A Comparison between the

Extreme Right in

Contemporary France and

Britain[1]

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Except for a small number of recent studies[2] existing literature on the contemporary extreme right[3] tends to follow a quite rigid country by country-based approach which fails to develop common theoretical perspectives. The key weakness of these specialised multi-country studies is neglect of a genuine comparative framework which often results in collections of 'descriptive' essays. The primary intention of this paper is to move beyond this approach and to offer a study of the extreme right in contemporary France and Britain in comparative context. This study transcends the limitations of country-specific accounts to answer the following research question: why has the contemporary extreme right in France enjoyed much more political success than the contemporary extreme right in Britain? A common conjunctural model of extreme-right political success will be constructed at the outset. This is intended to serve as a theoretical base for framing the comparison and will act as the mechanism through which the primary research question will be addressed.

A Conjunctural Model of Extreme Right Political Success

From comparative research on the experience of the Front National (National Front, FN) in France and the National Front (NF) in Britain, it is possible to construct a model which abstracts the combination of dynamics responsible for the

[2] See, for example, Hans-Georg Betz, 'The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-wing Populist Parties in Western Europe', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 25, no. 3 (1993), 413–27; *idem, Radical Right-wing Populism in Western Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994); and Paul Taggart, 'New Populist Parties in Western Europe', *West European Politics*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (1995), 34–51.

[3] For examples of 'country-specific' accounts, see Luciano Cheles, Ronnie Ferguson and Michalina Vaughan, eds, *The Far Right in Western and Eastern Europe* (Harlow: Longman, 1995); Paul Hainsworth, ed., *The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA* (London: Pinter, 1992); and Peter Merkl and Leonard Weinberg, eds, *Encounters with the Contemporary Radical Right* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).

development patterns of both political formations even though these development patterns were strikingly dissimilar. Whereas the 1970s was a barren period for the FN, the early 1970s saw growth for the NF. Popular support for the NF in the 1970s peaked twice at relatively low levels, during 1972–3 and again during 1976–7, but from 1977 the NF suffered sharp decline. Indeed, the experience of the NF from 1977 has been characterised by political failure, organisational schism, declining electoral participation and eventual collapse.[4] In marked contrast, the FN achieved its national electoral breakthrough in 1984 and has subsequently consolidated its national support base at between nine and fifteen per cent of the vote.[5] Yet despite this disparity, which makes comparison difficult, it remains that a common conjunctural model can be extrapolated from these contrasting experiences. The critical conjunctural conditions of this model can be outlined as follows.

i

The starting point is that right-extremist ideology (e.g. fascism) must exist at a 'transpersonal' level in the form of a 'carrier' organisation (e.g. the British National Front). This 'transpersonal' level (i.e. transcending the individual) is where political ideologies are said to exist as collective forces which interact with economic and social conditions to shape historical events.[6] In conceptual terms, ideological forces can be seen to occupy a realm of 'political space' which is divided between a dominant 'centre' (comprised of the legitimate political mainstream) and an insignificant periphery (marginalised by the dominant political forces). In the post-war period, right-wing extremism has occupied marginal political space in both France and Britain, although an inchoate right-wing extremism briefly entered mainstream, legitimate political space in France in the 1950s in the form of anti-systemic Poujadism. However for the most part, right-wing extremism in post-war France and Britain inhabited the political fringe and largely stagnated. In the late 1960s, the extreme right found itself correspondingly marginalised in both countries and this means that the underlying location from which right-wing extremism in the form of the NF and the FN emerged was essentially analogous.

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[4]   For an overview of the National Front in the 1980s, see Christopher T. Husbands, 'Extreme Right-wing Politics in Great Britain: The Recent Marginalisation of the National Front', *West European Politics*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (1988), 65–79; and Roger Eatwell, 'The Esoteric Ideology of the National Front in the 1980s', in Mike Cronin, ed., *The Failure of British Fascism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 99–117.

[5]   See Hainsworth, *Extreme Right*, 40–4. At the presidential elections of April 1995, Le Pen polled 15% of the vote which surpassed his previous zenith of 14.4% of the vote at the 1988 presidential elections. For coverage of the presidential and municipal elections of 1995, see James G. Shields, 'The Challenge of the Front National: Presidential and Municipal Elections in France', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 29, no. 4 (1995), 19–30.

[6]   On ideology and its location outside the individual, see Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), 15–17. On the concept of political space and its application to the far right in Britain see Martin Durham, 'The Conservative Party, the British Extreme Right and the Problem of Political Space, 1967–83' in Cronin, *Failure of British Fascism*, 81–98, and Nigel Copsey, 'Contemporary Fascism in the Local Arena: The British National Party and "Rights for Whites"', in Cronin, *Failure of British Fascism*, 118–40.

ii

The second condition of this model is that, for early growth to occur, both the 'idea' (i.e. right-wing extremist ideology) and its collective representation must be given credence – they must be allowed to enter the orbit of 'legitimate' or mainstream political space. This is vital because mainstream political space constitutes the centre of political interaction with society, and if right-wing extremism is to grow as a political force, then it needs to be in a central position from where it can inculcate society with its ideological concerns. In France and Britain, the FN and the NF penetrated this central political space and in both cases, this came about primarily through mainstream politicisation of the race issue. However, the corollary to this is that if legitimate space is not opened up for the far right, it will remain outside of the mainstream political locus and continue to be marginalised, wanting political legitimacy.

