

Appropriating the “No”: The French National Front, the Vote on the Constitution, and the “New” April 21

Situating the Referendum: Neither Right nor Left

On the evening of May 26, 2005, with the polls suggesting that the European Constitution was veering toward defeat, Jacques Chirac made a final exhortation to the French public. He argued that the French were voting not on a sectarian political issue but on an issue that would determine the future of themselves, their children, France, and Europe. Chirac characterized the choice before French citizens as “neither right nor left.” His use of a phrase more commonly associated with Vichy displayed an uncharacteristic historical amnesia and suggests that Chirac and his party were grabbing at straws in those final days.

The public discussion of the European Constitution in France, before and after the referendum, underscored the peculiarities and contradictions that are constitutive of the expanding process of European integration. A Socialist Party campaign poster that listed “5 reasons to say yes”

typified the rhetorical strategies of the “yes” camp. According to the pamphlet that accompanied the poster, the Constitution would preserve “social Europe” and make Europe “more democratic,” “stronger,” “more protected,” and “more efficient.” But the Socialist Party never convinced its entire constituency and the Socialist vote was 59% “no.” Fears of Polish plumbers and an “attachment to national identity” in the end had more general resonance with the 70% of French citizens who turned out to vote on the referendum.

In contrast to analysing why the Constitution failed in France, this article explores why the advocates of the “no” won. In the last 10 years, populist parties, such as the French National Front, have challenged the accelerated process of European integration that the Constitution represented. This brief symposium article focuses on the French National Front’s campaign against the Constitution as well as its post-referendum appropriation of the “no.”¹ This article explores how April 21, 2002—the date that Jean Marie Le Pen came in second in the first round of the presidential election—evolved as a political metaphor exploited by

both sides in the Constitution debate. The last section speculates on the landscape of political possibilities and opportunities that the vote and its aftermath, particularly the recent riots, provide. The linchpin of the discussion is my visit to the Front’s *Fête Bleu Blanc Rouge* that took place in the *Le Bourget* ex-urb of Paris on October 8 and 9, 2005. *Le Bourget* is a *banlieue* located near the areas that were in flames beginning October 27, 2005.²

The Campaign for the Constitution: The “Boomerang of April 21”

The French vote on the European Constitution did not fail for lack of effort. When the polls conducted in March 2005 began to indicate that the percentage of voters prepared to vote “no” was increasing, April 21, 2002, was not far from the minds of French politicians. The French experienced April 21, 2002, the date that Le Pen came in second in the first round of the presidential election, as a political earthquake, a shock and a source of international embarrassment. As the third anniversary of April 21 approached, Francois Hollande, head of the Socialist Party, announced a new strategy: “To save the ‘yes,’ we will explain [to the French public] that a victory of the ‘no’ will be a new April 21” (*Le Monde*, 4/20/05). Francois Bayrou used biblical imagery when he warned the French that it would “rain for more than 40 days” if the Constitution failed (*Le Monde*, 4/1/05). On April 15th, Chirac went on French television and implored French youth to “not be afraid!” (*Le Monde*, 4/15/05). On May 22, Hollande warned that “on May 29 there will not be a second round” (*Liberation*, 5/23/05). Hollande was referring to Chirac’s 85% victory in the second round of the 2002 presidential election where many voters crossed party lines to assure that Le Pen would be defeated. Three days before the referendum, Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy warned the French public to vote “yes” and “Do not take Europe hostage!” (*Le Monde*, 5/26/05).

In contrast to the French political class that warned against a repeat of April 21, 2002, Jean Marie Le Pen and the National Front embraced the date as a positive iconic event. In the two months proceeding May 29, Le Pen became

by
Mabel Berezin,
Cornell University

more visible and the National Front began to graft the “no” vote onto a political strategy that looked ahead to the French presidential elections of 2007. On April 9, 2005, Le Pen addressed National Front representatives at a party convention in Strasbourg, where he blamed the European project for escalating unemployment and *delocalisation*—the movement of French industry abroad. Interviewed at the Strasbourg convention, Le Pen said he was convinced that, “The French, high and low [referring to social class], will take its revenge without noise and the result of the referendum will explode like a bomb on the night of May 29; May 29 will become the boomerang of April 21.”³

