

The French National Front: Between Vichy and the Republic

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The National Front hasn't changed. It just learned how to articulate its longstanding racism and xenophobia with mainstream French republican discourse.

The first round of the French presidential elections is scheduled for Sunday, followed by a runoff between the top two candidates on May 7. Though the dynamic of the race has been volatile, Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front (FN) is still expected to make it to the second round, with a strong possibility that she will win a plurality in the first. Moreover, with the French party system currently in crisis, all bets are off, and there is a slim chance that Le Pen might even win the runoff.

A Le Pen victory would have been utterly unthinkable decades ago. Founded in 1972 by Marine Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie, the FN was for most of its existence a fringe nationalist movement whose racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism placed it beyond the pale. Jean-Marie himself has infamously characterized the Holocaust as a "detail of history," [1] and has frequently gotten into trouble for racist remarks [2].

But despite its unsavory origins, the FN has in recent years ridden a wave of popular discontent with France's political and economic elite to emerge as the country's leading party. It has been able to do so, in part, because of a sustained effort by Marine Le Pen since her election as party leader in 2011 to clean up the FN's image. To this end, she has cut ties with some extremist elements, and has gone out of her way to condemn antisemitism and to court Jews [3]. This effort to "de-demonize" the FN and to distance its past has been serious enough to open a rift between Le Pen and her more provocative father, whose expulsion from the party was engineered in 2015 after he once again referred to the gas chambers as a "detail."

Hence everybody's surprise when on April 9 Marine Le Pen told a television interviewer that she didn't think "France is responsible for the Vel d'Hiv" — a reference to the notorious July 16-17 1942 roundup by French police of thirteen thousand Jews [4], most of whom would eventually perish in Nazi death camps. Her statement was, unsurprisingly, roundly denounced by her rivals as a form of Holocaust denialism.

The initial English-language reporting on Le Pen's statement has tended to characterize it as a puzzling gaffe, given the effort she's made to "modernize" the FN. The implication is that her statement gave the lie to the FN's recent reinvention, and revealed a fundamental continuity with its antisemitic past.

This idea that Le Pen's statement revealed the true face of the FN, however, misses what I think is its deeper significance. First, it's important to understand exactly what she said. Le Pen followed up her initial statement by saying that responsibility for the Vel d'Hiv roundup lay with "those who were in power at the time," and not "France." Later that day, she clarified her statement: "I consider that France and the Republic were in London during the occupation and that the Vichy regime was not

France.” And again on Twitter: “I condemn, without reservation, the collaborationist Vichy government, and I do not give it any legitimacy.”

What Le Pen denied was thus not the fact that Jews had been rounded up in France, nor the fact that French people had participated in the Holocaust. What she denied was that the French nation — incarnated in the republic — could be held responsible for these actions, on the grounds that the Vichy regime that committed them was an illegitimate usurper.

This argument is not as crazy as it may seem. Indeed, Le Pen was simply repeating what had been the official republican consensus — maintained by Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand alike — until Jacques Chirac finally accepted responsibility for French participation in the Holocaust in 1995. In saying what she did, Le Pen was simply reaffirming the postwar national myth that denied any continuity between Vichy and the republic.

What’s significant about all this is that it’s precisely the kind of thing that would have been absolutely anathema to the old FN led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. The reactionaries that constituted the core of the old party — many of whom had ties to the Vichy regime [5] — would have been loath to condemn Vichy and embrace the republic. The continuity that Le Pen is claiming is not with Vichy and the historical far right, but with de Gaulle and Mitterrand [6]. In this sense, Le Pen’s statement was an index of the FN’s discursive transformation, not a callback to its past.

Historically, the defining characteristic of the reactionary right was its hostility to the republic and its secular values of liberty, equality, and fraternity [7]. The French left, in turn, has a long tradition of articulating its opposition to the far right in terms of “republican defense” — a reflex that persists to this day. But as part of its efforts to become a mainstream party, the contemporary FN has increasingly coopted republican discourse and has presented itself as the defender of republican values. It has inflected these in a distinctly chauvinistic direction and used them as a cudgel against Muslims and immigrants, but this has also entailed an abandonment of some mainstays of reactionary discourse. The FN today represents itself as the authentic bearer of a popular-republican tradition it had historically spurned.

Of course, none of this makes what Le Pen said any less of an antisemitic dog whistle. The FN continues to harbor many neofascist antisemites [8], and its “modernization” has not gone uncontested internally. And though its bread and butter these days is Islamophobia, it’s also clear that its most hardcore supporters are titillated by antisemitic provocations. Yet we should also recognize the ways in which the FN has adapted its racist and antisemitic discourse. Whereas the elder Le Pen minimized the Holocaust full stop, the younger Le Pen is minimizing French participation in it by appealing to a well-worn republican trope. That is significant in itself.

The story here is *not* that the FN has not changed, but that it has successfully articulated its longstanding racism and xenophobia with mainstream republican discourse. The FN is now a republican-chauvinist party, but both of these terms are equally significant. To insist that the new FN is the same as the old FN [9] and to dismiss the sincerity of its republican turn is, I think, an analytical and a political mistake.

In accounting for the historical weakness of fascist movements in France, many French historians have pointed to the supposedly inoculating effect of the country’s republican political culture. But if the current rise of the FN has demonstrated anything, it’s that republicanism and fascism are not incompatible. Those who are anxious to beat back the fascist tide will have to do more than just appeal to “republican defense.”

Mathieu Desan

P.S.

* Jacobin. 4.20.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/national-front-marine-le-pen-holocaust-vichy-republic-secularism/>

* Adapted from Scatterplot:

<https://scatter.wordpress.com>

* Mathieu Desan is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/06/jean-marie-le-pen-fined-again-dismissing-holocaust-detail>

[2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/jean-marie-le-pen-fined-inciting-hate-roma-170227193411226.html>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/world/europe/france-jews-marine-le-pen-national-front-anti-semitism.html>

[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/world/europe/france-reflects-on-role-in-rounding-up-jews-for-death-camps.html>

[5] http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/04/13/la-france-des-fondateurs-du-fn-n-etait-pas-a-londres-mais-a-vichy_1562534

[6] <https://www.marine2017.fr/2017/04/09/responsabilite-de-france-stop-a-linstrumentalisation-in-digne/>

[7] <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2015/01/12/past-and-present-in-france-dont-give-them-what-they-want/>

[8] http://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/presidentielle/jeunesse-au-gud-accusations-d-antisemitisme-combines-financieres-frederic-chatillon-un-fidele-toujours-dans-l-ombre-de-marine-le-pen_2109402.html

[9] <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/11/the-holocaust-denying-vichy-celebrating-heart-of-the-national-front/>