DIMENSIONI E PROBLEMI DELLA RICERCA STORICA
1/2023, pp. 223-242

E-ISSN 2723-9489
ISSN 1125-517X

On the French Historiographical "Immunity" to Fascism*

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This article deals with the parochial interpretations of fascism and the authoritarian right in France. These narrow readings of inter-war history – mostly promoted by French academia – have been used either to exclude national phenomena with overt fascist or anti-parliamentary features from this problematic political family or to consider them as marginal fringes. The article shows that foreign historians have challenged this specific historiography and assesses the impact of these historical reconstructions on the categorisation of contemporary extreme-right movements such as the Front National.

Keywords: Fascism, France, Historiography, Memory

Authoritarian cultures emerged in Europe during the inter-war period. Some of these never gained power or developed into regimes. Fascism was the most powerful authoritarian culture of the whole era; a *fascist wind* blew across European borders, including in renowned democracies such as France, where anti-parliamentary currents were, in a sense, even more dynamic than in other European countries. Foreign movements borrowed and developed French-born ideas. The fervently nationalist climate made the country one of the main candidates for the rise of fascism, while contributing to the establishment of the Vichy Republic. On the other hand, the lack of charismatic leaders and the rivalries between parties and factions, together with the absence of structural factors (including some political, social, and economic preconditions) such as those that contributed to Mussolini's success in Italy, prevented

* I am grateful to Jim House and Brian Jenkins for their useful suggestions.

a unified – and, above all, victorious – fascist movement from taking root in France.

This does not mean, though, that fascistic tendencies were simply foreign to French politics and society. The same Vichy Republic had some fascist connotations: its famous slogan *Travail, Famille, Patrie* was similar to one of the most popular refrains of Italian fascists. Moreover, its mobilising themes were commonplace in the rhetoric of the inter-war extreme right. I claim that these European extremists usually shared a sense of national decadence, anti-Semitism, racism, ultra-nationalism, a belief in the superiority of a given community against all unassimilable "others", a desire for national regeneration, a cult of violence and a state characterised by authoritarianism, strong leadership, rejection of parliamentary politics and democratic rules, and – whenever and wherever possible – imperialism.

However, this is not the place to discuss what fascism is or might be, or to discuss the fascist nature of Vichy. More generally, the definition of fascism has been a source of controversy for historians. Brian Jenkins rightly suggests that "the constantly changing and deeply contested definitions of 'fascism' have become an increasing source of confusion, and have ceased to be the sort of stable conceptual reference point that eases communication between scholars"[1].

Moreover, it is clear that fascism has had different national variations and developments, owing to the dissimilar state contexts and subcultures, and that there are differences among the domestic permutations of the fascist phenomenon both in space and time[2]. In many ways, this article follows a global understanding of fascism, which has, for example, been developed by Federico Finchelstein. In this reading, fascism can be perceived as a global ideology that can be interpreted and reformulated in different ways: "fascism was many things in different times and places and yet it remained a transnational political ideology with theoretical, national and contextual variations"[3].

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1 B. Jenkins, *Conclusion: Beyond the "Fascism Debate"*, in *France in the Era of Fascism. Essays on the French Authoritarian Right*, ed. B. Jenkins, Berghahn, Oxford and New York 2005, p. 214.

2 R. Paxton, *The Five Stages of Fascism*, in "The Journal of Modern History", LXX, 1998, 1, pp. 3-4. It is also worth noting that this US historian points out that fascism reveals different features when considered as an ideology, movement or regime, and that fascism typically goes through (five) different phases or stages, each of which presents a different context and environment, and different characteristics.

3 F. Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism. Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2010, p. 16.

On the other side of the spectrum, narrow readings of fascism have been used, in particular, not to highlight similarities or the transnational circulation of policies, but to exclude national phenomena from this political family. This can also be done for the preservation of public memory or the democratic strengths of nations in the inter-war era. Some of these parochial interpretations of the "dark shadows" of domestic histories have emerged in France, especially with eminent historians such as René Rémond, who linked the image of the local extreme right to a domestic historical pathway. A growing number of historians have followed in his footsteps. In 1954, Rémond published his well known *La Droite en France de 1815 à nos jours*, where he developed the theory of *les trois droites*. According to this approach, historically, France had not experienced a unique "right-wing momentum" but different rightist variations: *légitimiste*, *orléaniste* and *bonapartiste*. In this classification, there was basically no space for fascism. These readings of domestic history have had an enormous impact on the scholarship of right-wing extremism and mass media. Likewise, they have influenced academic readings of post-war parties. If one denies that a particular country has had a genuine *fascist* past, then it becomes (almost) impossible to trace any form of neo-*fascism* in that country. However, this article shows that France's inter-war extreme right was not a unique phenomenon and that it can be placed in the context of other authoritarian movements. It also highlights that the idea of French immunity to fascism was countered by foreign historians in particular.

The birth of a fascist idea

For many French historians and the general public, it came as a surprise when Zeev Sternhell traced the uncontaminated origins of fascist ideas back not to 1919 but to France itself. Along with Robert Soucy, he tried to demonstrate that fascism was neither a foreign concept nor an imported product. In 1972, both Soucy and Sternhell identified Maurice Barrès as the founder of French fascism[4]. French writers were the precursors of fascist philosophy, which was first developed in France and

[4] See Z. Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français*, Armand Colin, Paris 1972, and R. Soucy, *Fascism in France. The Case of Maurice Barrès*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1972. As John Sweets suggested, their two monographs "differed in that Soucy concentrated on Barrès' fiction, whereas Sternhell emphasized his journalism, but each author sought to demonstrate that the anti-Semitism and extreme nationalism of Barrès were the direct precursors of a French fascism". J.F. Sweets, *Hold That Pendulum!*

only later exported to other European countries. Interestingly, Sternhell argued that France had to be considered the birthplace of European fascism. Fascism was first and foremost an idea rooted in George Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism and the anti-materialist revision of Marxism. In his view, French fascism was the ideal type of the phenomenon, closest to the pure "idea" of fascism in the Platonic sense of the term[5]. In sum, France was the intellectual laboratory of that "national-socialist" synthesis between revolutionary syndicalism and nationalism that is, for Sternhell, at the *core* of fascism. This *French synthesis* soon moved across the Alps. In Italy, it was based – in Sternhell's words – "on the same principles as in France: on the one hand, a rejection of democracy, Marxism, liberalism, the so-called bourgeois values, the eighteenth-century heritage, internationalism, and pacifism; on the other hand, a cult of heroism, vitalism, and violence"[6].

