Le Pen and the Extremist Tradition

The process of coming to terms with the National Front has been hampered by French historians’ long-standing reluctance to acknowledge that French society could produce fascist political organisations. For a long time after World War II the ‘consensus’ view (Irving 1991, p.294) was that not only French fascism but also the crimes of the occupation period were imported phenomena (Girardet 1955; Plumpyène and Lasierra 1963; Burrin 1984, 1986; Berstein 1984). For René Rémond, the most influential of consensus historians, genuinely fascist organisations rooted in France were marginal, while other, more significant movements merely took on surface characteristics of fascism in the spirit of the age (Rémond 1982, pp.217–23). The collective tendency to shore up the republican myth by refusing to face up to French collaboration with the Nazis has been challenged by foreign historians such as Robert Paxton, who detailed the Vichy regime’s involvement in the crimes of the occupation (Paxton 1972), and Zeev Sternhell, who argued that France, far from immune to fascism, incubated its own protofascist tradition in the nationalist leagues of the late nineteenth century (Sternhell 1978). More recently, Robert Soucy has shown that during the inter-war period fascist organisations won widespread support in France (Soucy 1995).

However, although the reality of inter-war fascism is now indisputable, a new variant of the old consensus identifies the NF not with fascism, but with a vague and nebulous form of right-wing extremism referred to as ‘national populism’ (Taguieff 1984, 1986; Winock 1990; Milza 1987, 1992; Perrineau 1993, 1995a). The NF is thus held to be the latest manifestation of a peculiarly French authoritarian tradition which has emerged periodically under different names, gaining mass support in times of crisis only to fade away rapidly when stability returned. Le Pen’s precursors, therefore, are seen to be ‘populist’ leaders such as Boulanger or Poujade rather than, say, Mussolini or Hitler. We believe that use of the term ‘national populist’ tends to fudge the differences between distinct political phenomena by emphasising shared surface characteristics, such as propaganda techniques and style, while neglecting both doctrine and social and economic contexts. The label may be useful in
illustrating the cultural influences on the NF, without proving affiliation to a political tradition, if indeed national populism can be termed a tradition. In the next chapter we give our reasons for believing that, as a summary of its doctrine, the term ‘national populism’ is unhelpful in defining the National Front. In the second half of this chapter we show that as a political organisation, far from being called into being by a passing crisis, the NF is the product of a long and conscious process of regeneration in which fascist activists, defeated and discredited in 1945, attempted to rehabilitate themselves and adapt their political project to a changing environment. It is undeniable, however, that the extremist tradition in France is an important component of the political culture in which the NF has been constructed. Le Pen and many of his associates have been life-long activists in extremist causes and they can collectively lay claim to a diverse heritage, the themes of which they deliberately exploit. We therefore begin with a survey of the intertwining doctrinal and political evolution of the extreme right from the 1880s to the occupation.

Three crises: MacMahon, Boulanger and Dreyfus

The parliamentary Republic which was declared in 1871 and consolidated gradually in the 1880s and 1890s was the third such experiment after two short-lived false starts in the 1790s and 1840s. For much of the time since the Great Revolution of 1789 the country had been governed alternately by two different monarchies and two ‘empires’, headed by rival claimants of the Bourbon, Orleanist and Bonaparte dynasties. When they were out of power and not in exile, their respective supporters habitually formed a distinctly disloyal opposition aiming to overthrow the regime in place and replace it with one of their own preferred design. Paradoxically, the constitutional framework of the new republic, established piecemeal from 1870 to 1875, was largely the work of monarchists, divided between Legitimists nostalgic for the divine right of kings and the more constitutional Orleanists; each hoped that the constitution’s provisional nature would afford time to resolve their differences. Sweeping Republican success in the elections of 1876 dashed these hopes, inducing the monarchist-sympathising President MacMahon to exercise his power to dissolve the chamber; when fresh elections in 1877 simply confirmed the Republicans’ victory MacMahon was forced to resign and the Republic had surmounted its first crisis – a trial of strength between a would-be ‘strong man’ and the representatives of the people. For the next 65 years President, Prime Minister and government were subjected to the whims of a National Assembly which threw up and threw over 98 governments.