“STRANGE TIMES:” THE LANGUAGE OF ILLNESS 
AND MALAISE IN INTERWAR FRANCE

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ iv

CHAPTER .....................................................................................................................

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

1 FORMAL POLITICS AND MALAISE ........................................................................ 14

2 GENDER .................................................................................................................. 39

3 RACE ..................................................................................................................... 73

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................... 102
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>August 10, 1935 Je Suis Partout “The Soviet Alliance to France. - My love knows no borders.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1934 Je Suis Partout advertisement for “La Sudation Scientifique.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>July, 6 1935 Je Suis Partout Advertisement for “La Sudation Scientifique.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Je Suis Partout July 27, 1935 This page is typical of the newspaper’s coverage of the “conflit Italo-abyssin,” permeated with racist images. Note John Bull and the Ethiopian child, and the “Masculine Fashion in London” cartoons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Je Suis Partout, July 6, 1935 “Abyssinia asks for an opening to the sea. …And here is contentment!” Note the strong and masculine depiction of the Italian soldier as compared to the caricature of the Ethiopian man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Je Suis Partout, August 17, 1935. “Abyssinia As Used By Foreigners: The throne of the Lion of Judah in the photographs published in Europe and in reality.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Je Suis Partout, March 17, 1934 “While Marianne occupied herself with her neighbors, she did not see what was dancing on her nose.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Je Suis Partout, March 17, 1934 “Everything escapes Justice; she knows the punishment of the Masonic pillory, and Blum himself thumbs his nose!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Je Suis Partout, February 27, 1934</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

On the 26th of May 2013, tellingly, the French equivalent of Mother’s Day a surprisingly large crowd of protestors flooded the streets of Paris as part of the “Manif Pour Tous” or “protest for everyone” movement. Protestors of every stripe or ideology are an unsurprising sight in Paris, where powerful labor and professional unions and multiple political organizations regularly demonstrate for their sundry causes. However, this unusual protest, also called the Manif Monstre a play on the double meaning of monstre (monster) referencing both the monstrous number of protestors and the supposed monstrosity which they opposed, stands out from other demonstrations in that it was opposed to the recent legalization of gay marriage. The Manif Pour Tous movement regularly drapes itself in the rhetoric of protecting the French family and the importance to future generations in France that the challenge of legal gay marriage be defeated.

Though traditionalist challenges to legal gay marriage are nothing new, the Manif Pour Tous’ rhetoric and the posters advertising their events portrayed France’s Minister of Justice and the chief architect of the new law, Christiana Taubira, as King Kong comparing the French Guiana born Justice Minister to an ape. The most infamous of these racist ape images was widely used to promote the Manif Monstre demonstration and features Minister Taubiras as King Kong terrorizing a massive crowd of protestors and the words “Manif Monstre”. Perhaps most interestingly, the racist King Kong image of Minister Taubira is clearly juxtaposed with the image of a young white French woman
wearing the republican Frisian cap. The comparison between these two figures represents the real issue at the heart of the matter: demography.

As during the troubled interwar era decades ago, contemporary France has a rapidly shifting population, and the changing racial make-up of the country making some French uncomfortable. In this way, issues such as legal gay marriage can be conceived of by their opponents as an affront to the French family, an existential crisis to all things French. The Manif pour Tous movement and others like it, regularly drape themselves in the rhetoric of protecting the French family to speak to a large contingent of French society. In so doing, they tap into an overarching language of demographic crisis that was even more pronounced and culturally meaningful in the interwar era.

By the nineteenth century France’s population had fallen far behind its Western European neighbors, a fact that was certainly not lost upon French thinkers and writers. Demography became a chief area of concern amongst French academics and popular writers. The discourse of demography became even more important and culturally relevant in France following the devastations of the First World War, which further compromised France’s already anemic population, elevating the widespread interest in demography to an obsession. The constant focus on France’s dwindling population bridged the extreme political differences typical of the era from far right or fascist thinkers across the spectrum to far left and even Communists. This cross-spectrum political and social discourse defined life in France during the interwar era, and translated into an overarching dialogue about the body and a perception of France as being somehow sick or suffering from a malaise.
The language of malaise and near obsession with the body and body politic became widespread during the interwar era, building upon nineteenth and early twentieth-century antecedents, especially surrounding the infamous Dreyfus Affair. However, this is not a mere continuity in the language of the body and sickness as the nature of French politics had radically shifted between the Wars. Throughout Europe, the interwar era lent itself to the development of radical politics given the physical, economic, and human destruction of the First World War. Fascism, beginning with Benito Mussolini’s Fascisti Party, became a popular political solution to the troubles of the day; but did this apply equally in France, where the Third Republic government was fundamentally different from those governments in Italy, Germany, or Spain, and other states where the radical right-wing system took hold?

For many years, historians of France suggested that the country exceptionally avoided the worldwide growth of fascism, suggesting instead that any elements of the ideology were vestiges of foreign influence. Further, the French historical precedent of Bonapartism, coupled with this perceived non-French influence, obscured what might be seen as Fascism, or at least fascist elements.¹ This understanding gathered support partially because of the understandably complex and emotionally fraught history of the Vichy takeover of the Third Republic. The Vichy Government of Phillipe Pétain was widely seen as an aberration imposed from the outside, by Nazi Germany after the invasion, and not as the fruit of a largely internal structure and discourse that accommodated Nazism. In short, these historians argue that France was immune to the

development of Fascism, and only suffered from it all due to foreign invasion. The Immunity Thesis nicely fits with the national mythos that became so important to post-war France, but added historical distance has demanded a more subtle analysis.

Eventually, Robert Paxton’s 1972 work *Vichy France: Old Guard New Order, 1940-1944* effectively challenged this narrative by demonstrating that many of the political elements that defined the Fascist Vichy regime were not actually solely imposed from the outside. In fact, Pétain and his followers built upon a long-standing internal movement of far right and fascist thinkers. Paxton additionally reinforced the connections between existing French ideas and the Fascist Vichy regime by analyzing the officer corps of the French Army during the Vichy regime, finding that they too were willing participants. Some Historians, building upon Paxton’s work, have suggested that France not only experienced the development of Fascism, but was, in fact, the intellectual birthplace of Fascism. Zeev Sternhell’s seminal text: *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* suggests that the key elements of Fascism developed not from the ramifications of the First World War, but from “…a crisis of liberal democracy and a crisis in socialism.” In other words, aspects of Third Republic democratic society, specifically, the promotion of the state’s importance, coupled with the socialist drive to overthrow the old order to form the core tenants of Fascism.

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4 Ibid. The populist activist George Sorrel built upon more typical Marxist or socialist ideologies yet sought to challenge the supremacy of class as a unifying factor, created this proto-fascism according to Sternhell. His populist socialism, if it can even be termed that without emphasizing class, replaced the importance of economic and social hierarchy with the importance of the nation. To Sorelians the intrinsic moral value of
Sternhell’s thesis, though useful and fascinating, remains controversial, and the emotional impact of the bad old days of the Vichy regime upon French memory partially explain this controversy, however a closer look reveals more reasons to challenge the thesis. For this project, Sternhell’s work serves as a model in his assertion that extreme political right and the moderate to extreme left were not diametrically opposed to one another in all aspects. As the very title of his monograph suggests, the radical political and cultural crisis of the interwar era existed in *Neither Right nor Left*. Many political movements and organizations spanned the gap of the political spectrum. France certainly experienced an interwar era surge in Far right political pursuits. However, the political left and right ultimately shared particular forms of discourse in common in the politically extreme 1930’s. The challenges of interwar era France influenced the left and right equally, and in spite of their differences, a common set of symbolic political and cultural ideas about the body and sickness emerged uniting the two poles. Toward, this end a brief survey of the political left is needed.