On the other hand, Soucy challenged the idea that fascism in France also (or mostly) came from a revision of leftist politics or beliefs, but he also disagreed with those scholars confining it to the history of ideas. He suggested that the phenomenon was not in opposition to French (right-wing) conservatism[7]. Both scholars agreed on some central facts: (1) fascism was a factor in national traditions (and, consequently, not something simply borrowed from Germany or Italy), and (2) a fair number of French inter-war movements undeniably had fascist connotations. In a sense, they directly countered Rémond's idea that before 1936, "nothing justifies the myth [of] French fascism"[8].

It is true that Sternhell tended to minimise the impact of the First World War on the development of fascism as well as the later influence of foreign fascisms in France – and some scholars might respectably claim that French fascism was more a response to international events and the dynamism of Mussolini and Hitler[9]. Other members of French academic circles have stated that Sternhell was writing about a "fascisme imagi-

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Redefining Fascism, Collaborationism and Resistance in France, in "French Historical Studies", IV, 1988, p. 734.

5 Z. Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche. L'idéologie fasciste en France*, Seuil, Paris 1983, pp. 40-1.

6 Z. Sternhell (with M. Sznajder and M. Asheri), *The birth of fascist ideology: from cultural rebellion to political revolution,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994, p. 32.

7 See R. Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995.

8 R. Rémond, *La Droite en France de 1815 à nos jours*, Aubier, Paris 1954, p. 16.

9 See Sweets, *Hold That Pendulum*, cit., pp. 742-3; and, generally, P. Burrin, *La Dérive fasciste: Doriot, Déat, Bergery, 1933-1945*, Seuil, Paris 1986.

naire"[10]. Moreover, he probably exaggerated the left-wing roots of this revolutionary right as fascism's main opponents were naturally communists and socialists. Nevertheless, by tracing the (possible) roots of fascism to France and, above all, by emphasising the transborder influence of George Sorel's revolutionary syndicalism on the construction of Italian fascism, the Israeli scholar pointed, for example, to the local elaboration of fascist beliefs but also their *transnational circulation*[11]. Fascism was, in fact, both national and transnational. As Soucy highlighted, French fascists observed "with Nationalistic pride that many ideas could be found in such [French] intellectual precursors as […] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, […] Georges Sorel, Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès"[12]. However, these first fascist leagues also hoped to borrow some of Mussolini's policies. In Italy, *Il Duce* had a clear vision of the overall political situation and adopted flexible positions to gain control of the nation. Morgan notes how

> the problem for Fascism by 1922 was the one which had defeated the PSI [Italian Socialist Party] in 1919: how to translate its local provincial power in North and Central Italy into national power […]. He evolved what was, in retrospect, a quite brilliant strategy, which combined legality with extra-parliamentary illegality. It was no wonder other European fascist movements of the 1920s, including the German Nazi party and Le Faisceau in France, sought to emulate [Mussolini's first Fascism][13].

Action Française: the precursor

Mussolini's achievements gave new impetus to the French extreme right. The main movement of the early 1920s was Action Française (AF), led by Charles Maurras. After the March on Rome,

> the basic AF line was to see Italian fascism as a fraternal movement. Maurras perceived differences […]. He believed, nevertheless, that the new Italian nationalism that underlay fascism owed much to French thought, including his own. Maurras was especially interested in the way that Mussolini had come to power […]. Fascism in Italy had clearly come to power through elite connivance

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10 On this concept, see J. Julliard, *Sur un fascisme imaginaire: à propos d'un livre de Zeev Sternhell*, in "Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations", IV, 1984, pp. 849–61.

11 George Mosse has also traced a certain influence of the French Revolution on fascist culture and revolutions. See G. L. Mosse, *Fascism and the French Revolution* in "Journal of Contemporary History", XXV, 1989, 1, p. 7 and p. 24.

12 Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave*, cit., p. 1.

13 P. Morgan, *Fascism in Europe. 1919-1945*, Routledge, London 2003, p. 50.

at a time when many people were opposed to, or unaware of, the fascist message. As a result, the March on Rome gave new hope to the AF in that it seemed to point to the crucial role elites could play in politics[14].

The German historian Ernest Nolte, author of *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, was one of the first historians to include AF among the fascist types[15]. The AF was well-rooted in French political life. In line with Maurras's doctrine, AF was an anti-parliamentary, counter-revolutionary, royalist, Catholic and nationalist right and, like many other extremist movements, it perceived an overwhelming crisis and decline of the nation. It strongly criticised the spirit of the revolution of 1789, which was perceived as one of the main reasons for the French crisis. In the AF's views, political authority – and certainly not democracy – was the best way to rule the country[16].

