

Two Roads for the New French Right

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Last February the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held its convention in Washington, D.C. This annual gathering is a kind of right-wing Davos where insiders and wannabes come to see what's new. The opening speaker, not so new, was Vice President Mike Pence. The next speaker, very new, was a stylish Frenchwoman still in her twenties named Marion Maréchal-Le Pen.

Marion, as she is widely called in France, is a granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the far-right National Front party, and a niece of Marine Le Pen, its current president. The French first encountered Marion as a child, beaming in her grandfather's arms in his campaign posters (see illustration on page 46), and she has never disappeared from the public scene. In 2012, at the age of twenty-two, she entered Parliament as the youngest deputy since the French Revolution. But she decided not to run for reelection in 2017, on the pretext that she wanted to spend more time with her family. Instead she's been making big plans.¹

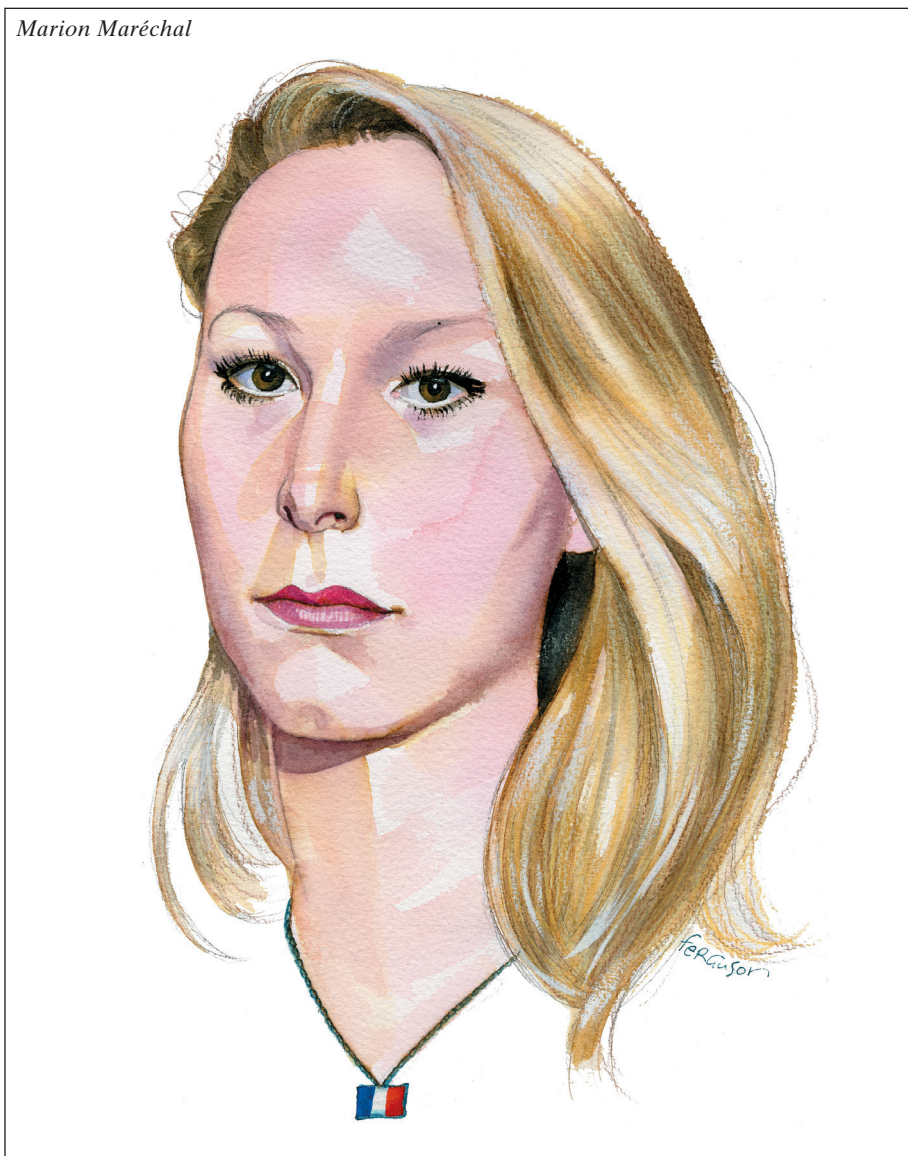
Her performance at CPAC was unusual, and one wonders what the early morning audience made of her. Unlike her hotheaded grandfather and aunt, Marion is always calm and collected, sounds sincere, and is intellectually inclined. In a slight, charming French accent she began by contrasting the independence of the United States with France's "subjection" to the EU, as a member of which, she claimed, it is unable to set its own economic and foreign policy or to defend its borders against illegal immigration and the presence of an Islamic "counter-society" on its territory.