Here, a less historiographical and more historical lens can shed light on the situation. Obviously, the interwar era was an époque of extremism throughout the world. The stresses of the Global Depression, and the ravages of the First World War, even amongst the victorious allied states, and further, the rise of the Soviet Union all created

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the French people with supplanted the importance class conflict. Sorelians combined an anti-big capital sentiment combined with nationalist self promotion creating something more recognizably fascist.

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5 Some Historians claim that given the dependence upon a particular state that is integral to Fascism, the only true Fascist state was Mussolini’s Italy, while others maintain an overarching definition of Fascism can be achieved. For an interesting discussion of the topic see Paxton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. New York: Vintage Books A Division of Random House, Inc, 2004. And Allardyce, Gilbert. *Generic Fascism: An’ Illusion*?. *The Fascism Reader*. Edited by Aristotle A. Kallis. New York: Routledge, 2003.
fundamental challenges to France, and the world. As the rise to prominence of fascists and the radical right demonstrates, the trend of radical solutions to the world’s ills spread throughout Europe, and included the solutions of the political left. Certainly less extreme than the fascist right, the historical prominence of Léon Blum’s Popular Front party which served to cement a left-wing alliance between more moderate republicans (ironically called the “Radicals”), Socialists, and radical Communists.

The 1930’s were especially tumultuous times for the Third Republic, but eventually a alliance formed uniting the three major political units of the left bringing some stability. Several governments had formed and disbanded before 1933 when Radical Socialist Edouard Daladier, formed his own government. The Radicals drew inspiration from the Revolutionary traditions of French republicanism placing them on the French ‘left’ albeit in a different way than the socialist and communist parties that would later become their allies. By 1934, the political left, from Daladier’s moderate Radical Socialists to the Stalinist Parti Communiste Français (PCF), joined forces in an unprecedented coalition government led by the socialist intellectual and member of the SFIO socialist party, Léon Blum. Left-wing parties had occasionally formed governing alliances dating back to the Dreyfus Affair, yet these alliances were typically temporary and increasingly strained over time, and more limited in scope.\(^6\) Often times, some socialists (SFIO) and communists (PCF) saw participating in the bourgeois structures of parliamentary democracy as counter to the very ideas they sought to promote. In spite of the tensions between the three ‘left’ wing parties, they managed successfully to form an

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\(^6\) Ibid, 3.
effective, if not close knit, governing alliance by 1935. The unlikely alliance arose as in response to the increasingly dangerous activities of the radical right, including fascists and royalists. The French right, as discussed above, gained popularity in the troubled interwar years, arguably reaching its height by 1934. Just as Benito Mussolini’s fascist combat leagues organized mass demonstrations and the March on Rome, and German fascists engaged in similar activities, a variety of far right voices gathered for a massive demonstration in the Place de la Concorde on February 6, 1934. The Third Republic was clearly divided between extreme political differences.

Given the divisive state of interwar French politics, defined in many ways by the newly united left under the leadership of Léon Blum and the banner of the Popular Front diametrically opposed to the divided forces of fascism and the far right, it is difficult to envision any similarities the two might have shared. However, the interwar era offered a variety of challenges which distressed equally the political right and left. Chief amongst these was, of course, the issue of the presumed demographic crisis. The crisis will be explained in more depth in the body of this work, but put simply French imagined their country as missing people, in spite of the influx of immigrants and vast numbers of colonial peoples at hand. An anemic level of reproduction coupled with the devastation of the First World War created a massive deficit in the “French” population (in other words white gentile non-immigrants) and a gender imbalance. The widespread perception of demographic crisis severely influenced every aspect of French society culturally and politically, and can be seen in the French preoccupation with the language of the body.
The widespread perception of demographic crisis in France cut across political division and ideology. Statistical treatments of the ailing French population took on a great level of importance as early as the late nineteenth-century. French academic departments developed the social science of demography, and the population statistics were used to support all manner of political ideas. Since the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, statistical analysis of the country’s population seemed to indicate a downward trend, unlike all of France’s immediate neighbors. Across the political spectrum, France’s future seemed doomed to many. The statistical anomaly of France’s declining population became the fodder for political rhetoric, and helped to fundamentally reshape the conceptualizations held by French citizens of their own state. Gender, race, and politics were all shaped by the discourse of demographic decline in the nineteenth-century, and would become even more influential after the disastrous First World War.

The conceptual link between France’s anemic population and the language and imagery of the body can be observed in the discourse of the interwar era, and sometimes even earlier. Historians have observed a particular kind of medical-social language coloring French discourse as early as the Dreyfus Affair. Here, conceptions of race, religion, and gender all fused together in the context of the body- both that of the individual and the body-politic of France itself. Christopher Forth points out in his seminal text *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* that the discursive line between the explicitly sickness-related dialogue of the individual body and the

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metaphorical language of the body politic became increasingly thin. One advertisement in the Catholic anti-Semitic newspaper *La Croix*, for instance, was aimed at selling lozenges, but imitated the style and language of the anti-Dreyfusard articles surrounding it and indicted the symptoms of the flu as “traitors.” By adopting the language of the anti-Semitic accusations against Captain Dreyfus’ supposed treason the newspaper directly linked the issues challenging the body-politic and the corporal body. From here, Forth influentially argues that the Dreyfus Affair took on such great importance, in part, because it spoke to a deeper divide in the French body politic.

Forth’s method of reading the language of metaphorical sickness in French political discourse is a valuable tool for analyzing the even more body-obsessed interwar era. World War I exacerbated the already severe perception of demographic crisis putting issues of the French population to the forefront of political and social discourse. With it came specific claims about the nature of the French ‘race’ and body. Though France’s ailing population could have been readily supplemented by immigration or the more full integration of colonial peoples, this struck most French as undesirable at best given the popular construction of “French race,” and whiteness. Ultimately, then, the demographic crisis itself was a fabrication, yet the wide spread fears the perception of crisis created cannot be ignored. In the scramble to repopulate the nation, colonial peoples an obvious choice for immigration, were often deemed inadequate due to imagined differences in the body and the effect this would have on the body-politic itself. Toward this end, French scientists applied their *medical* lens to the issue, even evaluating

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the potential of different ‘races’ as laborers, comparing Italians, Arabs, and more.\footnote{Elisa Camiscioli, \textit{Reproducing the French Race Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century}, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 60.} French political discourse focused on aspects of the body as the key to curing France’s ailments, utilizing medical dialogue, sexuality, and a corporeal understanding of the body-politic to attract attention. All of this indicates that France’s demographic crisis was something more than a mere issue of population numbers. Rather, in the minds of many interwar French thinkers a fear of racial degeneration posed a serious threat. From here, it is not difficult to see how the already prominent dialogue of the body took on a specifically medical tinge; France’s body was not just small, She was sick.

