

IS THE NATIONAL FRONT REPUBLICAN AND DOES IT MATTER? CLASS, CULTURE, AND THE RISE OF THE NATIONALIST RIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The growth of the nationalist right in Europe and the United States has set off a debate over whether “economic anxiety” or “racial resentment” is at the root of this phenomenon. Examining the case of the French National Front, I suggest that this is a poor way of posing the question of the significance of class in explaining the rise of the nationalist right. Recent advances by the National Front—particularly among working-class voters—have tended to be attributed to the party’s strategic pivot toward a “leftist” economic program and an embrace of the republican tradition. This in turn has been critically interpreted in two different ways. Some take the FN’s strategic pivot at face value and see the party’s success as the expression of a new political cleavage between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. Others see the National Front’s embrace of republicanism as a cynical ploy hiding its true face. Both interpretations, however, point to a strategy of “republican defense” as a means to counteract the National Front. I argue that this strategy is likely to misfire and that class remains central to explaining—and countering—the rise of the National Front, albeit in a peculiar way. Working-class support for the National Front does indeed appear to be driven primarily by ethno-cultural, not class, interests, but this is itself predicated on a historical decline in the political salience of class due to the neoliberal depoliticization of the economy. I argue that it was this disarticulation of class identity that helped deliver the

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working-class vote to the National Front and that any strategy for combating the nationalist right must thus find new ways to articulate a class identity capable of neutralizing racist and chauvinist articulations.

Keywords: France; national front; nationalism; neoliberalism; class; political articulation

Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton in the November 2016 US presidential election came as a shock to political observers, and journalists and scholars have since scrambled to explain the debacle. Discussion about the causes of this political catastrophe has crystallized into a debate over whether “economic anxiety” or “racial resentment” motivated Trump voters, particularly the supposedly crucial Obama-to-Trump swing voters. Many of the studies that have sought to adjudicate this debate have found more evidence for “racial resentment” and other regressive cultural attitudes as motivating factors among right-wing voters, and popular write-ups of this research in liberal media outlets have used these findings to suggest that racism and xenophobia are more important than class in making sense of right-wing nationalism’s ascendance (e.g., Luttig, Federico, & Lavine 2017; Major, Blodorn, & Blascovich 2018; Reny Collingwood, & Ali, 2019; Schaffner, Macwilliams, & Nteta 2018). The question, however, is often badly posed. The significance of class is neither reducible to “economic anxiety” nor is it incompatible with right-wing voters being motivated by regressive ethno-cultural attitudes. So long as we pose the question only in terms of voters’ motivations, we risk obscuring the importance of class politics—both in explaining the current conjuncture and in pointing a way out of it. A brief examination of the French *Front national*, or National Front (FN), and the debates surrounding its recent successes, particularly among working-class voters, is instructive for how we might more fruitfully think about the relationship between class and culture in accounting for the rise of the nationalist right.¹

The twenty-first century has seen a resurgence of far-right nationalist politics in Europe as these movements have in many countries moved out of the margins and implanted themselves firmly in the political mainstream. As one of its more successful parties, the FN is often held up as the vanguard of this nationalist wave.² Indeed, despite an unfavorable electoral system that has effectively kept it

¹The FN rebranded itself as the *Rassemblement national*, or National Rally, in June 2018. However, I continue to use the old name in this paper because it deals with the period preceding the name change.

²The actual relations between the nationalist movements are more complicated. For example, the FN enjoys close relations with the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), but it is shunned by the Danish People’s Party (DPP). All, in turn, keep their distance from Greece’s Golden Dawn, which is—officially at least—considered beyond the pale. As Linz (1980) points out for interwar fascism, one would expect any international cooperation between ideologically nationalist movements to be uneasy.

out of office, the FN has emerged in recent years as one of France's leading parties. A much-noted sociological fact behind the FN's ascendance has been the massive shift in working-class electoral support from the left to the far right in the past couple decades. This has coincided with a concerted effort by the party to shed the unsavory image of its neo-fascist origins in a strategy commonly referred to as *dédiabolisation* or "dedemonization." In addition to tempering its more extremist rhetoric, this strategy has included two significant shifts in FN discourse: first, a conscious embrace of the French republican tradition to which the reactionary right had historically been hostile, and second, a turn toward a "leftist" economic message targeting workers disaffected by the neoliberal consensus. This strategic pivot is often presumed to be responsible for the FN's ability to capture a formerly left-wing working-class electorate. Reflections on the rise of the FN and on political strategies for rolling back the nationalist tide have thus tended to revolve around the question of *dédiabolisation*.

In this paper, I consider two broad interpretations of the FN's strategic turn. Some have interpreted the party's implantation in the political mainstream as the expression of a new political cleavage between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism that has replaced the classic division between left and right. The FN of recent years is taken to represent a new form of far-right nationalist populism that is fundamentally distinct from its neo-fascist heritage. The tendency here has been to take the FN's strategic evolution at face value, though usually unwittingly, and to conclude from it that the coordinates of political contestation, and with it the political valence of class, have shifted. In this view, if the working class has rallied behind the FN, it is assumed to be because within these new coordinates, the FN's populism expresses the cultural and economic interests of the native white French working class.

The other interpretation has been to see *dédiabolisation* as a cynical ploy by the FN to smuggle their nationalist and xenophobic politics into the mainstream. In this view, the FN has not essentially changed since its neo-fascist origins, and any concessions to democratic values or to a "leftist" economic program are interpreted away as superficial illusions masking the FN's true face. *Dédiabolisation* here is seen as a sham, with commentators insisting that the FN is *not really* republican. To the extent that the working class has rallied behind the FN—a phenomenon which this view tends to think is overstated—the implication is that it has been duped.

Despite their divergent assessments of it, the two interpretations sketched above suggest that the key to the FN's success, particularly among the working class, has mainly to do with the strategy of *dédiabolisation*, and the political responses implied by their analyses are duly pitched at that level. Indeed, the debate about *dédiabolisation* has tended to revolve around the question of republican values, with both interpretations sharing the dubious assumption that republicanism and fascism are fundamentally incompatible. This in turn has underwritten a flawed strategy of "republican defense" to block the nationalist right's ascendance. In positing an essential antagonism between republicanism and fascism, "republican defense" renders political opposition to the nationalist right as primarily a conflict over republican and democratic values that are presumably

shared by the entire political mainstream. But, I argue, this strategy of “republican defense” is likely to misfire because of a misplaced political essentialism and because it positions resistance to nationalism as a defense of the status quo.

Ultimately, the problem is that *dédiabolisation* does not actually much explain the rise of the FN. Class, I argue, remains central to explaining the rise of the FN. However, the particular way in which class matters is not straightforward. Working-class support for the FN does indeed appear to be driven by ethno-cultural attitudes and not directly by “economic anxiety.” Yet the research also suggests that this does not really explain the massive *shift* in working-class electoral support from left to right. Indeed, the evidence suggests that this shift has less to do with changes in racist and xenophobic attitudes or broader cultural anxieties than with the weakening of class identity and its link with the left. Having embraced the neoliberal consensus after assuming the responsibilities of government in the 1980s, the established left began to deemphasize a vision of society defined by structural antagonism. In doing so, it effectively depoliticized the economy, which in turn decreased the salience of class vis-à-vis other forms of identification. It was this dissipation of working-class identity and its dealignment from the left that created an opening for the FN to capture this electorate. In other words, the FN’s attempt to articulate its historic chauvinism with republican discourse is predicated on a prior disarticulation of class within the political field more generally. Indeed, the recent growth in the FN’s popularity is better explained by the latter than by its supposed strategic acuity in adopting a republican and welfarist line. Class thus remains crucial in understanding—and countering—the rise of the nationalist right.