Rather influential in the cultural and intellectual milieu, the movement had its own daily newspaper, "L'Action Française"; Daudet and Maurras were the political editors, whereas Maurice Pujo was the editor-in-chief. At the same time, though, it promoted violence and intimidation against political opponents. AF used a security squad, the Camelots du Roi, for its meetings and demonstrations. In 1923, the Camelots du Roi physically attacked some moderate leftist politicians who were involved in a meeting of the League of the Rights of Man[17]. They later sent a box full of castor oil to the League's president, which contained an unambiguous message: "We hope to cure your gastric embarrassment by administering this Roman medicine that has succeeded so well beyond the Alps"[18]. Bruno Goyet argues that

> le maurrassisme a servi d'étape sinon à une éventuelle conversion au fascisme, au moins à son acceptation. Le fait que les thématiques fascistes passent par un homme qui a toujours refusé cette étiquette n'est en rien contradictoire, bien au contraire: c'est bien là que jouent les stratégies de différenciation nécessaires dans un même espace politique pour se démarquer de ses concurrents les plus immédiats[19].

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14 R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, Pimlico, London 2003, p. 196.

15 See E. Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism*, *National Socialism*, New American Library, New York 1969.

16 Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave*, cit., p. 12.

17 See J. Blatt, *Relatives and Rivals: The Responses of the Action Française to Italian Fascism, 1919-1926*, in "European Studies Review", X, 1981, p. 263.

18 Quoted in Ibid.

19 B. Goyet, *La «Marche sur Rome»: version originale sous-titré. La réception du fascisme en*

In sum, AF became one of the major vectors through which to inject fascism and its methods into French politics[20]. Maurras's movement shows how fascist beliefs, along with anti-democratic stances, were not simply imports. The French nationalists themselves portrayed this group as the precursor of anti-parliamentary values in Europe. As the fascist intellectual and editor of *Je suis partout*, Robert Brasillach suggested on 7 November 1936, "wherever a young nationalist movement takes shape, whether it be in Belgium, in Switzerland, in Poland, it turns first of all to the revolutionary tradition of Maurras. Who would be so bold as to say that his ideas are foreign to Germany?"[21]. Jean Azéma, another member of *Je suis partout* – a journal considered to be an echo chamber of international fascism – commented in 1961 that "from 1900 to 1940 Maurras was inseparable from French subversive thought. He was the man who preached action through reaction and his *Si le coup de force est possible* was the Bible of all the future young fascists"[22].

Nonetheless, the AF's attitudes towards Mussolini's groupings were often contradictory. The same Maurras seems to have suffered from the *dilemme du nationaliste autoritaire* theorised by Michel Dobry. It was sometimes hard for inter-war authoritarian nationalists to openly borrow from foreign models. They were

> des hommes qui se veulent et qui se croient nationalistes, germanophobes et qui, simultanément, sont séduits – et le terme est faible dans nombre de cas – par les mouvements et les "solutions" autoritaires de ceux de nos voisins qui remettent en cause justement les acquis de la victoire de 1918. Ce dilemme donne le principe des bricolages idéologiques qui ont été imaginés pour le surmonter – c'est une situation banale pour l'analyse des idéologies. De là provient la construction, assez systématique, de ce que j'ai analysé comme des *décalages de distinction* par rapport aux formulations idéologiques des fascistes italiens et, bien plus encore, vis-à-vis de celles élaborées par les nationaux-socialistes allemands. De là également toute une gamme de tentatives de "francisation" de ces idéologies, dont l'une des plus économiques, celle de Valois, consiste à montrer que le produit n'est pas d'importation, qu'il a d'abord, et solidement, ses racines en France[23].

France dans les années 20, in *Le mythe de l'allergie française au fascisme*, ed. M. Dobry, Albin Michel, Paris 2003, p. 93.

20 See Blatt, *Relatives and Rivals*, cit.

21 Quoted in W.R. Tucker, *The Fascist Ego: A Political Biography of Robert Brasillach,* University of California Press, Berkeley 1975, p. 121.

22 Ibid., p. 287.

23 M. Dobry, *La thèse immunitaire face aux fascismes. Pour une critique de la logique classificatoire*, in *Le mythe de l'allergie française,* cit., p. 48.

In sum, French nationalist politicians occasionally denied their connivance with Italian fascists or fascist ideology. Given this, Charles Maurras was reluctant to show complete admiration and, in particular, was not likely to advertise his affinities with Mussolini or Hitler when they could challenge both French national security and the 1918 peace treaties. Nevertheless, in 1923 he claimed that the AF

> had a close family relationship with and precedence over Fascism. Fascist doctrines were 'close cousins and even twin sisters' of those preached by AF for twenty-five years. In this context, he acknowledged that his own movement lacked 'great contact' with Italian Fascism, but asserted that his ideas had influenced Mussolini via the conduit of Italian nationalism. Maurras both admired Fascism and was jealous of it[24].

This kind of jealousy also emerged in some of "L'Action Française"'s editorials. In 1922, an important writer such as Leon Daudet wrote that Italy's fascist reaction to leftist collectivism and militants "devastations" had precursors in France: "les initiateur d'une telle forme de movement reactionaire furent, en France, les *Camelots du Roi* et leur chefs valeureux"[25]. Another contribution criticised the doctrinal side, arguing that fascists in Italy came from a mixture of existing beliefs: "ils manquen+t de doctrine et c'est ce qui constitue leur inferiorité à l'egard de ces autres troupes de l'ordre qui sont, en France, les Camelots du Roi, les Etudiants et Ligueurs d'Action Française. La violence des notres est au service de la raison"[26].

Yet, this did not stop the movement from pursuing extremist politics based on authority and order, similar to that of Mussolini's squadristi[27]. Once more, fascism was national but it had transnational parallels.

Marching on France: radicalisation

Once again in the history of the European extreme right, it was the fear of the left that revitalised the whole spectrum of right-wing parties. The first victory of the Cartel des Gauches in the 1924 elections marked an important moment for French fascists. The left's electoral success came after a period of domestic economic and political decadence and the decision

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24 Blatt, *Relatives and Rivals*, cit., pp. 269-70.