French politicians of all stripes represented the referendum as a choice between rationality and culture, market and nation. The National Front exploited these themes by articulating with increasing emphasis that Europeanization was an outgrowth of globalization and by reminding voters of the party’s longstanding defense of French national culture and identity. In a phrase eerily evocative of the 1930s, Carl Lang, then the 3rd ranking member of the Directorate of the National Front, told *Liberation* (5/26/05) that the “national-social” would carry the “no.” Lang was not unique in this assessment. It was “local knowledge” as a *Le Monde* reporter argued: “Social Europe is the eternal weak point of the construction of the Union” (*Le Monde*, 4/1/05). *Eurobarometer* (European Commission 2005) data published immediately after the referendum confirmed that economic uncertainty centering on fear of unemployment were the principle reasons that respondents gave for voting “no.”

In addition to his Strasbourg speech, Le Pen gave two other major speeches in the period before May 29. Each speech linked rampant unemployment in France to social and national issues.⁴ Le Pen’s annual May 1 speech began by blaming mass unemployment in France on the “social democracy of Chirac and Jospin” that treats the people as a “pack of lambs.” Calling unemployment a “veritable cancer,” Le Pen argued that the “impotent and corrupt political class” uses the “European fantasy” as “an escape hatch from their responsibilities.”

Le Pen continued: “Europe is not prosperity, full employment, social progress, it is unemployment, the end of French enterprise! This is the reality that they ask us to approve!” Arguing that the Constitution is “essentially materialist,” Le Pen asked if anyone had ever heard anyone cry “Long live Europe” except in a bank. A month later, on May 21, the National Front held a colloquy entitled “France Confronts *Delocalisations*.”

Appropriating the “No:” The Shock and Hope of May 29, 2005

The day after the referendum, Pascal Perrineau, distinguished director of Cevipol and student of the National Front, called the referendum “a replica of April 21, 2002” (interview with *Le Monde* 5/30/05). In contrast to the partisans of the “yes” who were in glum shock, the rejection of the Constitution provided an opening for the groups that had campaigned against it to appropriate the “no” for political purposes. The advocates of the “no” spoke out energetically in the post-referendum period. The French Communist Party, the anti-globalization group ATTAC, and the National Front, as odd an ideological trio as one would wish to see, viewed the “no” as a wellspring of political possibility.

On May 31, Marie-George Buffet, head of the French Communist Party, declared “A great hope arose today.” She argued that May 29, 2005, had “the dynamic of a popular coming together that evoked the great moments of the Popular Front or of May 68.” The rejection of the Constitution signaled that France demanded the “abandonment of the ultra-liberal projects of Brussels.”

On its web site, the anti-globalization group ATTAC declared that the rejection of the Constitution ushered in the “springtime of France”—an allusion to 1848 and the “springtime of peoples.” ATTAC proclaimed, “The French people came to write a page of history. For the first time in fifty years, they expressed their refusal to see Europe constructed on the sole basis of market criteria and objectives. For the first time in thirty years, the people affirm their will to put an end to disastrous politics, neo-liberal intrigues.” After the Dutch vote, ATTAC exuberantly referred to France and the Netherlands as the two black sheep of Europe. In a front page article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ignacio Ramonet, who seven years earlier had proclaimed “let’s disarm the markets,” announced that the “no” signified “a rebel France who honored its tradition as a political nation par excellence. She saved the Old Continent, aroused a new hope of peoples and the anxiety of established elites.”⁵

On the day after the referendum, the National Front called for the resignation of Chirac. The Front web site displayed a poster that proclaimed, “The People Spoke: Chirac Resignation!” Le Pen’s message on the night of May 29 was relatively sober: “The French people have clearly said NO to the Constitution of the European Union and also refused the feudalization of France to a supranational State. They rejected the construction of a Europe that was neither European, nor independent, nor protective. . . . They re-affirmed the political independence of France and its sacred right to provide for itself.” Le Pen advanced his own cause as he criticized the government: “The President of the Republic and the Government, which was involved without reserve in the campaign in favor of the YES, have been clearly disavowed. The National Front appeals to the French people to unite to confront the grave difficulties which are the consequence of politics followed for thirty years, and to promote indispensable reforms for the defense of our fundamental national interests.”

