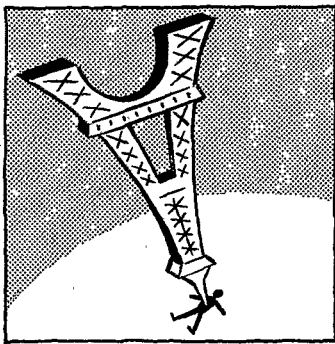


SCAPEGOATING IMMIGRANTS MAY BE A TRANSATLANTIC AND PAN-EUROPEAN PHENOMENON, BUT NEED PARIS PANDER TO THOSE WHO WANT THE TRICOLOR TO BE MONOCHROME?

Liberté, Egalité, Racisme?

DANIEL SINGER

Is France, born-again Christian, seeking its identity in the conversion of a Germanic barbarian fifteen centuries ago? Is freedom of movement limited to capital and forbidden for labor? Can racism be publicly asserted half a century after the Holocaust? These questions were raised by three French events: the visit of Pope John Paul II for the commemoration of the baptism of King Clovis; the storming by the gendarmes of a Paris church filled with immigrants; and, last but not least, the repeated proclamation by Jean-Marie Le Pen of his belief in the "inequality of the races." This provocative profession of faith, though unsurprising in the mouth of the xenophobic leader of the National Front, shook France because it broke a taboo. The debate is now on whether the party should be banned or its leader sued and, if necessary, legislation passed for this purpose. But before moving to such serious matters, let us start with the farcical.



Comedy of Conversion

Even the date does not seem to fit. We know that Clovis, king of the Salian Franks (one of the Germanic tribes), got converted. Legend has it that while in battle he promised the Christian God of his wife that he would embrace the faith if he won, which he did. Occupying what is now Belgium and northern France, competing with other invaders in the conquest of Gaul, the ruthless Clovis had less romantic reasons to strike a deal with the Christian church. The latest studies suggest that the commemoration should take place two or three years from now. Almost certainly Clovis was baptized around Christmas. Yet on September 22, Pope John Paul II celebrated a mass in honor of Clovis's baptism in Reims cathedral.

The source of the initial political trouble was the President himself, Jacques Chirac, for whom electioneering appears to be second nature. On a visit to the Vatican at the beginning of the year, with the Catholic vote in mind, he trotted out old clichés about "France, the eldest daughter of the church" and gave the impression that he was concocting some pact with the Pope. In a country where strict separation of powers between the state and the church was established in 1905 after battles so bitter that the wounds are still unhealed, the alarm was sounded at once. The defenders of the *laïcité*, that is, a scrupulously secular regime, asked about public money being spent on a private cult and reminded the government of the neutrality of the state.

For Chirac the game was no longer worth the candle. If France is nominally Catholic, only about a tenth of the population is ac-

tually practicing. The Catholic Church, its royalist dreams abandoned, has long resigned itself to the bourgeois republic. What it now wants from the state is as much money as it can get for its schools in order to preserve its declining ideological influence. Incidentally, for this task, the reactionary Polish Pope, the scourge of abortion and arch-enemy of condoms even in the age of AIDS, is probably on balance—for all his past charisma—a drawback rather than an asset.

In any case, for Catholics this was no time for confrontation, and the Pope's fifth French journey, which for a spell looked like a potential crusade, was turned into a pilgrimage. The President came to greet the distinguished visitor but took care to stress he did so in the name of a "secular republic." John Paul II traveled to the most conservative regions of France, including the Vendée of anti-revolutionary fame, and he duly repeated his horror of abortion. Yet the mood, on the whole, was ecumenical. The Catholic Church, with its capacity for organization, brought some 180,000 people to Reims for the well-staged mass, but the Pope, obviously in pain and at the end of his tether, carefully avoided political implications. The offensive clearly canceled, the defenders could not mobilize many people for a protest march in Paris. The much-heralded war of religion finally did not take place.

One lesson to draw from this curious episode is that the respectable French right can no longer use its conservative capital—the Christian heritage, ties of blood, kith and kin—without the risk of being outbid by a leader of the National Front unbothered by details of morality or consistency, who actually criticized the Pope for his mildness. It may seem odd that Le Pen and his xenophobic supporters should hail Clovis, the Germanic-speaking "foreign invader" who conquered what looks like the ancestors of the French, the inhabitants of Gaul culturally and linguistically affected by the Roman rule, or "Gallo-Romans." No matter. The concept of an essentially Catholic France suits the National Front, because it turns Muslims—and Jews for that matter—into aliens, and bashing outsiders is Le Pen's trade. Those who have tried to compete with him in this field have done so at their peril.