iii

Having gained entry, this space must be retained over the longer term. If it is not, then the political representative (if not the idea or some variant of the idea) could once again become marginalised. The retention of mainstream political space by right-extremist parties seems to depend on two dynamics. Firstly, the persistence of organisational legitimacy (the NF in the 1970s failed to construct or sustain lasting political legitimacy) and, secondly, a failure by mainstream political organisations to lessen available space for the extreme right. More typically, space for the extreme right has been diminished through thematic appropriation of the race issue (e.g. Conservative appropriation of the race issue in Britain in the late 1970s) but, that said, the experience of the FN suggests that thematic appropriation by mainstream political parties does not always result in the reduction of space. This may be because such appropriation has either not appeared convincing or is simply ineffective once an organisation has passed a certain support or credibility threshold.

iv

The final dimension to this model is the most important. Socio-economic conditions (currently, the 'post-industrial' stage of economic gobalisation and rapid technological change) determine the overarching historical context in which the contemporary extreme right interacts with society and develops its appeal. A key litmus test here is whether the historical context is one in which widespread personal and political alienation is experienced, as this combination serves as a major factor pushing individuals towards narrow ultranationalist responses.

In contemporary post-industrial societies, both personal and political alienation seems to be derived from two sources. Firstly, personal alienation can result from a crisis of community as structural change (rise of services, decline of labour-intensive industries, competitive consumerism) continues to dissolve traditional sources of social solidarity (class, work, religion, neighbourhood, family) and leads to increasing

individualisation.[7] Secondly, political 'dissensus',[8] i.e. alienation from established political elites, can arise from a crisis of confidence in the nation-state as national politicians appear ineffective and incapable of ensuring full employment, maintaining law and order, ensuring rapidly rising levels of affluence, and maintaining adequate provision of services. This incapacity of mainstream politicians to solve everyday problems can weaken the legitimising link between nation-state and society, engender political disillusionment and insecurity and create a widespread sense of crisis.

An important point is that this personal and political alienation shapes a climate of *anomie* in which disorientated and disaffected individuals become susceptible to ultranationalist and racist political mobilisation. This susceptibility must be understood in terms of racism readily accommodating a basic need for orientation, identity and rationalisation, especially at a time when individual difficulty or distress is experienced. It is in an anomic environment, in particular, that ultranationalism can assume a keen attraction as a possible source of meaning, belonging and identity which relieves (if not cures) feelings of anxiety, estrangement and isolation. If the aggregate level of personal and political alienation is extensive, then the underlying growth potential for right-wing extremism appears great. If, however, the 'crisis', i.e. difficulty or distress, is finite, then growth may reach an upper limit and not proceed further.
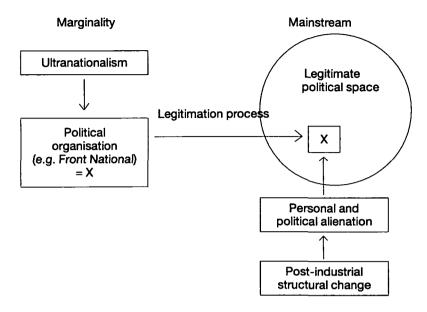
Certainly as far as the recent experience of the contemporary extreme right in France and Britain presents itself, the conjunctural occurrence of conditions (i) to (iv) possesses significant explanatory power for understanding the electoral emergence of extreme-right political organisations. It goes without saying that condition (i) is vital. If there are no extreme-right traditions or extreme-right political parties, then clearly extreme-right ultranationalism will not undergo mobilisation. However, seeing as this current typically has some form of political expression, the essential condition now becomes (iv), because if the contextual setting is hostile to ultranationalist appeals then growth will become extremely difficult (if at all possible). Conditions (ii) and (iii) are important in explaining actual levels of support but (iv) remains the key determinant because it also defines the extent of potential support and latent possibilities for growth. It thus provides the overarching context: it not only accounts for why ultranationalism is able to develop its appeal in the first place but also the potential threat that right-wing extremism can assume in the contemporary setting.

Comparing the Front National and the National Front

The FN was conceived in the early 1970s by the neo-fascist parentage of Ordre Nouveau ('New Order'), whose post-war lineage can be traced back to the small

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[7]   See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes* (London: Abacus, 1995), 424–32. A useful sociological approach connecting the rise of right-wing radicalism to the advent of post-industrial capitalism is provided by Betz, *Radical Right-wing Populism*, 22–35.

[8]   On political alienation and the radical right, see also *ibid.*, 37–67.

Marginality   Mainstream

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┌─────────────────────┐
│  Ultranationalism   │
└─────────────────────┘
          │
          ▼
┌─────────────────────┐        Legitimation process
│     Political       │───────────────────────────────▶  ┌───┐
│   organisation      │                                   │ X │
│ (e.g. Front National)│                                  └───┘
│       = X           │                                     ▲
└─────────────────────┘                                     │
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Legitimate political space

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                              ┌─────────────────────┐
                              │   Personal and      │
                              │ political alienation│
                              └─────────────────────┘
                                        ▲
                                        │
                              ┌─────────────────────┐
                              │   Post-industrial   │
                              │  structural change  │
                              └─────────────────────┘
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violent group Jeune Nation (Young Nation) which in the 1950s had exhibited a profound hostility to democratic republicanism and was banned by the French government in 1958.[9] The FN was created by Ordre Nouveau along the lines of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) as a crypto-fascist party and was intended to serve as the strategic vehicle for revolutionary nationalism.[10] The purpose of this two-dimensional strategy was to extricate the French far right from the political backwaters by concealing the FN's true orientations behind a moderate programme,[11] while proselytising followers to revolutionary nationalism from within. To expedite this strategy, Ordre Nouveau intended the subordination of Jean-Marie Le Pen,[12] which in due course led to intra-party confrontation, organisational schism and eventual formation of a rival grouping, the Parti des Forces Nouvelles (New Forces Party, PFN) in 1974. Yet rather confusingly, despite this internal conflict, the FN's dual strategy essentially remained intact. A strong neo-fascist contingent continued within the FN which could be readily perceived, at least until the late 1970s, while the PFN sought acceptability through pragmatic co-operation with the conservative right. But to no avail: during the 1970s both the FN and the PFN largely met with public indifference in a period in which both competed with each other in the stifling confines of political marginality.

