
H-France Review Vol. 5 (February 2005), No. 14

Jen Rydgren, *The Populist Challenge: Political Protest and Ethno-Nationalist Mobilization in France*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004. 272 pp. Figures, tables, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S./£50.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 1-57181-643-7; \$24.95 U.S./£14.95 U.K. (pb). ISBN 1-57181-691-7.

Review by Richard L. Derderian, National University of Singapore.

Jen Rydgren's *The Populist Challenge* grapples with one of the most important political developments in Europe today, the rise of Extreme Right Parties (ERP) and France's Front National in particular. Synthesizing a wealth of existing scholarship on ERP parties, the Front National, and French voter surveys, Rydgren details the societal changes, shifts in the political landscape, and electoral strategies that contributed to the success and survival of the Front National. Anyone interested in contemporary European and French politics, ERP parties, the Front National, populism, nationalism, or racism will find the book both interesting and useful.

Chapter one lays out the theoretical framework for the study. Borrowing from the language of economics, Rydgren offers an overview of the supply and demand factors, or all that shapes the behavior of political parties and voters. Macro demand factors include larger societal changes—such as the emergence of a postindustrial society, the breakdown of the nuclear family, or the decline of organized religion—that can affect voter perceptions and self-perceptions by creating desires for new forms of valorized identity or new notions of belonging. These are what Rydgren terms as the “opportunity structures” that ERP parties have successfully exploited by recasting society in ethno-cultural terms, tapping into xenophobic sentiments, and offering populist and authoritarian solutions to perceived problems. Micro demand refers to the realm of social cognitive theory, or how the human thought process works. Our tendencies to think in terms of simplified social categories or stereotypes, retain information that is more vivid or emotional, behave in ways that make us feel better about ourselves, perceive the world through collective forms of identity, and be driven by particular interests have been harnessed by the xenophobic rhetoric, ethno-nationalism, and welfare chauvinism of ERP parties.

Rydgren contends that most voters are less inclined to identify with the components of party ideology than party image or its simplified representation. Moreover, in recent decades membership in political parties has declined as party loyalty has been replaced by a growing interest in particular issues that can fluctuate from election to election—a development known as “voter dealignment,” which is especially pronounced in France. Voter dealignment and the increased availability of “floating voters” have added to the importance of party image. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's conception of social space, Rydgren notes that voters who share common cultural or economic capital will tend to share similar views and exhibit similar behavior. Shared sentiments of frustration or resentment that result from a perceived or anticipated decline in social status can trigger a rejection of the existing political establishment, a call for a return to a desired past order, and demands for ethno-nationalist protectionism or welfare chauvinism—all of which are features of ERP parties.

Turning to the supply side of the political equation, Rydgren underlines how the behavior of political parties is driven by the desire to strike a balance between ideology (core beliefs and values) and strategy (the need to win votes). Economic and social cleavage “dimensions” or “niches” are the terms used to refer to the divide that can take shape between the views of voters and parties about economic issues, such as the role of the state, or social issues, such as abortion or immigration. Less constrained and more flexible because of their weaker party organizations, new ERP parties located outside the political arena

are often more successful in exploiting these niches, especially when niches are associated with “hot” single issues such as immigration. However, Rydgren stresses that only when niches are accompanied by a decline in identification with traditional parties is it possible for new parties to gain support. While niches may contribute to the short-term success of ERP parties, they do not guarantee their long-term survival. Lastly, Rydgren underlines the importance of framing. Politicians have the power to shape voter behavior through the issues they choose to politicize and how they cast them, but only if these framing efforts are attuned to voter preconceptions.

Chapter two, the first of the case studies, offers a profile of Front National voters based on voter surveys from elections between 1984 and 1997. Here, Rydgren both confirms and dispels the importance of protest votes in understanding the success of the Front National. While it is true that defectors from the mainstream right contributed to the rise of the Front National in reaction to the Socialist victory in 1981, their support was short-lived. In the course of the 1980s, the Front National became more proletarian as the base of supporters shifted from more established and prosperous conservative voters to the working class, who had traditionally belonged to left parties. Reflecting the declining importance of left and right poles of political identification, most Front National voters do not define themselves in terms of the left or right. The surveys also demonstrate that Front National voters tend not to adhere to a broad range of authoritarian attitudes but rather identify with a few particular issues, especially immigration.

Chapter three explores the socio-cultural niche that developed during the early 1980s. As the newly elected Socialist party moved toward the socio-cultural left, abolishing the death penalty, and calling for increased voting rights for foreigners, a niche developed that the Front National was able to exploit. It did so by articulating a largely moralistic political ideology anchored in the conception of an imagined natural order. According to this ideology, what is deemed to be good (family, nation, work, community) or bad (ethnic mixture, homosexuality, globalization) is either in harmony or at odds with the natural order. Rydgren argues that this ideology grows out of a long French reactionary tradition of seeing society in terms of an opposition between nature and culture, or what is natural and what is artificial. It is an ideology fundamentally oriented toward the past with the desire to return to a seemingly lost natural order. While economic factors are less important to National Front ideology, the party’s position evolved during the 1980s from one in favor of neo-liberalism to one that opposed the forces of globalization and European integration, regarded as undercutting national sovereignty. This evolution, Rydgren notes, has more effectively aligned the economic and socio-cultural positions of the Front National.

