

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 4, FALL 2021

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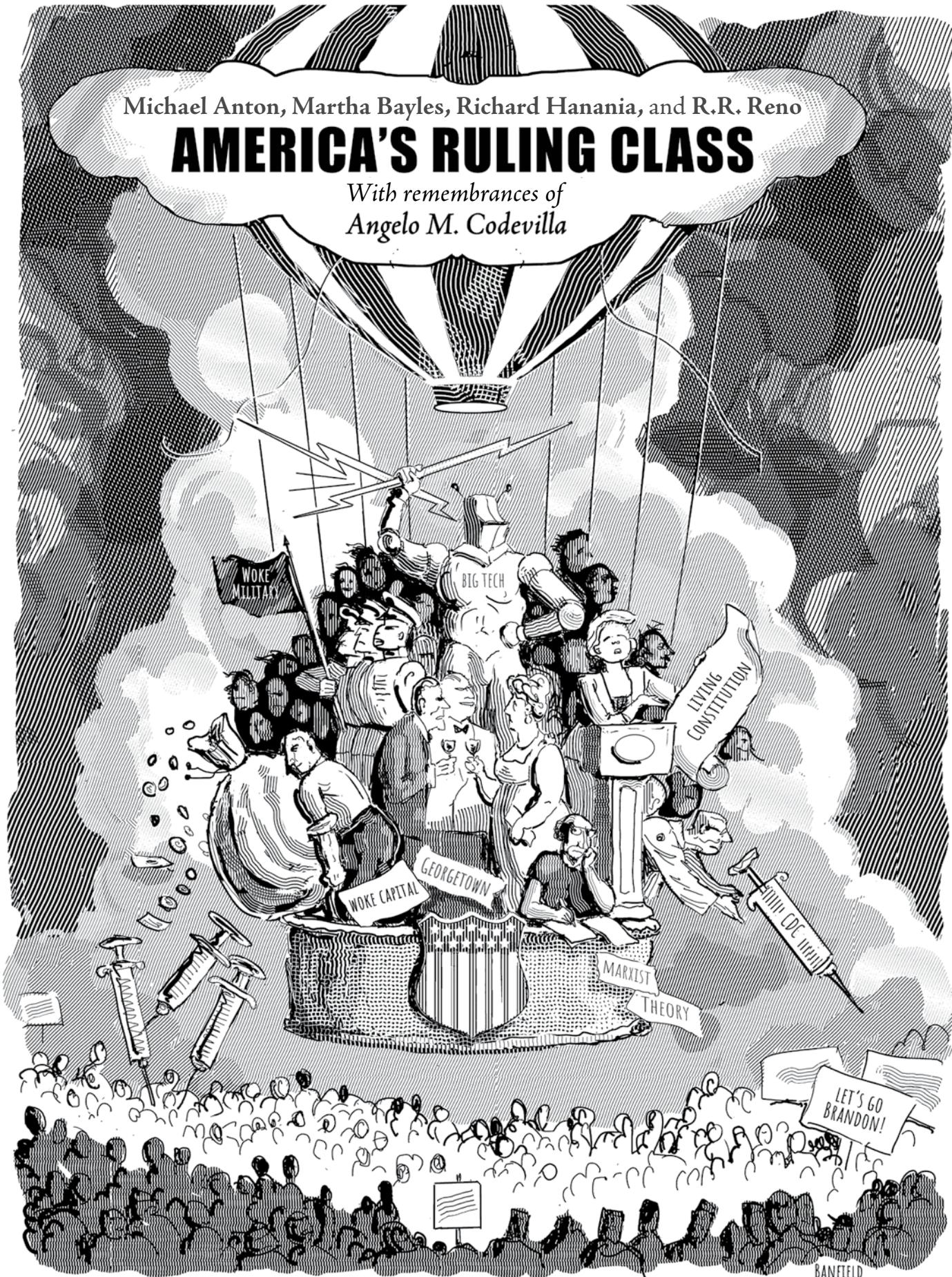
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PRICE: \$6.95

