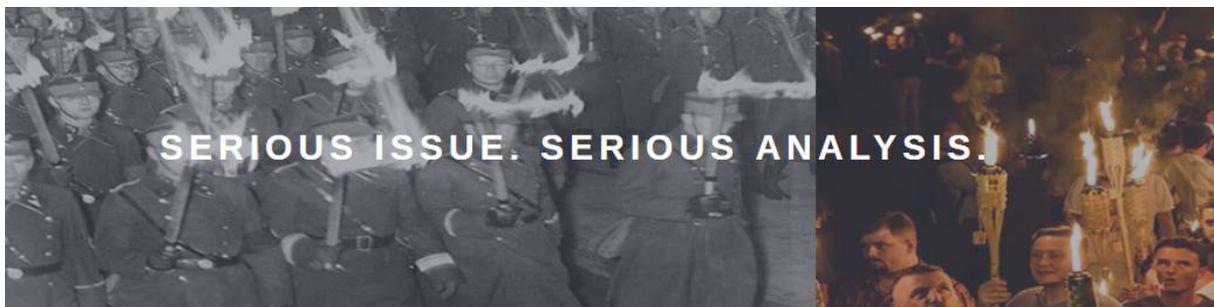


Collateral Damage: Eric Zemmour's Failed Bid for the French Presidency

CARR RESEARCH INSIGHT

Hans-Georg Betz
April 2022



To cite this document:

Betz, H-G. (2022). “Collateral Damage: Eric Zemmour’s Failed Bid for the French Presidency”. CARR Research Insight 2022.6. London, UK: Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.

About the Author

Hans-Georg Betz is an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Zurich. Before moving to Switzerland, he taught at a number of universities in North America. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on radical right-wing populism, nativism, and right-wing extremism. His short analytical pieces have been published online at fairobserver.com and opendemocracy.net. He is currently working on his next book on populism due to be published by Edgar Elgar.

About the CARR Research Insight Series

The CARR Research Insight series features the latest research from CARR Fellows. The series publishes open-access, peer-reviewed manuscripts to present their research to a wide audience. CARR Research Insights provide a venue for practitioners and researchers – ranging from those in early career stages to senior researchers – to share knowledge with a network of practitioners, policy makers, and scholars. We encourage readers of CARR Research Insights to comment and provide feedback using the contact details below.

Interim Editor: William Allchorn (Richmond University)

Contributing Editors: Jean-Yves Camus (Jean-Jaures Foundation) and Ruth Wodak (University of Lancaster)

About the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right

The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) leads the world in studies on, and responses to, radical right extremism, past and present. CARR features work by academics, journalists and practitioners via blogs, reference content, blogs and podcasts; but also through media commentary, policy consultation, and responses to the radical right. Throughout, CARR’s emphasis is placed upon the public dissemination of specialist insights into manifestations of radical right extremism around the world. We offer serious analysis on this serious issue each day, for the dynamics, influence, and threat of radical right groups and individuals has become more important than ever.

Website: www.radicalrightanalysis.com

Twitter: @C4ARR

Interim Director: Dr William Allchorn (Richmond University)

Introduction

Late November last year, Eric Zemmour made official what had been an open secret, his bid for the presidency of the French republic. The excitement was palpable, except among Marine Le Pen's entourage. With Zemmour in contention, her chances to advance to the second and decisive round of the election appeared severely compromised. And for good reason. Surveys gauging Zemmour's prospects in early October had him at 17 percent, ahead of Marine Le Pen with 15 percent and far ahead of anyone else on the right/center-right. Such a rapid and dramatic ascent was nothing short of a political earthquake, or so France's premier business magazine, *Challenges*, [proclaimed](#) at the time, dazzled and stunned by the enthusiasm generated by France's premier "polemicist."¹

In the weeks following Zemmour's announcement, almost everything appeared to go his way. A number of heavyweights defected from Marine Le Pen's camp to join Zemmour, [most prominently Gilbert Collard](#), a member of the European Parliament, who cited differences in ideas to justify his decision.² Marine Le Pen, in response, suggested that he was a mercenary who lacked courage and political morals. In early March, another blow followed when Marion Marechal – Jean Marie's granddaughter and Marine Le Pen's niece – officially rallied to her aunt's rival. [This was a heavy blow](#) given Marion Marechal's popularity in the south of the country where, in 2012 at the age of 22, she had been elected to the Assemblée nationale.³ Again, the reason for the decision was fundamental differences in ideas. These differences were nothing new, neither were the tensions between various ideological strands inside the Front national (now Rassemblement national, RN). With Zemmour, the disenchanteds were offered an alternative, and they seized the opportunity. Unfortunately for them, it turned out to be the wrong choice. Barely three months after Zemmour had announced his candidacy, his campaign started to implode, a casualty of Putin's aggression against Ukraine. For Zemmour, his proven effusive admiration for the Russian autocrat proved rather lethal, at least politically; as did, one might surmise, the close resemblance of their worldview.

Eric Zemmour, Jean-Marie Le Pen's "True" Heir

For a long time, thanks to Jean-Marie Le Pen, the Front national represented the uncontested point of orientation for the French far right. Since Marine Le Pen took over the reins of the party, this is increasingly no longer the case. Her venture to gain a modicum of respectability and normalize the Front national's public image – her famous project of "dédiabolisation" – proved quite successful. In mid-2021, slightly fewer than 50 percent of the French public consider the RN a [danger to democracy](#).⁴ Yet, the improvement of the party's image largely failed to pay the expected electoral dividends. It was as if the newly won relative respectability had translated into political irrelevance. Worse still, Marine Le Pen's relatively moderate tone together with her attempts to seduce France's political mainstream, irked and alienated a number of traditional far-right constituencies, such as

¹ https://www.challenges.fr/politique/presidentielle-2022-eric-zemmour-double-marine-le-pen-et-s-envole-vers-le-second-tour_783521

² See: https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elections/presidentielle/marine-le-pen-fustige-le-manque-de-courage-de-gilbert-collard-apres-son-ralliement-a-eric-zemmour_AN-202201230123.html

³ See: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220306-le-pen-s-niece-joins-forces-with-far-right-rival-zemmour>

⁴ See: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/front-national/les-francais-de-moins-en-moins-nombreux-a-voir-le-rassemblement-national-comme-un-danger-pour-la-democratie-selon-notre-barometre_4618247.html

Catholic fundamentalists and the right-wing extremist anti-Semitic, anti-Masonic conspiracy crowd. And her occasional invoking of General de Gaulle (her father's *bête noire*) and even Jean Jaurès did little to endear her to hard-core nationalists, who have never gotten over the loss of l'Algérie française and still pine for the days of Vichy.

With Eric Zemmour France's homeless far right had gotten themselves a new champion sur mesure. Or almost everybody. There are fringe groups that will never pardon Zemmour, neither for his Jewish nor his foreign roots. Jew and *métèque* – Zemmour represents the stereotypical embodiment of traditional French far-right nationalism's Other, as if sprung from the pages of Edouard Drumond's *La France juive*. For the right of the French far right, Zemmour is the perfect incarnation of Maurras's *ennemi intérieur*. For everybody else, he represents a new hope. And Zemmour delivered, both ideologically and rhetorically.

