

Liberté, égalité, fraternité?

Views from the far-right fringe in France

Anne Friederike Delouis

Anne Friederike Delouis is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Orléans, France. She has worked on cultural memory and metaphors in political discourse. Her current research focuses on German minorities in Europe and the Americas. Her email is anne.delouis@univ-orleans.fr.

Extreme right-wing parties are faring well in these crisis-riddled times: Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn) obtained an unprecedented 7 % of the vote in the Greek parliamentary elections of 6 May and the re-run on 17 June. The 'Party for Freedom' succeeded in bringing down the Dutch minority government in April. In several European countries – Austria, Hungary, Finland – far-right parties garner more than 15 % of the popular vote.

From April to June of this year, all eyes were on France where two significant elections took place. More than 6.4 million French citizens, i.e. about 18 % of the electorate, voted for the candidate of the Front National, Marine Le Pen, in the first round of the presidential elections on 22 April. This result was more than she had been credited for in the latest opinion polls before the election. She thus managed to mobilize more voters than her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, had gathered ten years before when he proceeded to the second round of the elections – the greatest success of the French far-right party so far.

Such a high level of far-right votes can seem surprising in a country that prides itself on being instrumental in the history of human rights, that has enshrined the equality of all, regardless of their origin, at the very beginning of its constitution, and that brandishes the Republican ideals of 'liberty – equality – fraternity' on countless public buildings.

Who are these 6.4 million, and what has motivated their vote? Did they act on the spur of the moment? Should they be seen as 'protest voters' ready to fall back into the political mainstream if their grievances are dealt with?¹ Or are they outright racists, hostile to democracy, and needing to be educated so as to become better citizens?

Socio-economic and geographical statistics yield some basic facts: the Front National appeals particularly to voters living in the north and east of France, and to those in the countryside rather than city-dwellers; a majority of them are male, but the gender gap is closing. Voters aged between 35 and 44 preferred Marine Le Pen to Nicolas Sarkozy, but put her in second place after François Hollande. She came first among working class voters, a fact that must worry the parties on the left.

But these statistical insights offer little in the way of an explanation. Ethnography should be of help here but comes up against a number of difficulties: potentially xenophobic nationalists are a particularly unpleasant research topic for social scientists. The few who have ventured into that terrain have met with tremendous complications when trying to position themselves (Bizeul 2003). Gaining access is a problem that can be solved rather easily as long as one is interested in working with party members and officials who by definition have taken a public stance in favour of Front National ideas (Crépon 2012). However, more than 98 % of Front National voters do not belong to this category. Far-right thinking is laden with taboo in France and cannot even be disclosed to family and friends in many cases. So how is one to understand who really votes on the far right and why?

An increasing number of extreme right voters reveal their political opinions anonymously on certain internet sites, often all the more vigorously as they have to keep their views under wraps in 'normal' life. One internet site in particular contains a wealth of life-stories written by scores of people attracted to far-right ideas. Hundreds have answered a call there to tell their personal story about what led them to change their worldview and start voting on



Fig. 1. Marine Le Pen's presidential campaign poster, April 2012.

the far right.² This collection of personal accounts provides a unique insight into experiences, perceptions and argumentations that cannot be gained by any other means. Although this material has obvious limitations when compared to traditional in-depth ethnography, many of these narratives are particularly interesting because they illustrate the thinking of new, shifting and even potential future voters. The variety of experiences told and views given is remarkable. No single all-explanatory factor or particular socio-economic background stands out. Some general observations can be made however.

Awakenings

The 'opinion turn' towards the far right can be very sudden. Voters compare such brutal 'awakenings' to a 'slap in the face'. For others, the process is slow and progressive, a 'long maturation' which may come about in several 'acts'.

In both cases, contributors use the same metaphor to account for their 'turn' to the right: something or someone 'opened their eyes'; they – slowly or suddenly – realized that they had been 'blind' before; one day they decided not to keep their 'eyes closed' any longer, to 'stop burying their heads in the sand'. They lifted their eyes and 'saw the sunlight' while many of their compatriots still 'wear blinkers' and need to be 'woken up' in their turn. These images bring Plato's allegory of the cave to mind. Changing one's political opinion is portrayed as a cognitive liberation, an irreversible step onto a new level of knowledge. Some compare the experience of emerging into a parallel reality to the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix* in which some humans manage to disconnect themselves from an artificial thought world the rest of mankind is being forcefully kept in.