The language of illness and malaise is evident in a great deal of interwar era political discourse and intellectual activity. Given the extreme times and unprecedented political situation, it is logical, if perhaps counterintuitive, that both the Popular Front and its political supporters and the radical right would share certain ideas. Each group undoubtedly held very distinct ideas, and participated in larger political movements such as the so called International Red or international fascism. However, all of France faced the same challenges, and more importantly the same perception, which linked population to health, race, and gender. Due to the these challenges thinkers from Popular Front leader and prime minister Léon Blum to the fascist intellectual and journalist Robert Brasillach shared a body-centered discourse of illness and population. Though they obviously disagreed about how to go about healing the state, they shared an underlying conception of France as ill, a malaise brought about through the demographic crisis. This thesis argues, in other words, that for all the political division, the left and right shared a
unified form of discourse that conceived of the nation and the body-politic as suffering from a metaphorical illness. It does not aim to suggest that the Popular Front and the various fascist groups of the era were politically or ideologically identical, however the two poles shared an underlying discourse, which allowed them to communicate with one another and to their own political bases. Conceding at least this level of parity between the left and right helps to shed light on how such radically different ideologies developed out of the same intellectual and political milieu, and partially why the interwar era in France bred so many varieties of politics. Taken as a whole, this parity demonstrates that conceptual issues about France’s ‘health,’ did more to color the identity and ideology of thinkers than larger international events.

In order to more fully explicate this discursive similarity, the Russian literary critic Bakhtin’s writings provide a valuable analytical system. The first chapter will more fully explain the particular application of Bakhtinian thought in terms of the discourse of malaise. Here, a brief survey will suffice: Bakhtin conceived of dialogue as a social construction that functions in one of two ways, either as a divisive form of speech or as an expanding and unifying speech, called “heteroglossia” and “unitary language” respectively.\textsuperscript{10} In the context of the interwar French discourse of malaise and illness, heteroglossic language was the political and cultural distinctions which divided French politics, and the unitary language was the shared language of metaphorical illness in light of the demographic crisis.

The metaphorical language of illness constituted an intellectual means of conceptualizing the real political and demographic issues which challenged the waning Third Republic. They can be traced in a variety of sources and ideas in various arenas. In order to limit this study the following three historical categories of analysis lend themselves quite nicely to the effort: politics, gender and race. The first chapter, dedicated to politics, serves to lay out the argument that the political left and right fundamentally shared a conception of France and her attached body-politic as sick, and the rhetorically distinct ways in which both the far right and left sought to grapple with this, yet shared fundamentally similar perceptions. Next, a discussion of gender seeks to demonstrate the means by which France was engendered in the conception of the body, and how these constructed notions of gender were seen both as a source of, and a solution to, metaphorical illness. Finally, the entire argument will be tied together in a discussion of race, which was seen as key to the health of the French body-politic. These three analytical lenses each constitute important aspects of the discourse of malaise in interwar France; all three were intimately interwoven with one another, together composing a broader intellectual discourse.

“Strange times.” Robert Brasillach tersely described his gradual journey to becoming a fascist in his book *Notre Avant-Guerre.* 11 His journey to fascism, or so he claimed, was an arduous process in reaction to what he saw as the slowly degenerating society around him. He placed the lion’s share of guilt for France’s problems on Prime Minister Léon Blum and his administration, framing France’s failure as the terrible

effects of Jews and Communists seeping into power and government posts. He and his fascist comrades founded *Je Suis Partout* as a means of combating the feminizing and degenerating effects, as they saw them, of the changing racial and political failures of French societies: “As a sop to feminism, Léon Blum had taken women into his cabinet: a fat bossy Jewess, Mme Brunschvig, and a skinny little, weasel faced schoolmistress.”

Interestingly, however, fear of the gendered and racial demographic implications of the French population was far from limited to far right-wing thinkers like Brasillach. Even the left-wing target of *Je Suis Partout’s* vitriolic attacks, Blum himself, saw the demographic crisis afflicting France as a fundamental threat to the republic. Despite their vast differences, the political left and right were ultimately united by the shared discourse of the sickness and malaise that the French saw pervading their anemic population.

“Strange times” indeed.

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12 Ibid, 200.
CHAPTER 1

FORMAL POLITICS AND MALAISE

The 1930’s were difficult times across globe. The world, especially Europe, was recovering from the physical and social destruction of the First World War, and the worldwide economic depression. As a result, millions of people turned to extreme political solutions, ranging from left-wing’s solutions such as various forms of anarchism or communism, or the radical right-wing’s answers, most notably fascism. However, as discussed throughout this project, though these radical solutions spoke to the international communist and fascist movements, they fundamentally responded to the nature of the societies in which they existed.

This is especially true of Fascism, as any form of the ideology intrinsically depends upon the culture and country that created it. In fact, some historians suggest that creating a rubric for an international understanding of fascism is not even possible. In other words, any ultra-nationalistic ideology is exactly that, nationalistic, and fascism as an idea and word comes from the case of Benito Mussolini in Italy and is sometimes considered to be a unique aspect of Italian history. In other words, international nationalism is an oxymoron but the extreme political environment of the 1930’s allowed for strange ideologies, and as such some international elements of the ultra-right-wing ideology can by observed.

Radical political solutions to the 1930’s social ills spread across the globe as a response to the Depression. France, however suffered from a unique set of circumstances in light of the demographic crisis. The country’s shrinking population dominated every aspect of public discourse, from gender roles to advertising, and of course in the realm of formal politics. It is, perhaps, unsurprising to claim that radical right and fascist organizations such as the Croix de Feu carried a pro-natalist bent, however, as the country dealt with its small population and the destruction of the First World War, both sides of the political spectrum seem to have been largely informed by a demographic discourse. France herself was seen as sick or broken and this is reflected in the ways in which both the political left and right sought to change the country. Put simply, France was seen as missing people in a substantive way, and divergent political organizations and thinkers dealt with this same issue albeit with very different rhetoric. The political left approached the topic with an optimistic dialogue and the right with a more apocalyptic language; however both sides of the spectrum were similarly concerned with and colored by the perception that France was broken or sick.

These extreme ideologies did not, however, exist solely in the realm of political thought and philosophical ideology, as a series of governments fell to fascism throughout the European continent. Mussolini and the Fascisti, the founders of fascism itself, led a march on the Italian capital of Rome in October 1922. Mussolini gained an appointed position from the Italian king, leading to fascist domination of the government. By November, 1923, Adolf Hitler and the fascist Nazi party had staged an unsuccessful imitation of the March on Rome, known as the “Beer Hall Putsch.” Despite many claims
to the contrary, France’s radical right and fascists attempted an eerily similar march on Paris in the eventful evening of February 6, 1934.

On that fateful night, thousands of members of the right descended upon the French capital to protest, among other things, the dismissal of the Prefect of Police, thought to have been sympathetic to the far right. Additionally, France’s media had been sharing the shocking story of the so called the Stavisky Affair for months. This financial scandal might not be totally unfamiliar today, and culminated in the suicide of Stavisky himself. This contributed to the widely-held belief that the government was complicit with the thievery, and even the belief the government murdered him. The financial scandal tore the country apart and forced the previous ruling coalition to step down, making way for the new government of the radical and unproven Edouard Daladier.

