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► **To cite this version:**

Aurélien Mondon, Simon Dawes. The mainstreaming of the far right in France: Republican, liberal and illiberal articulations of racism. *French Cultural Studies*, 2023, 34 (3), pp.329-339. 10.1177/09571558231157224 . hal-04191662

HAL Id: hal-04191662

<https://hal.science/hal-04191662>

Submitted on 22 Sep 2023

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The mainstreaming of the far right in France: Republican, liberal and illiberal articulations of racism

French Cultural Studies

2023, Vol. 34(3) 329–339

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DOI: 10.1177/09571558231157224

journals.sagepub.com/home/frc**Aurélien Mondon**

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Résumé

Dans cet entretien, Aurelien Mondon et Simon Dawes analysent la normalisation des politiques d'extrême droite. Leur but est d'expliquer de manière plus complète la montée de Marine Le Pen en prenant en compte le rôle des acteurs publics dominants (mainstream). En se basant sur les recherches conduites par Mondon avec ses collègues, cet entretien explore en particulier l'importance de comprendre le processus de normalisation au-delà du succès de l'extrême droite elle-même ou résultant simplement de son impact propre. En particulier, cela requiert une approche critique notamment vis-à-vis du populisme, mais aussi des articulations du racisme, pour pouvoir comprendre comment ces politiques qui étaient encore récemment reléguées aux marges de la société ont pu revenir dans les normes et occupent aujourd'hui une place disproportionnée dans le discours public. Loin de sous-estimer la menace que pose l'extrême droite, Mondon insiste sur le besoin une approche holistique pour la combattre, qui prend notamment en compte le rôle des acteurs dominants dans la légitimation des politiques réactionnaires.

Mots-clés

extreme-droite, populisme, racisme, libéralisme, républicanisme, laïcité

Abstract

In this interview, Aurelien Mondon and Simon Dawes analyse the mainstreaming of far-right politics. It aims to make sense of Marine Le Pen's rise by putting it in perspective and accounting for the role of the mainstream itself in the process. Building on the research Mondon has undertaken with colleagues, this interview explores in particular the importance of understanding

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mainstreaming beyond it being the success of the far right or a sign of its growing popularity. In particular, this requires a more critical take on issues such as populism, but also articulations of racism, to understand how politics which had been relegated to the margins of history have returned to the norm and occupy today a disproportionate space in public discourse. Far from downplaying the threat posed by the far right today, Mondon stresses that combatting it is of course essential, but that a more holistic approach, which tackles the role of mainstream actors in the legitimisation of reactionary politics, is essential if we are to stop the slide towards fascism.

Keywords

far-right, populism, racism, liberalism, republicanism, *laïcité*

Simon Dawes (SD): Over the past few years, there has been widespread (political, journalistic and academic) interest in the rise of so-called “populism” around the world. The far right is now almost uniquely referred to as populist, but the term is also often applied to the (far-)left. You have a very critical perspective on the pertinence of the term and its application to both right and left. Could you elaborate on that, and say a little about anything that’s specific to the French context?

Aurélien Mondon (AM): I have always had a love/hate relationship with ‘populism’. While I have increasingly come to believe that it is not a useful term in public discourse, critical conceptual discussions remain illuminating. Yet my work has mostly been about how populism is misused, rather than what it really is. One of my first academic encounters with the term was when I was writing my PhD proposal on the mainstreaming of the far right in France and Australia. As I was making my way through some of the core literature on the topic, I came across a book that referred to parties like the Front National as ‘right-wing populist’. In this book, ‘right-wing populism’ was used explicitly to differentiate these parties from what were traditionally named at the time ‘extreme right’ ones. ‘Right-wing populist’ parties were considered to be significantly different from extreme right ones, in particular through their tapping into cultural grievances rather than traditional forms of racism.

This did not sit well with me and soon after I was fortunate enough to come across the work of Annie Collovald (2004) on the dangers of misusing populism and that of Chantal Mouffe (2005), but also to acquire a much better understanding of racism than is sadly common in political science. These experiences introduced me to what I think are more fruitful understandings of populism, as well as of wider far-right politics. Interestingly, it was also then that Cas Mudde (2007) developed his ‘populist radical right’ framework which is the most commonly used today. What is fascinating is that, even though Mudde himself warned clearly of the dangers of exaggerating the populist nature of these parties, this has often gone unheeded, even when his definition is used.

