Names as Battlegrounds: The French Far Right and the Gallicization of Forenames

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This study examines how French far-right political actors strategically instrumentalized forename debates to construct exclusionary narratives of national identity between 2012 and 2022. Through Critical Discourse Analysis of speeches by Marine Le Pen, Jordan Bardella, and Éric Zemmour, this research investigates how far-right rhetoric transforms naming practices into battlegrounds for defining Frenchness. The analysis reveals a strategic duality: while Le Pen and Bardella employ implicit racialization through appeals to Republican equality and *laïcité*, Zemmour's discourse exemplifies explicit hierarchy and advocates for "native French" supremacy. Both approaches operationalize "elite racism" and naturalize exclusion through three key mechanisms: reconstructing national identity boundaries by framing non-French names as Republican threats, legitimizing racial hierarchies through assimilation discourse, and linking naming practices to existential threats such as "Islamization" and demographic "replacement". Situated within France's historical trajectory of Republican assimilationism, this study reveals how contemporary far-right discourse weaponizes everyday cultural practices to perpetuate systemic marginalization while undermining France's egalitarian pretensions.

1. Patriotic Onomastics: The French Far Right and Forename Gallicization

Scholarship on Europe's far right has extensively mapped its ideological terrain, with the analysis of narratives centered on ethnonationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, Islamophobia, and the defense of "traditional values" within frameworks of assimilationist integration (Wimmer, 2013; Mondon & Winter, 2020; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). In France, these discourses intersect uniquely with Republican principles like *laïcité* (secularism) and colorblind universalism, which far-right actors exploit to frame multiculturalism as a threat to national cohesion (Almeida, 2017). Yet, despite rich analyses of party manifestos, electoral strategies, and media discourse (e.g., Brubaker, 2010; Bar-On, 2011; Alduy, 2015; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017; Froio, 2018), the politicization of forenames remains underexplored – a notable oversight given their symbolic function as sociopolitical markers in France's enduring debates over cultural belonging and national identity.

Forenames function as linguistic artifacts embedded in power relations, which reflect and reinforce hierarchies of identity. France's historical preoccupation with gallicization[1] – from revolutionary-era de-Christianization campaigns to colonial-era forced renaming – underscores how naming practices have long served as tools of assimilation and erasure. In contemporary far-right discourse, non-gallicized names (e.g., *Mohamed*, *Aïcha*) are stigmatized as markers of cultural "unassimilability" and re-emerge as battlegrounds for defining Frenchness. This study interrogates how French far-right actors construct **extremist narratives** – marked by *cultural essentialism*, *demographic victimhood*, and *securitization* – to racialize immigrants and, more specifically French-Maghrebi communities, through debates over naming practices.

Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), this research investigates how far-right political actors strategically instrumentalize forenames to:

(Re)construct exclusionary boundaries of national identity by framing non-French names as threats to Republican values.

Naturalize racial hierarchies through implicit mechanisms (particularly through appeals to "assimilation") and explicit strategies (by valorizing le *Français de souche*).

Amplify sociocultural divisions by linking naming practices to existential threats like "Islamization" or demographic "replacement".

The analysis reveals a duality in far-right rhetoric. While Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella employ **implicit racialization** – veiling exclusion behind universalist appeals to Republican equality (*égalité*), Éric Zemmour's discourse exemplifies **explicit hierarchy**, as it openly advocates for the supremacy of "native French" and the inherent inferiority of French-Maghrebi communities. Both strategies operationalize what van Dijk (1993) terms "elite racism" by translating structural inequities into commonsense cultural distinctions. The research will defend the thesis that, by anchoring exclusionary ideologies in the

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[1] Gallicization means the process of making names conform to French linguistic and cultural norms.

terrain of naming practices, far-right actors legitimize policies that reinforce systemic marginalization and undermine France's egalitarian pretensions.

This study adopts a multi-layered analytical framework to interrogate the intersection of onomastic practices and far-right identity politics in contemporary France. First, I will present the corpus – which comprises public speeches by Marine Le Pen, Jordan Bardella, and Éric Zemmour (2012–2022) – alongside the theoretical foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and theories of racialization (Wodak, 2001, 2009; van Dijk, 2002, 2009; Wimmer, 2013). Second, I will trace the historical and sociopolitical trajectory of name policies in France, thus contextualizing contemporary debates within a legacy of Republican assimilationism, colonial naming practices, and the 1993 civil code reform. Third, a semantic and pragmatic analysis of selected speeches will dissect the rhetorical strategies – historical analogy, coded nostalgia, and invocation of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (Fr. *le grand remplacement*) – employed to frame non-gallicized forenames as markers of cultural threat, while naturalizing exclusion through appeals to *laïcité* and national unity. Concurrently, the study will interrogate the implications of these discourses on public perceptions of immigrant identities, and show how the racialization of naming practices perpetuates systemic discrimination, reinforces ethnonationalist hierarchies, and fuels polarization in debates over integration. By situating linguistic analysis within broader sociopolitical shifts, this paper sheds light on the mechanisms through which far-right actors weaponize everyday cultural practices to redefine belonging in 21st-century France.

2.   Corpus and Data Collection

This research forms part of a broader project examining public discourse on integration in contemporary France, by situating onomastic debates within wider assimilationist discourses. The present study focuses exclusively on political discourse regarding the gallicization of forenames between the 2012 and 2022 presidential elections in France. The 2012 election marked the emergence of

this issue in the political arena following a question posed to Marine Le Pen (MLP) about her position on the gallicization of forenames. This position would be maintained without significant alterations until just before the 2022 presidential elections. The 2022 elections took place after a long economic and health crisis and were marked by the disappearance of traditional major parties alongside the emergence of new political figures and movements. Éric Zemmour's emergence in 2022 as a presidential candidate – previously known primarily as a political journalist and author aligned with far-right ideologies – brought the forename debate into sharper political focus[2]. His persistent emphasis on this issue attracted substantial media attention, though other presidential candidates largely refrained from engaging deeply with the topic. While Emmanuel Macron briefly referenced the matter during his campaign, he did not elevate it to a substantive point of political debate[3].

During the 2012-2022 decade, the question of the gallicization of forenames was addressed in different spheres, but primarily in the media. Thus, the analysis will focus on media discourse. All materials are oral texts and can be defined as talk-in-interaction. The corpus comprises materials from both public and private television channels, including mainstream networks, news channels, and online platforms. All the selected programs are defined as political, featuring political figures discussing policy matters in institutional or semi-institutional settings.

The boundaries between media discourse and political discourse are usually not clearly delineated. Participation in a talk show is one of the activities that a

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[2] See, for ex. « Eric Zemmour sur l'Islam, l'assimilation, les prénoms », On est en direct, 11/09/2021, 05min50s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOtCCkVzYVY; « Eric Zemmour : 'Si le prénom est marqueur de l'identité, il faut donner des preuves d'amour' », RMC, 15/09/2021, 03min32s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vWje8huHOY; « Eric Zemmour : 'Je ne vais pas obliger les gens à changer leur prénom' », Europe 1, 26/09/2021, 02min10s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVMhDOVk7vI

[3] During his visit to the French Bibliothèque Nationale on 28 September 2022, Emmanuel Macron stated that: "Our identity has never been built on restriction/ […] neither to forenames nor to any other forms of constraint." (« Notre identité ne s'est jamais bâtie sur le rétrécissement/ […] ni à des prénoms, ni à des formes de crispation »). LeHuffPost, 29/09/2021, 2min55s., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EoPP5bwXwE

politician engages in, and thus a speech made by a politician participating in a talk show and debating with journalists constitutes political discourse.

Van Dijk (2002: 212) defines political discourse as

> a discourse produced by the speaker in her professional role of a politician and in an institutional setting. In a more action-oriented way, we may also say that discourse is political when it accomplishes a political act in a political institution, such as governing, legislation, electoral campaigning, and so on.