25 L. Daudet, *La leçon du fascisme*, in "L'Action française", 14 August 1922, p. 1.

26 Interim, *La politique. II. Les fascistes*, in "L'Action française", 20 July 1922, p. 1.

27 Interim, *La politique. IV. Le fascisme*, in "L'Action française", 22 July 1922, p. 1.

of Raymond Poincaré's government to occupy the German Ruhr. At the same time that Mussolini took the path towards dictatorship, the radicalisation of political conflict in France led to the creation of fascist leagues such as George Valois's Le Faisceau and Pierre Taittinger's Jeunesses Patriotes (JP). Both leagues were mainly composed of ex-servicemen and often funded by big businessmen and industrialists who wanted to defend their conservative class interests from revolutionary socialist politics. The JP was characterised by strong French patriotism, anti-communism and anti-parliamentarism. Taittinger's group also highlighted the importance of traditional Catholic values. Following AF and Le Faisceau's difficulties and rivalry, the JP became the largest and most influential league after 1926. JP also adopted an electoral strategy and obtained a significant presence in the Paris Municipal Council between 1928 and 1932[28]. As Robert Soucy put it, the JP was particularly *fascist* "in its anti-liberalism and anti-socialism, in its cult of the leader, paramilitary organization, and political authoritarianism. Its essentially conservative socio-economic programme paralleled fascisms in other countries, something which scholars who emphasize the 'left-wing' aspects of fascism tend to downgrade"[29].

George Valois was a prominent former member of the AF. In November 1925, he founded Le Faisceau des Combattants et des Producteurs. Valois, who had a Darwinist social vision of the world, believed in national palingenesis and in the establishment of a new elite. Le Faisceau's political philosophy was based on an overt form of anti-Marxism and a corporative view of the economic order, forged by paramilitary action[30]. Le Faisceau also adopted an anti-Semitic and xenophobic stance. In its view, the Jews were dangerous for the nation and racially incompatible: they needed to be expelled. Their elimination was crucial to "the establishment of a new *État combattant* based upon principles enshrined in the Faisceau, just as it became a condition for the establishment of the new order at Vichy two decades later"[31]. Furthermore, this fascist movement was against the corrupt democratic party system, and therefore in

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28 B. Jenkins, *The Right-Wing Leagues and Electoral Politics in Interwar France*, in "History Compass", V, 2007, p. 12.

29 R. Soucy, *Centrist Fascism: The Jeunesses Patriotes*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", XVI, 1981, 2, p. 350.

30 G. Valois, *Il fascismo francese*, G. Marino Editore, Roma 1926, p. 25.

31 S. Kalman, *Reconsidering Fascist Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia in 1920s France: The Doctrinal Contribution of Georges Valois and the Faisceau*, in "French History", XVI, 2002, p. 365. Kalman also notes that the Vichy slogan *La Révolution Nationale* was first adopted by Le Faisceau (p. 365).

favour of an open dictatorship. For Valois, Europe's problems could only be solved through the "creation of a fascist State"[32]. The reference (both lexically and ideologically) to the Italian *Fasci* of the 1920s was rather obvious, even if Valois seemed personally convinced of the French origin of the "fascist idea". Referring to fascism, he affirmed that "c'est nous les inventeurs, et c'est nous que l'on copiait en Italie"[33].

In the 1930s, France faced a period of alarming political and economic difficulties. After the second victory of the Cartel des Gauches in the 1932 elections, the country had to deal with Germany's newly aggressive foreign policy, the effects of the Great Depression, the rise of its own authoritarian right-wing forces and the financial corruption of governments. The result was a parody of the Blackshirts' March on Rome, or, in this case, a less successful March on the French Chamber of Deputies. On 6 February 1934, the extreme-right leagues sparked riots and demonstrations around the capital city, and "proved that they were strong enough to topple a French government but not strong enough to install another one in its place"[34]. The unrest was led by the JP, the group Solidarité française, Colonel François de La Rocque's Croix de Feu, the AF and the group Francisme.

AF was not only the driving force in the run-up to the February incident, but also a major presence in riots[35]. The fascist and anti-Semitic Francisme – founded in 1933 by Marcel Bucard – was numerically the least important of the leagues. Bucard was paradoxically called a "fighter for peace" by the post-war neo-fascist review "Notre Europe"[36]. In reality, he was one of those politicians who fought against democracy and parliamentarism. The party statute made this clear. It was a fascist group promoting a takeover, and its aim was to "conquérir le pouvoir", assuring "la loi de salut public". It especially promoted "le goût de l'ordre, le sens de la hiérarchie des valeurs et de la discipline des sentiments"[37].

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32 Valois, *Fascismo francese*, cit., p. 45.

33 G. Valois, *L'Homme contre l'argent*: *souvenirs de dix ans. 1918-1928*, Librairie Valois, Paris 1928, p. 265.

34 R. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Vintage, New York 2005, p. 69.

35 Action Française was the main catalyst in the month-long protest movement that preceded the riots. However, Soucy believes that François Coty's Solidarité française was the largest French fascist movement on the eve of February 1934. See R. Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave,* Yale University Press, New Haven 1995, p. 66.

36 R. Dayras, *Marcel Bucard*, in "Notre Europe", XXV, April 1973.

37 M. Bucard, *Règles statutaires du Francisme,* in Bibliotheque nationale de France, Recueil de pieces in-4.

Bucard received considerable financial support from Italian fascists. In September 1935, he even met Mussolini in Rome. Along with other authentic *fascisti* such as Oswald Mosley, Bucard was considered one of the most loyal of Mussolini's "agents" abroad. Similarly, in the context of Italian attempts to create a Fascist International under Rome's control, he was the only French right-wing extremist invited to represent the *fascisme française* at the conference held in Montreux in December 1934[38].