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[9] See Malcolm Anderson, *Conservative Politics in France* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), 283–4.

[10] The point that the FN was intended to be neo-fascist is clear from Ordre Nouveau's literature. See 'Pour un Ordre Nouveau', *Special Congress Supplement* (1973), 11.

[11] See *Le Monde*, 27 Dec. 1972, 7.

[12] Jean-Marie Le Pen was a former Poujadist deputy and campaign manager for Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancourt's presidential bid in 1965. He was not a member of Ordre Nouveau and consequently had a relatively 'moderate' image on the French extreme right. This enabled Le Pen to rally various far-right strands when he became president of the FN in 1972. For an overview of Le Pen, see Jonathan Marcus, *The National Front and French Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 27–35.

The failure of the extreme right in France in the 1970s can, in fact, be attributed to a number of factors: the relative political (if not societal) quiescence of the immigration issue which denied the extreme right a mobilising issue, allied with a leftwards shift in French political culture and also to general organisational difficulties (sectarianism, poor targeting of seats, financial constraints, etc.). Indeed, it was only after the FN began to invest heavily in the issue of immigration from 1977/8, in the style of its British counterpart, that the situation began to improve. Advantageously for the FN, this strategic shift corresponded with increasing main-stream politicisation of the race issue. Perhaps the years 1977/8 could therefore be seen as the very beginning of the FN's point of departure from the margins of French politics, rather than, say, 1982, 1983 (or even 1984) as most standard chronology seems to suggest.

The FN's decisive strategic shift towards focusing exclusively on the immigration issue occurred for a number of reasons. Rising unemployment was a factor allied to a desire to target a more *populaire* working-class constituency. Possibly the FN was keen to follow in the steps of the NF in Britain. Perhaps the key reason was Le Pen's desire to fashion a unique identity for the FN which he hoped would serve not only to demarcate it from the rival PFN (their identities by this time had become somewhat conflated) but also to publicise the FN as being fundamentally distinct from the political mainstream, as clearly offering something new. But, immigration was by no means a new concern on the French far right and, while it did not continually fill early Frontist literature, it was nevertheless in evidence. Indeed, the immigration issue had been a major preoccupation of Ordre Nouveau and predecessors in the 1960s, such as the Mouvement Nationaliste de Progrés (National Progressive Movement) and Europe-Action[13] and also even the PFN (though to a lesser extent). Yet the immigration issue had previously brought little return for the French extreme right prior to the late 1970s owing to the de-politicisation of race in France in the post-war period. This had essentially resulted from the non-political nature of the decision-making process, where immigration policy had typically been restricted to the realm of the technocrat, detached from the political arena and therefore removed from mainstream political debate.[14]

Despite the FN's marginalisation in the 1970s, the fact that it continued to give expression to the extreme-right tradition in France meant that in the 1980s it was in a position to mobilise support specifically around the immigration issue. And, most significantly, this perseverance paid dividends because, with the politicisation of race at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, legitimate political space for the FN opened up. Interestingly, this race politicisation resulted from both national and local dynamics, which then favourably interacted with an indigenous culture infused with an intolerant colonial legacy. Nationally, for the most part it resulted from the

[13] See Jean-Yves Camus and René Monzat, *Les Droites Nationales et Radicales en France* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1992).

[14] On immigration and the decision-making process in France (and Britain) in the post-war period, see Gary P. Freeman, *Immigrant Labor and Radical Conflict in Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

increasingly interventionist state immigration policy of Giscard, culminating in the Bonnet Law of 1980,[15] national exposure of the apparently racist activities of the Communist Party in late 1980 and early 1981,[16] opposition reaction to the alleged slackness of Socialist immigration policy between 1981 and 1984, national press coverage of violent and criminal incidents involving second-generation immigrants in the suburbs of Lyon, and the rising profile of unassimilable Islamic fundamentalism.[17] Locally, race politicisation resulted from the spatial concentration of immigrants, problems of cohabitation with the indigenous population and competition for welfare and social resources. This often generated a spontaneous backlash and the subsequent appropriation of popular racism by local mainstream politicians in areas of high immigrant density (e.g. Marseille in the early 1980s) which in turn prepared fertile terrain for the FN at a local level.

