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French Far-Right Trajectories: Against a Multiculturalism that Dare not Speak its Name

France is a peculiar place as far as multiculturalism is concerned. In his 1997 book *On Toleration*, Michael Walzer classified France as a “complicated case,” being both a classic nation-state and one of Europe’s leading immigration societies.¹ Official figures are hard to come by; about 140,000 legally recognized immigrants arrive in France each year, not counting foreign students. More than 100,000 people acquire French citizenship each year. According to an official report published by the High Council for Integration in 2011, one out of five people living in France is an immigrant or has at least one immigrant parent.² But France does not see itself as a pluralist or multicultural society. Its anomaly thus lies in the “physical presence and conceptual absence of cultural difference” (quoting Walzer again). According to the 1958 Constitution, “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs.”

The often invoked values of the Republic include liberty—understood as “self-determination through the exercise of individual autonomy,” according to political theorist Cécile Laborde³—and equality of all citizens or residents before the law, no matter what their cultural, ethnic or religious background may be. Citizens enter the public sphere unfettered by their choices or identities in terms of culture, gender or religion, which are understood to be private. Affirmative action or the recognition of particular rights for specific cultural groups are rather unthinkable in the Republican doxa.

According to the report quoted above, the French model of integration does work, one of the most visible examples being the national football team that won the

¹ Walzer, Michael. 1997. *On Toleration*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

² Haut Conseil à l’Intégration. 2011. *La France sait-elle encore intégrer les immigrants ? Bilan de la politique d’intégration en France depuis vingt ans et perspectives*. Paris.

³ Laborde, Cécile. 2001. The Culture(s) of the Republic: Nationalism and Multiculturalism in French Republican Thought. *Political Theory* 29 (5): 716-735.

1998 World Cup. More than a decade has passed however, and the 2005 riots in various French towns have brought the malaise of parts of the immigrant population to international media attention. Twenty per cent of all immigrants, most of them of extra-European origin, live in the 750 euphemistically named “sensitive urban zones” (three of them here in Nanterre, by the way), zones that have been all but deserted by the middle classes and are characteristically composed of often run-down social housing estates. Unemployment is twice as high as the national average, and concerns about 30 per cent of those under 30 years of age (2009). Crime rates are significant. Half of the people living in these zones would like to leave if they could.⁴

This context of not officially constituted or recognized, but spatially often segregated and highly visible cultural or ethnic communities on French soil has had an impact on elections in France. In 2002, the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen came through to the second round of the presidential elections, obtaining more than 17 per cent of the vote, so far the greatest success of the French *Front National* party with its anti-immigration platform. Five years later, Nicolas Sarkozy—who had famously declared that he intended to cleanse the suburban zones with high-pressure cleaning equipment— became president. Earlier this year, Marine Le Pen managed to surpass her father’s 2002 result by mobilizing 6.4 million voters, i.e. about 18 per cent of the electorate.

What message do these citizens wish to bring across concerning France’s conundrum of effective cultural pluralism faced with strict political egalitarianism? What is their criticism of the specific French brand of multiculturalism? Of course, these 6.4 million voters do not agree with every single item in the official party programme, and that is not necessarily where the answers can be found.

There is a strong stigma attached to voting on the far right. Many do not even admit to their electoral choices in anonymous opinion polls so that pollsters have started adding a few extra percentage points to projected far-right results in order to compensate for the shame factor. In some professional milieus, it would be highly risky, if not suicidal, to admit to voting for the far-right party, particularly in education, culture and the media. The Internet often remains the only space where far-right sympathizers can express themselves freely, under the cover of anonymity. A sizeable sphere of far-right or reactionary websites has developed in France these recent years, often committed to “re-informing” the supposedly dis-informed public by highlighting problems related to extra-European immigration. The most prominent of these sites is

⁴ Heurtel, H el ene. 2010. L’ins ecurit e dans les quartiers d’habitat social: quelles r ealit es? Report, 497. Paris: Institut d’am enagement et d’urbanisme, Ile-de-France.

the rather untranslatable “fdesouche.com,” an allusion to the racist expression “Français de souche,” a Frenchman of ancient French stock, as opposed to a French person of foreign origin.