Myriad radical right and fascist political organizations, veterans groups, and paramilitary associations, including the Action Française and the Croix de Feu, gathered to protest the new Daladier government. Toward this end, dissatisfied French gathered on the Place de La Concorde en masse demanding in both their signage and shouts “A Bas Les Voleurs!” or ‘Down with thieves.’ They marched toward the Place de la Concorde, a bridge leading to the Palais Bourbon where Daladier and the new government were actually in session. Though the name “Concorde” itself implies peace, the area does have a history of political violence stretching back further than the violent events of 1934 as it was once the site of the guillotine of the famous revolutionary period

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16 *Je Suis Partout* February 7, 1934.
known as “The Terror,” a fact not lost on the writers of the radical right-wing newspaper *Je Suis Partout*. The newspaper parodied the deployment of mounted police or “mobile guards” by suggesting that even the absolutist monarch Louis XVI did not order his Swiss guards to kill his own people. At some point in the evening, shots were fired, likely by the right-wing protestors themselves, and in turn the police returned the volley. As the violence and civil unrest continued through the night, however, the mobile guards became the only hope, though the protestors were not unarmed against this threat, carrying marbles and blades to hurt the horses.

The rioters were eventually dispersed after a night of death and property damage, but they successfully left their mark on the face of French government as well, given that the Daladier stepped down and disbanded his government as a reaction to the night’s violent protest. This came tenuously close to paralleling Mussolini’s March on Rome, as the government disbanded in response to street violence, an event unprecedented in the Third Republic, but it did not sound the death knell of the political left in France. Quite to the contrary, these events inspired Léon Blum to create his historical alliance party the Front Populaire, (henceforth the Popular Front), and came to dominate the French government, for a few short years until it collapsed. This failure coupled with the Nazi invasion and the subsequent Vichy Regime of Pétain forever altered France. In light of these troubling times, it may seem absurd to suggest commonality between the fascist right and the Popular Front left. After all, in the aftermath of these events right-wing

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
intellectuals like Robert Brasillach continued to refer to this riot and attempted coup d’état as “the revolution that failed,” and called those fascists killed in the struggle “brave revolutionaries.” Similarly, the highly influential right-wing newspaper he occasionally edited *Je Suis Partout*, reflected this sentiment in its sarcastic comparison of the actions of the police with those of King Louis XVI, who did not attack with the Swiss guards.

**Bakhtin and Demographic Language**

How then, can the political discourse and ideas of the interwar era be seen as expressing similar ideas from the right and left in a time so clearly divided? This is a result of the overwhelming importance the demographic crisis to France at this time. The right and left had obvious and substantive differences, and each spoke to internationalist movements; however each was also dependent upon a specifically French discourse concerning population as predominantly expressed through the language of sickness. Though the two sides sought to address imagined demographic crisis in different ways, their political disparity actually amounted to rhetorical differences. The political left and right spoke to very different audiences and utilized different rhetoric, but ultimately both poles, whether it was the Popular Front or the Action Française participated in the same over-arching discourse. These rhetorical differences separated the unlike political parties into separate rhetorical groups engaged in the same discourse. This discourse was wholly founded upon the language of illness and malaise; the French mania for the body which dominated the rhetoric surrounding demographic crisis clearly defines the overarching discourse of the day.

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The Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin provides a useful framework for conceptualizing this social discourse. He does so by juxtaposing elements of literature which speak to a larger, overarching dialogue, the “unitary language” to the language of the individual.\textsuperscript{21} The individual’s language is dependent upon what Bakhtin refers to as “heteroglossia,” which stands in stark contrast to the overarching conversation. Unlike this smaller language group, the Unitary Language unites and brings unlike thought processes and means of communication together. Heteroglossic language groups, on the other hand, are divisive. They become smaller and smaller by their own rhetorical means and function in terms of the individual and his or her means of communicating.\textsuperscript{22} This conceptual framework allows for the complex forces which unite and divide any given language or literary source.

Though Bakhtin’s writings were originally intended for literary understanding and critique, they certainly offer fruitful constructions for the historian as well. For the purposes of the cultural history of interwar France, the concept of the Unitary Language and Heteroglossic Language groups provides an especially enlightening means to read the past. Here, the Unitary Language is the overarching discourse which sets the stage for similarity between the political left and right, in this case the demographic crisis as conveyed through the language of illness and malaise which colored the discourse of every aspect of French society. The Heteroglossia serves as the linguistic barrier which divided the political spectrum. This is not to say that fascism and the Popular Front were

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 272.
identical, only to suggest that in light of the overwhelming demographic crisis a unitary language existed. Political discourse, regardless of the particular ideology was more informed by the perception of a degenerating society, demographic failure, infant mortality, and immigration than by international politics. Ultimately, the Unitary Language of interwar France was the overriding metaphor of France as a sick body, tying political thinkers of all stripes together in both word and deed as they sought an almost medicinal cure for France’s ills.

Bakhtin explained that these shrinking and divisive heteroglossic language groups “… arose from and were shaped by the historically *aktuell* forces at work in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups…”23 This indicates that, in his application of Bakhtinian thought, the heteroglossic left and right are shaped in their unique intellectual and rhetorical styles as a reflection of the events of the day as seen by different social groups. Contrastingly, the unitary language unites the overarching discourses of multiple language groups. Unitary language is the perfect understanding of cultural discourse as it is meant to stand in opposition to the evolutionary heteroglossic linguistic/social groups which reflect the events and reality of a time and place. Hence, Unitary Language, in our understanding the language of illness and malaise in interwar France, serves as a conceptual and unified framework of metaphorical understanding.

The hall-marks of these different rhetorical heteroglossic styles can be seen in both divisive idiosyncratic French dialogues (heteroglossia), of more importance here, and the international languages of right and the left. In keeping with the grand Marxist

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23 Ibid, 270.
tradition of historical materialism, left-wing political language was often couched in terms of an optimistic and brave march into the utopian future. This can be seen internationally in artistic movements such as the genre of socialist realism, which typically depicts happy and well-fed peasants working toward a proud Soviet future. In terms of the specifically French dialogue, the writings of Léon Blum regularly expressed incredible optimism in the face of great danger and problems. In fact, Blum was arrested and kept as a political bargaining chip by the Nazis during the Second World War. In this time he penned a typically hopeful book, *For All Mankind*, in which he outlined the core beliefs of the Popular Front ideology and a vision for the future. The book is shocking in its optimistic tones when considering that it was written during his captivity, during the war with no guarantee of an allied victory. In spite of this, after a poetic explanation of the fall of France he wrote “But it [the war] did not destroy France’s people, her soil, her nature, all the complex of traditions, convictions, and aspirations that we call today the spirit of France.”

Notice here, that in spite of the optimistic rhetorical tradition of the Left that this plainly illustrates, the statement still fits into the broader rubric of the Unitary Language. By personifying France, and gendering “her,” even bestowing her a “spirit” Blum implicitly accepts and propagates the cultural understanding of France as a body, and during the Second World War when this was written – clearly a body in need.