So what makes people 'see the truth', gradually or all of a sudden? There seem to be three major contributing factors. In some cases, the conversion to the political extreme right is the result of an intellectual itinerary. Many contributors to the forum give examples of readings that influenced them. Several confess a love for French history, which often reaches back to childhood. Books on Celts, Romans, the Bourbon kings, Napoleon, great Frenchmen



Fig. 2. The Fdesouche webpage displays clichéd symbols of Frenchness.

and Frenchwomen are cited as inspirations. Reading about French history is quoted as having various effects: some say that this traditional kind of historical knowledge 'vaccinated' them against modern day reinterpretations; others noticed the discrepancy between the France of yore and that of now through their readings. Oft-quoted literary authors include Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), Léon Bloy (1846-1917), Maurice Barrès (1862-1923), Charles Maurras (1868-1952), Georges Bernanos (1888-1948), Céline (1894-1961), Michel Houellebecq (born 1956), Maurice G. Dantec (born 1958), and Philippe Muray (1965-2006), some of them distinctly counter-revolutionary, royalist, racist, anti-Semitic or anti-Islamic, others less so.

Additional influences are writers and radio broadcasters Alain Finkielkraut and Eric Zemmour, the independent right-wing radio station Radio Courtoisie, nationalistic periodicals *Le Présent* or *Rivarol*, internet sites such as www.fdesouche.com, ripostelaique.com or fr.novopress.info, often chanced upon while searching for information about a particular incident, or recommended by a friend. Purely 'intellectual' conversions to the extreme right are rare, however; other factors usually enter into the equation.

A new look at recent history

A majority of contributors mention events in recent history that made them think and 'turn' towards the far right. In chronological order, these events include the election of socialist President François Mitterrand in 1981; the subsequent decline of the steel and mining industry; an anti-racism campaign orchestrated by the pro-socialist NGO SOS-Racisme in the mid-1980s, seen as 'anti-French', hypocritical and unwarranted for. While such earlier events left their mark on those aged 40 and above, a great number of contributors of all ages (from 15 to over 70) were shocked by 9/11 and some inappropriate reactions in France: they remember that students of North African origin refused to hold a minute of silence at school and that some French Muslims reportedly said the USA deserved to be attacked. They also allege to have witnessed celebrations in some Parisian suburbs on that day.

A number of forum contributors recall the infamous football match pitting France against Algeria on 6 October 2001, when several thousand French citizens of presumably Algerian origin booed the French anthem in the presence of the French Prime Minister and eventually invaded the pitch. Spectators hurled various objects at the presidential stand. Two female ministers were injured. Some months later, the 2002 elections saw Jean-Marie Le Pen, the then president of the Front National, at the second round, set against the centre-right candidate Jacques Chirac; half a million Parisians demonstrated against this undesired result (thus, against democracy, far-right

militants would say). North African flags were waved at Chirac's victory party.

Many were stunned by the 2005 riots in several French towns with what they perceived as biased media coverage, a weak response of the state and no outright public condemnation by immigrant community leaders. Blazing libraries, kindergartens and schools were a particularly shocking sight. When Parisian students demonstrated against a new precarious form of work contracts in the spring of 2006, some were assaulted by young people from the suburbs. Recently, streets have regularly been cordoned off during open-air Friday prayers in Paris (due to lack of space in the mosques that are few and far between in the French capital). One might also include in this somewhat eclectic list the unruly behaviour of the French football team during the world championships in South Africa, culminating in the Knysna training ground mutiny on 20 June 2010, which was seen as a national disgrace by some.

This string of events is taken to reveal the existence of a culturally different, hostile and potentially dangerous community on French soil, its increasing influence condoned by governing elites and the media who simultaneously restrain the expression of critical viewpoints. Naturally, a similarly selective, 'politically correct' rewriting of recent history could prove exactly the opposite. The important point here is that incidents occurring every day – petty crime, judicial decisions, certain political statements – are constantly being relayed by a number of self-appointed 'internet news agencies' or 'current affairs blogs' which back up this essentially xenophobic reinterpretation of recent history. Websites play an active role in sustaining a far-right vision of current affairs, with every hand-picked and highlighted news item feeding into this alternative version of truth.

Living together

However, hardly anybody turns to the far right without having some personal experiences which justify such a change of mind in their eyes.