Reactionary Populism: The Revival of the Virile Nation

It might be that in today's world, postmodernism has lost most of its former intellectual appeal and glitzy luster. Yet it perfectly fits Zemmour in his role as serious presidential candidate. As a postmodern simulacrum of a politician, Zemmour appeared as if made for these unsettling times. His political project, if project is the appropriate word, consists of an ideational bricolage of concepts and notions taken from both the left and the right, replete with contradictions and non-sequiturs. This is hardly surprising. Following François Bourricaud, ideational bricolage can be defined as a *mélange* of “scientifically verified and verifiable propositions (...), value judgements, common-sense platitudes, ad hoc hypotheses – invented for the needs of the cause and dressed in an illusory generality – and even a small number of downright paranoid affirmations.”⁵ This about sums up much of what Zemmour has stood for during the past several decades – an ideational corpus, which falls into the purview of what has been characterized as “confusionnisme idéologique.”⁶

Zemmour's ideational tool kit contains a limited number of *idées-forces* (or perhaps better, *idées fixes*), which inform the heart of his political agenda: to save France from “the abyss”.⁷ Abyss stands for nothing less than the impending death of the French nation, its culture and identity – death by self-destruction, as the title of Zemmour's 2014 bestseller, *Le suicide français*, suggests. Zemmour's self-chosen role: the proverbial providential shining knight on a white horse entrusted with the task of assuring the survival of the nation.

Alain Finkielkraut, outspoken heterodox philosopher and member of the illustrious Academie française, has noted⁸ that Zemmour's appeal is owed to a large extent to the fact that he has given voice to a certain anxiety, widely shared among the French public, that France's days are counted. Zemmour's interventions are largely informed by a sense of decline, which has a long history on the French extreme right – and not only there.⁹ Zemmour is an avowed Gaullist – which is one of the main points that distinguishes him from Jean-Marie Le Pen. Like his icon, Zemmour sees and promotes himself as the “savior of the nation.” As he put it in the short video clip that launched his campaign in early

⁵ See: https://www.persee.fr/doc/AsPDF/sotra_0038-0296_1981_num_23_2_1682_t1_0245_0000_1.pdf

⁶ See: <https://journals.openedition.org/sociologies/10462>

⁷ See: <https://www.fr.fnac.ch/a16213716/Eric-Zemmour-La-France-n-a-pas-dit-son-dernier-mot>

⁸ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hw4QEMmTWvA&t=122s>.

⁹ See: <https://www.lesechos.fr/2009/11/la-riche-histoire-du-declin-de-la-france-1084314>.

December 2021, “It is no longer time to reform France, but to save it. That’s why I decided to run for president.”¹⁰

If the French stand at the abyss today, Zemmour insists, it is because their elites have led them there. The elites – for Zemmour above all “the heirs of May 68” – that’s “the powerful (...) the do-gooders (bien-pensants), the journalists and politicians, the academics, the sociologists and the trade unionists, the religious authorities.” What renders them distinct is the fact, or so Zemmour has charged, that they have “turned their back on the French people,” on patriotism and “the ideals of the Republic.”¹¹ Instead they have chosen “to submit themselves to minorities” who they adore. No doubt, the choice of words is deliberate. After all, at the very latest since the slaying of Theo van Gogh in 2004 by an Islamic fundamentalist it is common knowledge that Islam means submission, which stands for the individual’s complete and unconditional surrender to the will of God.

Standing up for the Common Man

Zemmour is a populist. And like any good populist he promotes himself as a tribune of the people, along the lines of Jean-Marie Le Pen (viz the title of the second part of Le Pen’s memoirs: *Tribun du peuple* [2019])¹² in whose footsteps he follows. Or as he claimed himself in an interview some eight years ago, “To be the clarion voice of the popular classes is my greatest honor.” As a tribune of the people, Zemmour gives voice to their fears and anxieties, their resentments, and aspirations. As a tribune of the people he says out loud what the ordinary French only dare to think. This is, Zemmour has charged, why he is hated by the elite – because they hate the people.¹³ Like Jean-Marie Le Pen before him, Zemmour has maintained that it is “essential” to “restore voice to the people” (*redonner sa voix au peuple* – a slight modification of Le Pen’s well-known slogan, *render la parole au peuple*).

Zemmour’s populist sensibility has not popped up overnight, is more than a strategic ploy adopted for his presidential campaign. In fact, Zemmour was a populist way before populism became the latest political fashion. A case in point is an article from early 1975, with a quite remarkable title “*Nous sommes tous des Dupont Lajoie!*” – We are all Dupont Lajoies. *Dupont Lajoie* is the title of a French movie from 1974 directed by Yves Boisset and featuring Isabelle Huppert in one of her first roles.¹⁴ Dupont Lajoie recounts the story of an ordinary, average petty-bourgeois man (the meaning of “Dupont Lajoie”), Georges Lajoie. While on vacation, Lajoie comes across a young woman – the daughter of friends of his, passing their vacation at the same place as Lajoie –, sunbathing in the nude and forces himself on the young woman. When the young woman struggles to resist his attempt to rape her, he accidentally kills her. In order to cover up his crime, Lajoie deposits the corps next to barracks housing Algerian migrant construction workers, pretending that

¹⁰ See: <https://www.leparisien.fr/video/video-zemmour-candidat-a-la-presidentielle-il-veut-apparaître-comme-le-sauveur-de-la-france-30-11-2021-3XRFY3PJUZEYBELX6FJUKUK2VY.php>.

¹¹ See: <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/clubvaleurs/politique/la-grande-confession-deric-zemmour-je-me-sens-charge-dames/>.

¹² See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/jean-marie-le-pen-decu-par-les-ventes-du-second-tome-de-ses-memoires-20200213>.

¹³ See: https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2021/12/06/election-presidentielle-2022-a-villepinte-eric-zemmour-s-imagine-en-sauveur-contre-les-medias-les-elites-et-les-juges_6104851_6059010.html

¹⁴ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mt9MzZsAG0A>.

one of them was the perpetrator. In the racially charged atmosphere that follows, one of the Algerian workers is killed. The police officer charged with investigating the killing soon comes to the conclusion that it was a racist crime. Yet orders from higher up constrain him to cover up the affair. Lajoie and the others involved in the killing goes free. But once back in Paris, Lajoie is shot to death by the Algerian victim's brother exacting revenge for his brother's murder.

Given the plot of the movie, which "invited the French to reflect on their ordinary racism,"¹⁵ particularly towards North-African migrants, the title of Zemmour's commentary might appear, on first sight, to express both an acknowledgement and indictment of the prevalence of racism that suffused 1970s France. After all, a review of the movie that appeared in L'Humanité-Dimanche a few weeks after Zemmour's text carried an identical title,¹⁶ only this time the title was followed by a question mark instead of exclamation mark.