Most importantly, this mainstream race politicisation at both local and national levels was articulated in terms of discriminatory language. An 'immigrant equals problem' discourse acquired hegemony in the 1980s, often legitimised in the pseudo-scientific language of the *seuil de tolérance* or 'threshold of tolerance'.[18] This negative discourse created room for the FN in the legitimate political orbit and lent credence to Frontist discourse. Consequently, the arrival of the immigration issue at the centre of the French political scene in the early 1980s was instrumental in the electoral emergence of the FN as the political unfolding of the immigration issue threw open the window of opportunity for Le Pen and carried the FN into legitimate political space, thereby meeting the second conjunctural condition of the model. The FN tended at first to follow on the back of this emerging political agenda, rather than radically setting it. Agenda-setting was initially carried out elsewhere but it was also incisive that in the run up to the European elections in 1984 the media clasped Le Pen and assigned him and his themes political importance.[19]

It is also significant that the third condition of the model was satisfied: the FN's

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[15]   The Bonnet Law, as the name of the law suggests, was championed by Christian Bonnet, then Minister of the Interior under Giscard. This law provided for the expulsion of foreigners if they had, *inter alia*, no resident's permit or if the permit was false, if they had entered France illegally and, also, if they constituted 'a threat to public order'. An additional circular was directed towards foreign students. Bonnet had expressed concern at the alleged militancy of foreign students, their numbers and also 'false' students, i.e. those that used and abused the system to stay and work in France. The new measures required among other things that foreign students had to demonstrate that they were of 'good character' and had 'sufficient' financial resources.

[16]   See Marcus, *The National Front*, 77–82.

[17]   See Agnès Hochet, 'L'immigration dans le débat politique français de 1981 à 1988', *Pouvoirs*, no. 47, 23–30.

[18]   The 'threshold of tolerance' made the 'scientific' contention that an inescapable racist backlash against immigrants would occur in a locality if the density of the immigrant community reached a certain level (arbitrarily set at anything between 10% and 30%). This concept had been absorbed by central government by the end of the 1960s and had filtered down to local administration by the mid-1970s. On the discourse of immigration in France, see Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism and Citizenship in Modern France* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[19]   See Monica Charlot, 'L'emergence du Front National', *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 36, no. 1 (1986), 30–45.

newfound political space was retained. Decisively, the FN established and sustained itself as a legitimate political actor. This supplementary legitimisation issued from a number of directions. Firstly, Le Pen was given credence by a benevolent national and local media that did not actively seek to de-legitimise the FN (as the media did to the NF in Britain). Instead it confirmed the political importance of Le Pen and circulated his themes to the wider French public. Secondly, by 1984 the FN had integrated itself into moderate-right political space (as a form of moderate extremism) courtesy of a series of electoral pacts and thematic convergence with the conservative right. The appropriation of 'twin' Frontist themes by the moderate right (e.g. insecurity, which had become inextricably tied to immigration) further bestowed legitimacy on Le Pen and did not cut away his sources of support, presumably because either such appropriation did not appear persuasive enough to cut any ice with the disaffected French electorate or because once the FN had made its national breakthrough in June 1984 it had passed the required credibility threshold. The failure of anti-Le Pen sections on the far right (e.g., the PFN and the Parti Nationaliste Français) to challenge Le Pen's hegemony further confirmed the FN's credibility, especially with the effective collapse of the PFN by the mid-1980s. Fourth, internal dynamics were also crucial: re-organisation carried out with much professionalism, first under Jean-Pierre Stirbois and Michel Collinot,[20] then under the 'bourgeois' Bruno Mégret,[21] ensured that extremist edges, exemplified in the likes of the neo-fascist Groupes Nationalistes-révolutionnaires (Nationalist-revolutionary Groups)[22] faction within the FN in the 1970s were smoothed down and more intelligently hidden in the 1980s. The internal moderation of the FN after 1978 was a key manoeuvre in this respect because it allowed Le Pen to deflect attempts at delegitimisation in a way that the NF in Britain seemed incapable of effecting. Finally, while Le Pen's charisma has been rather overstated in the rise of the FN,[23] he nevertheless agglutinated the Front's rather volatile membership coalition which had, by the mid-1980s, succeeded in incorporating more legitimate renegade elements from the conservative right.

[20]   Jean-Pierre Stirbois alongside Michel Collinot had formed a new camp in the FN in December 1977 known as the *solidaristes*. Although this faction was regarded as 'neo-fascist', Stirbois and Collinot played an important role in the internal moderation of the FN from 1978. Stirbois became the FN's general secretary and played a key role in the internal development of the FN until his death in 1988. See Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys, 'Le Pen, the National Front and the Extreme Right in France', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 45, no. 3 (1992), 309–36; and David Bell, 'The French National Front', *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 18, no.2 (1994), 225–40.

[21]   Bruno Mégret is a defector from the conservative right. In 1988 he became responsible for propaganda, communication and the ideological training of party activists. See Guy Birenbaum, *Le Front National en Politique* (Paris: Balland, 1992), 74–109.

[22]   The Groupes Nationalistes Révolutionnaires was headed by François Duprat. Duprat was a former Ordre Nouveau activist and appears to have been used by Le Pen to recruit neo-fascists from the Parti des Forces Nouvelles. However, in 1978 Duprat was assassinated and this paved the way for the ascendancy of Stirbois and Collinot.

[23]   See for example, Michalina Vaughan, 'The Extreme Right in France: Lépenisme or the Politics of Fear', in Cheles, Ferguson and Vaughan, *The Far Right*, 215–25. Arguably, Vaughan overstates the role of Le Pen in the rise of the FN. Note how she concludes: 'It could be said of Le Pen ... that it is the person rather than the programme in which people put their trust.'

