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Discursive Elements in the (de)Banalisation of Nationalism. A Study of Speeches by Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy[1].

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Abstract: The paper offers a study of the contributions of Nicolas Sarkozy and Gordon Brown to a dominant culturalist discourse on identity in Europe. In recent years, issues about immigration and integration have been central across the European community, concurrent with a general feeling of cultural insecurity. In this paper, I argue that mainstream political discourse has shifted from common sense nationalism into an even more ambiguous discourse by also taking over aspects of national-populism. The aim of the paper is consequently to show that common sense representations of nationalism tend to go beyond 'banal nationalism'. I suggest how a culturalist shift has occurred in their more overt use of nationalist representations. Thus, despite the formal aim to render a new social cohesion, the cultural references inherent to nationalism seem to generate an exclusionary imaginary, which not only allows the reproduction of nationalism but also promotes forms of exclusions, which foster introverted assertions of identities.

Introduction

In recent years, many national political stages in Europe have shifted to the right of the political spectrum. Since 2007, most general elections for instance have been won by right-wing parties (one notable exception being Spain)[2]. Another representative case is that of the latest presidential election in France, where the right-wing was re-elected with a more radical programme (albeit with a different candidate). Concurrently, centre-left parties tend to adopt more liberal positions on their economic agendas and to engage in identity politics, slowly eroding the traditional social-democratic or socialist positions on these matters. 'New Labour' under Anthony Blair's leadership in Britain was one notable example of such a "refurbishment" or rather "Tory cross-dressing" (Dixon 2007), as it is often considered in certain aspects as more right-wing than its formal denomination would suggest (on the influence of Thatcherism on Blairism, see Dixon 2000, 2005; on immigration policies, see Smith 2008).

This evolution has triggered comments on how European societies have become more attuned to traditionally right-wing ideas (the extreme right-wing vote has also been regularly on the increase since the 1980's) and that there has been a more general shift towards conservative ideas, which the French phrase "droitisation des esprits" suggests.[3] A number of recent events may have contributed to the constitution of a favourable context for such a *droitisation*. Apart from the "9/11" terrorist attacks in New York in 2001, we can mention the more recent "Mohammad cartoons" controversy, which

originated in Denmark, and has been stirring a large part of the global community since 2005. Inside Europe, there were the 2004 and 2005 bombings respectively in Madrid and London. Additionally, twelve new countries have integrated the European Union in 2004 and 2007, allowing for a greater mobility across what was once called the Iron Curtain. All these events may have on various degrees influenced a general feeling of insecurity. In this context, the main political themes that have gained audience – in relation also to many enacted policies – are the increased securitisation (of terrorist threats for example), defensive identity politics centred on national identity and tougher immigration laws.[4]

This is striking in Britain and France, where national identity has become one of the key themes in the programmes of most liberal parties. It is not the aim of the paper to assess the policies concerning those issues but rather the discourse(s) that have accompanied the *droitisation*. With the promotion of tougher immigration laws for instance follows the promotion of a certain approach to belonging, to inclusion and exclusion, of who shares and how a social imaginary is shared. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French president Nicolas Sarkozy have been evoking national identity as key themes, and both have enacted or initiated policies that are a continuum of positions they have been promoting for years – albeit holding different offices. Prior to his election as president in May 2007, Sarkozy was leading the centre-right party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and had notably been appointed Interior Minister under Jacques Chirac's second term as president. Brown was previously Chancellor of the Exchequer throughout Blair's premiership before becoming leader of the Labour party and since June 2007, the British Prime Minister.[5]

Britain and France, as two of the first nation-states to be established, have ever since functioned as models for state and society. Although they are often presented in opposition to each other (the multicultural British liberal system versus the French centralised Jacobin and republican model), they happen to share a similar socio-historical condition: they both ruled over colonial empires and as such are postcolonial states and societies.

The research perspective is concerned with the extent to which the promotion of a national identity can provide the French and British societies with a "newfound" bond, or whether it falls back to the promotion of traditional, exclusive nationalism. The paper focuses on recent variations in political discourses and as such is *localised*. It does not

have the pretension to provide a comprehensive analysis of long-standing narratives of exclusion, but aims at deconstructing certain elements of nationalist discourse in public speeches by Brown and Sarkozy. It is part of an ongoing reflection on the relationship between nationalism and racism and their reproduction in contemporary social imaginaries in already constituted nation-states.

Considering that mainstream, state-centred nationalism is referred to as "banal" for so-called established nation-states (Billig 1995), the question could be formulated as follows: does the promotion of national identity as a main political issue remain banal? In other words: how exclusive is the nationalism promoted by Brown and Sarkozy? First engaging with theoretical considerations on the reproduction of nationalism – especially in relation to discourse; the paper will further focus on analysing relevant speeches by Brown and Sarkozy in relation to elements of the wider context. The last section pins down the culturalist aspect of their discourses in order to finally reflect on how the social imaginaries they promote are new and inclusive or radical and exclusive.

The Reproduction of Nationalism

Defining and Categorising Nationalism

Nationalism is believed to have a very strong rallying power at the same time as it traditionally evokes a particularly exclusive imaginary (e.g. Anderson 1983). What is more intriguing and relevant for the present paper is, however, how nationalism comes to be reproduced. Examining this would demand a different approach, although an element of an answer could precisely be in its rallying or mobilizing power (Calhoun 2007).