While the French Communist party and ATTAC were invoking the revolutions of 1968 and 1848, the National Front invoked its own revolution—April 21, 2002. In the spirit of revolutionary exuberance, Le Pen urged his supporters to attend the party *Fête Bleu Blanc Rouge*: “United as a Front, we will be able to open the path of renewal that our people desired from April 21, 2002 to May 29, 2005.”⁶ Riding the emotional wave of the twin victories of April 21, 2002, and May 29, 2005, the Front’s annual *Fête Bleu Blanc Rouge* unofficially began Le Pen’s 2007 presidential campaign.⁷ In many respects, the National Front won even though Le Pen lost on April 21, 2002. For Le Pen, May 29, 2005, and April 21, 2002, signaled the beginning of a new political era. These dates also signaled that the governing classes had misread two political facts: first, that the “people” supported the idea of Europe—writ large; and second that the National Front was an extreme and irrelevant political actor.

Fête Bleu Blanc Rouge 2005: Le Pen Le People 2007

During the campaign against the Constitution, a National Front poster displayed a golden-haired princess in a wedding dress about to marry an ugly frog king with a crown of euro stars on his head. The caption on the poster read: “Sometimes you must say no!” The poster represented a softer domesticated and feminized National Front that appeared in another incarnation at the exhibition hall where the *Fête* was held. Upon approaching the exhibition hall by bus, a large silkscreen of the festival poster immediately captures one’s attention. The poster is a photograph of a blond child, a young boy of no more than three years, with the colors of the French flag painted on his

face.⁸ The theme of the *Fête*, “French Pride,” is imposed above the face of the child. *Fête* literature, pamphlets, and flyers have the phrase “Passionately French” on them. The Front describes the *Fête* as a meeting of “friendship” and displays itself as welcoming to every one—from immigrants who assimilate to children in Iraq. Le Pen’s wife, Jany, visited Iraq to offer food and supplies to the suffering children and photographs of her visit dominate several of the exhibition booths.

The entrance fee is 10 euros for two days. The ticket stub doubles as a raffle ticket. The prize is a new automobile. A new generation of party leaders that include Le Pen’s daughter and heir apparent, Marine Le Pen, participated in open forums on “French youth”; “French entrepreneurship”; “social ambition”; and “French unity, the place of France in the world, our civilization.” The sessions were standing room only in the special tents in which they occurred. While one would not mistake the crowd for the fashionable inhabitants of St. Germain-des-Près, the younger Frontists seem almost stylish. The appearance of the participants suggests that a more upper middle class and slightly more educated group is joining the Front’s traditional lower middle class constituency.

Le Pen’s speech on late Sunday afternoon is the traditional high point that closes the *Fête*. The auditorium accommodated about 5,000 people and was standing room only. The room was strobe lit with red, white, and blue—the colors of the French flag as well as the name of the *Fête*. A chorus of youth dressed in white tee shirts that said “Le Pen/The People” decorated the stage and waved French flags. This was the first time that this event was televised.⁹ Le Pen entered the auditorium to emotional chants of “President, President, President!”

Le Pen’s speech continued the themes of the national and the social that he had begun in the spring. It focused on unemployment and the failure of the present French government to ameliorate its effects. He attacked the Socialists for “30 years of disaster”—making ironic reference to the *trente glorieuses*—the label for the 30 years of post-war prosperity that began to decline in the 1980s and pointed out that France was “paralyzed” due to the actions of just about everyone except himself. Le Pen sees France’s only hope in a break with the past that would lead to a “French renaissance and a new defense of workers and the French people.” Shouts of “President, President!” answered his call for a “true revolution.” He took up the old Front adage that French nationality must be “inherited or merited,” reiterated the Front’s support of “national preference” for French citizens, and expressed support of the 1905 law that separates Church and State and agreed with the recommendations of the December 2003 Stassi commission against the wearing of religious symbols in public schools. Le Pen’s position on separation of Church and State places him in the mainstream of French policy and public opinion.

Le Pen asserted that the presidential elections of 2007 would determine the future of the French people and promised to run against all those who have “lied, mislead and betrayed the French people for three decades.” His conclusion was strong and emotional. In contrast to the intensely nationalistic appeals of the past, Le Pen’s appeal focused on security and democracy as twin elements of a re-constituted people’s France.