Since September 2008, this site has invited citizens to explain why they have started to consider voting for the extreme right. Criticism of multiculturalism is expressly asked for: “Not so long ago, you still believed in it, you were even persuaded—of human brotherhood, the festive multicultural society, of France, a land of welcome, enriched by cultural diversity, republican integration, tolerance....Today you can’t escape reality anymore” goes the opening text in this section. More than 500 people have answered this call and told their political life-story to a sympathetic audience. Some have always voted for the extreme right, others not yet and some do not think they ever will. Many have travelled from the political left to the right and give their reasons for this change of mind. These stories bristle with everyday observations in the street, on public transportation, in the family setting, in school or at the workplace. There are of course some methodological caveats here: Does anonymity promote honesty or on the contrary does it rather prevent truthfulness? When the accounts refer to known events, fact-checking is simple; for private experiences, it is practically impossible. Some contributors give their age, their gender, their occupation and place of residence; others do not, which does not necessarily make their stories less vivid. My makeshift solution has been to take these stories for no more than what they are, i.e. narratives about political conversions or awakenings, sometimes full of suffering and anxious soul-searching, sometimes self-righteous and outright racist, often written in a caustic, ironic and deliberately provocative style.

So how do these far right voters perceive multicultural, yet republican France? Their life stories reveal above all a systematically ethnic vision of French society. As a result, they do not see “immigrants” as a monolithic category. *I A N* writes:

I am a daughter of Armenian immigrants, my grand-parents escaped the genocide with its 1.5 million victims and were welcomed in France. My parents were born in France, they started working at age 12, first helping their parents who were shoemakers and tailors. They never fooled around at night, after work they slept out of exhaustion. Like all their friends at that time, mostly children of Italians who worked with their fathers in construction.” Through hard work, her parents were eventually able to move to a better neighbourhood and to send their children to university. Even more explicitly, *Franek* says, “France was built by immigrants, that is true. But useful immigrants like my grand-parents, those who came from Poland

and Germany to dig the coal out of the ground, who died from silicosis or alcoholism before reaching 60. I've grown up close to the mines, shared a room with two others, we were struggling to pay the bills, but I was educated by dignified, intelligent parents who transmitted some values to me. Even if we did not eat meat all the time, I've always had books, and I learnt to respect everybody...

People like *I A N* or *Franek* tell successful assimilation stories which they compare to today's examples of failed integration. During what has been called the "thirty glorious years," from 1945 to 1973, upward social mobility was comparatively easy to achieve for skilled or unskilled workers, and arguably there might have been less discrimination against immigrants of European and Asian origin, who are paraded as positive examples in these types of narratives. For the far-right sympathizers, however, the difference between "useful" and "useless," good and bad immigrants, is purely cultural. They attribute success to the values transmitted in immigrant families: love of work, ambition, discipline, respect for the host country and only modest demands—many, even without any immigration background, emphasize the simple living conditions of their own or their parents' childhood in apartments offering less amenities than those in today's social housing park.

Culture and ethnic background also account for disturbing or shocking behaviour in these stories. Many contributors to this question thread affirm that "always the same" people cause them trouble. *S*, who had grown up in a small provincial town, learnt several languages and used to be curious about people from other countries, moved to Paris as a PhD student. Once she arrived in the capital, everything that bothered her was somehow related to extra-European immigrants. A woman and her many children living in the apartment next to her student pad would not stop screaming; another woman answered her mobile phone in the cinema and talked loudly in an African language for half an hour; *S* was insulted for being white; her neighbours would throw their rubbish out of the window "like in the Middle Ages;" in the Social Security agency, she saw a man jump the queue and slap the employee because he could not get free medical cover. *S* concludes:

In short, although I used to be stubborn and refused to acknowledge reality, I've seen too much in Paris to continue lying to myself. The different cultures do not live together, they only face each other. I used to think that the French population was a rich and colourful mosaic, but in reality it is only an absurd jigsaw puzzle the pieces of which do not fit together. For the first time in my

life, I registered on the electoral roll and I voted FN at the presidential elections.

