

On the Ordonationalist Political Party: The French National Front and Hungary's *Fidesz*

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Introduction

The French National Front's relationship with neoliberalism is multifaceted and contradictory. As astutely identified by Mabel Berezin in her 2009 book *Illiberal Politics in Neoliberal Times*, since the late 1990s the FN has positioned itself not only as an anti-immigrant party, but also as the party that dared to challenge the European Union's neoliberal consensus. However, drawing on Stephanie Mudge's concept of "political neoliberalization," in terms of which she emphasizes that neoliberalism is not only a market ideology, but also a *political* project in which economic expertise dominates in the political field – including within political parties across the political spectrum since the early twenty-first century (2008; 2011) – we can identify how the FN party itself has undergone a superficial neoliberalization.

To complicate matters further, political neoliberalization through the rise of economic expertise in the FN entailed the insertion of *ordoliberal* ideology into the party platform. This ideology emphasizes protection and enhancement of national capitalist markets through a strong state (Bonefeld 2017).¹ Raising the profile of ordoliberal techno-economic expertise enabled the party, for a period of five years (2012–2017), to flirt with the political mainstream. At the same time, these experiments did not transform the party from one that, at its core, is founded upon racist anti-decolonization politics, with its base mobilized most passionately by a view of the French nation as essentially white and by bitter condemnation of political elites putatively committing white treason (Geva 2018).

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1 I do not excavate, in this short paper, debates on the nature and origins of ordoliberalist thought, which developed in Germany during the Weimar Republic. For a review of the history of ordoliberalism and its relationship to neoliberalism, see Bonefeld (2012).

These developments bear significant similarities to Hungary's ruling Fidesz party. The French National Front and Hungary's Fidesz have distinct political histories, but share enough features to enable us to identify the emergence of an ordonationalist party family. The ordonationalist party, I argue, is a composite of four features: (1) political neoliberalization through the rise of technocratic economic expertise in the party; (2) an ordoliberal ideology emphasizing a strong state and strong leadership, steering capitalist market competition; (3) endorsement of "neoliberal morality" through punishment of the poor and harsh penal policies; and finally (4) racist ideologies that seek to foster internal solidarities within the "pure" nation regardless of class, and which even deny the politics of class, but are exclusionary through racial and ethnic lines.²

I will conclude with a brief comparison between the ordonationalist experimentation of the French National Front and the successful entrenchment of an ordonationalist political regime in Hungary, not only to consider the broad features of the ordonationalist party, but also to reflect on how the institutional political history of parties, political party competition, and middle-class capture might explain the entrenchment of an ordonationalist regime in Hungary, in contrast with the (so far) failed experiment at solidifying an ordonationalist party in France.

The *Front National*: Merging anti-decolonization politics, political neoliberalism, and ordoliberal ideology

While French radical-right anti-elitist and anti-Marxist ideologies emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sternhell 1983), some of which undoubtedly shaped interwar and Second World War French fascism, these currents took on a new register in relation to French colonial politics in the post-war period. The Poujadist movement, the first electorally important French radical-right movement in the post-war era, harshly denounced the decadence of French political elites who were purportedly the cause of the French empire's disintegration (Souillac 2007). France experienced an electoral shock in 1956 when fifty-two Poujadist representatives were elected to the National Assembly. A rising Poujadist star elected in 1956 was none other than a young Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Antisemitism and anti-Marxism remained features of the post-war radical right. At the same time, during the 1950s and 1960s the radical right increasingly adopted French colonial racial hierarchies, especially given the prominence of the political and military crisis in colonial Algeria and elsewhere. On one hand, the French state and its representatives were bitterly criticized for their laxity and inability to instill law and order against growing decolonization movements in Algeria and Indochina. Political elites

2 See Haney (2016) on "penal nationalism," which combines neoliberal punitive morality with racist nationalism.

in the metropole were denounced for military failures and for “submitting” to anti-colonial independence movements. On the other hand, the French colonial state was idealized as a white French administration that needed to be strong and decisive.

The National Front party was founded in 1972, ten years after the bloody war of Algerian independence (1954–1962). It was a political formation that emerged directly from the crisis wrought by the final years of French colonial rule. Jean-Marie Le Pen was the party’s first president, and remained in that position until he retired in 2011. The party attracted the support of *pieds-noirs* who had moved to the metropole after Algerian independence (Saverese 2011), and aligned itself with post-war veterans’ organizations. Furthermore, the Poujadist theme of white treason and morally lax political elites, belief in the need for a strong (white) state, and an economic worldview that supported petty bourgeois small commerce, remained central to the FN.

Jean-Marie Le Pen’s retirement from FN leadership in 2011, and Marine Le Pen’s party presidency from 2012 signaled an apparent break with the past. Recognizing that the FN base was ageing, Marine Le Pen was determined to modernize the party and to capture the young by distancing it from overt anti-Semitism and brute racism (Mayer 2013). Her strategy became more clearly articulated with the incorporation of Florian Philippot into the party. He became her right-hand man for five years, and is arguably equally, if not more, responsible for the FN’s electoral gains from 2012 to 2017. Philippot represented something new in the FN. Carrying the most elite technocratic credentials, he gave the FN a gloss of techno-economic expertise that affected the party from the top to its rank-and-file base. He held the number-two position in the party, articulated its “patriotic capitalist” vision, and developed the FN Youth wing, with a long-term view of cultivating the party’s future.