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Regardless of this particular work, or the exact nature of rhetoric and discourse between the political left and right, it is clear that a difference does exist. Another interesting comparison is the juxtaposition of the 1934 riots described earlier as a formative event for the French radical right, and the self-consciously republican Bastille Day rallies of the Popular Front. After the disastrous violence of 1934, the broader Cartel de Gauche, or coalition of the left, began to form, and by July the following year, they had organized an equally forceful, but far less violent series of demonstrations commemorating the anniversary of Bastille Day. These celebrations were staged across the country and required participants to take an oath vowing to feed France’s workers and defend the Republic from fascist attacks.25 These July 14th rallies served as an important means by which the Popular Front understood themselves, and distanced their politics from the violent action of the fascists and other far right protestors. In turn, the right-wing saw these Bastille Day celebrations and oaths as a preparation for a revolutionary action against the Republic.

**Demographic Crisis**

Despite these rhetorical differences and the obvious political disagreements, there is a common theme on the left and right at the time, which depended upon a particularly French issue. The demographic crisis dominated and haunted the imagination of the country through much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Often-times, the demographic crisis was seen as a direct consequence of the First World War, after all

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most of the fighting on the western Front was in France, and France sacrificed more soldiers proportionately- by bodily death or disfiguration- than other belligerent nations. However, the crisis was largely a construction of the French racial imagination. Immigration could have handily solved the demographic anemia, but pro-natalists of all political stripes demanded white French blood, not that of foreigners. As devastating as the Great War proved to be to France’s population, it was simply perceived as having pounded the last nail into the coffin of an already declining population. Over time throughout the late nineteenth century, France’s population failed to grow enough to keep up with its neighbors and on occasions even shrank. By the early twentieth century France had gone from the second highest population in the area to the fourth, being surpassed most ominously by Germany.\textsuperscript{26} The final census before war broke out indicates that by 1911 France had only 39,605,000 compared to Germany’s 64,900,000. More disturbing still, was the rate of population increase, as France had only grown from 1871 by 9.7\% as compared to Germany’s 57.8\%.\textsuperscript{27}

Though this steady population decline is evident from the nineteenth century, the Great War wildly exacerbated this issue in both the mathematical realities of population and in the popular discourse surrounding France’s well-being. An estimated 1,400,000 French people died in the war, in addition to the over a million who were permanently maimed by the conflict. Unlike the sanitized stand-ins used in the English-speaking world to describe those permanently wounded veterans, ‘handicapped’ for instance, the


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. 5.
French popular term “mutilés” clearly denotes the brutally wounded body.28 The common uses of this term, and more visually the presence of these Great War veterans, with missing limbs, or disfigured faces, were walking reminders of France’s illness. Their individual bodies made up the body of the French army and state, and by the time 1 million young mutilated men reached middle age in the interwar era their very existence surely drove the connection between France’s perceived weakness (a result of demography) and the ailing body. Perhaps most challenging to the French were the estimated 1,400,000 French who were never even born as a result of the gender imbalance and war deaths: nearly one and one half million individuals who could never participate in the body-politic.29 Not surprisingly then, this left a hole in the population that was particularly daunting by the 1930’s and this source of anxiety coupled with a previously existing dialogue about the French population and moved the demographic crisis to the fore front of political discourse on both sides of the political spectrum, as seen in the language of illness.

The already declining population and the immediate devastation of the First World War were widely seen as a crisis or problem. For many years demography as an academic field had been especially popular in France, and the language of population crisis was certainly nothing new. Arsène Dumont, a popular nineteenth-century demographer made this conversation explicitly political by casting the inadequate ability of the French to reproduce in great numbers as a side effect of democracy itself. Dumont

29 Ibid, 11-12.
theorized that as democracy was founded upon an emphasis on the individual, and this led to a comfortable bourgeois class, individuals in this class in turn sought to maintain their comfort and status, which meant having fewer if any children.

While other nations were rapidly increasing in population and strength, in Dumont’s opinion population in France was “malade” or sick, as other countries experienced strong population growth, France was “stationary or partially decreasing.”  

Here the fear of France’s ‘sick’ population was an implicit critique on democracy itself, which was certainly not lost on radical fascists and communists alike as they critiqued the Third Republic’s government. In another work, *La morale basée sur la démographie* Dumont furthered the connections between a morally bankrupt society and the language of sickness saying “Unless they refuse to recognize the price in human life, birth and death, health and sickness are seen as equal things.”  

It was certainly clear that the country was perceived of as unhealthy, and population crisis carries with it a huge moral burden – to heal France from this metaphorical malaise. Dumont and other demographers like him employed the language of an ill nation to describe more immediate political peril, especially given that the growing population of France’s bordering countries were often used for comparison. This language of sickness predated the Great War, and was very culturally relevant even then.

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32 Ibid. 19. It is interesting to consider that the Franco-Prussian was not too distant a memory when these conferences at the School of Anthropology were delivered, and later turned into a book. A country with a sick population could not defend itself from war, an image that would be equally important to the French following the Great War.
This was not an isolated philosopher of the late nineteenth century decrying the end of French civilization but rather a widespread discourse. Perhaps a more well-known pre-war thinker to American audiences is the founder of sociology Emile Durkheim. Durkheim frequently spoke of population issues and the demographic crisis as they were important aspects of the French discourse at the time. He even published a review of Dumont’s monograph about morality and demographics in which he too picked up on the language of illness. While he critiques Dumont’s direct connections between democracy, morality, and birth rates/populations, Durkheim recognized a moral basis for demographic reform saying, that a “moral rationale” was certainly possible but that Dumont failed to create a convincing portrait.\textsuperscript{33} His critique focuses on the lack of emphasis on religion and the crass reduction of morality to numbers, but the fact that an intellectual giant addressed this work and implicitly accepted the premise was very telling itself and indicative of a larger societal discourse, which gained even more importance after the crushing population shift of the First World War.

This discourse was not limited to the nineteenth century, as the war obviously exacerbated the demographic crisis to the point of a national emergency. By the 1930’s France’s natality rate was lower than even prewar levels, probably as a result of the estimated one million four hundred thousand French who were never conceived following the Great War. This was reflected across the political spectrum. It existed, obviously, on the right amongst myriad pro-natalist organizations and pronouncements, but also amongst thinkers on the left. The famous historical and social academic journal,

and the attached historiographical school, *Annales d’Histoire Économique et Sociale* was widely known, in part for its famously progressive politics, especially as its founders were well known as Dreyfussards decades earlier, and was enjoying great notoriety by the 1930’s. As the journal applied its particular style of *longue durée* analysis to the past, as well as contemporary political events, its authors too were pulled into the popular discourse of demographic crisis and the language of malaise.

Here again, a critical review of another academic’s text allows for the observation of a larger discourse about population and politics, this time from a left-wing position in the 1930’s. As is typical of the Annales style, statistical data comes to the forefront of the historical-political discussion, and is used to express approval of the reviewed work by George Mauco. The author in an ostensibly progressive journal argued that the quantity of prewar immigrants was at least partially responsible for the falling birthrates of the ‘French.’ Furthermore, the concept of demographic shifts are addressed here as a “problem” which must be addressed. The mathematically precise analysis of the relationship between birth rates and French industrial output is more reserved than the alarmist rhetoric of Dumont, or of the fascist right, but this is a *rhetorical* difference, not a fundamentally different understanding of the country and its ills. The immediate need for political action evidenced here is clear “France… is the only European country not to experience this [a demographic and industrial post-war boom], to the contrary a demographic congestion.”

