

“The essential core of the [French National Front] is nothing new; rather it is the continuation and actualization of deep-seated and longstanding attitudes and anxieties present in France.”

A TRADITION OF RACISM

The French National Front

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THIS ESSAY CONSIDERS THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FRENCH FAR-RIGHT SENTIMENT AND DISCOURSE AS ENCAPSULATED BY THE NATIONAL FRONT (FN) PARTY TODAY. FOCUSING ON THREE KEY AREAS—ANTI-SEMITISM AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS, NATIONALISM AND THE DUELING NOTION OF FRENCH IDENTITY, AND THE HISTORICAL MYTHS THAT AUGMENT AND LEGITIMATE BOTH—I SEEK TO SHOW HOW THE NATIONAL FRONT HAS SUCCESSFULLY PLAYED UPON THESE TRADITIONAL, OFTEN RACIST, TENDENCIES TO ACHIEVE ITS PRESENT ELECTORAL SUCCESS. THE PROBLEMS AND INSECURITIES MANIFESTED IN FRANCE TODAY—GLOBALIZATION, IMMIGRATION, AND JOB SECURITY—ARE, TO A DEGREE, THE PROBLEMS OF A HUNDRED YEARS AGO. THE FN ADVOCATES A SIMPLE, COMPELLING, AND ABOVE ALL, CONSISTENT ANSWER TO THESE COMPLEX ISSUES THAT APPEALS TO MANY CAUGHT IN THE IDENTITY FLUX OF THE 21ST CENTURY. AS LONG AS THESE PROBLEMS REMAIN UNRESOLVED, THE FN WILL ENJOY SIZEABLE SUPPORT.

INTRODUCTION

When an assorted band of French right-wing politicians founded the National Front Party (FN) on October 5, 1972, no one could have foreseen the party's stellar rise to become one of the major forces in French politics today. Indeed, in its 34-year history, the FN has only recently been catapulted onto the French national stage. During the 2002 French presidential election, the FN accumulated nearly 17 percent of the popular vote—beating out the rival Socialist Party candidate and advancing to a run-off election between the FN leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and incumbent President Jacques Chirac.ⁱ Additionally, in 2005, the FN was instrumental in mustering French public opinion against the adoption of the European Union Constitution. I argue that the essential core of the FN is nothing new; rather, it is the continuation and actualization of deep-seated and long-standing racial attitudes and anxieties present in France from the 19th century onward. These attitudes are exposed and furthered by the persistent insecurities of our modern era—jobs, globalization, and immigration—and are often coupled with a fundamental view that the past was right and noble, and that this past should become the exemplum for the future. In discussion of the FN and its appeal, this paper will take a thematic approach, analyzing and chronicling historically racial attitudes and identities as encapsulated in the FN party. As we will see, these racial identities are often integral to how many in the FN and the greater French public perceive themselves, their role in French society, and the idea of being truly “French.”

ANTI-SEMITISM

Of the themes present in the FN, anti-Semitism is the oldest, with roots running long and deep. Anti-Semitism resurfaces in the occasional statement by a party member—often as a Holocaust denial—and by similarities of rhetoric and method in other issues such as immigration that include racial dimensions. In order to understand these statements and the integral role anti-Semitic sentiment plays in influencing the discourse within the party, we must look to the development of French anti-Semitic at

titudes dating back to the 19th century. Anti-Semitism in its modern context often acts as springboard to other forms of racial discrimination currently integrated into the platform of the FN.

Prior to the denouncement of Captain Alfred Dreyfus as a traitor and German spy in 1894, much of the underlying anti-Semitic attitudes present in France were holdovers from the Middle Ages, a time when many saw Jews as scapegoats “responsible for the decadence of French society.”ⁱⁱ However, as the industrial revolution took hold during the 19th century, Jewish communities in France were transformed from a marginal population to one that participated in the growth of trade and capital, a process termed by some historians as “coming out of the ghetto.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Not all portions of the population were equally successful in the breakneck economics of the industrial revolution, and popular perception held that the Jews had a disproportionate share of economic wealth. As this idea of Jewish financial success became more widespread, we see the advent of the myth of the “200 families”—the idea that 200 influential Jewish families were acting as powerful oligarchs, pulling all the levers and holding all of the keys to the world economy.^{iv} Moreover, as perceptions of increasing Jewish wealth became widespread, the stature of traditional cultural institutions, such as the Catholic Church, decreased. As a result, portions of French society began to fear that Jews would begin to dominate France, as evidenced in the French philosopher Pierre Leroux's 1848 quip that “the true successor of Napoleon is the Jew.”^v This fear of the “other” is a precursor to the FN's modern anti-immigration slogan, “Immigrants are taking our jobs, our peace, our space, our customs.”^{vi}

