

The Rise of Political Extremism in France: A Political Crisis Behind Social Unrest

Research question: What are the real factors unravelling France and where is their impact in the context of a globalising world?

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Abstract

Following the recent results of French local elections of March 2014, a recurring debate over the rise of extremist politics in France came back. As it will be observed in this case study, globalisation is not the cause but rather an exhibitor of four elements unravelling socially and politically the country: closed secularism, the French idea of nationality following the Revolution, political taboos induced by a syndicate-captured society and an overwhelming two-party system. The first two factors exaggerated through globalisation are the cause of social unrest whereas the two latter cause the political crisis. This scope of this article is to distinguish the two crisis and the different challenges facing the country as well as inducing a reflexion on modern democracy and the social and democratic consequences of a two-party system.

Key words: French, secularism, extremism, globalisation, two-party system, crisis, democracy

Introduction

Following the recent results of French local elections of March 2014, a recurring debate over the rise of extremist politics in France came back on the table. For long years, the globalisation phenomenon served quite well as an excuse for the growing social crisis in the country. However, as it will be observed in this article, globalisation is not the cause but rather an exhibitor of four elements defining French society: French secularism, French idea of nationality, political taboos, and an overwhelming two-party system. By analysing and interpreting those factors in the lights of globalisation, it will be argued that those are the specificities causing social unrest in France.

In order to do so, firstly, we are going to redefine the concept of globalisation and contextualise it in a French light. Following this, a discussion based on historical institutionalism about the French concept of secularism will be held as to explain the reasons and the causes of its stronghold of society, and as being the first factor. Secondly, by arguing that the idea of citizenship equals to nationality is the second factor causing issues with the integration of post-colonialist populations, we are going to analyse and interpret the French social crisis. Thirdly, we are going to introduce two new factors not often taken into account when it

comes to the rise of extremist parties in France: two-party system and political taboo. In other terms, secularism and the concept of French nationality were factors acting in the social crisis whereas political taboo and the two-party system are the causes of the political crisis of France. All of those factors – not mutually exclusive - have led to a progressive increase of the extremist party Front National.

I- The social crisis and its factors

“Globalisation means that borders become markedly less relevant to everyday behaviour in the various dimensions of economics, information, ecology, technology, cross-cultural conflict and civil society”¹

Globalisation can be understood in many ways. On one hand, it is the border grime of ideas, materials, goods, information, money, problems and people². On the other hand, it is also the emergence and effervescence of international organizations, institutions, and social movements working with or against the global strength of the wind of globalisation. Through those shifts, it is not only demographic frontiers which are rearranged but also the socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious ones. This diversification of the ethnical structures of individual societies has brought new challenges to western states; challenges shaped as nationalism, political and religious extremism.

The heterogeneity, pluralism, and the fragmentation of society are all aspects of the secularisation of the Western world.³The 21st century brought with it a new vision of the world, with new norms and a new hierarchy for the Western part of the world, and especially France. The legalisation of secularism in France redefined how French people see their rights as citizens of the country. It led to a normalization of secular, even atheistic, habits in French society and redefined the hierarchy of norms and values for the French population: individual rights, human rights, freedom of speech, democracy, etc. As Mikael Harrington said: “secularisation is not just the decline of religious ideas and institutions, but a traumatic de-idealisation, bringing about new cultural movements”⁴

Globalisation has become the standard “word” used to describe how “Humanity” experiences a unique, historically speaking, intensification of international and human relations. Evidently, there also lies a problem as we first need a clear definition of what does the word “humanity” implies for the person using it. Is humanity only the nations and people sharing the same beliefs and norms of values? Effectively, because of the latency in the meaning of the concept of humanity and thus of globalisation, the way in which different societies perceive the challenges and the problems linked with it differs greatly from nation to nation, but also from people to people, since, globalisation brings also fragmentation and individualisation.

