The rise of the French far right in the 80s sparked anxiety across Europe. Elizabeth Rechniewski contends that the Left’s postmodern turn may have been partly to blame. She argues that the western Left needs to return to its older belief in universal human values.

The rise of the Front National in France in the mid-1980s transformed the previously settled terrain of French party politics. It also led to a somewhat uneven debate on the reasons for its success and the best means of combating it. The role of the media in giving its leader Jean-Marie Le Pen a platform has been widely criticised, as has been their tendency to sensationalise incidents in the housing estates on the outskirts of the cities, where many families of immigrant origin live.

Of course, neither a more sophisticated level of debate in the media nor the sporadic concerts and demonstrations of anti-racist organisations such as SOS Racisme (which never had deep roots among the young of the ‘cités’ themselves) have solved the multiple problems of the housing estates. This would require an investment far beyond anything the governments of prime ministers Michel Rocard or Edith Cresson have been able or willing to spend. Nor have they succeeded in seizing the political initiative from the Front National and its leader Le Pen which has increasingly set the agenda of the debate for the traditional Right and centre-Right parties. Already ideologically adrift and bitterly divided over issues such as European integration, these parties are particularly susceptible to the blandishments of Le Pen, since they cannot on their own expect to win enough votes to form a stable majority in parliament. With the centre ground fairly comprehensively colonised by the Socialists since the early 1980s, the Right and centre-Right parties feel they must capture some of Le Pen’s constituency by taking on board just as much of his anti-immigrant ballast as will not offend the more liberal members of the alliance.

Thus, both Jacques Chirac, leader of the gaullist RPR, and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, leader of the conservative UDF—both probable contenders for the presidency in the elections of 1995—have allowed some of Le Pen’s language to creep into their speech in the last year or two: ‘slips’
which can be modified or qualified later but which suggest to Le Pen's audience that their views are not overlooked.

It is a common mistake to believe that the Front National is a single issue party obsessed with the alien Arab minority, a response to the increasing immigrant presence. This is to overlook the fact that the FN has an all-encompassing political philosophy with deep roots in French history. It reflects a current of thought that comes to the surface at a time not merely of social and economic crisis, but when the very identity of the French nation seems to be in question, as is now the case with the extension of the European Community. (The Front National is a fervent opponent of the Maastricht Treaty.) It is an ideology that has been carried by different groups over the years, the most recent incarnation being the Poujade movement of the 1950s—a movement of small shopkeepers opposed to the rapid modernisation of France's commerce and industry. Le Pen first entered the French parliament as a Poujade deputy.

There are many other links with the past to be found in both the ideology and the personnel of the Front National. A number of its founder members were involved in the far-rightwing leagues of the 1930s and in Vichy France. Its ideological roots go back much further though, to the late-19th century, the period of Drumont's bestseller, La France Juive (Jewish France) and of the Dreyfus affair. It is only by going back to this tradition that one can understand why the FN is so strongly anti-semitic—seemingly a rather strange posture to adopt when in the present climate they have more to gain from being anti-Arab. The memory of World War Two is still too strong to allow most people to give themselves over wholeheartedly to anti-semitism. But Le Pen is merely respecting his 19th century roots. French theorists at that time were already articulating the thesis of the decadence of French civilisation—a key word in Le Pen's vocabulary—and the subversive influence on the French identity of foreigners, deviants, Jews and freemasons. All these targets the FN has also made its own.

Like its early 20th century predecessors, the FN is strongly nationalistic; highly critical of a 'corrupt' democracy; it aims for an authoritarian regime and a hierarchical society structured to combat 'decadence'. But in a number of important ways the 'Fifty concrete measures concerning immigration' proposed last November by the FN go further, and recall measures taken by the Vichy government during the occupation of France in World War Two. The FN's policy of limiting jobs to French workers and dismissing immigrants before French workers, for example, finds a parallel in the Vichy laws limiting to 2% the number of Jews allowed to practise in certain professions (and banning them from others altogether).Travail, Famille, Patrie (Work, Family, Nation) has also been taken up unchanged by the FN. This slogan deliberately counters the republican motto: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, discarding the universal values that the revolutionary motto represents. The FN makes no bones about its opposition to the universalistic ideologies encapsulated in documents such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man which—despite their apparently impeccable French origins—are dismissed as 'cosmopolitan' and anti-French.

Racism in its major forms in the 19th and first half of the 20th century relied on a pseudo-scientific demonstration of the inequality of races, founded on supposed genetic, biological and therefore immutable differences. It established a hierarchy of human races, a ranking of inferior and superior which justified racist practices of exclusion and dominance. The opponents of this kind of racism had recourse to universalistic values: we are all equal, we have more in common than divides us. The battle lines were clear and the scientific consensus worked against the proponents of racism.