Philippot represented the party’s move into the neoliberal political field. The party tried to go mainstream not only by toning down its flagrantly racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric, but also by bolstering its techno-economic credentials. Stephanie Mudge’s conceptualization of neoliberalism as a political field emphasizes that neoliberal politics do not necessarily advance neoliberal policies: “Neoliberalism is a *product* of intellectual contests over cultural authority, but it is a resource or *symbolic weapon* in contests over political authority – it is, in other words, a means toward ends in political realms rather than an end itself” (2011, 347). Within this field, economic expertise has become a *sine qua non* of political authority.

Philippot himself represented the new place accorded to economic and technocratic expertise in the party. However, his ideas go against established economic doctrines within influential policy circles and prestigious university departments (Fourcade 2009). Philippot’s economic views are not anti-capitalist and are not centrally concerned with redistribution across class. Rather, they emphasize étatist management of, and nationalist benefits from, capitalist competition. Philippot’s program was embedded in Marine Le Pen’s 2017 presidential campaign platform. The campaign’s economic proposals

included some commitments to maintaining social protection, but did not aim for systemic economic redistribution. It rather presented various proposals to increase French market efficiency, competitiveness, and productivity by returning economic management to the French state, and by protecting patriotic French enterprises from “disloyal” globally oriented capitalist firms.³

This technocratic economic expertise also affected the FN’s rank and file membership. Between 2013 to 2017, during my qualitative field research on the FN, I witnessed the entrance of young and educated FN members who once would have been centre-right voters, and who by 2017 were active FN members. For example, at a gala dinner during Marine Le Pen’s presidential campaign kickoff convention in February 2017, I spent the evening dining with a table of young assistants to FN MEPs. They were in their twenties, with advanced degrees in public law or economics, and the young women and men were wearing conservative and understated business clothes. They spent part of the evening debating an obscure aspect of German Bundesbank policy, at the end of which the loser had to buy the table a bottle of champagne. Like seemingly everyone else at the dinner, they applauded when Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (Marine Le Pen’s niece) entered the gala hall. Although she has now taken her leave from politics, Maréchal-Le Pen brashly personifies the “civilizational” faction in the party. Nonetheless, as much as they expressed admiration for Maréchal-Le Pen, my young dinner partners expressed strong identification with the Philippot line.

Philippot oversaw the creation of party sub-organizations aimed at legitimating the party as an economic authority in the political field. This included a group focusing on entrepreneurs, another focusing on managers of large businesses, and a third focusing on younger members in creative industries. These new ideational currents within the party did not grab the classic *Le Penist* membership of the party. At the presidential campaign kickoff convention in Lyon in 2017, when head of the FN entrepreneur group Mikael Sala delivered his speech in the congress hall, the amphitheatre emptied. FN loyalists had flocked to hear firebrands like Marion Maréchal-Le Pen deliver their stock civilizational speeches on “protecting” France from Muslim and Roma migrants, but were apparently less interested in listening to a speech about the party’s economic platform.

As opposed to some young and educated FN supporters who were deeply interested in discussing economic policy during my fieldwork, informal conversations and formal interviews with older petty-bourgeois FN supporters, and working-class supporters, suggested to me that they did not care about the finer details of the party’s economic program. Working-class supporters certainly saw themselves as the losers of the new economic order, and older petty-bourgeois FN supporters who had benefitted from the more robust welfare state of the past worried about their children’s economic future.

3 See proposals 34–51, and 65–73, in Marine Le Pen’s 2017 campaign platform, which included 144 proposals altogether: www.frontnational.com/le-projet-de-marine-le-pen.

Yet, as one working-class woman from the deindustrialized northwest lamented to me in 2013 as I walked alongside her at the once-annual FN May 1st march in Paris, she resented how she and her daughter had been “forced” to move to a new neighborhood when their old one “became unsafe because of immigrants.” She bitterly complained that, to add insult to injury, immigrants were putatively being accorded higher priority for subsidized housing over “native French people.” The FN had not given her a framework for criticizing an overall decline in social rights, but had rather channeled her sense of injustice to animosity towards her immigrant neighbors.

Another retired petty-bourgeois man from a town near the Swiss border told me at an FN party in May 2017 that he had shifted from the center-right to the FN when his town’s Socialist mayor started recruiting immigrants to his hometown, which was otherwise emptying out. This policy, he claimed, had resulted in so many newcomers that he “couldn’t recognize anyone anymore.” With an almost confessional tone he lowered his voice and explained that he did not mind the European Union: “It’s not about the economy. It’s about culture and civilization.” Marine Le Pen herself proved incapable of coherently defending the party’s economic program in a high-stakes televised debate with Emmanuel Macron in early May 2017.

