

H-France Review Vol. 1 (April 2001), No. 8

Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys. *The Politics of Racism in France*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. xiv + 240 pp., tables, biblio., index. \$69.95.

Review by Steven Zdatny, West Virginia University.

I recall arriving in Paris for the summer of 1986, taking the RER from Roissy Airport to the Gare du Nord and being immediately struck by the evidence of a change in government: a considerable group of police hassling a bunch of young Africans and Maghrebins. *Hélas*, I thought, the Right is back in charge, and racism is reasserting itself. Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys suggest that I may have been hasty in my conclusion, however. Not that Charles Pasqua was soft on immigration or sensitive to the feelings of young, non-white *étrangers*, only that Left governments have not been notably softer or more sensitive. In fact, the authors—two English professors of French—believe that the other parties' failure "to defend the right to cultural and ethnic difference" (p. 10) makes them complicit in a *politics of racism* that has cleared the way for the National Front's [NF] advance.

Of course, the National Front, with its smoothly thuggish leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, is still the champion of anti-immigrant politics and the central focus of this study of French racism. Where did it come from? What were its antecedents, the conditions that brought it into play? How did it grow so quickly in the 1980s and 1990s? What can we expect from the National Front in the near future? How bright are its prospects for success? And what can and ought to be done to dim these? These are the questions that command the authors' attention.

In seeking to explain "why such an organization [the NF] has come to occupy the place it has in French society," Fysh and Wolfreys begin with the history of a country that does not really believe in "the right to be different" (p. 3). They paint a grim picture of immigrant labor during the industrial revolution, principally Italians and Poles, squeezed between miserable conditions and the antipathy of native French workers. Their numbers peaked between the world wars. On the eve of the Depression, according to the authors, over four million foreigners—800,000 Italians—worked in France, especially in construction, heavy metals, and mining. The press portrayed them as dirty, diseased, and menacing. The CGT often led the fight against them. When the Depression hit, various trades and professions tried to close ranks against foreigners. The conservative parties called for their expulsion. The left in its compassion favored "voluntary repatriation." Vichy's notorious nativism led to denaturalizations and internments, yet foreign workers managed to play an important role in the resistance — although the internationalist ideal of the Resistance was betrayed during the Cold War, by the French communists as well as their opponents.

Needless to say, the outlook was consistently bleaker for non-Europeans resident in France. Even after 1945 when, on paper, immigration policy was officially more benign, the French practiced all manner of informal discrimination against immigrants, according to an informal hierarchy that placed "Nordic" *immigrés* at the top and Maghrebins at the bottom. Prejudice against colonial types was aggravated by France's losing struggle to retain those colonies. Up to the 1980s—and apart from the notorious *journée* of 17 October 1961—government policy, while not brutally racist, remained objectionable. Throughout,

cultural and political “apartheid” was accompanied by economic discrimination. Even during “les trentes glorieuses,” young, non-European immigrants quickly became aware of “the occupational ghetto to which their parents had been consigned” (p. 34).

The irony is that this racist class system characterized a country that generally considered itself one of the least racist in the world, and here Fysh and Wolfreys offer an interesting critique of the French republican tradition. Everyone expects the extreme right to be racist and anti-immigrant and understands that, from time to time, even the working class will cast a suspicious eye on foreign labor. But the authors detect a racist streak within republican values themselves. That is, the principles articulated by the Revolution implied the need to integrate all citizens into a society based on adherence to the Rights of Man. However, in addition to whatever hypocrisy has attended the application of these principles, the elevation of *égalité* over *différence* has been singularly unfriendly to those who have hesitated to “fit in.” This philosophical discomfort with difference, the authors suggest, has handcuffed French anti-racists in their fight against the National Front.

The Socialist victory of 1981 set the table for the FN’s breakthrough, both because it signaled the breakup of the “four-party system” and because the mainstream parties increasingly began to woo voters with “clumsy attacks on immigrants.” Actually, Mitterand’s initial policies toward immigrants had been admirably humane. It was only as the socialist experiment began to sour that the government reached to play the “immigrant card.” As the “gang of four” (PS, PCF, UDF, RPR) opened the door to the politics of racism, the FN expanded its appeal by playing to broad popular sentiments, favoring such policies as restoring the death penalty and “sending immigrants back to where they came from” (p. 48).