But then she set out in a surprising direction. Before a Republican audience of private property absolutists and gun rights fanatics she attacked the principle of individualism, proclaiming that the "reign of egoism" was at the bottom of all our social ills. As an example she pointed to a global economy that turns foreign workers into slaves and throws domestic workers out of jobs. She then closed by extolling the virtues of tradition, invoking a maxim often attributed to Gustav Mahler: "Tradition is not the cult of ashes, it is the transmission of fire." Needless to say, this was the only reference by a CPAC speaker to a nineteenth-century German composer.

Something new is happening on the European right, and it involves more than xenophobic populist outbursts. Ideas are being developed, and transnational networks for disseminating them are being established. Journalists have treated as a mere vanity project Steve Bannon's efforts to bring European populist parties and thinkers together

¹This past summer both she and the National Front changed their names. She has dropped Le Pen and insists on being called simply Marion Maréchal. Meanwhile her aunt has officially rebranded her party as the Rassemblement National (RN). *Rassemblement* is French political jargon for bringing in and unifying people for a common cause, something like "big tent" in American English.

Marion Maréchal



under the umbrella of what he calls The Movement. But his instincts, as in American politics, are in tune with the times. (Indeed, one month after Marion's appearance at CPAC, Bannon addressed the annual convention of the National Front.) In countries as diverse as France, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Germany, and Italy, efforts are underway to develop a coherent ideology that would mobilize Europeans angry about immigration, economic dislocation, the European Union, and social liberalization, and then use that ideology to govern. Now is the time to start paying attention to the ideas of what seems to be an evolving right-wing Popular Front. France is a good place to start.

The French left, attached to republican secularism, has never had much feel for Catholic life and is often caught unawares when a line has been crossed. In early 1984 the government of François Mitterrand proposed a law that would have brought Catholic schools under greater government control and pressured their teachers to become public employees. That June nearly a million Catholics marched in Paris in protest, and many more throughout the country. Mitterrand's prime minister, Pierre Mauroy, was forced to resign, and the proposal was withdrawn. It was an important moment for lay Catholics, who discovered that despite the official secularism of the French state they remained a cultural force, and sometimes could be a political one.

In 1999 the government of Gaullist president Jacques Chirac passed

legislation creating a new legal status, dubbed a *pacte civil de solidarité* (civil solidarity pact, or PACS), for long-term couples who required legal protections regarding inheritance and other end-of-life issues but did not want to get married. Coming not long after the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the PACS was largely conceived to help the gay community but soon became popular with heterosexual couples wanting a more easily dissolved bond. The number of straight couples *pacsés* annually is now approaching the number of those getting married, and the arrangement for gays and lesbians is uncontroversial.

To build on that success, during his campaign for the French presidency in 2012 the Socialist candidate François Hollande promised to legalize same-sex marriage and open up adoption and additional rights to gay and lesbian couples. *Mariage Pour Tous*—marriage for everyone—was the slogan. Once in office Hollande moved to fulfill his campaign promise, but he repeated Mitterrand's mistake by failing to anticipate the strong right-wing reaction against it. Shortly after his inauguration, a network of laypeople drawn heavily from Catholic Pentecostal prayer groups began to form. They called themselves *La Manif Pour Tous*—the Demonstration for Everyone.

By January 2013, just before Parliament approved gay marriage, *La Manif* was able to draw over 300,000 people to a demonstration opposing it in Paris, stunning the government and the media. What especially surprised them was the ludic atmosphere of the protest, which was more like a

gay pride parade than a pilgrimage to Compostela. There were lots of young people marching, but rather than rainbow banners they waved pink and blue ones representing boys and girls. Slogans on the placards had a May '68 lilt: *François resist, prove you exist*. To top it off, the spokeswoman for *La Manif* was a flamboyantly dressed comedienne and performance artist who goes by the name Frigide Barjot and played in a band called the Dead Pompidous.

Where did these people come from? After all, France is no longer a Catholic country, or so we're told. While it's true that fewer and fewer French people baptize their children and attend mass, nearly two thirds still identify as Catholic, and roughly 40 percent of those declare themselves to be "practicing," whatever that means. More importantly, as a Pew study found last year, those French who do identify as Catholic—especially those who attend Mass regularly—are significantly more right-wing in their political views than those who do not.

