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# The Cult of the Modern

Gavin Murray-Miller

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# THE CULT OF THE MODERN

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FRANCE OVERSEAS: STUDIES IN EMPIRE AND DECOLONIZATION

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# The Cult of the Modern

*Trans-Mediterranean  
France and the Construction  
of French Modernity*

GAVIN MURRAY-MILLER

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS  
*Lincoln and London*

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*For Morgan,  
An antiquarian in his own right.*



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In his lengthy *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand described returning to Paris in the 1820s and reflecting on the personal significance of each building and street he encountered in the French capital: a house where he and his sister had spent their childhood; the Palace of Justice that recalled his trial; the prefecture of police where he had served a brief prison sentence. To walk the streets of the city was to revisit an intimate past and history marked by familiar architectural sites and monuments, each detail evoking a memory redolent of “the skein” of former days.

In certain ways, this book possesses a similar quality. It was written over numerous years and in various places along the way. Sections and chapters evoke specific times, people, and cities that are called to mind in the act of rereading. In completing this work, I feel obliged to express my sincere gratitude to those who made it possible.

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THE CULT OF THE MODERN

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# Introduction

## The Cult of the Modern in the Nineteenth Century

Residing in the French capital briefly during the early nineteenth century, the German writer Friedrich von Schlegel found Paris obsessed with what he described as “the fantastic caprice of ever-varying fashion.” More than simply a critique on the lifestyles and tastes of Parisian society under Napoleon I, Schlegel’s remark was a judgment on the French Revolution itself. The social and political transformations wrought by France’s revolutionary experience in the late eighteenth century had, he believed, brought about a corresponding change in the sentiments and perspective of the country, commencing a period in which interests, just as much as politics, were subject to “the hasty revolutions of the fleeting day.”<sup>1</sup> In Schlegel’s estimation, the French suffered from an acute cultural amnesia as contemporary and momentary trends now took precedence over the historical and permanent, and this denouement was, he contended, a direct result of the political turmoil and upset that had radically transformed conventional understandings of time and society in the wake of the Revolution.

Although Schlegel’s insights may have possessed a detached and analytical quality common to a foreigner’s encounter with a society different from his own, such interpretations were certainly not lost on French observers. Over a half century after Schlegel’s Parisian sojourn, the critic and philosopher Hippolyte Taine readily agreed with the observations made by the German intellectual. The French public interminably clamored for the “new, salient, and unexpected,” he complained, while treating the past with disregard and boredom.<sup>2</sup> What was true of fashion was

equally true of politics, in Taine's opinion. "We demolished the past," he claimed while speculating on the effect of the French Revolution, "and all had to be done over again."<sup>3</sup> Severed from their roots, the French could only appreciate the transitory and contingent, seeing behind them a past of ruin and destruction with little consequence for the here and now. "In France, we are neither reformers nor *réformés*," the Saint-Simonian mystic Prosper Enfantin conceded in 1840. "We love new habits and have no desire for patching up old holes."<sup>4</sup>

Desire for novelty (*nouveauté*) encouraged a certain distaste for the old and *passé*, and this sentiment was as true of fashion as it was of physical places. Building projects during the middle of the century in French cities proceeded with little concern for the historic and familiar. Feeling nostalgic on a clement afternoon in the autumn of 1864, the journalist Victor Fournel decided to walk across Paris and revisit a small house that he had frequented on occasion in the past. "I wanted only to stroll by on the pavement slowly," he claimed, "raise my eyes to the third floor and look at the place." Arriving at the location, the journalist was appalled to find that where the building had once stood was now a vacant lot covered with a fresh layer of smoldering tar. "Even the street had disappeared," Fournel remarked in near disbelief as he surveyed the area.<sup>5</sup> The experience of the writer and renowned gastronome Charles Monselet was hardly different. The Paris that he had come to know and love was quickly vanishing in the midst of state efforts to beautify and modernize the city: "day by day, the streets are disappearing, the buildings known for their history [*ancienneté*] and the memories associated with them are being demolished."<sup>6</sup> The modern was, in Monselet's conjecture, a beast devouring history and memory that would, in time, efface all that had come before it.