Nonetheless, the most powerful league turned out to be the Croix de Feu, which somehow capitalised on the radical legacy of the February incident and the dismissal of Daladier's government. Immediately after *février 1934*, this movement received a full extra-parliamentary "fighting legitimisation" (which was naturally opposed to the "weak" democratic legitimisation of the electoral route)[39]. As with other paramilitary and authoritarian movements, the main core of activists was composed of ex-servicemen, while patriotism, anti-communism, corporatism as well as anti-capitalism represented the tenets of its political manifesto. Interestingly, the fascist Croix de Feu had a controversial approach to the electoral game. As Kevin Passmore observed, many militants had a real aversion to political elections. Nevertheless, like Mussolini, La Rocque had a very pragmatic line: "it is certain that a sufficiently large number of Croix de Feu deputies could be elected, then he would not hesitate to risk confronting the ballot box"[40]. This in no way reflected a proper republican feeling towards democratic politics, given that the early La Rocque had considered that elections "could only take place after a preliminary 'cleansing of committees and the press'"[41].

February 1934 had a huge impact on the political life of the Third Republic and on the extremist leagues themselves[42]. The fear of a fascist

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38 P. Milza, *Fascisme Français. Passé et présent*, Flammarion, Paris 1987, pp. 152-3.

39 D. Leschi, *L'étrange cas La Roque*, in *Le mythe de l'allergie française,* cit., pp. 169-70; and Jenkins, *The Right-Wing Leagues*, cit., p. 13. On the Croix de Feu, see also W.D. Irvine, *Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu*, in "Journal of Modern History", LXIII, 1991, 2, pp. 271-95.

40 K. Passmore, *The Croix de Feu and Fascism: a Foreign Thesis Obstinately Maintained*, in *The Development of the Radical Right in France: From Boulanger to Le Pen*, ed. E.J. Arnold, St. Martin's Press, New York 2000, p. 105.

41 Colonel La Rocque quoted in Ibid., p. 106.

42 February 1934 was popularised by post-war extremists. The influential neo-fascist writer and activist Maurice Bardèche, for example, praised the insurrection: "Le nationalisme de 1934 était essentiellement le sursaut d'un peuple pour imposer les conditions de sa grandeur. A l'origine de ce sursaut se trouvait la conviction qu'une nation perd toute force et tout avenir quand la corruption s'établit parmi ceux qui la dirigent […]. Les nationalistes

or dictatorial drift, together with the new strategy of international communism, led to the creation of the leftist, anti-fascist Popular Front (composed of communists, socialists, and radicals), which won the elections of May 1936 under the leadership of the future head of government, Léon Blum. The presence of a Jew leading a governmental coalition that was also supported by French communists stirred up local fascists. After its election, the Popular Front – in line with its overall policy – banned all paramilitary leagues. As a result, La Rocque transformed his movement into the Parti Social Français (PSF). This represented the new and respectable facade of the controversial Croix de Feu – a movement that judged the Italian fascist regime as morally more acceptable than the Third Republic in France, and which had a strong admiration for *Il Duce* and *Der Führer*[43]. The PSF was characterised by the radical and anti-democratic attitudes of its ancestor, but it attracted many militants and became the largest party in pre-war France.[44] According to Sternhell,

> the Croix de Feu made not the slightest adjustment to their program, their activities, the tone and spirit of their propaganda. On the contrary: the tone became more violent, the style more demagogic, the attacks on the left, Blum, and the Popular Front more crude […]. If the movement experienced spectacular growth after the dissolution of the leagues […] it was not because this mass of new recruits were joining a movement newly won over to the virtues of democracy, but on the contrary because more and more people felt disgusted with the existing order. To take out a PSF card, after the dissolution of the Croix de Feu, was a gesture of defiance, a cry of revolt, a desire to translate ideas into action. The new arrivals were demonstrating their commitment to the forces fighting liberal democracy. They were taking their place alongside the most powerful of the disbanded leagues to proclaim that the time had come to do away with the disgraced regime[45].

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français qui marchèrent ce jour-là […] n'étaient guidés que par leur indignation, leur colère et leur instinct". M. Bardèche, *Un nouveau nationalisme*, in "Défense de l'Occident", February 1954, p. 16.

43 See R. Soucy, *French Fascism and the Croix de Feu: A Dissenting Interpretation*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", XXII, 1991, 1, p. 178. La Rocque officially denied being a fascist. Nonetheless, this "did not prevent him", Soucy wrote, "from expressing many of fascism's animosities and aspirations" (p. 184).

44 The PSF had more than twice the membership of Germany's national socialist party in 1930.

45 Z. Sternhell, *Letter*, in "New York Review of Books", LII, 12 May 2005, p. 22.

Despite this, the party is often portrayed as a republican and non-fascist movement, and as a precursor of post-war Gaullism. Yet, La Rocque, who is regularly depicted as a *moderate* compared to other politicians, refused to be co-opted by the democratic establishment and maintained an explosive, anti-system, and anti-parliamentary charge[46]. In Didier Leschi's reading, this makes him a "saviour" for the most anti-republican sectors of French public opinion. In fact, "dans les courtes années qui séparent le 6 février 1934 de la défaite de 1940, l'image de La Roque, sa place dans l'espace politique le situent de plus en plus radicalement à l'extérieur du système parlementaire"[47]. Not surprisingly, this image remained unchanged under Vichy France. As La Rocque affirmed in 1943,

> la politique électorale n'a pas absorbé le millième de nos dépenses, le quart de notre besogne; nous ne l'avons jamais présentée ainsi qu'un but et nous sommes toujours interdits d'en faire notre but. Si, les circonstances nous ayant forcés à connaître cet avatar, la consultation du suffrage universel prévue pour 1940 nous avait introduits au pouvoir, notre premier soin eût été de transformer les institutions suivant des méthodes supprimant le vice du parlementarisme[48].