In some cases, people go as far back as to remember childhood events. When he was a little boy, one person, for example, on asking why an adopted girl was black, was slapped in the face by his grandmother, exposed as a 'racist' and humiliated in front of the entire family. A gang of youths stole 'Dewie's' yoyo when he was 10 years old, but instead of helping their son, his parents reprimanded him for referring to them as 'Arabs' and said that 'the poor boys don't have any yoyos of their own'.³ Just as for accounts of religious conversions, it is rather impossible to separate 'preconversion crisis and events from their postconversion reconstruction' (Cucchiari 1988: 429). Childhood anecdotes such as these gain a political significance only at the moment when they are recalled and inserted into a narrative. These kinds of memories tend to feature candid, well-meaning children or youngsters, and unfair authority figures. Thus, many contributors to the discussion thread list experiences and observations made at school: pupils of African origin rule in the courtyard and the classroom, deal drugs, harass white girls and bully white boys; they may even set the teachers' staffroom on fire, according to some accounts.

'Anti-French racism' is reported to be frequent. Many are retrospectively shocked at their teachers' attitude: they did not protect students, found excuses for violent and offensive behaviour, accepted 'you dirty Frenchman', but sanctioned 'dirty Arab' as an insult, their former students say. When '50 Arabs' reportedly knocked a white boy unconscious in front of a school, no teacher intervened; a social worker explained to a 15-year-old that he needed

to understand that he was being punched and beaten by young people of immigrant origin simply because 'they are bored'.⁴ In these stories, state schools are represented as a microcosm of society, with white students suffering at the hands of a minority of violent ruffians and authority figures failing to protect them.

In another typical kind of narrative, certain forum members moved from the countryside to the capital to earn a university degree or to start their first job. That is when they discovered the Parisian 'jungle': attacks, attempted or actual rape, anti-French graffiti on the walls, helpless police officers who try to push offenders beyond the city limits.

Likewise, many people describe how they perceive the everyday reality of living with immigrant neighbours, mentioning disturbances such as unpleasant smells (emanating from a petrol-fuelled barbecue in a courtyard, for example), dirt, spitting, vandalism, and cruelty against animals. Usually, an accumulation of real or perceived problems, rather than an isolated incident, provokes people's turns to the right. 'Dlfr's' lower middle-class parents educated him to respect minority groups, and taught him the values of work and family, he says. At age 9, he started having brawls with 'Arab' youngsters, one of whom stole his Walkman. One of his blond-haired friends was assaulted because he had spoken to the girlfriend of another youngster. His 'blond-haired, blue-eyed' cousin eloped with a certain Mouloud and regretted it later. A friend of his sister was reportedly raped and disfigured by an illegal immigrant. One of his girlfriends told him that she was raped by 'three Arabs and two Blacks' at age 13. He could write 'novels' full of more observations like these.

'Lulla', a 24-year-old lawyer, says that she is being insulted every day ('French slut', 'White'). Her family moved out of a difficult multi-ethnic neighbourhood in 1980, having suffered from numerous acts of violence (spitting, theft, vandalism, the killing of their cat). People throw stones at her husband and his team of professional firefighters when they intervene to save lives. Her best friend was assaulted in her car while she was pregnant, she then lost the baby.

'Wotan' was 'tortured' by a gang during an entire afternoon and left for dead when he was 8 years old; he had ventured onto 'their' territory of the neighbourhood. An ex-girlfriend of his was gang-raped, but the police refused to take her statement because she had been drunk. His present partner works at a public primary school where *halal* food is allegedly being served to all pupils, Muslim or not. Two 'Arabs' stole the scooter of his best friend. They beat her up and knocked some of her teeth out when she tried to get it back.

'Natacha' used to be a socialist, but her nephew was brutally assaulted by three 'North Africans', which made her change her mind. She has been insulted several times herself. When her sister asked a young 'North African' to keep his dog on a leash, a Molotov cocktail was thrown on her balcony, people repeatedly spat at her front door, and her car tyres were slashed. The police could not protect her and she eventually had to leave the neighbourhood.⁵

Long lists of grievances such as these convey the impression that the danger of being attacked is permanent and ubiquitous. If one takes these narratives at face value, fear and distress seem to be significant driving forces for the opinion turn to the extreme right.

