

Introduction

On July 10, 1940, less than a month after France signed an armistice with Nazi Germany, the French Senate and Chamber of Deputies voted 569 to 80 to grant full constitutional powers to Philippe Pétain, thereby effectively dissolving the Third Republic and establishing the French State based in Vichy. Soon thereafter, a well-known political figure named Marcel Déat presented a report to Pétain urging him to institute a one-party state. Though a former parliamentary deputy himself, Déat now called for scrapping the parliamentary regime and argued that the time was ripe for France to make its revolution “from on high and in order.” The Germans, he claimed, would be more likely to take France seriously and collaborate in good faith if there arose “a great party analogous to those that in Germany, in Italy, in Spain, or elsewhere, were the instruments of national revolutions.” Such a party would “make of France a national community, of which the peasantry would be the essential armature, in which the wage-earning elements would be completely integrated, where the family would become again the social cell *par excellence*,” and where the state would “take complete control over all large economic and financial forces.” Rival parties would be banned, and any propaganda outside the aegis of the party would be “prevented and penalized.” The party would be a conduit for the popular will, but it would be rigidly hierarchical, with chiefs at every echelon responsible to their superiors and with authority over their subordinates. Such was, after all, the “veritable form of the new order.” As for membership, all Frenchmen of “good will” would be welcome, except for Jews and the recently naturalized. The party would “constitute a militant elite, almost a militant order,” and would naturally draw on veterans and youth.¹

¹ Marcel Déat “Rapport présenté à Monsieur le Maréchal Pétain sur la constitution d’un parti national unique,” appendix to Cointet (1973).

The Vichy regime was authoritarian in both design and purpose, but it was dominated by traditionalist reactionaries suspicious of all mass parties, even those aspiring to incarnate the values of the so-called “national revolution,” and in the end Déat’s proposal for a new party was coolly received by Pétain. Undeterred, Déat left the ostensibly “free” Vichy and sought his fortune in occupied Paris, where he founded the Rassemblement National Populaire (RNP) in 1941. The RNP would go on to become one of the main pro-Nazi collaborationist parties in occupied France. From its base in Paris, it fiercely attacked the malign influence of the alleged *attentistes* surrounding Pétain and blamed them for what it saw as Vichy’s tepid commitment to Franco-German collaboration. The RNP instead aligned itself with Pierre Laval, considered an ally against the reactionaries and *attentistes*, in his struggle to lead the Vichy government, which he would do in 1940 and again in 1942–1944. The RNP also enthusiastically supported the German war effort, with Déat calling on the French to go “beyond collaboration” and participate in the “European Revolution” spearheaded by the Nazis.² To this end, Déat co-founded a French volunteer force to fight on the Eastern Front with other hardline collaborationist leaders, and he even likened the German war effort to the Battle of Valmy, characterizing the “German Revolution” as the ultimate realization of the ideals of the French Revolution (Déat 1943).

Domestically, the RNP bemoaned the limitations of Vichy’s “national revolution,” which it sought to remake in the image of Nazism. Avowedly antisemitic, anti-Bolshevik, anti-Masonic, and organizationally modeled on Nazism, the RNP conceived of itself as a revolutionary national-socialist party that would animate an “authoritarian and popular state.” It called for the defense of the “French Ethnic Community” against “inassimilable or deleterious racial elements” through measures of “physiological, economic, and political protection.” And although it declared itself socialist, it advocated an organicist form of corporatism in which class interests would be subordinated to the national interest – workers would have a right to a just standard of living so long as the “legitimate authority of the company boss” was respected (Rassemblement National Populaire 1943: 30–31).

The RNP emulated Nazism in substance and style, for example, adopting paramilitary uniforms, the Roman salute, a leadership cult around Déat, and a swastika-like winged odal rune – also used by other European fascists – as its insignia (see Figure 1.1). The RNP openly called for a “totalitarian” regime, in contrast to the merely “authoritarian” Vichy. Vichy, Déat wrote, had “nothing in common” with an order like Germany’s, which was consented to “gravely, joyously, by a grand people who have confidence in its Chief.” In Nazi Germany, “totalitarianism appears ... as it is, that is to say first as an equilibrium, and then as a unity re-conquered and recovered.” Only in a “totalitarian” regime

² Marcel Déat “Au delà de la collaboration” *L’Œuvre* January 7, 1942.