In *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig sets himself the task of deciphering the "ideological means by which nation-states are reproduced", that is precisely through what he has termed 'banal nationalism':

> "To stretch the term 'nationalism' indiscriminately would invite confusion […]. For this reason, the term **banal nationalism** is introduced to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. […] Daily, the nation is indicated, or 'flagged', in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nation-states, is the endemic condition." (Billig 1995:6, emphasis in original)

The confusion that an indiscriminate use of the word 'nationalism' may induce is brought about precisely by banal nationalism. In the common use of the term, Billig points out,

nationalism refers to a marginal phenomenon, "[i]t always seems to locate nationalism on the periphery." In the case of Britain and France, extreme right parties or regional separatists for instance are traditionally at the margins, be it geographically (separatist movements linked to Bretagne, the Basque country, Corsica, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) or ideologically on the extreme of the political spectrum (the *far* right, the Front National or FN, the British National Party or BNP or the UK Independence Party or UKIP). One could argue that their often self-declared nationalism is precisely a means to render their ideological stances "banal". But more significantly, this tells us about the relationship mainstream nationalism establishes with the 'margins': pointing a finger at the nationalism of "others" is part of what makes "ours" unnoticed, and hence banal (Billig 1995:5). In consequence, it is easier to define "their" nationalism as precisely nationalism instead of "ours". In this sense, the accepted popular use of nationalism stands for a reactionary, racist and xenophobic political agenda, usually associated with far-right political groups. Billig describes this perception of nationalism as "hot" in contrast with the unnoticed "banal" form(s) (Billig 1995:43-46).

From an academic perspective, there has been a very large number of inquiries into defining different types of nationalism.[6] One of the most prominent and traditional categorisations of nationalism is the civic versus ethnic forms of nationalism. But as it traditionally categorises western nationalism in contrast to eastern nationalism, especially from a historical perspective, it has been criticised for its limited use in the more recent studies on the characteristics of nationalism (Calhoun 1997; Nikolas 1999). One important aspect of academic studies on nationalism in which it opposes the popular use of the term is that the categorisation tends (even if only suggesting it) to present nationalism as an all-pervasive ideology. But in most cases the characterisation supposes a differentiation between "good" and "bad" nationalism, e.g. "our" civic nationalism and "their" ethnic adaptation (Billig 1995; Calhoun 1997, 2007).[7]

Another characterisation by French historian Michel Winock proves interesting; instead of defining types of nationalism in line with different nations or histories, he focuses on French manifestations of nationalism which he defines into two categories: 'open' and 'closed' nationalism. Where closed nationalism appears to be the extreme form:

"Open nationalism is that of a nation permeated by a civilizing mission, admiring itself for its virtues and its heroes, easily forgetting its faults, but generous, hospitable, in solidarity with other nations being formed, defender of the oppressed, hoisting the flag of freedom and independence for all peoples of the world […]. Nationalism, yes. But open to other peoples, to other races, to other nations, and not clinging to "France alone."" (Winock, 1998:24)

Winock acknowledges the "endemic condition" of nationalism in French history, although admitting to have a very positive view on the "open" form.[8] But beyond the historical categorization, what Winock provides is an image of a distinction in the French political imaginary, which proves useful in the formal categorization of what so-called "republican" parties represent in contrast with, among others, the Front National (Horobin 2007). But many approaches fail to decipher the mode of reproduction of nationalism, most of the time because they themselves fall into this mode (yet also providing elements for such an understanding). One could argue that Billig's categories of "banal" versus "hot" follow the same pattern. But while their relationship may be confusing in consideration of a certain contrast, banal does not mean "cold" nationalism. Billig does not focus on precise components of nationalism, but rather on *how* it is conveyed – consequently it is not only *what* is promoted that makes it nationalist, but also and maybe more significantly *how*.

Beyond Categories: Nationalism as a 'Discursive Formation'

The definition by Calhoun of nationalism as a 'discursive formation' in the Foucaldian sense hints towards a similar understanding of the daily reproduction of nationalism (Calhoun 1997; Foucault 1989:41). Banal nationalism is not necessarily the less extreme but the dominant and central discursive form. This hegemony provides the perspective in which marginal manifestations of nationalism are represented as "hot" (going from the centre to the periphery). Similarly and in a more general approach Calhoun argues that the discursive formation of nationalism plays a crucial role "both in the production of nationalist self-understandings and the recognition of nationalist claims by others" (Calhoun 1997:4). In established nation-states, like Britain and France, banal is usually common sense nationalism, which given the discursive hegemony it enjoys, understands and presents itself as banal.

The relationship between mainstream and marginal nationalisms consequently follows a different categorisation: that of competing discourses within the same discursive formation. The line drawn between the two is usually formal – as is held to be the case between mainstream political formations (commonly referred to as 'republican'

in France) and far-right parties, referred to as 'nationalist' – but this boundary is built discursively and hides a continuum of significations, and the formal expressions usually depend on the socio-historical context (e.g. a political or social situation perceived as a crisis may bring about more openly nationalist statements at any position on the right to left political continuum).

When on a first level analysis banal nationalism is differentiated from "hot" nationalism as a different phenomenon it proves to be insufficient in a further analysis in which their relationship is discursive. Banal nationalism is not essentially linked to more 'open' significations as Winock's account suggests. In fact, the "daily, unmindful reminders" (Billig 1995:174) can also convey "closed" and "hot" significations. Consequently, openly racist and xenophobic versions of nationalism are not inevitably marginal. Their peripheral situation may be part of their anti-establishment ideology (which again depends on the socio-historical context), – it partly serves the purpose of "central" nationalism. But not all peripheral nationalisms are xenophobic and racist, even when represented as "hot". By contrast , this suggests that banal nationalism can easily promote racist and xenophobic images, and that the banality it establishes can be grounds for even more extreme forms to fester – their "relationality" covering the daily nationalist promotion (Petersson 2006:124-125; Petersson and Tyler, 2008).