Since, there have been fascinating developments in critical understandings of populism, most notably emerging from the discursive approach based on the work of Ernesto Laclau (2005) and expanded by colleagues such as Yannis Stavrakakis and his Thessaloniki school (see amongst others Katsambekis, 2020; Stavrakakis et al., 2017; Stavrakakis, 2017). To me, the discursive approach eschews the many pitfalls other approaches risk falling for as it does not imbue populism with any ideological or normative content (De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon, 2018).

While the discursive approach has made some strides in populism studies, the mainstream use of the term in public discourse is generally based on poor definitions. This is particularly problematic as ‘populism’ has become almost ubiquitous when discussing our current reactionary moment. What I have tried to explore in my research on the topic with colleagues such as Katy Brown, Jana Goyvaerts, Benjamin De Cleen, Aaron Winter and Jason Glynos is that, as academics

researching the current reactionary moment, we must reflect not just on what populism is, but how we talk about populism and the impact this may have on public discourse.

What this means more precisely is that we should not substitute more appropriate, but also rightly stigmatising, terms such as far right or racism for populism, something Collovald made clear over 20 years ago! This is not just about a pedantic academic and terminological debate, but very much about the current state of politics and the dangers posed by the resurgence of far-right politics and their mainstreaming. Using 'populism' in place of far right or racism, for example, can lead to a dual process of legitimisation and delegitimisation, linked to what some of us have termed 'populist hype' (Glynos and Mondon, 2019; Goyvaerts et al., 2023; Maiguashca, 2019). Legitimisation of far-right politics and parties happens through the semantic link constructed with 'the people'. This is something which until recently the far right had been deprived of, and craved. It is therefore no surprise that far-right actors have been trying to claim populism since the 1990s and this very fact should ring alarm bells – Jean-Marie Le Pen was very keen on the term. It also legitimises these parties as alternatives to an increasingly distrusted status quo, and in reverse legitimises the status quo as the bulwark against the far right, despite the process of mainstreaming requiring the mainstream's agency and complicity (Brown, Mondon, and Winter, 2021; Brown, forthcoming). Finally, it delegitimises not only left-wing alternatives, which can rightly or wrongly be termed populist, by equating them to the far right. Linking the left, but also the people through the semantic roots of the term, to what remains widely considered as bad or even evil politics, allows the liberal elite to reinforce its hegemony and shirk its responsibility in the mainstreaming of the far right. Therefore, it is not just about understanding populism, but also accounting for anti-populist attitudes in mainstream understandings of populism (see amongst others Stavrakakis et al., 2018).

In France, populist hype can be witnessed in the 'rise' of the Front/Rassemblement National (FN/RN) and the way its politics have been mainstreamed. While this process of mainstreaming can be traced back to at least the 1980s, a key turning point to illustrate the process is the 2002 presidential election when Jean-Marie Le Pen reached the second round (Mondon, 2014). This election is both rightly and wrongly heralded as a watershed moment in the resurgence of the far right in Europe and the west more broadly. Rightly as it was indeed a turning point; wrongly as it was not for the reasons generally put forward.

It was generally covered in apocalyptic terms, suggesting that the very survival of democracy was at stake in the second round setting Le Pen against Jacques Chirac. Echoing what was a quasi-universal message in the media, all political parties called their voters to vote for Chirac,¹ who became the embodiment of the Republic. Many voters turned up to vote with pegs on their noses or wearing gloves to demonstrate they were not voting *for* Chirac, who had received the lowest ever first round score for a future president and was embroiled in countless corruption scandals, but *against* the far right. Chirac was elected with 82% and the media celebrated the triumph of democracy. I would argue that this was in fact very much a key step towards the mainstreaming of reaction and the weakening of democracy in France.