In the last five minutes of his speech, Le Pen abandoned the microphone and the podium and moved to the edge of the stage to literally shout out his closing lines: “We launch a fraternal appeal to all those who have the feeling of having been tricked, deceived, abandoned, to those who are discouraged and even desperate. You can take your revenge and win with us the battle of France.” Citing the French Constitution, he shouted: “The Republic is the government Of the People, By the People, For the People. French people, who have done many things and who can yet do so much more for the good of France, of Europe and

the World! Arise and march for the combat for the Victory of France!”

At that point, “Le Pen/The People” flashed on the screens where his image had been and Le Pen called his decidedly youthful team of party operatives up to the stage. The youth in white tee shirts and French flags served as a chorus in the background as white confetti and balloons of blue, white, and red dropped from the ceiling. Le Pen and his circle broke into *Le Marseillaise* and asked the audience to join in, which they did. The conclusion was focused and emotional. Amid the snowfalls of confetti, the flashing blue, red, and white lights, and the singing of the national anthem, one felt a flow of emotional energy and focus in the crowd—an emotional energy that was frighteningly real.

Shocking Events: From April 21, 2002 to May 29, 2005

The French public sphere discussed both April 21 and May 29 in terms of *choc*—or shock. These shocks are less shocking when situated within the context of a broader stream of events in France and in Europe. The National Front and its supporters are virtually synonymous with racism and xenophobia in public discourse. But this is a view that was more descriptive of the Front’s past than its present. The Front continues to have elements of racism and xenophobia. Turkey, and the Front’s opposition to its entrance to the European Union, was the remaining object of general ill will displayed at the *Fête*. The *National Hebdo*, the Front newspaper, described the discussion that was scheduled to begin on October 3, 2005, on the conditions of Turkey’s entrance to the EU as the “Betrayal of Europe.” What has changed is that the Front is no longer reducible to racism and xenophobia.

Beginning in 1997, with its party convention in Strasbourg, the National Front has put itself forward as a serious electoral alternative. The Front’s hope to normalize itself (*banilisation*) in the minds of the French electorate is the nightmare of the center left and center right. While Le Pen and the Front still carry the *patina* of ill-repute as well as intellectual antipathy toward its lower middle class constituency, they have been riding the crest of political events and attracting thinly committed voters.¹⁰

Other groups have espoused many of the Front’s less extreme positions. In addition, events in the national and international arena have benefited the Front politically. In 1999, the idea that Europeanization and globalization were iterations of the same economic processes began to become part of a broad public discourse in France and throughout Europe. The anti-globalization group ATTAC, founded in Paris in 1998, took up this position and was vociferously anti-Europe. The French state has addressed issues of crime, security, and the Front’s standard *bete noir*, immigration. The French state has also been more vocal about the defense of French culture and identity.

As of mid October 2005, there were 14 declared candidates for the French presidential election in 2007. Journalists were already speaking of the “risk of a new April 21” (*Le Monde* 10/18/05). Among the declared candidates and their parties, only the Front could claim the shock of April 21 and the shock of May 29 as non-shocks—genuine expressions of French public opinion. The “no” on the Constitution is one of several events of the last few years that suggests that the Front voices opinions held by French people in general—and not of a minority of xenophobic extremists.

The shocks of April 21 and May 29 present the Front with an unanticipated opportunity. It can position itself favorably *vis a vis* the major French structural problem—unemployment. By never having been in power, the Front cannot be held accountable for unemployment that has consistently hovered around 10%. The Front’s capacity to ride the wave of the “no” coupled

with a new and younger generation of professional and articulate party operatives positions the Front to capitalize on the thin commitments of French voters upset with the apparent lack of direction and incapacity of French politicians.

The point here is not that Le Pen will win the presidential election in 2007—although it is not beyond imagining that he once again could come in second. Nor is it the point that the project of Europe is finished. There is a social fact, no matter how unpleasant, that social analysts as well as French politicians ignore at their peril. In contrast to other parties, the National Front has read the general public mood very well. The Front's desire to place itself in a more nationalistic centrist position coupled with its strategy of domestication and the softening of its image as represented by the child on the poster, Marine Le Pen, and the princess and the frog poster, suggest that it may no longer be accurate to categorize them as simply representing the politics of the *refus*—those left behind by society.