As van Dijk observed, there are no particular textual or discursive properties that uniquely define political discourse. The main characteristics of political discourse are rather contextual: who is speaking and in which settings. A discursive analysis of political discourse will show, however, that this discourse has characteristics that, while not exclusive to it, largely define it.

Considering these criteria and employing systematic selection procedures, thirty-two video sequences were identified which explicitly relate to the polemic over the gallicization of forenames (representing a total of 15,700 words). Selection criteria included: explicit discussion of forename gallicization by target political figures; temporal boundaries corresponding to the 2012-2022 period; accessibility and audio quality sufficient for discourse analysis; duration allowing for substantive analysis; and authenticity of political discourse. The debate deals with the gallicization of admissible forenames rather than the gallicization of forenames already in use. The question discussed may be formulated as follows: Should the boundary for forenames that are legally admissible for newborns in France be limited by using the force of law to make parents choose a French forename or one selected from the calendar of saints? In these debates, special syntax and semantic categories reveal the reproduction of racist representations and thoughts beneath the surface of policy discussion. The analysis will therefore focus on identifying specific semantic structures and pragmatic strategies that make this racism perceptible.

3. Historical Context of Name Policies in France

The topic of forenames in France, including both foreign and French names, has been extensively investigated in sociological studies.

Weber's work (1976) demonstrated that the politicization of naming is not new: it is a recurrent tool in France's project of defining who belongs to the nation. This historical pattern becomes particularly evident when examining France's most intensive period of nation-building.

The Third Republic (1870–1940) marked a watershed in France's nation-building project, as the state sought to transform a fragmented populace – composed of linguistically and culturally distinct regional communities – into a cohesive national body. Weber (1976) reveals how this era engineered what he termed the "modernization" of rural France, dismantling local identities through systematic policies of linguistic, educational, and cultural homogenization. Central to this project was the eradication of regional diversity in favor of a standardized French identity, a process that extended even to the intimate realm of personal names.

Prior to the Third Republic, rural France exhibited striking heterogeneity: Breton, Occitan, Basque, and Alsatian languages thrived, each tied to distinct cultural practices and naming conventions. Recognizing this diversity as a challenge to their vision of national unity, the Republican state viewed this diversity as an obstacle to national unity. Through the Ferry Laws (1880s), which mandated free, secular, and compulsory education, the state deployed schools as instruments of assimilation. Teachers (*instituteurs*) functioned as ideological agents, who punished students for using regional dialects and enforced French as the sole medium of instruction. Textbooks promoted a Paris-centric narrative of history, and framed regional identities as backward and antithetical to Republican values.

Within this broader assimilationist project, naming practices became a key battleground in this cultural conquest. Civil registry officials frequently refused

to record regional names, compelling families to adopt gallicized versions. Breton names like *Yann* were replaced with *Jean* and Occitan *Martí* with *Martin*. This enforced renaming served dual purposes: it erased linguistic diversity while also symbolically integrating individuals into the Republican fold.

The logic established during this period would prove enduring. The Third Republic's assimilationist policies established a blueprint for later state interventions into cultural practices, including the act of naming (Boucaud, 2001). In the France of former times, parents were obliged by law to choose a forename from "different calendars"[4]. By asserting state authority over naming conventions, this legislation echoed the Republic's historical insistence that "Frenchness" requires linguistic conformity. The law's stipulation that forenames must align with *"French tradition"* (Code civil, Art. 1) perpetuates the logic that regional or foreign names threaten national cohesion – a logic first codified in the Republican crusade against regional diversity.

However, this law was not strictly applied. The legislation was relaxed on April 12, 1966, authorizing parents to choose regional or mythological forenames. This restriction was only removed by the law of January 8, 1993, which gave parents the option of choosing original forenames, while taking the child's interests into consideration (Code civil LOI n° 93-22 du 8 janvier 1993)[5].

Importantly, these practices of cultural assimilation through naming were not limited to metropolitan France. These domestic practices found parallels in colonial contexts. In Algeria, the French authorities imposed gallicized names on indigenous populations, framing such changes as prerequisites for "civilization" (Brower, 2025). This colonial legacy underscores how Republican

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[4] « L'article 1er de la loi du 11 Germinal an XI disposait que les noms en usage dans les différents calendriers et ceux des personnages connus de l'histoire ancienne pouvaient seuls être reçus comme prénoms sur le registre de l'état civil destiné à constater la naissance des enfants » (Boucaud, 2001 : 23).

[5] Code Civil, LOI n° 93-22 du 8 janvier 1993 modifiant le code civil relative à l'état civil, à la famille et aux droits de l'enfant et instituant le juge aux affaires familiales
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000361918

universalism, despite its ostensibly inclusive rhetoric, has often served exclusionary ends and marginalized both regional and immigrant communities.

This historical trajectory culminated in the contemporary legal framework. In contemporary France, legislative and administrative texts clearly state that all forenames (excepting those which cause damage to the rights of third parties or to those of the child) are legally valid, regardless of their religious, foreign, or other origin[6].

Fourquet (2019: 119) perceives the diversity and selection of forenames as a reflection of a society in perpetual change, but also of social and cultural division. In the French context, he identifies a "diversification of references and influences" (2019: 119) within mainstream society itself.

A child's forename reveals much about their family: it results from complex factors – a combination of parents' personal preferences, cultural references, and religious beliefs, all influenced by social norms. In migration contexts, this complexity intensifies. In choosing a forename, parents are perceived as selecting a position: either identifying with their culture of origin or with that of the mainstream population. However, sociological data (notably Coulmont & Simon 2019) demonstrate that, in practical terms within the French context, this choice of identity positioning is not as simple or categorical as it appears.

To understand these dynamics empirically, the *Trajectoires et Origines* (TeO) survey carried out in 2008-2009 by the *Ined* (*Institut national d'études démographiques*) and *Insee* (*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*), questioned 22,000 people with or without a link to migration, and living in metropolitan France, about their social trajectories. Three generations were studied: that of immigrants (born in another country) (G1), that of their children (G2) and that of their grandchildren (G3).

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[6] See, among other sources, the official French government site, "Choix du prénom de l'enfant" [Choice of a child's forename] https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F882, last consulted 25/08/2025.

A recent study conducted by Mignot (2021, online) based on data provided by this survey arrived at the conclusion that, out of the sample studied, "the grandchildren of immigrants from North Africa are those who usually have a specific forename (49%), far outnumbering the grandchildren of immigrants from Southern Europe (8%), or elsewhere in Europe (19%), Africa (9%) or Asia (5%)" (Mignot, 2021: 47). This pattern appears consistent among Muslim communities in other geographical contexts (see, for example, the study by Gerhards & Hans (2009) on the allocation of forenames among Turkish immigrants and those from Eastern Europe who have settled in Germany)[7].

The persistence of culturally specific naming practices among North African communities can be attributed to several interconnected factors. First is the very nature of the specific forenames of other minorities, especially European and Asian minorities. European forenames are close to French forenames, making it easier to move from one set of forenames to the other; whereas Asian forenames can be more easily confused with surnames, and resorting to a French or familiar forename therefore becomes more practical. Additionally, religious considerations play a significant role. Indeed, "Muslims have a supply of forenames that is different from that of Christians" (Mignot, 2021: 56).

The statistical acceptance of diverse naming practices obscures a more complex social reality. While Arab names have become visibly integrated into France's onomastic landscape, their superficial acceptance masks enduring societal resistance, particularly in spheres tied to socioeconomic opportunity. Studies on employment discrimination reveal a stark dissonance between nominal diversity and systemic exclusion. For instance, research employing *curriculum vitae (CV) testing methods* – where identical qualifications are presented with ethnically distinct names – demonstrates that candidates with Arab- or Muslim-associated names (e.g., *Mohamed*, *Samira*) receive significantly fewer callbacks than those with "French-sounding" names. This

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[7] The authors state, in their conclusion, that "a comparison of Germany's three largest immigrant groups shows that immigrants from Turkey have the lowest rate of acculturation, former Yugoslavs are in the middle, and immigrants from Romanic countries acculturate most quickly" (2009: 1125).

bias persists even when controlling for education, experience, and language proficiency, underscoring how names act as racialized proxies in hiring practices (du Parquet & Petit, 2019; Edo & Jacquemet, 2013…).

