

## *On the French Right — New and Old: An Interview with Alain de Benoist<sup>1</sup>*

Frank Adler

**Adler:** We should begin discussing the present state of the Right in France, because the initial project of the New Right was to renew this community, to counter the hegemony of the Left. Talking about that hegemony is difficult since the Left is in a deep crisis. What we find in France now is a united Center-Right party in power; a Left leaderless, divided, and not knowing where to turn; and a Right with no clear ideas, principles, or strategies. Mégrét was a fiasco. Le Pen remains in a permanent *ghetto*. What do you make of the present situation?

**Benoist:** I think the situation has completely changed in the space of thirty years. When, in May 1968, the New Right emerged, that is, what later came to be called the *New Right*, things were relatively simple: no one claimed openly to be part of the Right, indeed, the term was hardly used anymore. There was a Left hegemony, quite evident within university circles and, generally speaking, among intellectuals. The objective was to reconstitute ideas and concepts, developed through an encyclopedic process, to create a structured discourse in every domain of thought and knowledge. I can't say that this objective has yet been achieved. Thirty years later, this work continues. It has given life to a great number of articles, reviews, books, symposia, meetings and conferences. Obviously, it was not a fly-by-night phenomenon. It lasted a long while — a rare occurrence in France.

What happened? First, the world has changed. From the 1970s on, Left hegemony slowly disappeared and was replaced by a quiet hegemony of former leftist intellectuals more or less tied to the dominant political and economic system — intellectuals who abandoned Marxism or radical ideas in favor of a sort of liberalism or social democratic centralism. Yet, they remained very intolerant, and extended their influence beyond universities to journals, publishing houses, and the media in general. From this viewpoint, the situation today is rather paradoxical. Compared to the 1970s, there has been a clear decline in Left hegemony. At the

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1. This interview took place in Paris, Jan. 11, 2003. Trans. by Marie-Hélène Adler.

same time, there has been a growing intolerance. The result is an ideology that no longer has much to say, but wants to prevent the articulation of all non-conformist thought. This was best exemplified by the so-called “Appel à la vigilance.”<sup>2</sup> Today any real intellectual discussions in France have simply disappeared.

Second, the two main intellectual camps have splintered and crumbled. This means that the notions of Right and Left no longer adequately describe the present ideological groups or families of thought. Moreover, this tendency was accelerated by the impact of many political and historical events that provoked cross-sectional reactions within the dominant political families. I am thinking particularly of the European Union and the outbreak of major conflicts such as the Gulf War, the Kosovo War, and the War in Iraq. Each time such events occur, the Right splinters and falls apart, and so does the Left. Take the European question. There are people on the Right who are completely pro-EU, as well as some who remain completely hostile to the idea. On the Left, one finds the same thing. Thus, each time this occurs, the traditional ideological families break up and certain Left-Right and Right-Left affinities resurface. Another typical example was the phenomenon, very specific to France, of *souverainisme*. This refers to those who are profoundly attached to the idea of national independence, whose mouthpiece for a while was Jean-Pierre Chevènement. Actually, those who rallied around him came both from the Right and the Left. Paul-Marie Coûteaux, who has sympathies for both Le Pen and Chevènement, is just one exponent of this orientation.

Ideologically speaking, this split is even more evident, because we have witnessed the crisis of what Francois Lyotard called the “grand narratives.” The overarching institutional ideologies — Marxism, Structuralism, Freudianism — have more or less disappeared. Today, French intellectual life, which is not particularly brilliant, has organized itself around writers such as Alain Finkelkraut, Régis Debray, Pierre-André Taguieff, Jean-Claude Michéa, Alain Caillé, and Michel Maffesoli. At times, they have interesting thoughts, but they cannot be appreciated in terms of Right or Left. This impasse has been the object of many debates: What is Right? What is Left? The concepts of Right and Left were born with modernity, at the time of the French Revolution. But modernity today is ending, and we are entering the so-called postmodern era with all the ambiguities attached to the term. Ideological divides are no longer those described by the traditional Right or Left. There will be new ones. Feuding camps will always face off, but now they will be determined by a completely changed world. I already gave the example of the European Union or of the Gulf War, but there are also all the problems related to technology, for example biotechnologies, which provoke either positive or hostile feelings in completely different milieus (the debate on cloning and such topics).

Third and finally, the Right always had limits, which were rather difficult to establish. Where do they end toward the center and toward the Far Right? As a

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2. See “The Appeal to Vigilance in France,” in *Telos* 98-99 (Winter-Spring 1994), pp. 135-208.

man of the Right, I feel that a psychological typology might make more sense than a purely political or ideological one. That would suggest that the distinction between a man of the Right and a man of the Left still retains some validity, but only when considered from a psychological viewpoint. In real life, however, as opposed to analytic constructs, there are several types of men of the Right and the Left, and also mixed temperaments. Thus, I am probably the prototype of someone who came from the Right, but whose temperament is fundamentally that of the Left. Actually, what became clear to me was the degree to which the contemporary Right is almost totally uninterested in ideas. In that sense, the project of thirty years ago, to develop ideas so that people might have some intellectual ammunition, was one that could not have succeeded, simply because ideas cannot be given to people who do not want them. The man of the Right is not a man of ideas. There are few intellectuals on the Right. There are writers on the Right, there is literature, there are historians on the Right, but the intellectual as a cultural figure who is trying to understand, to explain, to theorize, that is something rather foreign to the Right. The Right is essentially reactive, not reflexive. It determines itself, either positively by enthusiasm, or negatively by indignation. The man of the Right sees something happening, and he immediately reacts, saying: "it is fantastic or horrible, something has to be done!" That is the Right's reactive side. Of course, the Left has reactions too, but against the Right. Furthermore, the Right does not have ideas so much as it has convictions, which are existential substitutions for a faith that one defends and never questions. In fact, that is the reverse of the intellectual process. In an intellectual process, one always questions one's ideas, because thought is never static, it is always a work in progress.