October 27, 2005: Le Pen Said It!

Europe has provided a context for the National Front's progress. Contingent or unexpected events have provided opportunities. The National Front has benefited from the force of events from unemployment to Islamic fundamentalism. On October 27, 2005, the riots began in the French *banlieues*, presenting another opportunity to Le Pen and the Front.

A week or so into the riots the Front posted a video on their web site that opened with the words "Le Pen said it." They also prepared a poster with that phrase. The Front produced the video in 1999 for the European Parliamentary elections. While Beethoven's 1812 Overture plays in the background, the video displays Paris burning. The symbols of decay are strewn about—an American Coca Cola can represents globalization and the daisy of the socialists and the sunflower of the greens represents failed ideologies. In the video, only the Front is triumphant—saving a *Europe of Nations* from the onslaught of globalization, Europeanization, and immigration. The Front claims to have doubled its membership in the weeks after the

riots. Two weeks passed before Jacques Chirac addressed French citizens directly and proclaimed a problem of "national identity." Immediately after Chirac's speech, Le Pen stood on the steps of the Palais Royal and reminded everyone that he had indeed "said it."

On December 8–9, 2005, the French polling agency SOFRES (2005) issued the results of a survey that showed that Le Pen's ideas had taken hold among roughly 38% of the French population. Of most concern in newspaper reports was that the percentage of persons who considered Le Pen's ideas unacceptable had declined and the number who considered his ideas merely excessive had increased. What should have been of more concern was that while only 33% of the general population thought that he could get to the second round of the 2007 presidential election, 51% of youth between the ages of 18 and 24 and 46% of lower level salaried employees thought that Le Pen could succeed.

As I left the train station at *Le Bourget* to catch the bus to the *Fête*, two things caught my eye. First, two French policemen pinned two dark-skinned youths against a building wall as they questioned them before eventually letting them go. Second, on the wall of the train station at *Le Bourget*, hangs a brass plaque with the following inscription: "From 1942 and until June 1944, more than 40,000 Jews, men, women, and children, who came from the camp at Drancy, were deported from this station to the extermination camp at Auschwitz. Following from July 1943 and until the liberation of France, the deportation trains departed from the station at Bobigny. Nearly all of the deported were killed. Less than 3% survived. We must never forget."

The riots were another shock to the French polity. Shock suggests a failure to see what is coming—a misreading of the social and political situation. Events may be contingent but they are never completely unpredictable for all social groups and observers. Repeated shocks, April 21, May 29, October 27, suggest collective misreading and force us to speculate as to how many shocks a collectivity can withstand before a genuine earthquake occurs.

Notes

1. This essay draws on material from a book-length study that focuses on the tension between national and European politics (Berezin forthcoming). Berezin (2003) contains an early iteration of the argument.

2. Due to space limitations, this article is telegraphic and compressed. For nuance and full documentation, please refer to my web page: www.soc.cornell.edu/faculty/berezin.shtml.

3. Vie du Front, "No, je garde la France." *FDA* (mai 2005, n. 402): 19.

4. Texts of Le Pen speeches cited in this article can be found on the National Front web page: www.frontnational.com/doc_interventions.php.

5. Ignacio Ramonet, "Espoirs," *Le Monde Diplomatique* 52 (June 2005): 1.

6. Jean Marie Le Pen, "Chacun a son poste!" *FDA* (septembre 2005, n. 406): 3.

7. I attended the *Fete Bleu Blanc Rouge* at *Le Bourget* on October 8 and 9, 2005. I am in the process of completing a book manuscript on the new populism in Europe and I wanted to gauge the emotional valence of the 2005 *Fête* in contrast to the *Fête* that I had attended in 1998.

8. French friends and colleagues have told me that the child does not "look" French.

9. Despite the presence of the television cameras, or perhaps because of it, the festival received sparse coverage in the press the next day.

10. The French literature on the National Front is voluminous. Examples of the emerging literature in English include Holmes 2000; Givens 2005; and Rydgren 2004.

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