Finally, another fascist inter-war party was Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français (PPF). Doriot, a former communist mayor of Saint-Denis and member of the Chamber of Deputies, was a politician with significant support from the working class[49]. The creation of the party had similarities with early *fascismo*. Doriot initially led a small and diverse group of former communists and leftist activists with strong local and provincial ties. One of the main inputs for the party's formation was the success of the leftist Popular Front in the election. In fact, "La Brèche", the party bulletin published by the branch of Villeurbanne, claims that the PPF was born when the country

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46 See also Jenkins, *The Right-Wing Leagues*, cit., p. 13.

47 Leschi, *L'étrange cas La Roque*, cit., p. 177.

48 F. de La Rocque, *France d'aujourd'hui, France de demain. 1943*, in Annexe 2, in *Le mythe de l'allergie française,* cit., p. 421.

49 On Doriot see also G.D. Allardyce, *The Political Transition of Jacques Doriot*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", I, 1966, 1, pp. 56-74. For similar transitions from the left to the extreme right see, for example, D.N. Baker, *Two Paths to Socialism: Marcel Déat and Marceau Pivert*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", XI, 1976, 1, pp. 107-28; and S. Goodfellow, *From Communism to Nazism: The Transformation of Alsatian Communists*, in "Journal of Contemporary History", XXVII, 1992, 2, pp. 232-57.

traversait une crise économique sans précédent; c'était au lendemain de l'arrivée au Pouvoir du gouvernement du Front Populaire. Au moment même où les communistes favorisés par les conservateurs sociaux étaient les maitres des usines. Il est né parce que les anciennes organisations politiques se sont révélées inefficaces. Notre chef, Jacques DORIOT, a créé le P.P.F. avec de militants venant d'une part du Parti Communiste lesquels étaient dégoûtés de la politique tortueuse de l'I.C. [Communist International] et d'autre part avec des gens clairvoyants alertés par le danger communiste et décidés à lui barrer la route […]. Ils se sont groupés autour de Doriot parce qu'il est qualifié pour connaitre les communistes et les combattre[50].

The bulletin also claimed that after the congress of St. Denis, the PPF already had 100,000 members – becoming 200,000 in 1937. In this year, and following the failure of the February 1934 incident, Doriot was one of the leaders who nurtured hopes of creating a front of nationalist, anti-democratic right-wingers[51]. The party philosophy was a mixture of corporatism and authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, and anti-communism[52]. It promoted the establishment of a "new man" and a novel French state. The PPF also became a catalyst for the fascist aspirations of the intellectuals Maurice Duverger and Paul Marion, who joined the party in the hope that Doriot might become the fascist leader of a new French renaissance.

This was the situation of the French fascist authoritarian right before the Nazi army violated the Maginot Line in 1940. The intellectual elaboration and fascist activism promoted by people such as La Rocque, Maurras, Brasillach, Valois, Doriot and Céline prepared Pétain's National Revolution after the military defeat and occupation, and the acceptance of the most radical "fascist" aspects of Vichy France. In fact, Vichy was initially influenced by Maurras's integral nationalism as well as by conservative Catholicism, but it also soon showed an anti-Semitic face. By 1944, it turned into a "police state in which the fascist influence became more evident"[53].

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50 *Pourquoi le Parti Populaire Française ?* in "La Brèche. Organe mensuel du Parti Populaire Française - Section Villeurbanne", n. 1, April 1937, pp. 1-2. See also La Section de Villerbanne, *P.P.F. à Villeurbanne.…*, in " La Brèche. Organe mensuel du Parti Populaire Française - Section Villerbanne", n. 1, March 1938, p. 1.

51 J. Vavasseur-Desperriers, *Le PPF, une formation radicale entre conservatisme et fascisme*, in *A droite de la droite. Droites radicales en France et en Grande-Bretagne au XXe siècle*, ed. P. Vervaecke, Presses universitaires du septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2012.

52 *Un mensonge*, in "L'Appelou émancipé mais Français. P.P.F. – Organe de la Section de Firminy", 1938; *Les gros trusts seront abattus,* in "L'Appelou émancipé mais Français. P.P.F. – Organe de la Section de Firminy", 1938.

53 A. Costa Pinto, *The nature of fascism revisited*, Social Science Monographs, Boulder 2012, p. 25.

On immunity

Fascism was obviously not a peculiarity of Italy and Germany. It subsequently becomes important to challenge all parochial interpretations of national histories referring to an "exceptionality" of the local extreme right between the wars. Conversely, some of these historiographical accounts seem to be based on a perverse desire to keep national memories immaculate and to obscure domestic violence and anti-democratic politics. In a volume that represented a landmark for scholars promoting a new scholarship on French history, Brian Jenkins notes that "the nature of France's response to the rise of European fascism during the 1930s, and subsequently to the Nazi occupation of 1940-44, has been a difficult subject for the nation's historians"[54]. Indeed, long before the 1930s, it was claimed that France had different social and political cultures and was, therefore, completely immune to fascism and significant anti-democratic political movements. Perceived either as a specific doctrine or as a movement of "brave men of action", fascism was a foreign – or *plutôt* Italian or German – product. Not surprisingly, this parochial historical interpretation denied any patterns of cross-fertilisation and political transfer between neighbouring countries and exaggerated the strength and resistance of France's *culture démocratique nationale*. Sternhell fiercely attacked this paradigm.

It was left to others – especially foreign scholars such as Sternhell himself, Paxton, Kevin Passmore, Soucy, William Irvine and Jenkins, but also a few French academics like Dobry – to challenge this *exceptionalist* historiography and the mythological view of a country that was immune to the fascist paradigm. This new narrative has led to some new, more articulated interpretations of contemporary political history. Meanwhile, academic debates finally started to focus on fascism both in the cultural and political life of inter-war France. The lack of charismatic leaders or parties, together with some other structural factors, cannot be seen as insurmountable obstacles in the study of any form of fascism. In fact, inter-war – and post-1945 – French fascism may be found to have melted into different environments[55].

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54 B. Jenkins, *Introduction: Contextualising the Immunity Thesis*, in *France in the Era of Fascism,* cit., p. 2.