This systemic exclusion is further institutionalized through corporate practices that quietly prioritize "neutral" names for client-facing roles. Thus, while Arab names may populate birth registries, their bearers often navigate a glass ceiling of belonging, where nominal diversity is celebrated rhetorically yet punished materially (Landolsi, 2023).

These underlying tensions crystallized in public discourse when the perennial debate over forenames resurfaced prominently in French public and media discourse in 2018, as *Mohamed* entered the list of the top 20 most commonly given boys' names in France (ranking 19th)[8]. Unlike names with broader cross-cultural appeal (*Adam*, *Sarah*…), *Mohamed* is perceived as distinctly Arab and Muslim, and laden with historical and religious significance. Its prominence thus carries *dual resonance*: it embodies a strong ethnic identity (though not exclusively limited to immigrant communities) and a visible religious affiliation, challenging France's secular republican ideals (*laïcité*). This tension underscores how certain forenames become lightning rods for anxieties over cultural pluralism and national identity, which reflects broader struggles to reconcile France's universalist principles with its increasingly diverse populace. In some debates and political interviews over (national) identity, immigration and integration, forenames acquire symbolic force and become a sign of the assimilation or non-assimilation of immigrants[9]. The choice of a forename determines the degree to which a person is imagined to belong to the host society – or more precisely to the *majority* – and it is therefore a linchpin on which the success or failure of integration policies for new immigrants and naturalized persons is judged. A French forename becomes a normative

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[8] https://www.tf1info.fr/societe/pourquoi-mohamed-fait-il-son-entree-dans-le-top-20-des-prenoms-les-plus-attribues-en-france-2131341.html

[9] See, for example, "Le face à face tendu entre Yassine Belattar et Éric Zemmour ", CNEWS, 19/03/2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezdaJJYHXS8

standard against which other categories of citizens are measured and their degree of allegiance to the national community assessed.

The complexity of this debate becomes evident in the following exchange, which exemplifies the contested nature of naming practices in contemporary France:

(1) ALEXIS LACROIX — ON[10] PEUT AIMER LA FRANCE DE TOUTES SES FIBRES/ (.) ON PEUT VIBRER AU SACRÉ DE REIMS COMME À LA FÊTE DE LA FÉDÉRATION/ (.) EN S'APPELANT MOHAMED/ OU EN S'APPELANT YASMINA\ C'EST PAS INCOMPATIBLE\

CAROLINE VALENTIN — ON PEUT S'APPELER MOHAMED ET ADORER LA FRANCE/ (.) MAIS EST-CE QUE/ (.) ON PEUT ADORER LA FRANCE ET APPELER SON FILS MOHAMED//[11]

ENGLISH TRANSLATION[12]

ALEXIS LACROIX — ONE CAN LOVE FRANCE WITH ALL ONE'S BEING/ (.) ONE CAN BE STIRRED BY THE CORONATION OF REIMS AS WELL AS BY THE FESTIVAL OF THE FEDERATION [IN HONOR OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION] WHILE BEING NAMED MOHAMED/ OR BEING NAMED YASMINA\ IT'S NOT INCOMPATIBLE\

CAROLINE VALENTIN — ONE CAN BE NAMED MOHAMED AND LOVE FRANCE/ (.) BUT CAN ONE/ (.) LOVE FRANCE AND NAME ONE'S SON MOHAMED//

This exchange crystallizes the central tension in contemporary French debates about naming and belonging. These two quotations represent a contentious media confrontation on the relationship between forenames and French identity. The broader media controversy from which this exchange emerged developed in 2018 following an acrimonious exchange between former political journalist and essayist Éric Zemmour (hereafter ÉZ) and television columnist Hapsatou Sy regarding the legitimacy of "foreign" forenames in France.

The specific incident that brought these tensions into sharp focus occurred during the television program *Les Terriens du Dimanche* on Channel C8

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[10] Transcription standards and conventions have been established by ICAR (CNRS–Lyon 2–ENS de Lyon http://icar.cnrs.fr/projets/corinte/documents/2013_Conv_ICOR_250313.pdf). One of the fundamental rules that have been respected is: everything that has been said is transcribed, and only what has been said is transcribed. It follows that capital letters and punctuation marks, being conventions of written texts, will not be used in the transcription.

[11] « Zemmour/Hapsatou. Faut-il une politique des prénoms », Figaro Live, 20/09/2018,10min02s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ImgFZF-PFA&t=7s

[12] All translations (of oral texts in the corpus, as well as quotations from French scientific articles) are mine.

(September 16, 2018)[13]. ÉZ appeared as a guest on Thierry Ardisson's show to promote his book *Destin Français*. When questioned about his criticism of former Justice Minister Rachida Dati's decision to name her daughter Zohra, ÉZ expressed regret over the abolition of legislation requiring parents to select names from the traditional Catholic saints' calendar. Sy, a regular columnist on the program, reminded the guest that her name was in fact… Hapsatou. ÉZ responded with "your mother was wrong". Sy then asked if her mother should have named her Marine or "some other forename which meant absolutely nothing to her". ÉZ confirmed this view, stating "that is exactly what I want" and suggesting the name Corinne would "suit her very well". In the unedited footage[14], Sy responded firmly: "what you have just said does not insult me, it's an insult to France". ÉZ countered: "it's your forename that is an insult to France"[15].

This exchange illuminates the deep tensions in contemporary French society regarding national identity, cultural integration, and personal heritage. The confrontation reveals how Weber's analysis of the Third Republic's role in constructing a monolithic French identity through cultural erasure continues to resonate in contemporary debates over immigration and integration. What emerges from this incident is not merely a disagreement about names, but a fundamental conflict over who has the authority to define French identity and belonging.

Despite the intense media attention generated by such exchanges, it ultimately had little impact on French legislation. Proposals to legally mandate French names for newborns failed to gain meaningful political or social support in the public arena. Similarly, attempts to revive laws requiring the gallicization of

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[13] « L'affaire Hapsatou Sy - Eric Zemmour - Les Terriens du Dimanche - 16/09/2018 », Les Terriens, 01/10/2018, 11min36s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFZehICfmNk&t=178s.

[14] « Les Terriens du dimanche : Hapsatou Sy dévoile la séquence du clash avec Eric Zemmour », Le Parisien, 18/09/2018, 02min33s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgTWEATjhj0

[15] On this media polemic, see Landolsi (2021, 2022).

forenames found no traction among civil society groups, trade unions, associations, or other institutional bodies.

Instead, the push for French forenames remained primarily the domain of far-right political movements, which advocated for cultural and linguistic assimilation through the adoption of French forenames (*assimilation par le prénom*) as a pathway to immigrant integration. The gallicization debate surfaced only occasionally in political discourse, mainly through Front National / Rassemblement National (FN/RN[16]) leadership. Marine Le Pen (MLP) first brought this issue into the political spotlight during her 2012 presidential campaign[17], and the idea was later amplified by ÉZ in media circles. ÉZ's confrontational approach, exemplified in the exchange with Sy, significantly increased the visibility of the debate while simultaneously polarizing public opinion.

Understanding how this rhetoric functions requires a theoretical framework capable of analyzing the relationship between language, power, and ideology. My research draws upon the theoretical models established within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which posits that social power dynamics fundamentally shape worldviews, interpretations, and discourse – enabling speakers to privilege certain interpretations of verbal messages over others (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; van Dijk, 2005).

Employing CDA's methodologies, this paper argues that the rhetoric on forename gallicization advanced by far-right leaders both emerges from and propagates an ideology predicated on ethnic hierarchy and the subordination of racialized groups. As this paper will demonstrate, the gallicization of forenames is weaponized by far-right actors to demarcate belonging, which reflects anxieties over demographic change and globalization.