Detached from the past, life, opinions, and perspectives in France became preoccupied with the "ephemeral, fugitive, [and] contingent" — elements that the critic Charles Baudelaire intimately associated with the advent of *la modernité*.<sup>7</sup> Homilies to the modern and professions of faith in the "modern spirit" resonated among an entire generation and found expression in a variety of cultural, social, and political projects.

By midcentury, French outlooks revealed an infatuation with a cult of the modern, a trend first announced in the frenzied days of the French Revolution when politicians set out to break irrevocably with the past and create a radically new type of society with no historical precedent. In his *Dictionnaire de la langue française* published in the 1870s, the positivist philosopher and lexicographer Émile Littré listed the word *modernité* as a neologism dating from the late 1860s first coined by the literary critic Théophile Gautier.<sup>8</sup> In actuality, Gautier had employed the term at various times over the previous decade in his reviews, applauding works that were “of [their] time” and, by consequence, pregnant with elements of “modernité.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Littré was, nonetheless, correct in accenting the word’s neologic quality, identifying it as a distinct product of a culture and period captivated by all things new and modern. “Modernity immediately seduces us with its intrinsic charms deriving from a secret conformity with our tastes,” admitted the literary critic René Doumic at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> For Doumic, a writer who came of age in an intellectual milieu where modernity not only symbolized an idea but a complete way of life and thinking, the appeal of *la modernité* was a given.

The extraordinary change and potential that nineteenth-century intellectuals and critics saw in their age have possessed an enduring legacy, one broadly understood as Western modernity. This phenomenon announced a “distinct and discontinuous” era in human history, a way of living and organizing society that was radically different from its antecedents.<sup>11</sup> It encapsulated the idea of a world torn asunder from its roots, “cut off from the past and continually hurtling forward at such a dizzy pace,” as the poet Octavio Paz once remarked.<sup>12</sup> More than a century after men like Schlegel and Littré surmised on the meaning and import of modernity’s implications for their own time, theorists and historians continued to adhere to basic assumptions that the changes experienced by Western societies between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries marked a fundamentally unique mode of thought and existence unlike any other. This modernizing drive provided the template for a vision of global order rooted in capitalist models of exchange, industrialized

production, distinct cultural practices and forms of sociability that acquired a powerful “singularity” across time and space.<sup>13</sup> To invoke the modern was to invoke universal certainty, a monolith shaped by a particular idea of society read in terms of its dynamic and innovative possibilities.

Yet what we have considered modern is the product of a specific cultural logic that has prized and valorized this exact quality. It was nominally “modern” societies that first articulated the very concept, seeing in it a reflection of their own power, prestige, and eminence.<sup>14</sup> Rather than a condition, modernity has constituted a particular way of describing and talking about the world that is, in its very nature, self-referential. As John Camaroff has pointedly argued, “in itself, ‘modernity’ has no a priori telos or content.” It is not an analytical category, but an ideological formation constructed and reproduced to revere certain practices and values while denigrating others.<sup>15</sup> Once modernity is stripped of its essentializing qualities, all that remains are the varying discourses, ideological forms, and cultural representations that give substance to this construction. The presupposed modern monolith vanishes, “melting into air,” as Marx would have it. Until relatively recently, modernity was tied to an idiom of newness prized by cultural and social elites in the Western world.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, it has underwritten and sustained a particular type of discursive power capable of representing socially particular behavioral norms and values in universal and humanitarian contexts while furnishing a rationale for their forcible imposition on others.

This book is concerned with the creation and possession of modern time as it has been known to the West. It takes for its subject France, a society that has stood at the forefront of the mythmaking and imagining that gave birth to a putatively “modern” vision of the self and the world at large. The French Revolution witnessed the first truly modernizing agenda in world history as its authors attempted to establish and disseminate a radical program of reform committed to overthrowing all existing values.<sup>17</sup> Time was “turning a new page of history,” as the republican Charles-Gilbert Romme confidently informed his contemporaries before

the National Convention in 1793.<sup>18</sup> The revolutionary experience gave birth to a cultural discourse that would evolve over the coming years as movements and ideas increasingly validated themselves through claims to a modern inheritance. Democratic protests, colonial projects, and even aesthetic *modernisme* all bore marks of the modernist mentality that grew up over the following century. If France continues to symbolize an avatar of the modern, this verdict is largely the product of the ways in which the French have conceptualized themselves and their society.