Furthermore, obvious proponents of "virulent" expressions of national identity (like the FN) are using "unmindful reminders" of nationalism (as well as "mindful" one of course). In contemporary western societies, more overt racism and radicalism may well add significations to how banal or marginal such expressions will be presented and considered by the general public. According to Billig, an important element for such a distinction in public opinion is the frequency (in the case of "hot" nationalists) or the rarity (in the case of "banal" nationalists) of openly nationalist statements that defines their banality. But repeated claims from marginal nationalist discourses can be seen as a attempt at challenging the hegemonic form, and may be perceived as "hot" because promoting a competing nationalism, which is not necessarily "hotter". When analysing their imaginaries, both discourses should provide with similar grids of signification. For the formal distinction to be efficient though, and the possibility for "central" nationalism to present itself as (partly) banal, the nation-states have to be previously "established", – this procedural aspect usually lacking in nation-state ideology.[9]

More precisely, it is not nationalism that separates mainstream politicians from their extreme counterparts; on the contrary, they are fostering the same discursive formation with *a priori* competing discourses. As a consequence, related discursive practices which may mobilise for similar ideals, may also signify different social processes, or in fact different social realities (or potential situations).[10] To put it in Foucauldian terms, they are competing, sometimes contradictory discourses from the same discursive formation (or "meta-discourse", "grand narrative") of nationalism (Foucault, 1989:41). It could then be considered that the lowest common denominator of nationalism is a certain discursive pattern, which could be summarised in signification as the recurrent worldview, the everyday mapping of the world, the boundary between "home" and abroad, the colours of the national football team, etc. In short, banal is the daily affirmation that we live in a nation (Billig 1995; Calhoun, 1997; Özkirimli 2000). So when Sarkozy states in a campaign video that "we have forgotten to speak about France" (2007c), the statement appears to be utterly false in this regard – some passages in Brown's speeches also suggest a lack of national identity (e.g. we should not let Britishness "leave a hole"; see Brown 2006).

Nationalism as a discursive formation therefore involves a variety of discourses and statements that can appear on different discursive levels as competing or contradictory.[11] In this perspective, the significations may themselves be ambiguous. The different levels of discourse may also come to compete between themselves, hence providing us with different statements. A speech in itself can be considered as a statement and the signification it bears will interact with the various significations from the lower level statements (a word, a sentence, a group of sentences) to the higher (the text, the group of texts, etc.), confirming or shifting for instance the signification (Foucault 1989:89-98). For example, while Brown's "key-note" speech at the Fabian Society "The future of Britishness" from 2006 (which is a somewhat shorter and edited version of his speech at the British Council annual conference in 2004, see below) may be presented as a traditional nationalist promotion of the Union (which is in fact the dominant signification of the speech that it shares with its earlier version) the references to British republicanism it contains also sustain a rather different tradition set in a more left-wing political tradition (Brown 2004; 2006). This contrasts with at times right-wing references, notably to: "[…] Lady Thatcher, who rightly defended the Union […]." (Brown, 2007)

But these contextual variations which certainly fit the audience that it is intended to (the previous quoted text was published in the conservative daily, *The Daily Telegraph*) do still provide the same dominant signification. For now, I would suggest that they are significant in the sense that they embed the general signification (the *uncommon* promotion of nationalism) with elements of banality. But contrary to the supposed rarity of banal expressions, here – as well as with Sarkozy – we are precisely presented with noticeable and mindful 'flags': the themes of national cohesion or national identity are more than obvious.

Contextual Components

Language and Policies as Meta-Discourses

The relationship between political discourse and policies is not necessarily essential, but the policies often come as discursive elements that provide additional support to a discourse. In France, the national theme was notably brought to the fore in the 2007 presidential campaign by Sarkozy's manifesto of which one of the fifteen paragraphs was devoted to French national identity: "Let's be proud to be French" (Sarkozy 2007b:15).[12] He further sparked a controversy when he announced on the 8th of March 2007 in an interview on the French public television network (France 2) his project for the creation of a "ministry of immigration and national identity" (sic).[13] The relationship between immigration and national identity was already present in some of his previous political "achievements".[14] After his election as President, the emblematic relation was institutionalized in the newly created ministry, filling a symbolical gap which had been carefully pointed at during the campaign: the supposed failure of the French integration system. In a campaign video on immigration and national identity, Sarkozy stated the following:

> "If no one explains what France is to newcomers, to people who want to become French, how can we integrate them? The French integration model has failed because we have forgotten to talk about France. I do not want to forget about France, because France is at the core of my project." (Sarkozy 2007c)

In Britain, since 2004 Brown has repeatedly spoken on the need for the United Kingdom to rediscover its "Britishness".[15] When delivering the British Council annual lecture on 7th

July 2004, Brown spoke of a "belief" that appears to have urged him to continuously try to insufflate a new life into "Britishness":

> "I believe that just about every central question about our national future […] can only be fully answered if we are clear about what we value about being British and what gives us purpose and direction as a country. […] And I want to suggest that our success as Great Britain […] depends upon us rediscovering from our history the shared values that bind us together and on us becoming more explicit about what we stand for as a nation." (Brown 2004)

On 5th October 2007, in the early stages of Brown's premiership, the government launched a review on citizenship in Britain. The report, "Citizenship: Our Common Bond" was eventually presented to Brown by Lord Goldsmith in March 2008. It is particularly significant as it contains proposals for "enhancing the bond of citizenship" – a national day for instance – which for most were previously mentioned by Brown when promoting the "rediscovering" of British identity (Brown 2006, 2007, 2008; Goldsmith 2008:88)

A different, maybe more blatant example can be drawn from the positions of Sarkozy on immigration: as Interior Minister he regularly appeared as the champion of hard-line speeches and statements on immigrants which were concurrent with his drafting of tougher immigration laws. When he further promoted similar positions during his presidential campaign, the media coverage of Sarkozy's attitude towards immigration and immigrants portrayed him or allowed him to portray himself as the one minister (and potential president) who *acts* – naturally, in opposition with his predecessors. The main difference with his predecessors is not as Sarkozy put it, that there was no "immigration policy" prior to his, but rather that it was kept quiet, and hence banal (and seldom being given media coverage). The case of illegal immigrants is particularly significant as the eviction of illegal immigrants was practiced long before Sarkozy took office. But one of the particularities of Sarkozy's discourse is that it introduced the issue of illegal immigration as an element in a wider rationale on national identity and provided it with a name, and more precisely an aim (see e.g. 2006b): part of the competences of the aforementioned new ministry is the eviction of a given number of illegal immigrants per year (the objective for 2007 was 25,000 evictions).[16]

As a discursive element, its signification is particularly strong as it is presented as a natural consequence of the preceding discourse. Additionally, the novelty aspect (which is a recurring element in political discourse) is also very significant as it opens up spaces for "missing" elements.