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35 Ibid. 489.
Malaise and Legislation

Activists from across the political spectrum advocated reforms dedicated to remedying France’s ailing population as they saw it. This even resulted in effective and long lasting pieces of pro-natalist legislation such as the formation of the allocations familiales or the distribution of laudatory medals for French mothers who bore large families. One of the most active and influential of such organizations was the L’Alliance Nationale pour l’accroissement de la population Française (National Alliance henceforth.) The National Alliance regularly released political statements through the lens of population crises and the conceptualization of the French population as suffering from some malaise. A September 1933 edition of the organization’s journal Revue de l’Alliance Nationale pour l’accroissement de la population Française even addressed the issue of women’s suffrage over a decade before French women would achieve that right. When the National Assembly debated the hotly contested issue, the leader of the National Alliance offered his advice in an open letter to Senator Louis Martin.

The letter respectfully requested that women’s suffrage not be allowed to become the norm in France by connecting women’s suffrage to the source of perceived illness: birth rates. “The vote for women, in fact, does not allow one to be worried about the results: everywhere it is established and since it is [established] the birth rate decreases.”36 The open letter to Senator Martin, and the National Alliance’s surrounding treatment of women’s suffrage further suggested that a family vote rather than a women’s vote could serve as the real answer. Women needed to take care of France’s next

36 Revue de l’Alliance Nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, September 1933, 261.
generations not trouble themselves with the strains of politics. Women did not gain the right to vote until after the Second World War at least partially because of the political ramifications of the widely perceived demographic crises. The National Alliance’s treatment of women’s suffrage was not an uncommon way of thinking about the issue at the time. However, their particular interest in the statistical inevitability, as Alliance saw it, of further demographic ruin of the state if women were to vote sheds an interesting light on the conceptual connections between every aspect of French politics and the ultimate importance of rebuilding the population. The Alliance, like many political organizations of the time even framed their political critiques in the language of metaphorical sickness and malaise.

The same issue of the National Alliance’s journal, promoted and explained a new pamphlet released by the organization called “The White Race in Danger of Death.” The alarmist article warned that the white peoples in general and the French in particular were victims of their own selfishness and individuality which cursed white peoples with a kind of malaise. “While these people, including us, moved voluntarily toward decrepitude, the Blacks and Yellow [African and Asian colonial people] keep their boundless fertility, which threatens to overwhelm the relatively close future of the impaired white nations.”

Here the language of decrepitude or decay indicates the conceptual connections between politics, a narrative of national degeneration, and demography.

The fear of white people being would be quickly outnumbered was not the only concern. “The White Race in Danger” even expressed an alarmist malaise concerning the

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37 Revue de l’Alliance Nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, September 1933, 258.
prominence of other white ‘races’ and the demographic make-up of France. Italy and Germany were juxtaposed to France and Japan in terms of population trends. All the European nations were depicted as suffering from an ultimately declining population and dire predictions for the future, with France suffering much more than its neighbors. Japan, a non-white country, on the other hand was depicted as enjoying the benefits of rapidly expanding population. Further, the National Alliance built upon a somewhat medical dialogue to explain the demographic situation. In exploring the “causes and remedies” of demographic crisis, a desire to elevate one’s social position, the distribution of knowledge of birth control, and weak religious sentiments were all indicted as causes for France’s Malthusian population. By criticizing French individualism, and weakness of the Catholic Church, the National Alliance made a political claim about the source of the country’s ills. These ills were reflected, so the Alliance argued, in the physical malaise of the French population, especially as the country suffered from an aging population. France needed youth, to avoid the kind of national degeneration and decay which the organization feared to be imminent.

In 1920, after much debate, the National Assembly forbade birth control in the French Republic. More than that, the law passed by a large majority of the National Assembly also banned the sharing of any materials, deemed “propaganda,” which either advocated birth control methods and abortion or explained how to prevent pregnancy. The law continued and by 1923, harsher sentences were imposed upon doctors who performed abortions and the women who received them, resulting in several

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38 Ibid, 259.
prosecutions. The pro-family and reproduction discourse that allowed the law to be so popularly passed built upon the same rhetoric of the body which united the left and right. Tellingly, these laws reflected the reification of gender roles (to be discussed more fully in chapter two) in that the ban on contraception and information about it did not outlaw condoms, only methods which were considered under the domain of the woman’s control. The condom exemption was justified by the argument that this particular type of prophylactic protected its user from sexually transmitted diseases. However, it seems to be a more ominous patriarchal undertone considering that this not only made the law far less effective, but allowed for men to maintain a level of freedom that did not extend to women.

The demographic implications of this law are obvious; in order to create more French children the abolition of birth control and abortion are obvious first steps. However, it becomes even clearer that this spoke to a larger political discourse when one considers that similar laws were attempted before the war, but following the huge losses in the conflict it passed with a large majority afterward. This is but one example of pronatalist legislation that came from the center left dominated chamber of deputies during the interwar era, including a tax on single women, medals to large families, and most enduringly, the allocations familiales. Together they demonstrate a larger trend in which the dominant political dialogue of the Republic, left and right, was largely

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid, 132.
informed by the troubling demographic crisis. Though the radical right and fascists are generally known as the voice of pro-natalism, as an ideological necessity was to build up the strength of a given people, it is clear that France’s particular problems over rode this traditional difference.

The implications of gender and the metaphor of the body politic may seem like an overwrought means of understanding the past, but is actually of great importance. The dialogue of the body indicates that France was grappling with an corporeal problem. Issues such as the dire demographic crisis, especially following the brutal Great War, that involved the body promoted a discourse dependent upon the body metaphor. Further, it recognizes of the “corporality of historical subjects.” This corporality was recognized by the people in the interwar era as the connections between the state and the body politic permeated every aspect of national discourse and politics. This is evident in the way in which depictions of the body and their political antecedents interact with one another on all levels of society from the high culture of political intellectuals like Leon Blum or the right-wing Robert Brasillach, or even in low brow, but equally telling images from political cartoons and advertisements. These images of the body are colored by the language of malaise and corporality.

**Heteroglossia of the Right**

Images of the body dominated newspapers on both sides of the spectrum, each somehow seeking to solve France’s ills by attention to the body, either explicitly or

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implicit. This can be seen in the myriad advertisements and political cartoons which focus on the body. *Je Suis Partout’s* advertisements are almost exclusively dedicated to products which concern the body including various snake oils or devices which offer rejuvenation such as “La Sudation Scientifique” a mobile steam bath that offered the user a renewed youth (a tempting proposition for a society facing an aging population, seen as lacking in healthful vigor) as well as a panacea for any number of physical ailments.⁴⁴ Similar discourse exists in the more mainstream center-left journal *Paris Soir.* Discursive understandings of malaise were reflected in a similar fashion advertising many products centered on the body, and even using the sick body as a culturally resonant way to sell products that had very little to do with medicine. In one particular case, an advertisement proclaimed “A doctor does not have the right to be late.”⁴⁵ The advertisement did not promote malpractice insurance or prescriptions; it was in fact motor oil. Given the environment in which the body was the root of France’s national anxiety and the language by which it was expressed, such an advertisement is not as ridiculous as it seems, rather it is an intelligent way to sell motor oil.