This is consistent with trends in Eastern Europe, where Pew found that Orthodox Christian self-identification has actually been rising, along with nationalism, confounding post-1989 expectations. That may indicate that the relationship between religious and political identification is reversing in Europe—that it is no longer religious affiliation that helps determine one's political views, but one's political views that help determine whether one self-identifies as religious. The prerequisites for a European Christian nationalist movement may be falling into place, as Hungarian president Viktor Orbán has long been predicting.

Whatever motivated the many thousands of Catholics who participated in the original *Manif* and similar demonstrations across France, it soon bore political fruit.² Some of its leaders quickly formed a political action group called Sens Commun, which, though small, nearly helped to elect a president in 2017. Its preferred candidate was François Fillon, a straitlaced former prime minister and practicing conservative Catholic who vocally supported *La Manif* and had close ties to Sens Commun. He was explicit about his religious views during the primary of his party, the Republicans, at the end of 2016—opposing marriage, adoption, and surrogacy for gay and lesbian couples—and surprised everyone by winning. Fillon came out of the primary with very high poll numbers, and given the Socialists' deep unpopularity after the Hollande years and the inability of the National Front to gain the support of more than one third of the French electorate, many considered him the front-runner.

But just as Fillon began his national campaign, *Le Canard enchaîné*, a news-

²It also inspired the spectacular Mishima-like suicide of one of its supporters, the nationalist historian Dominique Venner, who a few days after passage of the gay marriage law left a suicide note on the altar of Notre Dame Cathedral and then blew his brains out in front of over a thousand tourists and worshippers.

paper that mixes satire with investigative journalism, revealed that his wife had received over half a million euros for no-show jobs over the years, and that he had accepted a number of favors from businessmen, including—Paul Manafort-style—suits costing tens of thousands of euros. For a man running on the slogan “the courage of truth,” it was a disaster. He was indicted, staff abandoned him, but he refused to drop out of the race. This provided an opening for the eventual victor, the centrist Emmanuel Macron. But we should bear in mind that despite the scandal, Fillon won 20 percent of the first-round votes, compared to Macron’s 24 and Marine Le Pen’s 21 percent. Had he not imploded, there is a good chance that he would be president and we would be telling ourselves very different stories about what’s really going on in Europe today.

The Catholic right’s campaign against same-sex marriage was doomed to fail, and it did. A large majority of the French support same-sex marriage, although only about seven thousand couples avail themselves of it each year. Yet there are reasons to think that the experience of *La Manif* could affect French politics for some time to come.

The first reason is that it revealed an unoccupied ideological space between the mainstream Republicans and the National Front. Journalists tend to present an overly simple picture of populism in contemporary European politics. They imagine there is a clear line separating legacy conservative parties like the Republicans, which have made their peace

with the neoliberal European order, from xenophobic populist ones like the National Front, which would bring down the EU, destroy liberal institutions, and drive out as many immigrants and especially Muslims as possible.

These journalists have had trouble imagining that there might be a third force on the right that is not represented by either the establishment parties or the xenophobic populists. This narrowness of vision has made it difficult for even seasoned observers to understand the supporters of *La Manif*, who mobilized around what Americans call social issues and feel they have no real political home today. The Republicans have no governing ideology apart from globalist economics and worship of the state, and in keeping with their Gaulist secular heritage have traditionally treated moral and religious issues as strictly personal, at least until Fillon’s anomalous candidacy. The National Front is nearly as secular and even less ideologically coherent, having served more as a refuge for history’s detritus—Vichy collaborators, resentful *pièdes noirs* driven out of Algeria, Joan of Arc romantics, Jew- and Muslim-haters, skinheads—than as a party with a positive program for France’s future. A mayor once close to it now aptly calls it the “Dien Bien Phu right.”

The other reason *La Manif* might continue to matter is that it proved to be a consciousness-raising experience for a group of sharp young intellectuals, mainly Catholic conservatives, who see themselves as the avant-garde of this third force. In the last five years they have become a media presence, writing in newspapers like *Le Figaro*

and newweeklies like *Le Point* and *Valeurs actuelles* (Contemporary Values), founding new magazines and websites (*Limite*, *L’Incorrect*), publishing books, and making regular television appearances. People are paying attention, and a sound, impartial book on them has just appeared.³

Whether anything politically significant will come out of this activity is difficult to know, given that intellectual fashions in France change about as quickly as the *plat du jour*. This past summer I spent some time reading and meeting these young writers in Paris and discovered more of an ecosystem than a cohesive, disciplined movement. Still, it was striking how serious they are and how they differ from American conservatives. They share two convictions: that a robust conservatism is the only coherent alternative to what they call the neoliberal cosmopolitanism of our time, and that resources for such a conservatism can be found on both sides of the traditional left–right divide. More surprising still, they are all fans of Bernie Sanders.

