

ANTI-SEMITISM, ADIEU? ON THE POSSIBLE ABANDONMENT OF THE ANTI-SEMITIC STRATEGY BY THE FRENCH NATIONAL RALLY UNDER MARINE LE PEN

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Abstract: *This article analyses the implications of the change in the National Front's top leadership over the traditional anti-Semitic stances of the party. By studying the main reforms implemented by Marine Le Pen, this article shows that the dropping of anti-Semitism is at the same time not only a tactical move but not necessarily a genuine substantive change in the party's ideology. Rather, like the party's name change into the National Rally, it is a discursive adaptation on one hand to a general evolution of the French society (anti-Semitism being less entrenched in the public consciousness) and on the other hand to the particular conditions of the 2010s dominated by an increasing concern about the social, cultural and security-related consequences of the non-European and especially Muslim immigration to France.*

Keywords : *far-right; anti-semitism; French politics; strategy; adaptation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The election of Marine Le Pen as head of the National Front in January 2011 closed a page in the history of this political party and opened a new one. By her political style, her lifestyle, her speech and her ideas, Marine Le Pen did everything to place herself in a double apparently paradoxical hypostasis: on one hand, the heiress of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, founding president of the National Front since 1972, and on the other, the champion of the radical change of a National Front, a party that was politically isolated because of its backward-looking belonging to the extreme right. Against a number of expectations and forecasts, far from producing the image of a schizoid politician, this double hypostasis enabled Marine Le Pen to unite around her project and personality a sizable part of the electorate and of public opinion which extends beyond the traditional voters and sympathizers of the FN, renamed into the National Rally (RN) in 2018 (Ivaldi, 2018).

In this context of “dis-demonization of the FN”, among the ideological components which have been subjected to a radical revision, anti-Semitism occupies a particular place, since it was a historical mark of the party and, at the same time, one of its major vulnerabilities. In this article, I will analyse the reasoning that led to the revision

of the National Front's anti-Semitic discourse and the effective and possible implications of this process. In order to do so, I will first study the classic position of the National Front on the “Jewish question” and the particular circumstances which led to the need to amend it. Then, I will analyse the way in which the FN's discourse was revised by Marine Le Pen in an effort of “democratic normalization”. Finally, I will try to review the possible wider political consequences of such a shift in this party's discourse.

2. NATIONAL FRONT'S ANTI-SEMITISM – FROM A PROFITABLE STRATEGY TO A CUMBERSOME BURDEN

The diversity of approaches to National Front's anti-Semitism allows us to identify at least two major sources that have fed the Frontist ideology at different moments of time and at different levels. Even if these sources are themselves multiple and heterogeneous, we can still try to draw their general outlines.

First, there is the historical legacy of the traditionalist and ultra-Catholic far right, whose origins go back to Joseph de Maistre (De Maistre, 1796) and which feeds on a double rejection: that of the excessive universalism of the Enlightenment and that of the excesses of the 1789 Revolution. If throughout the nineteenth century, this current was

embodied by the royalist party and other counter-revolutionary movements, it was historically reluctant to openly manifest anti-Semitic positions, with some exceptions (Teste, 1910). There are two reasons for this. First, the existence of a series of wealthy businessmen of Jewish origin, sometimes ennobled (the most famous of which were the two great donors, the barons Alphonse de Rothschild and Maurice de Hirsch), who financially and symbolically supported the royalists, especially after the fall of the Second Empire (Irvine, 1989:95). How could the party which benefited from the generous contributions of Jewish donors make anti-Semitic propaganda? Then, because of the possibility to be criticised as being the future restorers of a political-theocratic regime that could return to inquisitorial and anti-Semitic ultra-Catholicism and all this precisely when the party wanted to appropriate the sympathy of the voters less steeped in bigotry and religious exclusivism (like Bonapartists or former moderate Republicans) (Dufeulle, 1883). This attitude would nevertheless change in the last decade of the 19th century, especially after the bitter defeat that the royalists suffered in the legislative elections of 1889, where they made a tactical, informal and ideologically costly alliance with the populist movement of General Boulanger (Fuller, 2012:30-46). Since it had now become clear that any possibility of regaining power through the elections was too distant a horizon, the royalists, now led by the Duke of Orleans, who was reluctant to pursue both traditional rules and strategies of the Royal House and of the party, quickly adopted nationalism and anti-Semitism as the pillars of their new doctrine. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Catholics and a most traditionalist royalists proceeded to the *Ralliement*, by now recognizing the republican order and leaving therefore very little room for manoeuvre to the legitimists and other relentless hardliners.