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FIGURE I.1 Marcel Déat speaking at a national council meeting of the RNP on May 6, 1944. Source: Bridgeman Images.

could all aspects of society – the economic, the political, the social, and the spiritual – be “oriented toward unity and not toward disparity and dissonance.” A “totalitarian” regime was a “regime of harmony where the body and soul each have their place and come together without crisis.”³ A fully reconciled society under the tutelage of an exclusionary, hierarchical, and disciplined party-state modeled on Nazi Germany was thus the ultimate goal of the RNP.

Though the RNP would never live up to its totalizing aspirations, struggling to impose itself even within the claustrophobic world of occupied Paris, Déat’s identification with Nazism would only harden as the tide of the war turned. In March 1944, Déat was appointed, at German urging, Minister of Labor and National Solidarity in Laval’s radicalized cabinet, serving alongside the notorious head of the Milice Française, Joseph Darnand (see Figure I.2). As the Vichy regime collapsed following the Allied advance across France in 1944, Déat made his way to Sigmaringen, Germany, where he was involved in the absurdist drama of creating a pro-Nazi French government-in-exile with the last desperate remnants of ultra-collaborationism. On May 3, 1945, just days before Germany’s unconditional surrender, Déat fled to Italy, remaining a fugitive in hiding until his death in 1955 and avoiding a death sentence for treason handed down *in absentia* in France.

The question of fascism in France – whether it had French roots or was a foreign import, whether it had any political traction or remained marginal,

³ Marcel Déat “Civilisation totalitaire” *L’Euvre* January 12, 1942.



FIGURE 1.2 Marcel Déat speaking in his capacity as Minister of Labor and National Solidarity at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris on April 30, 1944. Source: Bridgeman Images.

whether various parties, movements, and regimes, including Vichy, could be classified as fascist or not – is famously fraught.⁴ But for the occupation period, historians of France have widely accepted some version of the common distinction between pragmatic “collaborators” and ideological “collaborationists,” even if the boundary between these categories was often blurred in practice.⁵ With his eager emulation of Nazism and his stubborn attachment to the German cause until the bitter end, Déat was unmistakably within the vanguard of collaborationism, and as such it seems hardly questionable to classify Déat and the RNP as among the leading proponents of a French fascism during the occupation.

That the occupation would have brought various French fascists out of the woodwork is not surprising. Indeed, Déat and the RNP had several competitors in the sordid milieu of Parisian collaborationism with impeccable fascist pedigrees. But what makes Déat’s case remarkable is that ten years prior to the occupation, he had been a leading figure in the Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO) – that is, the French Socialist Party. Moreover, he was a leader of the party’s reformist parliamentary wing, which, unlike its revolutionary counterpart within the party, was attached to the institutions of bourgeois democracy and the Third Republic. It was from this reformist current of French socialism that the RNP drew a sizable part of its leadership. Even after Déat and some of his ideological allies were expelled from

⁴ See Bernstein and Winock eds. (2014), Dobry ed. (2003), Passmore (2014), and Sternhell (1986).

⁵ For example, see Hoffman (1968) and Gordon (1980, 1983).

the SFIO in 1933, they remained affiliated with the democratic left, and the heterodox revision of socialist doctrine they elaborated – what came to be called “neo-socialism” – was, despite its provocative appropriation of certain themes associated with fascism, justified in terms of the urgent need to forestall the rise of fascism in France. Not only did Déat and many of his comrades in the RNP not belong to any established current of French fascism on the eve of World War II, they had in fact spent the better part of their political careers warning against the dangers of fascism. How then did Déat and his fellow democratic socialists end up making ideological common cause with Nazi Germany during the occupation?

POLITICAL CONVERSION

This book is an account of Déat’s surprising trajectory, but it also seeks to make a more general point about how we should study the phenomenon of which it is a case: political conversion. In one sense, the term “conversion” appears to fit Déat poorly. Central to the experience of religious conversion is the renunciation of past belief – there is a clear break that is subjectively experienced and publicly avowed as such (Nock 1933). While some political conversions share this aspect with religious conversions, Déat insisted throughout his political career that he was only ever acting on the basis of the same principles he had always held. If these led him at one moment to join the Socialist Party and at another to align himself with Nazism, this was only because circumstances had changed. But how much of this should we take at face value, and should it preclude us from calling his trajectory a case of political conversion? I do not mean to imply that the phenomena of political and religious conversion are essentially similar, nor that they must be subsumed under the same concept. However, the term “conversion” remains useful precisely for how it emphasizes the discontinuity at the heart of the phenomenon in question.⁶ If Déat never totally disavowed his past, that is because it was not in his interest to do so. But his attempt to present a face of continuity does not require us to gloss over what is an undeniable fact: that between his past as a democratic socialist warning of the dangers of fascism and his abject emulation of Nazism during the occupation, there was a clear break and reversal in his political commitments that demands explanation.

