



EXPLAINING THE RISE OF THE FRONT NATIONAL

Political Rhetoric or Cultural Insecurity?

Arthur Goldhammer
Harvard University

Laurent Bouvet, *L'Insécurité culturelle* (Paris: Fayard, 2015).

Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots: Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

No aspect of French political life has attracted more attention in recent years than the rise of the Front national (FN) under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. As recently as 2007, many observers thought the FN was on its last legs. In the first round of that year's presidential election, the party's then leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, received just over 10 percent of the vote, sharply down from his showing in 2002 (over 16 percent). By the time the 2007 campaign was over, the party's coffers were depleted, and its headquarters building had to be sold to pay off creditors.

Nicolas Sarkozy, who won the presidency that year, was credited with having devised a strategy that finally resolved the dilemma the FN posed for the governmental right. By taking a tough stance on immigration and law-and-order issues, Sarkozy enticed voters who had drifted into the orbit of the FN and recaptured them for his Union for a Popular Majority (UMP), the mainstream party of the Right. Yet by the time Sarkozy was voted out of office five years later, the FN was back, stronger than ever, and it has continued to progress under Sarkozy's successor, François Hollande.

What explains this dramatic reversal of fortune? Two factors are generally invoked. First, the global financial crisis that began in 2008, followed by the crisis of the euro, revealed in the starkest possible way that France was no longer free to set its own fiscal policy independent of its partners in the European Union and therefore unable to defend its social model (based on a mixed econ-





omy, a highly regulated labor market, and generous social benefits supported by high taxes). This lent credence to the FN's contention that France had surrendered control of its economy to foreign financial interests and control of its borders to an influx of cheap foreign labor. Xenophobia could thus be recast as an economic issue, removing or at any rate alleviating the stigma of racism associated with the party since its founding. And second, the replacement of party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen by his daughter Marine, who was elected leader in 2011, facilitated this transformation of the party's image. Unlike her father, Marine had no commitment to defending the Vichy regime and no personal implication in the Algerian War. Most importantly, she had no aversion to seeking power, whereas her father preferred the role of provocateur, which he played to perfection. She therefore seized the opportunity to redefine the party as the champion of the victims of globalization and Europeanization rather than a defender of the lost causes of the traditional far Right.

These two explanations of the FN's rise are valid but insufficient. The first points to a need for a more fine-grained analysis of the *demand* for a new political rhetoric, while the second calls for an analysis of the rhetorical *supply*. Specifically, what social and economic transformations led some voters—perhaps a quarter of the electorate, to judge by recent polls and election results—to open their ears to the combination of potentially more enticing issues that constitute the platform of the “new” FN? And how did Marine Le Pen and other party leaders adjust their rhetoric, imagery, and political mythologies to offer these voters something new, different, and acceptable in ways that her father had failed?

Two recently published books address the need for these two types of political analysis. Focusing on the demand side, Laurent Bouvet's *L'Insécurité culturelle* locates the growing appetite for the FN world-view in a series of deep-seated cultural crises and insecurities. On the supply side, Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich analyze the “new frontist discourse” in *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots*. Despite the differing political sensibilities of the authors, the two works can be read as complementary, and both shed useful light on the FN's recent advances.

Begin with the demand side. The word “populism” is inevitable when discussing the Front national. As indispensable as the word is, it is also controversial. It is often used pejoratively to dismiss certain types of demand “from below,” but what distinguishes “populist” political demands from the demands of any subgroup in a democratic society is not always easy to specify. At a minimum, “populism” involves a claim that some segment of society constitutes the “authentic people,” to the exclusion of an elite, whose legitimacy is contested, and possibly of other groups, whose entitlement to equal rights of citizenship may also be challenged. The emergence of a populist politics always involves questions of identity: Who is to be counted as a full-fledged member of society, and by what right do some (designated the elite) wield power over others (the self-proclaimed people)?