The Dreyfus Affair, which served as a catalyst for all anti-Semites, determined the formalization of the new strategy of the tough and mainly crypto-royalist right, in which anti-Semitism occupied a central place (Winock, 1982: 157-185). Since then, there has been a radical right and no longer a royalist right, because by the end of the century most leaders of the traditional monarchist movement had already distanced themselves from the new party line, while on the ruins of the royalist organization rose up major figures of boulangism or even anti-Semitic leftism, like Paul Déroulède, Maurice Barrès, Edouard Drumont or Charles Maurras. From this point to the formation

of the traditionalist, nationalist and anti-Semitic leagues of the interwar period, there was only one step (Sternhell, 1978).

It is in this rather indirect and strategic way that the radical fringe of traditionalists and monarchists rallied openly anti-Semitic positions and prepared ideologically and electorally a key component of the political heritage of the National Front (Chebel d'Appollonia, 1988). Historically, there were among the nationalist-traditionalist-catholics of the National Front two attitudes with regard to anti-Semitism. On the one hand, central figures, such as Bernard Antony, who officially rejected anti-Semitism, while defending traditional and Christian values, but who practiced "academic" anti-Semitism, through historical-religious revelations (Anthony, 2007). Very influential in the FN in the 1990s, Antony and his organization "Chrétienté-Solidarité" did not exacerbate though their anti-Semitism and preferred to favour socio-religious themes, while attacking "anti-Christian and anti-French racism". On the other hand, many were those who did not hesitate to motivate their anti-Semitism by taking ultra-Catholic positions. This is the case of the group crystallized around Roland Gaucher, former member of the National Front's Political Bureau and former director of *National Hebdo*, who declared himself "a fighter for the Christian International" in his war against "the Jewish International" (*National Hebdo*, 1989).

We can nevertheless conclude that anti-Semitism is an ideological stance that has characterized only a part of the traditional-catholic frontists and that the virulence of their anti-Semitism is far from being comparable to that of others types of far-right militant groups.

The second source of Frontist anti-Semitism is more recent but quantitatively much more important and qualitatively more intense. This anti-Semitism is structured around what historian Nicolas Lebourg calls "the radical far-right", meaning a series of small groups which sought to make their way in the tumultuous political life of the years 1960-1970 and of which a part ended up integrating the National Front at the time when the purely revolutionary strategy finally proved to be losing (Lebourg *et al.*, 2014). Groups such as Jeune Nation, Occident and Ordre Nouveau have swept over French politics by taking anti-communist, anti-leftist and anti-republican positions, in the 1960s-1970s context of great ideological and militant confrontations. Significant events such as the Suez Crisis or the Algerian War influenced the ideological attitudes of the radical

far-right and enabled it to position itself in relation to the establishment, but also in relation to the “institutionalized far-right”. In the wake of French withdrawal from Algeria and, then, in the context of the Arab-Israeli wars, the non-revolutionary far right is increasingly forced to put on hold its anti-Zionist (but not necessarily anti-Semitic) discourse. This phenomenon is more salient within the National Rally led by Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, who intensively cultivated the revengeful feelings of the *Pieds Noirs* (the Frenchmen who have forcefully returned from Algeria after independence) and therefore anti-Arabism and anti-Islamism, but also among a series of royalists and even former WW2 *pétainists* (Birnbaum, 2006).