That said, the Front national would never have taken off in such a dramatic fashion without overarching structural conditions being favourable. To link once again with the conjunctural model, it was of fundamental importance that the fourth determinant interacted with, and occurred alongside, the other three determinants. In the 1980s, the historical context was now more favourable to 'anti-anomic' racist mobilisation, allowing the FN a key political opportunity to enlarge its appeal. That is to say, firstly, considerable personal alienation appeared as the transition to the post-industrial developmental stage in France triggered social disintegration and a crisis of community in urban, de-industrialising, multi-cultural regions (Paris and its surrounds, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Mediterranean littoral, Alsace-Lorraine and Lyon). Deprived of compensatory sources of social integration, this personal alienation turned to extremist nationalism by default.[24] Heitmeyer has applied a similar 'individualisation' thesis to western Germany to explain anti-foreigner violence and perceptively acknowledges the workings of the same default mechanism, where 'Nationalist feelings replace whatever seems to be missing from the individual's environment'.[25]

Secondly, this dissolution of community also occurred at a time of growing political dissensus arising from an emerging crisis of the nation-state where the French political class progressively lost its ability effectively to manage its own national economic space as a consequence of economic transnationalisation and globalisation.[26] Established political elites could no longer deliver the goods in ways in which French society had become accustomed and this had triggered a crisis of confidence in the French political establishment by the early to mid-1980s.[27] The disillusionment which resulted from this apparent political impotence assisted the FN by radicalising the electorate in the direction of anti-systemic appeals of the type promulgated by Le Pen. Moreover, since the dominant ideologies in the post-industrial era are those that endeavour to rationalise economic globalisation in terms of international competitiveness, the mainstream nationalisms associated with left (Mitterrand's nationalist programme of economic regeneration) and right (Gaullism) which had generally served to contain the far right in the post-war period disappeared from the foreground of French politics. As mainstream French politics moved beyond nationalism in the 1980s to embrace the liberal-market economy, the historic sense of national community and national identity came under pressure and the legitimising link between nation-state and society was displaced. Conse-

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[24] See Pascal Perrineau, 'Le Front national: 1972–1992', in Michel Winock, ed., *Histoire de l'extrême-droite en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 243–98; Emmanual Todd, *The Making of Modern France. Politics, Ideology and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 192–203; and Pierre Bréchon and Subrata Mitra, 'The National Front in France: The Emergence of an Extreme Right Protest Movement', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 25, no. 1 (1992), 63–82. On application of the 'social isolation' hypothesis to electoral support for the Front National between 1989 and 1994, see Nonna Mayer and Patrick Moreau, 'Electoral Support for the German Republikaner and the French National Front 1989–1994', paper presented to the workshop on 'Racist Parties in Europe'.

[25] Wilhelm Heitmeyer, 'Hostility and Violence towards Foreigners in Germany', in Tore Björgo and Rob Witte, eds, *Racist Violence in Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 25.

[26] See Peter Hall, *Governing the Economy* (Oxford: Polity, 1986), 196.

[27] See Betz, *Radical Right-wing Populism*, 52–5.

quently, and fortunately for Le Pen, with mainstream nationalisms withdrawing from the centre of French politics by the early to mid-1980s, additional space was opened up for narrow nationalist mobilisation at a time when, ironically, the receding power of the nation-state was weakening the credibility of mainstream nationalism.[28]

Significantly, the contemporary socio-economic context in France therefore produced anomic individuals with distinct affinity for the ideas of the far right. Clearly right-wing extremism in France has taken on increasing importance as historical circumstances have created favourable conditions for individuals to want to seek a racially defined, ultranationalist self-identification. This identification with the idea of French ultranationalism has performed a key function in that it has rationalised a period of transformation (i.e., the alleged decline of France) through ostensibly scapegoating the immigrant (as well as more hidden Jewish conspiracy theories for the more initiated). Without this overarching context, it is difficult to see how the FN's ultranationalism could have had any chance of success. All things considered, the fourth condition of the model was clearly satisfied in France: the contextual setting became fertile for ultranationalist mobilisation in the early to mid-1980s. Yet it is also an important consideration that this anomic context, of both personal and political alienation, remains finite and, in the mid-1990s, still appears to be largely contained in multi-racial urban areas undergoing de-industrialisation.

Corresponding to the origins of the FN, the British National Front was also conceived from fascist parentage. The birth of the NF in 1967, under the initial leadership of A. K. Chesterton, represented an amalgam of two non-Mosleyite[29] strands on the British far right: A. K. Chesterton's apparently more moderate League of Empire Loyalists[30] merged with the obsessive anti-semitic Arnold Leese stream occupied by Colin Jordan, John Tyndall and Martin Webster.[31] Mirroring early FN policy, although an anti-immigrant stance was present, this did not on

[28] On the crisis of national identity in France, see Brian Jenkins and Nigel Copsey, 'Nation, Nationalism and National Identity in France', in Brian Jenkins and Spyros Sofos, eds, *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe* (London: Routledge, 1996), esp. 108–21.

[29] Mosley created the Union Movement, which was 'Europeanist' in inspiration, following the Second World War. See Anna Poole, 'Oswald Mosley and the Union Movement: Success or Failure?', in Cronin, *Failure of British Fascism*, 53–80. The elements rejecting this approach in favour of extreme British nationalism can be defined as 'non-Mosleyite'.

[30] A. K. Chesterton was a leading figure in the interwar British Union of Fascists. He broke with Mosley in 1938 over Mosley's pro-German policy. In the 1950s he led the League of Empire Loyalists which was more a pressure group than a political party. It engaged in a series of publicity stunts such as infiltrating and disrupting Conservative Party conferences. On Chesterton, see Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), 264–5.

