture to remind a contemporary audience that there may be lessons to be learnt from the past.

In recent French history, a dominant role has been assumed by the study of the Second World War with its narratives of heroism and cowardice, hope and despair. This has largely overshadowed the more muted narratives of the aftermath of that war, once the great days of Liberation had passed. And yet the rebuilding of France must rank as one of the most successful examples of managing the aftermath of war, and certainly has light to shed for those who are grappling with more recent attempts at post-war reconstruction. Here we shall seek to identify some of the factors contributing to that success, and point to some of the costs which were incurred in achieving it.

### National unanimity

The French post-war elites demonstrated a remarkable unanimity on one central point: the need to rebuild their nation. This unanimity was captured

in the euphoria of the moment of liberation, especially the heavily symbolic liberation of the French capital. It gave many French people the feeling of a brilliant moment that could never be taken from them. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote: 'quoi qu'il arrivât après, rien ne m'arracherait ces instants: rien ne me les a arrachés; ils brillent dans mon passé avec un éclat qui ne s'est jamais démenti.'<sup>2</sup> Later accounts have then focused on the difficulties that began almost immediately, and the rapid onset of disillusionment and disagreement.<sup>3</sup> There was no shortage of divisions among the French elites, as among the French people more generally. But there was fundamental agreement that France should be a single, united, sovereign and independent nation. All other disagreements, however vehement, were secondary to this. The consensus was made more achievable by the radical pruning the elites had undergone, with a significant part of the political spectrum excluded by virtue of their poor wartime record, and much of the rest of the older generation compromised by their poor pre-war record. The remaining elites were more homogeneous than at any time in France's recent history, and had in addition the common bond of affiliation with or participation in the movements that had fought for national liberation. No doubt the historical circumstances of the period were particular to France. But a major lesson to be drawn is that the unanimity of national elites on the existence of the nation is a vital component of successful nation-building. Cultural and intellectual resources are then deployed to reinforce and implement this underlying choice.

A principle cultural resource is the language used to characterise a situation. Its power is exemplified by the manner in which the concept of 'liberation' was adopted to characterise the period. One of the most urgent tasks for the immediate aftermath of the conflict was to find a common language with which to articulate the experience of the present and of the immediate past. Very rapidly, all parts of French society came to agree with the Resistance and the Free French movements, that what was happening was a liberation. Those who saw it differently, for the most part sympathizers with German collaboration or with Vichy, were constrained to silence or at least to a discreet cynicism. Before long the Liberation became the canonical French name for the entire period and implicitly described all the events leading up to and following the end of the war.<sup>4</sup> The Liberation was a self-conscious starting point for a new era, and became a myth and milestone in the narration of French history. Within this agreed framework, a rich lexicon developed to express the nuances of interpretation and aspiration held by different groups. Revolution, rebirth, rebuilding and modernization all had their advocates, and each encoded a different concept of the past and future. Liberation meant many different things. However, once there was agreement on the most important concept, that the nation had been liberated, disagreements on secondary issues were contained and became productive.

The French elites were not wholly free agents in achieving their aspirations. The presence of British and American troops on French territory was a tacit reminder that the French elites were acting under licence. De Gaulle was painfully aware that Eisenhower had only abandoned at the last minute his plan to establish an Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories (AMGOT) in France, akin

to that which was later established in Germany. American recognition for the Provisional Government was also slow to be granted. In some respects this lurking threat may have served to strengthen support for the government. While de Gaulle was adroit in placing his cadre of administrators in liberated areas, the allied authorities were also pragmatic in allowing it to happen. None of this was inevitable, especially with Roosevelt's deep suspicions about de Gaulle and the possibility of a communist insurgency. But with hindsight, it was a key factor in avoiding civil war and securing a successful post-war recovery. De Gaulle's particular role in this has frequently been analysed, and there is no doubt that his personal qualities and political skills were an important factor.<sup>5</sup> However, it should be remembered that his leadership of the provisional government lasted less than two years. He was a focus for national unity but not its creator, and the unity survived his precipitate departure in January 1946.

### The nation and symbolic violence

Once the fundamental agreement was secure, the French elites did not need to fear high levels of discord on other issues. On the contrary, internal conflicts may have served to strengthen national identity as different groups contended for a greater degree of influence over the nation's future. Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence helps to clarify this process.<sup>6</sup> He argues that the strength of a whole social field can be increased by the struggles that are waged within it, since the field itself is the source of the recognition and distinction that are at stake in the struggles. He further shows that when the field is seen as being under threat, the dominated groups within it are likely to cooperate in reinforcing the position of the dominant group as a means of strengthening the field as a whole. This point is demonstrated in the subordination of class and gender identities to the overriding national imperative.

