



The New Faces of the European Far-Right

Nilüfer Göle

► To cite this version:

Nilüfer Göle. The New Faces of the European Far-Right. 2011,
<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/05/11/the-european-far-right/>. hal-00739443

HAL Id: hal-00739443

<https://hal.science/hal-00739443>

Submitted on 8 Oct 2012

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

[Rethinking secularism](#), [World affairs](#):

The new faces of the European far-right

posted by [Nilüfer Göle](#)



Two hitherto marginal but rising forces proved pivotal in the 2009 European elections: a burgeoning Green movement and a renascent far-right. On one hand, the British National Party won its first entry to the European Parliament, while in the Netherlands a rich multicultural heritage has been challenged by the electoral victories of the nativist Party for Freedom (PVV). On the other hand, the breakthrough of environmental groups on the political scene was celebrated everywhere in Europe. In Germany, where there was already a strong Green tradition, and in France, they outstripped the center parties in unprecedented fashion. But since the election, the actions of the Greens have remained virtually invisible, while the far-right never ceases to occupy the public stage, shaping societal debate across Europe and positioning itself as a viable alternative political force.

Republicanist France, which believed itself immune to the ominous rise of far-right political parties, is no exception. With the ascent of Marine Le Pen to the head of the National Front and her growing popularity in the polls, France joins the surge of nationalist parties that is sweeping over all of Europe. We must understand the new dynamics that underlie this relapse toward a continent-wide far-right movement: in its latest change of face, the far-right misappropriates the legacy of 1968 at the same time that it targets Islam under the guise of defending national values, just as its leaders claim to embody the value of personal liberty all the while asserting their belonging to the “land” of popular imagination, thus forging a new rhetorical repertoire and introducing it into European political culture. The movement is garnering newfound legitimacy by taking up themes of identity that have, for a decade, continued to gain purchase in European public debates. The far-right parties’ entrance into these debates procures, in particular, an audience for their spokespeople, who stand out in

these arenas through their combativeness toward Islam and through their irreverence, which breaks down former taboos surrounding multiculturalism.

The new faces of the far-right have gained power in their political parties by virtue of their capacity to make a place for themselves in debate—in other words, by manufacturing public personalities—as well as by stirring up controversies over the presence of Islam in Europe. They take great care over their self-presentation, which is given precedence over their political representation and their function in the party. We are witnessing a process whereby the presence of actors in the public sphere and the media determines the place they occupy in the political arena. However, public popularity and political engagement do not always follow the same logic, and, indeed, they sometimes come into tension with each other. There are those among the French public, for instance, who declare the National Front an obstacle to the popularity of Marine Le Pen.

Hence, we face a movement that has been revived politically by its entry to the public sphere, through which it acquires legitimacy for its ideas and puts an end to the stigma of the far-right. These parties are no longer at the end of the political spectrum but seek their political legitimacy at the center of public opinion, and they do so in large part by making Islam a common enemy. Thinkers from the republican right and intellectuals from the left both express perplexity over the rise of right-wing movements that do not hesitate to endorse egalitarian, feminist, and secular ideas. They have been dispossessed of the ideas that previously guaranteed the far-right's restriction to the margins of the political system.

The rising stars of the European far-right, such as Marine Le Pen in France, in fact scramble the divide between right and left, thus distinguishing themselves from the preceding generation of conservatives. They sometimes display a *habitus* evocative of European counter-culture—something completely out of step with the style of their predecessors. The leader of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria, Heinz-Christian Strache, who often sports a tee-shirt emblazoned with an effigy of Che, and the Swiss politician Oskar Freysinger, who wears his long hair in a ponytail, do not hesitate to borrow the emblems of cultural revolt. In choosing Islam as a target, they make themselves out to be defenders of sexual equality, feminism, and freedom of expression, as well as supporters of the fight against homophobia and anti-Semitism. Hijacking the cultural legacy of the left, they promote those values to which the preceding, patriarchal, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic far-right was hostile.

Similarly, Marine Le Pen, while profiting from her lineage, aims for political renewal by breaking away from her father's tradition and its representation of the "real" (i.e., Catholic and working-class) France. If the father made himself spokesman for the "little people," in opposition to the established elites associated with the *Grand Écoles* education system, the daughter, a lawyer and Member of the European Parliament, does not oppose the Republic's elite but, on the contrary, claims to be a defender of its values. She even goes so far as to claim to embody those values; she emblazons herself in republican ideals, defending secularism and adopting a feminist stance. She does not hesitate to endorse ideas that were introduced by a specific, and influential, form of feminism in support of her fight against the Islamic veil and the perceived threat of Muslim communitarianism.

Marine Le Pen has established herself through her declarations on controversies surrounding Islam. She attracted public attention by comparing Friday prayers on rue de la Myrha in the 18th arrondissement of Paris, which is home to a significant number of Muslims, to the German occupation. This comparison earned her a complaint for inciting racial hatred but also

assured her a bill of entry to the public arena. She denounces the *burkha* and then demands even more comprehensive laws, setting herself up against “mosque-cathedrals,” polygamy, and the proscription of pork from public cafeterias. In her eyes, all Muslim religious practices constitute an instrumentalization of religion for political purposes. And according to her, any tolerance of Muslims or minority rights leads to discrimination against those of “French” descent.