[31] In the 1930s, Arnold Leese was leader of the rabidly anti-semitic Imperial Fascist League which had denounced Mosley as a 'kosher fascist' (!). In the early 1950s, the Imperial Fascist League was reborn as the National Workers Movement. Following the death of Leese in 1956, Colin Jordan became heir to the Leese tradition of virulent nazism. In the early 1960s, Jordan was joined by John Tyndall and Martin Webster in the National Socialist Movement. Following the break-up of the National Socialist Movement, and an interlude in the Greater Britain Movement, Tyndall and Webster joined the National Front and proceeded to dominate the NF for much of the 1970s. On the formation of the NF, see Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 275–80.

Chesterton's instructions assume priority in the first instance.[32] However, the NF's ultranationalism did take on an increasingly anti-immigrant character with the advent of Powellism in 1968, even through a fear of non-white immigration had fixed itself into far-right mentality following the Notting Hill riots of 1958 (e.g. Mosley's Union Movement, Jordan's White Defence League). As in France, an equivalent two-dimensional strategy lay behind the NF. While publicly distancing itself from Nazism, and from other more radical groups such as the British Movement, a fascist agenda was also cultivated inside the NF's organisational confines, though in the British case it was less adroitly concealed by radical populism. Nevertheless, in the same way as the FN ostensibly functioned in France from the late 1970s, in Britain the NF looked to mobilise support around the immigration issue.

The second conjunctural condition of the model, the opening up of legitimate political space, occurred in Britain, as in France, with the mainstream politicisation of race. However, unlike in France where race was not politicised until the late 1970s, in Britain it had already been politicised nationally in the 1950s with the anti-black riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham in 1958.[33] Yet in the 1960s, race was subsequently de-politicised, removed from political debates by the establishment of a bipartisan consensus between the Conservative and Labour parties. This consensus, which accepted the need for controls on undesirable non-white immigration flows, appeased racist opinion (also the result of an intolerant colonial legacy) but also stimulated Powell's desperate challenge to this consensus in 1968 which carried these racist perceptions to the logical extreme. As the window of opportunity opened up for the FN in France through the politicisation of race, in the same way, Powell's dramatic re-politicisation of the race issue in 1968 created legitimate political space for the NF in Britain.[34] Interestingly, as in France, the NF did not set this agenda but rather followed in its tracks. Admitted by Powellism, the NF was able temporarily to occupy this space once the Tories had appeared to have deserted white interests with the Ugandan Asians crisis and Powell's subsequent defeat at the Tory party conference in 1972, and this continued with Powell's later departure from English politics in 1974.

However, a fundamental difference was that, unlike the FN, the NF failed to retain this space. Once again referring to the theoretical model: although the NF briefly entered the political mainstream on the back of Powell, it failed to consolidate this position because ultimately it could not construct or sustain lasting political legitimacy. Thus, the NF failed to satisfy condition (iii) of the conjunctural model. It seems incontrovertible that the NF's inability to construct political

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[32] See *Candour*, no. 469, Oct. 1967, 74.

[33] See Robert Miles, 'The Riots of 1958', *Immigrants and Minorities*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1984), 352–75.

[34] In April 1968, Enoch Powell made a dramatic speech which attacked the number of immigrants coming into Britain and forecast a future of racial violence. This 'rivers of blood' speech attracted substantial support and made Powell a figure of national political importance. Powell also played a significant role in opposition to the Ugandan Asians. On Powell and the National Front, see Durham, in Cronin, *Failure of British Fascism*, 84–98.

legitimacy was a major reason for its electoral decline. Most critically, the NF's room for manoeuvre in this space was reduced by both external and internal factors. Externally, there was an unfavourable institutional (i.e. electoral) setting (there was little room for legitimising electoral agreements with the conservative right as in France). In its formative period, the NF did try to integrate itself into moderate-right political space but efforts at infiltrating the Monday Club[35] were firmly rebuffed. Having failed to co-operate with the establishment Conservative right, the NF then ran into extensive national and local media antipathy.[36] Resolute opposition by both the national and local media arrested further growth for the NF and helped trigger its decline alongside other sources of opposition (anti-fascist street demonstrations, trade union activities, Church leaders' pronouncements and so on), all of which contributed to the NF's subsequent de-legitimisation. The NF was then finally driven into marginality in 1978 by the persuasive Tory appropriation of race which altogether diminished its space. Certainly it can be agreed with Messina that: 'Thatcher's reference to the "swamping" of British culture by immigrants on television in 1978 was ... a transparent effort to appropriate the National Front's main electoral issue for the Conservative cause.'[37] Given that Margaret Thatcher had also made it plain that she hoped to entice Tory defectors to the NF back into the Conservative camp, this manoeuvre does appear to be a model example of premeditated appropriation of extreme-right themes carried out with the single aim of dissolving the electoral appeal of the far right.

Moreover, internally the NF was far from dextrous in its application of two-dimensional crypto-fascist strategy. Following the resignation of Chesterton in 1970, the NF persevered with a transparent Nazi leadership in the form of Tyndall (now leader of the British National Party) and Webster. Tyndall was Chairman of the NF from 1972 to 1980, except for a short interlude as Deputy Chairman in the mid-1970s, and Webster was the NF's National Activities Organiser. Unlike Le Pen, both had clear Nazi pasts: both had been members of the National Socialist Movement in the 1960s where they had been photographed in Nazi paraphernalia. Tyndall and Webster were hardly an exemplary choice yet the NF retained this hardline leadership, even though the NF was readily exposed as a 'front for Nazis'. So, whereas the FN executed its two-dimensional strategy with dexterity after 1978, the NF was far more careless and markedly failed to construct political legitimacy from within. Moreover, it clung to provocative street marches as the dominant mode of operation. These street operations quickly became associated with violence. The predictable result was negative publicity which set the NF apart from the parliamentary tradition. In addition, the party was prone to internal schism, merely

[35] The Monday Club, an organisation on the ultra-right fringes of the Conservative party, was created in 1961. It had developed a strong anti-immigration position by the early 1970s.