The cult of the modern, therefore, proposes an analysis of nineteenth-century French politics and culture that attempts to take modernity on its own terms. Nineteenth-century France has traditionally epitomized the epicenter of the modern, whether in light of the nation's revolutionary inheritance or the various social and cultural developments that grew out of the period. It was the age of political and industrial revolutions, of large-scale urbanization programs, and the modernism of luminaries such as Baudelaire and Manet. Taken together, these details have contributed to a history of modernity that has ranged from assessments of artistic production and new modes of cultural experience to the roots of a "social modernity" associated with distinct forms of knowledge and administration appropriate to the rational organization of society.<sup>19</sup> Typically, the question of modernity has been one of origins. Numerous studies on nineteenth-century France have concerned themselves with pinning down the moment when modernity occurred or tracing its specific contours. Relatively less consideration has been given to questions of why the idea of modernity became so alluring to a widening French elite during this time or how this concept was iterated and reiterated within particular ideological frameworks and discourses.<sup>20</sup> Rather than seeking a genealogy of modernity, therefore, what is needed is a more informed understanding of the ways in which this concept has historically been imagined, reified, and deployed.

This analysis is especially instructive within the context of French politics and political life. From the French Revolution onward, the narrative of modern France has predominantly been communicated through a strong republican tradition linked to the country's revolutionary and

republican nationhood. The battles between republic and monarchy that colored the postrevolutionary period have conventionally signified a “matrix” of the modern, a liminal period marked by incremental social, political, and economic transformations that came to realization during the early years of the Third Republic founded in 1870.<sup>21</sup> This notion of a postrevolutionary crossroads has underpinned a historical narrative equating the advent of the liberal and democratic republic with the definitive fulfillment of the nation’s revolutionary and modern inheritance. Needless to say, this tradition of French history writing was shaped and influenced largely by successive generations of republican intellectuals who were ideologically inclined to see the republican state as the fulfillment of the modern telos. The fact that “modern” France continues to imply a republican France reveals more about the place and importance of modernity in French political culture and ideology than it does about the actual policies and practices that forged the French nation.

In light of this appraisal, a more nuanced understanding of modernity’s performative function is required. During the nineteenth century, the subject of modernity was a leitmotif of French politics. Speaking in the name of the modern constituted a form of political action that was capable of legitimating a wide array of policies and platforms across ideological lines. The increasing importance French politicians and intellectuals placed on this concept corresponded to advances in democratization and imperial expansion, both of which exerted a crucial influence on political discourse and administrative practices in the country. Confronting the various challenges posed by popular suffrage and colonial integration necessitated organizing and structuring new forms of control and legitimacy accommodating a democratic and imperial society. In the cultural and political vocabulary of nineteenth-century elites, modernity became the dominant idiom for this process, furnishing the means for imagining and discursively representing a world that, although described in exceedingly universal and utilitarian terms, remained, nonetheless, consistent with elite values and aspirations.

While radicals during the French Revolution articulated their revolutionary program through a similar language, concepts like “modern

society” and “modern civilization” acquired new contextual meanings and significance in the postrevolutionary period. Chronic domestic instability coupled with French expansion into North Africa after 1830 invested modernizing discourses with a distinct urgency and purpose as elites sought to reorder a fractured society. In many ways, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte and his Bonapartist entourage that came to power in 1852 set the tenor for this new style of French politics. Bonapartism exhibited an impressive ability to conjure the modern through bold speeches and spectacles. It dramatically wed modernity to a platform of national renewal and rehabilitation that proved effective at sustaining authoritarian government in an age of mass democracy. At midcentury, the revived Napoleonic Empire translated an infatuation with the modern into a dynamic political discourse and symbolism that contenders on both the left and the right found hard to discount. In the ensuing years, republicans and other political opponents were ultimately compelled to tailor their own ideological perspectives to the modernizing creed announced by the Bonapartist state and adhere to the cult of the modern.