Theoretically, the FN case demonstrates the limits of the demographic essentialist and determinist approach which has tended to dominate American popular discourse on the rise of right-wing nationalism, both in the United States and worldwide. In this approach, politics is largely about cobbling together coalitions of fixed demographic constituencies whose material and cultural interests are predetermined. The FN case suggests that making sense of right-wing nationalism instead requires an understanding of politics that is sensitive to the fact that the very terms of political conflict are themselves objects of contention. In this vein, Bourdieu has written that political struggles are also classification struggles, in that political actors seek to impose particular principles of vision and division on the social world in their pursuit of power. Similarly, scholars of “political articulation” have argued that political parties do not just reflect existing social cleavages but actively work to construct politically salient cleavages. An analysis of the FN’s growing working-class base lends support to these theoretical approaches. By taking the terms of political conflict at face value, we miss the fact that the strength of the FN, and perhaps the global nationalist right more generally, is due in large part to its success in defining the terms of conflict. By drawing on Bourdieusian and “political articulation” approaches, we can not only uncover the underlying dynamics, which remain obscured by the dominant principles of vision and division which pertain to the political world, but also begin to construct principles of political conflict that are more conducive to egalitarian politics.

THE DÉDIABOLISATION OF THE NATIONAL FRONT

Modeled on the Italian neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, the FN was founded in 1972 with the aim of unifying France's fractured nationalist right. Attracting an assortment of nationalists, reactionaries, and fascists, including a number of Nazi collaborators, the FN initially suffered from the discredit that had befallen the entire far right after World War II and as such remained a marginal political force in its early years. For example, party leader Jean-Marie Le Pen received a paltry 0.75% of the vote in the 1974 presidential elections and failed to even qualify for the 1981 elections. The FN's electoral breakthrough, however, came shortly thereafter, when the party won a 1983 municipal by-election in Dreux with the center right's support, thus legitimizing the FN in the eyes of many right-wing voters. The breakthrough was confirmed in the 1984 European elections, in which the FN won 10.95% of the vote. Between the 1981 and 1986 legislative elections, the party increased its score from 0.18% to 9.65%, and Jean-Marie Le Pen went from not qualifying for the 1981 presidential elections to finishing fourth in the first round of the 1988 elections with 14.38%. By the end of the 1980s, the FN had insinuated itself into the political space.

During the period of its initial growth, the FN appeared as the "ideal typical realization" of what Kitschelt and McGann in their classic study called the "New Radical Right"—a postindustrial political formation combining ethno-centrism, authoritarianism, and free market economics (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995, p. 91). Indeed, the FN cut the figure of a niche far-right party—typically scoring between 10% and 15% but no more—focused on immigration, law and order, and anticommunism. Its social base was centered on the old middle classes—i.e., shopkeepers, artisans, small business owners—and much of its growth came from right-wing voters looking for a hard conservative alternative after the sweeping Socialist victory of 1981 and the subsequent moderation of the mainstream right as the latter chased centrist voters (Charlot, 1986; Ignazi, 1992).³

Despite its success in carving out a niche for itself, the FN still remained a marginal force in French politics. That changed with the shock result of the 2002 presidential election, in which Jean-Marie Le Pen beat out the Socialist candidate to advance to the second round for the first time. Although Le Pen was overwhelmingly defeated in the run-off, the 5.5 million votes he received were

³Kitschelt and McGann (1995) argue that the convergence of social-democratic and moderate conservative parties and extended periods of conservative government participation are conducive to the growth of the authoritarian right. In the French case, periods of "cohabitation"—in which the presidency and government were split by party—had the effect of blurring left-right distinctions, thus opening a space for the FN on the right. Prior to 2002, when presidential terms were shortened from seven to five years, legislative and presidential election cycles were asynchronous. As a result, center-right governments were twice formed (1986–1988, 1993–1995) during the Socialist François Mitterrand's presidency, and a center-left majority governed for five years (1997–2002) under the Gaullist president Jacques Chirac.

nonetheless a record for the FN at the time. The 2002 election announced the party's arrival onto the political mainstage and nourished the ambition of its leaders to transform it from a protest party into one capable of winning power. But doing so required overcoming the anathema to which the party had historically been subjected. To this end, the FN embarked on a strategy of normalization—commonly referred to as *dédiabolisation*—in order to present a more palatable face to the general electorate. Notwithstanding a temporary setback in the 2007 elections, this strategy appeared to bear fruit, particularly after Marine Le Pen replaced her father as party president in 2011.⁴ Under her leadership, the party emerged as one of the leading forces in French politics. For example, the FN won 24.9% of the vote in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament and 27.73% in the first round of the 2015 regional elections, ranking first among parties in both. In first round balloting for the 2017 presidential elections, Marine Le Pen finished second with 21.3% and increased her total to 33.9% with over 10 million votes in the run-off. This result ultimately came as a disappointment to the FN, but it nonetheless represented the party's highest score—both in relative and absolute terms. Moreover, that Le Pen's presence in the second round was taken for granted, unlike in 2002 when her father's presence had scandalized French society, was itself an index of how far the FN had come. Indeed, a remarkable feature of the FN vote in recent years has been its consistency despite massive changes in the French political field with the rise of Emmanuel Macron's centrist party and the precipitous decline of France's historically dominant center-left and -right parties. In the 2019 European elections, the Socialists and Republicans only won 6.19% and 8.48%, respectively, whereas the FN again finished first with 23.34%.⁵ Although France's two-round voting system for most major elections has been successful in keeping the FN out of power and limiting its presence in the National Assembly, the party has undeniably moved from the fringes to the mainstream of French politics.

Many have credited the strategy of *dédiabolisation* with the FN's recent success. Although there had been previous efforts to present a façade of respectability, this became an overriding imperative under the leadership of Marine Le Pen and her lieutenant Florian Philippot.⁶ *Dédiabolisation* entailed significant

⁴Nicolas Sarkozy captured a significant share of the FN electorate with his hard-right law-and-order campaign in 2007.

⁵The French center-right, which has its historic roots in Gaullism, has rebranded itself several times over the years. Its most recent incarnation is as *Les Républicains*.

⁶Though representing historic highs, the 2017 election results were considered by some within the FN as a disappointment, leading to a fresh round of party infighting. As of this writing, Marine Le Pen's leadership and the strategy of *dédiabolisation* have come under increasing scrutiny within the party, and Philippot himself was pushed out in September 2017. The main opposition has come from traditionalists within the party who emphasize a social conservative message and for whom the party's path to victory lies primarily through consolidating the right-wing electorate at the expense of mainstream center-right parties. This wing of the party is usually associated with Marion Maréchal, Marine Le Pen's niece, who until recently went by "Maréchal-Le Pen."

shifts in both the FN's practice and messaging. First, it meant cleaning up the party's image by severing ties with some of its most extremist elements. Marine Le Pen thus engineered the expulsion of some neo-fascists, anti-Semites, Catholic fundamentalists, and other radicals (Camus & Lebourg, 2017, pp. 158–200).⁷ Even Jean-Marie Le Pen became a liability when in 2015 he repeated the most infamous of his many racist and anti-Semitic provocations and was consequently ousted from the party he had led for years.

The suppression of many overt expressions of racism and extremism has been accompanied by a discursive reorientation on several issues. The party whose leaders were once notorious for flirting with Holocaust denialism now explicitly condemns anti-Semitism and actively courts Jews. The FN also sidelined its traditionalist Catholic currents in favor of a more secularist line. While Jean-Marie Le Pen had once treated the republican concept of *laïcité* with contempt, Marine Le Pen has presented herself as a staunch defender of state secularism. Finally, although anti-immigration politics remain central to the FN, it has softened its language around the issue. As Alduy and Wahnich (2015) show in their lexicographical analysis of the FN, Marine Le Pen has tended to discuss immigration in more abstract, economic, and deracialized terms compared to the strident identitarianism of her father, preferring to subsume the issue under her broader opposition to “globalism.” Comparing Jean-Marie Le Pen's 1987–2011 public speeches with Marine Le Pen's from 2011– to 2013, the relative lexical frequency of immigration declined significantly from father to daughter (Alduy, 2015).

The above shifts are all part of a broader discursive reorientation toward a strategic embrace of the French republican tradition, with its values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Owing to their reactionary roots, party leaders had long been hostile to the Republic, even—or especially—its conservative incarnation in Charles de Gaulle. Historically, the French far right was defined in large part by its opposition to republicanism and its universalist values, and in this the FN was hardly an exception. Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, however, a new “republican nationalist” currently emerged within the FN. Republican imagery—like Marianne and the Phrygian cap—became commonplace in FN campaign materials, and party leaders have repeatedly proclaimed fealty to the Republic and its heroes in an effort to publicly distance the FN from its own past and the rest of the far right.

