The New Face of the French Right

Eric Zemmour, who recently declared himself a contender for the presidency of France, is that increasingly familiar figure in western democracies: the insider who poses, and is largely accepted, as an outsider. True, he is a journalist rather than a career politician—unlike Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, and François Hollande, he has not spent his life seeking office. In this respect, he is more like the current President of France, Emmanuel Macron, who also parachuted into the top political job, as it were, never having faced an election before.

Neither is he the scion of immemorial privilege, but rather the purest possible embodiment of meritocratic success. The son of Berber Jewish immigrants to France, he owes his reputation as the most revered (and hated) journalist in the country entirely to his own intelligence, industry, and talent. No one who has heard him speak, as I have, could doubt for a minute that he is a formidable polemicist whom any professional politician would have to fear in debate.

But—thanks to his ability—he is now extremely well-connected. In his latest book, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* (France Has not Said Its Last Word), which is self-published and sold 80,000 copies within three days of publication, he recounts his 45-minute telephone conversation with the President of the Republic—at the latter's instigation. They had exchanged private telephone numbers when Macron was Minister of the Economy and appeared on a television programme with Zemmour.

When the President called him on May Day, 2020, Zemmour had just been insulted publicly in the street (as he often is, sometimes with blows as well), and this time the perpetrator had filmed it and posted it on social media. This was the pretext of the President's call: soon they were discussing the subjects—immigration, the *banlieues*, Islamism—that are Zemmour's stock-in-trade.

> *Each of us put forward his arguments without leaving the other time to draw breath, without even reflecting, more by reflex than reflection, like two football teams which attack and defend by turn. He said to me, "Republic," I said to him, "France." He said to me, "Minority of scum," I said to him, "Supported by a majority." . . . He said to me, "The state is holding up in the banlieues," I said to him "The lockdown is not being respected there." He said to me "The police are enforcing respect for order," I said to him that the police were on the retreat everywhere from fear of creating problems. He said to me, "The Prefects are giving instructions to be firm," I said to him, "Every Prefect fears unleashing revolt in the banlieues like in 2005."*

Zemmour creates the impression that, in his heart, Macron agrees with him:

> *He said to me, "There are individuals whom we can save, who can be led back to the Republic," I said to him that there*

> *are always good and bad individuals, it didn't matter, but I believe in the collective unconscious that steers us, and that the collective unconscious of these Muslim populations is to colonise the former coloniser, to dominate the infidel in the name of Allah. At these words, there was a silence of a few seconds. . . . I felt that my last argument had caught him short. He said to me that I was right on this point.*

If Macron really did say this, he was in effect conceding that Zemmour was fundamentally right about everything, or at least about the most important things that he writes about, and that France faced problems that are deeper than the usual political ones that any country faces – that it faces ones that are existential. One is reminded of what Gibbon famously said about what might have happened if the Battle of Poitiers had been lost: "Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet." But the Battle of Poitiers was an event, and Zemmour was alleging something much more difficult to oppose: a process.

> *Attached to what de Gaulle called "a certain idea of France," [Zemmour] dislikes intensely all that has happened in, or to, his country since the fateful year of 1968—when he was 9 years old.*

Did Macron really say what Zemmour claims he said? If he did, he must be aware that his whole presidency has been vitiated by cowardice and has been almost a betrayal of the essential interests of his country. But we have only Zemmour's word for the conversation that took place between them; probably Macron cannot deny it because even to do so would be to admit that he has some familiar connection with the sulphurous journalist, and this would be damaging in itself.

Then, of course, there is the not insignificant question of

whether Zemmour is right in his depiction of France's predicament. That there are grave problems can hardly be denied; it is their source that is at issue. Zemmour, a partisan of the clash-of-civilizations hypothesis, argues that the Muslim population is unassimilable for cultural and religious reasons; the left argues that the problem derives from French prejudice against the immigrants (and their descendants). Naturally, these two analyses suggest very different solutions. At the end of their conversation, Macron asked Zemmour (at least, according to the latter) for his proposals about immigration in writing, to be sent to him at the Elysée, as if he were deeply interested in them. But having claimed to be a man neither of the right nor the left, Macron has constantly to try to reconcile irreconcilables, which essentially leads to a kind of confused immobility, pleasing to no one.

Although Zemmour is known to the public principally for his evident detestation of Islam, rejecting completely the romantic idea that his forefathers lived happily under a tolerant Muslim dispensation, he is a commentator on much else besides. In fact, detestation, often witty, seems to be his principal emotion. Attached to what de Gaulle called "a certain idea of France" (Napoleon and de Gaulle are his two historical heroes), he dislikes intensely all that has happened in, or to, his country since the fateful year of 1968—when he was 9 years old.

Although the events of May 1968, were not a revolution in the real sense of the word, but rather a revolt by the privileged but disgruntled children of the bourgeoisie, they nevertheless exerted a revolutionary effect, just as what was initially intended to be a mere coup d'état in Romania effected a revolution. And Zemmour hates what 1968 wrought, namely the rejection of national tradition in favour of personal liberty conceived of as licence.

He divides the Jewish population of France by his iconoclastic

views of two important figures, Alfred Dreyfus and Philippe Pétain. The former he holds not to have been innocent and the latter he holds to be the saviour of French-born Jews. These views, especially the second, do not endear him to those, now fast dwindling in number, who lived through the Occupation, and their descendants. More than half of French Jews are of North African origin, however, and it is probable that his views on Islam count more with them.

In economics, he is a protectionist and a Colbertian dirigiste, who believes that enlightened governors can make correct decisions that would otherwise not be taken (an example being Giscard d'Estaing's espousal of nuclear power). Like most French intellectuals, he reprehends economic liberalism and the term *anglo-saxon* is not generally one of affection in his lexicon. The fact that what he calls liberalism is actually corporatism escapes his notice. He laments the destruction of French industry (and therefore of the working class, replaced by an incoherent mass of people increasingly living from hand to mouth, completely separate, economically, socially, culturally, educationally, and geographically from the multicultural, mobile, well-qualified, and prosperous people living in the metropoles). He is in favour of a strong welfare state.

Whether all his attitudes can be woven into a coherent policy may be doubted. Until he began to be touted as a possible presidential candidate (as I write this, he has not yet declared himself as such, though his latest book tour of France is almost indistinguishable from an electoral campaign), he has not really been obliged to put forward alternatives to the *status quo*, only to criticise and bemoan it, which he has done very effectively and with evident relish. The fact is that his criticisms, often cogent and corresponding to the submerged and unavowable feelings of so many of his countrymen, have been the foundation of his fame and fortune.

There is something deeply troubling about him. His appearance is saturnine and he has a nervous intensity of manner that disconcerts and suggests ruthlessness and even cruelty. He has precisely that lean and hungry look that made Caesar think that Cassius did not sleep at nights and was dangerous because he thought too much. I think he has little chance of winning the election (though another terrorist outrage just before the election could tip the balance in his favour). He knows this, but winning is not everything. He has already altered the terms of the political debate in France, and therefore, irrespective of the outcome of any election, he has become a figure of historical importance.

First published in the *Library of Law and Liberty*.