55 Indeed, only the difficulty of establishing a unified movement broke the existence of a unique *fascism.* Soucy, one of the earliest students of French fascism, suggests that "as a European-wide phenomenon, fascism developed in different ways in different countries according to the different circumstances involved. Not all fascists were anti-Semites, nor was their only road to power 'marches on Rome'. Indeed, precisely because inter-

As I have suggested, this French academic orthodoxy granted a model of interpretation of the country's history based mainly on the exaltation of French democratic culture and on exceptionalism. It consequently developed an immunity thesis to fascism aimed to demonstrate that "those movements that displayed fascist characteristics were for the most part superficial imitations of something essentially 'foreign' and their political significance was anyway marginal"[56]. Much like some liberal readings of Italian fascism, historians thus regard Vichy and Pétain's National Revolution as a problematic, minor, parenthesis in the recent life of France. They also consider the Vichy Republic as "an artificial by-product of military defeat and occupation, a regime that would never have come about in the normal run of things and whose excesses were perpetrated under pressure from the occupying power"[57]. A champion of this "immune" rhetoric was the aforementioned Rémond, along with some members of his circle (close to Science Po in Paris), like Serge Berstein or Michel Winock – albeit to varying degrees. According to this very influential scholar, France lacked the conditions for the development of a distinctive fascist tradition, and the proto-fascist movements had only a very trivial following, importance and reputation. As a result, fascism had no space in the history of France's extreme right. Rémond proposed the previously mentioned triple distinction of the right: Legitimism, Orleanism and Bonapartism. However, this rather outdated classification cannot provide an exhaustive theoretical and empirical framework for the analysis of the universe of French right-wing extremism. It also seems to locate France at a distant point in the solar system, and most certainly outside inter-war and black-shirted Europe. This academic tendency furthermore tends to disregard the fact that France represented an important laboratory for modern forms of racism and right-wing extremism[58]. The latter materialised both in terms of ideas and everyday practices.

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war fascisms were so nationalistic, they lauded different national characteristics in their propaganda. Moreover, in France different fascist leagues […] had many overlapping goals and values […]. Despite these differences there was a basic underlying similarity". Soucy, *Centrist Fascism*, cit., pp. 349-50.

56 Jenkins, *Introduction*, cit., p. 2.

57 Ibid.

58 By way of example, Edouard Drumont can appropriately be considered the father of modern anti-Semitism. See, among others, J. Hellman, *Bernanos, Drumont, and the Rise of French Fascism*, in "The Review of Politics", LII, 1990, pp. 441-59.

Fascism found a certain place in various men, thinkers, actions, and ultra-nationalist movements such as Francisme, Le Faisceau, the PPF or the Croix de Feu. Moreover, it was represented by a whole galaxy of nationalist literature and even in modern art. As in other countries, it was not merely a political phenomenon. Some studies have highlighted this neglected feature. Looking at the history of the French avant-garde, for example, scholars have revealed the aesthetic dimension of French fascist myth-making. Fascists such as Thierry Maulnier, not to mention Valois, had indeed realised that modern art could be a useful ally in the fight for the realisation of national revolutions and the country's regeneration[59].

The fact that French fascists struggled to gain power or build a strong movement should not deter scholars from studying this phenomenon. Furthermore, if one insists on the exceptionality of French history as a product of a national historical *Sonderweg*, or – as one of the promoters of this interpretation wrote – if one accepts the argument that "le fascisme, en effet, est *inséparable de sa pratique*, *le totalitarisme*" then an analogous approach must be pursued for all other ideologies or parties[60]. Can communism only be analysed when it was in power or had established a dictatorship[61]? To prove the French immunity to fascism, it is enough to emphasise the absence of a distinctive French fascist party, followed by the claim that a (strong) party is fundamental for fascism or to control the population[62].

However, this interpretation lacks convincing historical evidence because it is based on a problematic reading of the political philosophy in question. This mostly fails to consider fascism a *European* phenomenon,

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59 See M. Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France,* Duke University Press, Durham 2007. On this aesthetic dimension of French fascism, and especially the relationship between literature and political extremism, see D. Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998.

60 S. Berstein, *La France des années trente allergique au fascisme. À propos de Zeev Sternhell*, in "Vingtième siècle", II, 1984, p. 88. On this point, see also M. Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France*, Seuil, Paris 2004, pp. 235-48.

61 Dobry even suggests a complete break with the *logique classificatoire*, a rigid comparison with successful fascisms, and retrospective interpretations on the (fascist) nature of various movements based simply on the outcomes of historical events – notably in terms of their capacity to gain power and promote overtly anti-democratic regimes. See M. Dobry, *La thèse immunitaire face aux fascismes. Pour une critique de la logique classificatoire*, in *Le mythe de l'allergie française*, cit., pp. 17-57; and M. Dobry, *February 1934 and the Discovery of French Society's Allergy to the "Fascist Revolution"*, in *France in the Era of Fascism,* cit., especially pp. 131-7.

62 Berstein, *France des année trente*, cit., p. 89.

which can exist as a pure intellectual *fact* or as movements with various and diverse national (successful or unsuccessful) permutations. In sum, even if Rémond and others do not see any fascism in France, "fascism played, and continues to play, a more influential role in French politics and in French political life" than is commonly thought[63]. However, their approach also (negatively) influenced public memory, up to the point that the possibility that

> celebrated figures of references in post-war France, with Resistance credentials, including prominent intellectuals, had loyally served the Vichy regime before changing horses in midstream, was hard to stomach. And to have to face the question of why these dignitaries of the new France had enthusiastically supported the National Revolution despite Vichy's anti-Jewish laws, the round-ups and the deportation of children, was simply intolerable[64].