Chapter four begins with an overview of the history, definitions, territorial, and ethnic understandings of nationalism and the importance of national identity. Nationalism often gains force as a restorative or more valorized pole of belonging, Rydgren asserts, with the weakening or destabilization of existing class identities, traditional features of society (family, religion), or with the decline of national sovereignty. Emphasizing traditional reactionary concerns about decadence and decline, the Front National offers a more valorized ethno-cultural conception of the nation based on the idea of an extended family and a closed community rooted in a shared mythical past. In keeping with this exclusive conception of the nation the Front National condemns immigration, multiculturalism, and globalization, trends that—the party claims—threaten to dilute or pollute the integrity of the national culture. Instead, the Front National calls for measures to strengthen the nation, such as basing citizenship policies entirely on blood ties rather than birth or naturalization, and giving French natives preferential treatment in areas such as housing, jobs, education, and health care.

Chapter five centers on the exclusionary, xenophobic and anti-immigration dimensions of ethno-nationalism common to all ERP parties. Rydgren stresses that while ethno-nationalism is central to the

success and survival of ERP parties, it is only effective when established parties are on the wane and when it becomes possible to challenge the political establishment. More than any other issue, it is the politicization of anti-immigration sentiments that has fueled the rise of ERP parties across Europe—even in countries without large immigration populations. In fact, concerns about immigration are based primarily on imagined fears rather than lived experiences. Rydgren notes that these fears were not created solely by the Front National; during the 1970s, the Communist Party, in an effort to expand its shrinking electorate, began to cast immigration as a problem. During the same decade the conservative government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing began to ratchet up controls on immigrants, helping to associate immigration and the presence of foreign populations with France's growing economic difficulties. The "new right" was also active in articulating an ethically (or ethnically) exclusive "right to be different" ideology that the Front National would later adopt. The Front National was successful making anti-immigration policies its political battle horse and moving the immigration debate to the center stage of French politics, but it did so by building on pre-existing anti-immigrant sentiments developed by the political left and right during the 1970s.

The Front National has been especially successful in framing immigration as a threat to French national identity. This strategy has worked by linking immigration and foreign populations to fears about crime and insecurity—issues that now regularly top the list of voter concerns. These fears are associated with specific places, such as the working-class suburbs, and are expressed through myths about declining families and the language of foreign invasion. Rydgren argues that the xenophobia of the Front National is representative of a new form of cultural racism based not on immutable biological characteristics but on equally fixed and unchanging cultural traits and qualities that place foreigners at odds with French norms and values. Immigrants and foreign populations in France are also cast as carriers of diseases, such as AIDS, and are blamed for taking advantage of unemployment benefits, housing, and healthcare at the expense of French natives. Rather than denouncing the xenophobic-nationalism of the Front National, the mainstream right has lent it greater political legitimacy by adopting a harder line towards immigration, tightening citizenship laws, and even borrowing the language of the Front National.

Chapter six focuses on the sentiments of voter discontent and alienation that have opened the door to ERP parties across Europe. As voters started to identify less with mainstream parties and party membership began to decline, anti-system or anti-establishment niches that could be exploited by ERP parties took shape. In particular, the populist dimension of the Front National has allowed it to harness the growth of voter alienation and distrust in the political establishment. The populist message of the Front National reinforces the perception that all political parties are the same and that a fundamental opposition has taken shape between the people and a corrupt, elitist political establishment. Populism rejects representative democracy for abandoning the people and calls instead for direct democracy through measures such as increasing the use of referendums. This notion of the people is a homogenous one which excludes segments of society such as elites, immigrants, and ethnic minorities. Populist leaders such as Jean-Marie Le Pen typically cast themselves as being representative of the people and better positioned to understand their true interests and character. However, as parliamentary democracy is now widely accepted in Europe, ERP parties must seek legitimacy through the existing political system. Alliances with mainstream conservative politicians at the local level in France have helped dispel fears of a possible threat to French democracy while bolstering the respectability of the Front National.

While Rydgren's study is well worth the effort, an overly lengthy first chapter, technical jargon, and a multitude of variables and categories of analysis can take the enjoyment out of reading about what is otherwise an extremely fascinating and colorful topic. Those situated outside the author's discipline of political sociology (such as this reviewer) are at risk of feeling like they are traveling through a foreign country. As a historian, I would naturally have liked to learn more about how the past has contributed

to the success of ERP parties in the present. For example, Rydgren did acknowledge the trauma of the Algerian War, but only in passing, ignoring the abundance of scholarship on the connections between the imperial past and racism in the postcolonial present.^[1] While I appreciated Rydgren's efforts to acknowledge the importance of anti-immigration sentiments fostered by the left and the right during the 1970s, prominent studies on the history of immigration policy and the even earlier framing of immigration as a problem were surprisingly absent.^[2] Similarly, cultural racism, rather than being a recent development, has roots in the imperial past.^[3] However, for those whose interests lie more in the present, *The Populist Challenge* offers a rich overview and a rewarding analysis of the recent political and societal developments that explain the success of ERP parties and the Front National in France.

NOTES

[1] Benjamin Stora, *Le transfert d'une mémoire: de "L'Algérie française" au racisme anti-arabe* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999); Neil MacMaster, *Colonial Migrants and Racism: Algerians in France, 1900-1962* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

[2] Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism and Citizenship in Modern France* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[3] Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

Richard L. Derderian
National University of Singapore
hisrd@nus.edu.sg

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172