

“The new extreme right”

Uncivility, irony, and displacement in the French re-information sphere

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Abstract

Contemporary France is a prolific arena for post-fascist actors, parties, and movements. Self-proclaimed alternative news outlets and publishing houses serve as forums for information and mobilisation, through various strategies, to resist an alleged onslaught by the enemies of the nation and its people: multiculturalism, feminism, political correctness, political corruption, and civilisational decay. In this article, I explore uncivility as a discursive logic within the French post-fascist media-ecology, focusing on the conspicuous use of irony and discursive displacement. More specifically, I discuss how sardonic irony as an uncivil discursive strategy is employed to navigate the legal boundaries of free speech and how discursive displacement, coupled with irony, is used as an affective identificatory technique in post-fascist discourse.

Keywords: discourse, France, post-fascism, racism, uncivility

Introduction

On the French-language web-based alternative news forum *Démocratie Participative*, one article from 2019 bears the headline: “The landing of African migrants in Italy is intensifying [translated]” (Captain Harlock, 2019). While this headline has nothing in particular about how post-fascist self-proclaimed alternative news forums in Europe and the US frame migration, the accompanying bitmap image (graphics interchange format, or GIF) is peculiar. The GIF – a short excerpt from the big-screen adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* – depicts the conspicuously evil necromancer Sauron’s invading army of orcs: bloodthirsty, hateful, and fear-driven semi-humans. The army, originating from Mordor, the Land of Shadows, is attacking the human-inhabited Middle-earth. While the geopolitics, orientalist fantasies, and racism of Tolkien’s writings and Peter Jackson’s film adaptation have been analysed elsewhere (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Chism, 2006; Fimi, 2008), what is of interest here is the allusion to migration from Africa to Europe as an invasion of Middle-earth by evil and foul semi-humans from Mordor. This hyperbolically sardonic and racist articulation of migration as an

Orcish invasion raises the question of whether it should be read literally or ironically – or some other way.

In the multiplatform and transnational post-fascist media ecology that has emerged during the last decades (Albrecht et al., 2019; Ebner, 2019), ironic and sardonic modes of communication merge, mix, and appropriate everything from popular culture to historical events to form this ecology's emblematic backbone (Greene, 2019; Nagle, 2017). In France, this ecology is made up of self-proclaimed alternative news sites like *Démocratie Participative*, *Égalité et Réconciliation*, *Fdesouche*, *Riposte Laïque*, and *Novopress*; discussion forums like JeuxVideo; social media coupled with publishing houses like *Éditions Tatamis*, *Éditions idées*, and *Éditions Ring*; magazines like *Éléments*, *Réfléchir & Agir*, *Terre & Peuple*, and *l'Incorrect*; and think tanks like Polemia and Sparta. These sites, forums, and publishers serve as platforms for information and mobilisation, through various strategies, to resist an alleged onslaught by enemies (e.g., multiculturalism, feminism, political correctness, political corruption, and civilisational decay) of an imagined universally white French nation and its people (Nilsson, 2019; Zúquete, 2019).

In this article, I provide a close reading of uncivility in the contemporary French post-fascist media ecology.¹ My methodological approach is informed by the Spinozian principle of understanding and draws on anti-foundationalist perspectives on post-fascism and populism (Panizza, 2005).² Drawing on discourse theory (Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000; Torfing, 2005), I more specifically set out to discuss, to quote Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner (2020: 8), “the underlying tonal, behavioral, and aesthetic characteristics” of sardonic irony – as in the case with the Orcish invasion – to assess its political function as an uncivil discursive practice. The analysis is explorative and argumentative and discusses in detail a handful of examples from voices of the French post-fascist media ecology and party politics; these examples are illustrative of findings in my earlier research on post-fascist movements and discourse in contemporary France (Nilsson, 2015; 2019). While the generalisability of this analysis should of course be treated with caution, it is my contention that they will encourage further exploration of uncivility from this perspective and lay the basis for more thorough qualitative and quantitative analyses.

In the following section, I contextualise the French post-fascist media ecology by discussing its emergence and relation to French post-fascist history. I then present my take on uncivility as a discursive technique in the French post-fascist media ecology and party politics and subsequently discuss the function of sardonic irony and discursive displacement as an uncivil discursive practice. I conclude with a brief discussion of uncivility, irony, displacement, and political identification.