Yves Boisset's movie is an indictment of the profound racism that pervades large parts of French society in the 1970s, directed particularly, but certainly not exclusively, at North African migrants. Zemmour's review of the movie is an indictment of Boisset, who in his narrative stands for the post-68 left and its disdain for the ordinary French. "They are ugly. They are stupid. They are vulgar. They are lecherous. They are misogynists, xenophobes, racists. They are both cowardly and violent. Their clothes are ridiculous, their pleasures grotesque, their leisure stupid." This is how Boisset depicts Lajoie, his wife and their friends, a perfect rendition, or so Zemmour suggests, of how France's post-'68 left sees the average French. And that includes, Zemmour charges, the French working class/proletariat, once lionized by the left, now despised, dismissed as a bunch of "vulgar, ignorant narrow-mindedly Francocentric low lives (my interpretation of beaufs franchouillards), alcoholics, racists, machos." In the eyes of this new left they are worthless because they "didn't want to make the revolution," because instead of seeking to destroy the detested *société de consommation* they opted for joining it.

With the denigration of the *couches populaires*, the French lower classes, Zemmour suggests, the traditional loathing of France that characterized certain parts of the intellectual left turns into a loathing of the French, "above all the most humble among them: to the hatred of France (aka francophobia) is added the hatred of the French people. They are being replaced, on the left, by the migrant as the new revolutionary subject, "the new proletarians, exploited and loathed." The last scene of the movie, for Zemmour represents a "call to murder. The French people must die." The "task" is "delegated" to the "Arab migrant" – a "mission exterminatrice" designed to lead to the disappearance of the French people, instigated and sanctioned by the left. Zemmour's conclusion: "Yves Boisset thought to make a film about racism; in reality, he has made a racist film." Racist, because it portrays, or so Zemmour suggests, ordinary French people as miserable creatures unworthy of dignity and respect while exalting immigrants. Some forty years later, in a representative survey, almost half of the respondents agree with the statement that "anti-white racism" is a "widespread phenomenon" in contemporary France.¹⁷

In the arguably most provocative passage of the text, Zemmour links Lajoie, the individual, and the popular classes, the collective, via the claim that the rape of the young women was merely a "clumsy attempt." After all, "these people screw up everything, even a rape." Actually, he didn't. The scene in the movie is quite clear on that, in a fairly graphical way. But in Zemmourlandia, already forty years ago, way before post-truth and fake news,

¹⁵ See: https://www.persee.fr/doc/homig_1142-852x_2001_num_1231_1_3686.

¹⁶ See: https://www.persee.fr/doc/homig_1142-852x_2001_num_1231_1_3686.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/117000-Rapport-CN-SR-N101.pdf>.

reality is fungible, at least as long as the resulting interpretative twist serves a higher purpose.

Metapolitics Gramscian Style

In this alternative reality, *Nous sommes tous des Dupont Lajoines* translates as, ‘We are all vulgar, narrowminded, xenophobic, racist, misogynist’ – because the left says so. And this is so because in the aftermath of ’68, the left has managed to conquer what in German is called Deutungshoheit, the power to define the terms and, in the process, set the rules. On the extreme right, this is called cultural hegemony, a notion adopted from the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci’s cultural hegemony stands for the notion that a society’s dominant ideas, values and norms reflect the beliefs and interests of the dominant elite. They are spread via a range of social institutions, such as churches, schools, universities, and the media, which serve a crucial role in indoctrinating, socializing and, ultimately, controlling the masses. For the political struggle, the concept implies, as Nicholas Sarkozy once put it, that “power is gained through ideas.”¹⁸

In this he followed Alain de Benoist, the spiritus rector of the *nouvelle droite* who in 1982 called for a “gramscisme de droite” centered upon cultural hegemony as the intermediate aim and “metapolitics” as the strategy to attain it.¹⁹ Metapolitics stands for a process of gradually subverting the dominant concepts, narratives and ideational patterns and replace them with new ones. This has been Zemmour’s main objective, for several decades. In an interview with the magazine *Causeur* from late 2014, Zemmour acknowledged as much, insisting that his was a “politique gramscienne.” This meant that he was engaged in a “battle of ideas in a struggle for intellectual hegemony,” a struggle encompassing “journalism, literature, history and politics.”²⁰ The objective of his struggle, or so he maintains in his most recent tome, *La France n’a pas dit son dernier mot*: “to deconstruct the deconstructors” in order to shed light on the “mechanism of the progressist ideology” which had led the country “into the abyss” – that “trptych born in the aftermath of May ’68, developed in the 1970s, and installed in all its majesty in the 1980s: deconstruction, derision, destruction.” In their wake: decadence and decline.

Palingenetic Hypernationalism

The political scientist Franck Orban has characterized Zemmour as “the herald of late twentieth-century declinism,”²¹ the novelist/essayist Jean-Marie Rouart, a herald “of the apocalypse,”²² for the historian Nicolas Lebourg he embodies a “nationalism obsessed with decadence.”²³ A preoccupation, one might add, closely associated with the extreme right. Its arguably most prominent exponent was Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, who throughout his relatively short adult life was obsessed with decadence. In fact, as Drieu maintained in the preface to his best-known novel, *Gilles*, it was the subject of decadence which provided

¹⁸See: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/10/30/la-grande-bataille-pour-l-hegemonie-culturelle_6017397_3232.html.

¹⁹ See: <https://www.revue-elements.com/produit/pour-un-gramscisme-de-droite-pdf/>.

²⁰ See: <https://www.causeur.fr/eric-zemmour-68-est-un-bloc-30136>.

²¹See: https://books.google.ch/books?id=9e-2DQAAQBAJ&pg=PA287&lpg=PA287&dq=zemmour+le+chantre+de+decadence&source=bl&ots=x6MDQU-XWg&sig=ACfU3U2GiPksi05jTl86FdQHDWvjLelt0A&hl=de&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjqlLvMyr71AhV2g_0HHTH3CvYQ6AF6BAgfEAM#v=onepage&q=zemmour%20le%20chantre%20de%20decadence&f=false.

²² See: <https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/Eric-Zemmour-voit-la-France-s-eteindre-644290>.

²³ See: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/nicolas-lebourg-eric-zemmour-incarne-un-nationalisme-obsede-par-la-decadence_2144164.html.

coherence and unity to an otherwise variegated literary œuvre. Drieu was part of France's disillusioned, disoriented "lost generation," his despair and fatalism reflected in the notion that "France is dying" – and nobody seemed to care to stop its descent into annihilation. In fact, as one of his characters in Gilles maintains, "The French have only one passion, and that is to croak (crever)." Drieu's search for meaning ended in fascism, collaboration with the Nazis – and suicide (in early 1945).

