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Is France Racist?

NONNA MAYER

Is France racist, as Michel Wieviorka has suggested in a recent book?¹ And if so, why? Is France more or less racist than her European neighbours, and is the degree of racism increasing or decreasing? These questions are being hotly debated in the wake of the electoral successes of the National Front, which is seen as a 'racist' party by three-quarters of French people old enough to vote.²

Defining racism

The word 'racism' itself requires definition.³ Firstly, it can be applied to the theories of such late nineteenth-century thinkers as Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau and Georges Vacher de Lapouge, who postulated that different races were unequal on biological criteria. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss condensed their opinions into four basic points:

One: there is a correlation between genetic inheritance on the one hand, and intellectual aptitude and moral tendencies on the other. Two: this inheritance, which governs the aptitudes and tendencies, is common to all members of certain human groups. Three: these groups, or 'races', may be ranked according to their genetic inheritance. Four: these differences entitle the 'races' which are held to be superior to rule and exploit the others, and potentially to destroy them.⁴

Since then progress in haematological and genetic research has proved that these theories have no foundation, and UNESCO has more than once solemnly proclaimed that there are no different human 'races'. The very use of the word is now

¹ Michel Wieviorka, *La France raciste* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). An investigation of racism in the population at large by means of group discussions based on the principle of 'sociological intervention', the groups being made up of dwellers in areas of racial tension, policemen, social workers and skinheads, in five contrasting regions (Roubaix, Mulhouse, Marseille, Cergy, Montfermeil).

² 'Would you say that the National Front is "racist"?' 'Yes' 87 per cent, 'no' 8 per cent, no answer 5 per cent. Opinion poll by SOFRES for *Le Monde*, Jan. 1994, nationwide sample of 1,000 French people of voting age.

³ On the origin and uses of the word see, in particular, the studies by Pierre-André Taguieff, especially *La Force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987); *Face au racisme*, 2 vols (Paris: La Découverte, 1991); *Les Fins de l'antiracisme* (Paris: Michalon, 1995). See also Colette Guillaumin, *L'Idéologie raciste, Genèse et langage actuel* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972).

⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *De près et de loin* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1988), 208.

controversial, as shown by a recent conference entitled 'Ought the Word "Race" to be Eliminated from the French Constitution?'.⁵ But everyday use of the word takes no account of scientific progress or semantic subtleties. Hence 'racism' is used indifferently to denote any kind of exclusion: it can be anti-immigrant, anti-youth, anti-women, anti-police, even anti-French.⁶

In this article I shall use it in the more restrictive and less controversial sense of 'ethnocentrism'. This means the tendency in all societies, in all ages, to esteem the group to which one personally belongs and reject 'outsiders'. As Lévi-Strauss has emphasised, it is

the oldest attitude, and has solid psychological foundations since it tends to resurface in any one of us when we find ourselves in an unexpected situation [which] makes us purely and simply repudiate cultural forms – moral, religious and social – which are the most unlike those we identify with. 'What savagery!', 'It would never happen at home', 'It shouldn't be allowed', etc.: crude reactions which express that shudder of repulsion when we are confronted with ways of living, believing and thinking which are alien to us.⁷

Attempts to measure ethnocentrism

A survey conducted just after the French presidential election of 1988 gives some idea of the scale of the phenomenon. It asked four questions about the place of minorities in France, and their rights.⁸ Of those interviewed, twenty one per cent thought that 'Jews have too much power in France', thirty-eight per cent did not think it 'all right' for 'Muslims living in France to have a mosque in which to practise their religion', half had a vague feeling that 'we don't feel the country belongs to us any more' and two-thirds thought that 'there are too many immigrants in France'. The answers to these four questions are closely interconnected. Rejection of Jews is essentially similar to rejection of Muslims, immigrants and, more generally, anyone who is 'different'. They all spring from one and the same 'ethnocentrist' attitude. They do, however, supply the elements for a progressive scale of ethnocentrism, and so make it possible to measure its intensity and frequency among the French population.