For Laurent Bouvet, a professor of political science at the Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin, populism is a symptom attesting to the presence of certain underlying social and economic conditions, including “persistent unemployment, growing inequality, a sense of generalized loss of status (*déclassement*), increasingly visible poverty, and geographical segregation (*relégation territoriale*) of ever larger segments of the population” (7). Crucially, however, Bouvet insists that these social and economic factors cannot by themselves account for “political ideas, discourses, and behaviors” (9). Something else is needed, something that Bouvet calls “cultural insecurity,” which he defines as “the expression of an anxiety, a fear, not to say a dread concerning what people experience, witness, perceive, and feel ... with respect to upheavals in the world order and changes in society” (10). Cultural insecurity thus exists in the realm of social representations. It is not limited to a single social group or category. Indeed, Bouvet remarks that although cultural insecurity is “quite obvious” in the attitudes of those who characterize themselves as “Français de souche” (who take themselves to have deep roots in France’s native soil) or “petits blancs” (borrowed from the American “poor whites”), among whom support for the FN is strong, it is also prevalent among immigrants and descendants of immigrants, the very groups that are partially responsible for the “anxiety, fear, or even dread” of those who would exclude them from the “authentic” national community (10).

In Bouvet’s terms, cultural insecurity must therefore be understood as “a phenomenon at once global and reflexive, a representation at once shared and antagonistic” (10). If populism is essentially an expression of a vertical division of society between “elite” and “people,” cultural insecurity as Bouvet defines it is a triangular affair: it is an expression of a horizontal base divided between antagonistic social groups, which are dominated by an elite. This structure gives rise to insecurity along with resentment that is directed both upward and laterally. For Bouvet, the existence of cultural insecurity “informs us ... about the inadequacies and failures of elites—be they political, economic, or intellectual—and the distrust directed toward them” (11). Bouvet’s analysis of this “distrust” is somewhat cursory. It stems, he says, “from the rigors of globalization as well as deficiencies and consequences of public policy” (12). But the different ways in which antagonistic dominated groups perceive and experience these rigors and policy failures are not extensively explored. For the purposes of Bouvet’s argument, what matters is simply that the “popular” groups are dominated by the “elites.”

The distinction between horizontal and vertical social divisions is crucial for the political component of Bouvet’s analysis, which is directed against what he calls the “double impasse” of the French Left. Borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, he first contends that the Left has succumbed to “economism,” the doctrine that all social ills can be both diagnosed and cured by focusing primarily on economic factors. Second, elements of the Left, including a number of political scientists and sociologists, various Socialist and Green politi-





cians, and the think tank Terra Nova (close to the PS), have, in Bouvet's view, tended to respond to the cultural insecurities of certain dominated groups, such as *les minorités visibles*, women, gays, regionalists, and radical ecologists while attacking the legitimacy of other dominated groups such as the white working class, inhabitants of exurbs, and residents of rural areas plagued by crime. The recourse to such "culturalist" legitimations of certain types of protest to the exclusion of others has fissured the "dominated fraction" of society and opened the way to a divide-and-conquer strategy on the part of the FN.

Bouvet's political analysis has drawn a good deal of criticism. Some readers apparently take him to be endorsing policy responses hostile to minorities, combating the FN by joining it, as it were. This, to my mind, is a misreading. His point is the straightforward one that attaching labels such as "racist" and "xenophobic" to portions of the electorate is unlikely to elicit a positive reaction or rally voter support among the stigmatized groups. He is also dismissive of the left-populist response that the key to winning back voters who have lately deserted the Left for the extreme Right is to attack elite policies as too social-liberal, modernist, or "Europe-ist" in orientation. Such an approach would merely exemplify what Bouvet sees as the fallacy that the antidote to culturalism is economism.

What approach does he think would work? Under the influence of Christophe Guilluy, the author of another controversial analysis of the evolution of French society, Bouvet emphasizes the spatial separation of dominated social groups. In *Fractures françaises* (2010), Guilluy observed that the suburbs that were initially conceived to provide the white working class with improved housing have seen an influx of minority populations in recent decades.¹ In response, the white working class, unable to afford housing in city centers, has moved still farther out into exurban communities, where the social services and amenities traditionally provided by the state are in scarce supply and, in a time of austerity, unlikely to be improved. Meanwhile, in response to symptoms of social dysfunction in the demographically transformed *banlieues*, the state has devoted the lion's share of the available resources to containing restive and potentially explosive minorities. This unequal apportionment of state resources has, according to Bouvet, exacerbated the horizontal antagonisms between dominated social groups, thus contributing to the rise of the FN. This analysis is more precise and more specific to France than the vague "globalization" explanation mentioned earlier. Bouvet also cites a variety of other scholars such as Jean-Loup Amselle, Jérôme Fourquet and Alain Mergier, Philippe Guibert, and Luc Rouban, whose work he believes amplifies his own analysis.²