A country at the crossroads

Once these people have 'opened their eyes', be it under the influence of readings, by following current affairs, or having first-hand experience of violence or anti-social behaviour of sorts, what do they 'see'?

It would be naïve to assume that Front National voters agreed with 100 % of the tenets included in the official

party programme.⁶ Some of the contributors to the website even express their scepticism about Front National policies, criticizing anti-European, xenophobic or homophobic tendencies within the far-right movement.

However, a rather coherent world view emerges from these political life-stories. Far-right voters perceive time and space in specific ways. They tend to display a nostalgic vision of the past, in particular of 1960s and 1970s France, when doors could be left unlocked and children walked to school on their own, as far as they or their parents can remember. This kind of social cohesion is thought to have disappeared on account of massive immigration in France. Today, as opposed to a mythical past, people living on French soil do not share the same values anymore and are unable to live together in peace, as some comments written in a neo-Durkheimian vein suggest. Present-day France is seen as a country at the crossroads. About 40 out of more than 500 contributors even refer to an 'invasion' of France. According to far-right sympathizers, the French territory has been 'abandoned' to strangers, France is being 'colonized'. In a more intellectual variant, France, the country of the Enlightenment, is threatened by 'obscurantism' (i.e. Islam); its 'civilization' is being 'assassinated'. Another oft-quoted set phrase is the 'cultural and ethnic genocide by population replacement', supposedly most advanced in the northern suburbs of Marseille and Paris but potentially threatening all of France (13 occurrences).⁷

As a consequence, the impression of being outnumbered by strangers is a recurrent motif in the far-right narratives and underscores these otherwise relatively abstract viewpoints. Some complain about being the 'last White' in their apartment block. Several people realize all of a sudden that they are the only white person at certain metro stations (Châtelet, Gare du Nord, Stade de France) or in buses serving the suburbs. Others see ethnically different women with pushchairs 'everywhere' or are disheartened at reading the list of mostly 'foreign' names given to newborns that the local maternity ward publishes. Pessimistic extrapolations about the demographic future of France spring from these types of observations.

Martial metaphors abound in the 'opinion turn' narratives; a 'civil war' is allegedly about to break out or has already started. There seem to be many parallels with the 1940s: the French live on 'occupied territory', some 'collaborate' with the 'enemies', while others join the ranks of the 'resistance'.⁸

Resistance vs. collaboration

This analogy calls for further explanation as it sheds some light on far-right views on society and politics in present-day France. Among the 'collaborators', three groups are singled out in particular: teachers, journalists, and mainstream politicians.

The Ministry of National Education coordinates the French school system; contributors to the site usually rename it 'anti-national' or 'pseudo-national education'. Supposedly 'neo-Marxist' teachers tell 'lies' in class; they 'brainwash' students, presenting a prejudiced view of French history and culture, while extolling the contributions of immigrants to French society. Students allegedly need to quote Marx, Sade and set out anti-racist ideas to obtain good grades. While it is true that teachers tend to lean to the political left,⁹ it is hardly possible to gauge what impact these political orientations have on classroom practice.

All mainstream media are also accused of conveying '*la pensée unique*', the supposedly only acceptable way of thinking, i.e. intellectual conformism and political correctness. Journalists allegedly do not listen to (white) victims and shield perpetrators. According to far-right

1. Nicolas Sarkozy wagered on this hypothesis between the two rounds of the presidential elections, inflecting his discourse towards the right. This strategy did not pay off; only a few far-right voters switched their allegiance.

2. These stories feature under the heading 'opinion turns' (*virages d'opinion*) on the website www.fdesouche.com. This site is ideologically close to the Front National, but is not officially sponsored by the party. 'François de Souche' is a pun on the rather untranslatable '*Français de souche*', i.e. a 'native of old French stock', a term that is deemed racist. The site is frequently subject to cyber attacks. A part of the stories quoted have been lost in one such attack and cannot be accessed anymore, but can be obtained from the author on demand. More than 500 accounts of various lengths have been published from 2008 to June 2012. Fdesouche.com belongs to the 700 most visited websites in France, with more than 81 million visits by June 2012 and about 2 million visits per month.

3. 'Rascar capac', testimony on 5 September 2008; 'Dewie', 1 September 2008.

4. 'Thomas', 1 September 2008; 'Luciux', 28 September 2009; 'Charles Lesage', 1 December 2009.