The 2002 presidential election was a perfect example of the role mediation plays in democratic life. The common narrative focused on the rise of the far right and the threat it posed to democracy. Yet this was only a small, albeit concerning, part of the picture. Indeed, in 2002, Le Pen didn't get to the second round because his popularity was growing and French voters found their 'legitimate concerns' addressed by his programme. In fact, Le Pen had been stagnating in terms of vote, not just since the 1995 election, but since 1988. The reason he reached the second round was therefore not because of his 'populism' or the 'irresistible' rise of the far right, but because of the huge increase in abstention and the split of the vote across many smaller parties, away from the centre left and right. The fall of the centre and wider disillusionment with the current state of democracy should have

been the real headline. Instead, the focus was placed on the far right as an alternative to the status quo, and the status quo as the only viable alternative to the far right. This only made matters worse, as it legitimised the far right which occupied a disproportionate space in public discourse in the following years. Think for example of the rise of Sarkozy and his incredibly right-wing campaign in 2007 (for more detail, see Mondon, 2013). It also stifled discussions about the crisis of democracy in France and how it could be addressed. If looked at this way, the subsequent elections and political development have been all too predictable.

SD: Often when people talk of the rise of the far-right in France they limit discussion to the electoral gains of the Le Pen family and the Front/Rassemblement National party (and recently to that also of Zemmour). But this limits discussion of the far right to specific individuals and parties, and of politics to the electoral process. In contrast, in your work you've tried to turn attention towards the mainstreaming of far-right discourse and to mainstreaming itself as a process worthy of scholarly attention. Could you explain this?

AM: The study of the mainstreaming of the far right has a long history, although it may not always have been done under this particular term. It has also been core to my research from the start of my PhD. What I originally intended to study was the far right itself in France and Australia, but I was struck early on by the role played by the mainstream actors in my case studies. I want to stress that the level of support One Nation and the FN received at the time was extremely concerning, as my research on populist hype is at times misinterpreted as me saying that we should not worry about the far right or that it is not a real threat. My point is very much the opposite. Any level of far-right support is concerning, and the threat is always all too present for those at the sharp end. As such, it is vital to counter it always and everywhere – a stand that is not always taken as clearly as it should in the field.

My point is that accounting for populist hype avoids legitimising far-right politics and thus strengthening them further. This is core to the process of mainstreaming as Katy Brown, Aaron Winter and I (2021) have most recently developed a heuristic framework for. Too often mainstreaming has been studied as a linear process whereby the far right is the main actor, either moderating itself to become more accepted or forcing the mainstream to become more radical. This has often been limited to the study of elections: put simplistically, if the far right does well, then it is normalising, if it doesn't then it is failing. This is not necessarily wrong, but it is only part of the picture. What we have tried to do is expand such understandings to account for wider politics, bringing to the fore the importance of discourse in the shaping of hegemony.

This requires a number of important starting points which are obvious but too often ignored: the mainstream is not fixed and what is mainstream one day can be radical the next and vice versa; the mainstream is not essentially good; the borders between the mainstream and extreme are fuzzy (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Our framework aims to make clear the crucial role played by the mainstream itself in the process of mainstreaming. Mainstream actors, whether it is the media, politicians or academics, often argue that they must give space to the far right and its ideas because it is what 'the people' want and thus democracy requires. Instead, we argue that this negates their own capacity to shape the agenda and the way the far right can be used as a self-serving distraction away from other issues. We also highlight how it can help legitimise the status quo by comparison: it's us or the far right.

This process leads to the construction of far-right politics as 'legitimate grievances' of the people, even though they only receive marginal support and this support is highly mediated by the state of the political discourse. This is something that I researched more precisely recently in an article on the way concerns about immigration vary widely depending on whether respondents are asked about what the main issues are in their country or for themselves personally (Mondon, 2022). When asked about their country, concerns about immigration are high (although not as

high as often portrayed) and follow the news: rising during particular political campaigns that prime immigration such as the EU referendum in the United Kingdom or particular events such as the so-called refugee crisis in 2016 or terrorist attacks. As research has shown, these events generally paint immigration as a problem and place it high on the agenda (on the Brexit referendum, see Moore and Ramsay, 2017; on Islam in France see Deltombe, 2005).