Fortress for Foreigners

The government's desire to pander to Le Pen's electorate throws some light on the otherwise rather mysterious events that captured the French imagination this past summer. The story actually begins in early spring, when some 300 African immigrants—many of them living in France for years but undocumented—threatened with expulsion under the recent tightening of the immigration laws, staged a mass protest. Kicked out of one

church, having passed briefly through a theater, they landed by the end of June at Saint Bernard's church in the poor yet colorful and cosmopolitan Paris district of Goutte d'Or. There were women with small children among them and ten hunger-strikers determined, if need be, to go the whole way. In a Paris deserted as usual in August, actors and scientists, along with green, radical and antiracist militants, kept a protective vigil outside the church. Experts offered their services as mediators for talks with the government. Since opinion polls suggested that the victims were popular, many expected the government to seek a compromise. Instead it sent an armada of more than a thousand men, and axes were used to break the gates of the church—"so that law and order be respected," claimed the officials. Doubts are permitted: When lawyers were allowed to intervene, scores of the arrested had to be freed because the authorities had not respected their own rules and regulations. Law was not at stake here. The purpose of the whole operation was to show, particularly to the electorate of Le Pen, that this government, too, knew how to be rough with foreigners.

To grasp the issue of immigration one must consider both Europe's general rule and a French specificity. During the thirty years of unprecedented growth after World War II, labor shortages forced Western Europe to import foreign workers. Indeed, the immigrants played a crucial part in Europe's "economic miracle." Filling the dirtiest, most dangerous and worst-paid jobs, they allowed the social climb of the natives and their "revolution of great expectations." Everything changed, however, with the structural crisis of the mid-seventies and the shift in methods of production. Foreign workers became dispensable and the age of mass migration ended, though the flow did not completely stop. Immigrants, having come to stay, were bringing their families, while many industries, such as construction or ready-made clothing, still needed cheap undocumented labor to compete.

The French contribution was Le Pen, European champion at artificially linking economic crisis with immigration. Though a veteran of all the battles of the French extreme right, he was a marginal figure until roughly 1983. Two years earlier, in the election that brought François Mitterrand to the presidency, he could not even run because he did not have a sufficient number of locally elected backers. Then came his opportunity. The orthodox right, in its eagerness to regain power, demagogically attacked the left as too soft on foreigners. It did not bargain for the fact that, however low it stooped, the newcomer would stoop lower still. With his absurd though catchy equation, "2 million immigrants = 2 million unemployed," Le Pen began his poisonous progress—thirteen years so far.

The Socialists, who had started by championing the integration of immigrants, lost their nerve. The right, to recover its lost battalions, insisted on the "common values" it shared with the National Front. The man who had used that expression, the neo-Gaullist Charles Pasqua, presided as Interior Minister in 1993 over the passage of a series of laws designed to make it harder to get into France and obtain a living permit, while making it easier to deprive people of their papers and to kick them out. In their zeal, the French even breached the law of the soil they share with the United States: To obtain citizenship, French-born children of foreigners must now wait till the age of 16 and apply for it. All these spectacular measures did not fundamentally alter the international flow of labor. Nor did they achieve their other alleged pur-

pose—cutting Le Pen's vote. Quite the contrary. Each compromise enabled the recruiters of the National Front to argue, Why choose the substitute when you can have the real thing? Each concession whetted their appetite. After the government's summer antics at Saint Bernard's church, Le Pen felt the time was ripe for him to go one better and declare his belief in the "inequality of the races."

Resistible Rise

In September in Marseilles, in a horribly gratuitous crime, a 14-year-old was stabbed to death by a youth one year his senior. Having discovered that the culprit, though French born, was of Moroccan origin, the leaders of the National Front descended on the corpse like vultures. Despite the protests of the victim's father that he did not care about the color of the murderer's skin, they staged a public march in Marseilles—fortunately not too successful—against this "anti-French crime."

It was tempting to use the full might of the law to restrict the influence of such peddlers of poison. The French already have quite a legal arsenal. Under a 1972 law you can sue people not only for practicing discrimination but also for inciting racial or ethnic hatred. The Gayssot law of 1990 widened the net, some think excessively. (According to some interpretations, you could be prosecuted for minimizing the number of victims of the Holocaust. Anybody saying "Burn the niggers" ought to be punished, in my view; ideas, on the other hand, however pernicious and twisted, should be fought with ideas.) There are also moral and political questions about ad hoc legislation passed for one purpose and then used for another. Finally, there are doubts about the purity of intention of a government that, faced with the prospect of defeat in the parliamentary election of 1998, is toying with the idea of introducing an element of proportional representation into the system—knowing full well it will favor the National Front, very seldom capable, so far, of winning an absolute majority in any district.

I am not arguing against proportional representation. I don't believe you can bring a patient's temperature down by breaking the thermometer any more than you can eliminate a party—alas, with a mass following—by the stroke of a pen. The French example, however, shows that the root of the trouble lies elsewhere. The National Front took off in 1983 when unemployment was already high and the Socialists began dashing the hopes they had aroused on coming to office. It spread afterward as the economic crisis deepened and the left, converted to consensus politics, ceased to look like an alternative. Le Pen could parade as the outsider, the only enemy of the system. Indeed, the Front has altered its strategy. Originally it presented Reagan as its model in domestic and foreign policy. Now it is anti-American. It opposes the invasion of international capital and the European Union powers in Brussels. It has spread from its base in the south of France, where former French settlers from North Africa are numerous, and gained a new constituency in regions ravaged by restructuring. Le Pen won 15 percent of the vote in last year's presidential election, but he apparently came in first among industrial workers and the unemployed. In the latest municipal elections the Front conquered several town halls, notably in Toulon, the harbor of the French Navy. And the tide is still rising.