Similarly, *nemesis* “woke up to reality” when his family moved to the Paris area: “For me, it was brutal. When I was 13, we moved to the Parisian suburbs. A little Arab spat on our piano downstairs, in front of the building. And then, regularly, my little brother would come home with injuries, people spat on him and insulted him, saying ‘dirty Frenchman.’ That was in 1987, right in the middle of the Mitterrand era.”

Minor misconduct, ignorance of unwritten social rules (such as being silent in the cinema), fights among children or young people happen every day and can be rather easily dismissed as isolated cases unrelated to any cultural factors. Other far-right voters however worry about more fundamental disagreements. *Eric* says:

My conversion took place about ten years ago and little by little it progresses... that’s logical, I can’t keep trying not to see what’s in front of my eyes every day.

Like so many other people of my generation, I used to be naturally ‘tolerant’ (i.e. ‘an idiot’, I’d say now, let’s not be afraid of the word), for I had been deluded for years by the nice discourse of the Mitterrandist left of the 1980s: a favourable view of immigration which supposedly leads us to a multicultural society, the respect of ethnic differences with the joy and good humour of a music festival... But then it was precisely my own difference that caused a problem for them, those so-called victims of ambient racism... I’m homosexual, without being ashamed nor proud of what I am, that’s what I am and that’s all, and I’m trying to accept what I am without bothering half the planet with my sexuality which I can live in discretion, with respect, without wanting that families, marriage, values disappear, without behaving in a provocative way.

I used to live in the suburbs where I could feel the profound hatred of the Arabs: rejection, repeated insults, threats... I thought that this was only meant for me and what I stood for. Then I forgot about it. Today I live in one of the nice parts of Paris with lots of well-intentioned left-wing people who have never ventured out of the centre of Paris and can’t possibly understand these dangers [...]

Reality is there however and will eventually catch up with us: I notice an increasing number of veiled women in the streets and in public transport. My

recent business trip to Les Mureaux⁵ has left me speechless and has reminded me that our dear liberties only hang by a thread. [...]

A number of narratives focus on an alleged lack of respect for women, the aged, and people with disabilities. *Soso*, another young woman, relates:

Then I moved to Paris and every time I was being hassled, harassed, insulted, chatted up in an unpleasant way it was by tanned people...incapable of respecting white women who are in their home country though, here in France (and then I'm a brunette, I do not even dare to imagine what blond and red-haired women go through). So that really disgusted me, but I've learnt to live with that...

Until the day before yesterday...what do I see...an Arab who spits a disabled woman into the face because she did not give way to him fast enough on an escalator. That's disgusted me all day long and I still feel uneasy about it.

There are other stories about old women who are pushed from the sidewalk into the gutter by proud North African immigrant women going to the market with their prams, or this conversion story featuring a dying old man, told by his grandson:

I didn't worry very much about these problems, actually I didn't think about them at all! I thought that they were only secondary phenomena blown out of proportion by the media. That's what I believed until the day when my grandfather who was very ill had to be taken to the hospital in Trappes.⁶ When I tried to put a stop to the ululation and permanent screaming in the hallways, I was confronted with the racism, the contempt and hyper-aggressiveness of those families who I only asked in the most diplomatic way possible if they could make a bit of silence for my dying grandfather. [...] My grandfather died ten kilometres from his birthplace, this June, listening to ululations. He didn't have any resentment, he just didn't understand.