What is fascinating though is that when the same people who place immigration as a top issue for their country are asked about issues for them personally, immigration and related issues drop off the radar. Instead, issues that would be far more beneficial to the left become central to respondents' concerns (cost of living, healthcare, etc.). This is not surprising: we all rely on mediatory processes to make sense of the world around us – what Benedict Anderson (2006) termed 'imagined communities'. The issue is that today, such mediatory processes are predominantly in the hands of actors who give disproportionate space to reactionary ideas. This can be for personal or ideological gains, because they sell or even because they may genuinely albeit wrongly believe this is what 'the people' want. In turn, this leads to a vicious circle whereby the elite decide to cover the far-right disproportionately, and this disproportionate coverage justifies them in covering it disproportionately since 'it's all over the news'.

This could not be clearer than in the headline that launched *The Guardian's* series on 'new populism' in 2018: 'Why is populism suddenly all the rage? In 1998, about 300 Guardian articles mentioned populism. In 2016, 2000 did. What happened?' (For an in-depth analysis of the series and populist hype, see Brown and Mondon, 2021). Not once in this article and very rarely in the whole series did *The Guardian* stop to think that they may be playing a role in what actually goes into their own newspaper. It was as if the editorial line was dictated directly by 'the people'. Much of our work on mainstreaming has therefore been about stating the obvious: the ability to impact on public discourse is not evenly spread in our societies and those with particularly privileged access should be held accountable rather than allowed to pretend the discourse they actively shape is forced onto them by some fantasised 'people'.

SD: As part of this process, we've seen centre-right candidates in France referring to the great replacement theory and the Islamisation of France, but across the political spectrum, including from people who would distance themselves from such terms, there has been a focus on Islam, Muslims and the problem of not everyone sharing so-called 'republican values'. Up until 10 years ago there was a tendency to distance mainstream political discourse from Le Pen, portraying her as 'unrepublican', while adopting many of the same talking points. Now the same term is used (also by Le Pen) to describe Mélenchon. Would you consider this kind of discourse as part of the same process of the mainstreaming of the far right or do you see a substantial difference between those that contribute to the construction of the 'Muslim problem' with and without referring to far-right conspiracy theories?

AM: This is indeed very much part of the same process. In fact, core to the research Aaron Winter and I have done on mainstreaming has been the role played by Islamophobia in allowing for the mainstream resurgence of racist politics which had been pushed to the margins, at least discursively (Mondon and Winter, 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2017). Of course, this is not to say that we have come to live in post-racial societies as racist oppression and colourblind racism remain widespread and systemic in our societies. However, the cruder, more visible and extreme forms of racism had become taboo and this had provided a wider albeit limited space for discussing if not countering other, more structural forms of racism. What we have witnessed in the past two decades is a retreat, whereby the little progress that had been made towards anti-racism as an obvious stance to take (no matter how flawed that stance was in both theory and practice) is now no longer even there. Instead, we have witnessed unmistakably racist (and more broadly reactionary) discourse, politics and policies, pushed increasingly openly by mainstream forces on both

the left and right, and hardly challenged if not altogether accepted by the liberal mainstream we have been told countless times would act as a bulwark against the resurgence of fascism.

This, we are told, is because 'the people' have reactionary 'legitimate grievances' which must be addressed as part of the democratic process. However, this view is naïve at best, and incredibly self-serving for the elite who can justify incredibly violent politics while shifting the blame onto a mostly and conveniently voiceless people. This is what I tried to show in my recent article about immigration being a major concern for people. I do not believe for a second that 'the people' have become more reactionary, but it has certainly become a lot easier to hold reactionary views as these have become normalised in mainstream elite discourse. This has led to the emboldening of a minority and support of growing sections of population for reactionary views, even if such support is via lazy acceptance that we may not like it but 'it is the way it is'. Just think of the way liberal, colourblind racism continues to grip our societies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006): the Civil Rights movement did not herald a post-racial society and structural racism remains and has even worsened in some cases (Ray, 2022). Yet we often reassure ourselves in the belief that at least 'it's illegal now', as if that made those suffering from ongoing systemic practices feel any better.