Because it is so prevalent and does concern us all, as in the definition given by Roland Robertson where globalisation is a process which transforms the world in a unique place “in which little can happen that does not have significant ramifications for the world as a whole”⁵, many debates and discussions are transferred to the bigger globalisation paradigm. This is why discussions on religions which were previously found in the paradigm of secularisation are now understood through the prism of globalisation. Since the fields have become global, the balance between fields tripped. They intensified the importance of the religious space in relation to the national one, leading to a greater chance of a different mapping of public and private spheres. Since religions “belong to the realm of civil society”⁶, the debate of their presence being

¹Beck Ulrich., (2006), “Cosmopolitan Vision, Polity Press”, England, p.70

²Christiansen F., Hetedoft U., (2004), The Politics of Multiple Belonging, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, England

³Lewellen T.C., (2002), “The Anthropology of Globalisation: Cultural Anthropology Enter the 21st Century”, Bergin & Garvey, Westport CT

⁴“The Politics of God Funeral : The Spiritual Crisis of Western Civilisation”, NY, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983

⁵Robertson R., (1995), “Glocalization :Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity”, in Global Modernities, pp.25-40

⁶Beckford James.A., (2008), “Social Theory and Religion”, Cambridge University Press, England, p.184

a matter of private or public interest is being strengthened by social institutions in the country. As James Beckford pointed out, religion stays a matter of private sphere where institutions of civil society are weak⁷.

This is exactly why debates on religions in France are very much part of the public/private sphere. It is reluctantly thrown into the public sphere by the powerful civil institutions of France; much like in Québec with their Charter of Values, taking much of the public debate in early 2014.

Because religions belong to the sphere of civil society, and because globalisation created a “generalised society”⁸ alongside, the differences between cultures have been put forward by meeting regularly, through increased contact⁹ in the public sphere of debate and life.

Deriving from that logic, those differences between cultures are most often found in the religious ways of people as they are a cultural and linguistic means which sculpts the wholeness of life and thoughts.¹⁰ Religion is a phenomenon which forms the subjectivity of individuals with its cognitive and behaviourist dimensions.

1. The “homogeneity” factor: French secularism.

1.1. Closed secularism

To open our first object of interest, when it comes to subjectivity and the understanding of religious matters, French tradition, politics and society are used to, paradoxically, only “one kind” of subjectivity. Since 1905, the general direction in the building of French society by politics and legalized norms is to establish and maintain homogeneity within society, becoming a part of what defines it and what defines the French population – and that never changed even in our modern times.

Where globalisation brought “secularisation” to the Western world, it did not bring it to France, which considers itself as the first secular country in the world. The term “secularity” (*laïcité*), *strictosensu*, defines the distinct separation between the State and the Church. The non-reconnaissance of one official cult by the state following the “loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation de l’Église et de l’État” (1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and the State) is a consequence of the 1789 article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen: No one may be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious ones, as long as the manifestation of such opinions does not interfere with the established Law and Order”.¹¹ Following this logic, the secularism was introduced in order to guarantee equal rights in obedience.¹² 1789 not only changed French society at that time but particularly redefined the modern society where secularism is part of the French values which are seen as fundamental to the French identity of nationality. The attachment and pride the French population feels towards the Revolution of 1789 echoes on how France sees itself: the country of Human Rights (le pays des Droits de l’Homme). In the French imagination, secularism goes hand in hand as the protecting frame of the Human Rights.¹³ Thus, secularity is not merely a concept in France but represents the echoes of France’s “glorious past” which the population

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸ « société généralisée » in French in Anderson B., (1996), *L’imaginaire National : Reflexion sur l’origine et l’essor du nationalisme*

⁹Hill Fletcher J., (2008), *Religious Pluralism in an Era of Globalization: The Making of Modern Religious Identity*, Theological Studies, Vol.69, n°2

¹⁰Lindbeck George A., (1984), “The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age”, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, pp.142

¹¹Translated from French by author, *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen, 1798*, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/dudh/1789.asp>

¹²Lehning J.R., (2001), *To Be a Citizen :The Political Culture of the Early French Third Republic*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY

¹³Baubérot J., (2008), « La Laïcité expliquée à Monsieur Sarkozy », Albin Michel, Paris

feels that the country cannot repeat. Religion is not seen as an element constituting of a nation but rather as a sphere that should be left at the discretion of each individual.