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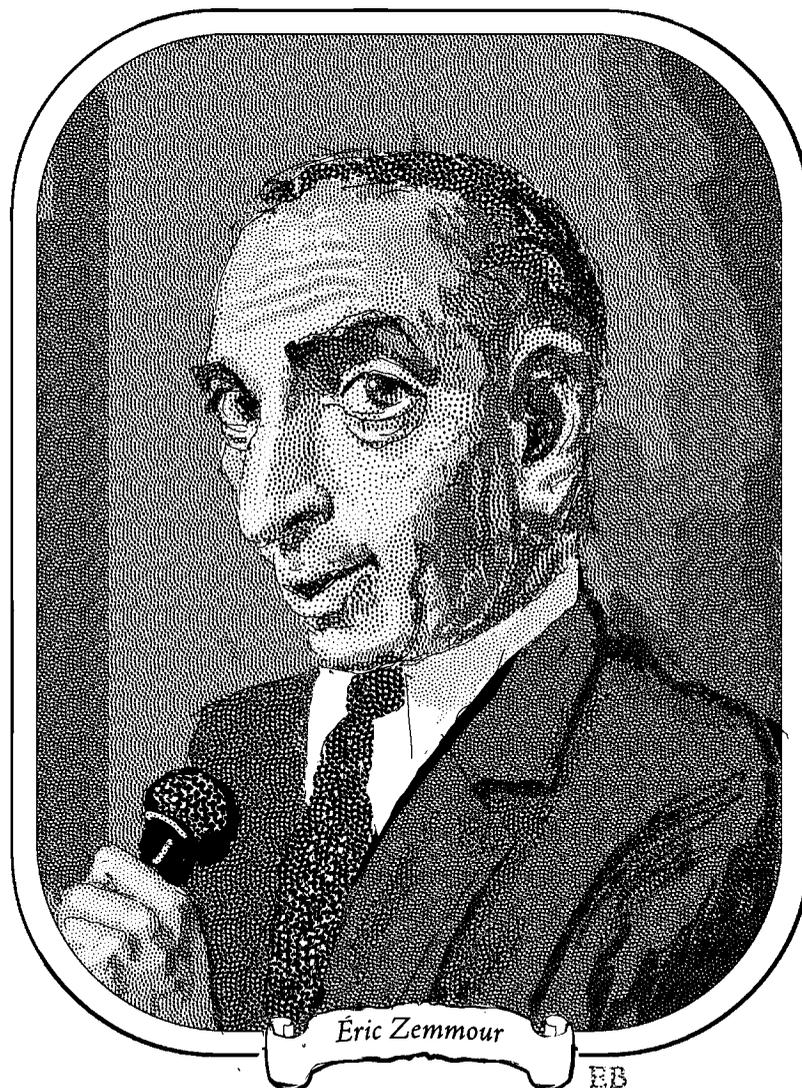


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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

FRANCE ON THE VERGE OF CIVIL WAR

The rise of Éric Zemmour.



AT HOME IN PARIS ONE EVENING DURING the COVID spring of 2020, the conservative columnist and television pundit Éric Zemmour got a cell phone call from the president of France. Emmanuel Macron, frequent butt of Zemmour's on-air contempt, was calling to commiserate. Zemmour had been accosted by a thug that afternoon while walking home from a fruit stand on the rue des Martyrs. The whole of political Paris was talking about it. For decades Zemmour, 63, has warned the public that France is being submerged by Muslim immigration and smothered by political correctness. In so doing, he has been acclaimed as a historian and author, and revered as a truth-teller. He has also been reviled in the press and hauled into court for inciting racial and religious hatred. Now he was being harassed in the street. That alarmed even Macron.

According to Zemmour, Macron used the phone call to defend his own vision of multi-ethnic France. He highlighted his good relationship with Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who has been skeptical of mass immigration. He acknowledged that France, rocked by terrorist attacks over the past half-decade, had problems with the Islamic radicals known as Salafists. Then the two began to debate. "I told him the Salafists were just the tip of the iceberg," Zemmour wrote recently, "that the key question was the *number* of Muslims, that we had to stop immigration." In the course of 45 minutes of passionate back-and-forth, Macron told Zemmour that a president who spoke like that would drag the country into civil war. Zemmour cut him off. "I told him that if we continue to follow his policies we are headed for civil war in any case."

Barely a year later, Zemmour is hinting that he himself will run to replace Macron in next April's presidential elections.

From one perspective, Zemmour's political ambition is crazy. He lacks experience, organization, and an obvious source of funding. Most of the country's mainstream journalists despise him. The Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA), France's national media regulator, recently forced him off the air by classifying him as a political actor rather than a journalist. But there is another perspective. Zemmour is gifted as a television presenter, though obviously not everyone's cup of tea. He has a somewhat broader appeal as a writer—his captivating histories shoot to the top of the bestseller lists. (An American will see certain parallels between Zemmour and Tucker Carlson.) His latest book, published in September, is an autobiographical reflection on the last 15 years of



French politics called *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* ("France hasn't said its last word"). The idiomatic title conveys the theme of a potential Zemmour candidacy: the country is down but not out.

Zemmour is not the only Frenchman who has lately been preoccupied with civil war. The best-selling philosopher Michel Onfray said a year ago that France is already in the midst of one. And last spring a thousand retired military officers, including 20 generals, published an open letter to Macron in the newsweekly *Valeurs actuelles*, warning that antiracism, Islamism, and disrespect for law enforcement were bringing about the collapse of public order. "Soon the growing chaos might end in civil war," they wrote, "and the dead, for whom you will bear the responsibility, will number in the thousands."

Until recently, many people have assumed that the upcoming national election will end like the last one. The 2017 campaign saw the collapse of France's two establishment parties, the Socialists and the *Républicains*. The latter are a mildly conservative party descended from the supporters of contemporary France's founding father, resistance hero Gen. Charles de Gaulle. Macron, golden boy of the Socialists, defected to lead a new party, *La République en Marche* ("Republic on the Move," or LREM),

drawn from the elites of the old establishment parties. LREM is devoted to the European Union, to the global economy, to high-tech and corporate multiculturalism, and to gender equality. Macron outdebated Marine Le Pen, who had inherited (and renamed) the National Front (F.N.), the populist and nationalist party founded by her father. Then Macron drubbed her in the polls by a two-to-one margin.