If there is a potential synthesis of these various critiques of multiculturalism, multiform insecurity, loss of status, and the rise of identity politics, it remains largely virtual in Bouvet's text, however, which is more convincing as diagnosis than as treatment plan. The argument is somewhat repetitive and



diffuse, and some of its conclusions are merely restatements of the questions they are supposed to answer; for example, “immigration and Islam: the summum of all fears” is the heading of a section that reports poll results showing widespread anxieties about immigration and Islam, but there is no discussion of why these themes should have become more salient after the economic crisis. Different sources of insecurity—economic precariousness, fear of unfamiliar cultural and religious practices, crime, terrorism—are not clearly differentiated in the analysis. A similar remark could be made about the evocative description of the European Union as a “Trojan horse.” Social theorists from Seyla Benhabib to Pierre Rosanvallon and historians such as Daniel Rodgers have discussed the rise of identity politics in relation to the economic evolution of the late twentieth century, but the use Bouvet wants to make of this theme here, to explain changes in the configuration of the French party system since the advent of Marine Le Pen as FN party leader, requires a more detailed account of the FN’s rhetorical and political strategy than he gives in his short essay.

This is where the brilliant and original analysis of the “new discourse” of the Front national by Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich proves to be both useful and illuminating. The two authors bring an unusual combination of talents to their task. Alduy is a professor of Renaissance literature at Stanford, and Wahnich teaches “political and public communication” at l’Université-Paris-Est-Créteil. Together they provide a quantitative and qualitative analysis of FN discourse using both the latest digital tools and the most classic methods of rhetorical analysis. The results fully justify the methodological innovation, which is manifested most clearly in the chapters attributed to Alduy.

The first chapter of *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots* is devoted essentially to a quantitative demonstration that Marine Le Pen is not simply her father’s heir as party leader. She actively and energetically reshaped the party’s image by altering its rhetoric, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes starkly and dramatically. For example, the frequency of terms bearing on economic issues is much greater in the daughter’s speeches and writings than in her father’s lexicon.³ Marine Le Pen discusses economic issues with roughly the same frequency as other political parties, whereas her father had much less to say on these subjects. If this shift in emphasis “normalizes” the FN and contributes to the desired and much-commented “de-demonization” of the party, it is also not without risks for Marine Le Pen herself, because it marks her as a member of the very technostucture she decries. This “economic tropism,” as Alduy refers to the shift in FN rhetoric, resembles what Bouvet calls economism and sees as a reason for the declining influence of the mainstream parties. Why would economism help the FN but harm other parties? To resolve the apparent contradiction, one has to look more closely at the content and not merely the existence of “economy talk.” Where the mainstream parties stress constraints stemming from the ferocity of international competition, the imperative of remaining engaged in the global economy, the





crucial importance of the single European market, and adherence to the euro, the FN acknowledges only the costs and refuses to recognize any of the benefits of existing economic policy.

Just as Marine Le Pen has diverged from her father by developing an economic discourse in opposition to that of the mainstream parties, she has also altered the tone and terms of the culturalist rhetoric that has long been part of the FN's stock-in-trade. Alduy notes the FN leader's preference for euphemism. Where the father insisted on the biological basis of cultural difference ("le peuple français garde de son vieux sang gaulois le goût de la liberté"), the daughter subtly shifts the emphasis from "blood" to the republican "liberty": "Tous les enfants de France ont pour ancêtres les Gaulois, non par la génétique, mais par l'amour de la liberté" (103). The cleverness of this reformulation lies in the way it implicitly evokes the alleged genetic basis of difference it ostensibly denies.