**Adler:** The Left too has its traditions and scared cows that are often held beyond serious reflection and criticism.

**Benoist:** Yes, but throughout its history the intellectual Left has always recognized the importance of reflection and theoretical development. One idea leads to another. People wonder if they did not make a mistake holding a position perhaps incompatible with some of their other positions. People debate issues. On the Right, there are no debates. When quarrels erupt there, they are always between men who detest so and so, who disagree. Never in Right journals does one find debates similar to those often found in Left journals. This distinction is even more striking if one compares extremes: the Extreme Left and the Extreme Right. I have read many communist and Trotskyist journals in which ideological discussions go on and on with an overabundance of quotes and bibliographic references. With the Extreme Right, it is just the reverse: there is never a discussion! Something is simply asserted on the basis of fixed values, such as courage, honor, and order — values based more on fixed moral convictions than on political observation and reflection.

**Adler:** Maybe there is another difference linked to that. Historically, on the Left, there had always been the commitment to realize an objective *telos*, for

example, Socialism. But today, if you ask people on the Right what goal they are pursuing, no one would say fascism or Nazism.

**Benoist:** Yes, that is true, even though it is unfair to imagine that a rightist *telos* could have no form other than fascism or Nazism. Actually, very few people on the Right are able to say clearly what kind of society and institutions they would like. The models they think about are only reminiscences of an idealized past. When I say that the Right is reactive, I also mean that the Right is always or almost always trying to preserve something that is in the process of disappearing. Characteristic of the Right is bitterness, sneering, derision, regret, nostalgia — all reactions showing that the Right’s ideal is always foregone, always spent: great examples from the past, great men of the past; it was so much better before, it was so beautiful, etc.

This goes toward what you said earlier, that the Left had at least a *telos*. Today, the difficult situation of the Left stems from disillusionment with a *telos* that did not work. The country of “real socialism” did not produce much enthusiasm. Models crumbled one after the other, and the idea of progress is in crisis (that is, people have lost the conviction that the future automatically will be better). Consequently, the Left now is comprised by two groups: On the one hand, a small minority that more or less retains its revolutionary inspiration, and attempts to legitimate it by the ongoing reality of problems such as exclusion, unemployment, racism, especially with reference to a growing number of those victimized people that Marcuse called *les sinistrés du progrès* (people left behind by the “triumphal” increase of commercial exchanges, by technological changes, by the needs of a society based more and more on cognitive abilities). For that part of the Left and Extreme Left, this is proof that, ultimately, there will still be a revolution. However, it is only a vague hope, with no clear perspectives about what will have to change. More than a real revolutionary will, it is a moral protest. On the other hand, there are the immense majority of the big Left battalions, formerly communists, Maoists, Troskists, etc., who no longer believe in revolution, who think we live in the only society possible, that, of course, we can always reform and improve, but that there are no fundamental alternatives to the way of life we have. Like Fukuyama, these people believe that we have come to the end of history. Henceforth, re-centering Right and Left, a mixing of the Center Right and the Center Left, a marriage of social liberalism and of liberal socialism (in the European sense). This has led to a perverse political consequence in that it justifies identical centrist politics from the Left and the Right which do not meet people’s needs or expectations. There is thus a chain reaction: the re-centering of the parties leads the electorate to see that all politicians say the same thing, that no one is more successful than the other, that no one is more honest than the other. Because of that, either it does not vote any more, and the rate of abstention increases, or else they vote for purely protest parties of the Right or the Left, for Le Pen or the Trotskyist Arlette Laguiller — for candidates they know cannot gain power, for candidates who do not really want to win. With this protest vote it wants to teach

mainstream politicians a lesson. Thus, there is now a divide between “the people below,” as we say now, and a bureaucratic-managerial “new” political class. There is thus a growing identity between the political and the ideological field, because the evolution of the ideological field has favored this relativization of the notions of Right and Left, and the re-centering one sees in the political scene.

**Adler:** Yes, but it is interesting to note the ideological weapons one still uses against the other. For the Left, it is always vigilance against fascism; for the Right, it is vigilance against communism

**Benoist:** There is not perfect symmetry. The Right, as it is reactive, and, as you said, having no *telos*, defines itself very often only as the “contrary” of the people against whom it fights. The Right draws its very existence from the existence of its enemies. For a century, the formidable adversary was communism. Consequently, for the Right, the classic sin of the Left was that it was leading to communism or it allied itself with communism. When Mitterand was elected, many people believed that the Red Army could soon come to Paris, that houses were going to be raided, even people who were not idiots believed that. Then communism disappeared, the Soviet system collapsed. It is interesting to observe that, unlike fascism, communism almost immediately became historicized and relegated to the past. Anyway, after that, the anti-communist argument, did not work any more. The Extreme Right needed to replace its enemy, and the easiest way was to make foreign workers a target. As luck would have it, immigrants came after the communists were gone. They succeeded them with this further aggravating element: immigrants were attacked not because of their ideas, like the communists, but because of their very nature, because of their existence, and in a manner which nourishes racism and xenophobia, etc., because what is reproached, regarding immigrants, is the fact that they are *here*. Very quickly, the criticism of immigration became extended to a criticism of Islam, just because many immigrants are Moslems. This was also triggered, of course, by the development of a world wave of radical Islamism, of islamic terrorism, produced by the eclipse of secular Arab nationalist forces in the Middle East and by the American policy toward the Palestinian problem. Huntington’s thesis about a so-called “clash of civilizations” was what dealt the final blow. For Catholics, this thesis was also reminiscent of past Islamic-Christian conflicts. Of course, this is only a very general sketch. But it explains how, in France, most of the radical Right quickly linked immigration and an image of Islam confused with Islamic terrorism. Islamism was assimilated with Islam, Islam with immigrants, and immigrants with Islamism, so that the ordinary Arab grocer is presumed to be an Al Qaeda terrorist.