The Ambiguity of the 'Nation'

In relation to this, and more in line with the national theme, both Brown and Sarkozy open up discursive spaces by pointing out a failure in the previous state of affairs. When Sarkozy dramatically talks of the "failure of the French integration system" (2007b), Brown more diplomatically casts a doubt on how effective "the balance between integration and multiculturalism" is (2006), or in a slightly more precise formulation: "[w]hat was wrong about multiculturalism was not the recognition of diversity but that it over-emphasised separateness at the cost of unity." (2007)

Certainly, Sarkozy's discourse is much more poised in the uneasy relationship between immigrants and integration (though misconceived, the so-called "suburban riots" in 2005 brought the question of integration to the forefront)[17], and through these themes his presidential campaign mobilised part of the electorate of the FN – whose famous electoral successes have had major consequences on the political stage (see Davies 1999). Brown faces a more diverse front, with on the one hand the memory of the July bombings in London, which is portrayed as connected to the question of integration (Brown 2006, 2007), and on the other the successful electoral campaigns of separatist political parties in the devolved parliaments – particularly in Scotland where a referendum on independence, as early as in 2010, is on the agenda of the leading party in the Scottish parliament, the SNP. These "secessionist forces" as Brown calls them (himself being Scottish and in an awkward position) are portrayed as one major justification why "we need a United Kingdom" (which is the title of the article from which the following quote is taken):

> "Perhaps in the past we could get by with a Britishness that was assumed without being explicitly stated. But when our country is being challenged in Scotland, Wales and now England by secessionists, it is right to be explicit about what we, the British people, share in common and the patriotic vision for our country's future." (2007)

Also, although perhaps to a lesser extent spectacular in electoral terms, the successes in local elections for instance of the BNP renders the whole equation even more intricate (see Renton 2003).[18]

One of the significations of nationalism in relation with the state, and consequently with political actors, pointed out by John Breuilly in *Nationalism and the*

State, is the inherent ambivalence of the signification of state nationalism. The nation, he writes, is portrayed:

> "at one moment as a cultural community and at another as a political community whilst insisting that in an ideal state the national community will not be 'split' into cultural and political spheres. The nationalist can exploit this perpetual ambiguity. National independence can be portrayed as the freedom of the citizens who make up the (political) nation or as the freedom of the collectivity which makes up the (cultural) nation." (Breuilly 1982:348)

The signification of the nation is consequently *neither* a cultural community *nor* a political community. It is not a combination of two possible significations, it is essentially ambivalent: the signification *associates* in a continuum the cultural and the political references with each other.[19]

Although Breuilly suggests that there is some arbitrariness in the way the "identity of the nation" is conveyed (ibid.), political actors which promote a common identity can have a major impact on public opinion and consequently influence popular opinions in a certain way. Billig underlines that the familiarity of public figures proves to be more significant than their popularity, particularly through the mediation by mass media communications (1995:96). In fact, however unpopular they may appear after more or less one year in office, both Brown and Sarkozy can be considered precisely as familiar figures for the respective British and French public audiences.[20] They not only hold the top rungs on the British and the French political ladders, but as it has been mentioned before, they have also held major offices in the directly preceding governments. Also, instead of trying to measure the impact of Brown and Sarkozy at the present time (which would certainly prove to be a vain task), we will rather assume that their discourses have a potential impact as they are also representative of generally shared discourses amongst their political partners.[21] An important and final aspect is the fact that holders of the British premiership and of the French presidency represent the official position of the state. As such, they can provide symbolic or even rational support for certain ideologies and public opinions (ibid.).

Interweaving Discourses: The (necessary) References to the Far Right

One of the common features of the two actors' discourses is the reference to the far-right political parties. Brown refers to the BNP in order to assert that patriotism is not a value that should be left for the extremists to thrive on, but needs to be "tak[en] back from the BNP" (2007):

> "[…] let us remember that when people on the centre-left recoiled from national symbols, the BNP tried to steal the Union Jack. Instead of the BNP using it as a symbol of racial division, the flag should be a symbol of unity, part of a modern expression of patriotism. So we should respond to the BNP by saying the union flag is a flag for Britain, not for the BNP; all the United Kingdom should honour it, not ignore it; we should assert that the union flag is, by definition, a flag of tolerance and inclusion." (2006)

On the other hand, Sarkozy's formal references to the FN, and particularly its leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, are again much more ambivalent than Brown's mild tone. On several occasions, when asked to respond to criticisms suggesting that he was directly referring to the programme of the FN (particularly concerning catchphrases similar to "love or leave France"[22]), Sarkozy systematically answered: "If Le Pen says the sun is yellow, I am not going to argue that it is blue." (2006a, 2007a). Yet Sarkozy also manages to maintain ambivalence, usually with less tendentious explanations on the dangers of the far-right:

> "[we] are the [democracy] where the extreme right is the strongest and where temptations of racism have in recent years been the most severe and the most dramatic. Maybe this should be reflected upon…" (2006a)

Opposing the common sense nationalism to "hot" nationalism, like the opposition between Labour's patriotism and the BNP's promotion of the national issue, is partly the means through which banal nationalism has been described as such.[23] Additionally, in the cases of Brown and Sarkozy, the formal references to the extreme right can serve the legitimation of their issue *as well as* delegitimation of those parties as relevant actors of the political scenes. In this sense, the wide consensus from the opposition in France that has criticised Sarkozy on the grounds of flirting with the voters of the FN through a radicalized discourse may be justified in this respect.[24] This attraction of votes can be seen as part of the campaigning process: the political competition is precisely about issue ownership (Bale 2008:320); so there might be no surprise here that mainstream parties are trying to flirt with the far-right votes as its electorate has steadily become – or is being perceived as becoming – a significant electorate in both countries (Davies 1999; Renton 2003). While Sarkozy remains ambivalent in the relationship with the far-right in his discourse, Brown, who (at least formally) appears farther from the extreme wing on the political right/left continuum, wants to promote the centre-left as the only champion of unionism and therefore has to engage with the BNP which, he assumes, is the only other unionist formation worth competing with (2007, 2008).