The imperative of nation building in France had the immediate effect of subordinating class interests to the common task. The working class and the intellectuals, in particular, had strong traditions of independence. The workers were often bitterly opposed to the national ruling elites, while writers and artists typically set a high value on a prior commitment to their vocation. In France during the period after 1944, they both accepted the overriding priority of the nation, and swallowed their deep-seated reservations. They became part of an implicit 'union sacrée', which placed the national interest above sectional interests, at least for the period of immediate need. They accepted a process of symbolic violence, in which their national commitment increased their own subordination within the nation. At this stage, the ruling political and economic elites within France were not clearly identified as a dominant group. In 1947 and later, when political and economic conflicts resurfaced, and the dominant interest groups were exposed more clearly, the national imperative proved sufficiently entrenched to contain the internal social divisions. It might therefore be concluded that a likely condition and cost of nation building is the long-term subordination of dominated classes and professional groups.

In a similar way, gender roles were also subjected to the symbolic violence of nation building. The end of the war reinforced male domination as an integral

part of French national identity, despite the extension of voting rights to French women. It appeared that the urgent rebuilding of the French state required a proportionately urgent reaffirmation of male supremacy. The nation was symbolically represented by the figure of Marianne in her various embodiments, but the work of building the nation was reserved for men. This was demonstrated by the ritual punishment of women suspected of collaboration.<sup>7</sup> In all parts of France, these women had their hair shaven or cropped by men, usually under official auspices, fixing their guilt firmly to their sexuality, regardless of the nature of their offence. This coincided with a movement to confine women to the private, domestic sector, under the cover of a humanist ideology that reasserted masculinity as the standard and model of humankind. In accordance with the 'rules of the game' of symbolic violence, women largely accepted their subordination in the national interest; though its ferocity sparked a feminist reaction in Simone de Beauvoir, whose book *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) sprang from the experience. It is perhaps a dismal lesson that the process of nation building has the potential cost of reinforcing male domination, and that national liberation may be bought at the expense of women's freedoms.

### Cultural bricolage

The French elites did not begin their cultural reinvention with a blank sheet. On the contrary, they had a rich and diverse cultural heritage to draw on. Much of it was damaged or compromised, but they carried out a work of what Claude Lévi-Strauss later called 'bricolage'. In the spirit of 'do-it-yourself' and the 'système-D', they constructed workable meanings from rough and ready assemblages of existing materials.<sup>8</sup> In the process they were able to juxtapose elements that had previously been incompatible, especially the symbols of state and religion, in order to serve an immediate purpose. They were also able to nurture cultural traditions that had previously been marginal. The new intellectual movements of the post-war period, for example, all had some roots in pre-war culture, but were enabled to rise rapidly to a position of cultural dominance. This suggests the lesson that building a nation necessarily takes place on a 'brown-field site', rather than a 'green-field site'. There are always previously existing materials and they provide valuable building materials, at least in the short-term and perhaps also in the longer term.

Among the most important building materials for the reinvented nation were its symbols. Charles de Gaulle was a consummate manipulator of symbolic speech and action, and constructed himself as the symbolic incarnation of France. He was conscious that in many respects he had little more than symbolic resources to draw on, but recognised that a certain gesture, a turn of phrase or a tone of voice could exercise more power than the administrative and military means, which were so painfully lacking. The symbols of the French state were themselves seriously damaged, so that de Gaulle and the political and cultural elites around him were obliged to draw on other symbolic systems, especially those of Catholicism. Christian symbols were similarly damaged but were sufficiently operational to provide at least temporary support, and were drawn on unhesitatingly by nation builders across the political spectrum. This tactic was explicitly endorsed by the communist poet Louis Aragon, who argued on

behalf of myths: 'les mythes remis sur leurs pieds ont force non seulement de faire rêver, mais de faire agir.'<sup>9</sup> It may be a useful lesson that, when the dangers are immediate, symbolic alliances may be required that in other circumstances would be unthinkable. It is a consequence of this that alliances forged in the heat of necessity may prove remarkably durable. The role of religion in contributing symbolic resources to nation building was not specific to France, and has clear resonances in more recent conflicts.