Early on, the Front won some local and by-elections and collected ten seats in the European elections of 1984. But its big break came with the switch to proportional representation and its strong showing in the 1986 parliamentary elections, where Lepenist candidates grabbed 9.7 percent of the vote (same as the PCF) and thirty-five deputies. Prosperity did not mellow the FN or Le Pen, who continued to steer a radical course. Yet as anti-immigrant discourse became more common among the mainstream parties, the Front lost some of its allure and, in the 1988 parliamentary elections, all but one of its deputies.

That the FN did not then fade away the authors attribute to the solidity of its base and appeal. Its membership was split between a “periphery” of the socially disconnected and pessimistic and a “core” of socially integrated, committed racists. It drew votes and members from a wide geographic range but was strongest in the Midi. The sociology of Lepenism shifted over time. Originally anchored in the “dissatisfied middle classes,” the Front began to pick up considerable numbers of working-class voters. By 1994 it was attracting what Fysh and Wolfreys call “the most plebeian electorate” and a bigger slice of the unemployed vote than any other party (p. 69).

According to the authors, however, the National Front was not simply, as the early NSDAP was once described, “a catch-all party of protest.” Rather, it is “the long-planned and carefully-nurtured project of hard-core leaders who identify with the French fascist tradition” (p. 5). In order to establish Le Pen’s fascist *bona fides*, Fysh and Wolfreys offer a quick history of the extreme right in France, from 1880 to 1944, Boulanger through Vichy. Based as it is on a sort of seminar’s reading list on French fascism—drawing overwhelmingly on Robert Soucy’s fine work—this essay provides no new insight into the phenomenon and does not place the FN clearly in this tradition. More troublesome, the authors’ loose ways with facts and language made me begin to distrust their judgment. They write, for example, that the Daladier government of 1934, after the February riots, gave way to “a more authoritarian one” (p. 84). They refer to a “massive general strike [that] welcomed the Popular Front” and to October (they mean November) 1938 “when the last gains of the Popular Front were wiped out” (p. 85). They claim that the Vichy regime “set about implementing the program of the paramilitary leagues, the Action Française, the Church and the big bourgeoisie” (p. 89). This is rhetorical rather than precise writing,

wrong in its particulars and misleading in its general effect. But I guess that's what happens when your authority for these matters is Daniel Guérin.

Fysh and Wolfreys are much more enlightening when they follow the mostly abortive efforts of die-hard fascists in the Fourth and Fifth Republics grappling with the thankless task of remaining a fascist in a prosperous, peaceful (and even post-communist) Europe. Strategic considerations led the rag-tag fascist movement in 1972 to line up behind Le Pen, as the man best placed to "widen the scope of nationalist struggle by opening out as broadly as possible" (p. 97).

The authors see in National Front ideology the generic elements of fascism: 1) assertions of cultural and racial superiority; 2) the vision of an organic community; 3) a hierarchical political order. Much of this fascist content is veiled in day-to-day pronouncements. Indeed, one of the things that makes Le Pen effective is his tactical approach to doctrine: what the authors call the Front's "dual discourse"—coded language that is explicitly official and legitimate while being implicitly authoritarian and racist—that allows it to speak to both core and periphery at the same time. In all, Fysh and Wolfreys conclude, with its "network of influence" and embryonic militia organization, the Front "represents the most successful attempt at rebuilding a fascist party since the war" (pp. 141-2).

The chemistry of Le Pen's poison, in the end, is less interesting than its ability to spread through the French political system. This question leads the authors to examine attempts, both formal and casual, to defeat the Front. They begin with a sympathetic portrait of immigrant, and especially Maghrebin, youth—to establish that the objects of National Front hatred are not as the Front paints them—and then look at the conditions of their "exclusion." They dismiss as laughable and cynical state efforts to ameliorate this situation—for example, by "repairing the lifts in the seedy tower blocks" (p. 169)—and point to the discrimination that pervades the police and the courts.