[36] On reporting the NF, see Barry Troyna, 'The Media and the Electoral Decline of the National Front', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 14, no. 3 (1980), 25–30. On the local press and the NF, see Nigel Copsey, 'The Extreme Right in Contemporary France and Britain', PhD thesis (University of Portsmouth, 1995), 182–93.

[37] Anthony Messina, *Race and Party Competition in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 144.

serving to confirm a dearth of political credibility which was hardly assisted by the ineffective and uncharismatic leadership of Tyndall. Beyond the NF's central command, branch organisation was weak and the NF was plagued by branch inactivity. There was rapid membership turnover (it had been suggested that 64,000 members passed through the NF between 1967 and 1979),[38] and poorly selected candidates were often put up with insufficient financial backing in areas that did not have the greatest potential support. In due course, these multifarious internal and external factors ensured that the NF's support declined from 1977.

Localised socio-economic conditions were favourable to a finite degree but, because the third conjunctural condition began to malfunction during the 1970s, support for the NF peaked twice at very low levels. Although this pattern seems to confirm transient surges in popular support, re-application of the survey work of Husbands attests to the existence of both personal and political alienation in pro-Front cohorts in the 1970s. These cohorts were strongest in high ethnic minority areas undergoing de-industrialisation.[39] This anticipates the emerging pattern in France, though in Britain anomie induced by de-industrialisation apparently occurred at a lower aggregate level. The prime reason for this discrepancy appears to be that, although the 1970s was a period of de-industrialisation, Britain had not yet fully entered its post-industrialised phase of development. Moreover, although there were problems with national economic management in the 1970s (rising unemployment, cutbacks in public expenditure, etc.) which encouraged political alienation, the link between nation-state and society had not yet become displaced. Corporatist structures remained until the arrival of Margaret Thatcher, and the economic adjustment that followed with free-market policies, privatisation and deregulation seemed to offer a popular alternative to old-style capitalism and apparent trade union domination. The crisis of the nation-state in Britain in 1980s was therefore concealed by a very populist, forcible, ideological approach to national government which was periodically injected with doses of patriotism (e.g. the Falklands episode in 1982). Consequently, while Margaret Thatcher's populism rejuvenated the link between nation-state and society, in France the crisis of the nation-state more clearly presented itself with the dramatic failure of François Mitterrand's Keynesian experiment between 1981 and 1983.

Support for the NF in the 1970s may have matched levels of support that the FN garnered had the other conjunctural conditions favourably interacted. Indeed, the NF possibly had the implied support of close to fifteen per cent of the electorate. NOP survey data from 1978 shows fifteen per cent of its sample British electorate tending to agree with the statement that 'it would be good for Britain if some NF candidates were elected to Parliament'.[40] Had the NF achieved a modicum of legitimacy it might have translated these sympathies into votes. The crucial point, of

[38]   Searchlight, *When Hate Comes to Town* (London: Searchlight Educational Trust, 1995), 2.3–3.

[39]   See Christopher T. Husbands, *Racial Exclusionism and the City* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983).

[40]   See Martin Harrop, Judith England and Christopher T. Husbands, 'The Bases of National Front Support', *Political Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 2 (1980), 271–83.

course, is this did not happen. The failure of the NF to retain legitimate political space meant that support fell away at the end of the 1970s and the theoretical schema was punctured.

Following electoral disaster at the 1979 General Election, the NF was downgraded to its original starting position at the end of the 1960s: it was once again marginalised and desperately wanted political legitimacy. Consequently, in a second attempt to extricate itself from the political backwaters, a new strategy was developed in the 1980s. Following its experience in the 1970s, the NF was convinced that pursuing a Le Pen type two-dimensional strategy was futile given the hostility of the British establishment.[41] In Britain, the same strategy had failed in the 1970s. As one NF activist (rather incoherently) explained, this was because:

the then NF leadership was ideologically ignorant and personally incompetent as having manifested their ignorance and stupidity some years earlier in ways providing free gifts to scaremongers. In France where M. Le Pen seems much more substantial and credible than the self-proclaimed 'leaders' with which we were afflicted in the 1970s, this strategy may work.[42]

A new strategy of radical nationalism that combined 'Distributism'[43] with 'Community Action' subsequently appeared, the rationale behind it being that by identifying the NF with native (i.e. non-fascist) nationalism and by involving itself in public-spirited community action campaigns at the local level, it could counteract allegations of Nazism. The aim was to bypass a hostile establishment and direct ideological appeals straight to the British people. Community action would demonstrably prove that the NF had a social conscience (which, of course, Nazism lacked), while bringing ostensibly non-fascist 'Distributist' ideology direct to the British people. However, the strategic plan was weakly carried out. It depended on a high level of local activism which was not evident, and the ideology itself was arguably far too esoteric and alien both to standard extreme-right traditions and mainstream political culture in Britain to serve its declared function.