Moreover, we also have entered into a world of threatening, unfamiliar networks, described by Ulrich Beck as one where a new notion of risk has become dominant. Beck argues convincingly that risk, in the contemporary sense, is something very different than “danger,” classically understood. Risk is omnipresent, contrary to danger, which is limited and localized. Today, there are networks,

there are risks, and risks of all types: Aids, new epidemic diseases, pollution, oil tankers on the coast, bombs, Islamists. Everywhere, people imagine themselves to be surrounded by others who look normal but might be terrorists, carriers of a contagious disease, and so on. It is easy to see how this culture of risk becomes a culture of fear, and how this culture of fear then becomes a culture of fantasy. If one adds to that legitimate anxieties caused by an objective increase in insecurity and unemployment, it becomes clear how the problem of immigration gives rise to a multitude of fantasies, beyond whatever real problems might be posed by immigrants. These immigrants are systematically thought to be unemployed, drug traffickers, Islamists, revolutionaries, who want to transform France into a mosque . . . everything falls into place. So much for the Right!

For the Left, it is a bit different. It is clear (or it should be) that in 2003 anti-fascism is totally anachronistic and obsolete. The time of fascism and communism is over. The curious persistence of this residual anti-fascism can be accounted for with a macro- and a micro-explanation. The macro-explanation deals with the differential treatment afforded to fascism-Nazism and communism. They have never been treated in the same way. One needs only to look at television and cinema to see that films are constantly produced to “keep alive the memory” of one, while the other has more or less already been quietly forgotten. There is still no equivalent of *Schindler’s List* to describe the world of the Gulag. Sixty years after its disappearance, fascism remains a threatening historical myth, kept alive for all kinds of reasons, and thus politically instrumentalizable. Anti-communism can no longer be instrumentalizable against the Left, but anti-fascism can still be instrumentalized against the Right, in particular to prevent the Right from allying itself with the Extreme-Right, as has happened with Haider or Le Pen. The micro-explanation is that most people who signed the *Appel à la vigilance* are former communists or former members of the Extreme-Left, who repudiated almost everything, who betrayed everything, who abandoned all of their ideas, either opportunistically, or more honestly by the evolution of their ideas. However, they are annoyed at having done this, so they keep something that has not changed at all: an anti-fascism, as virulent today as it was when they were Maoists and Trotskyites, and actually even more virulent, since that is the only thing that allows them to say that they have remained faithful to the ideals of their youth.

**Adler:** Morin actually said something like that: The weaker the Left, the more virulent is their denunciation, for that is the only remaining weapon.

**Benoist:** Of course. One ends up in a surrealist predicament where there is a compulsion to denounce a fascism that does not exist, to accuse people who are not fascist, since the only ones who could objectively be described as fascist are found in groups unable to change the political landscape, even if they can occasionally perform some violent acts. Stressing constantly an imaginary “past danger” is also a good way to be blind about real dangers or to mask today’s real problems.

**Adler:** What sense can one make of the sudden and rather remarkable popu-

larity of Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior, or “Speedy Sarkozy” as he has been dubbed in the French press? Though he has been attacked by the Left for his aggressive stance against crime, in fact he put in place some of the same policies that had been advocated by Chevènement and Vaillant, his predecessors in Jospin’s government.

**Benoist:** Now, that is another problem. First, Sarkozy knows that crime is real, that people have had enough of the rise of delinquency and such. He also knows, because he is a cynical politician, that many people on the Right vote for Le Pen for that particular reason. Thus, he wants to look like Speedy Sarkozy, who unleashes his supermen night and day, here seizing a presumed terrorist, there having someone else arrested. He knows that this will delight the Right. On the other hand, on the Left there has been a definite evolution. For a long time the Left upheld a classical humanism that expressed itself this way: crime is but a fantasy, there is only a feeling of a crime wave that is used to justify repression. Today, a lot of people on the Left realize that this is not true, because they see their electors, their working class electors, voting for Le Pen for that very reason. Moreover, if one considers real numbers, problems such as delinquency in schools have been getting worse. Many people of the Left are beginning to say that, indeed, more order is needed in schools. As they have abandoned the libertarian ideas of May 68, some feel order really needs to be restored. Thus, Sarkozy is more accepted today. Except for a tiny minority, his actions do not provoke the great indignation one would have witnessed thirty years ago.

Another factor is the objective participation of the immigrant population, those with an immigrant background, in criminal activities. In France, around 60% of the prison population is of foreign origin, which is enormous, somewhat comparable to the US, where the majority of prison inmates is African-American. This state of affairs fuels all kinds of interpretations and some fantasies. In France however, we have also a very sizeable Jewish community, which fifteen years ago campaigned for the defense of immigrants with organizations like SOS Racisme. This community now realizes that, partly as a consequence of the Israel-Palestine conflict, a judeophobic attitude is growing in immigrant milieus, in the *banlieues* (poor suburbs where many Immigrants live). Maybe one could compare what happened in the US, between the time when the Jewish-American community supported the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of a phenomenon like Farakan. The only difference is that in France we are not dealing with African-Americans, but with Arabs. In the US there is some tension between Jews and blacks, often Black Muslims, Farakan’s followers, etc. In France we have Muslims identifying with the Palestinians, so that many members of the Jewish community slid more and more toward the Right to the extent, in some cases, of voting for Le Pen.

**Adler:** Like Jo Goldenberg, owner of the famous Marais delicatessen, who before the first round of the presidential election said he intended to vote for Le Pen.

**Benoist:** There is a symmetrical evolution. As anti-Jewish feelings develop

among French Muslims, so do anti-Arab feelings within the Jewish community. These feelings are much stronger with the Sephardic Jews, who today constitute most of the French Jewish community and come from the French Northern African territories. Often, these Jews fled Algeria when they were ten or fifteen years old, chased by the War of Independence, in a climate of extreme violence. Their arrival after 1962, precipitated a significant transformation of the French Jewish community, which had been mainly of Ashkenazi origin and much more inclined toward the Left than it is today. One should not forget that many Algerian Jews were in the OAS, and today they must be thinking that the conflict is still going on. This colonial or Algerian background explains a lot, because the feelings of many are expressed in an extreme, but very revealing manner: “We did not have a French Algeria then, but we are going to have an Algerian France now,” or “They kicked us out, and now they are invading us.” This background is very important.

**Adler:** That judeophobia so widely reported in the press seems to me more a pathological reaction by young Arabs to uprootedness, alienation, and social exclusion than reflective of a deeply held and historically transmitted anti-Semitism. The older generation, in fact, cohabited with Jews very well, often in the same neighborhoods, just as they did earlier in North Africa.