This past October, Zemmour passed Le Pen in the polls, drawing from her voters and adding a few disaffected *Républicains*. That turns the presidential race upside-down. France's electoral system resembles those of California, Louisiana, and Georgia—a kind of open primary with the two top vote-getters meeting in a runoff. If Macron's main rival turns out to be Zemmour—and not any of the dozen gray Gaullists, socialists, environmentalists, and Europeanists vying for the top spot—then his view of France as a country on the verge of civil war must be more widely shared than anyone thought.

From Books to Television

ZEMMOUR WAS BORN IN MONTREUIL, on the eastern edge of Paris, and grew up in nearby Drancy. He is the son of a Jewish ambulance driver who

migrated from Algeria a decade before that country broke from France in a bloody war of independence. In little more than a generation, immigration has transformed the once-archetypal working-class French neighborhoods Zemmour grew up in, from baguettes and berets to beards and burkas. It torments him.

His family was devout. His grandfather spoke better Arabic than French, using a "folkloric" spelling that was a source of mirth to the kids. Zemmour rejects the idea that there is anything hypocritical about his anti-immigration views. Because Algeria was part of France until 1962, he says, the Zemmours were not immigrants. France had absorbed them as citizens through conquest—in the same way it had absorbed, say, Corsicans and Alsatians. The Zemmours strove, reasonably or unreasonably, to adapt to French ways. No one wore a yarmulke outside the house. They studied hard.

Zemmour graduated from the elite Institute of Political Studies (*Sciences-Po*), acquiring along the way an impressive erudition and literary refinement. He admired de Gaulle, president for the whole of his childhood, not just as a statesman and a leader of the anti-Nazi resistance but also as a prose writer. But he did not support de Gaulle's partisan successors. Seeing no obstacle to assimilating Muslims into French life, he voted twice for the Socialist François Mitterrand. His political conversion came during the nationwide uproar in 1989 over the demand of Muslim parents that their daughters be allowed to attend school in headscarves. The Algeria his family had fled now seemed to be pursuing them.

The elegant book reviews and historical essays that Zemmour writes in *Le Figaro* are a model of popular intellectual history. Fascinated by the often-neglected conservative side of the modern French intellectual tradition, from the nationalist historian Jacques Bainville to the monarchist radical Charles Maurras, he became France's great instructor in old-fashioned (and sometimes disreputable) patriotism. But he also turned out to have a knack for journalistic rough-and-tumble and, once the cable news era began, for what he calls "reactionary" television. He has lately been the star of CNews, a conservative chain sometimes called the French Fox News. Zemmour lights up a TV screen, though he sometimes exaggerates, "goes overboard," gets carried away.

His rise has coincided with that of militant political correctness. The French variety resembles the American in its preoccupations with race and gender, and in its privileged

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role for activist lobbies, crusading judges, and high-powered “public interest” law firms. This is only natural, since the French system has been imported from the U.S., lock, stock, and barrel. But there is an important difference: there is no French equivalent of the First Amendment.

Over the past half-century, France has made a number of opinions illegal to hold, and it can be hard to know for sure when you’re expressing one. The 1972 Pleven Law narrowed freedom of opinion and authorized certain non-governmental lobbies to haul citizens before the court for racism. A 1990 law bans Holocaust denial. It has been interpreted under European law to ban “relativization” and “minimization” of “crimes against humanity.” Two more “memorial” laws were passed in 2001. One established the official government position that the killing of Armenians in Turkey a century ago constituted a genocide. Many reputable historians, including the late Bernard Lewis, dispute this. Another declared the transatlantic slave trade a “crime against humanity” and authorized anti-racist groups to file civil suits against people who did not share that understanding. In 2005 charges were pressed against the historian of slavery Olivier Grenouilleau for having “minimized” the crime of slavery by saying that slavery was not the same thing as genocide. The charges were dropped after an uproar among intellectuals, but the law, with its draconian remedies, remains on the books. In 2018, France’s legislature passed a law against “fake news.” In 2020, it passed the notorious Avia law against “hate.” France’s constitutional council later declared unconstitutional some of the law’s wilder provisions, such as that any website accused by anti-racist activists of sowing “hate” (without any mediation by a neutral judge) would have to remove hateful content within an hour or face fines that could run over a million dollars. But some of its provisions remain law.

Zemmour has been convicted under such laws three times. Twice in 2011 he defended racial profiling, in hiring and then in policing. “The majority of drug traffickers are blacks and Arabs,” he said. “That’s the way it is. It’s just a fact.” Then in 2016, he described Muslim immigration as an “invasion” and a “jihad,” and said that Muslims would have to make “a choice between Islam and France.”

As in the United States, the direct power of such laws pales next to their indirect power. They work not just by punishing the alleged malefactor but also by threatening his associates with legal harassment, social ostracism, boycotts, and steep financial costs.