5. 'Dlfr', 2 November 2008; 'Lulla', 4 February 2010; 'Wotan', 8 April 2012; 'Natacha3', 14 April 2012.

6. For the 2012 presidential elections, Marine Le Pen's programme advocated a stronger authority of the state and its civil servants; support for French farming, commerce and crafts; reindustrialization; a 'Europe of nations' including Russia and Switzerland, but without Turkey; returning to a national currency; leaving NATO; political pluralism, transparency, freedom of the press; and, perhaps most significantly, stopping legal and illegal immigration, combatting communitarianism, as well as ending positive discrimination schemes (www.frontnational.com).

Fig. 3. *The values of the Republic, chiselled on a French town hall façade.*

7. This expression was forged by poet and politician Aimé Césaire in the late 1970s in an anticolonial context. The far right hijacked the turn of phrase in the 2010s.

8. Marine Le Pen herself likened Muslim street prayers to an 'occupation' in a speech in Lyons in December 2010. Unsurprisingly, the comparison was unanimously condemned in the media.

9. More than 60 % of the circa 800,000 French teachers voted for left-wing presidential candidates in the 2002, 2007, and 2012 elections; 79 % had the intention to vote for François Hollande in 2012. He obtained 51.64 % of the vote, which amounts to a difference of almost 30 percentage points between teachers and the general population (Fourquet & Kraus 2012).

10. Far-right forum contributors regularly come up with ruses such as slightly different spelling, spaces or dots in the middle of an 'offensive' word that would otherwise be blocked by a programme that checks new contributions automatically. Irony is another means for circumventing censorship: 'the Swedish' instead of 'Arabs', or 'CPF' (meaning a *chance pour la France*, i.e. an 'opportunity for France') for 'immigrant'.

11. 'FSK', 28 October 2010; 'Le Burcosier', 24 April 2011; 'WilliamDuffWallace', 6 September 2011; 'Chère Rasade', 30 September 2008; 'Marie.rie', 2 March 2009; 'Valar', 9 October 2009; 'Franek', 30 October 2009.

12. For a family with five children, child benefit would not exceed 1000 euros per month (about €620 if none is older than 14). The state owns all churches and pays for their preservation. Mosque constructions are funded by Muslim believers and sometimes foreign donors such as the Gulf states.

13. On criminal statistics concerning youth offenders, cf. Lagrange (2010).

14. 'Busi', 1 September 2008; 'Lorenzo', 10 December 2008; 'zoo', 6 March 2009; 'Le blond', 22 June 2009.

15. According to official figures, about 5.5 million, i.e. 9 % of the population, had neither French nor European citizenship in 2008. 21 % of babies born on French soil had at least one non-European parent, 7 % had two non-European parents in 2010 (www.insee.fr).

voters, ethnic aspects are systematically silenced in the media; journalists partake in 'intellectual terrorism', spread 'propaganda' and tell 'lies'. National newspapers such as *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro* do actually have a policy of not mentioning names with ethnic connotations in reports on criminal incidents (Alidières 2006), but Front National politicians have ample opportunity to voice their views, at least during election campaigns when the same amount of broadcasting time is allotted to each party. Nonetheless, mainstream media outlets are repeatedly accused of censoring 'nationalist' speakers, texts or forum contributions.¹⁰

While increased access to the traditional media has arguably granted the Front National a modicum of respectability and above all a great amount of publicity since the early 1980s (Ellinas 2010: 176-177), the internet has recently made it possible to spread an alternative worldview rather easily. Some sites like *fdesouche.com* apply the principle of so-called 're-information' (as opposed to 'disinformation' in the traditional media), i.e. they selectively compile all national and international news that confirm the hypothesis of an immigrant threat: crimes committed by immigrants or their descendants, public support or tolerance of Muslim customs, vandalism in churches, public figures' remarks in favour or against immigration and a multicultural society. These sites are perceived as the 'last hiding place of European thought', one of the 'rare democratic spaces in a totalitarian country', an 'oxygen supply' without which people would 'suffocate'. Interestingly, community advocates also complain about the unfair media portrayal of the difficult neighbourhoods they live in. Mainstream media, and TV channels in particular, do probably content themselves with pandering to perceived stereotypes so as to remain 'neutral' for commercial reasons (Bourdieu et al. 1993: 107, 208).