Whatever the part of reality in these stories may be, they are told because they are deemed to illustrate a historical change, the passing away of the France of old and the arrival of a new population on French soil which does not show much respect for the people it is about to "replace," to use far-right terminology. There is a sheer quantitative aspect to this; many potential far-right voters relate the surprise and shock

⁵ A small town west of Paris known for its housing estates built between the 1950s and the 1970s, as well as its high unemployment and crime rates.

⁶ A small town west of Paris with more than 60 percent social housing and a high proportion of inhabitants descended from immigrants.

of being the only white person on a bus or in their housing estates, which amplifies the impression of a massive arrival of extra-European immigrants.

Some additional factors contribute to make these immigrant communities appear like a threat. Pointing out the difference, explaining “the French way of doing things” and asking for respect does not always seem to help, as when *Gondy* asked for silence in the hospital. Many far-right sympathizers have the impression that a significant proportion of immigrants do not want to integrate French society. *Jobert* says:

Yes I admit, I believed in it.

I believed in an ‘open’ society.

I believed in ‘one flag, three colours’.

I believed that any immigrant could assimilate in France.

I’ve grown up in a more or less left-wing or even communist environment, I’ve also always believed that the State plays an important role in society (I still believe that but the state in question needs to work in favour of its own people), that we need to redistribute wealth to those who need it (but letting people manage their own money), what you would call a left-wing vision. [...]

What made me change my mind?

Reality.

The reality of immigrants who I’m sorry to say don’t assimilate (apart from some rare exceptions) and who reject the culture of my beautiful country.

The reality of my secondary school in the suburbs where groups of students were separated along ethnic lines [...]

The gratuitous violence of gangs.

The loss of orientation in this country where it’s better to say that my grandfather is Italian than that the three other ancestors are French. [...]

That’s what has cut me off from traditional politics.

Second, a minority of immigrants does not only seem to be indifferent to or to reject French ways of life, but even to demonstrate their hatred of the host country. The 2001 football match pitting France against Algeria in a Paris stadium is often cited as a case in point: the French anthem was booed by a public of largely immigrant origin,

many of whom had French citizenship. When it was clear that the Algerian team was losing, supporters invaded the pitch and threw various objects on the ministers sitting in the presidential box, lightly injuring two of them. *Moi Mad* explains: "As for me, it clearly was the France-Algeria match on 6 October 2001! Before that I thought they would end up being good French citizens eventually. That day I understood that we are not the same. Our cultures are too different to be mixable. And so, if we do not defend our culture, their culture will impose itself in France." Many far-right sympathizers also perceive what they think are hateful looks in the street or on public transportation; they relate cases of violence against civil servants such as fire fighters, or the burning of schools and libraries close to housing estates with a mostly immigrant population. How is a multicultural society supposed to "work" peacefully if the moral imperative to respect other cultures is not universally valid? *Eric* adds, "Our leaders are wrong and deceive us when they stress the respect of the Other because the Other does not have any for us, nor for what we are." Of course, there is an obvious confusion between a certain male suburban youth culture, groups of young men who astutely play with religious and ethnic codes, and whole communities. Far-right supporters such as *Eric* have a static and essentialist view of culture, they assume that the behaviour of a few is emblematic of the aspirations of entire communities, and that these groups have never changed and never will.

Third, and for many worst of all, the governing elites and the mainstream media seem to ignore or downplay the problem and thus to collaborate with those supposedly uncompromising or even downright hostile immigrant communities. When *Gondy* asked the hospital director for help, he was criticised for being racist. "The heralds of extreme tolerance are the greatest danger," he concludes.