In Gilles, Drieu blames France's interwar decadence on two groups: foreigners ("Poles, Czechoslovaks, wogs" [bicots]) "invading" the country; and the Jews, the epitome "par excellence" of the modernity Drieu "abhors." "Irremediably decadent," Frederick Brown notes in his summary of Drieu's worldview, "France has been undermined by modernity and by the assimilation of foreigners alien to her nature. Surrealists, homosexuals, drug addicts, feminists, and *métèques* are all called to account, but the most lethal and comprehensive agent of subversion is the Jew. (...) The modern world, which Jews epitomize, is decrepit." Needless to say, Drieu was a virulent anti-Semite.²⁴ As he admitted himself – with reference to his first wife, Colette, who was Jewish, "I hate the Jews. I've always known that I hated them."²⁵

The art critic Eric Loret once remarked that one "chooses one's authors the way one chooses one's friends."²⁶ Both choices, in turn, say much about oneself. This has been true for François Mitterrand, whose admiration for Maurice Barrès, Jacques Chardonne, Lucien Rebatet, and Drieu la Rochelle outed him,²⁷ or so Laurent Joly has charged, as a "man of the right." What is true of Mitterrand, is even more true of Zemmour. Zemmour's written œuvre is replete with allusions to, and quotations from, the most illustrious exponents of the Action française (Maurice Barrès, Charles Maurras and Jacques Bainville) and the extreme right (Drieu, and particularly Renaud Camus). All that in the service of Zemmour's central obsessions: decadence/decline and the question of identity.

Under the circumstances, one may well ask whether or not Zemmour's ideas can legitimately be qualified as fascist, a proposition most vociferously advanced by the sociologist Ugo Palheta.²⁸ Palheta evokes the spirit of Roger Griffin's well-known characterization of fascism, consisting of two major elements: the myth of the nation as an imagined community grounded in genealogical lineage and shared history and the myth of the nation's rebirth (what Griffin calls 'palingenesis') from decadence and decline. It is on this basis that Griffin defines fascism as a "palingentic form of populist ultra-nationalism." Zemmour's writings certainly fit Griffin's interpretation, at least in part. What is missing – and this is a crucial point – is that revolutionary fervor to create a new, secular order, grounded in racist supremacy aimed at destroying pluralist democracy and the constitutional order, which, Griffin maintains, distinguishes fascism from other political ideologies.²⁹

The Genealogy of Zemmour's Nativism

Rather Zemmour is a quintessential radical right-wing populist. Radical right-wing populism is an ideational amalgam of anti-elite bluster and nativist rant. Nativism stands for the notion that the "own people" should come first, particularly with respect to jobs and benefits. In France, as Laurent Dornel's monograph on the history of xenophobia has

²⁴ See: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3807230.pdf>.

²⁵ See: https://www.lepoint.fr/livres/le-cas-drieu-la-rochelle-12-04-2012-1452016_37.php.

²⁶ See: https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2012/04/18/linhumanite-tout-entiere_812653/.

²⁷ See: <https://www.lesechos.fr/2018/10/mitterrand-bibliophile-lhistoire-de-ses-passions-998536/>.

²⁸ See: <https://www.contretemps.eu/zemmour-lepen-extreme-droite-antifascisme/>.

²⁹ See: <https://www.contretemps.eu/zemmour-fascisme-racisme-symptome-morbide-palheta/>.

shown, nativism has a long tradition, going back all the way to the late nineteenth, early twentieth century. Among its most prominent exponents were Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurass, both prolific writers and instrumental in founding and shaping the Action française (AF), the arguably most influential right-wing extremist movement of the early twentieth century. The AF played an important role in the transition from nineteenth-century traditional-monarchist, catholic-inspired right-wing extremism to a new type of right-wing extremism that joins together ultranationalism and xenophobia, while, at the same time, taking its distance from Catholicism. Its most important exponent was Maurice Barrès, who was among the first to seek to exploit existing nativist tendencies for political gain. In France, nativism emerged in late nineteenth century, at a time of economic and political turmoil, it was triggered by the growing influx of foreign labor – Belgian, Italian, Spanish, even German. The “foreign invasion” – for as such it was characterized in the popular press – provoked a massive backlash, culminating in the demand for the protection of the national labor market against foreign workers, routinely characterized as “thieves.” All this in the name of the “national proletariat” which, or so a leading French socialist charged in 1896, was on the verge of passing away.

It was Maurice Barrès, however, who in the early 1890s, as a Boulangist députée, made the “protection of the French workers” from foreign labor a central plank of his political campaign. Central to Barrès’s “national socialism” was the notion of national preference, reflected in the slogan “la France aux Français” a slogan that also featured prominently on the top of the title page of Edouard Drummont’s *La libre parole*. In a modified form – “Les français d’abord” – it reemerged in the early 1980s as a succinct summary of the Front national’s political project, This project would propel Jen-Marie Le Pen to national prominence in the years that followed François Mitterrand’s turn from a socialist agenda to rigueur (austerity), which left large parts of his lower-class supporters angry and disillusioned.

Zemmour has to a large extent adopted traditional nativist tropes, such as the call for *préférence nationale*, one of the Front national’s central nativist demands (with Marine Le Pen, it was replaced by *priorité nationale*). At the same time, he has gone far beyond this traditional type of nationalism, largely informed by economic concerns. His version of nativism is rooted in the same fears and anxieties that informed the original nativism in the decades before the American Revolution and in the decades thereafter.³⁰ A prominent case in point is Benjamin Franklin, who in 1751 warned of the “Palatine Boors” swarming across Pennsylvania and threatening to turn the settlement into a German colony. “Why should Pennsylvania,” he asked, “founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion?” For, as Franklin charged, Germans, as well as Swedes, Russians, French (!) and many other Europeans were of “swarthy Complexion” and therefore not up to Anglo-Saxon standards. No doubt, Benjamin Franklin would have felt right at home in Zemmour’s nativist universe. Clearly, the notion of the “great replacement” has an illustrious history, reaching all the way back into the seventeenth century. And it continues to cast its spell on political entrepreneurs trading in fear-mongering and conspiracy theory to mobilize an engrossed audience.

The Great Replacement

³⁰ See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/rampage/wp/2015/08/28/founding-fathers-trashing-immigrants/>.