Apart from teachers and journalists, the governing élites are also counted among the 'collaborators'. Politicians and many better-off French citizens are believed to ignore the real problems of real people living in the suburbs because they can afford housing in upmarket neighbourhoods and send their children to exclusive private schools. The two main parties, UMP and PS, are supposed to basically have the same interests and discourse on immigration, that is why they are merged into a single entity, the 'UMPS', in true Front National jargon. Mainstream politicians are touted as 'internationalists', 'accomplices' in the attacks against 'French culture'. Supposedly, immigration has been encouraged for decades because it produces a cheap labour force and keeps salaries down, which benefits the socio-economic élites.

The voters criticize ordinary French citizens too: according to forum contributors, these 'useful idiots', 'brain-washed by propaganda', repeat always the same formula about the social and cultural enrichment brought about by immigrants, which flies in the face of the evidence. Thus, the far right has the impression that they need to fight on two fronts: against an outer and an inner 'enemy', immigration from the African continent and its fifth column at home, i.e. probably the majority of the French population, the media, and successive French governments.

Incidentally, far-right thinking does not only try to align itself with the concept of 'resistance', but also with the equally prestigious idea of Republicanism. This emerges from a number of emblematic stories intended to illustrate injustice and unequal treatment: 'FSK's' girlfriend is searched intensively at the airport, while a woman wearing a headscarf is hardly being touched; another storyteller had to do his military service, while he knew of young Frenchmen with an immigrant background who found an excuse and were exempted.



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Some express the view that there is only a limited amount of 'goods' to be distributed in society, and are angered at losing out. 'Le Burcosier' did not get a place on a Master's degree programme, but the French state generously funds foreign students, he says. White women prefer immigrants to 'WilliamDuffWallace', still single. Social housing is built for women wearing Muslim clothing and having lots of children, while 'Chère Rasade' had to limit herself to one single child; now she cannot leave the neighbourhood as her apartment lost value on account of the area becoming ever more 'ethnic'.

Some stories are even more exaggerated than others: French families have to live in caravans while immigrants get decent housing, says 'marie.rie'; in addition, she once had to wait two hours at the post office 'while 20 salaries were being transferred to Africa'. 'Valar' alleges that his immigrant neighbours receive 2000 to 2500 euros worth of child benefit each month, enjoy a two-month summer holiday in their home country, drive a BMW car and fill it with smoked salmon and other luxury food they get for free at a charity. The French state supposedly builds mosques after closing down churches.¹¹

As overstated and despicable as these accounts may be, they do pay lip-service to the Republican core value of equality, mistakenly accusing the state of granting preferential treatment to some citizens or population groups (that are portrayed as less deserving). It goes without saying that most militants get their facts utterly wrong.¹²

Pseudo-anthropological bricolage

It has been noted before that Front National officials like to delve into the anthropological toolkit to justify some of their ideas (Crépon 2001). This pick-and-choose approach is also noticeable in many voters' narratives.

A lot of the grievances voiced concern over anti-social behaviour and petty crime. Contributors to the right-wing discussion forum expressly refute 'sociological' explanations for these acts. They argue that poor living conditions and discrimination do not necessarily lead to criminal behaviour, as many counter-examples are supposed to show, especially those concerning Armenian, Indian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese or Vietnamese immigrants and their well-integrated descendants.

If social and economic deprivation may not explain deviant behaviour, 'culture' supposedly can. In the narratives quoted above, the offenders are perceived as being



Fig. 4. Far-right supporters at the Front National May Day rally in Paris.

Fig. 5. The number of female far-right voters is rising.



Muslim and/or of African origin. Using an argumentative shortcut, many Front National sympathizers impute deviant or criminal propensities to certain foreign cultures. They believe that they are justified in generalizing from some youth offenders to entire communities.¹³

The seemingly logical conclusion drawn from these observations is that multiculturalism has failed as an experiment. Some ‘cultures’ are thought to be incompatible, in particular Muslim communities and their west European host societies, as illustrated by second or third-generation immigrants who ‘hate France’, are ungrateful and ‘bite the hand that feeds them’.¹⁴

Other arguments draw on popular anthropology, too: the feeling of belonging to a community is part of human needs and should be respected (mainly where the ‘indigenous’ majority is concerned, of course). The ‘autochthonous population’ of France is believed to be endangered. Some argue that each ethnic group, as defined by its traditions and heritage, should live on ‘its own territory’: Africans in Africa, the French in France. This use of outdated or bogus sociological and anthropological ideas is selective and contradictory. Far-right voters do ascribe some agency to individuals: trying to assimilate or turning against the host society is described as a personal choice, but some ‘cultures’ are supposed to predispose men (hardly ever women) to hostile and violent behaviour. In these ‘opinion turn’ narratives, social thought is meant to legitimate views which their authors consequently take to be simple assertions of facts instead of the racist perceptions that they really are.