To differentiate themselves from this new “moderate” line, the radical far-right has increasingly positioned itself in an anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist logic (“green fascism”). They wanted to make these two themes the nodal points of a discursive articulation which would allow them to gather and mobilize the exalted young people, the former militarists, the irreducible anti-Semites, the anti-communists and other categories likely to be seduced by radical militancy. Radical far-right figures who have become famous, like François Duprat, and who later joined the National Front, ensured the leadership of these factions whose anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist speeches were often accompanied by public violent actions. Once this factionalism was suppressed or self-repressed, the National Front, which had become the main party of the non-revolutionary far right, was able to bring together most militants of the ultra-right-wing groups, which proved to be particularly useful in the construction of the party's territorial and professional networks (Mișcoiu, 2005: 44-45).

Radical far-right Anti-Semitism increased especially after the Six Day War, denounced as an Israeli aggression. It was no longer a question of repressing anti-Semitic positions while making anti-Zionist rhetoric more credible; on the contrary, according to the strategy proposed by Duprat, it was necessary to constitute an anti-system front which made revisionism, Holocaust denial, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism the pillars of the identity of the new political edifice (Dély, 1999). The actions of the State of Israel and the manipulation of public opinion through the post-Holocaust victimization of the Jews were “undeniable proof” of the existence of an international Jewish conspiracy targeting France. The denunciation of the Israeli aggression in the Middle East would therefore be less effective if it

were not supplemented by the questioning of the Holocaust and by the complete revision of the theses concerning “imaginary victimization of the Jewish people”. This revisionist work was certainly facilitated at the end of the 1970s by the publication of Robert Faurisson's notorious Holocaust denier theses and by the consequent opening of a controversy on freedom of expression, which would be refused to citizens who wished to express “alternative” opinions on the Shoah (Faurisson; 1999). The Faurisson Affair reinforced the anti-Semitic positions of the radical far-right and reconfirmed the “merits” of its revisionist strategy.

On the other hand, for diverse historical reasons, the leaders of the old nationalist-revolutionary current were not in the majority within the National Front. With the (unexpected and violent) death of François Duprat and the party's gentrification in the 1980s, the strategy advocated by the radicals drowned in the whole of the ideological nebula of the far right. Anti-Semitism turned into a topic of average importance, being rather the prerogative of major frontist leaders, including Jean-Marie Le Pen, who has been repeatedly condemned for revisionist and anti-Semitic remarks. But anti-Semitism is now only part of the logic of “controlled slippages”, which are supposed to both provoke public opinion and recall the fundamentals of the far right. This allowed the National Front, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, to bring together both those nostalgic for *pétainism* in the 1940s, *poujadism* in the 1950s and national-revolutionarism and neo-paganism in the 1960s and 1970, without alienating or shocking neither the royalists and some other traditionalists, nor those nostalgic for French Algeria (Mișcoiu, 2005: 63-77).

This strategy began to show its limits at the end of the 1990s, notably during the split of the National Republican Movement, led by the former No. 2 of the Front, Bruno Mégret (in December 1998). Being above all an interpersonal conflict, the episode of the split of the MNR is however revealing of the deadlock of the frontist strategy. All the reproaches addressed by the Mégret's camp refer to the rigidity of the leadership and the confinement of the FN in the isolationist political logic of the far right, an attitude which has jeopardized any effort to participate in majority coalitions in the local or regional councils and made surreal the possibility of concluding a governmental alliance with the right. The use of anti-Semitism is one of the themes criticized by the dissident faction, since it was a subject which

caused a general outcry and therefore contributed to the political isolation of the FN.

After the defeat in the second round of the 2002 presidential election, the FN's anti-Semitism became a burden. Surveys that could not escape Jean-Marie Le Pen have shown that the rejection of the FN was based on a few images stuck to its president, the most terrifying of which were that of the anti-Semite, that of the violent man, that of the anti-Arab (Sofres, 2002). Moreover, between the rejection of Islam "officially" adopted as a strategy by the FN and the traditional anti-Semitism of the party, cohabitation becomes less and less possible, while the security-related issues radicalized public opinion: they hypertrophied Islamophobic fears and validated the demand for ultra-severe security policies, like the ones practiced by the Israeli state. Without having decided on the matter, Jean-Marie Le Pen tried to moderate his speech for the 2007 elections, by making concessions in particular with regard to Islamism and by softening his stances in matters of security. But since he was in competition with the institutional right wing candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, who had taken up the hard core of the 2002 frontist topics, Le Pen made a disappointing score (11%) and missed the opportunity to have altered his image of anti-Semite in a positive way (Mișcoiu, 2009: 188-191).

