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France

The Dangers of Detoxification

- Debate - Fascism -

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The FN's new image doesn't mean the far-right party had a change of heart â€" it means the mainstream has accepted its program.

Almost every article about Marine Le Pen's National Front (FN) makes some reference to her party's supposed dédiabolisation. Generally translated as "detoxification," this "de-demonization" strategy has more to do with neutralizing attacks on the party than with purifying the organization.

We've heard the media's detoxification narrative over and over: a fringe group has cleaned up its act and joined the political mainstream, becoming a party like any other. The liberal press has been telling itself this story for years, uncritically relaying assertions that the FN has got rid of "the knee-jerk racists," offering up fawning profiles of party figureheads, and imagining that Marine Le Pen took a principled stand against her father Jean-Marie's antisemitism. A recent article described her niece, the profoundly homophobic and racist Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, as "a political star. Beautiful and fervently Catholic."

Countless reports describe the rift between Marine and her father, but very few mention the fact that a â‚¬6 million loan from Jean-Marie bankrolled her presidential campaign.

Le Pen's recent claim that France bears no responsibility for the 1942 roundup of over thirteen thousand Jews at a Paris velodrome should remind everyone taking these detoxification claims at face value that when it comes to the FN, all is not as it seems.

The men, women, and children held at the Vélodrome d'Hiver went to French internment camps and then Auschwitz. The roundup, or *rafle*, is just one example of the collaborationist Vichy regime's active engagement in the Holocaust, which built on a long tradition of organized far-right antisemitism in France. This led to the deportation of an estimated seventy-six thousand Jews. French police and officials conducted the *rafle*, aided by members of the fascist Parti Populaire Français (PPF). The state refused to recognize it as a French crime until more than fifty years later, when President Chirac admitted the nation's responsibility in 1995.

Le Pen defended her statement, saying that she was simply reiterating former president François Mitterrand's and other state representatives' positions. While this is partially correct, it doesn't tell the full story. Why would the leading candidate in the first-round polls, especially one apparently hellbent on cleaning up her party's image, even go there?

The controversy comes just as the mainstream right is trying to reframe the national narrative. Les Républicains candidate François Fillon famously claimed that France should not feel guilty about its former colonies: it did not invent slavery, and it was just trying to "share its culture" with the people of Africa, Asia, and North America. This is part of the Right's broader strategy of ridding itself of its "complexes" and acting "without inhibition," notably by rehabilitating France's imperial past.

The FN has been working on this same project for decades. Its concern, however, goes beyond acting without inhibition: the party also wants to provoke. Indeed, Jean-Marie Le Pen built his notoriety on this, describing the Holocaust as a "detail" of World War II, making "puns" about gas ovens, and asserting that the Nazi occupation of France was "not inhumane." In 1989, when he debated the Jewish minister of immigration, Lionel Stoléru, he responded to the minister's description of police raids to combat illegal immigration with "You could organize a *rafle*"

When Marine Le Pen defended the Vichy regime, she was reacting to today's political context, in which the FN must position itself in relation to an increasingly radical mainstream right. But whenever the Front addresses this period in French history, it evokes its own traditions and origins, embedded in antisemitism and negationism, collaboration, racism, colonialism, and fascism.

The National Front's Fascist Roots

The vast majority of academics and journalists writing on the National Front have avoided giving an explicit answer to one question: how and when did the FN stop being fascist? They implicitly answer it in one of two ways. Some categorize fascism as a uniquely interwar phenomenon, ruling out the possibility of a contemporary fascist formation.

Others point to the organization's new "respectable" image. Both explanations share a basic complacency about liberal democracy: having defeated fascism and eradicated the conditions for its resurgence, liberalism can now absorb and domesticate any "extremist" challenge. This helps explain the eagerness to accept the detoxification narrative.

When the FN formed in 1972, the party leadership consisted of ex-Vichy militiamen, former Waffen-SS officers, veterans of the fight against Algerian independence, and activists from organizations that span the history of French fascism, from the PPF to postwar revolutionary nationalist groups like Jeune Nation and Ordre Nouveau. Even setting aside those who actually fought for the Charlemagne division of the Waffen-SS â€" the last to defend Hitler's bunker â€" you would be hard pressed to find a group with more direct links to the fascist tradition.