It does not mean of course that there is no resistance to this, quite the contrary, and if the elite is mainstreaming such reactionary politics, it is very much because resistance is growing and likely to develop further as various crises hit. Deflection with reactionary politics is therefore particularly useful to occupy space in the public discourse but also to divert the energy of progressive movements, who instead of focusing on creating better futures must respond to the very direct and real threats posed by reaction here and now. Moral panics about critical race theory (Ray 2022), wokeness or free speech are great examples of this. They create a sense that 'polarisation' is the issue in our societies today, as if all was needed was more conciliation and compromise. This creates false equivalences between increasingly emboldened fascists and reactionaries of all kinds and their opponents. It is as if a centre ground should be found between racists and anti-racists, fascists and anti-fascists, transphobes and trans activists etc. This type of 'sensible', 'grown-up' discourse legitimises sitting on the fence; in fact it encourages it. Interestingly, it is not far off Trump's 'very fine people on both sides' comment after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017. This speech was denounced by Joe Biden during his campaign, but he then asked for reconciliation as soon as he was elected, as if those who had sided with Trump deserved more compassion than those who had suffered at their hands.

Islamophobia has played a key part in reintroducing reactionary and racist politics as Muslim communities, who had been oppressed and silenced for a long time in Europe, were easy targets. It is not surprising that similar moral panics have previously targeted Roma communities and subsequently targeted trans people, for example, showing that we are facing wider reactionary trends. This links to other forms of reactionary oppression against Jewish and wider LGBTQ+ communities, which we also see resurfacing. These racialising and othering discourses and politics have similar roots and rely on similar strategies. As such, we must absolutely understand them as inter-linked – a fight against one form of oppression must be a fight against all forms of oppression. Yet the mainstream elite has, consciously or not, failed to learn lessons from the past and holds onto the fantasy that progress is inevitable, and the mainstream is innately good. While widely debunked, the 'end of history' theory continues to grip our societies.

Key to this is the fantasy which posits liberalism and liberal democracies as bulwarks against the far right and fascism. This is incredibly naïve at best, as even a basic understanding of the history of liberalism demonstrates that it has proven flexible enough to adapt to and absorb many types of politics (see Losurdo, 2006). This has included the most reactionary ones which have often been at its core and remain so, which is particularly obvious if we take a more global perspective.

Eurocentric understandings of liberalism's innate, abstract goodness are also based on the ignorance that many of the rights which are today heralded as core to liberal democratic societies were actually wrestled from liberal elites rather than granted by them, and that exploitation remains a cornerstone of a system intricately linked to capitalism.

This fantasy that the mainstream is essentially good and can position itself as opposed to the most extreme right is absolutely key to its hegemony. Therefore, gradation matters here as being able to point to and oppose what is painted as the 'real' 'extreme' racists allows the mainstream, but also the far right in some cases, to pretend by comparison that they simply cannot be racist, extreme or reactionary. Therefore, you can have mainstream actors pushing Islamophobic politics, while denouncing the 'great replacement theory' even though the borders between the two are fuzzy and draw on similar exclusionary and white supremacist tendencies. The same can be said about the way the far right can denounce the most egregious racist acts, but then normalises the ideas that actually underpin such acts. It is therefore not surprising to see what are normally considered fairly mainstream actors quoted on the manifestos of far-right terrorists.

SD: You've distinguished between 'liberal and far-right racism', but to what extent can we also distinguish between 'liberal and republican racism'? One could also focus on the long-term history of liberalism (including in France) and the extent to which it has always been entwined with racism, though you focus more on the distinction between those on the centre and those on the far-right of contemporary political discourse. But to what extent is the normalised, centrist racism we see in secular France similar to or different from that in multicultural Anglo-Saxon countries? Is it similarly liberal or is there something specifically republican about it?