I define political conversions as radical reversals in political commitments within a relatively short span of time by public figures for whom politics is a vocation. This definition highlights the objective and relational character of the

⁶ In an interview, Alain Badiou (2008) has used the term “renegacy” to describe French Maoists who became supporters of Nicolas Sarkozy. The term “political renegacy” has the merit of connoting discontinuity without implying a direct analogy with the subjective dimension of religious conversion. However, it has the disadvantage of being an awkward neologism, especially in English.

phenomenon of political conversion. To make a public political commitment is not simply to hold a set of beliefs but also to stake out a position within a political field structured by a particular configuration of alliances and antagonisms. Political conversions thus are not simply matters of individual conscience; they also implicate one's position and relations within the field of politics. For political figures defined by their public commitments, a reversal in these commitments is necessarily problematic. Try as they may to obscure or finesse it, the fact of conversion is manifest in their changed relations within a reconfigured political field. Political converts may or may not admit to changing their minds, but an account must be given for why erstwhile antagonists became allies and vice versa. Political conversion thus involves a dramatic shift in one's place within the networks of relations that constitute the political field. How actors interpret this subjectively is secondary, not foundational, to the definition of the phenomenon. The proper object of analysis is not the individual convert's beliefs but the reconfiguration of the field and their place within it.

There are many historical cases of political conversion, but the ones attracting most interest have tended to be those of people moving from the far left to the right. Perhaps the most famous of such cases is Benito Mussolini, who had been a leader of the Partito Socialista Italiano before founding the fascist movement in Italy. He was not alone: among the earliest adherents of Italian fascism were a group of revolutionary syndicalists deeply influenced by the French heterodox Marxist Georges Sorel, who himself had briefly flirted with the far right in the years before World War I, while other Italian leftist defectors like Nicola Bombacci rallied to Mussolini later.⁷ Infamous cases also abound in the Anglophone world. Oswald Mosley, for example, founded the British Union of Fascists in 1932, whereas only a couple years prior he had been a Labour Party MP and committed Fabian. In the United States, high-profile figures like Whittaker Chambers, David Horowitz, and Eldridge Cleaver, to name but a few, followed various paths from left to right at different moments in history. The most well-known case of political conversion in the United States is probably that of the "New York Intellectuals" – a cohort of anti-Stalinist socialist intellectuals, some of whom, like James Burnham, Irving Kristol, and Sidney Hook, became key figures in the development of neoconservatism in the United States.⁸ More recently, once unambiguously left-wing journalists like

⁷ On the Sorelian influence on Italian Fascism, see Gregor (2005, 2009) and Roth (1980). On Sorel's flirtation with the far right, see also Mazgaj (1979), Jennings (1985), Sternhell (1986), and Sternhell et al. (1994).

⁸ See Oppenheimer (2016) and Wald (1987). The case of the "New York Intellectuals" raises some of the same questions as Déat's, namely, how to conceptualize political conversion in cases where apparent continuities exist and where converts do not subjectively understand themselves to have converted. Wald writes that although "there are certain obvious continuities between [Sidney Hook's] present neoconservative posture and some positions taken by the New York intellectuals in their previous incarnations," if one "understands the changes in political orientation on their part just prior to, during, and especially after World War II, it becomes clear

Christopher Hitchens and Matt Taibbi have aligned themselves with parts of the right in response to specific perceived threats (respectively, in their cases, Islamist terrorism and “cancel culture”).⁹ The Trump era has also witnessed several politicians who had once cultivated progressive reputations moving to the right, notably among them Tulsi Gabbard, who was a Bernie Sanders surrogate in the 2016 Democratic primary but later joined the Republican Party and became Donald Trump’s Director of National Intelligence. Whether they involve isolated individuals or entire milieux, prominent figures or marginal outcasts, such left-to-right conversions have been a recurrent feature of political life in the modern world, with many of these renegades rising to positions of influence within their new political worlds.

