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REFLECTIONS

The Patriot Ecology of the French Far Right

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The environmental policy of the *Rassemblement National* (RN), the French political party that represents the far Right, is grounded in a deep ideological commitment to nativism. According to the leader of the party, Marine Le Pen, "When you are a patriot, you are an environmentalist; when you are a globalist, you cannot be an environmentalist."[1] Only by safeguarding the sovereignty of the people over their native lands can the party ensure that those lands will be protected, both from immigrant others and from environmental nuisances. This approach to the environment is very much in keeping with the party's long-standing commitment to the twin platforms of immigration and national security.

The RN was originally founded in 1972 as the Front National by Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father. Le Pen conceived of the party as a challenge to the political establishment and never really had aspirations of his own to become president. He openly denied the Holocaust, stoked Islamophobia, and maintained that the fascist Vichy government, which held power during the German Occupation of World War II, had been unfairly maligned in the history books. As for the environment, Le Pen infamously dismissed it as a hobby for yuppies.[2] While the Front National did enjoy some success at the polls, it functioned

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by and large as a protest party, and the gatekeepers of the French political establishment ensured that Le Pen remained an outsider.[3]

In 2011, Marine Le Pen took over as party leader and slowly began to build a more credible opposition. She distanced herself from her father's opinions and tempered the more overtly racist and extremist language that had become synonymous with the Front National. In 2015 she expelled her father altogether, and in 2018 renamed the party *Rassemblement National*, or RN. In a bid to attract a wider swath of voters and to prove that she could govern, she has taken positions on all major arenas of policy, from the European Union and women's rights to industrial development and the environment.

The emphasis on environmental issues in particular has been instrumental to the mainstreaming of the party. RN officials have argued that the "totalitarian leftist monopoly" over ecological issues must be challenged with a different conception of what constitutes sound environmental stewardship.[4] By engaging with political adversaries on their own terms, with their own language, Le Pen has provided her supporters with a powerful weapon. RN voters tend to self-identify as those who have been left behind by the white-collar professional elite—the green-minded yuppies whom her father once disparaged. Thanks to the development of a "patriot ecology," these voters no longer feel belittled in discussions regarding the environment. They can fight back with counterarguments about the lighter carbon footprint that comes with supporting local producers, or the lack of follow-through on the empty rhetoric of EU environmental regulations.[5] By emphasizing the ecological advantages of localism, the RN has been able to mobilize environmental policy as a smokescreen for the unsavory nativist implications of its absolute commitment to a "French first" position.[6]

The new environmental strategy of the party has been devised by one man in particular, Hervé Juvin. With a long career in finance and management already behind him, Juvin met Le Pen at a conference in 2016. The two hit it off, and Juvin has been instrumental to the party ever since. (He is currently an RN deputy to the European Parliament and was recently elected to the Regional Council of Pays de la Loire.) Juvin's interest in the environment stems from his involvement with the Nouvelle Droite, a political movement that emerged in the 1960s and '70s. Spearheaded by the political philosopher and journalist Alain De Benoist, the movement sought to recuperate the far Right in a postwar

political context that stigmatized any association with the nation's fascist and collaborationist past.[7] Part of his strategy was to make the racism of the far Right more palatable: instead of focusing on the threat posed by immigration and Islam, he adopted a language that celebrated difference, and instead of maintaining that there was a hierarchy of races, he emphasized the importance of diversity. The emerging field of ecology helped him to do it.

At the core of the RN's environmental policy is a belief in cultural diversity and a commitment to localism that very easily maps onto the language of biodiversity and conservation. Just as invasive species can threaten local habitats, immigration and globalization risk eliminating cultural difference and national heritage.[8] As Juvin explained in an interview, "Diversity, both plant and animal, is what facilitates survival. If we reduce this diversity, we expose ourselves to species loss. I don't see why we shouldn't be applying the same logic to the subject of human diversity."[9] For the RN, biological conservation is as much about conserving nationally distinct human ecosystems as it is about protecting flora and fauna. Ensuring the security of the borders is therefore not just a political issue, but, as presented by the RN, an ecological issue as well.[10]

While immigration and border security have always been the core platforms of the party, the related focus on nativism has facilitated the development of a wide variety of environmental policies. In March 2021, the RN called for a public referendum on the environment. By bringing the environment to the people, the RN is wresting it away from the "ideologues" who have so far dominated the conversation.[11] As a party with populist roots that positions itself in opposition to the political establishment, a referendum is a savvy move, even if it is very unlikely that it will ever take place.