AM: What Aaron Winter and I (2017) call liberal racism could absolutely be termed republican racism or secular racism in the French context. We chose 'liberal' as an umbrella term as we wanted to create a more generalisable framework, but context is key. We developed the framework around liberal and illiberal articulations of racism to better understand how discursive constructions of racism create false oppositions between more or less acceptable articulations of racism, with some portrayed as 'real' racism because of their extremism or likeness to traditional forms of racism (as found in Nazism, Fascism, Jim Crow, etc.). We call these illiberal articulations of racism. They are generally found in the more violent occurrences of racism today and they are widely denounced as outside the norms of our societies, even by the more reconstructed far right such as the *Rassemblement National*. In France, these would be those that openly embrace the Great Replacement theory or attempt to rehabilitate fascism, for example. As such, they are generally individualised and described as freak occurrences – think of the 'lone wolf' trope, for example. However, we have recently witnessed an emboldening of more mainstream actors, such as Eric Zemmour, who have espoused more illiberal articulations of racism. Yet generally, by denouncing illiberal articulations unequivocally, mainstream public actors, or those on the far right attempting to mainstream themselves, can claim to be non-racist or even anti-racist simply by comparison. This is regardless of their involvement in other, more subtle but not necessarily less serious, forms of racist oppression. This is what helped Le Pen in her campaign as she seemed moderate by comparison to Zemmour.

This is where liberal articulations of racism come into play. Even though much of their legitimacy is drawn from their comparison to illiberal articulations, liberal ones rely on the same processes of racialisation, but couch them in liberal terms. Racist oppression is justified not through biology or crude cultural racism, but through the harnessing of otherwise progressive concepts such as free speech, women's rights or LGBTQ+ rights, often seen rightly or wrongly as core to liberalism. The latter two have been particularly useful to push Islamophobia into the mainstream, as liberal racists claimed that their racism towards Muslim communities is in fact to protect women and LGBTQ+ communities, as if one had to choose between anti-sexism and anti-homophobia on

the one hand and anti-racism on the other. The work of Jasbir Puar (2007) on homo-nationalism and Sara Farris (2012) on femo-nationalism is particularly important to understanding these trends (although the term 'nationalism' is potentially misleading). The work of Christine Delphy (2006, 2015) on the false dilemma which has split French feminists as many felt forced to choose between anti-racism and anti-sexism is illuminating in tracing the mainstreaming of liberal Islamophobia in France.

Reactionary intellectuals have been particularly effective in convincing people who would otherwise be on the more progressive side of politics that a crude racist homogenisation of Muslim communities, which portrays Muslim men as innately and solely sexist, is necessary if one wants to protect Muslim women from patriarchy. Ironically, and by contrast, Muslim women are positioned as either voiceless or willing victims needing to be emancipated by force, through laws banning certain garments or behaviours, for example, regardless of the rationale behind them. This mainstreaming of Islamophobia in France was further aided by what I have called 'secular hypocrisy' (Mondon, 2016) whereby reactionary understandings of *laïcité* have been used to push the same racist agenda. The hypocrisy was particularly blatant during the demonstration against same-sex marriage in France in 2013. While there was much opposition, this was never based on secular arguments, despite being led by religious groups and against the very freedom of some individuals. The harnessing of free speech for reactionary purposes has become particularly blatant and powerful in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack, where the death of the journalists was weaponised to prevent any criticism of Islamophobia (Titley et al., 2017). Ironically, it ended up curtailing free speech rather than upholding it, whether through the public silencing of more nuanced and critical takes, or the securitisation of society imposed by governments ever since.