As much as these 'manoeuvres' appear to be commonplace, it could also be argued that the rhetoric itself is by some means taking over or emulating far-right devices of rhetoric. The exclusionary position of the "champion" of the national ideal is traditionally related to openly nationalist discourses, which the far-right is believed to be representative of. One particular example is the reversing of prejudices and presenting the commonplace associations as a prejudice against "us" (Amossy 1995). Additionally, the use of understatements as considered by French historian, Gerard Noiriel, is a typical mark of Le Pen's rhetoric. Noiriel has pointed out the recurrent use of "small phrases" by Sarkozy, which create ambiguities that allow the audience (and the media) to fill the gap with what is considered suitable.[25] It is precisely the sort of loose rhetoric adopted by far-right parties to appear less "nationalist" and less "extreme" (Amossy 1995, Noiriel 2008). Although it is not the aim here to assess the extent to which far-right rhetoric devices are in fact being taken over by mainstream politicians (or vice versa), it is still interesting to consider some of the significations it can sustain. It can evidently add substance to the idea that far-right parties and discourses are significant and influential, or, more significantly, it could mean that the devices are becoming, or have maybe already become, inherent to the populist shift in contemporary political communication (Noiriel 2008).[26]

The value(s) of culture

Universalist particularisms: Culture as Exclusion?

Traditionally, a cultural (or rather 'culturalist') definition of national belonging is conceived as more exclusive than a civic, political approach, which the original categories of civic/ethnic and open/closed nationalisms point at – associating for instance closed and ethnic nationalisms with extreme right-wing political formations. But as it is suggested by Breuilly and in connection with Calhoun's critical analysis of the civic/ethnic categories the cultural and the political elements are interrelated.[27] It implies that it is more in terms of focus on the components rather than on these components themselves that Brown's and Sarkozy's nationalisms should be assessed (Calhoun, 1997). What it also implies is that there are nuances in both actors' discourses, especially when political significations are evoked (evoking citizenship for instance instead of national identity). But these may become themselves ambiguous when used instead of or along with cultural significations.

In this regard, Brown's use of the terms is particularly representative as he constantly juggles between terms referring to 'nationality' with others referring to 'citizenship', consequently conditioning at times one to the other. Generally focusing on British citizenship, it is often equated with the national identity, emphasizing:

> "[…] a Britishness which welcomes differences, but which is not so loose, so nebulous that it is simply defined as the toleration of difference and leaves a hole where national identity should be." (2006)

This provides a very good example of the ambiguity of the nationalist discourse in relation to Breuilly's analysis, showing that this discourse is indeed nuanced, but that it also confirms the shift from a "loose" British citizenship (the failing balance between multiculturalism and cohesion) to a more cohesive approach. As we have seen before, similar passages can be found in Sarkozy's discourse, providing more traditional nuances and typical nationalist ambiguities in terms of discursive significations. Nevertheless, these can sometimes, although not systematically, present a tendency towards more radical significations. Live during a political talk show on the largest public television network (France 2), Sarkozy stated for instance: "If one wants to live with one's culture, one does not come to live on the territory of the French republic."(2006c) The ambiguous significations are here obvious. What is actually more significant for the present perspective is the focus on the cultural aspect as the basis of exclusion – and not for instance the illegality of migrants. It is precisely the "imaginary", associative aspect of the cultural exclusion that presents a radical signification: it hints towards an idea of what belonging to the French Republic (one could have said 'nation') means, it hints towards an imagined cultural homogeneity.

Sarkozy's phrase is particularly heavy in significations, and as in the rest of his discourse, there is a deictic component towards the crystallizing of ambiguous significations. We can mention a similar discursive practice in one of his campaign videos on national identity and immigration where the one aspect that he mentions after saying that newcomers "need to respect" France is the equality of women and men (2007c). Out of context, there is no particular reason why this should have any particular significance. To put it into perspective, we need to mention the context of increased stigmatisation of Muslims in western societies (in the previous example, it hints to the perception of

inequality of Muslim women) (Deltombe 2005), and as a correlation Sarkozy's (in)famous use of prejudiced images on major French television channel TF1[28]:

> "No one is obliged to live in France. And when someone loves France, one respects her. One respects her rules. […] You do not cut a sheep's throat in your bathroom tub." (2007a)

Put in relation, these elements point to – aside of the stigmatization of Islam – a sometimes obvious, sometimes understated, culturalist direction of Sarkozy's discourse on national identity. While the promoted values of "Frenchness" appear to be "universalistic" (related to the rule of law, for instance), Sarkozy's discourse associates it with a particular cultural predisposition, analogous to those characterised as ethnocentric and essentialist notions of belonging.

Brown appears more traditional, and one could say more banal, in his discourse on the components of the cohesive identity that he promotes for Britain. As a rule Brown starts off in a similar fashion to Sarkozy, evoking universalistic values (the most often cited are: "liberty for all, responsibility by all and fairness to all", Brown 2006). The one difference that needs to be mentioned is that these evocations do not fit in the same socio-historical setup. As we have already shown in the case of Sarkozy, the theme of national identity is in direct connection with issues on immigration and integration. For Brown, the matter is also related to the potential "breakup" of Britain. As a consequence of promoting a unionist position, there is no systematic stigmatization of cultural groups in Brown's speeches which is worth emphasising in the present study.