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[16] As of June 1, 2018, the Front National has been renamed the Rassemblement National.

[17] "Marine Le Pen pour l'assimilation par le prénom français" franceaiseetfiere, 30/06/2011, 1min19s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o934nsi22rk

4. Rescuing the Naming Practices of a Once-Great Nation: Marine Le Pen's Strategic Nostalgia and the Racialization of Forenames in the 2012 Presidential Campaign

During the 2012 presidential election campaign, MLP gave her opinion on the gallicization of forenames: she was in favor of French forenames being made obligatory. But what is a French forename? On what basis/bases can a forename be considered as French? From a sociological viewpoint, any forename "whose sounds are characteristic of French linguistic systems" (Coulmont & Simon, 2019, online) is French. But according to MLP, a forename has to be chosen from the calendar of saints[18].

(2) TITRE : ÉLECTIONS 2012. DES PRÉNOMS FRANÇAIS POUR TOUS ?

JOURNALISTE   […] ÊTES-VOUS MARINE LE PEN EN FAVEUR D'UN RETOUR À DES CHOIX DE PRÉNOMS FRANÇAIS ISSUS DU CALENDRIER POUR LES ENFANTS NÉS EN FRANCE// TRÈS RAPIDEMENT\ [OUI OU NON]

MARINE LE PEN   [OUI- OUI/]

(.) OUI-OUI/ (.) JE SUIS FAVORABLE\ PARCE QUE EUH JE- JE CROIS QUE LE FAIT DE DONNER UN PRÉNOM FRANÇAIS À: À SES ENFANTS QU'ON EST::/ QUAND ON A OBTENU LA NATIONALITÉ FRANÇAISE OU QU'ON EST/ (.) D'ORIGINE:: ÉTRANGÈRE/ (.) A ÉTÉ UN DES ÉLÉMENTS QUI A EXTRÊMEMENT BIEN FONCTIONNÉ DANS L'HISTOIRE EUH DE FRANCE\ EUH POUR QUE L'ASSIMILATION SE FASSE TRÈS RAPIDEMENT/ (.) C'ÉTAIT LE CAS POUR LES ITALIENS: LES PORTUGAIS: LES ESPAGNOLS LES POLONAIS EUH ILS DONNAIENT/ C'EST VRAI/ UN PRÉNOM FRANÇAIS À LEUR ENFANT=

JOURNALISTE   =UN- UN MOYEN D'INTÉGRER//

MARINE LE PEN   C'EST UN MOYEN D'ASSIMILATION:: TRÈS TRÈS EFFICACE/ TRÈS TRÈS PERFORMANT/ (.) ET ÇA N'EST PLUS LE CAS AUJOURD'HUI/ EUH SOUS PRÉTEXTE DE CONSERVER: ET PRESQUE DE MONTRER/ (.) LE LIEN AVEC: LA- LE- LA NATIONALITÉ D'ORIGINE OU LA CULTURE D'ORIGINE/ (.) ON DONNE EUH AUX ENFANTS FRANÇAIS DES PRÉNOMS QUI SONT EUH À CONSONANCE ÉTRANGÈRE ET JE PENSE QUE/ (.) ÇA LEUR REND LA VIE PROBABLEMENT PLUS COMPLIQUÉE: ET- ET-/ (.) ET- ET- ÇA- ÇA FREINE À MON AVIS: L'ASSIMILATION NÉCESSAIRE/ ÇA LA RETARDE\[19]

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[18] The calendar of saints is a traditional calendar in which each day is marked by a particular saint. The French calendar follows the Catholic Church tradition, first commemorating martyrs and then, by extension, other saints, with each having their designated name day. For more on this subject, see Perdrizet (1933).

[19] « Marine Le Pen pour l'assimilation par le prénom français », france aiseetfiere, 30/06/2011, 1min19s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o934nsi22rk

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

TITLE: 2012 ELECTIONS. FRENCH FORENAMES FOR EVERYONE?

JOURNALIST   […] MARINE LE PEN/ ARE YOU IN FAVOR OF RETURNING TO
                                    CHOOSING FRENCH FORENAMES FROM THE CALENDAR FOR
                                    CHILDREN BORN IN FRANCE// VERY QUICKLY\ [YES OR NO]

MARINE LE PEN   [YES- YES/]

(.) YES-YES/ (.) I AM IN FAVOR OF IT\ BECAUSE UH I- I BELIEVE THAT GIVING A
                                    FRENCH FORENAME TO: TO ONE'S CHILDREN WHEN ONE HAS::/
                                    WHEN ONE HAS ACQUIRED FRENCH NATIONALITY OR IS/ (.) OF
                                    FOREIGN:: ORIGIN/ (.) HAS BEEN ONE OF THE ELEMENTS THAT
                                    HAS WORKED EXTREMELY WELL IN THE HISTORY UH OF FRANCE\
                                    UH FOR ASSIMILATION TO BE ACHIEVED VERY QUICKLY/ (.) IT
                                    WAS THE CASE FOR ITALIANS: PORTUGUESE: SPANISH: POLES
                                    UH THEY GAVE/ IT'S TRUE/ A FRENCH FORENAME TO THEIR
                                    CHILD=

JOURNALIST   =A- A WAY OF INTEGRATING//

MARINE LE PEN   IT'S A MEANS OF ASSIMILATION:: THAT IS VERY VERY
                      EFFECTIVE/ VERY VERY SUCCESSFUL/ (.) AND IT'S NO LONGER
                      THE CASE TODAY/ UH ON THE PRETEXT OF PRESERVING: AND
                      ALMOST DISPLAYING/ (.) THE LINK WITH: THE- THE- THE
                      NATIONALITY OF ORIGIN OR THE CULTURE OF ORIGIN/ (.)
                      PEOPLE GIVE UH FRENCH CHILDREN FORENAMES WHICH UH SOUND
                      FOREIGN AND I THINK THAT/ (.) IT PROBABLY MAKES THEIR
                      LIVES MORE COMPLICATED: AND- AND-/ (.) AND- AND- IT-
                      IT SLOWS DOWN IN MY OPINION: THE NECESSARY
                      ASSIMILATION/ IT HOLDS IT UP\

The link between assimilation and forenames is very strong in the extract in (2), and it underscores the idea that selecting a French forename demonstrates the immigrant's willingness to embrace the norms and values of the host society. The choice itself is also viewed as a clue that reflects immigrants' attachment (or lack thereof) to their host society[20].

From an argumentative viewpoint, the case put forward by MLP in favor of gallicizing the forenames that may be given to children is based mainly on historical grounds: namely, that the gallicization of forenames facilitated assimilation for former influxes of migrants and thereby accelerated their integration into wider society. According to MLP, European minorities who settled in France were easily assimilated by virtue of giving their children French forenames. The statement that *the assimilation of immigrants from Europe*

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[20] Regarding this topic, but in the case of the United States, see Nagel 2002.

passed off well is presented as indisputable, as factually true. But work by historians reveals a less idealistic picture of the integration process experienced by European immigrants to France[21].

Glorification of the past and nostalgia for an idealized former period are recurrent features characterizing far-right discourse. Melancholic description forms part of a larger vision of a golden past (see, for example, Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022, online). In MLP's brief assumption, the notion of a once-great past is implicitly but strongly conveyed. The use of hyperbole and parallelism, in the phrase "très très efficace/très très performant" contributes to the construction of idealized images of the social and political order that has since passed.

We might finally note that, unlike former waves of immigrants who are referred to by name, current migrants are not named. MLP speaks vaguely of French children of foreign origin (who are obviously the products of immigration) and whose identities have yet to be defined/constructed by the listener.

What is clearly established in the extract is society's division into sub-categories: the French (who are not mentioned, but who serve as the 'norm' in relation to which others are referenced), together with immigrants who are assimilated and others who are non-assimilated. Racialized categorizations are used as resources to serve a specific aim. The explicit aim is to help new immigrants become part of the host society as quickly as possible.