3. MARINE LE PEN OR HOW TO TURN THE PAGE ON FN'S HISTORIC ANTI-SEMITISM

For Marine Le Pen, the strategy of dis-demonization dates at least from the informal entrenchment of the idea of her succession at the controls of the FN, meaning just before the 2007 presidential elections. If this strategy did not work in 2007, it was for two reasons. First, it was too new, to the point that it even surprised the National Front militants, as shown by the episode of the presence of a young West Indian woman on a poster through which the party was attacking the failure of the social and cultural integration policies. Then, even if the strategy was not necessarily bad, the person supposed to embody it back then – Jean-Marie Le Pen – certainly did not have the necessary profile and did not go on the paths of moderation and modernization to the end. From the moment she was assured of succeeding her father, Marine Le Pen's attitude was going to be radically different. While knowing that the hard liners of the party were going to be initially reluctant in the face of an abrupt change, she initially staggered the reforms in homeopathic

doses (2007-2009), by ensuring control over the apparatus of the party and giving herself a stature of national leader through her entrenchment in Hénin-Beaumont, in the deprived mining area of the North (Le Pen, 2011). It was only during a second stage and following a series of satisfactory results (in the municipal elections of 2008 and in the European elections of 2009) that she began changes in strategy, while taking care not to upset the various sensitivities of her party and in particular to provoke negative reactions on the part of her father, which could have jeopardized the formal succession. Finally, most of the expected changes took place after she was elected at the January 2011 Congress and the after the change of the FN's whole management team.

What was the essence of these changes and what was the place occupied by anti-Semitism in the new ideological context? If the general strategy was dis-demonization, the ideological essence behind this strategy is anchored in the convictions of Marine Le Pen and of her colleagues of the new management team. In economic and social matters, the new FN is significantly more to the left than the old one, while advocating solidarity, the fight against "world finance", the return to the "social elevator" and protectionism. From a social-cultural point of view and with regard to identity themes, the differences are less important: the same insistence on the dangers of immigration and insecurity, a similar traditionalist conception of the family and a roughly equal dose of intransigence in relation to intellectual, sexual or cultural emancipation, at least during the first years of "Marinism" (2011-2015). Finally, in foreign policy, the same rejection of "Euro-globalism", the same contempt for the Obama's United States and the same hypercritical attitude towards China.

If there is a difference, it lies rather in the appearance and the political style of the two Le Pens. Dis-demonization works mainly because Marine is a woman, she belongs to another generation, sporting a more relaxed face, more easily seducing young people, emphasizing less ideological hard cores and clinging to themes more in line with the current concerns of the French citizens. The ultra-secular turning point of 2010 is indicative of the strategic chameleonic transformation of the FN, more capable than before of conforming to the citizens' demands and expectations of the moment (Mișcoiu, 2012:100-116).

It is in these terms that the issue of the FN's inflection on anti-Semitism should be addressed. For Marine Le Pen, it would firstly be useless and counterproductive to persist on a "detail" which,

far from providing support, could largely harm her political project, by shattering the whole strategy of dis-demonization. Indeed, the atmosphere of the past ten years has been marked by an escalation of issues related to identity and immigration, where the thorny problems of the integration of Muslim communities have brutally arisen (Mişcoiu, 2015). At the same time, there have been no incidents involving the Jewish community, which has been repeatedly cited as an example of “successful integration”. Thus, attacking a “perfectly” integrated community would have been a misstep that Marine Le Pen was wise enough not to make.

It is though obvious that the new FN leader was raised in an environment permeated with anti-Semitism. In their book, Caroline Fourest and Fiammetta Venner describe the Le Pens’ traditional hostility towards the Jews, which sometimes resulted in competitions for the identification of “Ikey heads” who appeared on TV (Fourest & Venner, 2011: 53). But, unlike her father and the other frontist leaders born before the Second World War, Marine Le Pen did not necessarily internalize anti-Semitism as a constitutive element of her vision of the world, but rather as a way of resisting to the wide rejection that the activity of the National Front aroused within the political class and the French society. Anti-Semitism *à la Marine Le Pen* is rather connected with to the cosmopolitan “elitocracy” which has isolated its family and its party. That said, this anti-Semitism is not systematic but instrumental and appears to be devoid of the virulence that has traditionally characterized her political family since the end of the 19th century.