If the conspicuous effort to claim the mantle of the republican tradition is the hallmark of *dédiabolisation*, the FN's strategic reinvention also entailed a major shift on economic issues. Jean-Marie Le Pen famously claimed to have been a Reaganite before Reagan (Le Pen, 1989, p.117). In the 1980s, the FN broke with the anticapitalism of its neo-fascist predecessors and began espousing an anti-statist, promarket economic program centered on tax cuts, deregulation, and

⁷This is not to say that all such elements have been expelled. Indeed, much of Marine Le Pen's entourage has deep roots in the radical right. The continued presence of neo-fascists and other extremists within the FN has been dutifully documented by anti-fascist groups.

bureaucratic retrenchment (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995, p. 95). But while Kitschelt and McGann considered this market-friendly orientation to be an essential distinguishing feature of the “New Radical Right”—of which the FN was an ideal typical case—the FN’s economic program in the period preceding the 2017 elections moved far in the direction of “welfare chauvinism.”⁸

Shifts toward a more protectionist orientation were already apparent in the 1990s as the FN attracted more working-class voters (Bastow, 1997). But under Marine Le Pen’s leadership, the FN’s economic program took on a definitively “social” cast, emphasizing social welfare protections and interventionist measures in the economy. Ivaldi has shown that the salience of economic issues within FN campaign manifestos has increased in recent years, with economic measures comprising 36.7% of the 2012 program compared with 14.6% in 1986 (Ivaldi, 2015, p. 167).⁹ This pivot toward the economy allowed the FN to extend its brand, particularly after the center-right successfully coopted the FN’s securitarian and anti-immigration appeal in 2007, and was part of Marine Le Pen’s strategic vision. Indeed, she has described the increased prominence of economic issues within the FN’s message as her signature achievement—her “value added” (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 39).

There was also been a substantive shift in the content of the FN’s economic program. While the party had traditionally been anti-statist, it took a strong welfare-statist line under Marine Le Pen, a fact reflected in the changing valence of her references to the state compared to her father’s (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, pp. 41–43). In the 2012 elections, the party’s economic program was for the first time tilted distinctly toward the “left”—i.e., toward redistributive, protectionist, and interventionist measures (Ivaldi, 2015, p. 171). In 2017, two-thirds of its proposed economic measures could be classified as coming from the “left,” whereas in the 1980s, up to 80% of its economic proposals were rightist—i.e., neoliberal—in orientation.¹⁰ Of course, the “social” reorientation of the FN’s economic program remains inflected by the party’s nationalism and chauvinism. Nonetheless, it represents a clear departure from its neoliberal past.

⁸Kitschelt and McGann hypothesized that only parties steeped in a legacy of fascism would adopt “irrational” welfare chauvinist appeals, which they argue were doomed to failure in postindustrial capitalist societies (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995, p. 24). The recent history of the FN confounds their argument in two ways. First, the FN’s adoption of a welfare chauvinist program has gone hand in hand with its efforts to sideline extremist elements, including neo-fascists. Second, this strategy has not met with electoral failure.

⁹Nonetheless, the FN still lags behind other parties in terms of the weight of economic issues in their program, and cultural issues remain overrepresented in its program relative to other parties. Relatively speaking, the FN has remained a niche party distinguished by its emphasis on cultural conservatism (Ivaldi, 2015, pp. 167–168).

¹⁰Gilles Ivaldi “L’économie populiste ‘attrape-tout’ de Marine Le Pen” *Le Monde* February 16, 2017. Retrieved on https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/02/16/l-economie-populiste-attrape-tout-de-marine-le-pen_5080505_3232.html. Accessed on October 23, 2017.

THE NATIONAL FRONT AND THE WORKING CLASS

The FN's *dédiabolisation* has coincided with a dramatic shift in the party's sociological base of support. While the FN's core was historically centered on the old middle classes, today its support is highest among working-class voters.¹¹ Indeed, the FN has been the beneficiary of a transfer of the working-class vote from left to right. France has not been unique in this regard. Far-right parties across Europe have increasingly drawn their support from the working class (Bornschiefer & Kriesi, 2013). In forging an alliance between the middle and working classes, contemporary far-right parties have realized one of the main ambitions of historical fascist movements.

However, it is important here to be precise because many popular accounts, deploying a kind of categorical thinking, overestimate the degree of working-class support for the FN. It is true that in electoral terms, the FN now routinely wins the largest share of working-class voters. But when abstention, which tends to be higher among the lower classes, is taken into account, the picture changes drastically. For example, even though the FN won 43% of the worker vote (compared to 32% for the combined left) in the 2015 regional elections, turnout for this class of voters was only 39%, compared with 50% nationally. If one considers FN support among eligible voters classified as workers, only 14.5%, or one out of seven, cast ballots for the FN. Across multiple recent elections, more French workers abstained than voted for the FN. One must thus be careful not to make overblown and fallacious claims, as many unfortunately have, about how the FN has become *the* party of the French working class (Lehingue, 2016; Palheta, 2018).¹²

With that said, there has nonetheless been an important historical shift in the working-class vote in France from left to right, and the FN's support among the working class has increased significantly. In the 1970s, roughly 70% of working-class votes went to the Socialists or Communists in legislative elections (Gougou, 2011). In the second round of the 1981 presidential elections, 72% of the working class voted for Mitterrand, and in the first round of the 1988 presidential elections, 59.2% voted for a left candidate, compared to 20.4% who voted for the center right and 17.6% for the far right. By 2012, however, the various left-wing candidates only won a combined 40.9% of the working-class vote, with the center right winning 24.3% and the far right

¹¹A caveat: in what follows, I do not break down the working-class vote by its ethnic or racial composition, despite the obvious importance of these factors in talking about the FN. Such data are, of course, difficult to come by in France, due, ironically, to the ideology of republicanism. It should be noted at the outset that the data that follow deal with the working class as a whole and not just the so-called "white working class" that is the object of much discussion in the United States. One would expect support for the FN to be much lower among non-white workers, though it should also be noted that the FN has made an effort in recent years to win over such workers.

¹²As Mischi (2016) has pointed out, the FN's increasing success among working-class voters has not been accompanied by any real penetration of working-class institutions like unions.

30.9% (Gougou, 2015; Perrineau, 2017). In fact, the FN has consistently won a plurality of working-class votes since 1995, when exit polls showed that Jean-Marie Le Pen won 30% of the working-class vote. The 2017 presidential elections only further confirmed the FN's status as the leading vote-getter among the working class. Marine Le Pen won 39% of the active working-class vote in the first round, compared to 25% for the leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon and 15% for the centrist Emmanuel Macron.¹³ Le Pen also won a plurality of active routine nonmanual employees, with 30% of the vote compared with 24% for Mélenchon and 18% for Macron. Moreover, workers also constituted a larger share of Le Pen voters compared with the other major candidates. Active working-class and routine nonmanual employees—accounting for 27.3% of total first-round voters—together made up 42.5% of Le Pen's voters, whereas they made up only 33.1% of Mélenchon voters, 18.6% of Macron voters, and 13.1% of Fillon voters (IFOP, 2017a). In the second-round run-off between Le Pen and Macron, the FN candidate won 60% of the active working-class vote (IFOP, 2017b).

The FN has thus largely wrested away the left's historic grip on the French working-class vote. This has coincided with the FN's breakthrough into the political mainstream. But what explains the FN's success in attracting working-class support, and what are its strategic implications? An obvious place to start is the possibility that *dédiabolisation* succeeded in capturing significant elements of the left-wing working-class electorate. Indeed, this is what Perrineau emphasizes in his account of *gaucho-lepénisme*, i.e., left-wing support for the FN.¹⁴ By combining a “leftist” economic program and republican themes, the FN supposedly managed to coopt the left's traditional universe of references and peel off a significant number of left-wing voters (Perrineau, 2017). In this view, the success of *dédiabolisation* has been more or less straightforward: the FN has won the working class from the left because of its economic program and because it has taken care not to offend republican sentiment.