As noted by van Dijk (2002: 209), any ideologically based discourse should have a common ground that is accepted throughout the cultural community, across different groups, and presupposed by various ideologies. This common ground is non-controversial, commonsensical, and therefore non-ideological. In our case, the common ground is equal opportunities, meaning that all citizens should have the same opportunities, even though the idea of obligation may infringe upon another fundamental right: *freedom*. Rather than employing overt

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[21] By way of example, see the special issue *Les Italiens en France de 1914 à 1940*, by Milza (1986).

racialization, the exclusion is framed as a defense of republican values. This rhetorical strategy exemplifies what can be termed FN/RN "strategic ambiguity" – a rhetoric that straddles the boundary between socially acceptable political speech and overt extremism. Such discourse is strategically ambiguous, allowing speakers to maintain plausible deniability while still advancing exclusionary, xenophobic, or racist ideologies. The concept of "strategic ambiguity" (used for example by Hoffjann, 2022; Wodak, 2024) is particularly relevant to far-right politics, where actors may avoid explicitly violating legal norms (e.g., anti-hate speech laws) while subtly reinforcing racialized hierarchies or stigmatizing marginalized groups.

The extract implicitly conveys the idea that *We* consistently extend a helping hand to others, leaving our doors open and aiding their assimilation. However, despite *our* efforts, *they* persist in rejecting inclusion and opt to remain on the sidelines. *They* persist in preserving and prominently displaying their link to their original culture. They prioritize their former identity over assimilating into ours, and consequently, they do not fully accept us.

These discursive mechanisms form part of a broader strategy of "positive self-presentation" and "negative other-presentation", whereby positive terms consistently refer to 'Us' and negative terms to 'Them' (van Dijk, 2009). This perception of *Us* and *Them* is well-rooted in an ancient ideology that resurfaces cyclically throughout history, much like a phoenix from the ashes: racism.

5.   Veiled Exclusion: Cultural Sacrifice and Ethnic Boundary-Making in Marine Le Pen's Assimilationist Rhetoric

In extract (2), the ideological foundations of the FN remain discernible, despite being strategically relegated to the realm of implication rather than being explicitly stated. The conceptual framework of assimilation and its associated rhetoric fundamentally relies upon the stigmatization of specific demographic groups. Clifton (2013) provides a comprehensive analysis of MLP's discourse regarding forenames (Extract 2), examining its inherent racialization. As Clifton observes,

Thus overt racism based on pseudo-biological notions of racial superiority is replaced by a form of covert racism based on the notion of cultural incompatibility which feeds on the fear of 'other' antagonistic cultures. (Clifton, 2013: 405)

During an interview with the Guardian, which was broadcast around the same time as the speech from which extract (2) is taken (June 2012), MLP elaborates on her views regarding assimilation, reaffirming, once again, the racialized representation of immigrant groups:

(3)   MARINE LE PEN

l'intégration/ (.) c'est l'id- c'est/ c'est la grande-bretagne/ (.) c'est le système anglo-saxon/c'est l'idée que/ (.) chacun arrive/ et conserve l'intégralité de ce qui fait sa spécificité/ (.) et que tout ça doit cohabiter euh comme une sorte de mille-feuilles/(.) l'assimilation// c'est un concept très français/ (.) qui consiste à dire que celui qui arrive/ doit// abandonner une partie/c'est vrai/de ce qu'il est pour se fondre dans la communauté euh nationale/(.) ça passe par le fait de donner un prénom français quand on/par exemple quand on décide de s'insérer euh en France/(.) de euh d'abandonner une partie encore une fois/ de sa culture qui doit rester dans le domaine- dans la sphère privée/mais ne pas/ (.) sortir dans la sphère publique/(.) c'est vrai que c'est une violence l'assimilation/c'est une sorte de violence hein/mais (.) c'est un sacrifice/ (.) si vous voulez (.) qui/ (.) parce qu'il est un sacrifice euh euh est une sorte de gage de la volonté justement d'appartenir totalement/ (.) à (.) la communauté dans laquelle on veut se fondre et de participer à son avenir (04min07s. 05min08s)[22]

   English translation:

integration/ (.) it's the id- it's/ it's great britain/ (.) it's the anglo-saxon system/ it's the idea that/ (.) everyone arrives/ and keeps everything that makes them special/ (.) and that all this has to coexist uh like a sort of mille-feuilles/(.) assimilation// is a very french concept/ (.) which consists of saying that whoever arrives/ must// give up part// of what they are in order to meld into the uh national community/(.) it involves giving a french forename when one//for example, when one decides to resettle uh in france/(.) to uh again give up a part/ of one's culture which must remain in the domain- in the private sphere/ but not/ (.) go out into the public sphere/(.) it's true that assimilation is a kind of violence/ you know (.) it's a sacrifice/ (.) if you like (.) which/ (.) because it's a sacrifice uh uh is actually a kind of proof of the willingness to belong totally/ (.) to (.) the community into which one wants to merge and to participate in its future

In this extract, integration is likened to a mille-feuilles, a French dessert consisting of layers of puff pastry (fr. *pâte feuilletée*) filled with confectioner's

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[22] "Marine Le Pen: 'Integration is the Anglo-Saxon system adopted in Great Britain'", The Guardian, 20/06/2012, 7min29s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hriotjnwPI

custard (fr. *crème pâtissière*). Beyond its sarcastic tone, this comparison is evocative: much like the mille-feuilles, integration is portrayed as comprising distinct layers, visibly separated and with significant barriers created between them. At the apex sits the creamy layer of whipped cream, symbolizing the upper class with its elevated social status and privileges. The discourse implicitly evaluates integration policies and suggests a societal categorization into three groups: the privileged upper class (represented by the confectioner's custard), an in-group positioned in the middle, and an out-group relegated to the lower layer. While not explicitly stating the perpetuation of power by the upper class, the discourse reveals a hierarchical social order that smacks of caricature: a society stacked in layers, potentially crushing those beneath. This image implies that integration policy creates a linear arrangement of groups, unfairly positioning racialized groups at a disadvantage, at the bottom.

This analysis of MLP's mille-feuilles metaphor exemplifies the strategic ambiguity central to contemporary far-right discourse on integration. MLP deploys a seemingly innocent and familiar cultural reference – a French pastry – to criticize what she describes as a hierarchical social order that positions immigrant communities as inherently inferior. However, this rhetorical strategy is particularly significant because it demonstrates how forename debates function within a broader discursive framework that legitimizes and naturalizes exclusion through the condemnation of alternative forms of exclusion. By rejecting the "Anglo-Saxon" model of integration as discriminatory, MLP establishes her own assimilationist vision as egalitarian and Republican. The metaphor reveals that debates over naming practices are never merely about names themselves but serve as vehicles for articulating racialized visions of national belonging that maintain the appearance of Republican universalism while promoting exclusionary politics.

This speech offers another compelling analogy: assimilation as an initiatory rite similar to joining a cult, where newcomers must conform to French identity. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1991) describes how cult initiates shed their old

identity to adopt a new one. The process typically begins with a symbolic "death" of the former self, followed by rebirth into a new identity. Bloch's research suggests that this spiritual transformation can be so profound that it constitutes a psychological death, stripping initiates of their former passivity while instilling a newfound sense of agency and superiority.

This transformative process echoes in extract (3), where immigrant francization requires shedding one's former self to embrace a new identity – a symbolic death leading to resurrection in a new form through changes in appearance, language, and cultural affiliations. These new traits are deemed to belong to *Us*, representing a higher echelon, and those seeking acceptance must prove their loyalty through suffering. The concept of sacrifice, a recurring theme in cult belonging (Bloch, 1991: Chap. 3), also appears in MLP's discourse.