The Ordre Nouveau leaders who founded the FN had a clear vision: they wanted to make fascism relevant again. We know this because, for over a decade, the protagonists went to great lengths, in various books and publications, to analyze how revolutionary nationalism might rebuild itself in the postwar period.One assessment summed up the consensus: circumstances had changed, and "[i]f the fascist flame is to burn again, it cannot do so in the same way."

Many of the FN's founders, like Jean-Marie Le Pen's former right-hand man François Duprat, had belonged to Jeune Nation. Dominique Venner, a former member of the paramilitary Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), which waged a terrorist campaign against Algerian independence, was a leading member of the group. Followers compared Venner's analysis of revolutionary nationalism's prospects to Lenin's What Is to Be Done?.

In 1958, Jeune Nation warned its members not to frighten new or young recruits with subjects that might shock them. For example, they should never mention the *métèque* (foreigner or race) issue in connection with gas ovens, "whatever measures we will have to take once in power." They advised activists to explain that Jeune Nation's revolution would make the nation's enemies pay a heavy price, but there was no need to indicate that it would result in tens of thousands of deaths. The far right has been detoxifying for some time.

These postwar analyses laid the foundation for the National Front. Revolutionary nationalists would have to adapt to new circumstances. Their politics were defined by goals, not means. Identifying with Hitler's and Mussolini's regimes would get them nowhere. The Left represented less of a threat in the postwar period; the state had become stronger and the economy more stable. All this made society less polarized.

Armed mobilizations would no longer lead to power. Far-right activists had to prove that they could run â€" rather than overthrow â€" the modern state. They needed to break out of their "ghetto" and recruit among broader layers of the population. An electoral front would allow them to reach peripheral supporters and "transform them in our image."

Victor Barthelémy served as the party's national secretary in the mid-1970s. A former communist, he had worked for the Comintern in the late 1920s before becoming a leading member of Jacques Doriot's PPF. In fact, he was serving as the PPF's general secretary when hundreds of its members took part in the Vel' d'Hiver *rafle*. After the war he helped run the fascist review *Défense de l'Occident (Defense of the West*) with Duprat and Maurice Bardèche, working closely with Le Pen over Algeria and in the 1965 election campaign. Barthélemy worked with Duprat to establish the FN's structure, basing it on the PPF model of a centralized party supplemented by satellite organizations.

At Duprat's instigation, the Front's platform focused on immigration, stressing economic and social questions rather than issues of racial purity. The organization presented itself as the social, popular, and national right. As Nicolas Lebourg and Joseph Beauregard have shown, Duprat came up with Le Pen's slogans: "Voters will always prefer the original to the copy," and the Nazi-inspired, "A million unemployed are a million immigrants too many."

Jean-Marie Le Pen freely acknowledged that the party included currents that had historically constituted the French extreme right, from royalists to revolutionary nationalists.

Duprat himself did not believe that a nationalist revolution was on the immediate agenda, but he did believe that the Front represented the best way to get to one. Like Bardèche, he played a major role in promoting Holocaust denial, publishing a translation of British National Front member Richard Verrall's *Did Six Million Really Die*?.

Detoxification

The 2002 election represented a significant turning point in the FN's development. Jean-Marie Le Pen made it through to the second round, where Jacques Chirac roundly defeated him. Two separate but mutually reinforcing trajectories unfolded in the aftermath of this election: the mainstream right's radicalization and the far right's supposed detoxification.

Chirac's inner circle saw his overwhelming victory as a "May '68 for the Right" and were anxious to capitalize on it. They believed that they could make secularism, hitherto the Left's terrain, their own. Chirac set up a commission whose deliberations lead to the 2004 law that banned the hijab in schools, institutionalizing an Islamophobic spiral that shows no sign of relenting, as last summer's ludicrous burkini ban demonstrated.

Nicolas Sarkozy became the dominant political figure of the first decade of the new century. Some claimed that his 2007 presidential victory showed that he had neutralized the FN by occupying its terrain. Ultimately, however, his hyperactive, authoritarian racism merely legitimized the Front, paving the way for its resurgence in 2012, when Marine Le Pen won the FN's highest vote to date.