THE REPUBLIC AGAINST THE NATIONAL FRONT

That the FN's recent electoral surge, especially among the working class, has appeared to coincide with its strategy of *dédiabolisation* has led many observers to seek the key to the party's success in the terms of this strategy itself. That is, critical attention has tended to be trained on the particular nexus of economic policies and cultural values that *dédiabolisation* represents, as if this were decisive.

¹³The Socialist Benoît Hamon received only 5% of the working-class vote. François Fillon, the center-right candidate, won 6% of the working-class vote.

¹⁴Perrineau distinguishes between three forms of *gaucho-lepénisme*: (1) FN voters coming from a fundamentally left social and political milieu; (2) FN voters who continue to identify as left-wing; and (3) FN voters who nonetheless still vote for the left in the second round (Perrineau, 2017).

As a result, much critical discussion of the FN's rise is hinged on its supposed relationship to republicanism. This in turn implies a particular political response to the FN.

The FN's efforts to distance itself from its neo-fascist and reactionary roots have provoked two broad varieties of response. One is to take its self-representation largely for granted. In this view, the FN has, like it or not, accepted the democratic rules of the game and has integrated itself into normal politics. By embracing republican values and promoting a more "social" economic program, it has positioned itself as a defender of French national traditions and popular sovereignty against the pressures of globalization. Camus and Lebourg have referred to this political line as "full sovereignty"—the promise of an all-encompassing defense of political, economic, and cultural sovereignty (Camus & Lebourg, 2017, p. 50). Furthermore, the party presents itself as "neither right nor left," having supposedly transcended outmoded political divisions to become the authentic representative of a popular nationalism oriented against economic and political elites.

As Bourdieu (1991) has noted, political struggles are ultimately also struggles over how to classify the political field. The FN is no exception in this regard. The strategy of *dédiabolisation* seeks to redefine the terms of political conflict away from its traditional left-right articulations toward a vision of politics in which the salient conflict is that between the national community and a globalized elite. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which the FN's self-representation has been mirrored by scholarly accounts of its success, even by those who are ostensibly critical of the FN.

As early as the 1980s, some scholars began characterizing the FN as the expression of an indigenous "national-populist" current going back to the late 19th century (Taguieff, 1984; Winock, 1990). Today, characterizing the contemporary European far right as "populist"—i.e., as a form of politics rhetorically counterposing the "pure people" to a "corrupt elite"—has become commonplace (Mudde, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mueller, 2016).¹⁵ But as Collovald (2003, 2004) has pointed out in the French case, the implication of such a designation has been to negate the fascist filiation of the FN, with the party presented as the incarnation of certain native traditions, whereas fascism is assumed to be fundamentally foreign to France's republican political culture.¹⁶ Moreover, the populist label deflects critical attention away from the political program of the FN to its representational claim on the people.

The insistent use of "populist"—an epithet particularly favored by elite opinion—to denounce political challengers indicates a "symbolic elevation of the threshold of access to authorized political speech in the sense of a delegitimation of all those for whom the people are a cause to be defended in favor of the

¹⁵It should be noted that scholarly uses of the populist label tend to be much more careful and precise than popular usages.

¹⁶Collovald (2003) argues that the assimilation of the FN to a non-fascist "national-populist" tradition has conveniently allowed historians to maintain the myth of a French "allergy" to fascism. On the debate over the supposed French "allergy" to fascism, see Berstein and Winock (2014), Dobry (2003), and Sternhell (2019).

legitimation of those for whom the people is a problem to be solved” (Collovald, 2003, p. 319).¹⁷ But precisely for this reason, the designation of the FN as “populist”—however derogatory the term in the eyes of the elite—is not fundamentally at odds with the image it presents of itself. Mammone, Godin, and Jenkins have noted that European far-right parties often like to be called populist because the term serves to legitimize right-wing extremism by offering them a “free ticket to the pantheon of democracy” (Mammone, Godin, & Jenkins, 2013, p. 4). This is true of the FN, which has relished the opportunity to present itself as an authentic popular voice against an undemocratic elite.

Another common trope is that the success of contemporary nationalist movements is due to the restructuring of the political field away from old left-right cleavages toward one opposing cosmopolitanism to communitarianism (Zürn & de Wilde, 2016). In a descriptive sense, it is true that the political field has been restructured along new lines of antagonism. But there has also been a temptation to naturalize these new political cleavages as if they simply express objective developments. This can end up reinforcing the far right’s self-representation. Indeed, the FN has not just benefitted from this redefinition of the lines of political antagonism, it has strategically sought to impose this redefinition itself.

The problems of taking the “cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism” frame at face value are apparent in Berezin’s account of the FN’s *dédiabolisation*.¹⁸ Berezin argues that the success of the FN is the product of a “disjuncture between culture and structure” resulting from the process of European integration (Berezin, 2009, p. 62).¹⁹ This process, she argues, allowed the FN to switch out its racist and xenophobic reputation for the more respectable position of defending French popular sovereignty against the pressures of neoliberal globalization. In her view, these pressures, as manifested in the process of Europeanization, cleaved the political field along national and cosmopolitan lines, with the FN becoming the champion of “national experience” and its resistance to neoliberal globalization (Berezin, 2009, p. 199). The FN gave voice to “existent, albeit submerged, collective nationalist ideas and feelings” that emerged as a kind of “globalization backlash” provoked by the accelerating process of European integration (Berezin, 2019, p. 110; 2015). In her characterization, Europeanization naturally produces a nationalist backlash, of which the FN is the natural voice. The FN’s success is thus essentially epiphenomenal to the process of Europeanization, which has redefined the terms of political conflict in a way that has made the FN’s agenda resonate to a wider public.

To be fair, Berezin is sharply critical of the FN, but she tends to frame political conflict as an exclusive choice between neoliberal globalization and nationalist

¹⁷See also D’Eramo (2013).

¹⁸Berezin’s book on the FN was published in 2009 and thus does not cover Marine Le Pen’s leadership of the FN. Nonetheless, it does cover the early stages of the process of *dédiabolisation* and anticipated some of its later developments. More recent work, however, does cover Marine Le Pen’s leadership (Berezin, 2013, 2015, 2019).

¹⁹Camus and Lebourg similarly argue that the far right is “a hostile reaction to the transformation of state-society relations within the context of globalization” (Camus & Lebourg, 2017, p. 50).

backlash, and as such unwittingly reproduces the self-representation of the FN, which presents itself as the only alternative to the status quo. The problem lies in her underspecification of concepts such as “nationalism” and “Europeanization,” which she takes to be the basic positions structuring the French political field. For example, though neoliberalism is ostensibly central to Berezin’s account, she rarely distinguishes between the economic and cultural dimensions of Europeanization, preferring instead to subsume them under a single process. The result is that Berezin not only ignores left-wing resistance to the particular form that European integration has taken, but she persistently conflates left- and right-wing resistance to “Europeanization.” Thus she treats the surprising failure of the 2005 European Constitution referendum in France as of a kind with Le Pen’s shock results in 2002, despite the fact that the former was in significant part driven by the left, which opposed the constitution because it was neoliberal, not because it was European. Likewise, she speciously claims that the 2012 electoral program of far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, which contained a section titled “Immigration is not a problem,” was “not all that dissimilar from that of Marine Le Pen” (Berezin, 2019, p. 118).²⁰ When Berezin writes that “left, right, and center seemed to collapse among themselves” as groups “who would normally be on radically different sides of issues ended up employing the same political vocabulary,” the claim is not only empirically dubious, but also harmonizes with the FN’s own self-interested representation of the political field (Berezin, 2009, p. 201).²¹ By stating that “Le Pen’s anti-Europe and antiglobalization rhetoric

²⁰Berezin’s conflation of Le Pen and Mélenchon, who despite his recent embrace of a left-wing national-popular discourse has remained an implacable foe of right-wing nationalists, leads her to make an especially dubious claim about the 2012 presidential elections. She adds up Mélenchon’s and Le Pen’s first-round scores (11.1% and 17.9%, respectively) and argues that because the sum of their two scores was higher than that of any *individual* mainstream candidate, the “anti-Europe right and left extremes carried the first round of the election” (Berezin, 2015, p. 7). More recently she has characterized this “victory” of the extremes” as “indicative” of the rejection of mainstream parties that would come in 2017 (Berezin, 2019, p. 118). Putting aside the questionable “anti-Europe” designation and the arbitrary lumping together of Mélenchon and Le Pen, the claim that the extremes “carried” the 2012 elections depends on some tendentious arithmetic. In fact, the center-left candidate (François Hollande) and the two center-right candidates (Nicolas Sarkozy and François Bayrou), all from established parties and all unequivocally “pro-Europe,” won a combined 65% of the first-round vote.