The intellectual ecumenism of these writers is apparent in their articles, which come peppered with references to George Orwell, the mystical writer-activist Simone Weil, the nineteenth-century anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, the young Marx, the ex-Marxist Catholic philosopher

³Pascale Tournier, *Le vieux monde est de retour: Enquête sur les nouveaux conservateurs* (The Old World Is Back: A Study of the New Conservatives) (Paris: Stock, 2018).

Alasdair Macintyre, and especially the politically leftist, culturally conservative American historian Christopher Lasch, whose *bons mots*—“uprootedness uproots everything except the need for roots”—get repeated like mantras. They predictably reject the European Union, same-sex marriage, and mass immigration. But they also reject unregulated global financial markets, neoliberal austerity, genetic modification, consumerism, and AGFAM (Apple-Google-Facebook-Amazon-Microsoft).

That *mélange* may sound odd to our ears, but it is far more consistent than the positions of contemporary American conservatives. Continental conservatism going back to the nineteenth century has always rested on an organic conception of society. It sees Europe as a single Christian civilization composed of different nations with distinct languages and customs. These nations are composed of families, which are organisms, too, with differing but complementary roles and duties for mothers, fathers, and children. On this view, the fundamental task of society is to transmit knowledge, morality, and culture to future generations, perpetuating the life of the civilizational organism. It is not to serve an agglomeration of autonomous individuals bearing rights.

Most of these young French conservatives’ arguments presume this organic conception. Why do they consider the European Union a danger? Because it rejects the cultural-religious foundation of Europe and tries to found it instead on the economic self-interest of individuals. To make

matters worse, they suggest, the EU has encouraged the immigration of people from a different and incompatible civilization (Islam), stretching old bonds even further. Then, rather than fostering self-determination and a healthy diversity among nations, the EU has been conducting a slow coup d'état in the name of economic efficiency and homogenization, centralizing power in Brussels. Finally, in putting pressure on countries to conform to onerous fiscal policies that only benefit the rich, the EU has prevented them from taking care of their most vulnerable citizens and maintaining social solidarity. Now, in their view, the family must fend for itself in an economic world without borders, in a culture that willfully ignores its needs. Unlike their American counterparts, who celebrate the economic forces that most put "the family" they idealize under strain, the young French conservatives apply their organic vision to the economy as well, arguing that it must be subordinate to social needs.

Most surprising for an American reader is the strong environmentalism of these young writers, who entertain the notion that conservatives should, well, conserve. Their best journal is the colorful, well-designed quarterly *Limite*, which is subtitled "a review of integral ecology" and publishes criticism of neoliberal economics and environmental degradation as severe as anything one finds on the American left. (No climate denial here.) Some writers are no-growth advocates; others are reading Proudhon and pushing for a decentralized economy of local collectives. Others still have left the city and write about their experiences

running organic farms, while denouncing agribusiness, genetically modified crops, and suburbanization along the way. They all seem inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015), a comprehensive statement of Catholic social teaching on the environment and economic justice.

Coming out of *La Manif*, these young conservatives' views on family and sexuality are traditionalist Catholic. But the arguments they make for them are strictly secular. In making the case for a return to older norms they point to real problems: dropping rates of family formation, delayed child-bearing, rising rates of single parenthood, adolescents steeped in porn and confused about their sexuality, and harried parents and children eating separately while checking their phones. All this, they argue, is the result of our radical individualism, which blinds us to the social need for strong, stable families. What these young Catholics can't see is that gay couples wanting to wed and have children are looking to create such families and to transmit their values to another generation. There is no more conservative instinct.

A number of young women have been promoting what they call an "alter-feminism" that rejects what they see as the "career fetishism" of contemporary feminism, which unwittingly reinforces the capitalist ideology that slaving for a boss is freedom. They are in no way arguing that women should stay home if they don't want to; rather they think women need a more realistic image of themselves than contemporary capitalism and feminism give them. Marianne Durano, in her recent book *Mon corps*

ne vous appartient pas (My Body Does Not Belong to You), puts it this way:

We are the victims of a worldview in which we are supposed to live it up until the age of 25, then work like fiends from 25 to 40 (the age when you're at the bottom of the professional scrap heap), avoid commitments and having children before 30. All of this goes completely against the rhythm of women's lives.