If left-to-right conversions tend to fascinate the most, the reason for this may be the especially surprising nature of such conversions. The insurgent character of radical politics calls for a high degree of emotional investment in one’s political identity in such a way that one might expect would filter out fickle opportunists with only a shallow commitment to their ideals. Moreover, radical left movements have also typically put doctrinal coherence and discipline at the center of their identities in a way that other political persuasions have not. For a socialist or communist to join with former enemies on the right thus involves a clear break not just with a set of former beliefs but with a whole community of meaning which had hitherto sustained their sense of political self. Left-to-right conversions thus throw into particularly sharp relief the problematic character of political conversion.

Recasting the object of analysis in this way implies rethinking how we explain the phenomenon of political conversion. Political conversion is as much a practical matter of where one stands in relation to the broader political field as it is a matter of individual belief. Yet both popular and scholarly explanations of political conversion are often pitched at the level of ideas. Where political conversion resembles religious conversion and involves a self-conscious renunciation of past belief, explanation entails accounting for such crises of conscience. Such cases are characterized by a sharp discontinuity in ideological commitments, and the explanation of this break typically takes the form of a narrative of ideological disillusionment. But what about those cases, like Déat’s, where a radical reversal in concrete commitments is accompanied not by a renunciation of the past but by a pretense of consistency? In these cases, a certain degree

that their ultimate evolution was not the only one possible.” In other words, “the political and cultural content of the group’s anti-Stalinism meant different things at different times” (Wald 1987: 10). As will become clear, my interpretation of Déat’s political trajectory is similar.

⁹ Whether these are temporary but principled alliances around specific issues or represent more far-reaching transformations in political identity is of course a matter of polemical argument. In any event, the approach taken here is that political conversions are defined less by actors’ self-understandings and more by the company they keep. By that standard, it seems clear that Hitchens ended his life on the right, however idiosyncratic his politics, whereas it remains to be seen how Taibbi’s own idiosyncratic politics shake out.

of discursive continuity in political actors' self-representation may conceal a fundamental discontinuity in their practical engagements and position within the political field. But if this practical discontinuity is what defines the phenomenon of political conversion, the overwhelming tendency in accounts of such conversions is to reduce this practical discontinuity to some underlying ideological continuity. That is, ultimately, what explains political conversion is some feature of the convert's prior belief which facilitates conversion. To explain political conversion is thus to identify those ideological factors which contain within them the possibility of conversion. This explanatory strategy may seem obvious in cases where a degree of discursive continuity bridges the convert's past and present commitments, but it is also common in cases more resembling religious conversion, as some factor of continuity can usually be found. In short, most accounts of political conversion rely on an internalist bias, which locates the ultimate source of conversion on the ideological plane, as an immanent tendency within past belief itself.

Consider, for example, what is arguably the most common folk explanation for such conversions: so-called "horseshoe theory." The basic idea of this theory is that instead of a straight line, the political spectrum resembles a horseshoe, with the left and right ends bending toward one another such that the "extremes meet." In this representation of the political spectrum, the far left and far right are in closer proximity to one another than they are to the center due to their shared hostility to the established political and social order. The various affinities and points of convergence which arise from this fact in turn supposedly explain the occasional passage of some figures from one extreme to the other.

"Horseshoe theory" suffers from some obvious problems. First, it is empirically dubious. When one surveys the field of leftists who turned to the far right, what sticks out is the heterogeneity of their starting points. Within this group, "extremism" is hardly a common denominator. Fascism, for example, proved just as attractive to the renegade reformist socialist as it did to the turn-coat revolutionary syndicalist or communist.¹⁰ In the case at hand, Déat had been a leading figure in the moderate faction of the SFIO that was committed to parliamentary institutions. Moreover, as is well known, where fascism did come to power, it usually did so with the complicity of the political center, which feared communism more than it did fascism. We are rightly fascinated by the fact that more than a few leftists gravitated toward fascism, but far more significant to the history of fascism was its ability to corrupt the liberal

¹⁰ Remarking on the confused political atmosphere of late Weimar Germany that sometimes led to surprising shifts in allegiance, Daniel Guérin noted that "Nazis and Communists found common ground in their hatred of Social Democracy and in the poisonous slogan for National Liberation," whereas "Socialists and Fascists found common ground in the myths of a centralized economy and apolitical trade unionism integrated into the state structure" (Guérin 1994: 73).

establishment. Yet one hears comparatively little about the ideological convergence between liberalism and fascism.