Indeed, this victim mentality comes to full fruition in the Dreyfus Affair and the advent of the infamous anti-Semitic French journalist Edouard Drumont. In his 1886 magnum opus *Les Juifs Contre la France* (The Jews Against France), Drumont echoed and expounded upon many in-

dustrial age insecurities by describing the complete “conquest” of the French state and race by the Jews:

One can recognize all the characteristics of a conquest: an entire population working for another population, which appropriates, through a vast system of financial exploitation, all of the profits of the other. Immense Jewish fortunes, castles, Jewish townhouses, are not the fruit of any actual labor, of any production: they are the booty taken from an enslaved race by a dominant race.^{vii}

Here we see the Jew defined not only in terms of religion and economic wealth but also as a ‘race’ that is external and dominant over the ‘enslaved race’ of the French people. Moreover, such words as “conquest” and “entire population” reinforce the notion that the group being subjugated is as much a state as it is a people—if not one in the same thing. In short, Drumont sets the underlying idea later exemplified in the FN: there is no difference between one’s nationality and one’s race.

The Dreyfus Affair changed everything. Because Captain Alfred Dreyfus was working on behalf of the French state for one of the most important military bodies and was denounced as a spy for archrival Germany, anti-Semitic discourse became fully political. Now the Jews were cast not

just as economic oligarchs but also as foreign outsiders interested in betraying France for the highest bidder. This “political anti-Semitism” allowed the far-right establishment to use the Jews as “perfect political scapegoats.”^{viii}

The anti-Semitic political scapegoating is a recurring theme throughout the early and mid-20th century. In the

1920s we see the anti-Semitic Charles Maurras write an open letter to the Jewish politician Abraham Schrameck in the anti-Semitic *L’Action Française*: “For us, you symbolize rather too visibly the foreigner who has seized the government unawares and is making it serve anti-governmental and anti-national ends.”^{ix} Historian Pierre Birnbaum notes that the ideas of the far-right were first actualized during the German-controlled Vichy Government in World War II^x when the Law of 2 June 1941 that “Aryanized” public office and removed

Jews entirely from the political sphere appeared. After the war, these anti-Semitic attitudes reemerged as veiled attacks upon the government for its support of what Pierre Poujade called Jews’ lack of “French guts.”^{xi} A number of other movements, such as *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS), continued the trend and gave FN leader Le Pen one of his first forays into politics during the 1960s. Indeed, the FN used the same political scapegoating in attacking



WILL THE BE REACQUED?
POLITICAL CARTOON ON THE DREYFUS AFFAIR AND EMILE ZOLA'S
OPEN LETTER ACCUSING THE MILITARY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

the Chirac government for its backing and support of immigrants.

As it is, many founding, indeed “charter,” members of the FN had backgrounds in organizations associated with anti-Semitism. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a group whose mission statement is dedicated to the prevention of “the defamation of the Jewish people,”^{xii} notes in their dossier on Le Pen that such early figures as François Brigneau and Jean Castrillo, who rose to be editors of the FN newspaper *Militant*, were previously involved with the Vichy Government and even the Waffen-SS during World War II.^{xiii} It is important to note that the FN and their leader Le Pen often portray themselves and are portrayed as one and the same. Le Pen is a dominating figure in the party—his face alone appears besides the prominent FN logo on the FN website^{xiv}—and a secret to the Party’s longevity has been his ability to unite disparate groups under his party’s banner with what the historian Edward DeClair calls the “sheer force of his charismatic personality.”^{xv}

The ADL is certainly not alone in portraying both Le Pen and his FN Party as a cadre of extremist anti-Semitic fascists. For instance, an editorial cartoon during the 2002 French Presidential runoff campaign between Chirac and Le Pen links Le Pen with the symbol of the swastika and the recent spate of a synagogue burning in Europe, suggesting that a bottle of “Le Pen,” which is “made in France” and branded with the swastika would be a great concoction complementing the anti-Semitic flame.^{xvi} Another example, also during the 2002 Presidential runoff campaign, surfaced when over 400,000 people protested in Paris against the FN and shouted the slogan, “Vote for the Crook, Not the Fascist,”^{xvii} and an op-ed published by the *London Independent* on Election Day carried the headline, “Le Pen Says He Is Demonised. But, He Isn’t Demonised Anything Like Enough.”^{xviii}

