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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

France in the End of Days

Marine Le Pen's road to victory is clear enough. Can a pragmatist stop the extreme right?

Roger Cohen APRIL 14, 2017

Paris — For some time France has been a country that does not like itself. Somewhere on the road from its humiliation in World War II to its disappointment with European integration to its discomfort with globalization, France slid into moroseness. High-speed trains purred; France pouted. Grumbling became a way of life, the response to lost grandeur. Now France seems ready to vent this slow-ripening anger in an election that could see the extreme right return to power for the first time since the 1940s and Europe revert to a turbulence not seen since that epoch.

If Marine Le Pen of the National Front wins, she says she will take France out of the euro, the shared European currency, and restore the franc. Exit from the European Union could follow. This would constitute an economic and political rupture so violent that even Donald Trump's victory and Britain's vote to leave the union would pale beside it. Europe, and not just its markets, would be upended. President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who has been meddling, would be happy.

A Le Pen victory is far from assured, plausible if not probable. Returning to France late last month, to the glow of Paris and the gloom of the provinces, I was struck by how much Le Pen's party, whose racist ideology was once taboo, has joined the mainstream. The pattern that has prevailed throughout the Fifth Republic — alternation of center-left and center-right — seems dead. The French are tired of increasingly indistinguishable Socialist and Republican presidents.

President François Hollande, a socialist with a single-digit approval rating, decided not to run for a second term. As elsewhere in the West, traditional parties bereft of compelling ideas are in crisis, buffeted by social-media-driven mobilizations.

The first round of voting on April 23 is almost certain to send Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron, the 39-year-old upstart leader of a new catchall centrist movement, into the runoff on May 7: the xenophobic nationalist versus the pro-Europe neophyte.

Polls show them both with clear, if tightening, leads over the scandal-plagued Republican candidate, François Fillon, and an extreme leftist, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, of the Unbowed France movement, whose support has surged in recent days. The left, still singing the Internationale and plotting class struggle, is in disarray. The inclination to blow up the system has found fertile ground. People have had it with experts. "Ça suffit!" — "Enough!" — is a much-heard cry; and if disruption leads to deluge, so be it.

Such end-of-days gloom is puzzling. Near 10 percent unemployment and near invisible growth cannot explain it. French infrastructure is a rebuke to American decay. French universal health care works. Savoir-vivre, the art of living, is not a French phrase for nothing. From the United States to China, the French hold on the world's imagination endures. It is a land of unique pleasures.

Yet this seems to offer scant comfort. Instead the French are focused on their country's failures: its dispatch under Vichy of Jews to their deaths, its painful colonial past in Algeria, its faltering attempts to integrate one of Europe's largest Muslim communities, its vulnerability to terrorist attacks in Paris and Nice, its expensive and sometimes rigid welfare state, its ambiguous relationship to global capitalism, its fraying model of "laïcité" *(*or secularism) designed to subsume religious difference in the values of the French republic — all are endlessly agonized over.

"There is a certain French masochism," Pascal Bruckner, an author, told me. "We are a country that does not unleash its potential. We ruminate on the past. After 1989, we thought Europe would become French. But the models of Germany and Thatcher did much better. And so we lapse into mediocrity."

Jacques Rupnik, a political scientist, put it this way: “France suffers from cultural and civilizational insecurity. Many people feel somehow dispossessed.”

This sense of dispossession, of loss, is what the National Front has exploited: loss of identity, jobs, national borders; loss of faith in a corrupt political system. “On est chez nous!” — roughly “We are at home!” — is the party’s strange battle cry, chanted at every rally. But why such pathological need to reaffirm belonging, and who exactly are “we”? Millions of immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa, many of them Muslims, do not appear to make the cut.

“There is no right or left. This election is about patriotism versus globalization,” Nicolas Bay, the secretary-general of the National Front, told me. “That is why we would end immigration. If it’s Le Pen against the globalist Macron in the second round, it will be clear what the contest is about: Do we defend the nation, or is the nation finished?”