In its new posture the National Front is increasingly reminis-

cent of the prewar fascist movements. Equally worrying is the fact that the phenomenon is not simply French. From Antwerp to Vienna, passing through northern and southern Italy, in the absence of rational prospects, all sorts of forces of unreason are gaining ground. Naturally, the situation should not be overdramatized. The economic crisis is not yet deep enough for a Le Pen to be voted into power in any Western European country. But the poison is spreading. It will not be halted by pandering to prejudices, making compromises, sticking to an increasingly con-

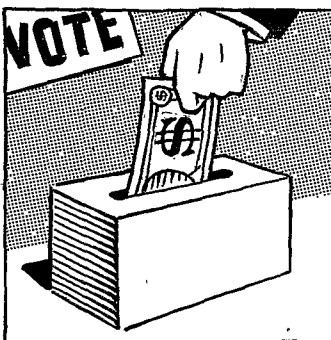
servative consensus. It won't be stopped by decree, either. The counteroffensive will require relentless daily battles on the political, social and cultural fronts. If the respectable right is more to blame as the carrier of the disease, the main responsibility, nevertheless, belongs to the left: The rise of Le Pen will not be really resisted until the people, offered the prospect of a radically different society, start struggling for genuine solutions instead of seeking scapegoats. This French lesson, now read throughout Europe, does not lose its validity on crossing the ocean. ■

DO CANDIDATES AND THEIR FINANCIAL BACKERS REFLECT PUBLIC OPINION? A DISTURBING POLL.

The Politics of Money

ROBERT L. BOROSAGE AND RUY TEIXEIRA

When money talks in politics, it doesn't sound like the American people. A new survey sponsored by *The Nation* and the Institute for America's Future shows that those who pay for the parties differ with most Americans on what's wrong with government, what's wrong with the economy and what needs to be done to make things better. The voice of money is more supportive of free trade and big business and more opposed to government spending and regulation than the public. Both big political donors and the public are cynical about politicians and special interests, but fat cats are far more likely to worry about the influence of labor than is the public, and are far less likely to be concerned about the influence of business. Not surprisingly, the conservative bipartisan consensus on economic policy that dominates politics reflects the views of big donors rather than majority opinion.*



Two Views of the Economy

The press has highlighted a growing optimism about the economy, now in what economists count as the sixth year of recovery. But the *Nation*-America's Future poll reveals that more Americans view today's economy as one of increasing instability, not one of increasing opportunity. A remarkable 83 percent agree (almost three-fifths strongly) that "average working families have less economic security today, because corporations have become too greedy and care more about their profits than about being fair and loyal to their employees." Only

15 percent disagree at all with the statement.

On the other hand, a majority of large contributors disagree, and 34 percent disagree strongly. Big-check writers are also more likely to see an economy of increasing opportunity rather than increasing instability.

Big donors believe "government spends too much, taxes too much and interferes too much in things better left to individuals and businesses." By nearly a 2-to-1 margin, they embrace that view over the more populist proposition that "government is too concerned with what big corporations and wealthy special interests want, and does not do enough to help working families." In contrast, Americans generally are more likely to agree with the latter statement, while barely a third think that government spending is the greater problem.

A similar divide occurs on views about trade, an issue central to the conservative economic consensus of both political parties. Most Americans see free-trade agreements with other countries as job losers, rather than job creators (59 to 25 percent). But big donors disagree, viewing free-trade accords as creating jobs by a 65-to-24-percent margin, with Democratic Party fat cats even more positive than Republican donors.

With different views about the economy, it is not surprising that moneyed interests and the public think differently about what should be done. By 53 to 38 percent, the public believes "we need to make government regulations tougher in order to stop companies from moving jobs overseas, polluting here at home and treating their workers badly" rather than thinking that "most government regulations go too far now, making it too difficult for companies to grow and create jobs, and costing consumers money." Big contributors have the reverse view, endorsing the "government regulations go too far" argument by 58 to 31 percent.

So on question after question, the public demonstrates a far more populist viewpoint about what's wrong with the economy, why the government isn't doing much about it and what should be done to set things straight. And among the overwhelming majority of the public that is not affluent (makes less than \$75,000 per year in household income) or not well educated (lacks a four-year

*These conclusions are documented in a survey sponsored by *The Nation* and the Institute for America's Future and undertaken by Lake Research in July. The survey compares the opinions of major donors to the federal political candidates with those of a nationally representative sample of citizens. Public views were drawn from a survey of 1,007 adults, donor views from a random-sample survey of 200 contributors who gave \$5,000 or more to federal candidates between November 1993 and March 1996, according to records kept by the Federal Election Commission—100 from each major party.

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