The survey revealed that the highest degree of ethnocentrism was represented by

⁵ Discussion in the Senate and the Sorbonne, Paris, 27–28 March 1992, Université Paris XII Val de Marne. Transactions published in *Mots*, Vol. 33 (1992) under the title 'Sans distinction de . . . race'.

⁶ AGRIF (Alliance Générale contre le Racisme et pour le Respect de l'Identité française et chrétienne) was founded by Bernard Antony, one of the leaders of the National Front, to counteract anti-racist organisations. It takes legal action against anything it considers to be a manifestation of 'anti-French' or 'anti-Catholic' hostility. See Jean-Yves Camus and René Monzat, *Les Droites nationales et radicales en France* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1992), 377–81.

⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire* (Paris: Gonthier, 1961), 19–20.

⁸ Opinion poll by SOFRES for the Centre d'Étude de la Vie Politique Française (CEVIPOF) between 9 and 20 May, based on a nationwide sample of 4,032 French people aged 18 and over, using quota method. See CEVIPOF, *L'Électeur français en questions* (thereafter *L'Électeur français*) (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1990), and the English translation edited by Daniel Boy and Nonna Mayer, *The French Voter Decides* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

anti-Semitism – a modern version of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.⁹ People who thought the Jews had too much power were consistently hostile to the building of mosques for Muslims, didn't feel the country belonged to them any more and thought there were too many immigrants in France. On the other hand, the most widespread, but the mildest, degree of ethnocentrism was hostility to immigrants; not all who expressed it gave an ethnocentrist reply to the other questions. The 'score' of each individual on this scale corresponded to the number of ethnocentrist replies, from 0 to those who gave none to 4 for those who gave all four. If we set down as 'ethnocentrist' those who scored 2 or higher, then in 1988 they represented slightly over half of all French people old enough to vote.¹⁰

These figures are confirmed by a more recent study by Roland Cayrol, based on surveys of 'The French People, Racism and the Struggle against Racism' commissioned by the National Consultative Commission on the Rights of Man as part of its annual report on 'The Struggle against Racism and Xenophobia'. Using about one hundred questions relating to immigrants, foreigners and minorities, he classified respondents into six groups, from the 'militant anti-racists', who were most tolerant of all kinds of minorities, to 'convinced racists'.¹¹ If we add to the latter those whose opinions are less clear but who are 'tinged with racism', the proportion of 'racists' in the wider sense is about fifty-five per cent – comparable to that revealed by the survey conducted by CEVIPOF (the Centre d'Etude de la Vie Politique Française).

Explanations for ethnocentrism

There are various ways of explaining these attitudes. The first, in the line of classic studies by Adorno and Allport,¹² stresses psycho-social factors. It sees ethnocentrism as a reaction to frustration going back to early childhood or arising from difficult working or living conditions. It is indeed in the more deprived social milieus – unskilled or manual workers and the unemployed – that racism and ethnocentrism are most widespread. The second explanation lays more stress on the cognitive origins of the problem, seeing it as a result of ignorance, combined with lack of

⁹ The most comprehensive study of the Protocol and its later exploitation was edited by Pierre-André Taguieff: *Les Protocoles des sages de Sion. Faux et usages d'un faux*, 2 vols (Paris: Berg International, 1992).

¹⁰ Nonna Mayer, 'Ethnocentrisme, racisme et intolérance', in *L'Électeur français*, 17–43.

¹¹ Roland Cayrol, 'Les Français, le racisme et la lutte anti-raciste', in Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, 1992. *La lutte contre le racisme et la xénophobie* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1993), 59–76. CSA opinion polls of a nationwide sample of French people of voting age, Feb. and Oct. 1990, Nov. 1991, Nov. 1992. The sample was classified according to the responses: 'Convinced racist' 21.4 per cent; 'Tinged with racism' 33.9 per cent; 'Not sure' 7.4 per cent; 'Lukewarm anti-racist' 8.9 per cent; 'Convinced anti-racist' 23.5 per cent; 'Militant anti-racist' 4.9 per cent.