The referendum includes fifteen questions and is broken into three sections. The first section of the referendum, "Empowering and Protecting the French," includes questions about transparent food labeling, investment in nuclear power, and the responsibility of parent companies for the environmental damages of their subsidiaries. The second section, "Preserving Our Lands and Protecting Biodiversity," invites the French public to weigh in on such issues as wind energy and compensation for farmers who engage in carbon sequestration. Finally, the section titled "Promoting a Circular Economy and Localism" suggests amending existing consumer taxes to favor goods that can be repaired

and recycled, as well as taxing imports to reflect the environmental costs of their production.

While many of these policies appear to be environmentally sound, the overall approach of the RN tells another story. For starters, Marine Le Pen has vociferously opposed wind energy on the grounds that turbines are unsightly. She has even said publicly that turbines are like migrants—everyone agrees that we must accept them, but no one wants either of them in their own communities.[12]

Moreover, while the party talks a good game about supporting local agriculture, the specifics remain undeveloped. For example, the party has called for a ban on the import of any food products that do not meet French standards for animal and environmental welfare (a variation of this issue appears as a question on the referendum). This language appeals to nationalists, who believe that French products are necessarily better than foreign products. But the reality is that French environmental standards for farming are abysmal.[13]

Finally, while the RN does accept that climate change is real and is at least in part caused by humans, it is not addressed by the referendum. On his website, Juvin responded to proposals for a Green New Deal by minimizing its importance: "climate change is not the only, not even the most important, ecological issue we are currently facing. The poisoning of our water, soil, and air; so-called free-trade agreements; concentrated agglomerations of industrial and service parks, all of which are increasingly subject to regulatory capture," are all threats to our survival.[14] He goes on to state that the only solution is greater national sovereignty, that only by securing national borders and protecting national identity will we be able to engage in the work of conservation, which again is as much about preserving cultural differences as it is about plant and animal life.

This particular approach to the environment has deep roots in French politics, stretching back at least to the turn of the twentieth century and the writings of Charles Maurras. One of the most influential right-wing intellects of the modern era, Maurras drew on Social Darwinism to argue that politics and nature were tied together, and that the best way of ordering society was not to devise abstract universalist principles, but rather to mimic the hierarchies found in the natural world. This kind of biological thinking was often tied to a blood-and-soil conception of nationalism. Maréchal Pétain, the leader of the fascist Vichy government that held power during the German Occupation, (in)famously

declared that "the earth does not lie," meaning that the true France was embedded in its soil, in its villages, its farms, and not in corrupt cities or government offices. For proponents of this way of thinking, French identity is tied to the landscape and therefore cannot be adopted by those who have no connection to the land. It is a nativism that lends itself well to a "patriot ecology" that prizes the local above all else.[15]

Despite the efforts of Marine Le Pen to transform the RN into a party that could win the presidential office, results at the polls have been unsuccessful. While she did make it to the second round of voting in the 2017 election, she was soundly defeated by Emanuel Macron. In the parliamentary elections that took place the same year, the party won just eight seats. In the presidential election held in the spring of 2022, Marine Le Pen hoped to score a surprise victory, but although the party came in second place in the first round of voting, Macron prevailed in the second round, defeating Marine with 58.5 percent of the vote—8 percent less than in the 2017 election. Despite a significant improvement in the 2022 election, the results of the 2020 municipal elections, in which the RN suffered substantial losses, and the 2021 regional elections, in which RN came in third and failed to win a single regional council, make the future of the RN uncertain.