It was likewise by arousing a sensitive debate around the construction of minarets in Switzerland that Oscar Freysinger, hitherto a relative unknown in the political landscape, won popularity on a European scale. Moreover, Switzerland, a neutral, non-EU country that willingly places itself at Europe’s margins, also made an entrance into European politics through this debate. The Swiss referendum became a major reference point and moved to the center of European public discourse. A Swiss poster opposing the construction of Minarets that was used during the referendum, and which depicts the Swiss flag pierced by minarets in the shape of bullets and overlaid by a woman wearing a burkha, has been appropriated and used by almost all the other European far-right parties. Its graphics communicate a feeling of invasion and menace to the nation posed by foreign forces—a representation of Islam that is far from the realities of Muslims in Europe, a dehumanized version of Islam, faceless and faithless.

In the Netherlands, a short film titled *Fitna* (an Arabic word that signifies social disorder or chaos), produced by Geert Wilders, current leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), in 2008, takes up the theme of the purported Islamic menace in terms of the question of women in Islam. In this film, images of Islamic terrorism and stoning are intermingled with images of women in burkhas. Wilders explicitly invites Europeans to “defend their freedom by halting Islamization.” In order to do so, he suggests a ban on the sale of the Qur’an, which he compares to *Mein Kampf*.

Thus, like Marine Le Pen, the other leaders of Europe’s far-right parties have constructed their careers and redefined the political agenda on the basis of controversies over Islam. The Austrian Freedom Party organizes anti-mosque campaigns; the *Lega Nord* in Italy initiates “pig parades” to desecrate land reserved for the construction of mosques; in France, the *Riposte Laïque* makes appeals for people to rally around an “*apéritif saucisson pinard*” for the celebration of June 18, the anniversary of de Gaulle’s famous speech to the people of occupied France. In other words, we see a repertoire of action that takes its inspiration and draws its references entirely from a battle against Islam. National values are thus defined in opposition to Islamic culture; accordingly, these movements valorize emblems of local French cuisine such as *cochon* (pork) and *pinard* (cheap wine), both of which are *haram*.

Indeed, the rise of neo-populist movements illustrates well the concern over a sense of national identity and belonging, that is, the concern over a conception of identity that posits

the national community as a homogeneous group of white Christians that is thus incompatible with Islam. Meanwhile, the difficulty in naming these movements indicates a change in the rhetorical register of the far-right. We can no longer trace a direct evolution of xenophobic and anti-immigration policies to the 1970s. Today, the category of race assumes religious overtones. Patriarchal conservatism and anti-Semitism have been overshadowed in favor of the so-called national (i.e., supposedly, *not* universal) values of personal liberty, freedom of expression, and sexual liberty.

These movements converge at the European level, yet the themes vary according to national context. Nordic countries, which are more concerned with sexual liberties, highlight the fight against homophobia, whereas France, with its attachment to its secular heritage, defends republican education. Muslims are under pressure to prove their national loyalty by demonstrably subscribing to these values; sometimes they are put to the test by demands of feminism, sometimes by tolerance of homosexuality. European democracy, as [Eric Fassin has written](#), is becoming a “sexual democracy,” where questions of gender and sexuality provoke and promote numerous public controversies.

The term *populist* is no longer suitable for grasping the significance of these movements. As [Jacques Rancière states](#), racism today is not a “popular passion” but simply a “racist passion on high.” This logic of the state, he writes, will be “supported primarily not by what we know as backwards social groups but by a large section of the intellectual elite [. . .], by an intelligentsia that is known as a leftist, republican, and secular intelligentsia.” The intellectuals of this line submitted to the logic of the state and wound up accomplices in the narrowing of public space and the legitimization of prohibition and exclusion. An entire intellectual and political arsenal for thinking about the relationship between the public and cultural and religious difference is falling into disuse. The principles that guarantee democratic pluralism and allow new social groups to integrate as citizens are criticized and even attacked head-on. Thus, ideals such as religious minority rights, freedom of worship, and multiculturalism are no longer used to think about difference. Muslim citizens suffer the loss of a viable political language and access to the public sphere. They are not invited to participate, except for those who attempt to adhere in mimetic fashion to the ideas of the secular, republican, and feminist intelligentsia, and thus turn away from Islam.

Muslims are issuing forth from their immigrant status and seeking, in this post-migratory phase, to establish the conditions of their citizenship by making their religious signs visible in public space. Presenting themselves as guardians of this public space, new faces have emerged on the far-right to bar entry to these new citizens. And any talk that [calls into question the use of the term](#) “Islamophobia” only contributes to the ascendancy of the new figures of nationalism and nativism in the public arena. We could soon see the sign “No Entry to Muslims” on the doors of the European public sphere.

Tags: [Europe](#), [Islam](#), [laïcité](#), [nationalism](#), [Rethinking secularism](#), [world affairs](#)

<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/05/11/the-european-far-right>