²¹Popular essayist Christophe Guilluy’s (2014) theory that the rise of the FN expresses the growing divide between globalized and multicultural metropolitan centers and a native (i.e., the “*françaises de souche*”), working- and middle-class “peripheral France” that has been economically and culturally left behind, has come under heavy criticism for the same reason, namely that it reproduces and naturalizes the FN’s representation of the world (Gintrac & Mekdjian, 2014; Girard, 2017; Lussault, 2015). See also the critical op-ed on Guilluy’s work signed by academics associated with the online journal *Métropolitiques*, “Inégalités territoriales: parlons-en!” *Libération* October 14, 2018. Retrieved on https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/10/14/inegalites-territoriales-parlons-en_1685261. Accessed on June 26, 2019.

was becoming increasingly French rhetoric—and a French left-wing rhetoric” or that “Le Pen’s issues were increasingly French issues,” Berezin ends up affirming, albeit unwittingly, the FN’s claim to be the natural expression of the resistance to neoliberalism (Berezin, 2009, pp. 119–206).

One response to *dédiabolisation* has thus been to take it at face value and to effectively, if not deliberately, affirm its premises: the disavowal of fascist filiation, the claim to represent national traditions, the blurring of left-right distinctions, and the reconfiguration of the political field around the axis of cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism or globalization/Europeanization versus national sovereignty. Even when it is supposedly critical of the FN, this approach essentially indulges the party’s own self-representation. The other response is to dismiss *dédiabolisation* as an illusion. For example, Wolfreys argues that the FN was founded with the explicit purpose of repackaging fascist ideas for the post-war era and that as such a “dislocation between word and deed” was intrinsic to the FN (Wolfreys, 2013, p. 20). Following Paxton (2004), Wolfreys notes that fascist movements have always opportunistically adapted themselves to native cultural traditions. With that in mind, he suggests, the notion of *dédiabolisation* must be met with skepticism.

In this view, the FN is—and always was—a two-faced party capable of adapting itself to new contexts and instrumentally taking up new themes, all without renouncing its core ideas. Dézé inscribes the strategy of *dédiabolisation* within the “ordinary strategic repertoire” of the FN, which has always had to reconcile the opposing imperatives of radicalization and normalization (Dézé, 2015, p. 33). He thus denies that there is anything new to Marine Le Pen’s strategy, attributing its “reactivation” simply to the “electoral logic” in which the FN has always been embedded (Dézé, 2015, p. 44). Likewise, Crépon has characterized the FN’s supposed evolution as a “routine partisan process,” denying that there has been any change in the party’s “name, symbol, or programmatic orientation” such that one could speak of a “new” party (Crépon, 2015, p. 16). According to Mestre and Monnot, an examination of the FN’s networks reveals “an unchanged nature,” suggesting that the party “has not essentially changed since the arrival of Marine Le Pen at its head” (Mestre & Monnot 2015, p. 76).

The notion that the FN has been cynical and insincere in its appropriation of republican discourse is widespread among FN critics. For example, even after tracking the mutations in FN discourse, Alduy and Wahnich ultimately question whether “it suffices to adopt the lexicon of the Republic in order to bear its true values” (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 15). They minimize the lexical differences they observe between Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen, seeing in these a dispute over words instead of ideas, a question merely of “political communication” and not of programmatic differences (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 18). The recourse to republican referents is dismissed as a “coded,” “pirated,” and “chameleon” discourse (Alduy, 2015, pp. 267–268). According to Alduy and Wahnich, it is a means to “normalize the form in order to banalize the substance” (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 99). The discursive normalization pursued by the FN, they argue, is a kind of “lexical entryism” that “takes the words of republican

discourse only to make them say the same frontist theses as in the past” (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 116). In other words, *dédiabolisation* seeks to coopt the “symbolic aura” of republicanism in the service of a politics that is fundamentally at odds with its values (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 116).

There is some truth to the idea that the FN’s embrace of republican referents has served to dissimulate its more troubling aspects. It is clear, for example, that the FN’s conversion to the principle of *laïcité* has primarily been a means to legitimize the party’s Islamophobia. Likewise, the softening of its rhetoric around immigration does not so much indicate a substantive departure from its xenophobic politics as it does its ideological success on that front. With many mainstream politicians moving substantially to the right on questions of immigration, security, and identity in an attempt to compete with the FN, the FN could recast itself as mainstream without thereby abandoning its core message (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 23). Even then, its appropriation of republican themes has been selective, with mentions of “equality” for example being conspicuously absent (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 47).

On the economic front, it is also clear that despite the FN’s recent “leftist” orientation its program remains a chauvinist one. As one of France’s leading trade unions has argued, the FN’s signature demand for “national preference” in employment and welfare provision undermines working-class solidarity, and as such the FN’s economic program cannot be considered proworker (CGT, 2011). In his study of European radical right parties, Mudde suggests that the heterogeneity in their economic programs can be attributed to the fact that economic issues are typically secondary and instrumentalized to reinforce core tenets of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007, pp. 132–133). Bastow makes a similar point with regard to the FN, arguing that its economic policy has always been subordinated to the “primacy of the political” and that both its neoliberal and protectionist phases were instrumentally geared toward the defense of national identity (Bastow, 1997, p. 68).

Despite its discursive and programmatic mutations, it would be difficult to deny that the FN remains a racist, xenophobic, and nationalist party situated firmly on the far right. The question, however, is whether this means the FN cannot also be sincere in its republicanism. Those who dismiss *dédiabolisation* as a façade masking the FN’s true nature imply that republicanism is incompatible with the ideological heritage of the FN. Ironically, this assumption is also shared by those who take the premises of *dédiabolisation* for granted. For those skeptical of *dédiabolisation*, the persistence of the FN’s fascist roots disqualifies the party from the republican family. For those who take *dédiabolisation* at face value, the FN’s embrace of the republican tradition and its acceptance of the democratic rules of the game essentially exclude it from the fascist family. This is evident for FN apologists who wish to legitimize the party, but it requires explanation in the case of critics who share this frame. Though they may decry the FN, these critics ultimately agree that the party is not best understood through traditional left-right terms or through the prism of fascism, neo or historical. Instead, they locate the FN within a different political cleavage dividing populists from nonpopulists and communitarians from cosmopolitans. Moreover, this frame implies that the

danger posed by the FN lies primarily in its populism and communitarianism—which it may share with elements of the left—rather than in its specificity as a far-right party with fascist roots.

The shared assumption that republican and fascist values are irreconcilable has strategic implications for political opposition to the FN. In spite of their differing interpretations of *dédiabolisation*, the two views sketched above both logically point to a strategy of “republican defense,” even if some of the authors cited above explicitly reject such a strategy. The basic strategic logic of “republican defense” entails the creation of as broad an alliance as possible, within which individual parties subordinate their substantive differences to rally around the common defense of republican values and institutions. The strategy is thus predicated on the idea of an underlying political consensus, on the basis of which a sharp boundary is drawn between legitimate and illegitimate politics, and in the name of which legitimate political actors must unify.

“Republican defense” has a long legacy in the French struggle against the reactionary and fascist right. The term has its origins in the Dreyfus Affair, when a “government of republican defense” stretching from the center right to the far left was formed in 1899 in response to reactionary agitation. The notion of “republican defense” was also the basis for the Popular Front in the 1930s, when socialists, communists, and liberals joined together in an electoral coalition with the goal of blocking fascism from power. Today, it is anxiously invoked whenever the FN breaks into the second round of an election. Almost invariably, strong showings at the polls by the FN are met with calls for a “Republican Front,” in which parties and voters are called upon to line up behind the “republican” candidate—left or right—best positioned to defeat the allegedly anti-republican FN. More generally, “republican defense” has been the dominant frame through which opposition to the FN has been historically interpreted and organized. By rendering the FN beyond the pale and isolating it within the political field, it underpins the famous “*cordon sanitaire*” that has largely prevented the FN from forming the kinds of electoral pacts necessary for success in France’s electoral system.