Post-fascism and the re-information sphere

Post-fascism is a broad and ambiguous term. Here, post-fascism designates, as Enzo Traverso (2019: 14) puts it, “erratic, unstable, and often contradictory ideological content, in which antinomic political philosophies mix together”. While post-fascism is firmly rooted in its fascist predecessors of the twentieth century, it is located in the current era and is an ideological movement that has “not yet crystallised”. Post-fascist actors typically seek to distance themselves from the fascism of twentieth century Europe,

unlike neo-fascists who seek to identify with it (Traverso, 2019). This does not mean that post-fascism lacks fascist ideological tropes, rather they are eclectically mixed with populist, radical nationalist, reactionary, and social democratic tropes (Griffin, 2016). Moreover, these actors’ political identification in the public arena typically demonstrates disdain towards historical fascism by appropriating and displacing social liberal lingua (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015; Brubaker, 2017; Nilsson, 2019). However, the exoteric political identification made for the public eye might differ, and often does, from a more esoteric private identification where the fascist roots are explicitly embraced (May & Feldman, 2019). As such, post-fascism is an umbrella category for a discursive field where actors, movements, and parties commonly classified as far-right, extreme-right, and radical belong (Moffit, 2016), and where emphasis is put on both its historical roots and its heterogeneous, fluctuating, transnational, and multiplatform nature.

The promise of the Internet as a digital agora for civil deliberative democracy (Flichy, 2008) has long since been overshadowed by a logic of capitalist self-fulfilment, new opportunities for mass-surveillance, digital warfare, and the opportunity for anti-democratic and populist nationalist forces (ranging from politicians, citizen journalists, agitators, sardonic humourists, and intellectuals) in a trans-local arena to exchange and spread ideas and strategies to level and develop a Gramscian-modelled counter-culture (Back, 2002; Bartlett et al., 2011; Nagle, 2017; Sassen, 2002) largely free of journalistic gatekeepers and censorship (Atton, 2006; Caiani & Parenti, 2016; Daniels, 2018; Titley, 2019; Watts, 2018). While these developments were conspicuously showcased to a global audience during the 2016 presidential campaign in the US (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018), contemporary France has for decades been a prolific arena for post-fascist parties, movements, and alternative news media (Dézé, 2011; François & Cahuzac, 2013; Matuscak, 2007; Zúquete, 2019).

In France, the post-fascist party *Rassemblement National* (RN)³ launched its first website as early as 1994, which soon became a forum where party representatives could practise direct communication with its electorate. The Internet also allowed the grassroots to reach a wider audience than through printed communication. From the Minitel Bulletin Board System, blogs, podcasts, and vlogs, to the emergence of the Web 2.0, grassroots communication has become an integral part of how post-fascist discourse not only manages to echo throughout the political mainstream in France, but has turned into a viable force for social and political change (Bouron, 2017; Hobeika & Villeneuve, 2017), from centralised and controlled party propaganda machinery to a spread of grassroots communication. Web-based activism practised outside the realm of the established party channels is not only welcomed by the political leadership of RN, it is actively encouraged. During her speech of 1 May 2016, party leader Marine Le Pen declared the following:

The Internet is a phenomenal tool for convincing more and more of the French people. With social media, we can short-circuit the traditional media. But to achieve this, it necessary that every activist seizes social media to convince. I see it every day: all of you, on Facebook, on Twitter, on forums. You bring life to the debate [translated].

Besides encouraging active participation on social media by the party’s grassroots, Le Pen (2016) emphasised that humorous savviness was a great way to have an impact

on politics: “You’re intelligent, you’re funny, you’re convincing. You’re not the image that the mainstream media depict [...] I hope that thanks to the Internet you will be a democratic force to be reckoned with [translated]”. Le Pen’s statement is indicative of not only RN’s communication online, but how contemporary post-fascist actors in general make use of the Internet to convey their messages (Gal, 2019; Greene, 2019; Josey, 2010; Marwick & Lewis, 2015). In this, the emergence of post-fascist alternative news media is crucial. Alternative news media should here be understood as a mixture of independent media and citizen journalism. However, while in research literature these terms tend to be described from the viewpoint of alleged progressive and democratic social and political movements (e.g., Allan & Hintz, 2020; Bowman & Willis, 2003), in post-fascist independent media and citizen journalism, instead of working towards a liberal democratic horizon, they have their eyes fixed on an authoritarian – and, at best, a strong majoritarian and white – democratic order (e.g., Figenshou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Holton et al., 2013). They tend to represent themselves as the portrayers of the true and unfiltered order of things – as the voice of the people against alleged politically correct or lying mainstream media (Engesser et al., 2017).

