

How the European far right discovered the dark side of the liberal tradition

The Front National secured the largest share of the vote in the first round of the French regional elections on 6 December, but failed to win any regions in the second round. [Ben Margulies](#) writes that while the Front National is often regarded simply as a far-right party, Marine Le Pen has increasingly focused on the Front National's role in defending liberal and republican values. He argues that this apparent liberalism reflects a wider trend across Europe for parties to cite liberal values as the basis for critiques of Islam.



Marine Le Pen, leader of the French Front National, isn't a fascist. And she wants you to know she isn't a fascist. No, the [victor of the first round](#) of the December 2015 regional elections is deeply concerned with defending liberal and republican values. She talks of leading "[a great republican political party](#)", defending French secularism [and leading a movement](#) which "would raise and restore 'the traditional values of the French Republic' which the 'classe politique' had abandoned and betrayed."

She [has reached out](#) to French Jews and Israel. She is the true defender of the Western Enlightenment tradition, threatened both by the Islamic Other. Her famous comment about how Muslims praying on the streets of French cities resembled "an occupation" [was meant to demonstrate](#) the Islamic threat to French *laïcité*.

This bigoted liberalism is not unique to Marine Le Pen; indeed, she is [modelling herself](#) on other European right-populists. Sindre Bangstad, writing for the *Boston Review*, [notes](#) "that the populist far-right in Western Europe has learned the language of liberal values and exploited it to reach a wider demographic... It has become commonplace for far and populist right politicians to declare themselves champions of gay and lesbian rights – as well as women's rights, which have long served as an exceptionally useful and blunt instrument to be wielded against patriarchal minorities."

As far back as the 1990s, Pim Fortuyn depicted himself as a defender of Dutch liberalism against Islam, [telling](#) De Volkskrant that he considered it a "backward culture" and adding, "In what country could an electoral leader of such a large movement as mine be openly homosexual? How wonderful that that's possible... And I'd like to keep it that way, thank you very much." Since his assassination in 2002 (by an animal-rights activist), Geert Wilders, leader of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), has taken up the mantle of defending Dutch liberalism from Islamic attacks.

Rafael Behr [describes how](#) Scandinavian far-rightists use liberal and social-democratic language to target Muslims: "The Scandinavian hard right configures its refusal to welcome refugees as a pragmatic defence of traditional Nordic values of tolerance and reciprocity – implying that the social contract is undermined by migrant communities whose failure to integrate is somehow wilful, a function of religious self-segregation."

Le Pen exemplifies a trend on the populist right, and in wider political discourse, which seems deeply paradoxical. On the one hand, even the far right is increasingly turning to open espousal of liberal and democratic values. Given that the European far right was, traditionally, explicitly or implicitly anti-democratic, this is a noteworthy development. It is certainly a sea change in the history of the Front National, which was once more openly connected to a [specifically anti-republican tradition](#) on the French right. It implies that liberal democracy, or at least democracy in its shallowest sense, is an unchallengeable social and political norm.

At the same time, though, this "liberal discourse" is careful to rule an entire group of people – Muslims – as being

outside the community of political subjects being defended. This new discourse emphasises both the equal rights that Europe guarantees all its citizens, and the essential *inequality* of Muslims. It is a sort of bounded equality – all the people are created equal, but Muslims are somehow not quite of “the people”, and in some ways, may not be quite people at all.

What we have then is a sort of half-liberalism, where the core values of liberty and equality are universal within a bounded group, but not for some out-group which is regarded as categorically or essentially different. Liberal values hold sway up to some border; then they stop, and an [essentially conservative rhetoric](#) of inequality takes over. Liberal values become not the universal inheritance of humankind, but a new mechanism for enforcing particularism. Liberal values are either means to exclude the Other or things to be “[imposed](#)” upon them in the service of integration.

This may strike the reader as a new – not to mention mutant – form of liberalism. But as Domenico Losurdo shows in [Liberalism: A Counter-History](#), there has always been a strain in liberalism which both proclaims values of liberty and individualism and, at the same time, limits, abridges or traduces the equality associated with the liberal tradition. Losurdo describes how liberals of the Enlightenment era and the 19th century frequently dehumanised any number of groups, from indigenous people and Africans to their own domestic labour forces, usually in service of some form of economic exploitation.

For example, John Locke, founder of the social contract, also enshrined slavery in the Carolinas and deemed that American Indians had no land rights. It was John Stuart Mill, not Benjamin Disraeli, [who said that](#), “England had a right to rule despotically because it brought the benefits of higher civilisation”. Unwittingly, today’s right-populists seem to have resurrected this dark side of the liberal tradition.

And there is a long history of liberal political parties allying with explicitly conservative forces, going back at least to the counter-revolutions that followed the democratic uprisings of 1848. When Bismarck unified Germany – where the liberals of 1848-49 had failed – many German liberals rallied to his government and the conservative-nationalist project of the Second Reich.

Liberals and nationalist conservatives can co-exist in the same parties, and liberal parties can adopt far-right stances: The Freedom Party of Austria, one of Europe’s most prominent far-right parties, [was once a member](#) of the Liberal International (LI); once Jörg Haider became leader in 1986 and embraced right-wing nationalism, the LI expelled it, and the liberal wing split [off to form its own party](#).

So how do we evaluate actors like Le Pen, who adopt liberal principles to advance a conservative, exclusionary and Islamophobic discourse? One way is to simply say that liberalism is itself cynical and hierarchical, and that we shouldn’t be surprised that modern far-right politicians can embrace it.

Or perhaps we should seek the cynicism not in liberal ideas but in their unlikely exponents – maybe it is Le Pen, Wilders et al who are the cynics, cloaking their intolerant language in the rubric of liberal democracy to gain new supporters, or to deceive the electorate as to the threat they represent. Marine’s “*dediabolisation*” of the party [is often described](#) as a “media strategy” or a semantic exercise. After all, [Viktor Orbán](#) was once a liberal too, and vice chairman of the Liberal International – [look at him now](#).

I think the least bleak view we can take of Le Pen liberalism is that it may represent the resilience of European liberal democracy in some parts of the continent, even now. In the 1920s and 1930s, fascists and other forms of right-wing authoritarians (like [Austrofascism](#) or [Francoism](#)) didn’t need to pretend to be liberals. They openly condemned and denigrated liberalism.

As Michael Mann has [pointed out](#), liberal democracy was often seen as archaic; fascism, with its violent, illiberal nationalism, statism, economic self-sufficiency and political violence was the wave of the future. Today, it is pure fascism that is discredited; no one wants paramilitaries roaming the streets, or to license political murder. Therefore, fascist parties must accommodate themselves to liberal democracy, just as conservatives have often had to adapt to

liberal and democratic norms to compete, whether that is universal suffrage, mass-membership parties or the welfare state.

All that said, just because Le Pen's mode of "liberalism" has historical antecedents doesn't make it a welcome addition to European politics or political theory. It is a degraded form of liberal thought. If the precedent of [Viktor Orbán](#) tells us anything, allowing these sorts of right-wing parties to come to power will lead to a degraded form of democracy. Sadly, it's not 1848, or 1989 anymore. It's the fake liberals who are making the weather, and the French establishment may have just run out of umbrellas.

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