Employers, colleagues, licensing boards, and local governments are conscripted as agents of enforcement, disguising as “evolving norms” what are actually measures of government censorship.

In 2014, Zemmour was fired from the network i-Télé for remarks about Muslims made to the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. It was around then, too, that he fell afoul of other colleagues for a brief but controversial argument in his bestseller *Le Suicide français* (*The Suicide of France*). His argument was this: during World War II, the collaborationist regime of Vichy France, poor though its record was in defending foreign Jews, had managed to save almost all French Jews from Nazi death camps, and in that sense had done better than its neighbors, specifically, the Netherlands. Employees of Zemmour’s publisher Albin Michel wrote an open letter protesting the “shamefully revisionist” book they had just published. Zemmour alleges that when the book’s spectacular sales made possible the disbursement of an end-of-year bonus, no employee refused it. Although Zemmour is

France has made a number of opinions illegal to hold, and it can be hard to know for sure when you’re expressing one.

perhaps the most reliable writer of non-fiction blockbusters in all of France, Albin Michel declined to publish his most recent book. He has self-published it under the imprint Rubempré.

This year, the CSA fined CNews €200,000 for a Zemmour outburst during a 2020 discussion about “unaccompanied minors,” who, under French as under American law, are given special consideration when they appear at a border post and apply for political asylum. “They don’t belong here,” Zemmour said. “They’re thieves, assassins, rapists, that’s all they are. We ought to send them home and they shouldn’t come back.” In mid-September, amid the talk of a presidential run, CSA anointed Zemmour a “national political actor,” though he had made no official announcement of any candidacy. It was the equivalent of an order to remove Zemmour from the airwaves, because it required CNews to give equal time to every bore mulling a run, and there aren’t enough hours in the day for that.

Demography and Destiny

“DEMOGRAPHIC LAWS ARE IRON LAWS,” Zemmour told an interviewer last summer. In this belief, he is in line with those hard-headed mid-20th-century French demographers (such as Alfred Sauvy) and historians (such as Pierre Chaunu) who warned that their country’s reproductive resources were limited. Because French people did not have a lot of babies, France could not afford to welcome immigrants as open-heartedly as its more sentimental citizens might wish. That was the background to Charles de Gaulle’s reluctant decision to abandon France’s Algerian possession to independence. “The Arabs are Arabs, the French French,” he explained to an aide in March 1959. “Do you think the French body politic can absorb 10 million Muslims, who tomorrow will be 20 million and the day after 40 million?” De Gaulle joked that the likely outcome of maintaining the link to Algeria was that his village, Colombey-of-the-Two-Churches, would be renamed Colombey-of-the-Two-Mosques.

But laborers arrived from North Africa all the same. Unsurprisingly, they underbid both the unionized industrial workers and the small shop owners who made up much of the French workforce. In December 1978, under President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, France’s council of state permitted the immediate families of those already arrived to join them, on the grounds that anyone who happens to be on French soil has a right to a satisfying family life. The migration now took on aspects of a colonization.

In 2011, French president Nicolas Sarkozy picked up the torch of neoconservative democracy promotion, by then dropped even in the United States. Goaded and inspired by celebrity philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, he devised the NATO invasion of Libya to topple the government of aging strongman Muammar Gaddafi. The dictator and his sons were murdered but no stable regime replaced them. Libya has become the hub of a massive mafia-run exodus from sub-Saharan Africa that is already changing the face of French society. France’s overseas departments (not colonies or possessions, but actual parts of France) have become migrant magnets, too. The population of heavily Muslim Mayotte, just off the African coast, has ballooned from 15,000 in 1950 to 280,000 today, about half of them immigrants from elsewhere in the region. Government demographers expect Mayotte’s population to triple again, to 760,000, by mid-century.

France is more and more Muslim, especially in its cities. In the past ten years, according



to sociologist Pierre Vermeren, the giving of Muslim names to newborns has tripled. Up to a fifth of the soldiers in the French armed forces are Muslim.

Naturally this upheaval impacts the lives of non-Muslims. In several books, the sociologist Christophe Guilluy—who, like Zemmour, grew up in Montreuil—has described the dislocation that inequality and globalization have wrought on the French-born working class. As France's urban economy shifted from manufacturing and farming to services and finance, Guilluy explains, workers were priced out of private housing by yuppies and bullied out of public housing by immigrants, who have turned many housing projects into Islamic strongholds. That process pushed the working class into France's exurbs and rural areas. There, making ends meet (or not) can come down to the price of gasoline. In 2018 and 2019, the so-called "yellow vests" (*gilets jaunes*) protests, focused on high gas prices and metropolitan contempt, briefly threatened to chase Macron from office.

There is a feeling of dispossession in peripheral France. Discontent is boiling over on any number of issues. Last summer, between 100,000 and 200,000 people marched in provincial cities every Saturday to protest Macron's COVID vaccine mandates. As in the U.S., teachers and other employees have been suspended or fired from jobs for posting "misinformation" and "conspiracy theories" about COVID online. A poll taken by *Le Monde* in late summer found that more than a third of French people (37%) believe they are living in a "health dictatorship."