It is hardly a coincidence that Zemmour has been particularly close to Hungary's Victor Orbán. Like Orbán, Zemmour promotes in his writings a form of illiberal democracy, which has been a major feature of contemporary populist regimes, from Erdogan's Turkey³¹ to Correa's Ecuador.³² This is not the only point of agreement between Zemmour and Orbán, however. They also share the same vision of the nation as a closed community; both are haunted by the specter of a demographic cataclysm that, if not stopped, will invariably lead to the extinction of the nation; In both cases, these sentiments are reflected in the propagation of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory. In September 2021, Orbán organized a "summit on demography." Among the invited were Zemmour and Marion Maréchal³³ and the topics discussed at the summit were Europe's falling birth rates and shrinking population, "pro-family" policies designed to encourage procreation, and the specter of the great replacement. As Orbán charged, "If Europe is not going to be populated by Europeans in the future and we take this as given, then we are speaking about an exchange of populations, to replace the population of Europeans with others." And to add that there were sinister political forces at work in Europe "who want a replacement of population for ideological or other reasons."³⁴

The "great replacement." That's also Zemmour's obsession, the driving force behind his political campaign. Together with the question of identity with which it is intricately entwined, it is the leitmotiv of his program for France, which trumps everything else. Zemmour has laid out on numerous occasions what the "theory" of the great replacement means. As he put it on TV in late 2021,³⁵ the great replacement occurs when one people replaces another (i.e., France), in the process "turning the country into a third-world country, with a different civilization, a Muslim civilization, which does not have the same values as does French and European civilization" with its Christian and Greco-Roman roots going back centuries, and "which is even antagonistic and antinomical to it." The great replacement is a direct result of decades of mass immigration, largely from France's former colonies, which is nothing other than what he refers to as "reverse colonization." The process has been abetted, Zemmour explained in his speech given at the Convention de la droite in September 2019,³⁶ by France's "religion of human rights." This has allowed Islam to "protect its operation of the occupation and colonization of parts of the French territory, which it transforms, thanks to the sheer weight of numbers and religious law, into foreign enclaves," into – here he cited the Algerian writer Boualem Sansal – "budding Islamic republics."

Not for nothing, Zemmour has called his newly-founded movement, Reconquête! – nomen est omen. According to its website, Reconquête! stands for the defense of France's national interest, for the promotion of France's "grandeur," for the revival of its national identity and the reclamation of its sovereignty. But above all, as Zemmour put it in early December 2021,³⁷ it stands for the "beginning of the recapture of the most beautiful

³¹ See: <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/93/4/957/3897532>.

³² See: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15335/populist-playbook-the-slow-death-of-democracy-in-correa-s-ecuador/>

³³ See: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/09/23/a-budapest-viktor-orban-organise-un-sommet-international-du-grand-remplacement_6095789_3210.html.

³⁴ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/06/viktor-orban-trumpets-far-right-procreation-anti-immigration-policy>.

³⁵ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTs7miis0Gg>.

³⁶ See: <https://www.facebook.com/OrganisationCitadelle/videos/%C3%A9ric-zemmour-discours-%C3%A0-la-convention-de-la-droite-28092019-bonne-qualit%C3%A9/502026090636657/>.

³⁷ See: <https://www.rts.ch/info/monde/12696727-eric-zemmour-promet-la-reconquete-de-la-france-lors-dun-premier-meeting-electrique.html>.

country in the world.” Recapture evokes the image of lost territory – and for good reasons. The notion that parts of France’s territory have been lost is a preoccupation that goes far beyond the far right. It was recently voiced, for instance, by Luc Ferry, former minister of education under Jean-Pierre Raffarin and noted, if controversial philosopher, in the context of his views on Zemmour.³⁸ If there was merit to Zemmour, Ferry stated, it was that he “went to look for the dust that had been swept under the carpet for decades,” in this concrete case, “that of the territories lost to the republic.” Zemmour was saying out loud what millions of French were thinking, namely “that the atomization of society, the islamization of certain neighborhoods, the proliferation of arms dealing in the no-go zones are unworthy of a republican country.”

It appears that some of these perceptions and ideas are shared by a considerable part of the French population. A representative survey from November 2021 on the “zemmourisation des esprits” (zemmourisation of the minds) found significant agreement (50 percent of respondents) with the notion of the great replacement.³⁹ More than 55 percent agreed with his statement that “we are above all a people of the white race, Christian religion and Greco-Roman culture;” and more than two thirds agreed with the statements that there were too many immigrants in France, that Islam poses a threat to France’s identity, and that today, one no longer felt as much at home as before. The survey showed, as the analysis of the results suggested, that the central themes advanced by the populist radical right were “slowly but surely” gaining “a certain cultural hegemony.” Zemmour’s Gramscian strategy was clearly doing its subversive job.⁴⁰

Coming to the Defense of the Endangered (White) Male

The *zemmourisation des esprits* goes, however, only that far. It certainly does not extend to part two of Zemmour’s great replacement – the question of the “white heterosexual catholic male” and Zemmour’s representation of him as an endangered species. This is an obsession that has haunted Zemmour for a long time. A prominent example is his review of Aymeric Patricot’s *Les petits blancs* from 2013.⁴¹ In the review, Zemmour evokes the “sexual misery of the young white proletarians who, raised in the universe of Western feminism, are unable to compete with the ostentatious virility of their black or Arab rivals, who seduce numerous young white women, preferably blond,” a success that could be interpreted as “the symbolic revenge of colonization.” Yet despite their wretchedness and deplorable misery, the *petits blancs* are held responsible, by the middle-class antiracists, of all the evils in this world, by virtue of the color of their skin. In reality, however, the white male is “the great victim of the age” and here particularly of globalization, which “was made at his expense, his jobs getting outsourced to India and China.” Yet he is asked to “support the promiscuity of immigrant families living as if they were still ‘down there’ and for whom he no longer serves as a model while they impose on him the unbearable condition of being a minority in his own country.” The progressive “colonization” of his neighborhoods in the cities leaves him with no other choice than to “submit (all the way to

³⁸ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/politique/luc-ferry-quand-la-gauche-morale-donne-des-lecons-20211208>.

³⁹ See: <http://www.presseagence.fr/lettre-economique-politique-paca/2021/11/26/paris-sondage-ifop-licra-ampleur-et-limites-de-la-zemmourisation-des-esprits/>.

⁴⁰ See: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/election-presidentielle-2022/20211126.OBS51444/grand-remplacement-place-des-femmes-islam-a-quelles-idees-de-zemmour-les-francais-adherent-ils.html>.

⁴¹ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/mon-figaro/2013/12/04/10001-20131204ARTFIG00481-petits-blancs-et-bonnes-consciences.php>.

converting to Islam)” or to abandon the home of his ancestors and “flee” to the countryside.

Zemmour revisits the dire situation of the white male in his vitriolic tirade delivered at the Convention de la droite in 2019.⁴² The tone is beyond alarmist, replete with vitriol and rancor. What is at stake today, Zemmour tells his spellbound audience, is nothing short of the very survival of the white heterosexual catholic male. He is the “only enemy to be put down” (*le seul ennemi à abattre*). It is on his back that all the deadly sins are loaded, “of colonization, slavery, pedophilia, capitalism, the ransacking of the planet.” He is the only one “who has been forbidden the most natural, age-old behaviors of virility, all in the name of the necessary fight against gender prejudices.” He is the only one who is “accused of domestic violence, the only one who can be denounced as a pig” (a reference to #BalanceTonPorc, the French version of #MeToo). What all of this amounts to, or so Zemmour contends, is nothing short of “a war of extermination of the white heterosexual male.” But who bears such a grudge against the white Western, heterosexual male? In a short article from 2019,⁴³ Zemmour gives the answer: a motley crew of feminist, gay and anti-racist activists, “each pursuing their own objectives, but aligned against their common enemy: white, heterosexual male” whose culture “is oppressive by nature and therefore needs to be delegitimated, ostracized, demonized. In order to be eradicated, and then replaced.” For, and here Zemmour quotes Danton, “One only really destroys what one replaces” (*On ne détruit réellement que ce qu'on remplace*).