The Illusion of Fixed Values: Between Continuity and Discontinuity

Nevertheless, Brown's propositions and justifications of what should make up the "renewed" fabric of Britishness imply a determinist and indeed culturalist outlook comparable to Sarkozy's. As a qualified historian, Brown recurrently provides his audience with linear historical accounts on how the values he mentions are deeply rooted in British history. His aim is to present the particular take the British had and still should have on these values. The promotion of a hereditary lineage (even for what appear mainly to be political events) is in fact nothing new in nationalist imaginaries (see Renan 1996). It focuses on a certain number of relevant developments in history which are presented as essential to Britishness – leaving aside other developments that are also relevant in many personal or group histories of contemporary British citizens (Calhoun 1997:18-20, 57). To name but one major aspect, the experience of colonialism and the

following and ongoing postcolonial condition – or the "postcolonial hangover" one should say (Koopman et al. 2005:15) – is barely referred to.[29] Ironically, and despite careful talks about the inclusiveness and openness of Britishness, Brown also fails to extract himself from a traditional "British" nationalism which is, through the "primordial ties" in his historical account (see Billig 1995:7), often equated with English political history (Brown 2006).

These discursive practices, while not necessarily adapted to the means of mass communication (like the aforementioned "catchphrases") illustrate a widespread and long running culturalist approach towards identities in a political or cultural setting (Bayard 2005). Some scholars have shown how in the post-colonial period, "race" has shifted to "culture", as part of this "turn" (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Lentin 2005).

In relation to the taking over of discourses mentioned earlier, Lentin examines the way in which some commentators have indicated how far-right parties took over the anti-racist discourse of the 1980's (in Lentin 2005). It is significant that prior to any borrowing of far-right rhetoric devices by the mainstream political discourse, the far-right was already undergoing a process, or had already completed the process, of making its discourse appear more acceptable: by turning round anti-racist rhetoric it attempted to make itself be perceived as a victim of discrimination.[30] Lentin's account of these studies suggests that these cross-cutting discourses made the formation of a new, "cultural" racism possible:

> "The idea that the culturally-relativist approach to the fight against racism has contributed to the rise in acceptability of the discourse of the far-right originates with the idea of a new, cultural racism. The 'new racism' is epitomized by the idea that cultures should be seen as separate but equal. The translation of this in far-right, nationalist rhetoric is that each culture deserves its own homeland where its members can live undisturbed by others. Publicly, proponents of this view claim that just like Europeans, immigrants too would be happier 'at home', in their 'natural surroundings.'" (Lentin 2005)

It is possible to see the shift from universal values (considered as "civic") to particularistic accounts and justifications, which sometimes fit the model of cultural racism described above. If we accept Lentin's presentation, the common feature between far-right discourse on culture and the mainstream discourse illustrated by Brown and Sarkozy appears in the non-relational conception of cultural encounters.[31] Cultures have incompatible and yet essential distinctive features, which make their encounters and a

national cohesion in multicultural societies an issue for the survival of their believed cultural integrity.

But it also brings forth the point, at first more obvious in Sarkozy's discourse, that newcomers and minority groups are asked to leave aside their "stories" by adopting the state-promoted "official" line in order to successfully integrate (this would obviously be excluded in far-right considerations). Contrary to far-right public discourse as Lentin describes it, mainstream actors seem to promote cultural prerequisites *necessary* for belonging (even politically) to "the nation". It is the presupposed (i.e. signified) cultural superiority that connects their discourses to the ideology of cultural racism, or racism in general.[32] The cause for this difference in public promotion may come from the existing and traditional acceptability and banality of mainstream political actors. These elements of cultural racism are indeed part of a larger public discourse, the significations of which, similarly to that of 'nation', are nuanced, shifting, ambiguous and even contradictory. As a corollary, they appear banal if not even "hidden", as Foucault would have it, within the context of multidimensional public discourses (or rather discursive formations). For example, Sarkozy can be represented as somebody who has promoted success stories of integration by appointing ministers from what is called in France "the diversity" (e.g. in "issus de la diversité", a neologism for "visible minorities"), while at the same time claiming the French integration system has failed.

Even if sometimes formally more radical, it is over-simplifying to describe mainstream nationalist discourse as "hot" or "closed". On the contrary, it remains somewhat open,[33] but the terms in which identities and cohesion are elaborated hover above the very traditional conceptions of nationhood: at the same time 'debanalising' the matter with new or renewed discursive practices and 'banalising' more exclusive and traditional significations of the imaginary of nationalism.

Conclusion: The Endurance of Nationalism

A wider and deeper inquiry into the evolution of political discourses would probably better show the dynamic relationships between the various political formations. But with the elements presented in this paper, it is noteworthy to correlate the process of acceptability operated by far-right parties with the more general "revival" of nationalism in political discourses across the political spectrum.

The success of conservative parties may thus be seen in a wider perspective: it is not essentially linked to the fact that they are conservative, but rather that the defence of

national identity and interests are traditionally associated with conservative parties. It should rather be viewed as representative of a wider trend on the renewed appeal of nationalism in the contemporary world. The ongoing crisis in Belgium is an example of the spreading of the basic idea of nationalist ideology: the "unity between nation and state" (Calhoun 1997:104). Furthermore and from a different point of view, the politicians of the Scottish National Party "are now more left wing, in political rhetoric but also now in government practice, than their Labour adversaries." (Dixon 2007)

In the 1990's, elite discourse, not only but especially in the then growing neo-liberal trend, focused on the "end of the nation-state" and the downfall of nationalism.[34] Due to the increased globalisation of capital and more relatively increased mobility of peoples, the equation or "balance" of power of certain established nation-states has certainly changed and may not be restored (for post-colonial and post-imperial countries for instance). Changes could have given the impression of a decline of the entity of nation-states as it was then conceived in the West, and consequently of nationalism, but it is not yet on the brink of extinction. Not in Europe, nor in the world: we are still witnessing ethnic cleansing, national borders and cultures are continuously being consolidated around the world (China provides a particular example), and the world map has never been as national as in the contemporary world (see e.g. the very recent birth of the Kosovar nation-state).

The process of change, which began with the end of the European colonial powers and has been pursued all the way up until today, is certainly challenging for the "established" social and political imaginaries. At least as far as France and Britain are concerned, traditional "fixed", established imaginaries are being challenged by the very components of British and French societies, peoples whose stories are directly linked to the recent history of change and who are in fact French and British. Consequently, the lines between inclusion and exclusion promoted by Brown or Sarkozy do not map simply onto their respective societies.