Therefore, while liberal and illiberal articulations of racism can be applied to many contexts, national particularities are essential to understanding the ways in which racism can be mainstreamed, as it often needs to tap into national myths. In France, this takes its strength in the foundational myth of the French Republic which has been constructed over two centuries. This rests on the idea that France was the cradle of the Enlightenment and that the French Revolution of 1789 enshrined equality and made the Rights of Man universal. This is what has served to hide the atrocities which took place under French colonisation as France claimed it had a civilising mission rather than one of violent exploitation. The same principles are at play again in the way race and racism have been thought about in France in the post-war period as French universalism, seen as innate to the Republic, prevents a reckoning with the very well documented fact that France is no exception when it comes to systemic racism. While the concept of colourblind racism was developed in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), it applies incredibly well to the French context. France literally prides itself in not seeing the identities of its citizens: French citizens are just that, citizens (Beaman, 2019). While this universalist approach may seem appealing in theory and in the abstract, in reality it has prevented a discussion from taking place regarding various forms of oppression. For example, collecting data on 'personal characteristics' such as 'racial and ethnic origins', but also political, religious or philosophical opinions, union membership or data related to health or sexuality, are strictly regulated and have been argued to prevent a real measure of the scale of discrimination. Colourblind racism in France was pushed to the extreme when the National Assembly voted to remove the word 'race' from the Constitution when discussing equality on the basis that the term is no longer pertinent. This demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of what racism is today, how it has evolved and that it remains systemic. Such performative gestures only serve to conceal the work that remains to be done to live up to abstract Republican ideals. As in other places, the political elite is more interested in a nostalgic and selective approach to such ideals than in their realisation as it would require radical change.

SD: In addition to the moral panics about Islamisation, communautarisme and separatism that have targeted the Muslim community, the term ‘Islamogauchistes’ has come to the fore over the past couple of years. This far-right trope, which could be applied to cover all Muslims as well as all of the left, has traditionally been used to dismiss those on the left that are critical of Israel and that defend the Palestinian cause, and then increasingly also those that argue that Islamophobia/anti-Muslim racism exists in France. It has now also been used by ministers in Macron’s governments to denounce academics who work on this subject, as well as on the wider array of teaching and research on race, gender, sexuality, intersectionality and critique more generally. This witch-hunt has since been extended to cover a potentially even wider range of targets under the banner of ‘wokisme’ and ‘cancel culture’. There are of course parallels around the world, particularly in those countries where the far right have taken power, but also in those where the centre-right has adopted far-right rhetoric and policies. Again, is the French case part of a wider trend and just another template example of this process, or is there something specific to the French context?

AM: Recent developments in France have been extremely concerning and context is again incredibly important to understanding peculiarities. Yet the current reactionary wave is not limited to France and we can see similar moral panics being whipped up in various countries. There are a number of broad trends we can witness in the current culture wars. First, they are the results of decades of mainstreaming of far-right politics. The rise of far-right politics tends to be covered in catastrophic terms – think of Trump or Brexit – as if these were unforeseen events. Yet they have really been a long-time coming and are a logical step in a long line of mainstream failures and enabling. The same applies to France: think of the way the FN/RN has been covered as an outsider for decades now and how it has occupied public discourse, diverting attention away from the responsibility mainstream elite had in its rise. Second, reactionary forces draw their strength from liberal complacency and denial. As previously mentioned, the idea that liberalism and liberal institutions are a bulwark against the far right remains incredibly widespread in elite circles, even though a basic historical survey shows that liberal elites have often accommodated reactionary politics if it served their interests (see Losurdo, 2006). The tactics employed in the culture wars are generally similar across contexts and resort to nostalgic readings of history; the exaggerated strength of the left, as if it were culturally hegemonic but also unified; claims of censorship and cancellation despite privileged access to public discourse etc. (see Titley, 2020; Malik, 2020; Smith, 2020).

Yet again, it is crucial to stress that these strategies have only returned to being successful fairly recently, and only when mainstream actors started giving them the space to thrive and as such enabled them. Think of the hype around Zemmour again. He has been given countless platforms in the mainstream media, which in the end helped to normalise not just his own extreme ideas, but Le Pen, who appeared moderate and reasonable by comparison. Even though it was clear support for his ideas was limited (albeit extremely concerning considering how extreme he is), he was portrayed as a key contender in the presidential election of 2022. This positioning and focus took attention away from other issues, and particularly those which would have been more propitious to the left, but are also more popular. All of this could have been prevented fairly easily. However, the mainstream elite, both left and right, have cynically decided to give air to these moral panics as they are useful diversions away from the many crises plaguing their countries and the world more broadly. These, we know, require radical change which would go directly against the interests of those running what are today more akin to oligarchies.

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Note

1. Except for the Trotskyist Lutte Ouvrière.

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