This premise draws on recent reappraisals of the decade of conservative reaction following the revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. The 1850s saw a new constellation of political alignments which prompted authoritarian regimes to endorse modernizing administrative and fiscal policies that inadvertently contributed to a resurgence of nationalist and democratic movements in the years ahead.<sup>22</sup> French historians now agree that the Second Empire marked a pivotal moment in which the roots of modern French democracy and political culture emerged.<sup>23</sup> However, changes in political practice were influenced and often shaped by political vocabularies and language that require further scrutiny. In examining how the politics of modernity influenced the period, this book deviates from earlier accounts concerned with the origins of social modernity in France. It suggests that rather than a determinant of social and political change, modernity was constitutive of the social relations and political projects that assumed shape over the course of the nineteenth century.

If an appreciation of modernity's imaginative properties holds the prospect of repositioning the Second Empire within the narrative of modern France, it also proposes a rewriting of this narrative across space as well. The Third Republic has enjoyed a status not only as the progenitor of the modern French polity but also as the chief architect of the modern French empire. The "civilizing mission" espoused by republican ideologues in the 1880s and the consequent acquisition of colonies across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia over the course of the following half century has constituted the necessary backdrop against which a mass colonial consciousness emerged in France. The result marked a significant transition from a nation that merely possessed colonies to a colonial republic that thought of and conceptualized itself in exceedingly imperial terms.<sup>24</sup> The French civilizing mission, an ideological program aimed at replicating modern European society overseas, traditionally provided a measure of continuity between France's own path to modernity and the subsequent modernization of non-Western societies. As a completed process in Europe, modern civilization was disseminated outward, reproducing the social and political forms of modernity throughout the colonial world, often in a violent fashion.<sup>25</sup> This narrative not only perpetuated one of the primary myths of the West's own modern origins and identity; it also distorted the fact that the colonial domain acted as a laboratory for many of the social and political projects that would be exported back and applied to European states under the guise of modernizing reforms.<sup>26</sup>

Considerations of the parallel nature of empire and European nation building have broadened our understanding of these processes in relation to one another. It is now recognized that external colonization abetted the production of domestic administrative techniques and types of knowledge within European societies.<sup>27</sup> Popular culture as well possessed an imminently imperial dimension that served to bridge the conceptual distance between metropolises and their peripheries. Propaganda, advertising, literature, and entertainment all contributed to the reproduction of imperial ideologies within the public and private lives of citizens.<sup>28</sup> The prevalence of empire in nineteenth-century culture and society

suggests that imperialism was more than just a question of political action and policymaking. It transmitted notions of national identity, structured basic understandings of spatial and social difference, and gave expression to European ideals regarding the capability for human perfection and the generative role of the state in achieving them.<sup>29</sup> These inclinations were especially strong in France where a republican ideology prizing national unity and universal values lent itself to a particular style of imperial rule and empire building. Bolstering a polity vested in assimilationist principles and national association, France constituted an imperial nation-state as opposed to merely an imperial nation.<sup>30</sup>

The period between 1830 and 1870 has received comparatively limited attention in the making of this imperial polity. The result has been an acute underappreciation of the influence that postrevolutionary regimes exercised on either imperial policymaking or the core tenets that would underpin French colonial rule over the next century.<sup>31</sup> Throughout much of the nineteenth century, France was governed by liberal and authoritarian regimes that did not always conform to republican models of cultural and legal assimilation. These regimes, nonetheless, laid much of the foundation for future colonizing efforts, whether through creating intermediary administrative bodies that engaged different ethnic and religious groups or proposing strategies of cooperation with indigenous community leaders.<sup>32</sup> Although this brand of French “cosmopolitanism” deviated from republican precepts of universal rights and indivisible sovereignty, many of these structures continued to furnish a basis for colonial and domestic policies well into the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> A closer examination of French nation- and empire building in the years prior to the Third Republic holds the prospect of expanding our understanding of France’s often contradictory imperial polity and the concepts of nationality and citizenship that it influenced.