Undoubtedly, the partial hijacking of the legacy of the Resistance movement, of Republican values such as liberty and equality, and of sociological or anthropological concepts broadens the appeal of far-right policies. This development chimes with Marine Le Pen’s recent strategy of whitewashing the Front National, trying to refashion it as an ‘acceptable’ party by distancing herself from her father’s controversial statements and softening some stances that had repelled important voter groups such as women or homosexual people.

What does the future hold?

If France’s traditional political right, currently numbed by defeat and mired in a leadership conflict after Nicolas Sarkozy’s departure, re-emerges as a credible party that appeals to voters scattered all over the broad spectrum of the right, there will be little chance that the Front National will cross the 20% mark in the future. French parliamentary elections operate according to a first-past-the-post system which disadvantages any but the two largest parties. As a result, 13% of votes for the Front National translated into only two seats out of 577 in the lower house (*Assemblée nationale*) after the elections in June. It remains to be seen

to what extent these two MPs make their voices heard. In the five years leading to the next presidential and parliamentary elections, the far-right party can only hope for success in local elections or expect to exploit some scandals or incidents so as to bring its views across.

In order to influence anyone beyond its 75,000-strong membership, and with a view to repeating, if not surpassing, its electoral success of this year, the party thus has to rely almost entirely on the media. However, as discussed above, the far-right movement entertains an ambivalent relationship with the main media outlets, accused of systematically downplaying immigration issues and vilifying the Front National.

In this atmosphere of general distrust, the internet plays a cathartic role. Emotional outpourings are common on sites such as *fdesouche.com*: many thank other contributors to the discussion thread for the stories they shared. The contributions to this site reveal the astonishing diversity of Front National supporters. Far from the stereotype of disenfranchised, poorly educated ‘losers’ in today’s France, some have obtained prestigious university degrees, earn a comfortable living, travel to foreign countries and write rather witty prose. Some declare themselves to be firmly on the political left; they want to defend the heritage of the French revolution, have anti-capitalist views or uphold feminist values.

Reading through the host of ‘opinion turn’ narratives as well as the other debates on *fdesouche.com*, one cannot help but notice that the argumentation moves in circles. Every new incident – from minor altercations with colleagues or neighbours to horror episodes such as the killing of soldiers and Jewish children in Toulouse in March 2012 – seems to confirm what is already taken for granted: France cannot welcome that many immigrants.¹⁵ Information to the contrary (for instance, on offenders of European origin, or successful integration of immigrants and their descendants) is simply not taken into account.

If this two-tier information society is left to develop, a sphere of unchecked information and debate, freed from the fetters of political correctness, is likely to expand even more at the expense of mainstream media. The life-stories under consideration clearly demonstrate the growing attractiveness of far-right ideas for citizens who used to situate themselves on the political left or were previously apolitical.

Instead of ignoring, minimizing or discrediting experiences, observations, perceptions of the kind described above entirely, they should at least partially be dealt with and thus subjected to critical analysis in public debate. Exclusion has proven to be a less efficient strategy in dealing with far-right discourse than engagement (Goodwin 2011). Underneath intolerably racist and verbally violent remarks, some unpleasant questions may be hidden: why is there so much distrust towards political élites? Are globalization, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism unquestionably positive values? Are discrimination and racism the only obstacles to ‘integration’, however defined? Would ethnic statistics (largely non-existent in France) help to demystify prejudices against certain immigrant communities?

Dismissing these interrogations would confirm the far-right sympathizers’ view that conventional media, researchers and politicians refuse to ‘see reality’, and bring about further radicalization and withdrawal from the public sphere into virtual shelters like *fdesouche.com* where their opinions go unchallenged.

The views expressed by these voters touch on issues that are at the heart of anthropology’s concerns: culture, society, justice, ethnicity, identity, tradition. Social scientists have a part to play in setting the record straight and drawing them back into public debate. ●

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