During the last decade in France, a heterogeneous web of hundreds of self-proclaimed alternative news sites has emerged, ranging from anthropoemic nationalists dressed in republican and universal lingua and identitarian ethno-nationalists to white supremacists and race revolutionaries (Gimenez & Voirol, 2017). Some of the most prevalent sites are *Égalité et Réconciliation*, *Fdesouche*, *Novopress*, and *Riposte Laïque* (Froio, 2017). In public debate, this web is often referred to as the *faschosphère* [the fascist sphere], an epithet that gained widespread traction in France after the publication of a journalistic book bearing the same name (Albertini & Doucet, 2016). However, voices within this alleged sphere have been quick in not only rebutting this type of classification, they have appropriated and displaced it, with a satirical twist; in their logic, they are the *ré-infosphère* [the re-information sphere] and if anyone is fascist, it is the mainstream media for not giving them the place they deserve in the media spotlight.

This self-proclaimed re-information sphere has not emerged in a vacuum. It should be understood in relation to the French *Nouvelle Droite* [New Right] strategies to disassociate themselves from its fascist roots by developing a political lingua that resonated more broadly. They aim, through meta-political strategies, to change cultural frames and the general mindset of the French and European population, and to make their ideological frames the new normal, rather than explicitly seeking political change through party politics (François & Cahuzac, 2013; Griffin, 2000).

The intertextual and interdiscursive overlapping between these French self-proclaimed alternative news sites and European (Ekman, 2014; Nilsson, 2020; Ricknell, 2019) and American (Greene, 2019; Harsin, 2017; Holt & Haller, 2018; Krämer, 2017) counterparts is striking. For example, the white-supremacist American *Daily Stormer* – which is structured in the same way as the aforementioned *Démocratie Participative* – explain in their contributor guidelines, “We want to take over the culture, to consume it” (Daily Stormer, 2018: 13). While these European and American sites share a common language in terms of memes, hashtags, and appropriations of popular culture, the so-called French re-information sphere also draws, explicitly and implicitly, on a long tradition of French political satire and nationalist press and literature reminiscent of early twentieth-century antisemitic intellectual and propagandist publications (Sanos, 2013).

Segments of the sphere echo throughout French public debate, particularly voiced by the neo-reactionary media pundits like Michel Onfrey and Éric Zemmour (Durand & Sindaco, 2015).

Uncivility: A subversive practice

Uncivility has come to be used as a descriptive category of that which is diametrically opposed to civility, and most often in the form of the uncivil society versus the civil society. Whilst civil society is often thought of as a realm where free citizens meet to foster democratic ideals and values – where, in a deliberative agora, they reach consensus about the political ideas and social norms that should underpin society – uncivil society is seen as its counterpart (Bob, 2011). Carlo Ruzza (2009: 88), for example, suggests that “one needs to think of uncivil society as formed by a set of practices situated along a continuum of democratic acceptability” where the distinguishing line between the acceptable and unacceptable “[in] many cases [...] is self-evident” and he asserts that while “extreme right organizations” are a part of civil society, “unlike the rest of civil society, they have an openly exclusionary agenda (in addition to a disruptive one)” (2009: 88). In this sense, “uncivil society reflects a concept of the self which is oppositional to those characteristics of the modern self which make liberal democracy possible” (Ruzza, 2009: 91). To put it bluntly, uncivil society is “bad civil society”, in the words of Chambers and Kopstein (2001). I believe that using uncivility as an analytical concept along the lines of Ruzza is problematic, since it conceals systemic power relations embedded in the supposed “civil”. Similarly, Chambers and Kopstein’s approach is problematic, since ruling whether a certain practice, action, or statement is bad assumes that uncivility has an essential feature to it that, by necessity, leads to an authoritarian or totalitarian rendering of all political action that aims to change the hegemonic status quo into bad or illegitimate actions.