In this light, the "civil war" that Zemmour talks about might be understood as something like the polarization that has marked American politics since midway through the Obama Administration. On one side are the "winners" of globalization—the super-rich and protected minorities. On the other are globalization's losers—the newly precarious middle and working classes. That is *partly* the way Zemmour understands it: "We are living through a moment of the sort that we have lived through often in our history," he writes in his newest book, "where the people no longer recognize themselves in the elites, the political parties, or...the system."

In December 2016, a Trump supporter, an American woman perfectly fluent in French and flushed with her candidate's victory, came to visit Zemmour in his Paris office. France needed the sort of leader America had just chosen, she explained, someone who could wipe the slate clean. Zemmour began to lay out the ways in which the French system differed from the American, making it difficult

for businessmen to intervene in politics. But she cut him off: "We know the differences. We know all that," she said. She was there to deliver a message specifically to Zemmour: "*Le Trump français, c'est vous.*"

The growing distance in France between rulers and ruled will ring an American bell. In his 1998 book *Le Coup d'état des juges* (*The Judges' Coup d'État*), Zemmour warned that courts and bureaucracies had usurped powers that previously resided with voters. "Since the 1970s," he laments, "we have undergone a juridical revolution." It continues to deepen. France's last two conservative presidents, the late Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy, were pursued through the courts for years for fundraising irregularities. In September, Macron's former health minister Agnès Buzyn was put on trial for *la mise en danger de la vie d'autrui*, which must be French for "happening to be minister of health when COVID struck." Often politicians are given only suspended sentences, but that does not mean they are "let off." It means that French judges and lawyers—whose political opinions are as class-bound as they are in any other country—hold a Damoclean sword over the political futures of elected officials.

The European Union is a mystifying presence to most French citizens, the main engine of the de-democratization of their country. In 2005, E.U. authorities proposed a "constitution" that would shift many national responsibilities away from Paris to the E.U. capital in Brussels. France scheduled a referendum to resolve the question. After a passionate and all-consuming national debate, voters resoundingly blocked the constitution. Three years later, Sarkozy quietly committed France, by treaty, to the very arrangements it had just rejected at the ballot box.

Foundations, too, play a role by keeping major government projects so far from the voting public's reach that they scarcely seem like government projects at all. The 2017 Socialist presidential candidate Benoît Hamon, whose once-dominant party fell to single-digit poll results under his leadership, announced recently that he was leaving electoral politics to work with a well-endowed NGO called SINGA, "a movement oriented toward welcoming refugees and migrants" and dedicated to the proposition that "the more inclusive a society is, the better its economy works." Perhaps an objective that was overwhelmingly rejected when pursued openly, through public elections, can be insinuated into French life when pursued secretly, through the influence of private capital.

Many French solutions to the problems of immigration and Islam appear doomed to fail.

A case in point is the belief that *laïcité*—the system of secularism imposed at the turn of the last century to topple the Catholic Church from its position of cultural and educational dominance—might work to tame Islam as well. To show that education is free, champions of *laïcité* defend civics classes for small children that subject the prophet Mohammed to robust democratic debate. To show that women are free, they build public swimming facilities, like the refurbished Butte aux Cailles pool in the 13th arrondissement, with mixed-sex showers.

They are barking up the wrong tree. The problem with Islam is not that it dominates the country's official institutions but that the population of its adherents is growing by leaps and bounds. Last summer, *Causeur* magazine released a set of maps that the government consulting group France Stratégie had been using. They showed a growth of immigrant populations in all French cities that was almost incredible. In vast stretches of Seine-St-Denis, burial place of France's kings and queens, 70-80% of the children under 18 are born of immigrants from outside of Europe. ("There are 135 different nationalities in Seine-St-Denis," the Socialist interior minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement once remarked with black humor, "but one of them has pretty much died out.") The same goes for Limoges and other provincial cities that would, until recently, have been considered sleepy. The maps sent shock waves through France when they were published, but what is most striking is that the outrage took the government consultants by surprise. They had been using the maps for two years to develop plans to fight residential segregation. It had apparently not occurred to them that, in the public's view, the main problem was not the distribution of the immigrant population but the sheer size of it.

Faced with an increasingly anxious public, Macron has sought to strike a populist tone. His interior minister Gérald Darmanin, and his education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer, are both conservatives of a sort. In the wake of the George Floyd riots and demonstrations in the United States, Macron made a forthright announcement that France "will tear down none of its statues."

But that has done little to change the country's mood. Among the major Western countries that sought to develop an effective COVID vaccine, France alone failed—France, the country of Louis Pasteur. In a wide-ranging poll last summer, *Le Monde* found that three quarters of the citizenry believe France is in decline. The belief is held by overwhelming majorities of every age group, and of every political party except one: Macron's La République en Marche (LREM). That in itself is



a problem. The country appears to be ruled by the wildly atypical sliver of its population that believes everything is hunky-dory. By 68 to 32, members of LREM and top executives believe globalization is good for France. Members of all other parties and people at all other income levels disagree. Only 26% of French people trust the media. Only 16% trust political parties. One element in *Le Monde's* study was a departure from what French polls have tended to show over the last few decades. Suddenly, 79% of French people want a "real leader to reestablish order," while 86% say "authority" is a concept unjustly maligned, and half want to re-institute capital punishment. Odd that Macron has chosen this very moment to enlist the United Nations in writing a ban on the death penalty into international law.