Eugénie Bastié, another alter-feminist, takes on Simone de Beauvoir in her book *Adieu mademoiselle*. She praises the first-wave feminist struggle for achieving equal legal rights for women, but criticizes Beauvoir and subsequent French feminists for "disembodying" women, treating them as thinking and desiring creatures but not as reproducing ones who, by and large, eventually want husbands and families.

Whatever one thinks of these conservative ideas about society and the economy, they form a coherent worldview. The same cannot really be said about the establishment left and right in Europe today. The left opposes the uncontrolled fluidity of the global economy and wants to rein it in on behalf of workers, while it celebrates immigration, multiculturalism, and fluid gender roles that large numbers of workers reject. The establishment right reverses those positions, denouncing the free circulation of people for destabilizing society, while promoting the free circulation of capital, which does exactly that. These French conservatives criticize uncontrolled fluidity in both its neoliberal and cosmopolitan forms.

But what exactly do they propose instead? Like Marxists in the past who were vague about what communism would actually entail, they seem less concerned with defining the order they have in mind than with working to establish it. Though they are only a small group with no popular following, they are already asking themselves grand strategic questions. (The point of little magazines is to think big in them.) Could one restore organic connections between individuals and families, families and nations, nations and civilization? If so, how? Through direct political action? By seeking political power directly? Or by finding a way to slowly transform Western culture from within, as a prelude to establishing a new politics? Most of these writers think they need to change minds first. That is why they can't seem to get through an article, or even a meal, without mentioning Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci, one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, died in 1937 after a long imprisonment in Mussolini's jails, and left behind mounds of notebooks with fertile thoughts on politics and culture. He is best remembered today for the concept of "cultural hegemony"—the idea that capitalism is not only sustained by the relation of forces of production, as Marx thought, but also by cultural assumptions that serve as enablers, weakening the will to resist. His experience with Italian workers convinced him that unless they were freed from Catholic beliefs about sin, fate, and authority, they would never rise up and make revolution. That necessitated a new class of

engaged intellectuals who would work as a counter-hegemonic force to undermine the dominant culture and to shape an alternative one that the working class could migrate to.

I don't have the impression that these young writers have made their way through Gramsci's multivolume *Prison Notebooks*. Instead he's invoked as a kind of conversational talisman to signal that the person writing or speaking is a cultural activist, not just an observer. But what would counter-hegemony actually require? Up until this point I have portrayed these young conservatives, perhaps a little too neatly, as sharing a general outlook and set of principles. But as soon as Lenin's old question comes up—*What is to be done?*—important and consequential divergences among them become apparent. Two styles of conservative engagement seem to be developing.

If you read a magazine like *Limite*, you get the impression that conservative counter-hegemony would involve leaving the city for a small town or village, getting involved in local schools, parishes, and environmental associations, and especially raising children with conservative values—in other words, becoming an example of an alternative way of living. This ecological conservatism appears open, generous, and rooted in everyday life, as well as in traditional Catholic social teachings.

But if you read publications like the daily *Figaro*, *Valeurs actuelles*, and especially the confrontational *L'Incorrect*, you get another impression altogether. There the conservatism is aggressive, dismissive of contemporary culture, and focused on waging a *Kulturkampf* against the 1968 generation, a particular obsession. As Jacques de Guillebon, the thirty-nine-year-old editor of *L'Incorrect*, put it in his magazine, "The legitimate heirs of '68... will end collapsing into the latrines of post-cisgender, transracial, blue-haired boredom.... The end is near." To bring it about, another writer suggested, "we need a right with a real project that is revolutionary, identitarian, and reactionary, capable of attracting the working and middle classes." This group, though not overtly racist, is deeply suspicious of Islam, which the *Limite* writers never mention. Not just of radical Islamism, or Muslim men's treatment of women, or the refusal of some Muslim students to study evolution—all genuine issues—but even of moderate, assimilated Islam.⁴

All this grand talk of an open culture war would hardly be worth taking

⁴One night I attended a dinner with some young writers in a bistro whose owner, obviously a National Front supporter, was complaining loudly that a public television station was about to run a special for Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan. Curious, I watched the show when I got home. It was utterly banal, an extravaganza that resembled a wedding, with tables of guests watching pop performers. The hostess went around asking those guests what Ramadan meant to them, and one young woman's response was typical: "I want to live my life, as a woman, and succeed." A self-made Muslim businesswoman, obviously quite successful, was also interviewed and spoke of her faith...in herself. It was an assimilationist's dream.