However, the French secularism is also a “closed” secularism¹⁴ where religious expression is “accepted” only in the private sphere with no visible signs of religious belief outside a person’s house door. In the French culture, traditionally catholic, this rule of secularism does not impact particularly the everyday habits of its population. Since religion often relates to not only religious practice but also bodily marks such as the hijab, the scull-cap, etc., this distinct separation of public and private spheres can lead to a clash between the hierarchy of values of the Muslim person and the hierarchy of the French person. What comes first: the freedom of beliefs or the sacred rule of secularism? Are we still standing before a cleavage between nationalism (as protection of individual rights) and Human Rights (as freedom of obedience and beliefs)¹⁵? It is precisely these questions that cause one of the conundrums of the French modern society, especially when it comes to religious practices. As Alma Mancilla said: “everything that falls under the topic of the person’s body is formed somewhere at the border of the private/public”.¹⁶ It is the different answers to the same question of what disturbs the established law and order that leads to conflict on the public sphere. This conundrum has been put to the front of the public debate ever since more and more immigrants arrived on French land with a baggage of different culture and religion. This clear separation between public and private space “in the name of” the protection of individual freedoms does create a contradiction less and less accepted by some who do not wish to put aside their whole cultural baggage. The perception of differences has become easier because they are being displayed through the arena of this generalised society.

Contrary to Québec, for instance, where all religious signs can be worn at school (open secularity), the principle of a “neat” secular school in France is very important and very restrictive for other cultures. The example of the hijab worn by many women of Muslim obedience in France illustrates the problem of two worlds colliding. Since 1989, many “cases” of young women wearing hijabs to school have put the media and society into a tumult, reviving the ongoing debate about society, Muslims in France, integration. Where people with French origins see the hijab as a clear sign of unwillingness to fit in (and thus contradicting their norms and the “rule of 1998”), people of Muslim obedience (with French nationality or other) see a lack of tolerance, a rejection of their beliefs, their culture, and thus of themselves – even though they are part of France.

1.2. Secularism, equity and identity

However, the concept of French secularism meeting globalisation would not be such a difficult question if it brought real equity to the society. Because France has a roman catholic past and still holds many catholic traditions, its secularity is more *de jure* than *de facto*. Echoing from catholic tradition, it has become acceptable in a customary way to wear/show signs of catholic faith. Although it is normal for France to have customs flowing from catholic faith as Roman Catholicism was predominant until 1905 in French history; and the French attachment to its tradition is part of the French culture which can hardly be changed, the concept of secularity imposed on all its citizens leaves questions to be answered about equity and

¹⁴Gouvernement du Québec, Rapport abrégé de la commission Bouchard-Taylor (2008), « Fonder l’avenir : le temps de la conciliation », Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d’accommodements reliés aux différences culturelles, <http://www.accommodements-quebec.ca/documentation/rapports/rapport-final-abrege-fr.pdf>, accessed the 18 october 2013

¹⁵Metzger L., (2000), “Nation, Nationalism and Globalization in France”, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

¹⁶Translated from French by Caroline Garnczarek, Mancilla, Alma (2009), « La religion dans l’espace public : une enquête préliminaire sur les perceptions de quelques leaders juifs et musulmans en milieu montréalais », Diversité urbaine, vol. 9, n° 2, 2009, p. 41

equality for the minorities¹⁷. What does disturb the established law and order? In the French mind, surely not the things considered as customary. And yet, the reality is that Muslim religion has now become the second most practiced religion and this fact moved the secularity debate from “protection of catholic culture” to “protection of the public sphere”.

Nevertheless, this concept secularity as “protection of the public sphere” does not respond well to the challenges of heterogeneity brought by the globalisation phenomenon. This separation and obliteration of religions in the public sphere do not provide answers for the preservation of individual identities, communal identities in times where religion is becoming more and more a factor of identification as borders, territories, and other aspects of cultures become blurred. The homogeneity goal of France as “one unique and cohesive society” is impacting negatively on the coexistence in one unique public sphere of a plurality of identities, communities, imaginary societies¹⁸. The reality of secularisation can be perceived in many domains: uniformity v. plurality; private v. public; assigned v. accomplished; choice v. inheritance. It is true that on one hand, globalisation impacts evidently on how people perceive themselves and each other: “the citizen who does not belong”¹⁹. The disappearance of identity worries. The appearance of identities worries.