The purpose of *dédiabolisation* was to neutralize the logic of “republican defense.” Curiously, however, the critical perspectives on *dédiabolisation* discussed above do not entail a rupture with the time-worn strategy for fighting the FN. In fact, they generally point to the same conclusion, even if only by implication: the defense of a republican consensus to which the FN is presumed to be disloyal. On the one hand, casting the FN primarily as a populist and anti-cosmopolitan backlash implies that its danger lies in its illiberalism and that the proper response to it is to uphold the liberal elements of republican ideology. This usually takes the form of a defense of existing political norms and values—and thus of the existing political establishment—against all forms of perceived extremism. On the other hand, characterizing the FN’s “alignment with the norms and values of the French institutional system” as simply an “illusion” also implies a defense of this system (Dézé, 2015, p. 35). In this view, the egalitarian dimension of republican ideology is emphasized in order to claim that the FN cannot *really* be republican, the implication being that criticizing the FN means first and foremost reiterating real republican norms and values. In both cases, the

FN is effectively condemned for not conforming to a political order whose fundamental legitimacy is presupposed.

The strategy of “republican defense” has been historically effective. But there are reasons to be skeptical of its continuing efficacy. First of all, it is based on a historical myth. Fascist and other authoritarian movements in France have not in fact always been anti-republican. If we follow Mann’s (2004) advice and take fascists seriously, it is clear that for many in France, republicanism was perfectly compatible with their fascist or *fascisant* politics.²² Similarly, it is wrong to suggest that racism and xenophobia are foreign to republicanism. One need only look at French crimes in Algeria and the disgraceful—sometimes murderous—treatment of immigrants under the Fifth Republic to see that this is wishful thinking.

One could of course always respond by making the distinction between authentic expressions of republican values and their perversion. But the broader issue is that there is no stable and coherent republican tradition that can be used as a benchmark to determine fidelity. As Gombin notes, the composition of the “Republican Front” has been historically variable, determined by electoral expedience more than any agreement on core values. The myth of a “Republican Front” is a convenient one precisely because “republican values” are, especially today, an ambiguous catch-all. The myth allows those who deploy it to “place themselves automatically in the camp of the good, of the Republic and its values, without having to specify what these referents concretely mean”.²³ As such, it does not have any analytical value, but rather functions as a kind of call to order for an imagined consensus.

The problem with the logic of “republican defense” is twofold. First, the semantic ambiguity of republicanism means that the FN cannot be *a priori* excluded from the republican family. The charge that the FN is not *really* republican will ring hollow as long as the party continues to play by the rules of the game. Second, by privileging the performance of consensus and muddling political distinctions, the “Republican Front” only risks confirming FN rhetoric that it alone represents an alternative to a political establishment whose members—left and right—have become indistinguishable. Any strategy for countering the FN premised on a defense of the status quo is thus likely to be of limited effectiveness. *Dédiabolisation* seeks to position the FN as at once a republican insider and an antisystem outsider, thereby reaping the rewards of both political normalization and distinction. By opposing the FN in the name of a consensus predicated on equivocation, “republican defense” is uniquely ill-suited to challenging the FN’s insider/outsider strategy.

²²Historical examples of far-right appropriations of republican discourse include the anti-Semitic Ligue des Patriotes in the late nineteenth century and the pro-Nazi Rassemblement National Populaire during the German occupation. For example, Marcel Déat, the ex-socialist leader of the Rassemblement National Populaire, saw Hitler’s “revolution” as a continuation of the French Revolution (Déat, 1943).

²³Joël Gombin “Mythologie du front républicain” *Le Monde diplomatique* March 2015. Retrieved on <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2015/03/GOMBIN/52740>. Accessed on October 23, 2017.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE SHIFT IN THE WORKING-CLASS VOTE

The accounts I have discussed thus far have tended to interpret the nature and appeal of the FN through the prism of values, with the implication that it is also at the level of values that the FN should be opposed. The assumption has been that the key to understanding and curbing the FN's success lies in identifying and criticizing what the FN stands for. But a narrow focus on the FN and its message leads to a distorted range of responses to *dédiabolisation*. In order to break out of the impasse of “republican defense,” we need to reconsider the FN's social base of support.

As discussed above, the FN's success has in significant part been due to its ability to win the working-class vote away from the left. However, the kind of direct left-to-right transfer indicated by Perrineau's concept of *gaucho-lepénisme* should not be overemphasized (Perrineau, 2017). Formerly left-wing individual FN voters certainly exist, but they cannot account for the dramatic shift in the working-class vote. Indeed, though there remains a cleavage within the FN voter base on economic issues, research has shown that the vast majority of FN voters are generally oriented to the right and that the FN's electoral successes have come mostly at the expense of the center-right (Mayer, 2015).

There is reason to be skeptical of a direct relationship between the FN's economic program and its working-class support. First, the growth in working-class support preceded the FN's economic reorientation. The FN's economic program as a whole did not tilt leftward until 2007, well after it had already secured its status as the leading working-class party in terms of votes cast (Ivaldi, 2015). Rather than being at the origin of the FN's changing base, the new welfare chauvinist line is perhaps better seen as an effort to find a “new winning formula” capable of capitalizing on the fortuitous discovery of a new clientele (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995; Rydgren, 2013). Second, the most disadvantaged workers are still unlikely to vote for the FN. For example, precarious workers were more likely to abstain or vote for the left than they were to vote for Le Pen in 2012 (Mayer, 2015, pp. 311–312).²⁴ Indeed, Bornschiefer and Kriesi (2013) have found that across Europe, the worst off among the losers of economic globalization typically do not vote. In France, the very people one would expect to be the most receptive to a welfare-statist message appear to be resistant to it—at least as expressed by the FN. The notion that the FN's new economic line has translated directly into increased working-class support, and that this support is due mainly to the FN's economic message, is thus doubtful as an explanation for the massive realignment of the French working-class vote from left to right.

Another approach would be to focus on the issues that have historically been central to the FN: immigration, national identity, and security. The question here is whether working-class support for the FN can be explained by a higher propensity to hold racist, xenophobic, and authoritarian views. At first glance, there appears to be some support for this view. In the first round of the 2017 presidential elections, 92% of Le Pen voters identified illegal immigration as a determinant

²⁴This could, of course, be due to the possible overrepresentation of non-white workers among precarious workers.

factor in their vote. About 93% and 85% said the same about terrorism and delinquency, respectively, whereas only 69% identified unemployment, 66% purchasing power, and 45% public services as reasons for their vote. Moreover, these latter figures were in line with those for supporters of the other major parties (IFOP, 2017a). This suggests that support for the FN was driven by its standard issue base and not its economic message, in spite of the party's *dédiabolisation*.

Evidence also suggests that the working class is particularly open to the FN's identitarian message. In a 2011 poll, for example, 70% of working-class respondents said that there were too many immigrants in France, while 68% agreed that Muslims had too many rights. About 42% favored the restoration of the death penalty and 30% favored the FN policy of "national preference" in hiring. The figures for all respondents were 53%, 53%, 30%, and 20%, respectively, with the working class more likely than any other class to align itself with the FN on such ethno-cultural issues (Gougou & Mayer, 2013). Likewise, a higher proportion of workers than any other economic group—including retirees—identified immigration as a determinant factor in their 2017 vote (IFOP, 2017a).

The French working class may thus be especially prone to holding racist, xenophobic, and authoritarian views, and such views may currently drive support for the FN. But again, the question is whether this explains the electoral realignment of the working class. After all, these sentiments are pervasive in French society. Even among left-wing voters, for example, 59% supported revoking French citizenship from binational terrorists, 48% believed that "traditional values" were not sufficiently defended, 51% that the justice system was not severe enough toward minor delinquents, 40% that police should be given more power, 27% that there were too many immigrants, and 35% that Muslims had too many rights (Perrineau, 2017, pp. 27–28). It is also the case that xenophobic attitudes have always been common within the French working class, even when it mostly voted for the left. In a 1969 poll, 71% of French workers agreed that there were too many North Africans in France, including 68% of those belonging to the left-wing CGT trade union (Perrineau, 2017, p. 43). Historically, then, the French working class voted for the left *despite* its propensity for racism and xenophobia. The FN's recent success with the working class cannot be explained by such attitudes alone.