Le Pen’s anti-Semitic reputation is spurred by what DeClair aptly calls his “rhetorical excesses.”^{xix} Along with other

members of the party’s leadership, Le Pen has quite a history of running his mouth. For instance, in 1988 he made a very offensive pun in which he rhymed the name of Michael Durafour, a Jewish minister in the Socialist government, with the word *crématoire*, which in French means oven or gas chamber.^{xx} Following the incident, a prominent National Front member close to Le Pen, Francois Bachelot, in an interview in the newspaper *Le Monde*, claimed the pun was not just Le Pen’s sloppy mouth but a “considerable strategy” that was designed to “give the national right a shot



“SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF DEPORTED FRENCH JEWS”
PROTEST AGAINST LE PEN’S “GAS CHAMBER” COMMENT

in the arm.”^{xxi} Bachelot’s claim if true, might suggest intentional tactics of portraying Jews as an external “anti-French” group in order to stir the passions of far right supporters. In a 2001 *Jerusalem Post* report, it was argued that Jean-Marie Le Pen has successfully used “holocaust denial to focus media attention on his party and mobilize right-wing voters.”^{xxii} In fact, many media organizations within France and greater Europe seem quite happy to publicize his every anti-Semitic move. While believing that they are showing him in a negative light, the publicity may have an unintended effect of raising awareness of Le Pen and the FN instead. Moreover, it allows Le Pen to portray himself as a “victim” of what he occasionally refers to as the “Jewish media,”^{xxiii} a strategy which seems reminiscent of Drumont and the “conquering” Jew. Indeed, a 2002 letter to the editor in the *Spectator*, a U. K.-based syndicate noted

that “the French electorate do not believe that [Le Pen] is the ogre he is made out to be by the mass media.”^{xxiv} Certainly, by now the French people are accustomed to the latest FN and Le Pen Holocaust denial. Up until the 2007 French Presidential Election, the stigma against voting for Le Pen and the FN did not significantly affect their routine share of 10-15 percent of the vote.

“An opinion poll . . . found that 33 percent of FN supporters ‘disliked’ Jews—more than double of any other party surveyed.”

So, is the FN anti-Semitic? An opinion poll by the *Institut de sondages d'opinion et d'études de marché en France et en Europe* (CSA Institute) in 1995 found that 33 percent of FN supporters “disliked” Jews—more than double of any other party surveyed.^{xxv} Given the historical ties to anti-Semitic movements, the anti-Semitic language used by some in the party elite, and the rhetoric similar to historical anti-Semitic movements, this comes as no surprise. However seemingly prevalent anti-Semitism is in the FN, it is not a classical “institutional” anti-Semitism as its far-right ancestors like the *Action Française* were, and certainly, the political platform and agenda of the FN are not directed toward Jews unlike Drumont’s efforts. Rather, anti-Semitism in the FN is directed exclusively toward the French state and her history; furthermore, it is still partially used as a political scapegoat to explain political failures and to muster votes. Moreover, the FN has morphed this old tendency into a vehicle through which they are successfully able to generate controversy, publicity, and attention.

NATIONALISM

The French far right has historically found itself in a quandary when it comes to defining the idea of the French nation. The historian Pierre Birnbaum argued that politically right groups in the 19th century which believed in the “unchallengeable strength of the [French] state found it hard to tolerate the construction of a pluralist political democracy.”^{xxvi} Presently, a tension exists between electoral participation in a democratic and meritocratic Fifth Republic and a romantic desire for the strong state that once existed under the *Ancien Régime*—the time perceived by the far right as the “golden age” of France.^{xxvii} It comes as no surprise then that the Dreyfus Affair affirmed and reinforced many perceptions on the far right that the Jews were instrumental in betraying France to her greatest enemies. Edouard Drumont was quick to link Dreyfus to one of the definitions of a nation:

The Jews have done what they announced, and we must recognize that they have proceeded to this moral destruction of the French army with unequalled virtuosity.^{xxviii}

His sarcastic language of “moral destruction” and “virtuosity” reveal his mockery of Emile Zola’s earlier 1896 letter in which Zola says, “Let us enrich ourselves with [Jewish] virtues, since virtues they have.”^{xxix} Although nowhere near as stark, we see this political anti-Semitism manifested in the FN today. In 2002, Le Pen commented that President Chirac was ‘in the pay of Jewish organizations,’^{xxx} insinuating that both Chirac and the French state were being corrupted by an outside force.