The problems linked with religious practices in the French society and in the institutions are correlated with integration problems. Because the French community was “born and raised” in homogeneity, differences can be met with hostility as a form of xenophobia if they are not quickly “erased” by assimilation. The word ‘stranger’ is still commonly used to qualify someone who does not share the same norms or beliefs than the ones accepted by the French community, the ones which do not fall in their comprehension grid. It is precisely this feeling of rejection which “forces” them as social beings to find a community to which belong where belonging means a feeling of identification to a community, to one container of individual identity. The sense of “belonging” marches towards two directions: embodying the personal psychological death throes and the political construction of identification symbols.²⁰

The sense of belonging develops a political competition between different communities such as the state-nation and migrant communities. This clamber shapes itself as a struggle between the individual in those groups of “migrants” and the State in which they live; and having as a result a throwback of attachment to their country of origins. For the purpose of this essay, we are going to consider the Algerian community, and in particular the third generation of the post-Algerian war comers. Although their grandparents feel very much French, it is not the case for the youngest generation in which we can observe a rejection of the French nationality and state which they refuse to integrate as long as they feel rejected. Obviously, it is a talk about a vicious circle where no one is interested in integrating or getting integrated by anyone. There is a distinct cleavage, often imposed by those feeling rejected, who now might bite on every hand given to them, this we cannot ignore, to be perfectly fair. Certainly, because they feel treated as strangers, they do become estranged to the French community, and again, are further appealed by their country of origins. However, because they were born in France, they are treated as Frenchmen, as strangers, back in their cradle, leaving them as “bastards of the world”, stateless. Religion becomes indeed a hope of new identity, a form of belonging to an imaginary community²¹, an identity that becomes spiritual rather than territorial. « Today, under the conditions of globalisation, we have inherited an imaginative landscape where nations

¹⁷Chavura S., (2010), “The Separation of Religion and State: Context and Meaning”, Nebula Publication, Vol.7, n°4

¹⁸Lévi-Stauss C., (1971) "Race et Culture", dans Revue internationale des sciences sociales vo.XXIII n°4, chap. 9

¹⁹Castels S., Davidson A., (2000), «Citizenship and Migration : Globalization and the Politics of Belonging», Routledge, New York

²⁰Brøgger in Christiansen F., Hedetoft U., (2004), The Politics of Multiple Belonging, Ashgate, England

²¹Appadurai A., (2005), « Après le Colonialisme : les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation », Petite Bibliothèque Payot, Paris

contain cultures, and cultures contain religion, and a singular religion contains identity »²². To water a bit our wine, we can remark that other “imaginary” communities become more and more present – on another level – such as vegans for example – who do not miss an opportunity to share their beliefs and values – even sometimes by using extreme verbal violence in order to “shove down our throat” vegan ways of seeing the world, their habits. The extreme reaction is common to every new identity to which individuals become attached and represent themselves in – as egocentric Homo sapiens.

It is thus easy to notice that the first direct effect observed of this unmovable secularism was an increase in religious extremism. However, the answer to that question is no wonder. Since religions and actions made in their name possess a complex system of beliefs and claims and religion as a whole comes into culture as “a part [of it] which is actively concerned with the establishment and defence patterns of belief and values”²³, it is not difficult to see why the feeling of being left out of society because of one’s particular vision erases the need or the will to become absorbed by others.²⁴ The case of Mohammed Merah, 23 year old French from Toulouse with Algerian origins shocked the French society. Also called “le tueur au scooter” (the killer on a scooter), he brutally killed seven children in a Jewish school on the 21 March 2012 in order to – as he claimed – be accepted in Al Qaeda. However, if we look deeper into the story, the young boy who proclaimed its devotion to the extremist movement and who went to such great length to be part of something did not come from a particularly religious environment as a friend of his said during a documentary: “he wasn’t following meticulously his religion, we were going clubbing, and even having drinks [...]”²⁵. Toulouse is quite known for its violent environment, the rejection of others and heavy religious actions. There is a will to become part of something bigger by all means, even by becoming a martyr – which becomes an integrative part of their values’ system.²⁶ It is also the importance and the sanctity of the “martyr” that was put behind with secularization. It comes with a meaning of religious utility where there is a promise of rebirth, eternal life, and especially a profound feeling of acceptance and belonging to the community, a goal, and a destiny.²⁷