A direct relationship between the FN's ethno-cultural message and its electoral growth is thus also unconvincing. There is little evidence that French voters have become *more* racist and xenophobic. In fact, Gougou (2011) has shown that younger generations are much less ethnocentric and authoritarian than older cohorts. For Gougou, this represents a paradox: despite holding the same economic attitudes as older workers and being on the whole less xenophobic, younger workers are more likely to support the FN today. The paradox is resolved, however, when one takes issue salience into account. While older workers were more likely to prioritize economic issues and thus vote for the left, younger workers are much more polarized around cultural issues (Gougou & Mayer, 2013, pp. 163–164). In other words, although workers continue to lean left on economic issues, the ethno-cultural issues on which the FN has long staked its claim have become more important in determining the working-class vote. French workers have not become more racist, xenophobic, and authoritarian, but

these values now outweigh in salience the redistributive economic values that used to tie the working class to the left.

Gougou and Mayer conclude that the shift in working-class electoral allegiance is primarily a case of intergenerational replacement rather than of direct left-to-right conversions. Older workers politicized in an era of class polarization were gradually replaced by younger workers coming of age within a political conjuncture polarized primarily around cultural stakes (Gougou & Mayer, 2013). It is among these younger workers that the FN has had the most success. In both 2012 and 2017, roughly a quarter of Le Pen voters reported having a father on the left (Perrineau, 2017, p. 47). This points to the importance of taking a relational approach to the FN's recent history. The party has not so much stolen working-class voters from the left as it has filled the void opened by the inability of the left to reproduce its working-class voter base. In this sense, the FN's popularity among the working class has as much to do with the failure of the left as it does with anything specific to the FN's message. Working-class support for the FN is in the first instance the product of a gradual dealignment of workers from the left, followed by a repolarization of political debate around ethno-cultural stakes. As such, rather than being the fruit of *dédiabolisation*, the increase in working-class support for the FN is inscribed in a broader historical shift of the working class away from the left and toward the right more generally (Gougou, 2015; Gougou & Mayer, 2013).

NATIONALISM AND THE DISARTICULATION OF CLASS

The evidence cited above suggests that workers who vote for the FN do not necessarily do so *as workers*. What appears to drive the FN vote are the usual nationalist, xenophobic, and racist attitudes that have always been its calling card. As Palheta notes, many studies have shown that xenophobia and racism remain central to the FN electorate's "perception of the world and of politics" (Palheta, 2018, p. 217).²⁵ But what has changed, and what helps explain the *shift* in working-class political allegiance, is that these attitudes have increased in salience compared to the past. In other words, the FN has benefited from the fact that these attitudes now tend to outweigh other aspects of working-class voters' experience, such as their class attachments, as the basis of their political identity. One theoretically fruitful way to make sense of this is as an effect of what Bourdieu has called "symbolic" or "classification" struggles and what political sociologists have called "political articulation."

Bourdieu has argued that political struggles are also symbolic classification struggles in which the power to impose the legitimate "principles of division" of the social world is both a weapon and a stake (Bourdieu, 1991). Political struggle, in other words, is performative. Political actors do not simply represent existing social groups but help constitute those groups in and through their political practice. Politics is not just about the balance of forces between different social groups, but it is in the first instance a struggle over what groups exist and which

²⁵Palheta cites in particular the contributions in Mauger and Pelletier (2016).

social divisions matter. The “goal” of this symbolic struggle is “to change groups and the relations between them, to change their boundaries and hierarchies by changing the way that members of groups perceive their own and other groups” (Bourdieu, 2019, p. 88). A condition of political success is thus the ability to impose a particular representation of the social world and the conflicts that obtain within it that is conducive to what is being offered politically.

Inspired by Gramsci’s analysis of hegemony, scholars of “political articulation” likewise argue that political parties do not simply reflect social cleavages but “actively condition the nature and degree to which different cleavages gain political salience, and which political coalitions are possible” (Eidlin, 2016, p. 495).²⁶ As Przeworski and Sprague point out, “Class, religion, ethnicity, race, or nation do not happen spontaneously as reflections of objective conditions in the psyches of individuals.” Rather, “Collective identity, group solidarity, and political commitment are continually transformed—shaped, destroyed, and molded anew—as a result of conflicts” in which various institutional actors “strive to impose a particular form of organization upon the life of society.” Individual political behavior must thus be grasped “in concrete historical articulation with these conflicts—particular traits become causes of individual acts when they are embedded within a definite structure that has been imposed upon political relations at a given moment in history” (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986, pp. 7–8). Parties, then, do not just appeal to fixed constituencies but forge political identities by discursively constructing and politicizing social cleavages in particular ways. What parties do matters, not just for their electoral success but for defining the lines of political and social antagonism that are salient within a given conjuncture.

The electoral realignment of the French working class can be seen as the consequence of a transformation in the dominant “principles of division” and forms of political “articulation” that have governed French politics in the past couple decades. While social antagonism had once been defined primarily in class terms, with the political field structured along class divisions, the FN’s strength has come from its success in “imposing at the heart of French politics a cleavage between ‘us/’them’ established on an ethno-racial basis” (Palheta, 2018, p. 216). The FN has won over a significant segment of the working class not because it has in any meaningful sense become a “workers’ party,” but insofar as it has succeeded in politicizing ethno-racial identity *over* class attachments. If many workers have rallied to the FN, it is because, politically, they no longer see themselves primarily as workers, but instead see themselves and the social divisions that matter in largely ethno-racial terms. The realignment of the French working class was thus in a sense predicated on its ceasing to have a political existence. That is, a political representation of the social world and its salient divisions which emphasized the existence of antagonistic classes and which had once largely inoculated the working class against nationalist politics, or at least their formal expression at the ballot box, had to give way before workers could be

²⁶For more on “political articulation,” see de Leon (2014), de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal (2009, 2015), Desai (2002), and Riley (2003).

rearticulated in a way that instead invested political meaning primarily in their ethno-racial identity.

The erosion of class identity and its declining political significance is in part the consequence of broad socioeconomic transformations. For example, the post-Fordist transformation of production and the transition to a postindustrial economy have undercut the traditional solidarities that once underpinned left-wing identity. The material bases for collective working-class identity have to a certain extent dissolved with the fracturing of the industrial workforce, inducing a “crisis of representation” within unions and left-wing parties (Goodliffe, 2013, p. 94). However, the increasing salience of ethno-cultural issues and the FN’s ability to capitalize on them are not reducible to these or other structural transformations. To see the rise of the FN simply as the expression of structural forces or as a reflexive backlash to large-scale processes like immigration or globalization is to succumb to fatalism.

In contrast to treating political identities as direct reflections of structures or processes, the Bourdieusian and “articulation” approaches highlight the relational constitution of these identities in and through political struggle. In this view, attention must also be paid to how political actors respond to a particular conjuncture and how they choose to define the conflicts that are salient within it. Not all articulations are equally plausible in a given conjuncture, but the imposition of a dominant “principle of division” nonetheless remains a practical achievement, one that depends as much on the relations between competing political actors as it does on structural factors.

From this perspective, if the FN has been successful in imposing a representation of the social world that harmonizes with its own racist and xenophobic politics, it has been with the active and tacit complicity of its competitors. In the most immediate sense, the adoption by important segments of both the center-left and -right of a harder line on issues of security, immigration, and cultural assimilation in a wrongheaded attempt to temper the FN’s appeal has only served to entrench a racist and xenophobic vision of the world as common sense, a fact which has ultimately benefitted the FN because of its “ownership” of these issues (Gaxie, 2016; Palheta, 2018).²⁷

The center-right has been complicit in legitimizing the FN, but much of the blame also falls on mistakes made by the major parties of the left and center-left, which have effectively disarmed themselves in the face of the nationalist threat. Indeed, the response of these “parties of government” to the capitalist restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s only reinforced the dealignment of workers from the left. Across Europe, social-democratic parties responded by embracing the emerging neoliberal consensus. This convergence with the center-right on economic policy effectively depoliticized the economy, thus enhancing the political salience of ethno-national issues and opening the way for political realignment (Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2013).