**Benoist:** That is right. It is young people who are the most responsive to the radical Islam. However, this judeophobia, although real, should not be exaggerated, as is commonly the case in American papers. In France also, some people magnify it today, either in the Jewish community, because we always magnify the wrongs we are subjected to, or by other observers, usually knowledgeable, but who on this point are mistaken (and here I am thinking of Pierre-André Taguieff, who has begun to do what he formerly denounced in others), that is, identify this incontestable judeophobia, popular with young immigrants of the *banlieues*, with anti-Zionism or criticisms of Israel. You cannot put in the same bag *banlieue* youths writing hostile inscriptions on a synagogue and people such as Gisèle Halimi, Edgar Morin, Daniel Sallenave, who are certainly pro-Palestinian or anti-Zionist, but not at all judeophobic. This is important, because in the US there are so many articles that give the impression that in France we are living in a quasi-Third Reich. This judeophobia, fortunately, has been responsible for only a few things (incidents, insults, one or two synagogues were torched), but that turned out to be an unrelated accident).

**Adler:** Not in Marseille.

**Benoist:** True, not in Marseille. There were some incidents and doubtless there will be others, but this is not a situation of pogroms, of racial laws, or concentration camps. Fortunately, no one has been killed yet.

**Adler:** Yes, and one might also note the difference between two mass demonstrations in Paris. At the pro-Palestinian demonstration, none of France’s major politicians could be spotted. Only a few celebrities from the Extreme Left were there, while at a demonstration in support of French Jews . . .



**Benoist:** All major political parties were there. That is a great difference. If there is a clear, localized judeophobia in some circles, that is nothing common to the Islamophobia that is expressed by some readers of Huntington's theories or, above all, Oriana Fallaci's incredibly racist book. If one had substituted the word "Jew" for the word "Arab," Fallaci's book would have been forbidden. There was a lawsuit, but the book was not censored. One has to keep a sense of proportion in these matters. Now, to return to the Right, what is striking about the issue of immigration is its relative support for the themes of exclusion and xenophobia, themes too often substituted for a reasonable critique of immigration. That is why I disagreed with the National Front (FN) from the very outset. Campaigning only against immigration implies an ongoing simplification. For most of Le Pen's followers, things are very simple: there is an enemy, the Arabs, what are perjoratively called the *Bougnouls*, and they have to be kicked out. How this might be possible in Europe today, of course, is a question nobody cares about. For the great majority of the extreme Right, xenophobia is a quick substitute for any kind of serious reflection. It is striking that the FN, which was and objectively remains a relatively important movement (Le Pen obtained up to 15% of the votes, roughly four million electors), only enjoys the support of a totally mediocre press, writing at the lowest cultural and intellectual level. This is the first time in French history that an Extreme Right movement produces nothing at the cultural level. There was not a single book of ideas, not one famed intellectual associated with the movement. This is quite revealing, both of the degeneration of the Right and the Extreme Right. It is in marked contrast with the period between the two world wars, for example, when it was still possible to find on the Right or on the Extreme Right many great literary and intellectual talents. Today, you have a flat encephalogram. The electoral amplitude of the Le Pen phenomenon cannot mask the extraordinary political and intellectual impoverishment of that family. I personally expect nothing from it.

**Adler:** Perhaps Mégret's initiative was its last chance for a renewal.

**Benoist:** But his movement was typical of the Right. Look at the facts. There was a big party, the FN, and in it there were the usual ongoing quarrels between individuals, never ideological debates. Mégret was number two who wanted to be number one. Thus, all those who resented Le Pen bet on Mégret. They forgot one important thing, Le Pen might well have had some defects, but he had electors. Mégret had supporters among local leaders, but not electors. And electors who vote for the FN were not ready, of course, to vote for a second-hand copy of the same thing. In addition, Mégret did not possess the means, the temperament, the charisma, or the presence to touch the voters. Le Pen is a political animal, a true politician. When he speaks, many recognize themselves in him. When Mégret speaks, everyone laughs. His drawbacks are his unattractiveness, his technocratic profile, and his unsympathetic personality. You cannot say that he looks like a nice guy, and certainly not like a man in whom most lower-class voters could rec-

ognize themselves. Moreover he adopted an absurd, contradictory strategy: he wanted both to be more extremist than the FN in the fight against immigration, so much so that he accused Le Pen of being an Islamophile, and, at the same time, sufficiently moderate to be accepted by the Chiraquian majority as a viable partner. These goals were totally irreconcilable. He also wanted to accomplish this with people who individually were often more extremist than Le Pen. The result was that everybody was disappointed. The M egretistes first received 3% of the vote, then 2%, then 1%, then 0%. When M egret initially broke from Le Pen, I wrote in my book, *Derni ere ann ee*, that they were disappointed Le Pen supporters, who would soon become disappointed M egret supporters. It was at the time of the Congress of Marignane. In fact, it happened much faster than I imagined.

**Adler:** I happened to be at Marignane as an observer. This meeting was extraordinary. It took place in a large hall, actually a gymnasium, with people everywhere, full of enthusiasm. It was a bizarre mix of older, very pleasant, moderate, provincial people, and young extremists. Though within the FN the M egretistes were called “New Rightists” by Le Pen’s entourage, the Congress actually began with a greeting by the old militant and notorious anti-Semite Fran ois Brigneau, hardly someone close to the New Right by age or temperament.

**Benoist:** That can be explained. Brigneau had been a life-long friend of Le Pen, and including him in the program was a conspicuous wink at FN supporters: “if Brigneau, Le Pen’s old comrade, is joining us, then you must join us too.” The error of M egret was to forget that a political party prospers not only when it has militants and leaders, but above all when it has voters. M egret simply does not appeal to voters: he is a cabinet man, a high civil servant. He may be a good organizer, a good number two. But a good number two will not necessarily be a good number one. Take another example, that of a singer and impresario. The impresario thinks: Why can I not be the one singing? The impresario kills the singer in order to sing himself, but that does not work. Even if the impresario is very good at his job, he does not necessarily know how to sing.