However, those questions about religious extremism have become quite redundant. Already Samuel Huntington was talking about “the West vs the Rest” and of a religious separation of the world. It hasn’t been news for a long time. And it is not the scope of this article either. Thus, after having explored in a non-exhaustive way the questions of French secularism and identity as the first issue in the French social crisis we are going to address the question of “nationality” via French cultural glasses of understanding.

II- Nation and the implicit political crisis

1. The Nation factor

According to Stephen Castels and Alistair Davidson (2000), the era of pre-globalisation represents the “end of the national belonging” where the concept of citizenship based solely on the Nation becomes obsolete. « This process is primarily driven by the characteristics of migratory patterns in the contemporary world, its rapidity and its great variety... forcing the creation of a new layer of citizenship above that of the

²²Hill Fletcher J., (2008), Religious Pluralism in an Era of Globalization: The Making of Modern Religious Identity, Theological Studies, Vol.69, n°2, p.8

²³Weinberg L., Pedahzur A., (2004), Religious Fundamentalism and Political Extremism, Frank Cass, London, Portland, p.14

²⁴Parker C., Kasanda A., et al., (2005), Mondialisation, Acculturation et Résistance, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgique, Paris, Montréal, l’Hamarttan

²⁵Enquête Exclusive, aired the 21 september 2012 sur TF1 – French TV

²⁶Beit-Hallahmi B., (2004), The Return of Martyrdom: Honour, Death and Immortality, Frank Cass, London, Portland

²⁷*Ibid.*

nation – the citizen who does not belong»²⁸. And yet, as it was argued above, the pre-globalisation era is a factor leading to a “frantic search of an identity”²⁹ as a natural response of individuals which are, as stated before, social and individualistic. It is thus not surprising that just as religious actions become more extreme and intense, to see the same happening with politics. Indeed, can we not say that religion is politics in a non-secular world? It would be hard not to presume the same behavioural patterns from both sides. We can take as an example the case of Anders Behring Breivik. Wasn't his actions sensibly look alike to those of a religious extremist? Nationalism is a form of fragmentation, particularism and even localism coming with its luggage of reactive and defensive actions, just as religious extremism. It is Mark Jurgensmeyer³⁰ who speaks about ethno-religious nationalism. Of course, we can wonder about the cultural survivalist dynamics which happens in many western countries, leading to a rebirth of a certain type of chauvinism. It is not only the case in France but in all Western countries affected by the globalisation and touched in their feeling of untouchability.

But why is France struggling so hard to cope with what has touched every neighbour so far? Clearly, as every Historical institutionalist would argue: “history matters”³¹, and who says history says development of institutions – thus norms – which shape and follow the actions and behaviours of each individual in a society, combining the rational/optimizing aspect of an individual with its property as a social animal. As we argued in the *supra* part of this work, secularism is deeply embedded in French institutions and thus French norms and values of each “French” citizen. But also what is profoundly rooted is the fact that France – and its leaders – believe, as a norm, that France is the country of democracy, the “promised land” that keeps its immigration policies largely loose – in comparison to countries such as Canada, for instance, where immigrants are a large part of the Canadian society (17.6% of the population) and are vital to the country's wellbeing – but where more than 60% is a controlled immigration³². France, more often than not, bites off more than it can chew. And it is precisely those two characteristics that collide harshly with each other.

Aside from secularism, another concept was brought by the French Revolution: the idea of a Nation. Even if considered as obsolete by many authors, yet, this idea lies deep within the French history, within the French identity. It is during the Revolution that all residents of France became citizens – no distinctions applied leading to the idea of a common Nation. Ernest Renan (1882), a pillar of nation thinking, thought that a modern nation was a historical result brought by a series of converging factors.³³ But the attachment of the French population to the Revolution, and ergo to its institutional legacy is also linked to having known glory in deeds, as a nation, and the hope to see that glory shine again once more upon the whole country, the whole population – a patriotic glory; “to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more”³⁴.