Instead, I approach uncivility as a subversive practice that is performed in relation to assumed normatively proscribed boundaries in a given arena; that is, the specific ways by which certain actors navigate and adapt statements and practices in relation to what is seen as acceptable, but to change and expand the boundaries of the acceptable: to hegemonise civility through uncivil practice (e.g., Tuters, 2019). Why is it uncivil? Because these actors strategise ways to undermine their opponents with disinformation, discrediting, and ambiguity that are outside the prescriptive norms of the civil in order to achieve political ends. These sorts of strategies are far from restricted to online communication. For example, during the French presidential campaign in 2017, *Rassemblement National* worked explicitly with this type of strategy to destabilise the political debate by planting seeds of doubt, distrust, and disbelief, not only in their opponents but also politics, the media, and the democratic system in general (Sénécat, 2018; e.g., Alduy & Wahnich, 2015). To rule out these strategies as being bad would be to decontextualise them and to fall into a theoretical and political normative impasse. Instead, I argue that the analytical focus needs to be emic, since what is considered civil is spatially and temporally contingent.

In the case of contemporary French post-fascist discourse in the self-proclaimed re-information sphere, at least two aspects need to be taken into account. First, the perceived hegemonic structure in relation to which these actors articulate statements is the “politically correct”, policed by an Orwellian “thought police” (Albertini & Doucet,

2016; Nilsson, 2019). The politically correct and the thought police should here be understood as imagined censorship, or as a wet blanket that glosses over or simply lies about the imagined reality of crime, race, and religion. This blanket dampens public debate and allows mainstream journalists and the assumed political elite – by sending in the watchdogs of the thought police (i.e., anti-racist organisations) – to silence political adversaries from telling inconvenient truths about the order of things. Leading figures from Rassemblement National have continuously decried the supposed antidemocratic and stigmatising effects of the politically correct (e.g., AFP, 2015; Galiero, 2016; Le Pen, 2014).

There are laws restraining free speech and political strategies to keep the “extreme” or “far-right” populists out of power (cordon sanitaire), and anti-racist organisations do call out actors from the sphere for being conspicuously racist, misogynist, and so on. However, to articulate this as part of a racialised conspiratorial scheme (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2018) – where the established media and assumed political elite, sometimes in cahoots with Muslims and Jews, are working to replace the white population of France and Europe – turns it into a phantasmagoric surface onto which are projected all the alleged ills of the current order of things (Nilsson, 2019).

Secondly, there are many strategies for navigating the politically correct online. Many of these strategies play on the vernacular, such as LARPing (live action role playing), trolling (spurring up emotional reactions), shit-posting (unrelated and misleading postings), doxing (using personal information to attack someone), and red-pilling (a reference to the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, signifying an awakening to see the truth as it really is) (Tuters, 2019). These types of strategies are not unique to the post-fascist media ecology but, rather, a consequence of online communication tout court. Phillips and Milner (2020: 202) call this aspect of online communication and storytelling the ambivalent Internet:

[Online spaces are unruly, messy, and] tangled up with tissues upon tissues of quotations, multiplicities upon multiplicities of authors, and densely knotted meanings hinging not on who made what thing, or even the thing itself, but on what memetic motifs resonate with an unknown number of unseen audiences.

While the specific language used to “decode” the politically correct varies within the sphere, a much-circulated dictionary from Polemia gives a general idea of the logic in play. For example, the dictionary explains how journalists and politicians supposedly use an Orwellian newspeak – “young man” instead of “criminal with immigrant background”, and “racist crime” when the victim is “of African or Muslim origin” – a misuse since the alleged real racist problem in France is against whites (Geoffroy, 2019).

Irony and displacement

The articulation by *Démocratie Participative* of immigration from Africa to Europe as an Orcish invasion is a typical example of how hyperbolic irony is practised as an uncivil discursive technique within the alleged re-information sphere to reveal the supposed newspeak of the politically correct. The site’s publications frivolously mix hyperbolic white-supremacist, racist, misogynist, fascist, national socialist, and conspiratorial tropes. Although it could with reason be classified as neo-fascist, the employment of sardonic irony makes the site ideologically slippery and thus better suited to being called

post-fascist. A standard dictionary definition of irony states that it is “a: the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning [and] b: a usually humorous or sardonic literary style” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, irony is not necessarily a matter of stating the opposite. It might be, as Paul Simpson suggests, a way for an enunciator to express degree or variety without necessarily opposition (Simpson, 2003). Irony is imbedded in a “protean polymorphism” (Tittler, 1984: 16) that makes it possible, as Linda Hutcheon (1994: 10) states, to “function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests”, since it can be “both political and apolitical, both conservative and radical, both repressive and democratizing” (Hutcheon, 1994: 34; e.g., Hillenbrand, 1995). Approaching irony as a discursive strategy thus means that irony is more than “the substitution of an (opposite) intended or ‘ironic’ meaning for a literal one” (Hutcheon, 1992: 219). Hutcheon (1992: 220) suggests:

[Irony] would then be a mixture of the pragmatic (in semiotic terms) and the semantic, where the semantic space is a space “in between”, comprising both the spoken and the unspoken. Such a space, however, would always be affectively charged; it would never be without its evaluative “edge”.

Irony, and in particular sardonic irony, taps perfectly into the inherent ambivalence of online communication. For some readers, the Orcish invasion thus might not even be ironic in the first place; for some it might seem outright racist; for some it might be corny; and for some ridiculous, not even worth taking seriously. Here, I am certainly not suggesting that the reader of this text should read the Orcish invasion as a humoristic and ironic articulation. However, drawing on the aforementioned guidelines of *Daily Stormer*, I believe a key is provided to understanding these types of articulations as a form of strategic ironic uncivility. In the guide, it is explained that “the more hyperbole the better” even “when it is totally ridiculous” (Daily Stormer, 2018: 14). First, statements of this sort are “fun”, and second, even if this is understood as “ridiculous”, the readers “are still affected by it on an emotional level” (Daily Stormer, 2018: 14). One example, drawing on both *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and the movie *Braveheart* (1995), turns this into practice:

“We stand as gods made flesh, bearing the light of truth and power passed down by our sacred ancestors through our divine blood, our swords raised as the assembled hordes of Mordor, those oldest of blood enemies, gnash their teeth, prepared to rend our flesh from our bones and feast on us in the name of their ancient demon masters.” You and anyone reading that can say omg corny lol. But it just doesn’t matter to the primitive part of the brain. The part that gives you chills when William Wallace gives that speech in *Braveheart* (don’t even lie brah). (Daily Stormer, 2018: 14)

Without doubt, as Noam Gal states, “humor in these disembodied, fragmented, and context-collapsed arenas creates great potential for misinterpretation” (2019: 730) and, while the Orcish invasion’s inferred meaning depends on who is reading, the sought-after effect is to target a specific discursive community and to strengthen it by creating and solidifying affective bonds (Greene, 2019; Hutcheon, 1992; e.g., Papacharissi, 2014) and to mobilise it in various ways (Pérez, 2017). As Gal puts it, “The ironic text thus

produces a unique relationship between addressors and addressees. In order to become a proper addressee of a polysemic text (i.e., to get the joke), one must successfully take part in the meaning-making process” (2019: 732). The allusion to African migration as an Orcish invasion, and the symbolic associations it seeks to make with it, is arguably irony practised as an uncivil discursive strategy seeking to interpellate a reader’s primordial emotions where hyperbolic racism is clothed in hyperbolic and sardonic irony.

Another example of irony as an uncivil discursive strategy is from *Riposte Laïque*. The site, which is one the most popular in the sphere, is a web-based journal and an activist network that is part of the broader counter-jihadi movement electively mixing radical secularist groups with identitarian, reactionary, fascist, and national socialist groups – all unified around secularism as an emblematic category of French identity and the will to purify the nation from Islam and Muslims through a new *reconquista* [reconquest] (Nilsson, 2019). In several editorials of the journal, the founder, who goes under the pen-name Cyrano, recounts his vision of a future France: a long account of how the *reconquista* of France plays out in a near future. In an anti-elitist and typically populist fashion (e.g., Mudde, 2017), he talks specifically about the reestablishment of a naturally national order through purification of the traitors to the French people: “Once these indispensable expulsions have been effectuated, I really dream of a Nuremberg” with the “principal collaborators” and “all these traitors that deliver France to globalization, immigration, and Islam” (Cyrano, 2014). In a cartoon accompanying the editorial, the former government – led by the then president, François Hollande – is heading towards judgement. The government officials are dressed in black and yellow prison suits with ball and chain, reminiscent of how the Dalton Brothers in the comic *Lucky Luke* usually ended up, but wearing signs saying “traitor”.