**Adler:** In retrospect, it is ironic that within the FN the M egretistes had a reputation for exceptional organizational skill and political competence. This is precisely why in the mid-1980s Le Pen recruited the so-called new rightists, just as the FN was making the transition from a *groupesqule* to a political party of national significance, with organization and expertise. Yet, when they broke from the FN and formed the MNR, the M egretistes proved to be both organizationally incompetent and lacking any political savvy.

**Benoist:** Therein lies the great problem. It is very common for people of the Right to want to engage in politics. But they do not know how, because they lack any idea as to what politics really is. Julien Freund coined the word “impolitical” to describe the kind of politics undertaken by people who do not understand what politics really is, its essence, its goal, its limitations. I think the Right is fundamentally *impolitical*, either because it believes that good politics is more or less a

return to the past, a restoration, or because it believes that politics, above all, is a matter of ethics, a kind of “sacrificial” action, a field where “moral virtues” have to be illustrated, an eternal “struggle,” etc. But politics is only a patient search for the best ways to achieve the common good. That is why most voters seek concrete responses to their problems, which unfortunately they do not obtain very often.

When Mégret split with the FN, some newspapers wrote that this had been organized by the New Right. This, of course, was completely wrong. In fact, all the alleged connections between the New Right and the FN or MNR imagined by the press were pure fantasies. Mégret was never part of the New Right. Yvan Blot and Jean-Yves Le Gallou were members of the New Right thirty years ago. They left it twenty-five years ago, not to enter the Extreme Right, but rather the very respectable and classical parties of Jacques Chirac (the RPR) and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (the UDF). It was only after this, and years later, that they jumped from the RPR and the UDF to the FN. As for myself, I never voted for the FN. The only one that came from the New Right was Pierre Vial, who these last few years has broken with Le Pen, then with Mégret. When leaving Mégret’s movement, Vial accused Mégret of being a stalking horse for Chirac. Things are probably simpler than that. At the time of Mégret’s split with Le Pen, Chirac’s party might have encouraged Mégret because he was considered to be potentially useful in weakening the FN. Afterwards, Chirac’s supporters certainly would have had no scruples against allying themselves with Mégret had he miraculously obtained 15 or 20% of the vote. But, since Mégret received only 1 or 0,5% of the vote, he no longer counted.

**Adler:** What you said about Vial is interesting. At the famous December 5, 1998, meeting of the FN’s *conseil national*, when a fight broke out between Mégret’s supporters and Le Pen’s (someone actually recorded the meeting secretly, and I obtained a copy of the cassette), Le Pen directly attacked Vial, saying “Organize a congress of GRECE, you might have a majority there . . .”

**Benoist:** Yes, they smeared each other. Le Pen sees conspiracies everywhere, and it is possible that he might have thought Vial was acting against him because he was pushed by the New Right. But that was not the case. In the years that followed, as I said, Vial left Mégret’s movement and, strangely enough, as a regional counselor he endorsed the nomination of Le Pen for the 2002 presidential elections, when it was said that Le Pen might not have enough signatures to be a candidate (as you know, in France one must obtain 500 signatures from city mayors, members of Parliament, regional counselors, etc. to qualify as a candidate for a presidential race). That was some kind of retaliation against Mégret, who disappointed him. But Vial did not return to the FN. On the whole, his reaction was mainly emotional. Once again, you see here how the people of the Right are “reactive.” They love somebody, or they do not love him anymore; this is always more important than analysis and reflection. Given Vial’s behavior toward Le Pen, the most amusing thing is that, around 1978 or 1979, Le Pen signed up to attend a colloquium of GRECE. I decided to turn him down, the per-

son who actually kicked him out when he appeared was none other than Vial. This might appear as a portrait of someone who is not very rigorous, but Vial has always been sincere. He is also a courageous man, motivated mainly by enthusiasm, by sacrificial militancy. He probably thinks the best way or dying would be of a cardiac arrest while putting up posters in the streets. . . .

*Adler:* Or, better yet, in the forest, given his weird (if not actually racist) distinction between wholesome “men of the forest” and devious “men of the desert.”

*Benoist:* Maybe. But young people love him, because this exemplary side is a great inspiration for people of the Right. Vial’s qualities are real. But politics is something else.

*Adler:* Mégret is clearly finished, and within the FN there is now an open conflict for eventual succession between Marine Le Pen and Bruno Gollnisch, and behind Gollnisch . . .

*Benoist:* This is complicated. Problems of succession are always very dangerous for the Right, precisely for the reasons I gave earlier. Everything is so personalized, so linked to emotions, that when a leader disappears, all hell breaks loose. The leader’s subordinates immediately begin to compete and fight among themselves. You notice that in the history of fascism, and it is an important difference with communism. When the Secretary-General of a communist party disappears, there are mechanisms that assure succession.

*Adler:* With fascism, classically understood, defeat in war precluded any succession. The Italian and German defeats made succession a moot point.

*Benoist:* Yes, it was the war, but generally, when there is no war, succession never goes well, except maybe with Franco. You must remember that Le Pen has a big flaw, which explains his quarrel with Mégret: Le Pen does not like to be contradicted. He does not like to surround himself with very bright people. He does not like anyone to outshadow him and in the history of his party, and has always eliminated people who could compete with him. This is the main cause of his quarrel with Mégret, who took advantage of his position to acquire more and more influence. Had Mégret quietly waited for Le Pen’s death, he would have succeeded him without great difficulty. Thus, there are not many valuable people today among FN leaders. That is the first point. As far as the dauphins go, Gollnisch is intelligent, educated, but does not have much charisma. He is rather lazy, a very poor organizer; he is not so bad on TV, but the French would say there is a flakey side to him. I do not see masses of electors voting for him. But Marine Le Pen has two advantages. First, she is a woman, and she has on certain points a woman’s reflexes. Thus, she confronted Bernard Anthony on the question of abortion, because she knows what abortion represents for most women. She is not at all a militant Catholic, and religion is not her dominant concern. Moreover, she does not have the old-timers’ nostalgic past, of Vichy or Algeria. She is a young woman of our time. The second advantage, of course, is her name, Le Pen. Familial legitimacy counts, especially on the Right. This is why Mégret at one time instrumental-

ized Le Pen's other daughter, and enlisted her mainly to use Le Pen's name.