¹² Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson and Nevitt R. Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950); Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1954).

Table 1. Dislike of minorities: 'What do you feel about the following groups? Do you feel a good deal of liking, some liking, some dislike or a good deal of dislike?'

% dislike	Total	FN sympathisers	2 - 1
North Africans	42	94	+ 52
<i>Beurs</i>	35	83	+ 48
Gypsies	36	67	+ 31
Blacks	18	54	+ 36
<i>Pieds Noirs</i> *	19	49	+ 30
Jews	16	47	+ 31
Asians	17	42	+ 25
Antilleans	9	24	+ 15
Southern Europeans	7	22	+ 15

* Former Algerian colonists resettled in France.

CSA/Commission Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, 15-23 November 1994.

education and social and cultural isolation.¹³ This view is supported by the fact that the frequency of racist responses is inversely proportional to educational level: the least well qualified are the most intolerant. The third stresses the ideological and political convictions which encourage racism. In France today, by far the greatest intolerance is shown by those who vote for or sympathise with the National Front. Among declared Le Pen supporters, the level of antipathy to all minorities is twice or three times greater than average, reaching record heights with regard to North Africans (+ 52 points) and *Beurs* (+ 48 points) (see Table 1).¹⁴ They are also the only group which openly and overwhelmingly describes itself as racist (Table 2).¹⁵ It is hardly surprising to find that the chief vehicle of racism in France is a party which, ever since its foundation in 1972, has used immigrants as the universal scapegoat and built its agenda round 'national preference', with a leader who describes the gas chambers as 'a minor sideline in the history of World War II'.

Ethnocentrism in a European Context

Does France have a higher level of ethnocentrism than her European neighbours? Comparisons of this kind can be tricky: definitions, approaches to the subject and

¹³ See Gertrude J. Selznick and Stephen Steinberg, *The Tenacity of Prejudice. Antisemitism in Contemporary America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

¹⁴ A slang word for an Arab, applied to children of immigrants from North Africa who were born in France.

¹⁵ 'Would you say that you personally are quite racist (+ +), a bit racist (+), not very racist (-) or not at all racist (--)?'

	+ +	+	-	--	no answer
NF sympathisers (percentage)	64	22	10	0	4
Total sample	12	28	25	31	4

CSA Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme, November 1994.

Table 2. *Changes in the perception of people of another nationality: 'Generally speaking, how do you feel about the numbers of people of another nationality living in our country: are there too many, a lot but not too many, or not many?'*

% too many	1988	1991	1992	1993	1994
Belgium	43	56	53	54	57
Denmark	36	43	46	43	41
W. Germany	48	58	57	60	40
E. Germany	—	45	48	57	40
Greece	19	29	45	57	64
Spain	17	25	23	25	27
France	45	56	52	56	55
Ireland	7	12	11	8	8
Italy	34	63	65	64	46
Luxembourg	30	20	32	21	23
Netherlands	30	44	49	47	47
Portugal	14	18	28	25	30
UK	45	54	50	52	42
EC	37	50	50	53	43

Eurobarometers 30/35/37/39/42, in Anna Melich, 'Comparative European Trend Survey Data on Racism and Xenophobia', ECPR/Bordeaux, 27 April–2 May 1995.

ways of measuring vary from country to country. Even if we confine ourselves to analysing the racial prejudices revealed by opinion polls, the questions asked and the way of asking them are seldom identical. The survey launched by the European Commission in 1988 is a fortunate exception to this rule. The Commission, worried by the rise of racism and xenophobia, began a poll among residents of all twelve EC countries, examining their opinions on the rights of man, immigration policies and the foreigners among them. Using the results we can, for the first time, make a systematic comparison.¹⁶ A sizeable proportion of those questioned felt that there were too many people in their country who were of 'another' nationality, race, culture, religion or social class. Just over half the sample (51 per cent) thought that at least one of those groups was too large, and almost a quarter (23 per cent) thought that at least three of them were. It will be seen that this estimate of average levels of intolerance roughly corresponds to those in France. Not only does the average level of racism seem to be similar in France and in the Community as a whole, but it correlates with the same social, cultural and political factors, particularly educational levels and political beliefs.