Conclusion

This academic immunity has led to a rehabilitation of inter-war politics along with a minimisation of its xenophobic radicalism. Incidentally, by excluding the transnational – or international – nature of a native form of *European* fascism, or a generic form of fascism, historians have promoted a related exceptionalist version of the history of their local extreme right. Another dangerous outcome of these historiographical trends has been the democratic legitimisation of backward-looking neo-fascists in France, giving the impression that nothing happened during the inter-war period; from this perspective, they were not the successors of brutal fascist regimes or anti-parliamentary movements. Given this, the existence of a distinctive French version of fascism assumes pivotal importance, allowing for a better understanding of the immediate post-war and the contemporary extreme right in France. AF, for example, has been active in the post-war era. Although it was undoubtedly less prominent than other parties, its intellectual elaboration continued to influence extremist politics. AF was one of the first right-wing forces to reject European integration in the 1950s[65].

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63 C. Fieschi, *Fascism, populism and and the French Fifth Republic. In the shadow of democracy*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2004, p. 130.

64 Z. Sternhell, *Morphology of Fascism in France*, in *France in the Era of Fascism,* cit., p. 22.

65 H. Cucchetti, *« L'Action Française Contre l'Europe »: Militantisme Royaliste, Circulations Politico-Intellectuelles et Fabrique Du Souverainisme Français*, in "Politique Européenne", 4, 2014.

Another consequence of this parochial approach is the fact that contemporary parties such as the Front National (FN) have never been depicted as belonging to an even vaguely fascist world. When this was the case, "neo-fascism" was subsumed into a wide range of other *filières*. This is relevant because the FN was one of the main examples of right-wing extremism in Europe. The party was born in 1972, following the example of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano in Italy. From the 1980s onwards, it has made some noteworthy electoral gains. In 1983, its historical leader Jean-Marie Le Pen was elected *conseiller d'arrondissement*. He branded the xenophobic slogan *Paris to the Parisians*. In the 1980s, Le Pen became the most important extremist politician in Europe and enjoyed growing popularity. A couple of decades ago, his nationalist movement held a number of city councils that became a network for xenophobic policies. Since then, the FN (now rebranded as Rassemblement National) has achieved significant results. Even if the rhetoric on security, values, tradition, or immigration is often used by mainstream parties across the globe, France represents an interesting example. This shows that the extreme right was culturally as well as politically very active in both the inter-war years and the post-war era.

Le Pen has also stirred controversy for his historical interpretations, especially after watering down inter-war anti-Semitism or praising Vichy. This was not surprising, because Philippe Pétain's regime was still one of the main references for the post-war extreme right. It was evident how

> the FN has […] preserved its affinities with Vichy, whether in its conception of the nation and the family, its views on morality, education, women and abortion, its authoritarianism, its anti-communism, its exclusionary policy of 'national preference', or the anti-Semitism that breaks occasionally to the surface. Echoes of Vichy proliferate in the FN's imprecations against '*la décadence*', '*l'égalitarisme*' and '*le cosmopolitisme*'; in its fear of international conspiracies, notably '*l'internationale juive*'; in its calls for national regeneration ('*redressement national*' being a formula borrowed directly from the lexicon of Pétain); and in its open espousal of the Vichy trilogy '*Travail, Famille, Patrie*'[66].

It is therefore curious that a genuinely extreme-right group such as the FN has been a problematic object of classification for some historians. Even those who take the FN's anti-democratic approach more seriously have been reluctant to use the term "fascism" because they believe that it never

[66] J. Shields, *The Extreme Right in France. From Pétain to Le Pen*, Routledge, p. 307.

really emerged in the inter-war era [67]. The fact is that there are ties between interpretations of the extreme right in the 1920s–1930s and studies of the post-war resurgence of the phenomenon. Building on their previous studies, some French scholars have considered neo-fascism in the same way as inter-war fascism: as a marginal fringe or phenomenon that influenced the FN only in the early stages of its political life. If fascism never existed in France, how could the country possibly have produced a mass party whose credentials were genuinely neo-fascist, and consequently incompatible with the country's republican culture? Other labels were necessary, such as populism or national populism. In Winock's words, fascism in France "n'a que des référents éphémères, littéraires, ou groupusculaires. Les concepts de populisme (protestataire) et de national-populisme (identitaire) me semble aider mieux que le 'fascisme' passe-partout à la compréhension du phénomène"[68]. Similarly, Philippe Burrin claims that it is impossible to argue that "Le Front national soit un mouvement fasciste camouflé, malgré la présence de fascistes dans ses rangs. Le phénomène lepéniste s'inscrit pleinement dans la tradition nationale-populiste, avec son bagage de nationalisme exclusif et xénophobe, son discours rudimentaire et ses valeurs autoritaires"[69].

Are xenophobic and exclusionary nationalism, and authoritarian values, the sole distinctive features of this French national-populist tradition[70]? Were European (neo-)fascisms not equally intolerant, authoritarian, and ultra-nationalist? Are those features not shared by other post-war extremist parties across Europe as well? *Populism* and *national populism* were some of the problematic answers given on the nature of the contemporary far right. Once again, certain academic circles have considered the FN to be a French peculiarity rather than the national version of a transnational phenomenon, or the ideal type of a pan-European form of xenophobic right-wing extremism. In doing so, they have promoted a vision of national history that supported the normalisation of extreme-right rhetoric.

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67 P. Milza, *Le Front national: droite extrême ou national-populisme?*, in *Histoire des droites en France*, vol. 1, *Politique*, ed. J.-F. Sirinelli, Gallimard, Paris 1992, p. 729.

68 M. Winock, *Populismes Français*, in "Vingtième Siècle", LV, 1997, p. 90.

69 P. Burrin, *Le fascisme*, in *Histoire des droites en France*, vol. 1, *Politique*, cit., p. 647.

70 I previously criticised this specific approach in A. Mammone, *The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism across Britain, France and Italy*, in "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", XVI, 17, 2, 2009.