**Adler:** Marie-Caroline.

**Benoist:** Yes. So, my prediction is that should Le Pen disappear tomorrow, and the choice is between Marine Le Pen or Gollnisch, Marine would probably win. And in that case, there could be a new split. At any rate, it is unlikely that Marine Le Pen would have sufficient strength and ability to maintain the FN current electoral level, let alone make it grow. Everything depends on the people surrounding her about whom I know practically nothing. From what I read or hear, they seem to be "modern," coming from her generation.

**Adler:** In fact, her organization is called "Generation Le Pen."

**Benoist:** Yes, the Generation Le Pen. That is to say, young people without exaggerated nostalgia, who realize that it is a handicap for the FN to drag around old members of the OAS, Vichy, etc. That does not concern them anymore. It is a generational phenomenon.

**Adler:** They are not very Catholic, as are many of the FN's older generation.

**Benoist:** They are not very Catholic for the good reason that today in France no one is very Catholic any longer, except for a very active small minority. You must not forget that all the polls showed that Catholics as a group did not vote for the FN, except for some integralists or traditionalists, and that most of the people adhering to the FN were more secular than the average French person.

**Adler:** Why then the relative weight, the strength of Bernard Anthony in all this?

**Benoist:** Because Anthony is a network man. Like many traditional Catholics, he has organized many networks. He has excellent relations in circles generally very nostalgic for the OAS, Algeria, the militant struggle against communism, against the "red danger." For his part, Le Pen is not a man of ideas or ideologies; he clearly conceived the FN, from the very start, as an ecumenical site where almost anyone was welcome who agreed politically. If in other respects one was an atheist, Protestant, Catholic, etc., that was never his problem. Anthony, on the contrary, has tried to expand his network, but he is caricatural and has even less charisma than Mégret. He has his small group, his small court, but appears as ridiculous as Mégret. Anthony has a good relation with the right-wing integralist newspaper *Présent*, which is becoming more and more pro-American, even over Iraq. George Bush has been idolized in the columns of *Présent*.

**Adler:** Because of his stance against Muslims, that is all.

**Benoist:** That is one of the reasons.

**Adler:** But *Présent* had always been anti-American.

**Benoist:** No, its dislike of Americans has always been moderate. Under Clinton, who was from the Left, that was something else. But as soon as Bush came to power, it was pure ecstasy. President Bush was described as "our President," "*George W., we love you.*" And on the first page of the newspaper! Why? Because for these naive people Bush represents banning abortions, "*In God we trust,*" the return of the Christian Right, Ronald Reagan reincarnate, whose "boys" will fight

in the spirit of John Wayne, etc. The main “Bushophile” in *Présent* is Alain Sanders, who is a fan of John Wayne, country music, Disneyland, etc. This is all rather amusing, because *Présent* generally supports FN positions, despite the fact that the FN has always cultivated some friendships in Arab countries — Iraq in particular.

**Adler:** Last time, I forgot, what was the position of *Présent* in the Gulf War? Was it not against the war?

**Benoist:** It was hostile to the war, but favorable to the French army. A typical reaction of the Right: “even if we disagree with the motive of the war, we have to support our troops.” But this was before the shock of 9/11, before the new wave of “Islamic terrorism,” and, above all, before Bush’s election. This was also before the split between Mégret and Le Pen, and the links were then stronger between *Présent* and the FN. When the quarrel between Mégret and Le Pen started, *Présent* did not support Le Pen. It was rather critical, and stood as an outsider.

**Adler:** Yes, it was impartial.

**Benoist:** *Présent* made it clearly known that Le Pen had made some mistakes, and said that it would publish communications by both groups. Le Pen did not like that at all, and one of the main editors of *Présent*, who was very Catholic, Yves Daoudal, left to become the editor-in-chief of *National Hebdo* (the FN official house-organ), replacing Michel Pelletier, who was considered to be a Mégretist and more or less connected with the Mégret camp. Well, since then relations between *Présent* and Le Pen have somewhat recovered, helped by Mégret’s collapse. However, this relation is not as close as before. Both are maintaining some distance. For not of the Extreme Right, Bush is now on the good side, on the side of the “West.”

**Adler:** But not in the FN.

**Benoist:** No, not in the FN leadership. But I am certain that at its base many members support the war for reasons I have just elaborated.

**Adler:** Explain to me this anti-American evolution of Le Pen. Because in the beginning, he tried to become the French Reagan, he saluted John Wayne, etc.

**Benoist:** Le Pen did not start out being anti-American. As a member of the traditional Right, he was used to reasoning from the perspective of “the West” more than that of Europe. This was inherited from the time of the Cold War, when the “free world” was supposed to constitute a united bloc against the Soviet Union. Moreover, when the FN began to succeed, it was the time of Reagan and Thatcher. Thus, Le Pen, a true politician, that is to say an opportunist, said: I am the French Reagan! That evidently did not work. Afterwards, he became more anti-American both through his dealings in the Arab World with the intermediary of Martinez, the one from Morocco, and because he understood that his electorate was strongly attached to the idea of national independence. Thus, he began to be against the EU and against the US at the same time. Another reason is that nowadays Le Pen sees, like everybody else, that globalization, interpreted as a New World Order, is organized under American direction, in conformity with American interests, etc. In such a situation, Le Pen sounds the discordant voice, befit-

ting his place in the French political landscape.

**Adler:** One could say there was also the influence of Le Gallou and Bardet. *Identité*, the FN's cultural journal, was edited by Bardet, who adopted a rather anti-American stance.

**Benoist:** This could have played a role. Bardet, even more than Le Gallou, probably retained from his former time in the New Right some elements of a radical critique of "American ideology" (Manifest Destiny, etc.). But do not forget that Le Pen only adopts an idea or a position if he thinks it will pay politically. He is not anti-American for ideological, intellectual, or philosophical reasons. He simply thinks that defending an anti-American position in the Gulf War is more profitable than a pro-American one.