If Zemmour stands for anything, it is reconnecting the French public to big decisions over the future of France, particularly when it comes to immigration. "Our people...must be able to make decisions on who is part of it and what its future will be," he wrote recently. "It must be able to decide whether to end family reunification for immigrants and birthright citizenry, and whether to limit the right to political asylum—without an oligarchy of French and European judges standing in its way."

That is the sound of a second shoe dropping. The question of "who belongs" is an indication that when Zemmour talks about civil war, he means something more than the Trump-era clash between insiders and outsiders. He is questioning, among other things, whether Islam and Christian-derived secularism can co-exist on the same soil. At the end of the summer the magazine *Marianne* described a private meeting in which Zemmour reassured a group of businessmen that, if elected, he would not rock the economic boat. He would not try to take France out of the European Union, or out of its common currency, the Euro, ill-advised though he might consider both these things. He has other priorities. "If I get into power, it will be to deal with one thing," Zemmour reportedly told his listeners. "The clash of civilizations."

Going to Extremes

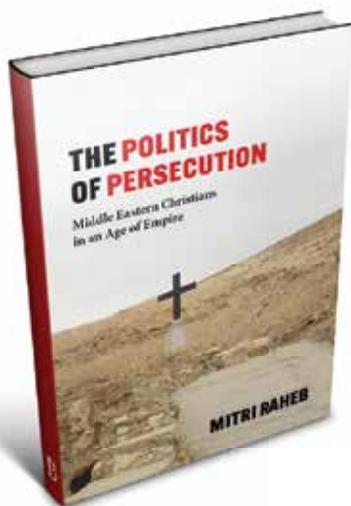
OPEN MENTION OF THE CLASH OF civilizations as a subject for government policy has until recently been confined to what in France is called the "extreme Right." As long as World War II cast its shadow over European political life, it was fairly easy and uncontroversial to say who the extreme Right was. It was quarantined in an

outrageous reactionary party called the National Front, founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, a classically educated and eloquent lawyer, war veteran, and businessman. Le Pen had been indignant over de Gaulle's abandonment of Algeria in the face of guerrilla war, and sympathetic to those colonial officers inclined to resist his policy of decolonization.

As such, he and the movement he led could reasonably be described as imperialist, nationalist, and even (in sentiment, at least) putschist. On top of that, Le Pen, without giving vent to any specifically anti-Semitic characterizations or theories, delighted in baiting those who placed anti-Semitism at the center of World War II, and of the repentance that necessarily followed. He called the Holocaust a "detail" of the war. This attitude not only tainted him morally, it seemed to tie him to the side of collaboration and defeat.

And when migration from North Africa began in earnest, he did not euphemize, or seek to pass off as a policy disagreement, his revulsion at the prospect of sharing the country with an alien culture. The category of "racism" was not much used at the time, but in the absence of an alternative explanation, it seemed to describe him well. Le Pen was never close to power, though he shocked the country in 2002 by making it to the second round of the

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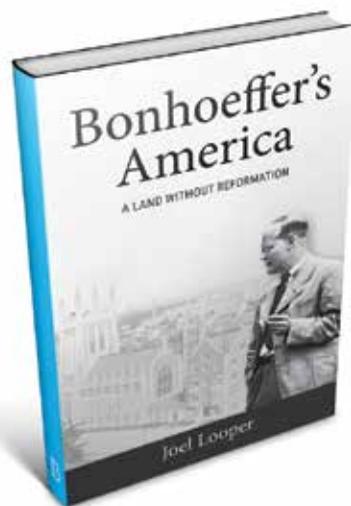


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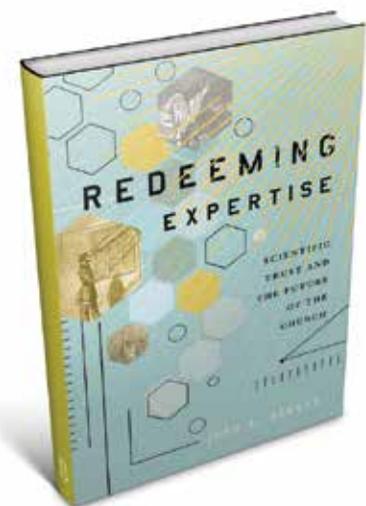


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presidential elections. He and his voters were excluded from politics by a tacit agreement of all other parties, an arrangement known as the *cordon sanitaire*.

