

Publications

France's Far Right and Dubious Vichy Reverberations

by Vivian Grosswald Curran

The far right's success in the first round of the recent French presidential elections triggered evocations of France's Vichy past both as a subtext and overt point of reference. Signs demonstrators displayed as they protested the initial election results referred to the country's fascist past and to Nazism. Similarly, in a quiet march of elderly, white-haired anciens déportés, one of whom carried a huge flag of France that seemed too heavy for its frail bearer, the sole comment of a participant was poignant and bitter: "La France a courte mémoire" ("France has a short memory").

Whether the commonly touted connections with Vichy are the most relevant for assessing current events is debatable, however. Links between Vichy and Le Pen are not to be denied, but perhaps the more significant ones have gone unobserved. Obvious connections between Le Pen and Vichy are many. Unlike most other far-right politicians alive today, Le Pen is old enough to have been a Vichy supporter himself. He was an ardent and unabashed pétainiste whose infamous claim that the gas chambers merely were a detail of the Second World War was captured on film.

Were France's surprise and shock that Vichy-ites still exist? That the far right still exists? That it exists in the precise percentage that voted for it in France? Of the many surprises that emerged from the first round of votes, the most notable may be the extent of surprise itself. On the surface this has a certain illogic, inasmuch as the far right did no more than inch forward by a very few percentage points from its election results of recent years. On the whole, its support was fairly consistent with what it has been for a number of years. It is true that the fracturing of the left, resulting in Le Pen's unanticipated displacement of Jospin for second place in the run-off, created a possibility of a far right government that until 2002 had seemed an impossibility.

It is difficult and perhaps unfair to qualify as illogical the tremendous outpouring of national emotion in the face of the specter of a National Front government, given the country's still vivid memories, whether personal or historical, of the domestic fascism endured under Pétain, of the Nazi occupation, and of the country's having been rent in two between resistance and collaboration. For those of us born after the war whose parents lived in Vichy France, even aside from the wrenching political dimensions and the unsettling if not nightmarish issue of France's role in the holocaust, a memory such as the food privations that the vast majority of people in France suffered is enough to elicit strong emotions, even in a generation that did not experience the privation personally but was raised on parental evocations of it. When a man associated with Vichy takes a step closer to the presidency of France it may be understandable that it would trigger the strongest emotions, perhaps even despite the fact that Le Pen's proximity never was very proximate.

Despite the often evoked backdrop of Vichy in the reaction to the far right's initial success, there is a disconnect between the fears articulated, the denounced past, and the Le Pen of today. For example, his anti-semitism may be indisputable, but he has toned it down in recent times. The stands he has taken against immigration hardly involve the sort of measures, such as denaturalization of foreign-born French

citizens, that Vichy implemented as early as July of 1940, let alone the round-ups conducted by French police that were a prelude to deportation and death.

The connection between current events and France's Vichy past does not lie in a realistic prospect of fascism's resurgence in France. The shock that Le Pen's initial success spawned harks to another problem, one that echoes the past of Vichy, although not just Vichy, and one that may represent also the European Union's single biggest challenge for the future. Simply put, it is a denial of pluralism and dissent, not *de jure*, but *de facto*, and this time not coming from the political right. It is a self-representation of oneness of perspective, based on values endorsed by official France and its mainstream media.

Modern France embraces not a coercive, but a pedagogic stance. Substantively at odds with everything Vichy stood for, it nevertheless resembles Vichy in a slide from pedagogy into propaganda, difficult to curtail (and often even to identify) in a state viewed legitimately as having a strong instructive presence. The boundary between pedagogy and propaganda is situated where presentation and representation exclude the voice and the view of the "other." This has become the case in France on numerous fronts, and ironically exists under a surface of approval and display of debate, so long as the issues do not disturb the conclusions that the media and rest of official France have placed beyond discussion.