From 2012 the party attempted to produce a new socio-political bloc, one which would weave a party forged from racist anti-decolonization politics into the neoliberal political field, and with an ordoliberal economic vision. But the elements holding this ordonationalist coalition together did not cohere. The avatars of racist anti-decolonization politics finally pushed Philippot out of the party in September 2017, several months after Marine Le Pen’s failed presidential bid and the party’s disappointing results in the June 2017 parliamentary elections. A tweeted photo of Philippot and an FN delegation at a restaurant in Strasbourg exposed photographic evidence that Philippot had eaten a North African couscous, rather than a regional dish of choucroute garnie, an Alsatian recipe normally prepared with copious piles of pork. It is questionable whether FN members and leaders really cared about Philippot’s eating habits, but Philippot nonetheless resigned shortly after these events. Philippot had tried with Marine Le Pen to create a new FN, uniting the anti-decolonization politics represented by the Le Pen clan, with his protectionist capitalist economic views. However, the Le Pen–Philippot alliance did not succeed in cultivating a stable ordonationalist bloc. With Philippot’s departure, the rump FN is now returning to its anti-decolonization roots.

Hungary’s *Fidesz*: From ordonationalist party to ordonationalist regime

A brief comparison with Hungary highlights informative parallels and contrasts with French political developments. As Central European University political scientist Béla Greskovits argues, after losing the elections in 2002, Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán engaged in an extensive strategy of asserting a hegemonic position in contemporary Hungary,

with the help of the “historical” churches and a cadre of organic intellectuals (2017). In the void left by the collapse of state-socialism and rapid liberalization, his party intensively cultivated civic circles throughout Hungary during his years out of power to advance the party’s long-term success. The strategy has worked since Orbán’s re-election in 2010. Combining nationalist pro-market policies, anti-EU rhetoric that resonates with a bitter modern history of Hapsburg imperial rule and Soviet occupation,⁴ and selective policies that advance the growing middle class by enabling access to cheap commodities, a flat income tax rate, and temporary tax measures to promote middle class home ownership, Fidesz forged a hegemonic ordonationalist political society.

The Orbán government has its own cadre of alternative economic expertise, enacting Philippot-style principles of étatist capitalist competition and episodic forceful state interventions (Bohle 2014), limited economic redistribution, and a neoliberal moral regime with little compassion for those who have not weathered well the transition from state-socialist worker-citizens to capitalist subjects. With tight control over the national state and over the dominant political party in a system with little party competition, but with a high level of ideological fragmentation (Enyedi 2016), Orbán has taken the ordonationalist party one step further by using the political party to personally extract from the state and the national economy (Magyar 2016).

No bourgeois capture, no ordonationalist regime?

Several important differences between France and Hungary surface when one compares the role and history of the political party and of the middle class in each country. In Hungary, the supremacy of what Attila Ágh has called the dominant “Golem party” in East Central Europe (2017), the absence of vigorous party competition, and the state-socialist legacy of an equivalence between party, state, and economy, have together enabled Orbán’s Fidesz party to cultivate an entrenched ordonationalist political society that promotes state-led capitalist competition and exclusionary race-based solidarities, with the support of the growing middle class (Szombati 2017).⁵ However, if we bracket Orbán’s oligarchic drift, we can see that the FN under the Le Pen–Philippot alliance and Orbán’s Fidesz party can be grouped as variants of the ordonationalist party.

4 The Orbán government emphasizes that Hungary was never a colonizing power. Therefore, they claim that Hungary does not need to be party to EU-wide refugee distribution schemes which purportedly pay penance for sins committed by former colonial powers such as France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. This narrative emphasizes that Hungary itself has historically been the victim, not the perpetrator, of imperial domination.

5 On the need to re-theorize the “new” middle class and its political manifestations globally, see Tuğal 2015.

Neoliberalization since the 1970s has undoubtedly yielded political instability, undoing the warp and woof of twentieth-century political society. At the same time, France's National Front and Hungary's Fidesz are not simply illiberal responses to neoliberalism. The FN was a party born from a defense of French colonial domination. It has recently experimented ambitiously in the metropole with fostering citizen solidarities across class lines through exclusionary conceptions of race, religion, and nation, while superficially borrowing from the leftovers of the Socialist party, and at the same time promoting ordoliberal visions of state-led market society, alongside promotion of neoliberal morality.

These multiple strands, however, did not stably bind in France, at least not in the FN.⁶ French party competition has remained comparatively robust, and pivotally the Philippot–Le Pen alliance made headway with the working class, but did not capture the middle class (Perrineau 2017). Viktor Orbán's success in Hungary was but a dream for Philippot and Le Pen, who could only wistfully admire their comrade to the east. Hungary's Fidesz regime is a stark reminder that with an even more extreme void left by neoliberal reforms, in conjunction with an electoral system lacking party competition, an institutional history of single-party rule in which the party subsumes state, nation, and economy, and a successful capture of middle class voters, these strands can coalesce into a stable ordoliberalist political regime.

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6 It leaves the field open for the rightwing *Les Republicains* to potentially occupy the ordoliberalist space.

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