In many ways, the tension with the far right boils down to different conceptions of citizenship. In the case of the Third Republic, Pierre Medes France, a prominent Jewish politician in the Socialist government of the early 20th century, emphasized, “true democracy is the intimate association, the fusion, of the state and the citizen.”^{xxxi} This statement is a fully inclusive definition of citizen and state, and this inclusiveness makes the citizen and the state wholeheartedly the same thing. P.M. France’s statement is con-

sistent with the general expansion of the French definition of citizenship and the state as the natural extension of all citizens and inevitably puts it on a collision course with the far right. For instance, the staunch Catholic writer for *Revue des Deux Mondes* and Académie française member Ferdinand Brunetière argued in 1899 that race and “Frenchness” are a product of “Latin” culture:

For us the French, is to be and remain Latins, Latins, in sentiment, Latins in morals, Latins in taste, Latins in spirit, Latins in language and Latins in thought.^{xxxii}

For Brunetière the idea of the “nation” is one rooted in common traditions of the past, and a true French citizen is rooted in a national French “soul” comprised of this unassailable and unchanging “Latins” cultural identity.^{xxxiii} Therefore for Brunetière, one’s citizenship, one’s “Frenchness,” is one’s race. This idea—and its full implications—manifests itself in the undertones of the FN. During the course of DeClair’s interviews with FN, one conversation is particularly illuminating:

One of his colleagues, a founding member of the Front, discusses her visit to an immigrant neighborhood in Paris: “There wasn’t a single white person. There were hundreds of people in the area, and there wasn’t one white person.” As she realizes the import of her comments, she stops and says, “I’m not talking about the color of one’s skin, I’m talking about their nationality.”^{xxxiv}

Clearly, this “founding member”—caught in the act of her racism—encapsulates the link in FN thinking linking a person’s racial identity and their supposed “nationality.”

These two dissimilar notions of nation and of “being French” lead to very different attitudes in the conceptions of society, culture, and government. Most of secular, modern France has no problem with a parliamentary democracy that espouses citizenship for all under law regardless of ethnic origin. Drumont, Brunetière, and the FN have core ideological disagreement with this conception of French

democracy because it includes people that, in their view, are incapable of understanding or participating in French culture and history and are therefore ineligible to be French citizens. Like Drumont’s own fears, these apprehensions seem rooted in insecurities of identity and belonging. Another interviewee of DeClair’s hits this cord when he says, “My . . . biggest fear is that we are losing our cultural identity for a sort of cultural melting pot which has no foundation.”^{xxxv} Furthermore, we see this core insecurity translated into common FN slogans, such as “putting our people first”^{xxxvi} and “we live in France and we have to remain French!”^{xxxvii} The FN, while participating fully in French democracy, has never been able to agree with the definition of citizen espoused and lauded by the modern French state. This often has FN supporters looking back in history for meaning and identity.

NOSTALGIA, MYTH, AND LIES

Intertwined with a healthy dose of nationalist sentiment, nostalgia for the way the far right *perceives* things once were has a long tradition in the French right political domain. Much of this nostalgic sentiment is tied to longing for the strong state, the *Ancien Régime*, and thus almost exclusively looks back to the period before the revolution. This tendency, like political anti-Semitism and nationalism, has its roots in the far right reaction to the Dreyfus Affair. A prime example of such is the previously mentioned figure Ferdinand Brunetière, who later framed the struggle of French identity as eternal conflict: “Our entire history can be interpreted in terms of the persistence of our effort to maintain, to claim, to defend . . . against the invaders from outside and the enemies from within.”^{xxxviii} It seems that Brunetière was conveying an identity based on separation from external “invaders” and internal “enemies,” most likely for him a group of Jews; this identity holds that *all* of French history has been about “maintaining” and laying “claim” to that separate identity. Brunetière was in effect, claiming that the definition of what a French citizen is has been *constant*, and that the battle to prevent any entity or group from changing, interrupting, or distorting



NATIONAL FRONT RIGHT-WING LEADER JEAN-MARIE LE PEN

that historical constant is the battle that defines what matters most—French identity.