These future Nuremberg trials echo other post- and neo-fascist memes in Europe and the US (e.g., the Day of the Rope and Finnspång). In another editorial, Cyrano (2013) goes one step further and calls for execution: “12 bullets for the traitors. For the half-traitors, 6 bullets would be enough”. This and similar calls to violence are often followed by ironically ambiguous statements: “The sorts of statements that we repeat are only rhetorical, since there is no war being waged on French territory, because if that were the case, the media would surely have informed us!” (Cyrano, 2013).

The affirmative and emotional framing of the dream is immediately contradicted by referring to such statements as dreams portraying a fictional reality. It appears as a case of using hyperbolic irony as a strategy for deniability. The author of the text is well aware that calling for the assassination of the president of the republic is not only transgressing the boundaries of the imagined structures of the “politically correct”, it is punishable by law. However, since the journal’s overarching mission is to prove that a war against France *is actually* being waged, as stated in the majority of their publications, they continuously preempt any deniability. However, to reach this conclusion, a familiarity with their discursive field is required (e.g., Zúquete, 2019).

From these two examples, I suggest that irony can be approached as an uncivil discursive technique which functions in a variety of ways that go well beyond the understanding of irony as simply subverting a literal reading. Irony as an uncivil discursive practice draws on the ambiguousness of online communication and can thus be understood as the following:

- the possibility of saying the unsayable
- a strategy to convey both affirmative and dissociative identification through a play on the esoteric and exoteric
- a way, through affect, to interpellate different subject positions and mobilise a discursive community by creating a sense of exclusive inclusion and a call to arms
- a self-acclaimed revolutionary and heroic practice to navigate the borders of an imagined politically correct censorship
- a strategy, through ambiguity, to preempt accusations of hate, racism, misogyny, and so on
- as a strategy to reify and expand the horizon and reach of the discursive field and to push the boundaries for what the imagined politically correct permits

A related aspect of irony is displacement, by which I mean the function whereby the classifying markers used by the imagined “politically correct” to define the type of actors I am analysing are projected back onto the “politically correct”, or rather, displaced and dislocated: extreme-right, fascist, racist. The most prevalent trope in this sense is “the new extreme right” which gained traction in the alleged re-information sphere after the publication of a book of that name, *La nouvelle extrême droite* by Jean Robin in 2010. Here, Robin (2010) argues that the new extreme right in France consists of the political mainstream, particularly the French left and political elite. In discussing the social and political situation in France and Europe before and during World War II, Robin suggests that the new extreme right rests on four pillars; first, they are against representative democracy due to the cordon sanitaire that for a few decades created a dissonance between the popular support of Rassemblement National and its representation in parliament; second, they are authoritarian since they keep alleged truth-tellers out of public debate; third, they are obsessed by race and multiculturalism, through their talk about antiracism and integration; and fourth, they support the spreading of Islamic fundamentalism in the country with their preoccupation with integrating Islam in France. By Robin’s logic, France and Europe are reliving a new Munich of 1938. This time, however, the political elite has entered into an agreement with an Islamic occupying force, and the situation is dire indeed (Robin, 2010). In the logic I am describing here, the new extreme right is protected by the imagined “politically correct”; it is they who are imposing totalitarian thought and are supporting the Islamisation of France, and they are “collaborators” in the “Islamofascist” invasion of France (e.g., Nilsson, 2019).

Displacement here adds another dimension to the understanding of irony as a strategy of uncivility. If irony is a play on deliberative and dissociative ambiguity in terms of populist identification and a strategy to navigate and push the boundaries of the imagined politically correct, then displacement is affirmative in that it articulates a subjectivity that is the true defender of the people. In other words, the re-information sphere is where real representative democracy rules (i.e., where the white majority can be recognised as such); it is where freedom of expression is cherished (i.e., where the supposed truth about feminism, Muslims, Jews, etc., can be told); it is where racism is taken seriously (i.e., reversed racism is a leading trope in the victimisation of whiteness); and, finally, it is where the supposed Islamic threat is taken seriously (i.e., where the consequences of anthropoemic nationhood are strategised into its genocidal end-goal). Displacement appears to bring about a certain satisfaction or jouissance (Žižek, 2008)

in destabilising the strategies of both the politically correct and the thought police to denounce the sphere for its hyperbolic uncivility. The appropriation of Islamophobia is indicative in this regard. Drawing on a construed Enlightenment tradition of critique against religion, Islamophobia is no longer seen as a derogatory term but, instead, something to be proud of: “Islamophobia is not a crime. It is legitimate” and “islamophobic and proud!” (Cyrano, 2013).