The rebuilding of the nation was facilitated by a general agreement on shared values. No religious or secular ideology offered an acceptable basis for this. As a result, a process of intellectual bricolage brought the moral framework of humanism together to create an agreed space for argument and debate. Assembled from disparate elements of pre-war thinking and the universalistic aspirations of the Resistance movement, it was promoted by Christian democrats and social democrats, and secured the assent of most other currents of thought. It proved an inclusive framework and rapidly became a 'doxa', in Bourdieu's sense, expressing the common wisdom of the nation and defining the boundaries of what could be thought and said. Once established, this eclectic value system exercised a discreet hegemony in France for many years, rarely examined directly, but providing the underlying assumptions of the Republic. The debates around the nature of humanism in 1945-6 may reflect the fact that nation building requires an agreed value system. If there is no widely accepted system, such as a shared religion, then a more general system may need to be constructed, as it was in France, from the ideological materials to hand.

Within the broad framework of humanism, there was broad scope for a battle of ideas. Three dynamic and innovative intellectual movements emerged in France in the post war period: Existentialism, Catholic personalism and Marxism. They were developed by a younger generation of thinkers, who took advantage of the relative intellectual vacuum created by the war, and built energetic schools of thought. Each offered a largely new philosophy, built on long-standing intellectual currents of French and European thought that had previously struggled on the margins of cultural life. They offered moral and political guidance that engaged with the difficult issues of the time, and attracted strong commitment from a wide intellectual and cultural milieu. Existentialism emerged as the culturally dominant movement, but the other movements strongly and at times vehemently contested it. The intensity of the competition between them contributed to raising the level of debate, and generated both a high level of philosophical culture in the country and a wider reputation for France as a leading international focus for new ideas and debate. While the intellectual effervescence was a particular feature of France, there may be lessons that the rebuilding of a national culture can be strengthened by intellectual debate. Perhaps also that in the aftermath of conflict, when previously dominant cultural forms have been swept away or damaged, there are opportunities to develop new intellectual and cultural movements.

### **The unburied corpse**

With all its ambiguities, France did succeed in re-establishing a sense of national identity. The French people addressed their post-war problems with what in



the circumstances must be regarded as a remarkable degree of national unity. However, there was a price to be paid for the pragmatic sinking of differences, and the amalgamation of disparate symbolic systems. The re-established national identity bore the marks of its provisional and ambiguous beginnings. It was made with symbols that still carried uncomfortable connotations, and narratives that still lacked closure. This was already tangible in the summer of 1945, as the Second World War finally ended. The rejoicing was distinctly muted, and Sartre observed of the VE Day celebrations: 'on avait dit aux gens de pavoiser: ils ne l'ont pas fait, la guerre a pris fin dans l'indifférence et dans l'angoisse.'<sup>10</sup> In some respects, it was not felt to be their victory, and did not bring the sense of final triumph that was felt, for example, in Britain. Even de Gaulle, more upbeat about the occasion, commented in his memoirs:

Et puis, l'épreuve, si elle fut marquée, pour nous Français, par une gloire tirée du plus profond de l'abîme, n'en a pas moins comporté, d'abord, des défaillances désastreuses. Avec la satisfaction causée par le dénouement, elle laisse, - c'est pour toujours - une douleur sourde au fond de la conscience nationale.<sup>11</sup>

The disastrous weaknesses in question primarily included the acts and policies of Vichy and the collaboration. From de Gaulle's point of view they also included the deep divisions between political parties and intellectual traditions. The dull pain was the lasting, though contained, impression that these left. For Simone de Beauvoir, writing later in her autobiography:

La guerre était fini : elle nous restait sur les bras comme un grand cadavre encombrant, et il n'y avait nulle place au monde où l'enterrer.<sup>12</sup>

Although the war was formally ended in 1945, it had already been symbolically ended for France in 1944. But that earlier end had been as much an end to the French civil war as to the German occupation. Consequently the defeat of Germany did not provide a narrative closure, and perhaps served more to emphasize the ambiguity of the victory, which had nonetheless to be celebrated. Beauvoir's unburied corpse is in essence the same as de Gaulle's dull pain in the national consciousness, and corresponds to a deep-seated ambiguity in French national identity.