²⁷In the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, the main center-right party obtained its worst score ever (8.48%) in a European election following a hard-right turn under the leadership of Laurent Wauquiez.

In France, the realignment of the working class can be traced back to the Socialist Party (PS) government's austerity turn in 1983. The 1970s had been marked by sharp class conflicts to which the parties of the left sought to give political expression, but after 1983 the governmental left capitulated to neoliberal orthodoxy. Thereafter, the established left largely treated the economy as a technocratic problem rather than as a terrain of political struggle and abandoned the language of class struggle. And as is often the case, left-wing governments proved to be more successful in imposing the market-friendly austerity measures demanded by the right. Even the French Communist Party (PCF), which also distanced itself from the language of class struggle under the leadership of Robert Hue in the 1990s, was discredited in the eyes of many in the popular classes because of its participation in Socialist governments overseeing neoliberal reforms (Mischi, 2016).

In pursuing this neoliberal path, the left demobilized its constituency and undermined the very basis of its support. The FN has done well precisely among those working-class cohorts who never knew the class struggles of the 1970s and instead came of age politically in the era of neoliberal consensus. While a strong class identity once anchored the working class to the left, the decomposition and atrophy of working-class identity gave free rein for ethno-national identifications to dominate political identities. What Przeworski and Sprague argued about historical socialist parties applies to the French left in this period: "When political parties do not mobilize individuals as 'workers,'" people are less likely to see "society as composed of classes, less likely to identify themselves as class members, less likely to see their interests as those of workers, and eventually less likely to vote as workers," thus opening the door to competing articulations (Przeworski & Sprague, 1986, pp. 45–46).

The FN has benefitted enormously from the political realignment of the working class. At the origin of this realignment is the virtual disappearance of class and class struggle from political discourse, which has had the effect of weakening working-class identity. This in turn has cleared the way for the FN to give political form to preexisting prejudices which, though always present, had not hitherto risen to the level of a principle of political identification for working-class voters. The success of the FN has less to do with its specific appeal to the working class than it does with the failure of the left to cultivate and sustain a politicized class identity. Indeed, research has shown that those who subjectively identify as working class are less likely than the rest of the working class to vote for the FN (Gougou, 2015, p. 339). The condition of possibility for the political appeal of the FN's racist, xenophobic, and authoritarian message is thus a prior decline in a politicized class identity. One-dimensional explanations that privilege the FN's economic program or the regressive ethno-cultural attitudes of the working class are therefore inadequate. Neither of these would have produced political effects for the FN were it not for the political disarticulation of class. The relevant question is not about the relative weight of economic and ethno-cultural factors, but rather about the conditions under which the latter supplant the former as the basis for political identification and mobilization. As Palheta, commenting on the erosion of class solidarities in France, puts it: "consciousness hates a void, and racism—both as ideology and as affect—is precisely what can fill this void" (Palheta, 2018, p. 220).

The implications for an anti-FN strategy are clear. Didier Eribon has been particularly eloquent on this front. Writing about his working-class parents' political evolution from supporting the left to voting for the FN, Eribon, despite his recognition of the pervasive racism and homophobia that marked the proletarian milieu of his childhood, nevertheless lays the blame on a left that increasingly spoke "the language of those who govern."²⁸ The French left, he argues, gave up the field when it abandoned a vision of the world marked by structural—i.e., class—conflict in favor of the more neutral and individualizing discourse of "social contract" and "social compact":

By erasing any idea of social groups with conflicting relations to each other from leftist political discourse (indeed by going so far as to replace the structuring affirmation of a conflictual society, in which one's obligation was to support the demands of the working class, with a denunciation of social movements that were claimed to be relics of the past, that were, along with their supporters, taken to be somehow archaic, or some kind of a sign of the deterioration of the social bond that the government's project should be to restore), the goal was to succeed at depriving people who voted together of the possibility of thinking of themselves as a group held together by common interests and shared preoccupations. Their opinions were reduced to individual ones, and those opinions were dissociated from any of the power they might have held in the past, doomed henceforth to a kind of powerlessness. But that powerlessness turned into anger. The result was inevitable: the group reformed, but in a different way, and the class that had been deconstructed by the neoconservative discourses of the left found a new way to organize itself and to make its point of view known. (Eribon, 2013, pp. 129–134).

The crucial point for Eribon is to understand:

why and how it is possible for the popular classes to think of the conditions under which they live sometimes as tying them necessarily to the left, sometimes as self-evidently placing them on the right.

Although economic transformations have reshaped the underlying structural terrain, what is ultimately decisive for Eribon is political discourse and the process of political articulation (Eribon, 2013, pp. 153–154). The critical task for the left, then, is:

...the elaboration of theoretical frameworks and of political modes of perceiving reality that enable not an erasure—that would be an impossible task—but as great a neutralization as possible of the negative passions that are at work within the social body, especially within the popular classes (Eribon, 2013, p. 155).

Such efforts, however, must be anchored in the structural conflicts shaping working-class experience if they are to have any force. The left, in other words, must find new ways of giving progressive form and meaning to this experience—i.e., to define new bases of solidarity and new lines of struggle capable of sustaining a collective identity oriented toward universal emancipation.

²⁸It should be said, however, that cases such as that of Eribon's parents are exceptions. As noted above, the transfer of working-class votes from left to right has for the most part been intergenerational and not direct.

CONCLUSION

An appreciation of the class dynamics of the FN's support points to the fundamental problem with the strategy of "republican defense": it appeals to cultural and political consensus when the FN's success is rooted in its usurpation of the left's historical role as the bearer of structural conflict. "Republican defense" thus rhetorically ties opposition to the FN to a defense of the status quo. As such, and because it represents an abstract and illusory universalism founded on the dissimulation of social cleavages, republican ideology, at least as it has been invoked by the French political establishment, presents an ideological obstacle in the long-term fight against the nationalist right. The pious appeal to defend an increasingly hollow republican consensus will resonate less and less with those who suffer from the structural and symbolic violence of the neoliberal order.

The French case is suggestive for how we might rethink the relationship between culture and class in making sense of—and combatting—the rise of the nationalist right across the globe. In North and South America as in Europe, the recent successes of the nationalist right have clearly been propelled by its ability to articulate a racist and xenophobic politics. Yet the manifest centrality of this kind of cultural politics to the global reactionary wave does not lessen the significance of class. Indeed, as the case of the FN shows, class politics—or the absence thereof—can still play a determining role. But as long as debate about the rise of the nationalist right is mired in the problematic of "motivation" and as long as class dynamics are reduced to the superficial notion of "economic anxiety," the significance of class will be missed. Rather than simply weighing the predictive value of economic and cultural factors against each other, we should ask ourselves the following question: under what conditions does the political field become primarily polarized around ethno-national issues? This is a question of "classification struggles" and "political articulation," and what the French case suggests is that the articulation of ethno-nationalist political subjects can be predicated on the disarticulation of class political subjects. Class, in other words, remains significant in that the failure to politicize and address economic grievances is what creates the opportunity for the nationalist right to define the terms of political antagonism in ways that capitalize on latent racist and xenophobic attitudes.

This has implications for political strategy. If the left is to win back those social groups it has lost, then it cannot be enough just to affirm cosmopolitan and democratic values against the ethno-nationalist threat to democracy. Those susceptible to an ethno-nationalist articulation must instead be articulated *otherwise*. The way to ensure that racism and xenophobia do not become the organizing principles of white working-class political life is not to engage in a moralizing call to order, but rather to elevate those aspects of working-class experience that bring workers, white or otherwise, into solidarity with the rest of the oppressed and dominated. This requires strengthening the political salience of class identity by embracing anew the politics of class struggle. A simple appeal to republican and democratic values, because of their emphasis on formal political equality at a time when social inequalities are deeply felt, is incapable of fostering the collective action and identity necessary to stamp out the scourge of the

nationalist right. The abandonment of class politics has been a catastrophe not just for the left, but for democracy itself. It is time to bring it back.

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