Read from this perspective, Zemmour’s account of Dupont Lajoie from 1974 appears in a new light, explains why Lajoie emerges as the true victim from Zemmour’s narrative. He is the embodiment of the petit blanc, whose apparent “sexual misery” leads him to assault, rape and kill the young woman. It might also explain Zemmour’s “cordial relationship” with Tariq Ramadan, the Muslim intellectual facing several charges of sexual assault in France. This is even more remarkable, given persistent suspicion and allegations⁴⁴ that Ramadan is a “closet fundamentalist”⁴⁵ who hides his true convictions behind a cloak of moderation and tolerance. Yet, Zemmour has been steadfast in his friendship with the disgraced scholar, on multiple occasions expressing his appreciation of the “frank and virile debates”⁴⁶ the two have had over the years. The emphasis here is on “virile.” For Zemmour, Ramadan belongs to that rare species of men who have not yet fallen prey to the “devirilization, coupled with feminization” of western society.⁴⁷ Both are deliberate, or so Zemmour charges, the result of a “political project designed by progressivists, feminists, and many other groups” intent on doing away with the vestiges of an age (“the stupid nineteenth century”) when virility still counted as a virtue.

It might also explain Zemmour’s defense of Dominique Strauss Kahn (DSK) in the pages of *La France n’a pas dit son dernier mot*. DSK’s assault on Nafissatou Diallo – a “spectacular American misadventure,” a ridiculous amorous affair with a servant.” In the good old days, “men’s sexual appetite goes hand in hand with power.” In traditional societies, women are: “the loot of every accomplished man who aspires to climb the social

⁴² See: <https://www.facebook.com/OrganisationCitadelle/videos/%C3%A9ric-zemmour-discours-%C3%A0-la-convention-de-la-droite-28092019-bonne-qualit%C3%A9/502026090636657/>.

⁴³ See: <https://www.fdesouche.com/2017/12/22/eric-zemmour-veut-male-blanc-occidental-heterosexuel/>.

⁴⁴ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/28/tariq-ramadan-muslims-need-to-reform-their-minds>.

⁴⁵ See: <https://www.latimes.com/la-fg-ramadan-qa22-2009sep22-story.html>.

⁴⁶ See: <https://www.lejdd.fr/Societe/affaire-tariq-ramadan-les-enqueteurs-ont-retrouve-ses-messages-telephoniques-chaleureux-avec-eric-zemmour-3811784>.

⁴⁷ See: <https://sante.lefigaro.fr/actualite/2011/10/15/13853-mais-est-passee-virilite>.

ladder.” By contrast, “DSK in handcuffs between two New York cops” represents a “reversal of a thousand years of royal and patriarchal French culture.” It is nothing short of “a castration of all French men,” an exemplary case of the “devirilization of the Western male” and “feminization of society” which Zemmour has denounced on numerous occasions.⁴⁸

Dupont Lajoie, Tariq Ramadan, DSK and Eric Zemmour, what all of these men have in common is that they are “at war with women.”⁴⁹ Zemmour’s misogyny has a long history, going all the way back to the publication of his antifeminist pamphlet, *Le premier sexe*, published in 2007. Zemmour is the opposite of Bertrand Morane, the hero of François Truffaut’s film from 1977,⁵⁰ *L’homme qui aimait les femmes*. Zemmour has nothing but contempt for women’s rights,⁵¹ if not outright hatred toward women in general.⁵² Unfortunately for a presidential candidate these days openly expressed misogyny is hardly an asset. In a representative poll among French women commissioned by the feminist magazine *Elle* in the fall of 2021, two thirds of respondents expressed their anxiety with respect to women’s rights and the fight against sexism in case Zemmour were to be elected.⁵³ The survey on the zemmourisation des esprits came to similar conclusions.⁵⁴ It found that only a small minority of around 20 percent of respondents shared his most sexist propositions, such as that women are made to have children and raise them. Under the circumstances it was hardly surprising if his advisors suggested that he tone down his misogynist rhetoric and concentrate on the immigration question instead.⁵⁵

Zemmour’s attempt to impose his view of the world has also largely failed with respect to another issue dear to his heart, if not his campaign, what in the United States is known as “family values.” This includes a traditional conceptualization of the family, but also the question of reproductive rights, of gender identity and sexual orientation. On each of these issues, Zemmour has propagated ideas that reflect the values of a bygone era, when television was still in black and white, men were still “breadwinners,” homosexuality was classified as a criminal offence, and transgender rights had no meaning. These was the time of Charles de Gaulle, Zemmour’s hero, when the world was still in order – before ’68 destroyed it all.

The Catholic Utopia: Yearning for a Past that Never Was

It has been pointed out that Zemmour speaks to sentiments of nostalgia which inform a significant part of French society.⁵⁶ Nostalgia for the “trente glorieuses,” those three decades after WWII that transformed France into a major industrial power. Nostalgia for the days when France was still a great nation. Nostalgia for a time when the Catholic Church’s authority was uncontested. Nostalgia for a time when the *français de souche*

⁴⁸ See: <https://sante.lefigaro.fr/actualite/2011/10/15/13853-mais-est-passee-virilite/>

⁴⁹ See: https://www.liberation.fr/societe/religions/eric-zemmour-et-tariq-ramadan-en-paix-lun-avec-lautre-en-guerre-contre-les-femmes-20211022_EFCNOUTZNFQDLHDZ3V7F74BT54/.

⁵⁰ See: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076155/>.

⁵¹ See: <https://www.femina.ch/societe/actu-societe/eric-zemmour-un-cauchemar-pour-les-femmes/>.

⁵² See: https://www.terrafemina.com/article/eric-zemmour-oui-le-polemiste-deteste-aussi-les-femmes_a359736/1.

⁵³ See: <https://www.elle.fr/Societe/Les-enquetes/Sondage-exclusif-ce-que-votent-les-femmes-3969088>.

⁵⁴ See: <http://www.presseagence.fr/lettre-economique-politique-paca/2021/11/26/paris-sondage-ifop-licra-ampleur-et-limites-de-la-zemmourisation-des-esprits/>.

⁵⁵ See: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/12/30/eric-zemmour-du-mepris-des-femmes-a-la-hantise-de-l-immigration_6107701_823448.html/.

⁵⁶ See: <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/declinisme-et-nostalgie-un-cocktail-francais/>.

made up the vast majority of the population. Zemmour embodies and reflects all of these sentiments. At the same time, he serves as the perfect “empty signifier” (Ernesto Laclau)⁵⁷ onto whom all the various grievances, hurts, resentments, and frustrated aspirations which have accumulated over the years can be projected. In this sense, he resembles Georges Ernest Boulanger, the late nineteenth-century general turned populist politician who for a few years shook the political foundations of belle-epoque France.