This type of appropriation of what are commonly seen as slurs, such as racism, fascism, and nationalism, was openly strategised during the annual congress of the *Rassemblement National* in 2018. Marine Le Pen invited a secret guest speaker: Steve Bannon – the American alt-right icon, the former executive chairman of the Breitbart News Network, and the former chief strategist of the Trump administration. Bannon’s appearance was part of a European road show to promote his newly founded organisation, *The Movement*, whose aim is to reinvent a new populist radical nationalist movement in Europe, particularly targeting the European Parliamentary elections in 2019. To an applauding audience, Bannon called upon the French to be proud of who they really are, not to be discouraged by the “globalists” who try to smear them and their ideas: “Let them call you racist. Let them call you xenophobes. Let them call you nativists. Wear it as a *badge of honor*. Because every day, we get stronger and they get weaker [emphasis added]” (Winsor, 2018: para. 4). Bannon added: “You are part of a world-wide movement”, and the time had come to show “the globalists the door” (Winsor, 2018). “Globalist” is a well-established and ambiguously employed code word for “Jew” amongst European and American post-fascist movements (*Anti-Defamation League*, 2018; Rensmann, 2011; e.g., Zúquete, 2019), and Bannon’s speech tapped directly into both the party’s historically conspicuous antisemitism and its contemporary esoteric antisemitism.

However, the (re)appropriation of identificatory categories like “racist” and “Islamophobic” in French and American uncivil populist and anthropoemic discourse suggests that the assumed threat from the politically correct and the thought police is diminishing. Being called racist or Islamophobic is no longer seen as bringing up a burdensome spectre of fascism and Nazism, but as being authentic, true to oneself and one’s whiteness, and something to be proud of (e.g., Harsin, 2017). In self-acclaimed post-racial societies (Goldberg, 2015), there appears to be a shift in the play on exoteric and esoteric racist statements. As Greene (2019: 36) argues, if “frontstage” or public discourse have been seemingly attentive not to overstep the boundaries for the alleged civil rules of public debate, today “backstage” discourses, fuelled by conspicuous whiteness and racism, “are moving from backstage to frontstage, a transition facilitated by the alt-right’s use of new media and ironic or satiric communicative styles”.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the use of irony and displacement as uncivil discursive strategies in the contemporary French post-fascist media ecology, and in particular, the French self-acclaimed re-information sphere. I have argued that these two discursive strategies are used in tandem to performatively interpellate a sense of authentic truth and primordial affective register amongst their audiences. Irony and displacement can

thus be seen as discursive strategies that, in a Gramscian meta-political fashion, seek to expand the horizon of the possible, as attempts to hegemonise culture and the contours of public debate by subverting the civil. Furthermore, in a populist logic, these strategies tend to performatively identify and mobilise political and social identity – such as the “people” – while simultaneously attacking the very institutions associated with the imagined politically correct.

I have, moreover, made a case for not using uncivility and civility as normative analytical categories, but focusing instead on their emic usage. This approach helps in revealing the changing, mimicking, and eclectic nature of post-fascist social and political communication, online and offline. In particular, it brings about a sensitivity in understanding the displacement of discourse (i.e., hegemonic struggles of meaning-making of central political categories such as democracy, liberty, and freedom), and also the logics in play when post-fascist actors deem that formerly taboo categories are publicly acceptable as positive identity markers (i.e., Islamophobic and racist). In this logic, these types of identifications are with the alleged true order of things as well as a political rebellion against the supposed politically corrects’ newspeak and limitations of free speech. This is arguably also key to understanding how contemporary post-fascist discourse, in France as elsewhere, slips into the realm of liberal-democratic discourse and presents itself as a viable alternative among all the others in the political market place. While this article has focused on discursive enunciators, more research is needed to get a fuller picture of how other forms of discursive strategies and genres beyond irony and displacement function in different types of spheres and arenas.

Notes

1. All quotations from French-language sites have been translated by me.
2. About human conduct, Spinoza aimed “to try, not to laugh at human actions neither to mourn about them or to detest them, but to understand them” (Klever, 1995: 44).
3. Previously known as Front National.

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