As for carrying on this nostalgia in the FN, Jean-Marie Le Pen provides a great wealth of rhetoric. Beyond frequently alluding to Joan of Arc in his speeches (as the woman who “had the courage to say ‘no’ to a foreign invader”)^{xxxix}, we see a poignant illustration of his belief in the unchanging myth of France on his personal website:

My mother was a small peasant woman, a true salt of this earth person. She started tending cows at the young age of twelve, just as all my ancestors from the Morbihan region of Brittany had done since long before the French Revolution.^{xl}

By pointing to a period “before the French Revolution” and the region of Brittany, Le Pen is pointing to a time and place when his ancestors weren’t French at all—they were actually Bretons. Moreover, the Bretons didn’t even speak French; they spoke their own dialect, which is quite separate from the modern French language. Second, the “French Revolution” which he is effectively snubbing by alluding to an earlier pastoral time, is the very unifying movement that is responsible for his modern idea of what it is to be “French.” In short, he is caught in a paradox—the very thing that allows him to be “French” is the thing he desires to marginalize and avoid. Like much of the FN, he is pro-

jecting an ideal, a solution to his modern day insecurities, into the past and deriving from it a mythical and unchanging identity that, historically true or not, affirms his worldview.

This false belief in French identity often leads to a call to change those things in the present that do not correspond to this myth. Edouard Drumont exemplified this when he said, “Never has there been a more serious moment”^{xli} while attacking what he perceived as decadent Jewish elements that were destroying his perception of France. Le Pen is eerily similar when he says, “The Battle of France has already begun. It’s a battle of liberation, which must be won so that tomorrow, France can continue to be French.”^{xlii} Le Pen’s “battle” is a battle against those same decadent forces he and his party perceive as corrupting France, a France that has lost what *it is*, requiring “liberation”, a return to the old, constant myth of nation—a ‘victim mentally’ we’ve seen earlier with Drumont—all so that, akin to Brunetière’s thesis, “France can continue to be French.” In truth, France has never really been the France that Le Pen assumes it once was. Le Pen, like his historical predecessors, looks to project an idealized, mythic past in reaction to and as a comfort from the acute problems that have invaded and challenged his and the FN’s ultimately racist idea of the French nation.

THE FUTURE OF THE FRENCH

NATIONAL FRONT

As argued in this paper, many dimensions central to the human experience—insecurity, economics, immigration, history, identity—are intimately bound up and, in the case of the National Front, are inseparable from the racial tendencies the Front exhibits. The virulent anti-Semitism of the 19th century became the virulent anti-immigration of the FN today, for the Jew and the Immigrant represent the same threat to Front members’ perceived identities. Anti-Semitism remains a viable political tool to generate votes and publicity. The idea of the nation, too, never really changed, for the FN it is still inseparable from one’s race, and is antithetical to modern conceptions of nation and cit-

izenship. The ideal of the past forms the core of their identity; they reject, wall-off, and marginalize many other viewpoints and people of the world. The myth of the past becomes the litmus test for what is agreeable in the modern world, and it becomes the standard for how they seek to change it.

The FN performed badly in the 2007 French Presidential Election—amassing only 11 percent of the vote on the first round.^{xliiii} It was certainly a poorer showing than the 2002 election that witnessed the Front and Le Pen make it to the second round of voting. Many were surprised by this turn of events, although many reasons were given to explain the results. For one, polls indicated that many who may have in the past voted for Le Pen chose this time to vote for victorious UMP center-right candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, who had campaigned by employing similar “France for the French” rhetoric as Le Pen in discussing hot-button issues like immigration and the integration of minorities in French society. This was so apparent that Le Pen himself accused Sarkozy of “stealing his ideas” and demanded him to stop. For many, Sarkozy was a candidate that spotlighted many FN voters concerns, and did so without the baggage, stigma, and crassness of Le Pen. The FN may have suffered an electoral defeat in the latest election, but some of the ideas they advocated as a fringe party have now become a part of mainstream French politics. The following months and years of the Sarkozy presidency will show whether his election rhetoric matches his policy and vision of France.

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