While ordinary citizens perceive a threat to French ways of living, to "civilisation" as a whole, while they highlight abuse directed against homosexuals or women and thus against liberal values, mainstream politicians and journalists and probably a large proportion of the French public would accuse them of being racist, focusing on ethnic criteria and stigmatizing entire communities. As a result, any references to ethnic or cultural aspects in problematic contexts have become impossible.⁷

In a blurring of left–right distinctions, far-right sympathizers claim to defend the heritage of the Enlightenment against "Islamofascism," as well as the Republican values

⁷ That is probably why many respondents in Pierre Bourdieu's early 1990s study about the social malaise in France felt that it was necessary to frame any reference to ethnicity with a formula such as "I'm not racist, but..." Cf. Bourdieu, Pierre, with others. 1993. *La misère du monde*. Paris: Seuil.

of equality and freedom. They are faced with what they perceive as culture-blind elites who choose to ignore the “danger” or even deliberately promote the arrival of cheap immigrant labour so as to keep salaries down. *Desperado* sums up this dichotomy when he says:

I’m a died-in-the-wool Republican and a convinced Democrat, and in that way I’m an extremist in favour of equal treatment of their behaviour and nothing else.

In other words, I’m up in arms against the silencing of certain incidents in the media pretending that if you analyse them thoroughly that could lead to the stigmatisation of this or that ethnic group.

I find the deliberate blindness of the political, intellectual and media class is scandalous and inadmissible; they deny the evidence such as the explosion of racism in all its forms in today’s society, particularly anti-white racism.

I can’t explain this blameworthy apathy. It creates a deep gap between the society which our ‘elites’ describe and the reality experienced by us, the poor average citizens.

Multiculturalism, many far-right sympathizers say, is a nice utopia that works for the highly educated, well-off citizens who like to travel, enjoy world music and world food, but are shielded from the inconsiderate, violent, disrespectful or racist behaviour that a part of the less well-to-do French citizens associate with North African and African immigration. Multiculturalism is a “nice dream” for some, a “nightmare” for others. The perception of the multicultural society that France has become is radically different: mainstream thought and the educational system would point to colonial history and identify a moral obligation to repair any damage brought upon the colonized African populations and by extension their descendants living in France. Far-right sympathizers would turn this discourse around and claim victim status for the French who are being “colonized” by African immigrants, and will possibly become a minority in their own country. Multiculturalism implies the issue of an explicit or implicit hierarchy among the communities sharing a territory. Far-right sympathizers ask a tongue-in-cheek question: does “French civilisation,” however defined, deserve special protection measures, being an “endangered indigenous culture”?

A more serious question would be: if “Frenchness” or “French civilisation” is inextricably linked with the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, should we not conclude that it is of superior value than the cultures of any groups or communities that

negate these ideas?⁸ In itself, the question shows how short the distance between liberalism and racist extremism can be. In other, more positive words, it shows that there is common ground between the majority of French citizens and a part of the increasing minority that votes for the extreme right. If those far-right voters who believe in liberal and Republican values can express their views on immigration publicly and submit them to debate instead of hiding on far-right websites where nobody will contradict them, there would probably be less danger of them becoming ever more radical and obsessed with ethnic differences.

If there are any policy recommendations to draw from this close-up look at French far-right voters, the first and foremost would probably be to examine the language that is used to talk about immigration in the media and mainstream politics: “cultural diversity,” an “opportunity for France” and now even “multiculturalism” are perceived as ironic euphemisms that hide obvious problems. For a long time, most media in France have adopted a policy of politically correct reporting or even silencing of certain incidents, thinking that this would avoid the stigmatization of particular ethnic groups. It seems that the opposite is the case: lack of information has created an underground media sphere where facts are not checked and conspiracy theories may run wild. Drawing the lost Republican sheep back in the mainstream would start with a free flow of information and an open debate which would attempt to resolve the conflicting truth claims surrounding the benefits of multiculturalism.

⁸ A stance called “identity liberalism” by political philosopher Adam Tebble, cf. Tebble, Adam James. 2006. Exclusion for Democracy. *Political Theory* 3 (4): 463-487. Quentin Gausset, Justin Kenrick and Robert Gibb raise a related question: on what grounds are we to decide whether one indigenous or autochthonous claim is more legitimate than another? Political neutrality seems virtually impossible here. Gausset, Quentin, Justin Kenrick and Robert Gibb. 2011. Indigeneity and autochthony: a couple of false twins? *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale* 19 (2):135-142.