As a matter of fact, French do not make a distinction between nationality and citizenship because, historically, both words were synonyms. “One is either a national (or a citizen) of France, or not.”³⁵ This concept of citizenship/nationality became even more important and of greater impact when France

²⁸Castels S., Davidson A., (2000), «Citizenship and Migration : Globalization and the Politics of Belonging», Routledge, New York

²⁹Bauman Zygmunt, 2001, “Identity in the Globalizing World”, Social Anthropology, Vol.9, n°2

³⁰The Paradox of Nationalism in a Global World in *The Postnational Self*; Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort (eds.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press

³¹Porta D.D., Keating M., “Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Science: A Pluralist Perspectives”, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.126

³²Government of Canada, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/>, accessed the 3rd of April 2014

³³What's A Nation?, in *Discours et Conférence*, Paris, Caiman-Levy

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Metzger L., “Nation, Nationalism and Globalization in France”[in Suryadinata Leo, (2000) “Nationalism and Globalisation”, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore]

“expanded” its territory on the colonies where the people in these colonies were given the French citizenship, nationality, and thus, became “French”³⁶. This vision of nationality and citizenship became a problem when, by the end of the French colonization period (i.e. Algeria War), civilizations started to mix. The first generation of newcomers was blended in the national landscape because they were “willing” to become completely assimilated by the French culture and acquire a French identity, as a price to pay in order to live in the Promised Land. “Glory to the Republic, Democracy, and Secularism” is the real “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”.

Since that time, it appeared that the French tend to welcome more immigrants if they show a strong will to adapt and make fit in the society³⁷. Indeed, in the 1998 year, a new “nationality code” was introduced with a set of rules or rather guidelines for “strangers” who would be willing to acquire the French nationality.

And because the French concept of nation goes hand in hand with citizenship, the debate about the existing two nationalisms heads straight to the wall. Where the concept of “open” nationalism normally rhymes with the large and vague concept of citizenship and where “closed” nationalism goes with the idea of ethnic nation³⁸, in France, mathematically speaking, nation which is equal to citizenship keeps close company to the concept of ethnicity, origins. The disgust regarding present days (terrible economic situation) coupled with the nostalgia of the past splendour of French history³⁹ and its people’s achievements do not allow for a shift of the concept of “what should France be” in the mind of its citizens. Adding to this, the sacred character of secularism in the paradoxical French mind bears with it an immutable strength and pride in the eyes of the people.

2. Finding the unknown factors in the equation of the uprising of extreme politics.

Of course the era in which we live in offers plenty of challenges: cultural, economic, individual ones. Yes, French secularism – even though obsolete - is a factor leading to a rebuff of the minorities in France. Yes, religious “presence” is a bit more up front our alley for some time; after all, French Muslim minorities are an integrant part of the cultural French landscape – brought by the country’s history. The beauty of cultural mixture has become a burden to many persons in France.

Yes, there is an increase in harsh visible nationalism as it was shown with “Jour de Colère” where many people in Paris went protesting on the street for any personal reasons they could find. It led to a mixture of people protesting against fur alongside anti-Semitic and racist propagandas.

Yes, those are challenges of the French society – particularly the personal seclusion, atomisation and division of all the elements which form civil society. It is not simply pure xenophobia or racism which led people to vote for an extremist party. Despite all the problems brought by French secularism with regards to its religious “minorities” and the French concept of nationality as stated above, the evolution of French voters has been guided by at least two more factors x and y .

³⁶Appadurai A., (2005), « Après le Colonialisme : les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation », Petite Bibliothèque Payot, Paris.

³⁷Balibar E., (1991), Race, Nation, Class, « Ambiguous Identities », Paris, Edition La Découverte

³⁸Metzger L., “Nation, Nationalism and Globalization in France” [in Suryadinata Leo, (2000) “Nationalism and Globalisation”, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore]

³⁹ motives leading to closed nationalism according to Winock Michel, (1990), in Davies P., The Extreme Right in France: 1789 to the Present: From Maistre to Le Pen, p.7: disgust of present days, nostalgia of glorious era, praise of immobility, anti-individualism, elitist society’s praise, nostalgia of the sacred, the fear of genetic degradation and demographic downfall, moral decadence, and anti-intellectualism.