This European average is deceptive. The level of intolerance varies from one country to another, according to levels of industrialisation, history of migration and the size of the immigrant population. The countries divide into two distinct groups,

¹⁶ Opinion poll of a sample of the adult population (aged 15 and over) of the twelve EC countries: 11,795 persons were interviewed at home by experienced pollsters as part of the Eurobarometer 30 scheme. The results were published as *Eurobaromètre. L'opinion publique dans la Communauté européenne. Racisme et xénophobie* (Brussels: Commission des Communautés Européennes, 1989).

Table 3. *Index of xenophobia by country**

%	+
Greece	34
Belgium	22
France	20
Denmark	18
Germany	13
UK	13
Italy	11
Netherlands	11
Luxembourg	9
Portugal	9
Spain	7
Ireland	5
EC	14

The value ‘+’ corresponds to respondents who agree with at least two of the following statements: there are too many people of another nationality/the presence of people from another nationality (another race) is disturbing (Eurobarometer 42, 1994/in Anna Melich, ‘Comparative European Trend Survey Data on Racism and Xenophobia’, ECPR/Bordeaux, 27 April–2 May 1995).

whatever the indicator used. It is in the countries with the largest numbers of immigrants – France, Germany, Britain, Belgium and, to a lesser extent, Denmark – that rejection of foreigners and minorities is most marked, Holland being a notable exception. The southern European countries with high levels of emigration (Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal), together with Ireland, appear more tolerant.

This distinction is now becoming blurred, however. As countries with traditionally high levels of emigration begin to receive immigrants in their turn, attitudes and behaviour towards foreigners begin to change. For the first time there have been racist incidents in Spain, Portugal and Italy,¹⁷ and recent ‘Eurobarometer’ surveys have shown that levels of xenophobia in southern Europe are catching up with and even overtaking those in the north (Tables 2 and 3).¹⁸

Not only do intolerance levels differ among the EC countries: the groups which suffer from it are also different. The 1989 survey is particularly interesting in this connection because it uses open questions, asking respondents what comes to mind when they think of a person of ‘another’ race, nationality, religion etc. As far as ‘nationality’ is concerned, the French immediately think of North Africans, the British of Asians and the Germans of Turks, while southern Europeans give more

¹⁷ On Italy in particular see Michel Wieviorka, ed., *Racisme et xénophobie en Europe. Une comparaison internationale* (Paris: La Découverte, 1994).

¹⁸ For an overview of Eurobarometers from 1988 to 1994 see the paper by Anne Melich, ‘Comparative European Trend Survey Data on Racism and Xenophobia’, given at the European Consortium for Political Research workshop on ‘Racist Parties in Europe: A New Political Family’, Bordeaux, 27 April–2 May 1995. For a detailed analysis of the Italian, French, German, Belgian and Austrian evidence see also the paper by Gilles Ivaldi, ‘Cognitive Structures of Xenophobic Attitudes among Supporters of Extreme Right-wing Parties in Europe’, *ibid.*

varied responses relating mostly to other Europeans. In terms of race, the group most often mentioned is blacks. But French and British responses are once again conditioned by their colonial history: the former mention Arabs, the latter Indians and Pakistanis. The most frequently mentioned religion – by more than half of all French and Belgian respondents and over seventy per cent of Dutch, Danish and German – is Islam. But the southern countries and Luxembourg give priority to Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists, while in Ireland, for obvious reasons, 'the others' are the Protestants – and in mainland Britain Catholics are mentioned almost as often as Muslims.