It could be argued that the idea of the end of the nation-state played a role in the recent resurgence of state nationalism, as it could also have fostered impressions that the nation is endangered. Other studies were already questioning these claims. Reflecting on the merging of the nation-state into a supranational polity, Panić argued that the end of the national "is very unlikely […] in Europe or anywhere else." He then concluded that

"[w]hether [countries in Western Europe] will also succeed in protecting [their nation-states] from the disintegration caused by rampant nationalism exploiting economic and social problems to create smaller and more 'pure' national political units is a different matter." (1997:42-43).

As I have argued in the paper, the "rampant nationalism" Panić refers to is not only a peripheral phenomenon and the question should consequently be reformulated. Mainstream nationalism in its banal form found in Brown's or Sarkozy's discourse provides imaginings nearly as "limited" as those that Anderson refers to in the opening questions in his inquiry into the roots of nationalism (1991:7). Consequently, it does not matter here whether a political unit is small or large, but whether societies and polities can be imagined across rather than along "lines of difference" (Calhoun 1994:329).

In a context of cultural plurality and hybridity, it is questionable whether the promotion of homogenising and hegemonic imaginaries – like nationalism – is a way to improve our actual heterogeneous coexistence (which will probably rise, as among others, the dramatic question of climate refugees indicates). New or rather different imaginings would consequently seem to be necessary in a world where individual or group cultures, "official" or unrepresented ones, mingle, connect and encounter each other.

The present study has pointed out the rather limited imagination of the British and French political leaders in promoting new significations. It also suggests that they tend to foster a radicalisation of political and cultural positions. What remains to be answered is whether this limited imagination is inherent to nationalism or whether nationalism can accommodated pluralism, in spite of various established national traditions and the nationalist paradigm of essential unity– which is maybe what Brown and Sarkozy are somewhat clumsily trying to do. [35]

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Notes

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[2] The fact that the conservative vote has increased may not be exceptional as such, although in certain cases elections are won with harder ideological lines as it is pointed out for the French presidential election (the latest Italian general election is also particularly representative in this regard).

[3] The phrase "droitisation des esprits" [possible trans. "mood shift to the right"], was especially used in commenting on the 2007 presidential election. It follows the idea of the "lepénisation" of the campaign (in reference to the extreme right-wing party candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National). For a critical analysis see Etienne Schweisguth (2007), "Le trompe l'oeil de la droitisation", in *Revue française de science politique*, Vol. 57/3-4, pp.393-410. Concerning comments on elections in Italy and

in the UK in 2008, see e.g. Dominique Reynié, "Une droitisation à l'échelle de l'Europe", in *Le Monde*, 3 May 2008.

[4] The themes are often intertwined. We can mention the case of national identification cards in the UK as such one example, or, as is mentioned subsequently in the paper, the creation of a new ministry in France concerned with immigration and national identity.

[5] In brief, Gordon Brown has been Chancellor of the Exchequer for Anthony Blair's governments from 1997 until 2007, before becoming leader of the Labour Party (24th June 2007) and as a consequence Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland since 27th June 2007. Nicolas Sarkozy held four ministerial offices under Jacques Chirac's presidency: three times Minister of the Interior (2002-2004, 2005-2007) and Minister of Finances (2004-2005). He became leader of the UMP on 14th January 2007 and became President of the French republic on 16th May 2007 (elected 6th May 2007).

[6] For a comprehensive overview see e.g. Umut Özkirimli (2000), *Theories of Nationalism, A Critical Introduction*, New York, Palgrave.

[7] See e.g. Ernest Gellner (1983), *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Blackwell; Tom Nairn (1997), *Faces of Nationalism, Janus Revisited*, London, Verso.

[8] Beyond the historical analysis, Winock's categorization can prove to be useful in analyzing the image mainstream nationalism has in contemporary France in contrast with the image of the extreme right, like the FN (Horobin 2007).

[9] The myth of "palyngenesis" or "rebirth of the people" may hint towards the recognition of a procedural aspect. But it is precisely in terms or *re*-birth, or awakening, rather than in terms of construction that it is considered in nationalist ideologies. In the case of established national histories, this "rebirth" lies in the past (the French Revolution for instance). For an account on the status of the myth of palyngenesis in fascism, see Catherine Fieschi (2004), *Fascism, Populism and the French Republic. In the Shadow of Democracy*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, esp.108-110.

[10] Usually perceived as "risk", see Ulrich Beck (1992), *Risk society: Towards a New Modernity*, London, SAGE; or "socio-cultural risk", see Petersson (2006:11-24).

[11] The ambiguity of significations is well portrayed by Foucault when acknowledging his impossibility to ascribe one meaning to the term "discourse" alone (1989:90).

[12] Unless stated otherwise, all translations from French are my own.

[13] Source: "Naissance de la polémique", in *Libération*, 16 July 2007. Retrieved from the World Wide Web, 27 April 2008: http://www.liberation.fr/actualite/evenement/evenement1/267231.FR.php. The ministry was eventually created on 31st May 2007 under the name "ministry for immigration, integration, national identity and codevelopment" ("Ministère de l'immigration, de l'intégration, de l'identité nationale et du codéveloppement").

[14] E.g. one of the first laws Sarkozy drafted was entitled the "law related to immigration control, the sojourning of foreigners and nationality" (Loi no. 2003-119, 26 November 2003).

[15] For an insight into Anthony Blair's position on the question of "Britishness" and the difference with Gordon Brown, see e.g. Keith Dixon (2007), conference paper, "Blair, Brown and Britishness: the end of an old song?". Retrieved from the World Wide Web, 17 February 2008: http://www.raisonsdagir.org/kd7.pdf

[16] For a more thorough analysis, see Marthaler (2008). Additional details on official measures can be found on the website of the ministry in charge: http://premier-ministre.gouv.fr/iminidco/

[17] The separatist movements in France are virtually inexistent in the public debate, or are given media coverage through the lens of radical movements if an outburst of violence occurs.