From this perspective, Zemmour’s propagation of traditional family values, his “declaration of war” on the LGBTQ community,⁵⁸ and his assault on gender theory are as much political expediency as they reflect true conviction.⁵⁹ Politically, they are meant to appeal to the militant segments of French catholic community, who despite various differences among them, share a “fundamentalist and intransigent conception of the faith” and have fewer reservations to get involved in politics.⁶⁰ In the past, fundamentalist catholic groups formed part of the Front national, gathered around Bernard Antony. In the process, Antony established himself as the unflagging defender of France’s Christian identity and the voice of all those Catholics who see themselves as belonging to an “oppressed minority,” its beliefs ridiculed and denigrated.

Not long after Marine Le Pen assumed the presidency of the Front national, Antony left the party, after publicly chiding her for not “drawing the appropriate consequences” from the Catholic faith, particularly with regard to the abortion question.⁶¹ In the years that followed, Antony sought to establish himself as a nodal point for France’s dwindling Catholic community via a magazine, Reconquête, founded in 1989. The magazine was designed to counter the erosion of Catholicism in French public life and shore up French identity – a theme particularly close to the heart of practicing Catholics.⁶²

A few years ago, the late Henri Tincq, a noted expert on the Catholic Church, warned of the growing move to the right, even extreme right among a number of practicing Catholics.⁶³ What explained this move was what Tincq called “the convergence of fear.” Fear in the face of “the fragility of a Catholic institution which weakens itself,” fear of increasing immigration; fear of Islam, fear of the “cultural and moral hegemony of the left,” fear of a secularism (laïcité) seen as “more militant and aggressive in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks (2015) and the assassination of père Jacques Hamel (2016), more uneasy when it comes to Christian symbols such as mangers and crosses, all in the name of religious neutrality above all imposed on the Muslims.” A survey from the same year gave a sense of the size of France’s “catho-identitaire” sphere.⁶⁴ The results suggested that there was a substantial minority of around a third to more than 40 percent among practicing Catholics who were potentially susceptible to nationalist and identitarian positions, directed against immigrants, particularly if they were Muslims.

⁵⁷ See: <https://voidnetwork.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/On-Populist-Reason-by-Ernesto-Laclau.pdf>.

⁵⁸ See: <https://tetu.com/2021/12/06/eric-zemmour-candidat-election-presidentielle-2022-declaration-guerre-lgbt-meeting-reconquete-villepinte/>.

⁵⁹ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2016/11/09/31003-20161109ARTFIG00421-eric-zemmour-la-theorie-du-genre-pour-tous.php>.

⁶⁰ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/les-catholiques-a-l-avant-garde-de-l-effondrement-du-mythe-du-progres-20200117>.

⁶¹ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite/2006/06/17/01001-20060617ARTFIG90651-antony-repond-a-marine-le-pen.php>.

⁶² See: <https://www.marianne.net/societe/les-catholiques-sont-ils-devenus-identitaires>.

⁶³ See: https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/henri-tincq-une-partie-de-l-eglise-se-droitise-voire-s-extreme-droitise-01-04-2018-2207154_23.php.

⁶⁴ See: <https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Rapport-MIC-0606-hd.pdf>.

Zemmour's 2019 speech at the Convention de la droite was a clear indication that he was not only prepared but quite determined to rally the catho-identitarian vote to his cause. And for good reasons. Like any other right-wing presidential candidate, Zemmour confronts a fundamental challenge: to bring together two disparate constituencies: one the one hand the traditional "bourgeois" right-wing electorate, which, in 2016 largely supported François Fillot. On the other hand, the *couches populaires* (popular classes) which have formed a significant part of Marine Le Pen's support base. The two constituencies are very different from each other.⁶⁵ The former expect from their candidate a classical conservative agenda; the latter have been seduced by Marine Le Pen's "social turn," a legacy of her former advisor, Florian Philippot. In order to square the circle, Zemmour banks on the seductive power of three themes – identity, immigration, Islam. They are supposed to be convincing enough to forge an electoral alliance between the two groups, to be mobilized in favor of Zemmour. Here Zemmour counts on their protest potential, displayed in the mass demonstrations against the 2013 law that legalized same-sex marriage and the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) protests that erupted in late 2018 against a new carbon tax proposed by Macron. Both were protest movements, but for very different reasons. Cultural reasons in the case of the former, material ones in the case of the latter.

This poses a fundamental problem for anyone seeking to rally the two groups, and particularly Zemmour. Zemmour might have a lot to say on the first, yet very little on the second. Inequality and inflation, to name just two major issues, are largely ignored by the presidential candidate. It is only very hesitatingly that Zemmour has broached some of the material concerns and worries that plague the *classes populaires*, more often than not in a rather defensive manner. Clearly, the defense of France's and Europe's Judeo-Christian civilization has been Zemmour's main concern. This explains his fascination with Catholicism, not as a religion but as an institution with its rituals and rich cultural heritage, which is one of the foundations of France as a nation. Christian values, Zemmour has maintained, "marked" him from early childhood, shaped his identity as a French citizen.⁶⁶ At the same time, Catholicism evokes images of the Jewish rituals his parents observed, brings back fond memories of a distant past. None of this has anything to do with religion. In fact, as he recently put it, he is "for the Church, but against the Christ."⁶⁷ His defense of the Church, in turn, represents to a significant extent an attempt to weaponize Christianity against Islam – a strategy shared by most radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe and beyond.⁶⁸ Here Christianity serves primarily as an "identity marker" that marks the civilizational border between us and them.⁶⁹

This was one of the two main reasons Marion Maréchal cited to justify her joining his camp, his devotion to the "civilizational struggle" which she characterized as "the first of all struggles" encompassing all major questions – migration, culture, demography.⁷⁰ The second main reason was her belief that Zemmour would be able to bring together the two major right-wing constituencies – middle class cultural conservatives and Le Pen's popular classes.

⁶⁵ See: <https://www.commentaire.fr/boutique/achat-d-articles/le-cas-zemmour-13611>.

⁶⁶ See: <https://www.france-catholique.fr/Zemmour-Je-suis-impregne-du-christianisme.html>.

⁶⁷ See: <https://www.lavie.fr/actualite/societe/iacopo-scaramuzzi-zemmour-reduit-le-christianisme-a-un-instrument-contre-lislam-80605.php>.

⁶⁸ See: <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/saving-people/>.

⁶⁹ See: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/424533.pdf>.

⁷⁰ See: <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/politique/exclusif-marion-marechal-explique-son-ralliement-a-eric-zemmour>.