But in the 80s, according to Taguieff, developments have taken place on each side of the ideological barricade which have blurred the arguments and undercut somewhat the anti-racist stance. The far Right has found a way of reformulating racist ideology to avoid the discredit cast on the earlier bases for discriminating, by moving away from claims of genetic/biological difference towards theories of cultural difference.
The irony of this new turn, Taguieff suggests, is that the ground has been prepared in part by the Left and the anti-racist themselves. In the 80s they questioned the ideal of the nation 'united and indivisible', so long an essential aspect of their ideological tradition, and have put increasing emphasis on the right to difference and respect for other cultures.

The Right have seized on this development and have turned it to their own ends. Yes, they agree, cultures are different and must be respected but, for this very reason, it is dangerous to bring them together, for this leads inevitably to a dilution of each culture and therefore to the loss of what is precious and unique. The old horror of the mixing of races reappears under a new guise. It is opposed because it will lead to irreparable loss of cultural difference resulting in an undifferentiated, characterless mass. When the FN argues against the presence of immigrants it claims, therefore, to be seeking to protect a unique culture—French civilisation—against a kind of genocide resulting from the presence of other cultures.

Moreover, the Right argues that it speaks, not only in the interests of its own culture, but also in the immigrants' own interest, because the immigrants' culture will also be adversely affected by contact with another alien and inassimilable culture. Some cultures are considered close to one another of course, so Europeans can intermingle safely. But others are simply too different to be able to be brought together without risk.

In another ironic twist, the FN has clambered on board the ecology bandwagon, using arguments concerning the preservation of endangered species to support their argument for the preservation of endangered cultures! They call themselves not 'écologistes' (for whom they express a great deal of contempt—they are to some extent rivals, since both compete for the votes of those who are disillusioned with the major parties) but 'écologiens'. They are found of quoting Konrad Lorenz's view that nature consists of a struggle between species. For species they substitute culture and add that just as many species are endangered in the world today so, even more importantly, are many cultures which must be protected by any right-thinking 'écologien'.

The anti-racists, Taguieff argues, have not found a satisfactory response to these ideological moves, for a number of reasons. First, the right to cultural difference is increasingly being claimed by minority groups in fundamentalist and separatist movements among immigrant groups themselves and among Jews. There is a demand among some for exclusively Muslim schools in France, while certain rabbis have attempted to re-emphasise the uniqueness of the Jews and the impossibility of separating religion and politics. In such situations the most unexpected and dangerous alliances can take place.

Secondly, the ideological position of the Left has been weakened by its questioning of the universalist values embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, a questioning characteristic of French post-structuralist theory. If what Jean-Francis Lyotard describes in La Condition Postmoderne as the great universalising myths have died, if we cannot agree on common values which transcend each culture, enshrined in the equal rights and capacities of the individual, or if we cannot appeal to a reason common to all, then the grounds for a meeting of cultures are thin indeed.

Further problems are created by the Left's abandonment of the Jacobin tradition of the strong central state imposing universalist principles and a national culture on an often unwilling population. The French school system—less highly centralised than in the past—now plays a less important unifying role. The state is increasingly reduced to being a mere facilitator of economic progress as a result of the acceptance by the Socialist government in France of the need to open up the economy to market forces. The decline of the state has opened the way to the ideology of the nation.

Racism is not, of course, merely a result of ideological adroitness, the ability to cobble together a convincing argument and spread it effectively. The principal reason that the Front has met with some success are the underlying social, economic, political and psychological crises that beset the French today. Moreover, the FN has shown an ability (which has not been typical of other European far-right parties) to unify under the same banner different groups including Catholic fundamentalists, revisionist historians and dissatisfied police unions. Their increasingly populist stand on economic issues which directly contradicts their earlier Reaganite position against state intervention in the labour market, makes them even more attractive to former communist voters. To combat the ideology of the Front is first and foremost to combat the conditions that make it possible; among them the effective ghettoisation of immigrant groups in the 'cités' and extremely high unemployment, particularly among young people.

However, Taguieff contends that to counter the Right's manoeuvrings it might also be necessary to return to some kind of universalist stance. This might require arguing that the preservation of cultural difference is not the only value to be promoted in the meeting of groups. And this would, in turn, involve questioning the acceptance of the cultural relativism that has become an axiom of much recent leftwing thought. How far can respect for cultural difference go?

In the name of cultural difference do we respect the rights of families to practise cliterodectomy, to take two wives, or to marry their daughters against their will? Hampered by a bad attack of historical bad conscience, terrified of appearing superior and therefore racist in the old definition of the term, not wanting to repeat the mistakes of past centuries of missionary intervention, the Left seems to have lost the will to judge and to fight for the rights of individuals when they conflict with those of 'culture'.

ELIZABETH RECHNIEWSKI teaches in French at Sydney University.