[18] Since the Burnley council elections in 2002, the BNP is – if not a major actor – present in almost all levels of the political arena.

[19] Associations are according to Castoriadis a significant relationship of imaginary significations, as elements of signification call one another. ." See Cornelius Castoriadis (1975), *L'Institution imaginaire de la société*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil, and (1986) "La logique des magmas et la question de l'autonomie" in *Domaines de l'homme: Les carrefours du labyrinthe II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil (421-443). An interesting analogy can also be drawn with certain elements related to what Derrida described as *différance*, on how "concepts are inscribed in a chain or a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of difference" (1982:11); see Jacques Derrida (1982) (trans. Alan Bass), *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, (esp. 3-27).

[20] Since January 2008, French media are systematically publishing statistics on the falling public support for the president. On the other side of the Channel, the significant event is the backlash of the Labour party in local election in May 2008.

[21] To provide with one particularly strong example, we can mention one of Brice Hortefeux's (the Minister for Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development) first statements to the National Assembly on 18th September 2007 where the rationale he exposes for the new immigration policy and its relationship to national identity is nearly a copy of what Sarkozy as Minister of the Interior (i.e. then in charge of these issues) exposed in the political talk show, "A vous de juger" on 30th November 2006 (France 2). Sources: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) http://www.ina.fr; "Discours de Brice Hortefeux à l'Assemblée nationale". Retrieved from the World Wide Web 25 November 2007: http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/iminidco/salle_presse_ 832/discours_ tribunes_ 835/discours_brice_hortefeux_devant_57534.html.

[22] Another example of Sarkozy's "love it or leave it" slogans dates from 22nd April 2006, during a UMP meeting in Paris: "If there are people who feel embarrassed of being in France, they shouldn't feel embarrassed of leaving her". These relate to a famous motto of the FN "France, love it or leave it" ("La France, aimez-la ou quittez-la") also used by another far-right party (*Mouvement pour la France*), "France, you lovie or leave it" ("La France, tu l'aimes ou tu la quittes").

[23] By extension, it can be explained through the lens of the metaphorical exclusiveness of nationalist ideology suggested by Billig with the example of Macedonia (1995:73-75), considering that the BNP's Britain is not Brown's Britain: "Each homeland is to be imagined both in his totality and its particularity. The world is too small to bear two homelands with the name 'Macedonia', even if clear borders between the two are agreed. Each homeland must be considered a special place, separated physically and metaphorically from other homelands." (75)

[24] But this is regardless of the fact that the centre-left candidate, Ségolène Royal, reacted to Sarkozy's nationalist symbols during the presidential campaign by invoking herself some symbols, like the national anthem for instance, which added up to the controversy. Source: "Naissance de la polémique", in *Libération*, 16 July 2007. Retrieved from the World Wide Web, 27 April 2008: http://www.liberation.fr/actualite/evenement/evenement1/267231.FR.php.

[25] For a similar vein in Brown's discourse, it is interesting to note the dramatic evolution in the titles of three of some of his speeches and articles on Britishness, from 2006 to 2008, the two more recent articles intended to a wider and more conservative audience: "The future of Britishness" (2006), "We need a United Kingdom" (2007) and "We must defend the Union" (2008).

[26] An insight into mass and especially new media could prove very important in shedding light on evolving forms of political communication. For studies on populism see e.g. Francisco Panizza (ed.) (2005) *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London, Verso; with an interesting focus on popular culture see Jim McGuigan (1992), *Cultural Populism*, London, Routledge; Liesbet Van Zoonen (2000) "Popular Culture as Popular Communication: An Introduction", in Popular Culture as Popular Communication, Vol. 7 (2) 5-18.

[27] Especially in Hans Khon's formulation in (1944) *The idea of Nationalism*, New York, Macmillan; see Calhoun 1997 and 2007:41-45.

[28] The passage was first censored before hitting the news headlines the following day (as was reported on *nouvelobs.com* 7th February 2007. Retrieved from the World Wide Web on 2nd May 2008: http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/speciales/politique/20070207.OBS1068/sarkozy__ tf1.fr_joue _a_ sautemouton.html).

[29] Apart from brief accounts on how "Britain lost confidence in itself" when "faced with economic relative economic decline as well as the end of empire" (Brown 2006), without any further mention for instance of the situations of the colonies of the British empire. Though not included in the paper, further considerations on the differences between French and British colonial and postcolonial experiences would certainly bring out a deeper understanding of specific aspects, references and images in Brown's and Sarkozy's discourses.

[30] We can here mention a BBC report on the anti-BNP front in 2004 which is particularly representative of the shift of the party's public discourse: "[…] BNP national press officer Dr Phill Edwards told BBC News Online the party's opponents wanted to prevent freedom of speech. He said: "[…] We are not racists, we are race realists." […] Mr Phillips [leader of the Commission for Racial Equality] said the BNP's message was "increasingly voter friendly", with the party avoiding overt racism […]." Retrieved from he World Wide Web 30 March 2008: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_ news/politics/3455273.stm

[31] In the case of Brown, it is more obvious in the hierarchical presentation of various identities, Britishness being the overarching identity, e.g.: "[…] a British identity which is bigger than the sum of it parts […]." (2006).

[32] Castoriadis (1990) proposes an interesting insight on the variety of racisms and the exclusive aspect of social imaginaries.

[33] For example, both in Britain and France, we can find the idea of immigration having a positive economic impact (or being more generally seen in economic terms) is an element that comes into this discourse of "openness".

[34] See e.g. Jean-Marie Guehenno (1995), *The End of the Nation-State*, (Trans. Victoria Elliott), University of Minnesota Press; K. Ohmae (1995) *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of Regional Economies*, New York, The Free Press.

[35] Ironically, Anthony Giddens has suggested they nations are "shell institutions" which means they "have become inadequate to the tasks they are called to perform." (2003:19). Although not mentioned in the paper, the democratic aspect of nation-states should be brought in a further reflection on the matter.