Macron is a former banker and economy minister under Hollande. Small, with glittering blue eyes, his pitch is that he’s a tech-friendly pragmatist with the ability to revitalize France. Nobody quite knows what’s in his gut. To fans he’s a doer; to critics he’s a hedger of bets. But nobody can deny his remarkable surge. En Marche! (Onward!), Macron’s movement, was formed just a year ago. It has become the last best hope of those who would stop Le Pen.

In an interview, Macron told me: “Look, do you want to strengthen Europe, to have a strong reformed France, or do you just want to leave this world and return to the 19th century? What Le Pen proposes does not fly even for a second.”

I headed east to Metz, in the Lorraine region of France. Outside the station, opened in 1908 when the city was part of Germany, I found French, German and European Union flags fluttering to mark “Metz Wunderbar” (“Wonderful Metz”) week, a celebration of French-German friendship. Such is Europe today: a shared house built over borders etched in blood. Lorraine closed its last iron ore mine a couple of decades ago. The region has struggled to replace it with service sector jobs. The National Front has prospered.

At a restaurant I ran into Thierry Corona, a sommelier from nearby Koenigsmacker who had come to attend a Le Pen rally. A blue rose, Le Pen’s campaign symbol, was pinned to his lapel. Corona was fired up. Le Pen would boost the wine industry by getting rid of a “politically correct” law curtailing

advertising. She would end “the dictatorship of Brussels.” She would rebuild “France for the French.”

Koenigsmacker, Corona said, had been stripped of life. Small stores had been replaced by huge “hypermarkets” on the outskirts of town. Human contact was almost forgotten. “In the shopping malls the cashiers are lined up like cattle for the slaughter,” he said. Old people without cars were treated like human refuse. “And immigrants arrive and they immediately get handouts!”

Such provincial alienation is widespread. The most talked-about political book these days is Christophe Guilluy’s “The France of the Periphery,” a devastating portrait of what he calls the “total cultural fracture” between the networked milieu of Paris and a few other cities, and the declining dystopia outside them. If America has New York and Trump country, France has Paris and Koenigsmacker. The red state-blue state chasm, in various guises, is the core cultural condition of the West.

“The political world is today a field of ruins,” Guilluy writes. He cites a poll conducted in 2014 by the Ipsos research firm that found that 74 percent of French workers felt they were no longer “at home”; 74 percent saw globalization as a threat (while 68 percent of managers saw it as an opportunity).

“On the fundamental subjects of globalization, free trade, immigration and multiculturalism, dialogue has become impossible,” Guilluy concludes. This is the backdrop to workers’ abandonment of the left and their embrace of the National Front, now the leading working-class party in France.

Corona took me over to a nearby table where Florian Philippot, one of Le Pen’s top advisers, was lunching. Philippot is an architect of the attempt to rebrand the party by shedding its Fascist, anti-Semitic antecedents (Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine’s father, called the Holocaust “a detail” of history) and replacing it with France-first economic nationalism. Philippot is a slick operator. He did not have time to talk, but I saw him a half-hour later at the rally, warming up the crowd as images of Le Pen on a horse and with a truffle-hunting dog rolled across a giant screen, evoking the connection with “La France profonde” (deep rural France) that is still de rigueur for any French political career.

“ON EST CHEZ NOUS!” the crowd roared. Philippot vowed that the “radical Islamists strolling around our towns” would soon be history. He called Macron an

agent of high finance, a man “recycling everything that has ruined France.” Somebody in the crowd shouted “Rothschild!” and then again “Rothschild!” — a reference to the bank where Macron once worked. The attempt to rid the National Front of its anti-Semitism is clearly a work in progress.

Indeed, Le Pen has reopened old wounds by insisting that France was not responsible for the “Vel’ d’Hiv” — a reference to the stadium where 13,000 Jews were rounded up in 1942 before being dispatched to Auschwitz. She tried to portray the wartime Vichy government as distinct from France, an appalling evasion.