The overarching Unitary language of the body and the language of malaise are evident in the ways in which various policy goals of the Blum administration and the Popular Front were sold to the general population. One of the administration’s greatest legislative achievements was the creation of mandatory two week paid vacations for French workers. In the context of the global depression, this was a huge coup for the working class and allowed it to see more of the country as well as relax and rejuvenate.

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⁴⁴ Ibid. multiple issues.
⁴⁵ *Paris Soir*, 1935.
their bodies, the constituent parts of the body politic and the Third Republic itself. Often times, pictures of happy workers enjoying their vacations on bicycle trips in which strenuous exercise, made possible by this previously unavailable leisure time, were utilized to promote the legislation.

**Military Weakness and the Weak Body**

One avenue in which the heteroglossia of the rhetorical schools left and right alike experienced the same unitary language of corporality and malaise of the body politic was in the realm of foreign policy. Both ends of the political spectrum were equally dismayed by France’s crippled population, or at least their perception of it, in large part because of the fear of invasion. After all, the population had steadily decreased, especially compared to Germany, since the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and the First World War was seen as a direct result of a sick population. Further it is impossible to ignore the massive impact the destruction of the war exerted on France both in terms of missing people and gender imbalance, and over a million brutally wounded soldiers served as walking reminders of France’s wounded body.46 This state of affairs did not apply solely to domestic politics, but deeply colored France’s interactions with other countries.

Much of the discourse of the body seems to have been framed explicitly in terms of military weakness in the face of another international conflict. How could France defend herself from an invading country with an insufficient supply of young men to send to the army? This fear was well founded considering that Germany had invaded twice

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before in the previous century. The fear of military inferiority was exacerbated by the 
1930’s when the rise of extremist ideologies such as fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain 
as well as the dominance of communism in the newly formed Soviet Union constituted 
serious threats to many countries, not just France. These ubiquitous threats were 
especially intimidating to French given the widespread understanding of demographic 
crisis, the resultant gender imbalance and perceived lack of people would have made for 
a very small army.

Both the political left and right feared their neighbors, but not in the same way. 
Once again the heteroglossic communities were divided rhetorically, but in line with one 
another ideologically. The Popular Front and the political left understandably feared the 
rise of Nazi Germany, especially since it faced fascist enemies internally as well. 
Perhaps more interestingly, however, the far right and fascists feared the Soviet Union 
and communist revolution internally. This anxiety, like most of French discourse at the 
time was permeated with the language of the body, in its corporality and gendered 
aspects reflecting the demographic crisis which both put France in danger and informed 
perceptions of the world.

An August 1935 edition of the influential flagship of the fascist press Je Suis 
Partout featured a political cartoon of France personified as, what else, a beautiful 
woman, exemplified this connection. France sits passive and seduced by a portly Soviet 
general, whose corpulence belies both population density and communist excess. In the 
image, the General reached slyly behind France’s back to hand a dagger to a dirty 
working class man; the cartoon, meant to protest the temporary alliance between France
and the Soviet Union problematizes both the political arrangement itself and that population disparity that made France so vulnerable. The caption which read “The Soviet Alliance with France – ‘My love knows no borders’” certainly intended to chastise the Blum administration and the Popular Front, but does so by participating in two larger dialogues the fear of the Soviet Union and the perception of the body politic as vulnerable by its very corporality.\(^47\) Here, as in France itself, corporeal sexuality creates the danger; it is not too great a leap to connect the body politics metaphor to the weakness of the state itself.

\[\text{Figure 1}\]

August 10, 1935 Je Suis Partout

“The Soviet Alliance to France. - My love knows no borders.”

\(^47\) Je Suis Partout, 1935.
Marianne’s ‘love’ boundless as it may be, could not create enough young French men to defend from a Soviet threat. This cartoon seen through Arsène Dumont’s rubric, demonstrates France’s own democratic bourgeois excess as having created a soft and self-absorbed people, so the emphasis on the body seen here was part of a larger over-arching unitary language of the demographic malaise which permeated French discourse far more deeply than the international goals of either fascism or the international left.

The metaphorical understanding of the corporeality of the body-politic intimately connected, in French conceptualizations, the body of the individual to the well-being of the country as a whole. In this way individual health of the body became inextricably linked to the metaphorical health of the nation. As such, anything perceived as an affront to that health was seen to exert a deep impact upon its counterpart. In other words, when France’s racial ‘hygiene’, for example, was challenged by immigration it was seen as fundamentally weakening the genetic stock of individual French. Further, the widespread acceptance of demographic crisis created a ready-made ailment which was transmuted into the language and understanding of sickness or malaise.

The “Health” of the Colonies

Another aspect of foreign policy that was shaped by the demographic crisis and the dominance of body and sickness related discourse took place in the colonies. France looked to immigration to make up for her missing people but the obvious choice of colonial peoples, whether from the Maghreb-Bain or Indo-China, did not meet the racial criterion of the day.\(^{48}\) Instead, the French government sought to expand through the

\(^{48}\) Race will be dealt with in the third chapter.
colonies and revitalize the body-politic. In Indochina especially, the climate was seen as a massive challenge for French colonists, which sapped their energy and contributed to widespread fears of the feminization and creolization of French soldiers. In this context, resort towns such as Dalat allowed for the colonists to retire to a more European environment, and strengthen their bodies. The creation of these mountain spaces in the case of Indochina, and the colonial spaces more broadly, constituted a physical space, and a way in which the metropole could rejuvenate itself more broadly.

In the grand scheme of twentieth-century history, the international conflict between far left and far right was one of the most influential series of events in recent memory. Clearly, each side of the political spectrum was separated both ideologically and in terms of discourse. Each group spoke to vastly different rhetorical and ideological communities, yet in spite of all these differences the two were engaged in a dialogue which spanned the gap between radical right and left. This unitary language community was defined by the overarching discourse of the demographic crisis and the resultant French mania concerning the body and the metaphorical body of the state. By examining this unifying language it becomes clear that the two seemingly opposed sides of the political spectrum had much more in common than commonly thought given that they were both operating in what was perceived as a sick or broken nation.

CHAPTER TWO

GENDER

Of all the challenges which plagued France during the interwar era, demography and the gender imbalance certainly garnered the most attention. Most of the fighting in the Western Front of the First World War took place within France’s borders, killing millions of French men. The already challenged French population suffered more in terms of human losses proportionally during the Great War than any other Western European power – even the defeated German army never incurred the same population loss as France. The statistical loss was shocking. Up to 10.5 percent of the “active male population” lost their lives during the conflict. The resultant population loss and gender imbalance only worsened over time as the long-term effects of poison gases and the horrors of war took their toll on survivors. Well over three million of those who did make it through the conflict were injured, and over one million brutally disfigured. These startling figures severely exacerbated the focus on the individual body and the health of the state in the already population-weary Third Republic. The gendered experiences of the home front and the stresses of combat or camaraderie of the trenches truly set the stage for gender politics of the troubled interwar era.