The Front, meanwhile, took the 2002 defeat badly. The party failed to break through the 20 percent barrier in the second round and then performed poorly in the 2007 election. Some leading members saw Jean-Marie Le Pen's image as a problem. When Marine Le Pen took over the party, she made detoxification a feature of her leadership, expelling some fascist elements and distancing herself from her father's overt antisemitism. But this rhetorical shift needs to be seen in context. Since 2002, an intensification of three processes have changed the coordinates of French politics.

First, the Socialist Party (PS) has embraced an authoritarian security agenda. France has been under a permanent state of emergency since late 2015. When a Socialist government pushes to incorporate the state of emergency into

the constitution and strip French nationality from those convicted of terrorism, the FN's draconian authoritarianism â€" and the threat it poses to democracy â€" no longer appears so dangerous.

Second, the mainstream right has radicalized. Unable to secure enthusiastic consent for neoliberal economic policies, the Sarkozy agenda focused on issues that boosted the FN: national identity, law and order, immigration, and Islamophobia. The development of a radical social authoritarianism among mainstream right voters was expressed most dramatically in mobilizations against gay marriage in 2013 but also in rising racist attitudes among right-wing voters and an increasing readiness to back the FN in second-round electoral contests against the Socialists.

Finally, secularism has mutated into a tool of bigotry, making racism, particularly Islamophobia, respectable. This goes beyond hate speech and reinforces established tropes in FN propaganda: identifying an enemy within that needs to be isolated and repressed; stigmatizing immigrants and their descendants in cultural-religious rather than in racial terms; designating the *banlieues* as "lost territories" inhabited by unassimilable, lawless, antisemitic, and misogynist potential terrorists.

As Robert Paxton has underlined, themes are less important for fascist organizations than their function. The rightward shift in mainstream politics has validated longstanding features of the French far right's ideology, but not necessarily in their original form. These include a sense of national decline that requires regeneration through strong leadership and suspicion of an "anti-France," untrustworthy and unruly elements loyal to a foreign power that demand constant vigilance and policing. We should understand the public distance the FN has taken from antisemitism in this context: when part of the stigmatization and isolation of Muslims relies on labeling them antisemites, the FN simply has no need to detract from this.

In this radicalizing environment, the Front, aided by an indulgent media, has been able to create the illusion of moderation. As Nonna Mayer has shown, while racist attitudes among right-wing voters are on the rise, their radicalization is comfortably outstripped by FN sympathizers (people who vote for the party and identify with it but are not members). More than eight out of ten FN sympathizers describe themselves as racist, three-quarters have a negative view of Muslims, over half express "very strong" antisemitic views, and a third neither consider Jews to be fully French nor object to the phrase "dirty Jew." Indeed, antisemitism among this hard core of the FN electorate has increased under Marine Le Pen's leadership. With detoxification like this, who needs radicalization?

The FN has prospered from wider developments as well, including the return of Cold War myths targeting an "enemy within" and the revival of colonial tropes that depict an unassimilable "other," both of which breed an authoritarian security agenda. Of course, the nation-state has always defined itself by what it excludes, resorting to moral panics and the creation of internal enemies in order to assert its authority in times of crisis. What has changed in modern French politics is the consensus around security and secularism.

By championing a reactionary form of secularism that excludes Muslims, the mainstream right has paved the way for Marine Le Pen to credibly adopt a republican mantle, creating endless possibilities for her party to push for further discrimination against Muslims.

The first presidential debate between the five leading candidates underlined the trap that significant sections of the Left have fallen into by accommodating this drift. The radical left candidate â€" republican nationalist Jean-Luc Mélenchon â€" reminded everyone that he supported Chirac's 2004 ban on conspicuous religious symbols in schools. He then tried to take Le Pen to task for wanting to outlaw the hijab on the street. Did she want the police to scrutinize what everyone was wearing? Le Pen's reply highlighted the scope that republican accommodation has given to Islamophobic escalation: "We already do that in schools."

As far as the FN is concerned, if racism and authoritarian nationalism can be asserted in a respectable republican guise, why do it any other way?