The tactic of simultaneously highlighting and erasing her father's more divisive word choices is repeated often: she says "national priority" (or "social patriotism") instead of "national preference" (104). She shrewdly uses the vocabulary of antiracism to appeal to her own base: "Leave genetics to the Left, which wants to erase the word 'race' from the Constitution. Anti-racist legislation will then be deprived of all constitutional support. It should instead be strengthened to fight against anti-French racism" (110). Instead of denouncing "cosmopolitan," "stateless" elites as her father did, Marine Le Pen attacks the "globalized hyperclass," avoiding the anti-Semitic connotation of the French *cosmopolite*. She has a gift for constructing what Alduy calls a "palimpsest text," in which certain keywords remind the audience of an implicit subtext. In this way she can appeal to the traditional extreme Right base of her father's party without alienating newer adherents who might be put off by the more vehement and naked rhetoric of another era.

Just as she makes the republican value "liberty" the defining characteristic of the "French race," she uses the republican values "equality" and "laïcité" to attack Islam without naming it: "No sect should encroach on the public sphere" (114), she says. Yet the only examples she gives of such encroachments pertain to hours of public swimming pools, the serving of halal meat, and the construction of mosques; all point to Muslim offenses against a supposed national consensus.

Another key observation is the capital role that Marine Le Pen assigns to the state. Compared to her father, the authors note, "Marine Le Pen makes a 180-degree turn Rather than compartmentalize the good and bad uses of government, she invests the state with a global mission, symbolic and political, economic and cultural, which makes it not only the quasi-mystical incarnation of the national will but also the voluntaristic instrument of national unification, the repository of the nation's collective history, the agent of its economic renewal, and the guarantor of its republican and democratic values, including *la laïcité*" (114). Thus for Marine Le Pen, achieving power is the ultimate goal of political action.





But, one might ask, is that not the goal of any political party? Indeed, this might seem to be a truism, yet Jean-Marie Le Pen is the exception that proves the rule. Power, as is increasingly clear in retrospect, was never his goal. Provocation was for him an end in itself as well as a lucrative business. His daughter's transformation of the party he created into a credible political force, a challenger to the UMP-PS duopoly in a transformed tripartite political system, has made the elder Le Pen increasingly uncomfortable. He has injected his habitual verbal *dérapages* into the public domain in an apparent effort to undo Marine's reinvention of the party. In an interview published in the extreme right *Rivarol* in early April 2015, he reiterated his admiration for Pétain, his belief in the superiority of the white race, and his doubts about democracy, finally provoking his daughter into declaring that he could not head the party's ticket in the PACA region in the upcoming regional elections. Threatened with exclusion from the party he created, he has responded by saying that if that happens, he will "kill" the Front national he bequeathed to his daughter.

Another way in which Marine Le Pen's vocabulary differs from her father's is that she frequently uses phrases borrowed from the lexicon of the Left, such as "le grand patronat," a staple of French Communist Party rhetoric in the 1980s. This verbal tactic, which the authors wittily describe as "lexical *entrisme*" (alluding to the Trotskyist tactic of borrowing the ideological garb of other parties as camouflage), no doubt contributes to the FN's appeal to the working class, and polls consistently show that workers, both blue-collar and clerical, are more likely to vote for the FN than for any other party. This observation is to be set alongside another, namely, that Marine Le Pen has studiously avoided aligning herself with the traditional and "Catholic" Right on social issues such as gay marriage. She thus reinforces her claim to embody a "modern" rather than reactionary Right and avoids alienating recent recruits raised in the anticlerical traditions of the Left. Whereas her father continues quixotically tilting at windmills such as "the socialo-communists," she has updated the historical references in her speeches, abandoning references to World War II and the Algerian War and confining her forays into the past largely to the period after the Socialist victory of 1981.

In essence, however, Marine Le Pen's worldview is mythical rather than historical: "She incorporates isolated economic and political facts into a broader archetypal schema" (121), which again revises the content of her father's mythical constructs while preserving their form. Both father and daughter gesture toward a lost Golden Age (the Ancien Régime for Jean-Marie, the Trente Glorieuses for Marine); both raise the specter of an apocalyptic future if their enemies emerge victorious from the present political struggle; both invest the People and the Leader with heroic qualities threatened by a "conspiracy" of scheming antagonists.