The credibility of the NF was further undermined from the mid- to late 1980s by organisational schism as a new strategic division opened up within the party. This division was outwardly one between mainstream radical nationalism and more fanatical radical nationalism grouped around the so-called 'political soldiers'.[44] The political soldiers were intent on running down membership to allow for the training

[41]   See *Nationalism Today*, no. 23, July/Aug. 1984, 11.

[42]   *Nationalism Today*, no. 29, May 1985, 11.

[43]   Distributism had been a fringe political gathering of the interwar years in Britain grouped around the two leading literary figures of Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton (a cousin to A. K. Chesterton). It advocated a rural-orientated 'peasant state'. Anti-modern, anti-urban, its revolutionary alternative was the resurrection of small rural medieval guilds (such was its abhorrence of the modern, atomistic industrial state). It was also strongly imbued with Catholicism and anti-semitism. On the NF's radical ideology in the 1980s, see Eatwell, in Cronin, *Failure of British Fascism*, 99–117.

[44]   The 'political soldiers' was a self-designated term used by the National Front. A booklet entitled 'The Political Soldier', setting out the beliefs of the 'political soldier' faction was written by Derek Holland (one of the NF's leaders). On the 'political soldiers', see Searchlight, *From Ballots to Bombs. The Inside Story of the National Front's Political Soldiers* (London: Searchlight Publishing, 1989).

of a Herculean new man élite, to abandon electoral participation in order to focus instead on the possibilities of armed insurrection combined with infiltration of animal rights and ecological groups, while the other wing of the NF, known first as the NF 'Support Group' and then the 'Flag Group', favoured a more traditional electoral approach in similar manner to an old-style NF. The late 1980s saw the adoption of increasingly esoteric ideology by the political soldiers, which included a repudiation of biological racism, support for Islamic fundamentalism and for Gaddafi's regime in Libya. It seems rather inconceivable that the political soldiers actually believed that this radical ideology could achieve any degree of popularity with the British people and, not surprisingly, the political soldiers collapsed by 1990. Indeed, the experience of the NF in the 1980s suggests that strategies based on radical, esoteric nationalism rather than anti-immigrant racial populism, do find it painstakingly difficult to gain access to the precious orbit of legitimate political space, especially when in Britain (as was the case with France) the potential support base for the extreme right remains essentially grounded within a mainstream culture already implanted with popular racism. More reasonably, the other wing of the NF turned back towards adopting a Le Pen type radical populist strategy, but critically the NF lacked a Le Pen type figure to give this two-dimensional strategy any forceful direction. By the early 1990s, the NF was in a state of crisis: both demoralised and highly marginalised. Finally, in July 1995, with a disappearing membership now estimated to be between two and three hundred, the rapidly disintegrating National Front decided to change its name to the National Democrats in a desperate effort to engineer fresh stimulus. According to the NF, this decision was reached because (understandably) the words National Front were 'tainted so much by the mistakes of the past'.[45]

Conclusion

Why has the contemporary extreme right in France enjoyed much more political success than the contemporary extreme right in Britain?

The response to this complex question lies in the dynamics of the common conjunctural model. In both cases, the conjunctural occurrence of the four conditions resulted in relative electoral growth, though at different times: the 1970s for Britain, the 1980s for France. This conjunctural scheme operated in Britain in the 1970s at a diminished level. It then declined and was de-activated at the end of the 1970s, resulting in electoral decline for the NF. In France, the extreme right hardly moved beyond the first stage in the 1970s, although in the 1980s the conjunctural occurrence of conditions (i) to (iv) functioned at an elevated level, resulting in the FN's national electoral emergence.

Initial impetus for the early growth of the NF in Britain came from Powell's sensational challenge to the bipartisan consensus on race at the end of the 1960s,

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[45] Cited in *Searchlight*, no. 242, Aug. 1995, 5. However, following the renaming of the party, one faction did remain loyal to the original NF name.

which opened up legitimate political space for the NF's racial populism. However, this growth was then curbed by a marked failure to acquire supplementary legitimisation owing to an unproductive relationship with the Conservative right, internal deficiencies and a hostile national and local media backlash. Political space for the NF was then further reduced by the Conservative appropriation of the race issue towards the end of the 1970s. Noticeably, this space at a national level continued to be occupied by the Conservatives' tough line on race throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, exemplified by more restrictive controls on immigration introduced in 1987, passage of the first Asylum Bill, exploitation of the race card at the 1992 General Election and, more recently, the passage of a further Asylum and Immigration Bill in 1996.

Matching Britain, initial growth for the FN in France was made possible by the increasing political importance of the race issue which carried the FN into legitimate political space in the early 1980s. Significantly, this space was then cultivated (rather than curbed) by a productive relationship with the conservative right, by internal competence and, at least in the first instance, a benevolent national and local media response. Once the FN had entered the legitimate orbit, structural conditions resulting from the advent of the post-industrial stage of development created a favourable socio-political configuration where both personal and political alienation attracted anomic individuals towards transpersonal identification with the FN's brand of extreme nationalism. In the 1990s, however, it appears that this conjunctural schema may now have hit its upper limit in France. The extent of structural strain which is spatially concentrated in urban, multi-racial areas is geographically limited and this predominantly urban character militates against further substantial growth for the FN.

It only remains to suggest that the common conjunctural model extrapolated from this comparative study of the contemporary extreme right in France and Britain seems to offer a premium analytical framework for evaluating relative electoral success of extreme-right parties. Clearly it brings us closer to a broader understanding of the causal processes behind the growth and decline of extreme-right organisations and, as a result, could serve as an indicative theoretical basis for further comparative research.