2.1. The x factor

However, I do not believe those are the only reasons that the extremist party Front National has gained such popularity. It has been for some years that the party of Jean-Marie Le Pen led now by his bulldog of a daughter Marine Le Pen surfs on a wave of “success”. Already in the last presidential elections of 2012, the party leader met with 19% of the votes. In 2014, the local elections were met with many local administration going far right-wing (14 cities of more than 9,000 inhabitants) qualified as a historic score by Marine Le Pen.

The problems facing France are being talked about by the media and the people, but not by its leaders. The topic of religion and immigration has become a political taboo. This is the factor *x*. It is not to say that economy or finances are not important matters – they are – but they do not touch the everyday life of citizens. The day to day lives are being paced not my economic questions that a majority of the country’s population does not even truly understand, or does not bother to understand for some but by diversity and cultural questions⁴⁰ such as the “Christmas Dad” being cancelled from some public schools in the name of secularism, it is the construction of mosques – or the lack of it – that threatens the random citizen, it is the witnessing of the evolution of their country which they fear because they don’t understand. Yes, the economic situation of France and its citizens is at an all times bad, and we know that “when threatened, for instance, by an economic crisis, the population of a country tends to look inwards and blame foreigners for their misfortune”⁴¹ – foreigners would they be ones, or not. It is the disappearance of France as they know it which scares them.⁴²

Only, the truth is that none of the ruling parties to date has really treated, or even talked about those subjects. France is a difficult country to rule, where every leader should be aware that every decision he will take will be brought on the street. Attempts of transforming French society of being less old-school, less obsolete in the 21st century are often met by virulent protests which scare the leaders of the country. The taboo of diversity comes from a fear of stigmatisation of the Muslim minorities on one hand, and on the other, the fear of revolting a part of the country by bringing unpopular measures. It is the very divergence about the integration topics of the French population that lead politicians to seal their mouths. Nicolas Sarkozy did try to start a debate about secularism in France, which resulted in a big uprising of French society on every side – since it was still in the mind of a closed secularism. From the secularity defendant sides, the thought about a debate on secularity in itself was a scandal, on the other side, the planned results of this debate showed the lack of openness, for instance, no Halal meals at school (although they do serve fish every Friday or a vegetarian option). This debate on secularity was in fact more a debate on Islam. The way it was handled by the politics and by society has shut the door on the topic since 2011. Moreover, the ideas proposed in this debate were particularly strong on the “closed” secularism concept – which – as we have seen in the part above – is one of the factor creating cleavages and unsettlement in French society.

2.2. The y factor

The *x* factor does not come alone. It is also the dominant two-party system of French politics that renders the political debate dull – and there we have oury. Not only did the left-wing *Parti Socialiste* (PS) absorb all

⁴⁰Tchumkam H., Spring 2013, “Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France”, French Forum, Vol.38, n°1-2 - Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom, eds, Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 352 pp.

⁴¹Metzger L., “Nation, Nationalism and Globalization in France”[in Suryadinata Leo, (2000) “Nationalism and Globalisation”, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore]

⁴²Gordon P.H., Meunier S., (2001), “Globalization and French Cultural Identity”, *French Politics, Culture and Identity*, Vol.19, n°1

the other parties 'left-sided' – even nearly the communists, but so did the right-wing party *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) with all the 'right-sided' ones (except the FN), adding to its programs more extreme views as a counterbalance to the growing popularity of the Front National. This modern day's theatre which politics have become leads the hegemon parties to have a self-centred look about them and their adversary. So much in fact that, more often than less, every debate leads to having an argument over the cover of the book rather than its content. It falls into the realm of disagreeing for the sake of it. By entering this vicious circle which can even appear insulting to the voters which can feel that they are more in a zoo than a theatre, the current politics have lost the respect, the legitimacy of the voters. This system has led France to become blocked, not only by a divided civil society which has become more and more atomized, leading to conflict of interests by small independent groups of people, but also by its parties, which in their two-party system have become atomised from within where every individual is in a charisma-lacking power competition, not for the wellbeing of the country, but for their own personal success. Politics and politicians have moved to the realm of the Public Choice. The two-party system has pushed democracy to its limit – or the image of “good people for good politics” and erased the hope French citizens had in it since the parties and the people in them do not represent well the people of France. No wonder abstention is at its highest. A wonder the blank vote has not yet been introduced. And the result of $x + y$ leaves no choice for lovers of their citizen's duty to vote for the party which “represents” them the most, even though they do not agree with the rest of the party's program.