**Adler:** But why this pro-Iraqi position? One could certainly be anti-American, but not support such a horrible regime. It is bizarre, because in France Le Pen is against Arabs, against Islam, or Islamism in France.

**Benoist:** No. Le Pen is not against Islam. On this point, he is paradoxically more "moderate" than most people who vote for him. He has always cautiously centered his discourse against immigration. He has never uttered a word against Islam. He always maintained that his argument was nationality, not race or religion.

**Adler:** He does oppose the building of mosques in Marseilles, for example.

**Benoist:** Against the mosques, well, yes, because in his mind that would lead to the destruction of the French landscape, would be a visible symbol of the "invasion." But I think this was more a concession to his audience. One should not forget the important role of someone like Farid Smahi. Especially during these last few years, Le Pen made some declarations reflecting rather moderate positions on Islam, and that is precisely why Mégret accused him of Islamophilia. Mégret's anti-Islamism has been much stronger than Le Pen's. Thus, the Huntington thesis on the shock of civilizations is always reoccurring in Mégret or Le Gallou, but not so often in Le Pen's. Le Pen always said that we should have good relations with Arab countries, who are our normal partners and who do not support immigration at all, which is true. This is something that the French political class always seems to forget. Le Pen, who was able to meet with the King of Morocco, was told by him to kick the Immigrants out, because Morocco would very much like them to return. Le Pen always said you need good relations with the Arab countries, for it is with them that we will solve the problem of immigration. This is a far more intelligent position than to say we should wage war against a billion Moslems in the world. I also have the feeling, but it is only a feeling, that Le Pen no longer believes it is actually possible to send immigrants back to their countries of origin who, some for more than two generations, already have French nationality, since they have married French people, whose children have only known French schools, etc. Such a belief might have been possible twenty years ago. It is much more difficult to hold it today.

**Adler:** But Iraq is not a typical Arab regime. It is far worse. For someone like Le Pen to actually support Iraq is tantamount to supporting political gangsterism.

**Benoist:** No one disputed that the Iraqi regime was a dictatorship. The question is to know if any country in the world, the US, for instance, has the right to decide which regimes have to be destroyed without the backing of international institutions, to invent the “danger” of imaginary “arms of massive destruction,” to engage in military operations against a whole people, to occupy its country for an undetermined time, to take the risk of replacing the dictatorship with such utter chaos that things end up worse in the whole region. In addition, when the country under attack is also an oil-producer of major geopolitical importance, this “virtuous” position becomes suspect, especially when it comes from a superpower which has supported so many dictators in the past and continues today to maintain excellent relations with the Tunisian, Algerian or Egyptian dictatorships, among others. Anyway, I can imagine that there is a parallel Le Pen noticed between his position and that of Saddam. Le Pen is kept on the side by the “Band of Four,” that is, by the four main political parties. He is atypical, he is the intruder, the “black sheep” — and on the international scene, the same goes for Saddam. He is an obstacle to world order. So, Le Pen decided to support him, or at least to denounce any aggression against his country. This also allowed Le Pen to present himself as a skillful player: On the one hand, he is against immigration, on the other he supports Iraq, which shows that he is not a maniacal anti-Arab, etc. This position is more intelligent than Mégrét’s, who thinks we are threatened by a billion Moslems, so this means war against one sixth of the world’s population.

**Adler:** That certainly was Le Gallou’s hardline position, and Mégrét was wrong to let it stand as his as well.

**Benoist:** Yes, most of the MNR communications were written by Le Gallou, and I dislike their general tone. You know that I have never had any sympathy for Le Pen or Mégrét, but when they broke with each other I found Le Pen’s communications more correct, more balanced than Mégrét’s, which struck me as extraordinarily stupid. That is rather strange, as everybody once said Mégrét was dangerous, because he was extremely intelligent. We were told for months by the French press that, after all, Le Pen is nothing but a clown, that the real danger is the “clever” Mégrét. The real danger in the end amounted to zero and such stupid writing! There is in all of this an extraordinary amount of fantasy.

**Adler:** This is also funny, because in the first round of the presidential elections Le Pen ran the type of “proper,” relatively inoffensive campaign the Mégrétistes had been advocating all the time they were in the FN. I recall that at that time Mégrét emphasized this point, that for years he pushed and pushed for the type of public behavior that the press later called “Le Pen Light,” but it was only after the split that he seemed to have become more rational. So, what we saw was a strange inversion: the extreme Le Pen became moderate, and the moderate Mégrét became extreme

**Benoist:** Like everyone else, Le Pen is also growing old. He is past the age of uttering apocalyptic proclamations. In any case, Le Pen has succeeded in what he wanted to do. One really has to be incredibly dumb to believe, as many do, that Le



Pen ever wanted to hold power. That would have been the worst thing that could have ever happened to him! This is the reason why I always thought that the Left was wrong in doing everything it could to prevent an alliance between the Right and the Extreme Right. I always defended the opposite position. If, in 1981, Le Pen had been given a small ministerial position like that of Undersecretary of State, it would have been all over. No more FN. Look at what happened in England with Thatcher. She did that. Look at what happened in Austria with Haider. It amounted to nothing. Le Pen wanted to be talked about. He succeeded. He was a political star for 20 years. He organized a party that grew stronger as criticism against him increased. He is rich and famous. He is a thorn in everybody's side. That was his supreme objective. That is all he really wanted, it is typical Right-wing attitude.

*Adler:* And no responsibility.

*Benoist:* Precisely. Is it not wonderful? Le Pen succeeded in what he wanted to accomplish. You might say he is a man who has been very lucky in life. Some people are lucky. Mégret is not.

*Adler:* In fact, Mégret told me that as well; destiny, he said, seemed to be against him.

*Benoist:* Le Pen was also lucky financially, since he inherited a great deal of money from one of his supporters. Le Pen was born to a poor family, and he remained poor for a long time. But when he inherited wealth, he became a bourgeois, a “*nouveau riche*.” He was delighted to enter upper class circles. He creates a little party that was nothing for many years and then, suddenly, by the “miracle of Dreux” (the first FN electoral success), it takes off, and then it grows, and the more he is criticized the higher he goes. He jump-starts the machine with one or two provocative utterances, and immediately people rush into the snare: It is abominable, it is Hitler once more, etc., and up the polls go again.