The “catastrophe of the twentieth century,” as Domenico Losurdo has argued, was not “a new barbarian invasion that unexpectedly attacked and overwhelmed a healthy, happy society.” Fascism developed in an era of mass political confrontation, war, revolution, and colonial expansion. It adapted to fill available space. Its uniforms, elitism, anti-egalitarianism, notions of racial hierarchy, and, later, its concentration camps and mass exterminations, did not fall from the sky â€” they drew on the legacy of imperial and colonial rule that liberal democracy had already normalized.

Fascism did not appear with a fully formed essence or fixed ideology. Its politics were forged in relation to rivals and circumstances. As Michel Dobry has shown, fascism does not simply exist, it develops. Today, the FN is doing precisely what the postwar fascist milieu set out to do in the 1970s: adapt the fascist legacy to the space available to it, reach out to a broad spectrum of voters and then “transform them in our image.”

The associative networks and social circles that shape the FN’s internal culture, in which deputies and mayors mix with members of extreme-right groups like the Bloc Identitaire and the Groupe Union Défense (GUD), facilitate this process. The Rassemblement Bleu Marine (RBM), an FN satellite organization, allows the party to cultivate relationships not just with high-profile figures like Gilbert Collard and Robert Ménard, but also with the monarchists, revolutionary nationalists, and identitairesoperating in the party’s orbit. RBM candidates have included members of the reactionary secular group, Riposte laÃ¯que, which proposes an ‘Islamectomie” to deal with France’s Muslim population.

What Kind of Threat?

In 2013 former Jeune Nation leader Dominique Venner shot himself in the Notre Dame cathedral, evoking the threat to French civilization posed by gay marriage and the “great replacement,” a theory popular on the extreme right whereby white European stock is being replaced by Muslim immigrants. Marine Le Pen responded to his death with a tweet: “All our respect to Dominique Venner, whose final, eminently political gesture is a wake-up call to the people of France.”

The FN does not have an organized armed wing and cannot mobilize hundreds of thousands on the streets. Does this mean it poses no threat to democracy? Or simply that, like its founders, the party does not believe that the route to power requires an organizational form that can rival the state?

After the Front made its first electoral breakthrough in the 1980s, many expressed concerns about the danger of an FN president with access to the Fifth Republic’s various authoritarian aspects. Most worrisome was Article 16, which grants the president the right to take “exceptional measures” when French institutions and territory are considered under threat.

These dangers are much greater today. The ongoing state of emergency gives police the right to conduct raids, seize data, and place individuals under house arrest without judicial authorization. Demonstrations can be banned, curfews imposed, institutions closed down, and the media censored. Human rights groups have warned that such excessive and disproportionate restrictions are leading to a “permanent state of securitization.”

The detoxification narrative has obscured the threat posed by the FN in a climate where those implementing the state

of emergency are themselves radicalizing. Last year, police officers took to the streets to demand greater protection, security, and resources. They also faced strong criticism for their particularly heavy-handed response to protests against unpopular workplace legislation. This year, a number of injuries and deaths at the hands of officers have added to the impression that the police believe they can act with impunity.

A lawyer representing a police officer accused of using his baton to rape a young black man â€" an assault so violent that the victim needed major surgery on a ten-centimeter wound to his rectum â€" claimed that the baton had entered his anus "by accident." A police investigation did not find significant evidence of rape. In a television interview about conflicts between the police and minority youth, a union representative remarked that the racist epithet *bamboula* was "more or less acceptable." More than half of France's police force votes National Front.

Some FN members and supporters believe that a coming crisis will require the intervention of an authoritarian force in the shape of their party. Others believe that they can win power through existing institutions, forging alliances with the mainstream right's socially authoritarian and radicalizing elements. These tensions form part of the process of the party's development and that of the extreme right across Europe.

In Italy, Gianfranco Fini's acceptance of alliances with the mainstream led to the eventual absorption of the Alleanza Nazionale into the party system, despite the strong fascist allegiances among the organization's membership. The Front will likely resist such alliances, preserving its credentials as an authoritarian alternative to the mainstream and retaining the potential for both radicalization and absorption.

This process of development, combining respectability with an outsider status, can be interrupted, thrown off course, disrupted by various factors, not least the actions of its opponents. To be effective this is going to require much more than abstract appeals to antiracist sentiment and the values of the Republic.

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Jacobin