Now a clearheaded 93 years old, Jean-Marie Le Pen has stuck to his guns on immigration. “Birthright citizenship, family reunification, dual citizenship, and above all the right to asylum,” he said in a late-summer interview in his backyard west of Paris, “all need to be rethought from top to bottom. And I’ll tell you something else: If I were in power, I would warn those who intend to come to our country without authorization that they will never have a right to anything. Never. No path to citizenship, no work, no lodging, no school for the children, no hospitals for the sick. We have nothing to give them. We cannot afford to indulge ourselves in a suicidal generosity.”

That is a worldview that retains a lot of the old F.N. sulfur. But beyond immigration questions, it has become harder to define who and what is “extreme Right.” Other parties cynically took advantage of the *cordon sanitaire* to win through ostracism arguments they could not win through debate. Politicians who believe there are three or more genders flung the word “extremist” around to describe those who do not. Gay marriage was voted into law under the Socialist government of François Hollande in 2013 and provoked unanticipated resistance from the long dormant world of Catholic conservatives, drawing hundreds of thousands of young people into the streets of Paris for some of the biggest demonstrations since World War II, and creating bridges between the bourgeoisie and the National Front.

On closer examination, it was open to question whether the F.N. was even a party of the “Right.” It fought against globalization and viewed the spread of American high-tech corporations as a kind of imperialism. In the French south, the F.N. was, to be sure, on the right—it was a conservative rival to the *Républicains*. Nicolas Sarkozy, France’s last conservative president, won many of Le Pen’s votes there in 2007. But in the north, where Le Pen’s daughter Marine holds her seat in the National Assembly, the F.N. was more a party of the Left—a successor to the Communists. Northern F.N. voters wanted nothing to do with Sarkozy, and were stubbornly unwinnable for him.

Marine Le Pen has led the party for almost a decade now, and has made a root-and-branch effort at what she calls its *dédiabolisation* (an attempt to “de-stigmatize” the party in the public eye). She compliments politicians of the Left, like the anti-globalist ex-Socialist Arnaud Montebourg, whom she

said her party would be proud to have as an economics minister. She often speaks in centrist boilerplate: “The only real division is the one between those who believe in France and those who no longer do.” Her condemnations of anti-Semitism are frequent, unconditional, and apparently sincere. In 2015, she expelled her own father from the party for saying he still believed what he had said about the Holocaust being a “detail.” She rebaptized his party the *Rassemblement National* (“National Rally” or R.N.), a name that sounds so Gaullist that neither its members nor its detractors can yet pronounce it without a quizzical hesitation.

An easygoing National Front is a bit like caffeine-free Red Bull: there may be a niche market somewhere for it, but there is not a *raison d’être*. France is not exactly crying out for a fifth moderate party. Marine’s niece (and Jean-Marie’s granddaughter), Marion Maréchal, has views closer to Jean-Marie’s, at least on the question of *dédiabolisation*. Until recently a rising star in the party, she has stepped away from it to tend to a think tank she founded in Lyon.

Zemmour is deeply
insightful and deeply
offensive. He is the one
thing to the extent that he
is the other.

Jean-Marie Le Pen has an explanation of what is happening to the F.N. under his daughter’s leadership, and of why it is misguided. For him, the National Front was a means to “express my liberty,” not a machine for trolling for votes, which in any case was unnecessary. “The moment will come when people realize that the national option is the only chance left to protect our liberty, our security, our existence,” he said in September. “And then, rather than our bending to politics, politics will have to bend to necessity. Opinion will evolve and radicalize with each new demonstration of authorities’ incompetence. That, in effect, is the difference between my analysis and hers. I always thought that, given sufficient clarity on our part, the French people would understand that the moment would come to apply the principles we were defending, without any need to soften or update them to make them popular.”

In other words, Marine has abandoned her father’s strategy at the very moment when it is bringing forth its fruits—and it may be

Zemmour who gets to harvest them. That is certainly how Zemmour himself sees it. “Everyone at the R.N. has understood that Marine Le Pen will never win,” he said at a talk in Provence in August. Interviewed for this article a month later, alluding to Jean-Marie Le Pen’s ideas about immigration and the ripening of time, he would add, “Actually, I am the inheritor of the battle to save France from the main threat that faces it—the Muslim migrant invasion. I am that inheritor.”

Le Pen professes himself flattered by Zemmour’s homage. “He actually has no need of me. He is a man of deep and serious culture. He is also a man of great courage.” The great French actor Jean-Paul Belmondo having died that week, occasioning an outpouring of national grief, Le Pen gave Zemmour an extraordinary compliment: “In a way he is like the political equivalent of Belmondo. In a way he is the same kind of figure—a risk-taker, a battler, but always with a smile.”

Nonetheless he did not think Zemmour should run for president. It would be a squandering of his tremendous talents. “His daily broadcast on CNews,” Le Pen says, “is a veritable school of politics for hundreds of thousands of people, maybe even millions—especially the young. His candidacy would cost him his calling.”