Much work has been done on the French Atlantic in critiquing revolutionary constructs of citizenship, democracy, and human rights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>34</sup> Studies highlighting the particularities of the colonial Atlantic have revealed just how portable and flexible ideological principles and conceptions of national identity

could be when applied within imperial contexts. For most of the nineteenth century, however, the Atlantic empire built upon slave labor and colonial plantocracies stood juxtaposed against a new vision of empire inspired by the Mediterranean, and social critics and policy-makers of the day did not fail to draw stark contrasts between the two. The proximity of the Mediterranean region to continental Europe lent itself to greater metropolitan oversight and intervention than the distal Atlantic colonies. For this reason, North Africa played a key role in reshaping the imperial formations and practices of earlier regimes, redefining ideas of national boundaries, identity, and governance in the process as postrevolutionary thinkers responded to changes wrought by revolution and industrialization at home. By the early nineteenth century, the Mediterranean was already functioning as a laboratory for the administrative and modernizing policies of the First Napoleonic Empire.<sup>35</sup> France's entrance into the Ottoman Maghreb in 1830 and the subsequent creation of an Algerian settler colony only reinforced these tendencies as France established a permanent presence in the region that nurtured strong social and emotional ties to Europe. After 1830, metropolitan politics were increasingly projected onto Algeria in quite dramatic ways, resulting in the intertwining of imperial and domestic politics that influenced ideas of political leadership, militarism, republican virtue, and citizenship.<sup>36</sup>

This evolving interaction between imperial and national political culture provided the basis for *la France transméditerranéenne*, an abstraction upon which French values of universal liberty and national identity would be repeatedly projected and reified for national audiences over the course of the century.<sup>37</sup> Two years after the launching of the North African military expedition, imperial ideologues were already outlining an ambitious plan of conquest and national assimilation for the nascent Algerian colony. As Victor-Armand Hain, founding member of the Société Coloniale de l'État d'Alger, wrote in 1832:

The time is not far off for us to believe that the [Barbary] Regency, governed by the same laws as the metropole, divided into departments

will form a *France transméditerranéenne*. . . . Such an outcome will be worthy of a great nation, and our children will feel pride when, taking their first lessons in geography, they will be quizzed by the professor on the borders of their birth country and respond, while tracing their finger across the map: “France is bordered on the north by the Channel and the Pas-de-Calais and on the south by the great Sahara Desert.”<sup>38</sup>

While Hain may hardly be considered a visionary or master architect of French colonial policy, his procolonial pamphleteering was indicative of a particular national-imperial mindset informed by a new sense of national mission and community stimulated during the years of the French Revolution. Although histories of French colonialism have traditionally made categorical and qualitative distinctions between a First French Empire centered on the Atlantic and the rise of the Third Republic’s Afro-Asian Empire a century later, the interval between these two imperial polities suggests a more nuanced pattern of development than previously imagined.<sup>39</sup>

*La France transméditerranéenne* constituted a key ideological formation in a vision of empire that matured over the postrevolutionary period, an interim that David Todd has aptly labeled a “French imperial meridian.”<sup>40</sup> The ambiguous status of Algeria vis-à-vis France prior to 1870, its proximity to the European mainland and its sizable settler and Muslim populations made Algeria at once a unique colonial territory and a model colony of France’s revived empire. This contradiction was one of many framing the so-called Algerian question, which extended from questions of political integration and cultural assimilation to the limits of acceptance in the French nation itself. As a point of convergence for both national and colonial discourses, Algeria offers valuable insights into questions regarding how nineteenth-century individuals reflexively understood concepts of nationality, modernity, and the relationship between the French metropole and its colonial periphery. At once fashioned in the image of France *and* serving as an object against which French identity was constructed and projected, Algeria reflected

the mythologies and tensions inherent within the idea of France itself to a greater extent than other French colonial domains.<sup>41</sup>