The choice to abandon (at least temporarily) anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism can also be explained by the positioning of the FN/RN president within her political party. In order to mark her differences compared to the “dinosaurs” of the Jean-Marie Le Pen generation, Marine assiduously cultivates ambiguity in her attitude towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, by taking positions that can be considered to be almost balanced, to the dismay of historic anti-Zionists like Alain Soral, who did not hesitate to accuse her of “having become a part of the Israeli system” and to slam the door of the FN (Fourest & Venner, 2011:349).

By moving away from anti-Semitism, Marine Le Pen was able to force the resignation or withdrawal of a series of members of the old National Front guard. This was first the case of Carl Lang and his followers (including especially some former members of the governing bodies of the FN: Martial Bild, Martine Lehideux, Bernard

Antony, Jean-Claude Martinez and Fernand Le Rachinel), who deplored the “socialist” drift imposed by Marine Le Pen. After a traumatic process of reorganization, this group founded in 2009 a party more anchored in the traditional values of the extreme right, the Party of France, which obtained insignificant results in the next years’ elections (Faye, Mestre & Monnot, 2010: 6).

The final momentum of the last “ultra” of the old FN was their attempts to tighten the lines around Bruno Gollnisch – former Number 2 of the party and counter-candidate of Marine Le Pen for the presidency of the FN – while brandishing the danger of contamination of the FN by “Jewish cholera”. Even if Gollnisch has distanced himself from his viscerally anti-Semitic supporters, Marine Le Pen was able to pose as a victim of... anti-Semitism and thus obtain a Republican coat of arms to win the internal election hands down (with two thirds of the votes casted by the party’s militants). Attacks by radicals like Marc George and the entire anti-Marine campaign orchestrated by the radical far-right weekly, *Rivarol*, and peppered with sexist and anti-Semitic insults have served the cause of the dis-demonization of the new FN, who, unlike the former, was said to be so republican and non-anti-Semitic that it became itself the object of attacks by anti-Semites.

4. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS: FULLSTOP OR POINT-VIRGULE?

Like all of the political actions she initiated, the renunciation – as temporary as it may be – to anti-Semitism is framed in the logic of a discursive strategy rather than in the logic of an essentialist doctrinal reconstruction. Adapted to the comings and goings of post-television politics, Marine Le Pen is less the woman with unshakable political convictions than the heiress of a political empire designed for the dimensions of her father and which she strives to carve out to her size. Intuitively, anti-Semitism was no longer a profitable strategy and therefore had to be at least temporarily abandoned. As it was not “written in the DNA” of Marine Le Pen and as her opponents within the National Front used it to the extreme, anti-Semitism could easily be ruled out for the time being from the party’s discourse.

However, the depth and the irreversibility of this abandonment should not be overestimated. If the new “rally generation” is undoubtedly less affected by anti-Semitic culture and education, it would not remain indifferent if electoral or symbolic capitalization based on the use of anti-

Semitic themes became possible again. Admittedly, for the moment it is above all a part of the radical leftists who denounce globalization, imperialism, anti-Islamism and the tyranny of bankers – so many themes which lend themselves better to be articulated through social and economic anti-Semitism. But, as was once the case with anti-Islamism, anti-Semitism should remain a valuable ammunition, usable if the opportunity arises again.

What Marine Le Pen will have to avoid are above all the partial and inconsistent uses of anti-Semitic comments, in the absence of a well-thought-out strategy for returning to anti-Semitism. The political context of the late 2010s and of the early 2020s is far from a good opportunity to return to anti-Semitic discourses. The way it looks today, the cultural climate is not favourable to a new change of strategy. This allows us to conclude that the period of the National Front's founding anti-Semitism seems to be over, but that the door to anti-Semitic ideas is still open.

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