*Adler:* My impression is that for many in the FN, gaining power and, in effect, ruling has always been less important than having a sense of belonging, especially on the part of those who could not possibly feel at home in other political parties.

*Benoist:* Of course, belonging is always important. That is one of the stronger human motivations. But concerning the seizure of power, there are different levels of appreciation or motivation. Le Pen's chief motivation, to be a nuisance, to become a political star, has been accomplished. The motivation of the FN executives was not so much power, but rather to re-energize a political family that had previously disappeared. But for the voters, surely many of them have seriously thought that Le Pen one day could seize power. They vote for him for this very reason, which, after all, is quite normal. They were encouraged in this rather naive belief by the stupidities often said and published by the Left and the Extreme Left, which so instrumentalized the purported FN “danger” that they made Le Pen's seizure of power a believable hypothesis.

Between the two rounds of the last presidential election, after Le Pen emerged second to Chirac in the first round, this attitude became hysterical. I saw cata-

strophic scenarios in the newspapers, showing mathematically that Le Pen could be in power ten days later. On TV, it was possible to hear extravagant declarations from people announcing: "If Le Pen wins, I am packing and leaving the country," "concentration camps could be opened up in France in a fortnight," "I have already reserved my flight, I am leaving France." A fantastic collective delirium prevailed. The result was that the Left voted massively for Chirac, who the very same Left had denounced as a crook a fortnight earlier. Chirac probably would have lost the election if he had to face Lionel Jospin in the second round. In the end, Le Pen allowed Chirac to be elected, though Chirac was his chief political enemy. In such an electrical climate, Le Pen voters came to believe that their champion could win in the second round. They were, of course, bitterly disappointed by the results. Everybody went mad at that time, because it had become perfectly obvious that Le Pen, with 16% of the votes in the first round, had absolutely no chance no win. After the election, the Extreme Right reacted emotionally, as always. The final result added to Mégrét's failure, and pushed many to say that it was all over, all was lost, that was the end, that was the last hope. The old moderates went home, while for the young people it was further proof that with the existing political parties nothing will ever be possible, that only violence could bring results. In that sense, it is clear that the results of the last presidential election might very well radicalize young people who were formerly obliged to remain more "quiet." In such a climate, all forms of provocation are possible. The appearance of a new extremist pole on the Right would then nourish extremism from the other side, with all the risks related to that

**Adler:** Are you thinking, for example, of Maxime Brunerie, the MNR hard-liner who tried to assassinate Chirac at the July 14 parade in Paris?

**Benoist:** Yes, of course. Brunerie was not of any importance, but tomorrow you could as well have a "super Maxime Brunerie," or a small group could decide to organize some "counter-terrorism" in the hope of setting off an "ethnic war." Stupidities of this kind are always possible in a general climate of political crisis, of extremism and hysteria in social relations and intellectual life. The FN at least had the advantage of channeling a number of extremists, preventing them from committing crazy acts which would have compromised the party, whereas now young people like the skinheads and others are roaming free.

To sum up, what always struck me is the number of people who took Le Pen seriously, either as partisans or adversaries. I never believed for a minute that Le Pen was a danger, that he could actually gain power. Besides, I am convinced that the first thing he would have done if he had held power would have been to adopt the most moderate policy possible in order to demonstrate the extent to which he was unlike what people said he was. For twenty years, the "Le Pen phenomenon" has been a permanent, incredible psychodrama. Finally, if Le Pen has been a danger, it was rather a danger for the Right. To many people on the Right, he gave hope that ended only in deception. He triggered the belief that it was possible, using the immigration problem, to gain power through elections. Implicitly, he also legitimated the neglect

of any cultural initiatives, the neglect of any intellectual reflection. He seduced many young people, who were attracted to him as one can especially be in youth, and left them with the bitter feeling of having lost their best years for nothing. The FN appeared to have revived a family of thought, when in reality it totally buried it. However, the “Le Pen phenomenon” served to reveal the deep crisis which has afflicted contemporary French society, with all its social and political contradictions. But here we hit upon another problem regarding the significance of so-called populism, a political form which often poses fine questions, but often gives bad answers.

*Adler:* In any case, in France, and not only in France, in America, in Italy, and everywhere, it seems as if politics as we knew it is disappearing. The old form of a political party with militants who march, put up posters, attend meetings, volunteer their time, etc., is finished. It has been replaced with virtual, mediatic, parties.

*Benoist:* Yes, that is obvious. I have written about this transformation numerous times. The end of modernity for Western countries means the end of several political phenomena: the end of the nation-state model, the end of the “Leninist” model of a party conceived as a church, that is to say, the end of the commitment of the militants as sacerdotal. I remember hearing in my youth: One must enter politics like one enters religion, like a monk pronouncing his vows, a total commitment, day and night and even in one’s dreams, that is a militant’s life. It is evident that now this happens only at the two extremes, and in very tiny circles. Parties have no members any more, nor do unions and churches. All of these phenomena go together. We are confronted with a general crisis of those political models and institutions inherited from modernity. The main division is no longer between Left and Right, but between “above” and “below,” between a new managerial and political class, which tries to continue deciding everything for everybody at the very moment when nation-states are more and more impotent, have less and less room to operate in the face of global economic, financial, technological realities, and the common people who see that none of their concrete problem can really be solved by this new class. Nowadays, common people no longer make revolutions. They just leave. They discover that real life is elsewhere, for example in building associations or communities around common aims and shared values. As for the “classical” political system, what remains is more and more used by people as if they were consumers in a market. The sociological, traditional or religious affiliations of yesteryear are gone. This explains these transfers of votes that astonish political scientists like Nonna Mayer. People try things out. They engage in political “zapping,” remote control, exactly as they do when watching television, jumping from one program to the next. When they want to buy a car, they say: last time I bought a Chevrolet, now I am buying a Toyota. At the polls, they do the same: last time I voted for Mitterrand, now I will try Le Pen, tomorrow maybe Chirac or Laguiller. And when they are tired of this game, they do not vote any more. For them, real life is elsewhere.