By framing assimilation as a necessary "sacrifice" and "violence", MLP simultaneously acknowledges the harsh reality of cultural erasure while presenting it as a noble, transformative process. This rhetorical maneuver is particularly significant for understanding how the demand for French names is not merely administrative but represents a ritualistic shedding of immigrant identity.

The cult analogy exposes how MLP's discourse operates on multiple levels: while ostensibly offering immigrants a pathway to belonging, it actually establishes impossible conditions for acceptance that demand complete cultural self-erasure.

Furthermore, the speech emphasizes choosing French forenames for newborns as evidence of immigrants' fitness to join the host society. While it is true that a forename is not merely a portal to identity but a fundamental aspect of it, MLP's instrumentalization of this reality serves exclusionary purposes. As Dickinson (1998: 67) notes, the forename serves as "a cultural marker", and Sue and Telles (2007: 1384) reinforce this by stating that the forename "can be a powerful sociological indicator of sociocultural assimilation". However, MLP's discourse transforms this sociological observation into a political weapon, using

the symbolic power of names to establish conditions for belonging that ultimately reinforce rather than challenge existing hierarchies.

MLP's nationalist discourse constructs symbolic and institutional boundaries to define membership in the French national community, echoing Wimmer's (2013) theory of ethnic boundary-making. Her vision frames national identity as coercively homogenizing: nation-building is portrayed as a process that forcibly incorporates ethnic groups by erasing cultural differences ostensibly to dismantle ethnic stratification. However, this assimilationist project does not eliminate hierarchy; instead, it replaces ethnic divisions with hierarchies of cultural legitimacy, where 'Frenchness' is contingent on conformity to majoritarian norms (e.g., adopting 'French' forenames, secular practices).

The controversy surrounding MLP's remarks about forenames stems from their foundation in an ideology of ethnic and cultural supremacy. The superiority of the 'Gaulois' – the native French people – is presented as incontestable and rendered nearly explicit. This discourse reveals a clear desire to control others' choices and lifestyles by imposing specific behavioral norms alongside the vision endorsed by the majority or the elite.

This ideological framework established by MLP was later adopted, with minor modifications, by Jordan Bardella (JB), who was then the spokesperson and a member of the RN's national office. When commenting on the polemical exchange between Hapsatou Sy and ÉZ, JB reiterates and clarifies several ideas advanced in extract (2).

The following section analyzes an extract from Jordan Bardella's discourse that addresses the proposed restoration of legislation mandating the gallicization of forenames.

6.   Discursive Continuity and Generational Alienation: Jordan Bardella's Golden Age Nostalgia and the Recasting of Ethnonationalist Belonging

(4)   JORDAN BARDELLA

je pense que/(.) euh quand on arrive dans un pays/ (..) donner à ses enfants un nom qui est- qui soit sur le calendrier/ (.) je pense que c'est une preuve/ (.) d'attachement au pays/ (.) je crois que c'est une preuve d'assimilation/ […]

aujourd'hui l'assimilation n'est plus possible parce qu'on a des tensions communautaristes dans les quartiers/ (.) et (.) on enseigne depuis des années/ par l'école notamment/ la repentance de manière permanente/ la haine de soi\ et je pense que/ (..) oui quand on est issu de l'immigration/ ben donner un prénom français souvent/ (.) je crois que / (..) c'est pas une obligation/ (..) mais je crois que c'est un marqueur d'attache/ […]

le modèle français/ (.) même s'il n'est plus à l'œuvre aujourd'hui/ (.) est basé sur l'assimilation\ et l'assimilation ça veut dire quoi// ca veut dire que/ on apporte à un pays non pas/ (.) quand on est issu de l'immigration/ (.) non pas une différence/ (.) mais une nuance/ (.) […] et ça veut dire que l'on accepte de mettre de côté une part importante de sa culture d'origine/ (.) ce que beaucoup de familles/ (.) dans CERTains quartiers n'ont pas fait/ (.) ont refusé de faire/ (.) et on voit aujourd'hui est arrivée à l'âge adulte une génération dans ces quartiers qui ne se sent pas français/ (..) et qui / (.) régulièrement manifeste des signes euh de- de- des signes de désamour à l'égard du pays qui les a accueillis/ qui leur a transmis le savoir/ le logement/ et j'en passe\[23]

English translation

I think that/(.) uh when you arrive in a country/ (..) giving your children a name that is on the calendar/ (.) I think it's a proof/ (.) of commitment to the country/ (.) I think it's proof of assimilation/ […]

assimilation is no longer possible nowadays because there are community tensions in the suburbs/ (.) and (.) for years we have been teaching/ particularly in schools/ permanent repentance/ self-hate\ and I think that/ (..) yes when you have an immigrant background/ well, giving a french forename often/ (.) I think that / (..) it's not an obligation/ (..) but I think it's a sign of connection/ […]

the french model/ (.) even if it no longer operates today/ (.) is based on assimilation\ and what does assimilation mean// it means that/ you bring to a country not/ (.) when you have an immigrant background/ (.) not a difference/ (.) but a nuance/ (.) […] and that means you agree to set aside a large part of your original culture/ (.) which is what many families (.) in CERTain localities have not done/ (.) have refused to do/ (.) and today you see a generation in these communities who have reached adulthood but do not feel french (..) and who / (.) regularly show signs uh of- of- signs of bitterness (hatred) towards the country that has welcomed them/ which has given them education/ housing/ and so on\

Extract (4) once again reveals a deep skepticism toward the existing social and political system. The discourse establishes an unfavorable comparison

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[23] « Punchline (2e partie) du 17/09/2018 », CNews, 17/09/2018, 39min39s. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZA_IhQTkY8&t=1884s

between the current dysfunction and the presumed efficiency of the previous order, by employing the same golden age rhetoric mechanism, which juxtaposes an idealized past against a decaying present. As Elgenius and Rydgren (2022) note, such juxtaposition displays political actors' motivation to draw on Christian narratives of fall and redemption.

The extract's main argument can be summarized as follows: the state's integration policy has visibly failed in certain localities because children "with an immigrant background" neither belong to, feel part of, nor desire to join the wider society. According to the text, this alienation stems from immigrant families maintaining their original cultural ties, with non-French forenames for second-generation children serving as evidence. Moreover, these children reportedly display not just discontent, but "bitterness" (a weighty term in this context) toward what is described as "the country which welcomed them" – not "their country".

This phrasing reveals a crucial subtext: second-generation immigrants are not considered fully French. The verb "welcomed" implies that they remain outsiders, as one would hardly tell a French native that France "welcomed them" and provided education and housing. This underlying notion, while not explicitly stated, aligns with De Rudder's (1998: 5) observation that the term "second generation" deliberately signifies "not French" or "not really French"[24].

Extract (4) presents these issues while attributing collective responsibility ("for years *we* have been teaching..."). The text implies that lenient policies failed to instill love for France and national pride in children from immigrant backgrounds, and taught instead "repentance and hatred of France". The text distributes responsibility between the state (which prioritized integration over assimilation) and first-generation immigrants. The use of the French pronoun "on" (which can mean *we*, *one*, or *they*) reinforces this shared culpability: the state could have

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[24] « Cette affaire de 'génération', apparemment neutre et peut-être surtout quand elle paraît neutre, euphémise l'ethnicisation, car 'seconde génération' signifie expressément et nécessairement 'pas Français', 'pas vraiment Français' … », (De Rudder 1998 : 5).

imposed assimilation through stronger legislation but did not, while immigrants could have chosen assimilation but did not.

However, the extract overestimates the intentionality and freedom of first-generation immigrants. Choosing culturally familiar forenames does not necessarily indicate a deliberate rejection of French identity. As Dickinson (1998: 78) observes, many families perpetuate the memory of forebears through name choices, a practice that transcends social boundaries. Name selection is rarely entirely free, it is influenced by tradition, cultural attachments, religious affiliations, family ties, and relationship dynamics.

Additionally, many first-generation immigrants believed their stay would be temporary and "dreamed of a return" (de Rudder, 1998: 5), and thus selected names that connected their children to their culture of origin.