The Burden of History

Rallying the various constituencies that make up the contemporary French right under one zemmourian umbrella requires above all to eradicate the “moral dike” that stands between the right and the extreme right.⁷¹ Given Zemmour’s long history of referencing and citing the gotha of the French far right (Barrès, Maurras, Drieu), given his equally long history of sexism and misogyny, and given his promotion of the great replacement “theory” which, if a reminder is necessary, informed the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre in 2019, this appears like a futile undertaking. So far, Zemmour’s strategy has been to propagate an “alternative” interpretation of French history, designed to whitewash the image of the French far right. Its best known example is the claim that Pétain saved the French Jews from falling into the hands of the Nazis.⁷² Another example is his suggestion that Captain Alfred Dreyfus was not innocent after all.

There are several reasons for Zemmour’s manipulation of history. Political considerations are one, yet hardly the most important. Historical revisionism à la Zemmour serves above all as a weapon in the culture war he has been waging against the French intellectual left for decades. It is meant to discredit academic historians, such as Laurent Joly, who has shown, on the basis of meticulous research, to what degree Vichy was implicated in and complicit with the Nazi war against the Jews. As Joly has put it, Vichy’s policy was “to deliver a maximum number of Jews.”⁷³ Zemmour, however, is not interested in the truth. His goal is, and has always been, to gain cultural hegemony for the right. To attain this goal, no distortion of the truth, no falsification of evidence, no fabrication of literary references attributed to authoritative sources, from Chateaubriand⁷⁴ to Huntington,⁷⁵ seem to be off limits, as long as they serve the cause. In academia, intellectual dishonesty is severely sanctioned; in contemporary politics, not so much. It certainly has not deterred major French intellectuals⁷⁶ and politicians⁷⁷ to engage him in public debate and, in the process, accord his views legitimacy and intellectual stature – and score points in Zemmour’s Gramscian war of position. This in itself says as much about Eric Zemmour as it does about contemporary France.

Conclusion: Sunk by Putin

Under “normal conditions” Zemmour’s ideological project, given its relative coherence and the stature of its proponent, might well have proven a winning formula, at least on the right. In the aftermath of Putin’s aggression against Ukraine, it quickly became a losing proposition. And this not only because of Zemmour’s closeness to Putin. After all, Marine

⁷¹ See: <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/edito-presidentielle-2022-le-bluff-d-eric-zemmour-sur-l-union-des-droites-7900117270>.

⁷² See: <https://www.franceculture.fr/histoire/trois-contre-verites-deric-zemmour-sur-petaain-et-vichy-rassemblement-national>.

⁷³ See: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-question-du-jour/les-theses-deric-zemmour-et-le-regime-de-vichy-quel-est-le-regard-de-l-historien>.

⁷⁴ See: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/la-croisade-pour-le-vote-chretien-quand-marine-le-pen-court-apres-le-pape-zemmour_2166049.html.

⁷⁵ See: <https://actualitte.com/article/102483/edition/l-introuvable-citation-qu-eric-zemmour-prete-a-huntington-dans-son-livre>.

⁷⁶ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paPKnx4j-dk>.

⁷⁷ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBZZAtCeH0k>.

Le Pen too has had close ties to the Russian autocrat.⁷⁸ Yet in the days and weeks that followed the invasion, Le Pen regained lost ground while Zemmour's support took a nosedive. The relationship between the two candidates and Putin cannot be the reason for their political fortunes. This only leaves their programs.

The philosopher and radio/TV show host Raphaël Enthoven once characterized Zemmour's project as a reflection of a "tribal ethnocentrism of the little white guy" (l'éthnocentrisme tribal du petit blanc).⁷⁹ The results of a representative poll from late March confirm this observation.⁸⁰ At the time, Zemmour stood at 12 percent overall. But among men he attained 14 percent; among women, merely 10 percent. Marine Le Pen (20 percent overall), by contrast, attained 25 percent among women, compared to 15 percent among men. This suggests that Marine Le Pen's moderate course, which continued during this most recent campaign, paid out. This was reflected, for instance, in her refusal to follow Zemmour's civilizational crusade, focusing instead on mundane issues, such as purchasing power.⁸¹

There are striking similarities between Zemmour's civilizationalism and Putin's Dugin-inspired Eurasian phantasies, aimed at nothing short of the eradication of Western liberalism, "the greatest threat to the ethno-cultural survival of all the earth's people."⁸² For ages, Zemmour has promoted Putin as the "last bulwark against multiculturalism and gay communitarianism" and as a symbol of "the opposition to Western decadence."⁸³ The events of the past few weeks have shown that phantasies and delusions can have horrible consequences. Yet Zemmour persists, even after his campaign was sunk by Putin, in insisting that the Great Replacement – which he continues to see as the "central issue of this election" – is going to be the "fundamental subject" which will occupy us for the next few decades.

As he put it in a recent dispute with Alain Minc organized by the news magazine *L'Express*, "The Great Replacement of one people by another, of one civilization by another, I believe that this is the major theme of this election, that (i.e., the Great Replacement) which will destroy France, which will turn into a Lebanon, with all the disorder it engenders: civil war, ethnic confrontations, misery, corruption, etc."⁸⁴ A few days later, in a lengthy interview accorded to *Le Figaro*, France's leading center-right daily, for which Zemmour had worked since the mid-1990s, reiterated his position. He ran for the presidency because he wanted that "France remains France." If he lost, he feared that "pretty soon France would no longer be France." It might still be called France, but would have become a "different country." A country that had lost its standing, "which no longer respects its own culture, a country with a Muslim majority, African, which will belong to a different civilization."

There is more than a certain touch of irony in the fact that the same issue of *L'Express* that published the Zemmour/Minc debate has on its cover snapshots of Putin and Xi under the headline, "Those who want to take down the West." They should have

⁷⁸ See: https://www.lepoint.fr/presidentielle/le-rn-embarrasse-par-un-tract-ou-figurent-marine-le-pen-et-poutine-01-03-2022-2466676_3121.php.

⁷⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7yfGvfG7tM>.

⁸⁰ See: https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ROL22_2022.03.23.pdf.

⁸¹ See: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/marine-le-pen-je-suis-lassee-du-bruit-et-de-la-fureur-ai-envie-d-efficacite-20220203>.

⁸² See: <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/ideological-platform-eurasian-movement>.

⁸³ See: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/l-edito-politique/presidentielle-2022-eric-zemmour-plombe-par-sa-poutinophilie_4966209.html

⁸⁴ See: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/zemmour-minc-la-dispute-excusez-moi-c-est-moi-le-plus-universaliste-de-nous-deux_2170176.html/

added Zemmour. It would have completed the picture – at least as far as France is concerned. It is even more ironic that the man who has been haunted by the specters of submission of his own making has been sunk by a man whose demand for total submission is frighteningly real. The collapse of Zemmour’s campaign has shown that the vast majority of the French electorate have no appetite for a candidate who, as a France Info commentary [recently put it](#), “in the face of a threatening foreign power, is a great risk of being little more than the president of submission.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ See: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/l-edito-politique/presidentielle-2022-eric-zemmour-plombe-par-sa-poutinophilie_4966209.html

Written by:
Professor Hans-Georg Betz
Senior Fellow
The Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right

Website: www.radicalrightanalysis.com
Twitter: @C4ARR