The national, mainstream media have a unified voice that seems unimpeachable: a pro-democratic ethos of willed tolerance and inclusion, an antithesis to Vichy and the repression and murderous state violence that it represented. It denounces oppressors, not victims. It praises and celebrates immigrants and denounces the far right, so much so that Le Pen scarcely ever figured in the pre-election media interviews of presidential candidates on national news.

In one of the few television interviews of Le Pen that I caught, the interviewer could not do enough to express her contempt for him. Far from trying to treat him impartially or in anything remotely like an objective journalistic style as the other candidates were treated, the interviewer seemed concerned primarily lest her own disgust not be sufficiently apparent to the public. Similarly, Chirac refused to participate in the customary debate between the run-off candidates.

Official France, including the mainstream media, seems to be of a piece, whole and unified. It appears to endorse liberalism. It voices great deference for the concept of human rights, for example, but one might also say for its concept of human rights. The media no doubt would excoriate any suggestion to silence voices of dissent, because they champion the idea of dissent, yet at the same time they effectively exclude expressions of dissent incompatible with their own value judgments.

An example not directly related to France's far right, but highly illustrative of the phenomenon I am describing, is the French media's adoption of a unified viewpoint (and freezing out of the opposing viewpoint) in coverage of the Middle East conflict. Profuse television footage of suffering Palestinians contrasts with a dearth of film footage of Israelis bloodied and massacred by Palestinian suicide bombers. News commentary that sounds like editorial viewpoint is presented as objective truth. In a typical news reportage on French mainstream television, an anchor reported the Palestinian demand that any peace settlement must include the right of return to Israel of all Palestinian refugees who once

resided there. The anchor then stated, as though it were a simple statement of fact, that the Palestinians were seeking their legitimate rights. No mention was made of the widespread view that an influx of millions of Palestinians into Israel would mean the end of the state of Israel.

One cannot reproach official France for failing to attend to its vision of generosity and human rights, to what it takes to be a liberal ideal. It has failed to be tolerant, however, of opposing views where it has concluded that it has identified what is incontestably right, creating a humanistic vision that precludes all others.

Following the French mainstream media closely in the months preceding the first round of presidential elections might have led one to conclude that no support whatsoever existed for Le Pen, that he was universally reviled, a pathetic though evil joke, and that he would not garner a single vote, let alone many thousands. The polls later were blamed for having predicted incorrectly that Le Pen would get a much lower vote than he received, but the polls were virtually the only presence reported in the media that reflected the existence of any sort of support for him. As interviews with Le Pen voters later revealed, many refused to disclose their names because they feared reprisals if their views were known.

Le Pen's campaign is reputed to have resonated favorably among a portion of the French citizenry experiencing a growing resentment against violent crime which it perceives as being committed by immigrants and a growing feeling of helplessness, as it perceives the police to be prevented from dealing effectively with the problem; the judiciary as being too lax; and immigrants as benefiting from a general refusal to acknowledge connections between immigrants and crime. Official and media descriptions of immigrant youths committing violent crimes often present the youths as victims, exculpated regardless of their deeds by the alleged inequity, prejudice and discrimination that they are deemed to suffer at society's hands.

France's disaffected citizenry recently has had little recognized place in the nation's public space, a space too constricted to recognize the legitimacy of dissent on issues considered sacred, such as immigrants-qua-victims. One only can wonder whether the success of the far right over the past many years is not the result of a sector of French society that might have been able to reach more informed political decisions had there been a more genuine marketplace of ideas. The reluctance of politicians, of the press and of the rest of the media to fan anti-immigrant flames or to promote the views of the far right is understandable and laudable. Where a state and media's inclination to pedagogy lapses into paternalism and fails to shun propaganda, however, the democratic tissue of the society becomes marred.

The fabrication of a unified image of France has a crucial parallel in the European Union. The genuine nature of the EU's commitment to humanism and justice notwithstanding, the EU creates ever-increasing one-nesses that may endanger the recognition and celebration of pluralism, particularly as in France when the truths of the "other" appear illegitimate and offensive. An open space of dissent also is one of catharsis, however, and a sine qua non for intellectual, social and political progress.