Gaullo-Communism

IT IS WORTH BEING SPECIFIC ABOUT WHAT that calling is. Zemmour is a historian, a gifted one. The heart of his project is to be found in his books. Although there is nothing “middle-of-the-road” about his narratives of French history—that is why they sell like hotcakes—there is nonetheless something decidedly moderate about his sense of France. Zemmour believes in what de Gaulle called *la France éternelle*. Certain conflicts and oppositions are perennial. Understanding the military feint of a Merovingian king, say, will enlighten you as to the wage package a French prime minister was willing to offer an industrial union 1,500 years later. None of this is right or wrong. It’s just French.

It is tempting to look at his newest book as an exercise in score-settling, gossip, and tales told out of school. He reveals (or claims) that Pascal Blanchard, the most woke of President Macron’s sometime advisers, told him, off the air, after the two had been at loggerheads over multiculturalism, “You can say what you want. We don’t give a shit. We’ve won. We control the schools.” But Zemmour’s observations are generally embedded in a literary understanding of French culture. Zemmour was in many ways sympathetic to the *Répub-*



licains' 2017 presidential candidate François Fillon, who sought to unite moderates and Le Pen followers around cultural issues, from gay marriage to mass migration. But Zemmour worried that Fillon, whom he remembered as having been too weak to stand up against his ally Nicolas Sarkozy, would fare even worse against his outright enemies. He was not surprised when Fillon was brought down by a featherbedding scandal that may have been blown out of proportion. Rather than pile on Fillon, Zemmour contents himself with quoting Proust: "Unfortunately, in the world at large as in the political world, victims are so often cowardly that you have a hard time staying mad at their persecutors."

Zemmour's historical project resembles the one the English journalist Paul Johnson has undertaken in his books, above all *Modern Times* (1983). Much as Johnson sought to undermine the pro-Soviet bias of certain Cold War-era historians, Zemmour is re-sorting dates and facts into a counter-narrative meant to undermine the multiculturalism that France has imported from America. Probably the highlight of his newest book is his re-reading of the great anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose *Race and History* (1952) was a pillar of French educators' arguments for inter-ethnic tolerance in the first decades after World War II. Zemmour does not object: cultures differ one from the other, and must find a way to cohabitate. But he insists that we understand what the anthropologist actually said. Lévi-Strauss always considered Islam a special threat to diversity. In a later work he explained that the diversity of cultures rested on a mutual "impermeability" that was threatened by mass migration. Toward the end of his life he warned President François Mitterrand of the dangers that would arise should the non-French population exceed a given "threshold of tolerance."

Zemmour is very often weaving current events into a long-established tapestry of French history that he has *received* rather than *theorized*. When one understands this, his preoccupations look less radical. He may be wrong that France is heading toward civil war, but civil war is a natural thing for French people to think about. "The first thing you need to understand about France," he said in September, "is that we are the country of civil wars. We've always had civil wars: the wars of religion, the French Revolution, the Commune of Paris, the battles between collaborators and résistants after World War II."

The reason France has civil wars, according to Zemmour, is that it is, like the United States, a created nation. It is a place where people dispute principles, and conflicts can end when disputes over values are settled. "Before World War I," he says, "there were two Frances, secular France and Catholic France, and those two Frances were a hair's breadth away from a military confrontation. What saved France from civil war? The Great War. Horrible to say, but that's how it is. People found themselves in the same trenches, fighting the Germans."

After World War II, Zemmour believes, Charles de Gaulle settled many of the "cold" civil wars that had coursed through France in the 1930s, when the country wound up too polarized between Left and Right to unite against the looming German threat. Post-war France was built on a *modus vivendi* between two seemingly incompatible groups of resistance fighters—the Gaullists (who represented France's age-old Christian culture) and the Communists. Zemmour has evolved since the turn of the century from a fairly standard-issue free-markets-and-traditional-values conservative into one who gives the Communists their due as builders of contemporary France. One can read his biggest-selling book, *The*

Suicide of France, as a paean to that "Gaullist-Communist" alliance.

Today, by contrast, the political culture has something in common with that of France's "strange defeat" in 1940. It is too polarized to take account of threats to the country's survival. Nor is France alone in this. Zemmour, an avid reader of Samuel Huntington, says, "The United States, too, is at risk of civil war."

Zemmour is deeply insightful and deeply offensive. He is the one thing to the extent that he is the other. In the autumn of 2019 he spoke to a "Convention of the Right" sponsored by Marion Maréchal in Paris. He gave a brilliant and embittered speech in which he warned: "The question before us is the following: 'Will young French people accept to live as a minority in the land of their ancestors?' If so, they deserve to be colonized. If not, they will need to fight for their liberation."

That line brought the house down. It also brought legal charges against Zemmour for "incitement to hatred." He was assessed a fine of €10,000. Zemmour appealed on free-speech grounds and in September had it overturned. Prosecutors are seeking to have it reinstated.

As winter approached, Zemmour stood at 17% in the presidential polls, and seemed to be consolidating his position as Macron's most serious challenger. But the road before him is a long one. He will need to persuade his countrymen that the political questions they have been debating up till now are secondary. He will need to persuade them that the only real political question before France is its survival. And he will need to do his persuading faster than his adversaries can do their prosecuting.

Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties (Simon & Schuster).

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