

## **Making Sense of Populism: Jean-Marie Le Pen and the French Antitotalitarian Moment**

In 1988, the far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen ran for the French presidency with a message remarkably similar to the one Donald Trump would run on in 2016. Le Pen attacked all the major politicians as equally corrupt and out of touch. “Tous pourris, tous les mêmes,” he declared—they are “all rotten, all the same.” His campaign was centered on opposition to immigration. And it thrived on rhetorical excess. Self-consciously adopting the emblem of “populism,” he deployed an angry, flamboyant style unlike anything France had seen in decades. To the disbelief of the French political class, Le Pen garnered over four million votes in the first round of the 1988 election (15% of the electorate). His performance was described as a “political earthquake.” It established his party, the National Front, as a lasting political force.

Le Pen’s stunning performance would also profoundly influence French political thought. What kind of figure was Le Pen? And why had this novel right-wing partisan movement burst onto the scene in France? The intellectuals who engaged most forcefully with these questions—and sought, most profoundly, to understand “the Le Pen phenomenon”—came from a circle that had participated during the 1970s in what has come to be called “the French antitotalitarian moment” (it is also known as “the French liberal revival”). The founding participants of this group included Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Francois Furet. A younger generation was composed of such figures as Jacques Julliard, Marcel Gauchet, and Pierre Rosanvallon. At the end of the 1980s, these figures would all comment extensively on the 1988 presidential election and the rise of Le Pen. To a remarkable extent, they invented the currently prevalent theory of “populism.” There has been a great deal of scholarship on how these authors turned against the “Old Left” during the 1970s. However, their writings on the “New Right” in the 1980s have been entirely overlooked. This paper will be among the first-ever treatments of the subject.

In the aftermath of the 1988 French presidential elections, three competing approaches to understanding the rise of Le Pen were expressed within the French liberal revival. The first, exemplified by Claude Lefort, was to treat Le Pen as a new manifestation of the totalitarian threat. For Lefort, the National Front was analogous to fascism while populism more generally represented an authoritarian and illiberal form of democracy that deified the people in a manner reminiscent of Jacobinism.

A second and very different response was expressed by Francois Furet. Unlike Lefort, Furet argued that Le Pen was qualitatively different from earlier totalitarian or illiberal movements in French history and significantly less dangerous. What Le Pen signified, for Furet, was that France had entered a new historical era, in which liberal democracy was more secure and its enemies less imposing.

The third response was articulated by Pierre Rosanvallon. While Rosanvallon agreed with Furet that Le Pen was not a totalitarian figure, he believed that Le Pen did represent a genuine challenge to liberal democratic politics—and one with deep roots in French history. What Le Pen promised his supporters was a direct and organic connection to representative institutions. In his 1988 essay on Le Pen (and in his magisterial trilogy on the history of French ideas published between 1992-2000), Rosanvallon argued, first, that this kind of promise had been a recurrent

theme in French political life since the Revolution, and, second, that it had frequently given rise to pathological movements. Unlike totalitarian movements, which claim to absolutely represent society or the nation *against* representative institutions, Le Pen exemplified a different kind of movement, one no less recurrent in French history, which claimed to absolutely represent society or the nation *within* representative institutions, promising that it alone can restore true representation.

To a remarkable degree, the debate within the French antitotalitarian moment that followed Le Pen's 1988 breakthrough profoundly foreshadowed our current discussion over populism. It is striking how many interpretations of Trump, for instance, were originally asserted about Le Pen. Yet in one key respect, the debate following Le Pen's rise proved quite different than the one following the rise of Trump's. Despite their different positions, Lefort, Furet and Rosanvallon each sought to interpret Le Pen within a history of ideas and events that went back to the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century. They were convinced that only within such an expansive historical horizon could one make sense of his "populism." This was a project that Rosanvallon in particular sought to follow through on with his 1990s historical trilogy. While we have inherited the French antitotalitarian moment's initial interpretations of Le Pen, a large-scale history of modern political ideas to make sense of our populist moment is yet to be written.