The extent of French complicity in collaboration with the German occupation, and in its repressions and atrocities, is a historically unresolved issue, which has flared into life with extraordinary regularity in France, to the extent of appearing as a pathological disorder, which Henri Rousso has called the 'syndrome de Vichy'.<sup>13</sup> It is characterised by acrimonious quarrels and alternating rhythms of affirming and denying the importance of the occupation and its interpretation. Undoubtedly, as Rousso argues, each crisis in which France has been divided is sedimented on preceding ones, so that the 'Franco-French war' has developed a self-propelling momentum, from the Revolution to the Dreyfus Case and on to the Occupation, all of which have resurfaced intermittently in more recent contentions. However, this long-standing internecine struggle took a new turn after 1944, which gave it a particular visibility. On the one hand, there was virtual unanimity over the need for national unity, and for its powerful expression in

a reconstructed national identity. This was successfully achieved by deploying the symbolic resources of language, religion and culture to supplement the weakened images of the state itself. On the other hand, the new republican state and its accompanying national identity became the only political and cultural fields within which the traditionally conflicting forces in French society could find expression.

Previous generations in France, on the Left or the Right, had variously looked to a change of regime, whether by revolution, restoration or *coup d'état*. The conflicts pitted Royalists against the Republics, Republicans against the Monarchies and Empires, fascists against parliamentary democracy, and communists against the capitalist state. Now for perhaps the first time in two centuries there was no available cultural identity or political project outside the existing regime. The result of this containment was to focus divisions internally. The smaller space inevitably raised the temperature. Moreover, the heightened role of cultural construction, and its 'nationalisation', meant that the conflicts contained within national identity were exhibited to the French and to the rest of the world with a particular prominence through the development of post-war French culture. In this way, in proportion as the reconstructed national identity dampened fundamental conflicts, the energy from those conflicts was transferred to the cultural realm. There, the struggle to articulate and reconcile the resulting ambiguities nourished the effervescence of a combative cultural and intellectual industry. And its participants drew additional confidence from the implicit awareness that they bore the responsibility of representing the nation, to itself and to others.

In some respects, the post war rebuilding of French national identity was a synthesis in the Hegelian sense. It was achieved by superseding internal conflicts and contradictions, but without abolishing them. And the more strongly the internal conflicts raged, the more strongly the overriding national identity was reaffirmed. There are both opportunities and costs in this dialectic of unity and struggle. A secure national synthesis provides opportunities for groups and movements to contend with one another for dominance within it. But it exacts a cost in subordinating the demands of other identities, especially those of class and gender, to the dominant forces in the national society. The powerful consensus to rebuild a new national identity in 1944-7 helped to secure the future for a free and prosperous post-war France. It placed a *cordon sanitaire* round those parts of its wartime experience that could not be integrated into the new identity, it helped to entrench a state of social dominance in class and gender relations, and it set cultural and intellectual life at the heart of national identity. In the process, it has provided a cultural arena within which the French political and cultural elites return continually to re-examine their country's wartime experience and its struggles of class and gender, to the endless fascination and instruction of observers in other countries.

The aftermath of the Second World War provided the French political and intellectual elites with the opportunity for a new beginning. The country's cultural and intellectual heritage was badly damaged by the conflict. In that respect it resembled the material infrastructure of buildings, bridges, roads



and railways, which suffered destruction on a massive scale, and the political institutions, which had collapsed for a first time in the spring of 1940 and for a second time in the spring of 1944. Emerging from a succession of foreign military interventions, the French elites took ownership of regime change and launched an urgent programme of nation building, in which the cultural and intellectual rebuilding of French national identity played a key role. The way in which they rebuilt their nation was particular to the circumstances of France in 1944-47, but the success with which they achieved it surely holds lessons for other countries in the present day, where embattled national elites confront the strategic task of building or rebuilding a nation after conflict and regime change.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The findings on which this analysis is based are discussed in detail in my book: (Kelly 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Beauvoir (1960 : 688).

<sup>3</sup> For a contemporary account, see Aron (1945). See also Elgey (1965).

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Azéma (1979); Kedward and Wood (1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Cook (1984); Jackson (1990); Shennan (1993); Andrieu, Braud, and Piketty (2006).

<sup>6</sup> See Bourdieu (1991).

<sup>7</sup> See Brossat (1993); Virgili (2000).

<sup>8</sup> 'Bricolage' corresponds closely to the British concept of amateur 'do-it-yourself' manual building work. It was popularised by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to describe the use of available materials to create artifacts with new cultural meanings. See Lévi-Strauss (1962). 'Système D' is an expression widely used in the 1940s to describe resourceful improvisations of any kind to overcome shortages, thought to be derived from 'débrouillard'.

<sup>9</sup> (Aragon 1944 : 95)

<sup>10</sup> (Sartre 1949 : 63)

<sup>11</sup> (De Gaulle 1959 : 178).

<sup>12</sup> (Beauvoir 1963 : 50-51).

<sup>13</sup> See Rousso (1990).

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