seriously except for the fact that the combative wing of this group now has the ear of Marion Maréchal. Marion used to be difficult to place ideologically. She was more socially conservative than the National Front leadership but more neoliberal in economics. That's changed. In her speech at CPAC she spoke in culture war terms, giving *La Manif* as an example of the readiness of young French conservatives to "take back their country." And she described their aims in the language of social organicism:

Without the nation, without the family, without the limits of the common good, natural law and collective morality disappear as the reign of egoism continues. Today even children have become merchandise. We hear in public debates that we have the right to order a child from a catalogue, we have the right to rent a woman's womb.... Is this the freedom that we want? No. We don't want this atomized world of individuals without gender, without fathers, without mothers, and without nation.

She then continued in a Gramscian vein:

Our fight cannot only take place in elections. We need to convey our ideas through the media, culture, and education to stop the domination of the liberals and socialists. We have to train leaders of tomorrow, those who will have courage, the determination, and the skills to defend the interests of their people.

Then she surprised everyone in France by announcing to an American audience that she was starting a private graduate school to do just that. Three months later her Institute of Social, Economic, and Political Sciences (ISSEP) opened in Lyon, with the aim, Marion said, of displacing the culture that dominates our "nomadic, globalized, deracinated liberal system." It is basically a business school but will supposedly offer great books courses in philosophy, literature, history, and rhetoric, as well as practical ones on management and "political and cultural combat." The person responsible for establishing the curriculum is Jacques de Guillebon.

Not many of the French writers and journalists I know are taking these intellectual developments very seriously. They prefer to cast the young conservatives and their magazines as witting and unwitting soldiers in Marine Le Pen's campaign to "de-demonize" the National Front, rather than as a potential third force. I think they are wrong not to pay attention, much as they were wrong not to take the free-market ideology of Reagan and Thatcher seriously back in the 1980s. The left has an old, bad habit of underestimating its adversaries and explaining away their ideas as mere camouflage for despicable attitudes and passions. Such attitudes and passions may be there, but ideas have an autonomous power to shape and channel, to moderate or inflame them.

And these conservative ideas could have repercussions beyond France's borders. One possibility is that a renewed, more classical organic conser-

vatism could serve as a moderating force in European democracies currently under stress. There are many who feel buffeted by the forces of the global economy, frustrated by the inability of governments to control the flow of illegal immigration, resentful of EU rules, and uncomfortable with rapidly changing moral codes regarding matters like sexuality. Until now these concerns have only been addressed, and then exploited, by far-right populist demagogues. If there is a part of the electorate that simply dreams of living in a more stable, less fluid world, economically and culturally—people who are not primarily driven by xenophobic anti-elitism—then a moderate conservative movement might serve as a bulwark against the alt-right furies by stressing tradition, solidarity, and care for the earth.

A different scenario is that the aggressive form of conservatism that



National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen with his granddaughter Marion in a campaign poster, 1992

one also sees in France would serve instead as a powerful tool for building a pan-European reactionary Christian nationalism along the lines laid out in the early twentieth century by Charles Maurras, the French anti-Semitic champion of "integral nationalism" who became the master thinker of Vichy. It is one thing to convince populist leaders in Western and Eastern Europe today that they have common practical interests and should work together, as Steve Bannon is trying to do. It is quite another, more threatening thing to imagine those leaders having a developed ideology at their disposal for recruiting young cadres and cultural elites and connecting them at the Continental level for joint political action.

If all French eyes are not on Marion, they should be. Marion is not her grandfather, though within the soap-operatic Le Pen family she defends him. Nor is she her aunt, who is crude and corrupt, and whose efforts to put new lipstick on the family party have failed. Nor, I think, will her fortunes be tied to those of the Rassemblement National *né* Front National. Emmanuel Macron has shown that a "movement" disdaining mainline parties can win elections in France (though perhaps not govern and get reelected). If Marion were to launch such a movement and make it revolve around herself as Macron has done, she could very well gather the right together while seeming personally to transcend it. Then she would be poised to work in concert with governing right-wing parties in other countries.

Modern history has taught us that ideas promoted by obscure intellectuals writing in little magazines have a way of escaping the often benign intentions of their champions. There are two lessons we might draw from that history when reading the new young French intellectuals on the right. First, distrust conservatives in a hurry. Second, brush up your Gramsci. □