Alduy's analysis is thorough, refreshingly innovative, and convincing. It cannot, however, answer every question about the FN's rise. She remarks, for





instance, that “when [Marine Le Pen] attacks ‘the money powers,’ ‘transnational ... capitalism,’ ... the ‘dictatorship of finance and banks,’ ... [and] ‘the globalized class of the idle rich,’” she is reviving the explicitly xenophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric of a nineteenth-century writer like Alphonse Toussenel, and she points to textual evidence of Toussenel’s commitments. Yet similar denunciations of financial power and globalization can be heard in the mouths of orators on the radical Left, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who cannot be accused of the “surreptitious allusions” here laid at Le Pen’s door. Even François Hollande declared his enemy to be “the world of finance.” Yet the mobilization of these tropes by left-wing parties has not enjoyed the same success as Le Pen’s campaign. Is this to be explained by a difference in the nature of the audience for right populism as opposed to left? The authors point out that Le Pen’s electorate is on average less educated than that of her rivals. Their hypothesis is that the FN’s “explanatory myths ... are more likely to appeal to the less educated because they offer not only a simple analytic framework that responds to their search for meaning but also a compensatory subjective validation stemming from a feeling of having penetrated the secrets of a world that excludes them” (163). Perhaps, but all political rhetoric seeks to provide meaning and subjective validation and to penetrate the secrets that explain why things are as they are. There is a tautological quality to this explanation: the FN’s rhetoric is successful because its audience responds to it. There is a similar tautological quality to the argument that the FN has been able to enlarge its base by employing rhetoric that “constructs the contending [political] forces as two irreconcilable antagonistic camps (heroes and demons, Good and Evil, nation and globalism)—the mythological language ensures a bipolar division of the political field” (163).

Finally, there is an international dimension to right-wing populism. Parties whose rhetoric shares many of the characteristics of FN rhetoric have arisen in many countries in Europe, as documented for example in Dominique Reynié’s *Les Nouveaux Populismes*.⁴ The authors’ choice to structure their analysis around the generational shift from father to daughter has the advantage of highlighting many features peculiar to the French context but at the expense of potentially illuminating comparisons with the evolution of right-wing populist rhetoric elsewhere in Europe. This loss is nevertheless amply compensated by the gain of deeper understanding of such France-specific features as the importance of republicanism and *laïcité*.

The two books under review thus illuminate different aspects of the Front national phenomenon. Marine Le Pen’s success appears to be on the verge of transforming the French party system from an essentially bipartite competition (with two major parties monopolizing access to the all-important presidency, the office whose institutional preponderance has made it the key to French politics since the advent of the Fifth Republic) to a tripartite regime. This apparent transformation may prove to be illusory, however, since the Front national may have reached the limits of its expansion. It is too easily for-





gotten that the early Fifth Republic was also a regime of tripartite competition, with the Communist Party playing the role now filled by the Front national. Just as there were demographic and ideological limits to the Communist vote, there may be similar barriers to further extension of the FN. To use the jargon of pollsters, Marine Le Pen's "unfavorables" remain high. Nothing in either book under review proves or disproves the hypothesis that her rhetorical skills have taken her as far as she can go pending further changes in the underlying social and economic situation. Only time will tell.

ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER is a senior affiliate of the Center for European Studies at Harvard University and the translator of more than 125 works from the French, including Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*.

Notes

1. Christophe Guilluy, *Fractures françaises* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013).
2. Jean-Loup Amselle, *L'Ethnicisation de la France* (Fécamp: Lignes, 2011); Jérôme Fourquet and Alain Mergier, "Le point de rupture: Enquête sur les ressorts du vote FN en milieux populaires," Fondation Jean-Jaurès, August 2011, <http://www.jean-jaurès.org/Publications/Essais/Le-point-de-rupture>; Philippe Guibert and Alain Mergier, *Le Descenseur social: Enquête sur les milieux populaires* (Paris: Plon-Fondation Jean Jaurès, 2006); Luc Rouban, "Du vote de classe au vote privatif," Cevipof, *Les Enjeux: Élections 2014* 1 (October 2013), <http://www.cevipof.com/rtefiles/File/ELECTIONS%20MUNICIPALES/note%20Luc%20ROUBAN%20.pdf>.
3. In a note on the corpus of texts used in the analysis, the authors explain that only public pronouncements such as speeches, interviews, editorials, etc. were submitted to digital analysis. Internal party documents were not included.
4. Dominique Reynié, *Les Nouveaux Populismes* (Paris: Plon, 2011).