Le Pen entered to thunderous applause in a black pantsuit. It’s easy to imagine her an everywoman telling it like it is. Her hashtag is #aunomdupeuple (in the name of the people), and, like Trump, she vowed to “return power to the people.” The Élysée Palace, she declared, would become “the house of the people,” and referendums would be held on major issues like leaving the European Union.

For a couple of hours Le Pen rambled. The influence of Islam was “unbearable.” France faced “a choice of civilization” — either uncontrolled immigration “or recovering our home.” National borders would not be closed; they would, however, exist. Patriotism meant resistance to “savage globalization.” In short, “The Republic must again become all-conquering.”

Thérese and Frédéric Defaux were watching. “Look, this is pretty simple,” he told me. “We need to recover our values and defend them.” Then his voice was drowned out. “ON EST CHEZ NOUS! ON EST CHEZ NOUS!”

Europe used to signify stability and peace. Now refugees and asylum seekers stream across the union’s porous borders. To find jobs for immigrants, you need an open and flexible labor market. But the comprehensive French welfare state — financed by mandatory contributions for pensions, health and unemployment benefits that push up wage costs — tends toward inflexibility. Firing anyone can be tedious and expensive, so there’s reluctance to hire. Youth unemployment stands around 25 percent. Over 31 percent of gross domestic product is spent on health, unemployment and other benefits, compared to 24.6 percent in Germany. France has in effect made a structural choice for unemployment. Everyone knows

this. But because attachment to the model is fierce, honest discussion tends to be taboo.

The first presidential debate last month was an exercise in evasions. The moderators redefined journalism as deferential passivity. Macron, Fillon and the socialist candidate, Benoît Hamon, were all dressed in blue suits and blue ties, like a bunch of airline stewards, and their responses scarcely differed more than their attire. Nobody even asked Fillon, a former prime minister, about the fact that he's been placed under investigation relating to allegations he employed his wife and children in make-believe jobs as aides.

Fillon, a social conservative who favors free-market reforms and labor market deregulation, had been looking formidable but slumped after the scandal broke. He had promised to stand aside in the event of a formal judicial inquiry, but reneged, infuriating people. The political classes' contempt for the electorate was encapsulated in his volte-face. Voters' disgust has boosted the National Front, even if Le Pen is herself caught up in a financial fraud investigation at the European Parliament and has used parliamentary immunity to avoid a police summons.

Her path to victory runs roughly like this. She qualifies for the second round with about 24 percent of the vote. Macron is her opponent, with about the same score. The more right-wing Fillon supporters migrate to Le Pen. Supporters of the far-left candidate, Mélenchon, refuse to vote for Macron; they've had it with so-called "useful votes" and they believe Macron, for all his talk of being a progressive, will pursue "neoliberal" global capitalism. Some Hamon supporters also refuse to back Macron. The abstention rate soars. Le Pen squeezes past 50 percent and becomes president.

It could happen. Only a fool, after Brexit and Trump, would suggest otherwise. Le Pen's line of attack on Macron is clear: he is the perpetuation of Hollande, the representative of "the system" and a product of "international finance," with all the attendant innuendo. This attack is pretty disgusting, which is not to say it won't work. Russia is helping. The Russian propaganda site Sputnik has singled out Macron for attack. It was behind rumors that he's gay and living with the head of Radio France — rumors so insistent that Macron, who's married to his 64-year-old former high-school teacher, had to deny them.

One thing is certain: Le Pen needs to distract attention from her economic program, a hodgepodge of nationalist and statist measures combined with exit from the euro, which alone could send French bank accounts into free fall. Fear of such a meltdown may be the biggest obstacle Le Pen still has to overcome.