Racism in new clothes

Racism varies not only through space but also through time. If we look at trends in responses over a long period it seems, paradoxically, as if racism and ethnocentrism are on the decrease. This is particularly striking with regard to anti-semitism. In France since the Liberation, surveys have shown the Jews becoming more and more socially and politically integrated. Overt hostility and a feeling that Jews are different have almost disappeared, as has dislike of the idea of Jews holding high public office – including the presidency.¹⁹

The same applies to views on immigrants. The percentage of French non-Muslims who say they are not 'hostile' to the idea of a near relation (brother, sister, child) marrying a Muslim rose from 49 per cent to 59 per cent in five years. The percentage who would not object to a Muslim being elected mayor of a commune rose from 28 per cent to 42 per cent over the same period.²⁰

This does not, however, mean that ethnocentrism and anti-semitism have disappeared: they have changed and shifted their ground. As the National Front rose in electoral favour and commenced attacks on the 'Jewish lobby', the feeling that 'Jews have too much power in France' began to affect one French voter in every five. As 'negationist' theories (denial of the Holocaust) began to gain ground, the idea that 'there was too much harping on' the Nazi extermination of the Jews during the Second World War advanced along with it. And a lively debate has arisen over the cultural differences ascribed to Islam, which is identified with fanaticism and extremism.

Here again, the development is not unique to France. Many studies have brought out the development of new forms of racism in the United States, which may be described as 'subtle', 'indirect' or 'symbolic'.²¹ The more overt manifestations of

¹⁹ See Nonna Mayer, 'L'antisémitisme français à l'aune des sondages', in Michel Wieviorka, *Racisme et modernité* (thereafter Wieviorka, *Racisme et modernité*) (Paris: La Découverte, 1992), 278–88.

²⁰ Telephone survey of a sample of 936 French people aged 18 and over by IFOP for *Le Monde*, *La Marche du siècle* and RTL, 20–21 Sept. 1994: *Le Monde*, 13 Oct. 1994.

²¹ See especially Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, 'Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism versus Racial Threats to the Good Life', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 40 (1981), 414–31; David O. Sears, 'Symbolic Racism', in Phyllis A. Katz and Dalmas A. Taylor, eds., *Eliminating Racism: Profile in Controversy* (New York: Plenum, 1988), 53–84; Thomas F. Pettigrew, 'The Nature of Modern Racism in the United States', *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale*, Vol. 2, no. 3 (1989), 291–303. For a dissenting view emphasising the persistence of 'biological' racism see Gérard Lemaire

racial prejudice, evoking the presumed physical, moral or intellectual inferiority of minorities or implying a refusal to grant them equal rights, are on the decrease. But at the same time the idea is spreading, even among prosperous and cultured people, that minorities have no respect for fundamental American values, and there is growing distrust of policies designed to fight effectively against discrimination. With regard to France, studies by Pierre-André Taguieff relating to the ideological offensive by the New Right have revealed a change from anti-egalitarian racism on biological grounds to differential racism on cultural grounds.²²

It was changes of this kind which were sought by another comparative survey conducted in France, Germany, Holland and the UK, the results of which are worth mentioning.²³ The authors distinguished two scales of racism. The first was based on questions relating to hostility to minorities and reluctance to mix with them: this the authors called 'blatant racism'. Respondents who scored highly on this scale thought that foreigners were dishonest, not very bright, likely to abuse the welfare system and fiddle unemployment benefit, etc., and refused to have anything to do with them – marry or have sex with a foreigner, work for a foreign boss, etc. The second related to 'subtle racism'. Those who scored highly on this scale were more likely to think that foreigners in their country did not respect traditional values (hard work, social ambition etc.), and exaggerated cultural differences of language, religion or sexuality. They might not admit to negative feelings about foreigners, but they were less likely to express positive feelings such as sympathy or admiration.