Overall, the extract presents a pessimistic view of its social context, which implicitly fosters fear toward a perceived out-group blamed for societal problems. In JB's discourse, second-generation immigrants remain in-group outsiders, treated similarly to foreigners. Being born, raised, and educated in France apparently does not qualify the children of former migrants as full members of the national community – additional conditions are deemed necessary. Their perceived inability to meet these unstated cultural and attitudinal conditions reinforces the implicit dichotomy between birthright citizenship (French: *le droit du sol*) and citizenship by bloodline (French: *le droit du sang*).

In extracts (2), (3) and (4), the speakers discuss foreigners and children descended from immigrants. The absence of specific naming of the targeted groups may be seen as a strategy to avoid the threatening force of designating and identifying social groups, thus maintaining political correctness. But who are these foreigners and who are their children?

7.   From Veiled Assimilation to Blatant Othering: Forenames as Catalysts for Islamophobic Conspiracy in Éric Zemmour's Discourse

Although the identity of the minority is latent in extracts (2), (3) and (4), it is explicitly established in the discourse of ÉZ, who declares that

(5)   ÉRIC ZEMMOUR

> donner un prénom qui n'est pas un prénom français à ses enfants/ c'est ne pas se détacher de l'islam/ c'est vouloir continuer l'identité islamique en france/ et c'est vouloir/ transformer la france\\[25]

English translation

> giving a forename that is not french to one's children/is not breaking away from islam/it is wanting to continue islamic identity in france/and it is wanting to/transform france\\

The transition from general to specific is readily apparent in extract (5). The unconjugated verb '*giving*' in the phrase "*giving a non-French forename to one's children*" could potentially apply to any foreign resident in France or even any French person. Similarly, the expression "*a forename that is not French*" might indicate any non-French forename, yet the remainder of the utterance narrows the potential subjects: we understand that only Muslims in France (whether of French or foreign nationality) are implicated by this statement. Indeed, "*not breaking away from Islam*" [*ne pas se détacher de l'islam*] presupposes an existing attachment to Islam.

The assertion adopts the form of a general truth: the choice of infinitive form, the parallelism between propositions, the double negation, and the recurring phrase "*it is wanting to*" all create the appearance of an incontestable maxim. This particularity singles out the Arab-Muslim minority as the focal community when discussing foreign names and the lack of integration. The corpus reveals that pejorative judgments and examples of forenames deemed incompatible with French identity belong predominantly to a single group – the North African

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[25] « Eric Zemmour dérape : 'Donner un prénom pas français à son enfant, c'est se détacher de la France' », Closer, 1min19s. https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4uyoi0

minority (generally conflated with the Arab-Muslim minority). Whether advocating for or against assimilation policies, the forenames cited as examples are consistently Arabic: Malek, Yasmina, Zohra, and especially Mohamed[26].

The discussion surrounding forenames in the context of French identity serves as a critical lens through which far-right discourse articulates its views on immigration and integration. The emphasis on naming practices not only reflects societal attitudes towards cultural assimilation but also underscores a deeper ideological battle over national identity. This battle is vividly illustrated in the rhetoric of figures like ÉZ, whose narratives shift from advocating for the gallicization of forenames to framing immigration as a threat to the very fabric of French society. In this context, ÉZ's discourse marks a significant departure from implicit biases toward a more explicit form of racism, where the call for gallicization intertwines with fears surrounding the Islamization of France, thereby resurrecting historical prejudices and reinforcing a narrative of cultural supremacy.

8. From Historical Colonization to Inverted Victimhood: Éric Zemmour's Rhetorical Weaponization of Forenames and the Ideological Recasting of Muslim Identity

According to ÉZ, the act of giving a forename is part of a series of other acts aiming to colonize France:

(6) ÉRIC ZEMMOUR

> aujourd'hui/(..) on a un destin de diaspora/(..) ils AURont la nationalité française/ ils AURont la nationalité américaine/ mais ils seront PAS français/ sois français/ mais il ne le devient jamais\ ça/ c'est pas de l'immigration/ ça s'appelle de la colonisation/(.) parce que/ qu'est-ce que c'est de la colonisation// quand les pieds noirs/ (..) je connais bien le sujet/ (.) vont en algérie// ils se disent pas/ (..) on va devenir arabo-musulmans// ils se disent/(.) on va être/ (.) rester français//(.) c'est des colonisateurs/ (..) quand les anglais vont en inde/ (.) ils se disent pas/ (..) on va devenir indiens/ (.) non// (.) ils se disent/ on va rester| anglais// ça s'appelle une colonisation/(.) quand des gens viennent en france/ (.) et disent/ (..) moi je veux la nationalité française/ mais// (.) mon fils s'appellera mohamed ou: hapsatou ((rires et applaudissements public + une voix criant *corinne*) on vivra entre musulmans/ (.) euh mon fils quand il aura l'âge de se marier/ (.) il ira chercher une fille au bled/ (.) en algérie/

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[26] The only counter-example is *Giulia*, the forename chosen by Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife for their daughter. This forename was generally mentioned specifically as a defense against being attacked for targeting a single minority (and one only).

> euh/ et euh/ il faut pas parler euh aux gaulois et aux roumis/ (.) ET/ on vit/ (.) euh entre la mosquée/ euh la boutique halal et/ compagnie/ ça ça s'appelle une colonisation//(.) ça s'appelle pas une immigration\ une immigration// ça veut dire que je viens/(.) je parle mal français/ euh j'interdis chez moi/ à la maison/ (.) de parler la langue du pays/ c'est ce qu'ont fait les italiens/ c'est ce qu'ont fait- voilà\ je dis à mes français/ à mes enfants t'a bien intérêt à travailler bien à l'école/ (.) sinon tu prends deux claques// ça/ ça s'appelle une immigration//[27]

English translation

> today/(…) we have a destiny of diaspora/(..) they WILL have french nationality/they WILL HAVE american nationality/ but they will NOT be french/ be french/ but never they will be\that/ that's not immigration/ that's called colonization/(.) because/ what is colonization// when the pieds-noirs/[28] (…) I know the subject well/ (.) went to algeria// they didn't say to themselves/ (..) we're going to become arab-muslims// no/ they said/(.) we're going to be/ (.) to remain french//(.) they were colonizers/ (..) when the english went to india/ (.) they didn't say to themselves/ (..) we're going to become indians/ (.) no// (.) they said/ we're going to remain| english// it's called colonization/(.) when people come to france/ (.) and say/ (..) *I* want french nationality/ but// (.) my son will be called mohamed or: hapsatou ((laughs and applause from the public + a voice shouting *corinne*) we'll live among other muslims/ (.) uh my son when he is of marriageable age/ (.) will go and look for a girl in the village/ (.) in algeria/ uh/ and uh/ mustn't speak/ uh to the gauls and roumis (non-Muslims)/ (.) AND/ we live/ (.) uh between the mosque and the halal shop and/etc/that that is called colonization//(.) that's not called immigration\ immigration// means that I come/(.) I speak french badly/ uh I forbid those living in my house/ at home/ (.) to speak their native language/ that's what the italians did/ that's what – there you are\ I say to my french people/ to my children it's in your interest to work well at school/ (.) otherwise you'll get two slaps// that/ that's called an immigration//

What is easily noticeable in this discourse is the simplification of a complex social reality, as shown especially by the almost ridiculous description of an immigrant's daily life spent between the mosque and the halal shop, alongside the stereotyped image of a Muslim whose every act revolves around the primitive instincts of eating, praying, and reproducing.