This is not to say, however, that the RN should be dismissed. While the party has had difficulty winning seats in recent elections, it continues to do well at the polls, and Marine Le Pen is a steady media presence. While the party did not succeed in its 2022 presidential bid, its platforms have become part of the wider political conversation. In particular, its development of a coherent stance on environmental issues has provided the right, regardless of party affiliation, with a language to engage on such issues as climate change, species extinction, and air pollution. While this brand of ecology might be deemed superficial by those who subscribe to a different politics, the fact that extremists have a stake in these debates gives them a dangerous newfound sense of legitimacy.

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Notes

1. France Culture, "Comment le RN tente de se repeindre en vert," March 9, 2021, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-billet-politique/comment-le-rn-tente-de-se-repeindre-en-vert-3248025.
2. There was a brief moment in the 1990s when the Front National did consider the environment, largely as a result of the influence of party member Bruno Mégret. When Mégret left the party in 1998, due to a falling-out with Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party largely went silent on environmental issues until Marine Le Pen assumed leadership.
3. For more on the history of the Front National, see Grégoire Kauffmann, *Le Nouveau FN. Les vieux habits du populisme* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2016); and Daniel Stockemer, *The Front National in France: Continuity and Change under Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen* (Berlin: Springer, 2017).
4. For more on the launch of Nouvelle Écologie, see Eugénie Bastié, "Le Front national se met au vert," *Le Particulier*, December 10, 2014.
5. For a general overview of the history of mainstream environmentalism in France, see Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960–2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Florian Charvolin, *L'invention de l'environnement en France: chroniques anthropologiques d'une institutionalization* (Paris: Editions la découverte, 2003); and Joseph Szarka, *The Shaping of Environmental Policy in France* (New York: Berghahn, 2002). For a history of French environmental thinking in the nineteenth century, see Caroline Ford, *Natural Interests: The Contest over Environment in Modern France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
6. For more on Marine Le Pen's brand of populism, see Dominique Reynié, "The Specter Haunting Europe: 'Heritage Populism' and France's National Front," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (October 2016): 47–57; and Anne Sa'adah, "After the Party: Trump, Le Pen, and the New Normal," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 35 (Summer 2017): 43–58.
7. For more on the history of the Nouvelle Droite in France, see Stéphane François, *La Nouvelle Droite et ses dissidences. Identité, écologie et paganisme* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2021).
8. For an excellent critique of the political mobilization of the invasive species/immigration parallel, see Sonia Shah, *The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
9. As quoted in Hugo Domenach, "Écologie: les contradictions de Marine Le Pen," *Le Point Politique*, March 15, 2019.
10. Juvin has also said, "Plant and animal biodiversity is essential, but from my point of view, the diversity of human societies is even more important, and this diversity is protected by the border." See Simon Blin, "Les droites dures s'enracinent dans 'l'écologie intégrale,'" *La Libération*, May 5, 2019.
11. Rassemblement National, "15 Questions sur l'environnement: contre-projet de référendum," https://rassemblementnational.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/03

/WEB_CONTRE_PROJET_ECOLOGIE_RASS_NAT_.pdf (accessed August 12, 2021).

12. Hugue Garnier with AFP, "Marine Le Pen présente un contre-projet sur l'écologie en vue de la présidentielle de 2022," BFMTV, March 10, 2019.
13. For more on the greenwashing of the French farm industry, see Venus Bivar, "Greening the Mainstream," in *Organic Resistance: The Struggle over Industrial Farming in Postwar France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 141–69.
14. Hervé Juvin, "'Green Deal': réalités et illusions écologiques," December 26, 2019, https://hervejuvin.com/green-deal-ecologie-humaine (accessed August 13, 2021).
15. For a longer trajectory of the extreme Right in France, see Chris Millington, *A History of Fascism in France: From the First World War to the National Front* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). For more on the connection between French identity, nationalism, and rural authenticity, see Pierre Barral, *Les Agrariens Francais de Meline a Pisani* (Presses de la Foundation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1968); Laurence Bérard and Philipe Marchenay, "A Market Culture: Produits de terroir or the Selling of Heritage," in *Recollections of France: Memories, Identities and Heritage in Contemporary France*, ed. Sarah Blowen, Marion Demossier, and Jeanine Picard (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 154–67; and Sarah Farmer, *Rural Inventions: The French Countryside after 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).