I found Macron in Paris answering questions for a Yahoo News event in French and then English (radical for a French politician). The first question was whether “explicit Macron” is an oxymoron. He laughed. He said he was pragmatic, supple, interested above all in results. His political family was broad: the pro-European moderate right, socialists, progressives, “reasonable ecologists.” He called for “strong reforms” of the French labor market, decreased corporate taxes and invigorated vocational training.

“Modernity is disruptive,” he declared, “and I endorse that.”

As economy minister, Macron’s “disruption” involved allowing stores to open on Sundays and creating what are still called “Macron buses” to offer cheap competition to trains for journeys within France: deregulation, French-style! More reform is needed; it’s proved elusive because nobody wants to give up their “acquis” — the benefits they already have. Whether Macron could build a parliamentary base for change is also an open question.

Still, he’s proved that he can break molds. Perhaps his most attractive feature is his brave attachment to the European Union and commitment to helping refugees. “We are a continent of refugees,” he said, “and if you say we can’t integrate refugees, that’s not consistent with our values, even if borders cannot be wide open.”

I asked him if his pragmatism could really fly in an age of populist demagogy. Sure, he told me. “We are contrarians,” he went on. “When neoliberal economics was triumphing everywhere, we refused to adopt it. And now when demagogues are winning, in France pragmatism is going to win.”

Macron continued: “There is a crisis of such proportions that people are ready for change. I am not shy. I am for an open society. I am for a progressive world. I do not propose to reform France; I propose to transform it at its deepest level.”

Could he do it? I want to believe he can, in part because I take seriously something he had said earlier: “I want to help with Muslim integration. If you follow the line of Marine Le Pen, you create a civil war.”

In “Submission,” his best-selling novel, Michel Houellebecq writes: “The growing gap — an abyss — between the population and those who spoke in its name, politicians and journalists, had necessarily to lead to something chaotic, violent and unpredictable. France, like other western countries, had been heading for a long time toward civil war.”

In the book, frantic maneuvering to keep Le Pen from power leads to the victory of an imagined Islamic party led by a telegenic character Mohammed Ben Abbes. Houellebecq’s France is culturally exhausted — a land of desperate sex and spiritual emptiness — and so it succumbs to a movement driven by faith and conviction.

It takes about a half-hour to get from the Luxembourg Gardens to Houellebecq’s abyss — the grim banlieue, or suburb, of Sevran. Here just about everyone is from north or sub-Saharan Africa. On a rainy morning women spread old shoes, screwdrivers and 20th-century cellphones on mats in the station, hoping to sell something. Men stand on corners, idle. One pisses against a wall.

I get talking to Moussa Sanogo, who came to France from the Ivory Coast a quarter-century ago, and N’diaye Fousseiny, from Mali. Here’s the deal, Sanogo explains, there are no jobs for his kids. He used to install scaffolding, but these days Polish and Romanian construction workers arrive by truck every Monday, making it impossible for French citizens to compete. “My son drifts around the projects selling drugs,” he says. “It’s the only business that works.” Fousseiny, who works a night shift at Disneyland Paris, tells me his 14-year-old daughter got detained the other night while hanging out with dealers. Integration through education, the French Republic’s promise, has broken down.

I ask about Islamic radicalism. Sanogo, a Muslim, says the area “is worse than Molenbeek,” the terrorist-breeding district of Brussels. About 30 young men from the area, he says, had left for Syria. “Look,” he tells me, “here we are, there’s nothing, it’s a hole, and the jihadists do this out of vengeance. It’s revenge for an indecent life.” He describes a pattern: first drugs, then the discovery of religion (perhaps in jail), then radicalization in clandestine mosques.

Close to five million Muslims live in France. Many succeed, but they are likely to have overcome prejudice first. Nisrine Zaibi, the daughter of Tunisian immigrants and now the socialist vice president of the Burgundy regional council, told me how when she became a French citizen at the age of 18, she was asked if she wanted to change her name to "something more French." (She also told me she would never "vote useful" for Macron.) Job interviews inevitably turn to questions about the veil or extremism. Laïcité often translates into laws banning Muslim headscarves. It may seem a short step from defining the state by its secularism to insisting everyone become secular. "The banlieue can be a desperate place," Zaibi said. "I know people who are ready to vote Le Pen just to break something."