The years of the Second Empire marked an important moment in the making of this Franco-Algerian imaginary. Imperial efforts to consolidate authority and unite the country during the 1850s and 1860s paralleled attempts to establish French rule in North Africa. From the beginning, state modernization policies exhibited a trans-Mediterranean orientation that, in their most aggressive phase, translated into a Bonapartist civilizing mission straddling the Mediterranean. French “modernization” and North African “colonization” were, in this respect, interconnected processes, and this denouement permitted political and cultural elites to imagine the contours of a modern French nation and society in diverse and often expansive ways. Studies detailing the administrative arrangements and fluctuations of Second Empire colonial policies tend to lose sight of these wider parameters that framed Bonapartist politics and policies. A more critical examination of the modernizing acts undertaken by the imperial government provides a better understanding of the interwoven trajectories that guided Franco-Algerian social and political development at midcentury. Moreover, because colonialism offered an important channel for the articulation and realization of modernizing projects, Algeria figured prominently in the battles waged over modernity that played out during the period. Algerian modernization was championed by the Bonapartists just as much as their rivals; it served to justify the claims of metropolitans and spur colonists into action. As powerful symbols of the modernity coveted by French elites, colonization and the civilizing mission became fixtures of national political life. The politics of modernity helped establish and legitimate the framework for a trans-Mediterranean community that, by the end of the Second Empire, had acquired both republican and colonial features.

In focusing attention on these trans-Mediterranean currents, this book argues that during the years of the Second Empire modernity remained an imaginary construction that carried a variety of meanings and associations. The gradual pace of French economic growth matched with the persistence of traditional forms of labor and social relationships

throughout the first half of the nineteenth century entailed that French modernization proceeded along a different path than that of Great Britain and the United States. The absence of the industrial “takeoff” familiar to Anglo-American modernization narratives permitted different groups to interpret the nature and scope of French modernity through divergent ideological perspectives.<sup>42</sup> Although Napoleon III promoted his modernizing program in an effort to unify a divided country, more often than not modernity proved a divisive subject. Radical and socialist opponents exploited the Second Empire’s authoritarian policies and close ties with the clergy to fashion a revolutionary program of action promising an alternative vision of society organized around scientific and secular principles. Bonapartist modernity similarly came under fire from liberals and republicans who criticized the government only to tout their own platform of political and educational reform as the true cause of a new and “modern” France. Algerian settlers likewise employed the language of modernity to buttress claims of national inclusion and their vision of a French Algeria. The opposition that grew up under the imperial regime revealed the extent to which Bonapartist political discourse reoriented national politics, transforming an obsession with the modern into a common ideological currency.

In the fissures and commonalities it engendered, modernity remained tied to large issues of inclusion, identity, and power, eliciting questions of who had the authority to speak in the name of the modern and what attributes affirmed one’s inclusion in a community with other nominally “modern” individuals. In its broadest sense, identity persuades people and groups that they are in some way identical, thereby establishing a conception of community and basis for collective action. This process is, by necessity, characterized by acts of confrontation and antagonism as subjects define and categorize themselves against putative outsiders.<sup>43</sup> Yet it equally fosters a sense of collectivity vested in “a powerfully imagined and strongly felt commonality.”<sup>44</sup> Modernity contained—and continues to retain—these dual “grammars of identity” that simultaneously constructed social and cultural boundaries while effacing them through the promotion of a worldview and system of values deemed common

to all.<sup>45</sup> It is this aspect of commonality that shaped an understanding of modernity as a multilayered, decentered, and spatially extended community connecting individuals across multiple points and frontiers.<sup>46</sup> In the democratic ambience of the postrevolutionary period, this sense of connection operated within political, national, and imperial discourses, offering a framework for the articulation of solidarity and alterity consistent with egalitarian and universal values. It was also this common sense of connection around which visions of a French people and nation united across vast swaths of space by a shared time, culture, and singularity would crystallize.

Placing the period of the Second Empire in a truly imperial context and assessing how conceptions of the modern defined French politics and political culture augers a rethinking of the general narrative that has underpinned France's path to modernity. As an early case study in the politics of modernity, the Second Empire stands as the backdrop against which the contours of modern France can be critiqued and accurately appraised. The confluence of colonial and metropolitan politics at mid-century came to be expressed in a new vision of a republican nation, one construed through democratic principles but that nonetheless rationalized forms of elite power and ethnic hegemony. Modernity became, in this context, encoded with forms of social and ideological domination that would structure French society well into the next century and give rise to the practices and discursive representations essential to the mythmaking and valorization of the French republican state.