By combining the scores on both scales, the authors divided the sample into three groups. At one extreme were the convinced anti-racists, 'equalitarians', who had low scores on both scales; at the other, the 'bigots' with the highest scores on both scales. In between was the third group, the 'subtle racists' who had low scores on the blatant-racism scale but high scores on the subtle racism. Their attitude confirmed the idea that a degree of anti-racism has become the norm in the Western democracies since the war. To a certain extent this group had interiorised the norm: they were against racism and did not see themselves as racist. Their attitude could be seen as a milder, attenuated version of the racist phenomenon.

With a problem as complex as this, the limitations of the survey methods are obvious. They record only stated opinions, and actions do not always match words.²⁴ Surveys register opinions at a certain point in time, and opinions tend to be

and Jeanne Ben Brika, 'Le rejet de l'autre: pureté, descendance, valeurs', in Martine Fourier and Geneviève Vermès, eds, *Ethnicisation des rapports sociaux* (Saint-Cloud/Paris: ENS Editions Fontenay Saint-Cloud/Éditions de l'Harmattan, Paris, 1994), 196–235.

²² See the important book by Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987), and *idem*, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite* (Paris: Descartes et Cie, 1994).

²³ Thomas F. Pettigrew and R. W. Meertens, 'Le racisme voilé: dimensions et mesure', in Wieviorka, *Racisme et modernité*, 109–26. National surveys in the four countries mentioned were conducted in 1988 with the assistance of Gérard Lemaine (EHESS, Paris), James Jackson (University of Michigan) and Ulrich Wagner (University of Bochum).

²⁴ On racist violence in Europe and the complex relationship between racial violence and the electoral successes of racist and extremist parties, see the interesting paper of Ruud Koopmans, 'A

volatile (see Tables 2 and 3). They assemble a large number of individual opinions without regard to the environment of the individuals concerned and their social, professional and residential contacts with minorities. Despite these limitations, they do introduce a degree of objectivity into what is a highly emotive debate, and they do reveal some common elements in contemporary expressions of racism.

There is a certain consistency among the stated opinions on minorities: they spring from the same ethnocentric attitude. Everywhere the same socio-cultural factors engender the same prejudices, especially financial insecurity and poor education. They are everywhere sustained by the same extremist and xenophobic ideologies which help to legitimise and normalise racism, preached by parties such as the National Front in France, the Vlaams Blok in Belgium and the Republikaner in Germany.

However, it is worth noting that the electoral successes of these parties do not correspond exactly to the level of ethnocentrism in the country concerned. France here is typical: in the first round of the presidential election in April 1995 the National Front scored a record fifteen per cent of votes, whereas the level of xenophobia in France, as measured by the latest Eurobarometer (Table 3) is lower than in Greece or Belgium and comparable to that in Denmark, where no right-wing party has ever enjoyed a similar success. Le Pen's party does well not because the French are more racist than their neighbours but because of the economic and political state of France in the 1980s, because the other parties could not agree on a strategy to deal with the Front and because of the latter's own political resources – leadership, organisation and agenda.²⁵

Taking a long-term view, advances in education and anti-racist legislation seem at last to be muting the expression of anti-minority prejudices, which are being reformulated in terms of cultural differences rather than race or skin colour. But this does not mean that the symbolic barriers which isolate cultural, national and religious minorities are in the process of disappearing. They are merely different.

TRANSLATED BY ROSEMARY MORRIS

Burning Question: Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe', given at the ECPR workshop on 'Racist Parties in Europe'.

²⁵ On the factors contributing to the establishment of the NF as an electoral force, see the papers by Pascal Perrineau, 'Les étapes d'une implantation électorale (1972–1988)', and Piero Ignazi, 'Un nouvel acteur politique', in Nonna Mayer and Pascal Perrineau, eds, *Le Front National à découvert* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1989), 37–62, 63–80. See also Nonna Mayer and Pascal Perrineau, 'Why Do They Vote for Le Pen?', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 22 (1992), 123–41. On the structure and organs of the party and the development of a 'frontist' system of thought see Guy Birenbaum, *Le Front National en politique* (Paris: Balland, 1992).