As I leave Sevran, a lanky kid barges into me. "You could excuse yourself," he says, looking for a fight. We square up; he moves off, muttering insults. Violence simmers just beneath the surface.

Villers-Cotterêts, a town in Picardy about an hour northeast of Paris, has a special place in French history. It was here in 1539 that Francis I established French rather than Latin as the language of all legal acts and notarized documents. The town is synonymous with the forging of that formidable thing: French culture. Today it is run by a National Front mayor, Franck Briffaut.

Macron came here last month to try to correct one of the worst stumbles of his campaign, when he said in February that "There is not one French culture. There is a culture in France." The National Front pounced: *Macron believes there's no such thing as French culture!* So Macron trooped out here to stand in front of a statue of Alexandre Dumas and attempt a definition of the French spirit as one of "open patriotism" and refusal to "exclude the other."

Briffaut thinks Macron is a clown. "He's an unidentified political object, part toad and part duck," he told me. Another Macron stumble — the decision to go to Algiers to tell an autocrat that France should apologize for its colonial-era "crimes against humanity" — caused the mayor to explode. "It's scandalous, this penitence! Every country has a history of light and shadow. We cannot blame ourselves. These Algerians wanted us to leave. Well, if French colonialism was so terrible, why do they flock here to colonize us today?"

An ex-parachutist who served in Beirut, the bristling Briffaut sees a war of civilizations against Islamism. Parts of France have become no-go areas, he says. “I joined the National Front because I did not want to see what happened in Lebanon happen in France.” He asks me why Trump even had to say “America First.” It’s obvious a nation must put itself first.

After the meeting, I am joined by two leftists who worked in education before retirement, Jean-Claude Meunier and Christiane Dufour. They hate the National Front but will not “vote useful” for Macron. Their issue is growing inequality and what they call the “pauperization” of France as the welfare state and workers’ rights and salaries are gradually eroded. They wanted a “social Europe”; they got what they see as a Europe of ruthless capitalism.

We head for a restaurant called the Kiosk of Bacchus. I order a Coke but am brought a glass of Côte de Gascogne red wine — “our form of resistance,” Meunier jokes. Dufour’s daughter, Geraldine Leclerc, has joined us. She is struggling as a nurse. “It’s just more and more difficult to survive,” she says. “France is a land of gradual degradation.” Still, we raise a glass and, of course, the steak tartare is first-rate.

An argument ensues. Cyril Jacquiot opened the restaurant last year and is working a 75-hour week. He thinks France’s problem is not the fraying welfare state but the fact that “there are too many acquired rights and too little will to work.” Jacquiot tells Dufour and Meunier they are deluded. If France is the land of “immobilisme” — roughly paralysis — it is because the French know they are protected. “If you want less unemployment, you need more flexibility,” he says. “People need to know they can be fired. Otherwise all sense of responsibility is lost. You have to decide in life: Do you want to work or not?”

I listen to the escalating row. In truth, I am not sure the French will ever decide. They live better than they admit but in a state of growing angst fed by failures they are not quite ready to confront. That is the backdrop to Le Pen’s possible victory. It is a frightening prospect; French streets could become battlegrounds. Insurrection is another of those French habits that do not die easily.

Seeking quiet, I wander into a park that was once the grounds of the chateau where Francis I made French the language of the land. The chateau, its roof

sagging, its windows boarded up, is collapsing into ruin.

Correction: April 14, 2017

An earlier version of this column misstated the given name, in one instance, and the surname, in a photo caption, of a restaurant owner. He is Cyril Jacquiot, not Cyrille Jacquinot. A separate caption misstated where that photo was taken: It was in Sevran, not Sevran Cotterets.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on April 16, 2017, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: France in the End of Days.