The explanatory logic underlying “horseshoe theory” also does not stand up to scrutiny. Simply identifying affinities between the “extremes” does not in itself explain conversion. Not only were not all converts from the “extremes,” but most of those at the “extremes” did not become converts. These supposed affinities only appear to explain political conversion if we omit all those cases where no conversion occurred. The more general problem is the arbitrary way in which “horseshoe theory” constructs and assigns causal value to such affinities. Take, for example, the view – still common in discussions of contemporary populism – that hostility to liberalism is a factor uniting the far left and right and thus underwriting convergences and passages between the two. This apparent factor of continuity only appears as one if defined at a high level of abstraction that filters out everything that differentiates left- and right-wing critiques of liberalism. Rather than explaining political conversion in the sense defined above, “horseshoe theory” thus effectively defines the problem away by selectively conflating the “extremes” along arbitrarily constructed dimensions. Indeed, in practice “horseshoe theory” usually amounts to little more than a self-serving centrist ideology. Its polemical purpose is to delegitimize the far left by drawing a false equivalence with the far right and to bestow a veneer of heroism on the defense of the status quo.¹¹

If proponents of “horseshoe theory” are interested in political conversions for ideological reasons, the phenomenon nevertheless remains important to the study of political life, albeit precisely because it is about discontinuity. Isolated cases certainly exist, but political conversions frequently occur in waves, suggesting that they are not individual phenomena having primarily to do with the inner lives of converts but social phenomena tied to specific historical contexts. As such, they are indices of broader shifts in the political landscape and studying them can help us better understand the process by which political actors draw and redraw the lines of conflict in ways that both react and contribute to large-scale political change. In terms of left-to-right conversions, these tend to be a feature of periods of political reaction, of which they’re both a symptom and a catalyst. Such conversions are only a part of the story of the rise of the far right across different historical contexts, but their study can provide special insight into how the far right achieves ideological hegemony, not by revealing some essential and timeless complicity between the far left and right, but by identifying the concrete historical conditions under which people change their political commitments, sometimes radically. We live in reactionary times, and the contemporary political scene contains no shortage of people who have already

¹¹ In drawing an equivalence between the far left and far right, “horseshoe theory” is nonetheless typically deployed against the far left. The point is almost always to warn of the dangers presented by the far left by highlighting its affinities with the far right, the dangers of which are generally already accepted.

made the journey from left to right or whose politics, for now in any case, have crossed into ambiguous territory. Time will tell in these latter cases whether we can speak of political conversion, but clearly something has changed to weaken the hold the left once had on them. Attributing this, or indeed the rise of the far right more generally, to some invariant feature of their politics or the political culture more broadly will not do. It is this question of change – in the holding power of the left and in the configuration of the political field – that political conversion sharply raises but which “horseshoe theory” conveniently elides.

Despite some attempts to give the theory a more scholarly formulation,¹² “horseshoe theory” largely remains a folk theory with little empirical support. Still, it is only an exaggerated form of what has been the dominant style of explanation relied upon by historians and other scholars writing about political conversion. Whether implicitly or explicitly, most accounts of political conversion are marked by what I call the continuity thesis or bias. The basic premise in these accounts is that to trace political conversions back to their ideological origins, influences, and antecedents is at the same time to explain them, with the upshot being that political converts were in a meaningful sense already ideologically predisposed toward conversion. The task of the historian is thus to uncover these seeds of conversion at their source by tracing the threads of continuity across the convert’s career.

Two related problems follow from this premise of the continuity thesis. First, the notion that historical explanation entails the search for origins – a general disciplinary hazard among historians, as Foucault points out, but one especially common in accounts of political conversion – has the effect of telescoping the process of conversion. Indeed, the narrow focus on the ideological sources of conversion renders this process as an essentially passive one in which converts, instead of being active participants in their own conversion, are more or less carried along by the internal logic of their thought (Foucault 1998). This implies that the explanatory principle driving conversion is already present at the beginning of a convert’s career. Reasoning backwards from the outcome and reading it into the origin in this way, various contingencies only matter inasmuch as they activate what are conceived as latent predispositions toward conversion. The process of conversion thus comes to appear as a simple expression or realization of these latent predispositions.

Second, dissolving difference into identity and discontinuity into continuity – habits that Foucault also describes as characteristic of “traditional history” – misses what is truly specific about political conversion. Reducing political conversion to underlying ideological continuities evades that aspect of conversion that is necessarily problematic – the reversal in political commitments. Political conversion is not simply a matter of changing labels; it involves a break with past commitments and a realignment of one’s political relations.

¹² See Faye (2002) for a classic statement of the theory. Pels (2000) has advanced a modified version of the theory.