The authors' analysis of French anti-racism revolves, first, around the development of "Beur identity" and, second, around the difficult and tangled struggle to control the anti-racist movement. Serious ethnic and tactical differences divided the anti-FN forces. On the one hand, those who favored a strictly "Beur strategy" opposed those who wanted to bring immigrant youth into a broader, progressive social movement. Fysh and Wolfreys generally consider anti-racist groups in the old Republican tradition—France Plus and SOS Racisme, above all—to be fatally flawed: uncomfortable with ethnicity, too "white," too moderate, and too happy to cooperate with the "authorities." Thus, according to the authors, a 1988 SOS conference adopted a program of six demands covering nationality, rights of entry, the right to vote, an independent police authority, housing and schools and simply 'submitted them to the government,' rather than contemplating a militant campaign for their implementation (p. 167).

SOS Racisme's strategy is all the more problematical because the "authorities" are so unreliable. From "Chirac and his henchmen" (p. 59) to the "egregious Fabius" (p. 51), politicians blithely employed racism to win votes. But Mitterand was the worst, for being the sneakiest. One moment he cast himself as "the friendly uncle, protector of youth and minorities." The next, with his 1988 "re-election in the bag [and having] no further use for a lively and radical youth movement," he betrayed them (pp. 165, 177). The clearest illustration of socialist cynicism arrived with the so-called "Headscarf Affair" in 1989. Virtually the entire "official" left—socialists, communists, and such *intéllo* celebrities as Régis Debray, Alain Finkelkraut, and Elisabeth Badinter—joined the right in agreeing on the need to defend the secular character of the Republic by forbidding Muslim girls to wear headscarves in state schools. This "affair" was an utterly manufactured crisis, in Fysh and Wolfreys's opinion, since the scarves presented no genuine "threat to republican norms"; it was only an attempt to exploit racism for political gain. What is worse, the mainstream parties' exploitation of racism served to legitimize the National Front and further entrench it in French politics.

It is impossible not to sympathize with the authors' condemnation of racism, as well as to admire their sense of solidarity with its victims and their intimate knowledge of the contemporary anti-racist scene. I must confess, however, to having serious reservations about the book. I begin to suspect the authors' historical good sense when they describe the demonstrations against Juppé's abortive reform plans of 1995 as the "revival of class struggle" (p. 199), or allude to the "*collusion* [sic - my emphasis] of the established political parties" in Le Pen's "electoral breakthrough" (p. 63), or when they approvingly cite Sartre's tendentious observation, after the brutal police action of October 1961, that "Jews under the occupation . . . had suffered less savagery from the Gestapo than the Algerians at the hands of the police of the Republic . . ." (p. 30). I lose faith when they call Louis Barthou foreign *secretary*, have the Popular Front elected in *June* 1936, and place the Poujadist electoral surprise in 1953 (it was 1956). I squirm when I read a contemptuous reference to the "jet-set benefactors" of SOS Racisme (p. 169) and come upon such expressions as the above-mentioned "Chirac and his henchmen." This is the sort of thing that Trotskyists say just before they expel Stalinists from the cell and vice-versa. It does not, in my opinion, illuminate the success of the National Front or the complicity of other elements.

Besides, this emphasis on perfidy obscures other aspects of the story described in the book. It is obviously true that the integration of immigrants into French society has been difficult and incomplete and that enormous problems remain. Yet the process has crept forward even in a time of slow growth and high unemployment. Moreover, there is another way to read the electoral statistics. The economy has dragged for the last twenty-five years, the socialist promise of the early 1980s has dissipated, and the entire political establishment has been racked by scandals. Disappointment and cynicism have deeply infected French politics. Nevertheless, the National Front, scary and despicable as it may be, has never managed seriously to threaten the stability of the Republic. It has some parochial successes to show for its enormous efforts. Lepenists have won power here and there, where they have been able to re-channel municipal budgets and bully local librarians. As Fysh and Wolfreys document so well, however, the FN has never earned more than a mediocre 15 percent of the national vote, and most of the time it has fallen well short of that mark. Even in the age of proportional representation, which really *was* Mitterand's very cynical gift to the Front, Le Pen has never had the power to push national policy beyond the bounds set by the traditional left-right coalitions. Perhaps the message is an encouraging one after all.

Steven Zdatny
West Virginia University
szdatny@wvu.edu

Copyright © 2001 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172