The crystallization of a bipolar view is also evident: the same referent is given two different signifiers. For the speaker, a 'native' French person is a *Gaul*; and for an immigrant, he is a *Roumi, Algeria* is the *bled* (the village, the back of beyond) and the same social phenomenon is called *immigration* by some and *colonization* by others… It is also possible that ÉZ is creating

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[27] « Éric Zemmour se sert d'Hapsatou Sy pour faire un parallèle entre immigration et colonisation », LeHuffPost, 06/02/2019, 2min47s.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NO7Bqg7FC4
[28] The Pieds-noirs (literally 'black feet') are a group of people of French and other European descent who were born in Algeria during the period of French colonial rule from 1830 to 1962.

a form of parallelism between standard French (spoken by most of society) and the minority's slang to highlight the gap already created between two parallel societies.

The view that the speaker defends is that North-African immigration constitutes colonization. The repeated expression "that's called" introduces the act of renaming. The main argument in ÉZ's reasoning relies on historical examples. Muslims in France allegedly live in their own sphere, creating a private world on the margins but parallel to mainstream society, just as the Pieds noirs in Algeria or the English in India did historically. Koren defines the historical example as "a concrete, well-known event, from which is derived a general rule enabling the particularities of a current event to be analyzed and interpreted"[29] (2016: §1). ÉZ infers the existence of two groups within the same geographical space, which are mutually exclusive. These groups enable additional category pairings: insider/outsider, cultivated/savage, loyal/disloyal, and so on.

In fact, this is not a valid analogy. From a lexicological perspective, the French term *colonisation* inherently includes the dual concepts of occupation and exploitation of an underdeveloped and underpopulated country by nationals of a metropole (*Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé*, entry "Colonisation")[30]. Immigration involves individuals settling in a host country for various reasons, with fundamentally different power relations and objectives.

The concentration of North-African families in particular areas is a social phenomenon that is not limited to any specific minority but stems from human and social behavior: people tend to form groups, and group membership requires certain criteria, the most decisive being ethnic,

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[29] L'exemple historique est « un événement concret et notoire dont on induit une règle générale permettant d'analyser et d'interpréter les tenants et aboutissants d'un événement actuel » (Koren, 2016 : §1).

[30] « Occupation, exploitation, mise en tutelle d'un territoire sous-développé et sous-peuplé par les ressortissants d'une métropole », http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=3526216245

cultural, and especially economic factors. In large cities, these patterns do not lead to *colonization* but rather to *ghettoization* or *segregation*, meaning both physical separation and social distancing of ethnic groups and social classes.

ÉZ's analogy acquires meaning if we consider the implications of his discourse on North-African immigration in France rather than the lexicographical definitions of *colonization* or *immigration*. If this immigration constitutes colonization, it is, according to ÉZ, because:

The minority's numerical significance makes it visible. The host society supposedly cannot absorb an entire nation, resulting in a society within society. ÉZ repeatedly asserts, "we take in individuals/we don't take in nations"[31].

In certain neighborhoods, Muslim law allegedly prevails, just as colonizers historically imposed laws alien to colonized peoples' customs and traditions.

These Muslims purportedly share a common ultimate objective: just as colonization aimed "to evangelize […] the world and exploit its riches, the former goal justifying the latter" (Pervillé, 1975: 329), Arab-Muslim immigration seeks to Islamize France and exploit its wealth.

The giving of a Muslim forename is therefore, in ÉZ's view, the sign of a more dangerous social phenomenon. Halal meat, the use of the mother tongue at home, intercommunal marriage, and so on, are all signs that the whole of France (and not just the suburbs) is sliding towards communitarianism and Islamization.

While neighborhood sectarianism can indeed be disconcerting, presenting it as colonization – with its negative axiological potential (linked to force, oppression, and exploitation) – further reinforces the feeling of danger and

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[31] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLG2GNpylvo&t=4s

fear for the future: a colonizer is one who possesses strength and power – a power that is often abused.

Choosing to frame immigration as colonization plays a crucial role in conspiracy theory: the notion that foreigners are taking over national territory and imposing their laws aligns with the concept of the slippery slope (idealizing the past while depicting the present as decadent) and with demonization of the Other.

In view of the foregoing analysis, it appears that key notions present in the three discourses, namely *French*, *first and second generation of immigrants*, and *colonization*, have undergone significant semantic shifts. The semantic instability of these lexemes stems not only from their inherent ambiguity (what constitutes a 'true' French person, for example?), but also and especially from meaning reconfigurations that result from the influence of values, beliefs, and shared knowledge in the construction and development of meaning. The analysis of the preceding extract (6) leads to the conclusion that:

The meaning of a lexeme is constructed within different discursive strata and therefore engages different levels and categories of linguistics, notably lexical semantics and syntax;

The meaning of a lexeme is constructed through (inter-)subjective negotiation carried out by the speaker in reference to their ideological and cultural background.

These discourses play a significant role in the construction and circulation of what van Dijk called "ethnic beliefs", i.e., beliefs about ethnic groups (2000: 87). They also lead to the (re)construction of ethnic identities. Wodak's comments on identity and identity construction (2012: 216) are particularly relevant here:

• Identities are always re/created in specific contexts. They are "co-constructed" in interactive relationships. They are usually fragmented, dynamic and changeable; everyone has multiple identities.

• Identity construction always implies inclusionary and exclusionary processes, i.e., the definition of ONESELF and OTHERS.

• Identities that are individual and collective, national and transnational are also re/produced and manifested symbolically.

By appropriating and distorting the concept of "colonization" to describe North African immigration, ÉZ inverts power relations to position the French majority as victims and Muslim immigrants as threatening invaders. The analysis of his discourse further demonstrates how cultural practices, including naming conventions, are instrumentalized as evidence of presumed resistance to integration. This process of semiotic reframing transforms mundane cultural expressions into politically charged signifiers within a broader narrative of cultural incompatibility.

Conclusion

The discourse on assimilation through forenames, articulated by Marine Le Pen (MLP) and Jordan Bardella (JB), hinges on an interplay between the *natural* (the act of giving birth to a child) and the *social* (assigning identity through naming). Beyond these dimensions lies a cultural imperative: bestowing a forename transcends mere selection; it projects children into a cultural trajectory and embeds them within a symbolic historical continuum.

Central to this discourse is the assertion that France's social fabric must remain homogeneous, where perceived "difference" – particularly when dominant – threatens to destabilize the nation's foundational identity. Here, meaning is often obscured, relegated to the realm of the implicit. Whether through extra-discursive context or linguistic markers (lexical choices, syntactic structures, or textual framing), the unsaid carries authoritative weight, and thus reinforces exclusionary norms without overt declaration. This strategic ambiguity allows far-right actors to evade direct confrontation while perpetuating racialized hierarchies.

Such rhetoric reaches its apex in Éric Zemmour's (ÉZ) discourse, which intensifies the assimilationist logic by reframing immigration as colonization. Through inverted historical analogies, ÉZ recontextualizes cultural markers – including forenames – as evidence of "territorial conquest" rather than heritage. By doing so, he constructs a narrative of existential threat, and positions French-Maghrebi communities as invaders rather than citizens, thereby naturalizing their exclusion.

Embedded within these calls for gallicization is a binary appeal: to assimilate into an idealized "Us" (a homogenous national community) or remain relegated to the "Other" (a group marked by difference). This framing is inherently political: the act of raising the forename question reflects and reinforces the speaker's vision of France's socio-ethnic landscape, where belonging is contingent on cultural erasure.

Such exclusionary logic perpetuates generational alienation. Second-generation immigrants, though born and socialized in France, are rendered perpetual outsiders, with their purported "bitterness" being invoked to legitimize their marginalization. Through this lens, naming practices become tools of cultural gatekeeping, which erode *droit du sol* (birthright citizenship) and institutionalize discrimination in spheres like education and employment. Crucially, this rhetoric appropriates France's Republican tradition, by distorting *laïcité* and assimilationist ideals to veil structural racism.

By anchoring these discourses within a historical continuum – from colonial-era forced renaming to contemporary anxieties over "Islamization" – the far-right weaponizes forenames to demarcate belonging in racialized terms. Ultimately, naming practices remain potent instruments for enforcing exclusionary nationhood, revealing the persisting tension between Republican universalism and the politics of ethnonationalist purity.

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