2.3. The result of the equation: what does it say?

And indeed, this strong two-party system (y) and the conversational taboo (x) in the only two leading parties have left Frenchmen and women with the feeling of their issues being left out. This has led people to feel attracted to the only party who speaks – in a certain manner – about those precise topics. Coupled with heavy abstention, the votes go for the party that talks about the everyday matters of the people. The FN, with its populist strategy and its lowdown profile ever since Marine Le Pen came to power, seems to offer more answers to the “real” questions of the people in comparison to the other choices who diplomatically keep their mouths shut. It is not that they are racists, xenophobic, or anti-Semitic. They are the people still willing to cast a vote, will it be for a party that only partially addresses the issues on which they wonder.

If we look closely at one close neighbour of France, in other words, England, we can see the same pattern happening: strong two-party system, rise of the “nationalist” party, abstention, and disinterest of people in politics. The factors x and y do not represent the limits of French society but the limits of the modern French political “democratic” system impacting of the relationship of politics and society. Two-party system, would it be inside a country or in international relations (bipolar system) often leads to a redefinition of rules where individuals or smaller groups have more trouble to be heard – thus undermining the equity and justice of the system. The lack of choice in present French politics has led to the results known to us nowadays. However, this deficiency did not put a strain directly on the French population but rather on the politicians within the parties. Indeed, as in economic theories where supposedly the market is fair when there are many small players involved because each balances the other through just price competition, it is closely the same with politics. Because of the lack of competition from other quasi-inexistent parties, there is no real balancing process where citizens can only “shop” in store A or store B which offer both high prices for low value and sometimes not even the ones you are looking for. In other words, the “apparition” of a third competitor on the market, even the political one, will have an attractive effect if it offers some of the goods/ideas voters/consumers are looking for – independently of the prices or aftermath.

Ergo, it is not surprising to see the extremist party gaining more votes. Marine Le Pen has been a shockingly good poker player in redefining her own image: charismatic but less threatening than her father's. If we look back at French history, once more, we see that even though many persons place their professed love in the Revolution, we cannot forget that only 16 years after, Napoleon was named Emperor. Even if they admit it or not, French people long for a strong character to lead the country, of whom they would accept the rule. Legitimacy in France in fact comes not from the democratic vote per se, but undoubtedly from the charisma of the person – a charismatic leader. The memories of Charles de Gaulle, François Mitterrand, or even Jacques Chirac are still sacred. Even though all of them - either by a strong hold on the country, bad economic decisions, or by inaction – introduced the country to the rabbit's hole, or followed its path.

This article seeks to introduce, through the French example, a reflexion about the modern concept of democracy, the social and democratic consequences of a two-party system, and the possibilities to better the actual political and social landscape of many countries, including France.

Conclusion

Globalisation did challenge French society on important factors defining French identity, especially the French secularism and idea of nationality. They are the reasons the society has been unsettled for many years. And because French civil society is particularly active and strong – through syndicates and the well-known French strikes - politicians have become more and more delicate about certain topics leading nowadays to a political taboo on important societal matters – brought by globalisation, among other dynamics of the modern world.

However, as we noticed here, the rise of the extremist party is not only an externality of the social crisis the country is going through. It is the representation of an important crisis of the French political system. Indeed, the two-party system has led politics and politicians to become self-centred, assured of their positions because of the lack of challengers capable of removing them from their office – even following scandals.

The scope of this article was to point out the main challenges of France as a political country and as a society as well as introducing a possible discussion on the path the country should take regarding its political status quo. How to unblock the system? How can society challenge it? What would be the right direction to take? What does it say about the modern concept of democracy?

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