51 Ibid, In fact in French word describing them, “mutilés” lacks the sanitized English euphemisms for the handicapped, reflecting the French conceptualization of the body upon which these disfigured veterans would act.
The Antecedents of French Gender Discourse and the Body

Very early on in the war the effects of the war created a perceived division between men and women in the Third Republic. Often times, veterans of the war considered women incapable of understanding their shared male experience of combat, and the economic activities of women during the conflict served to further alienate men from women as it was deemed to be frivolous and undermining the larger war effort. The resulting environment, a society with more women than men, and a perceived tension between the two lent itself to the widespread belief that something was fundamentally wrong in France. In the realm of gender, as in formal politics, this idea spanned the political spectrum from anarchists, republicans, and socialists on the left to royalists and fascists on the right, and manifested itself in the language of metaphorical illness and malaise.

Gender as a category of historical analysis can help us examine this discursive understanding of the war’s consequences. As Joan Scott argued in her important work *Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis* gender is often employed to discuss other issues. “Gender, then, provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction.” After all, the only solution the French widely considered to their small populace was reproduction. Further, the body obsession and medical discourse endemic to the interwar era required a gendered understanding of the body-politic. Matters of reproduction, social malaise, and

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the language of illness all reflect on the actual lived lives and conceptualizations of historical actors. Deconstructing the heavily-loaded notions associated with gender can shed a great deal of light on the past, especially in the reference to cultural reactions to the demographic crisis. Toward this end, it is important to consider the corporeality of the subjects, both to confront the ‘intimate’ and also to understand the bio-political cultural understandings this work is meant to explore. Gender, then, is related to but distinct from the physically sexed body; rather it is the cultural constructions surrounding the categories of male and female. This is not how the French thinkers of the 1930’s understood gender, however. To them gender roles were direct results of physical sex, and the strains of demographic crisis and the bad old days of the “hollow years” exerted an unfortunate and real physical impact on the sexed body of the individual, as well as the conceptually gendered French body-politic.

Even in the years before the Great War gender deeply colored French discourse and the corporeal understanding of the body-politic. As far back as the Dreyfus Affair, political discourse regularly took on a distinctive gender context in light of what was perceived of as the corrupting influences of modern life. The overwhelming sense that modern life imparted degenerating effects on the body-politic (evident in any Zola novel) was directly linked to the idea of the degeneration of the individual body. This specifically medical dialogue was not solely joined to the idea of the body, but also intimately tied to an understanding of France and her body-politics in terms of the

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54 Elisa Camsicioli, *Reproducing the French Race Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), Here the category of the “intimate” refers to the personal lives and even sexual habits of historical actors. Their understandings of reproduction, society, and culture can only be analyzed through the lens of everyday life. 3.
gendered body. Gender discourse clearly inundates language across time and space; however it became especially important in France’s Third Republic. The changing face of the French workplace meant that men often worked in offices or as clerks, not the traditional hard labor associated with masculinity. This perceived assault on masculinity or virility coupled with the degeneration of the body politic and individual body to create a crisis of masculine identity in France, coming to a head by the time of the Dreyfus Affair. Here, the health of the individual gendered body was tied to the well-being of society itself in a pseudo-medical understanding of French identity which indelibly linked (in the contemporary French understanding) the health of the individual body to the state.

Concerns over race (to be discussed more fully in the third and final chapter), class, and the ‘health’ of the Third Republic itself, were consumed through medical discourse, such as the Poncelot’s Lozenges advertisement parodying the hapless Captain’s fate to sell a medical product. As ‘manhood’ seemed to be degraded by the bourgeois luxuries of modern life, the notion that a Jewish man, traditionally seen as feminine in the racist discourse of the day, could rise to the high command of the conservative army seemed to present a fundamental challenge to the body-politic itself. The “French” body had become so bourgeois and effeminized that an outsider, a pathogen, could reach the core of French Manhood and the state itself.

One common trope through which this was expressed was the medical symbolism of obesity. In a body-obsessed nation, fearing emergent bourgeois complacency the malaise of obesity served as an appropriate and immediately

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understandable symbol. Emile Zola’s classic *The Belly of Paris* employs this metaphorical malaise as the story describes a symbolic battle between those with money and power and those without, pitting the overweight against the thin. The same body-centered imagery of obesity was employed by the political right and anti-Dreyfusards to lampoon the novelist. Depicting Zola as obese suggested that he was nothing more than the bourgeois targets of his own works, and this implied a direct relationship not only to the contemporary popularity of body discourse but also an assault on his masculinity. Sexuality, gender, and medical understandings of the body and the body-politic existed in the nineteenth century as well. These conceptualizations lent themselves to the exacerbated connections which linked the understanding of a social body to medical discourse, following the Great War. By the troubled interwar era, the medical discourse was applied to any sexual behavior or gender identity which deviated from the norm, as it was seen to harm France’s body-politic.\(^6\)

The death of 1.4 million French men, and the ‘maiming’ of over 3 million, following the Great War posed France with a serious crises.\(^7\) Demographic crisis could be neatly conceptualized through the discourse of sickness, and viewed through the lens of gender. The pro-natalism endemic to the day transcended the political and cultural spectrum of ideas and thinkers resulting both in interesting discourse and in legislation. By 1920, France banned not only contraceptive devices and the practice of abortion, an obvious step toward rebuilding the population, but also forbade the dissemination of any

'propaganda’ that might encourage their use or explain their function. This law reflected the cultural gender norms in that it both reinforced the division of gender roles and, once again, placed the onus firmly on women. The law, heavily influenced by explicitly pronatalist organizations such as the Alliance Nationale pour l’Accroissement de la Population Française or National Alliance for the Growth of the French Population, the 1920 prohibition confirmed that women were meant to reproduce without questioning. In a society in which coitus interruptus remained the predominant form of birth control, this piece of legislation served only to exacerbate the socially constructed role of women in society as reproducers and transmitters of French culture yet still subordinate to men. Women, it seemed, were in some way flawed if they could not fulfill these roles. This flaw could be viewed through a particular lens of medical discourse of illness. In fact, even the 1920 prohibition itself took the illness of the individual as an underlying principal. It built upon socially constructed gender roles implicitly given that condoms, a ‘male’ method of birth control were exempted to combat the spread of venereal disease, to maintain the health of the French population.

Just as virility and manhood were seen as under attack in the Belle Époque so too was womanhood by the early interwar era. Women were obviously necessary for the reproduction, and ultimately bringing the French ‘race’ back from the demographic brink. Historian Mary Louise-Roberts’ Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927 explores the pervasive new cultural constructions of gender

59 Ibid, 131.
that came in response to the crisis. The understanding of alienation between the genders from World War I, and the pressures of a low population, created a discursive and cultural categorization of women into three hierarchical groups: patriotic mothers of large families, tragically single women searching for a husband, and at worst modern individualistic women who cared little for gender roles or reproduction. Here too, the language of illness or malaise entered the discourse in that *Femmes Modernes*, the supposedly unpatriotic, individualistic, and promiscuous women, were framed as threats to the body-politic via their degenerating effects on individual bodies.

Even seemingly apolitical fields such as the always popular French fashion industry were caught up in the gender controversies of the day, and the pseudo-medical dialogue attached to it. “Flappers” as we might call them in the United States, the *Femmes Modernes* adopted new clothing styles, behaviors, and haircuts that were widely perceived as fundamental challenges to the social order of the day, embodying a particularly gendered malaise. Short or bobbed haircuts, seen as juvenile or masculine, were particularly egregious violations of interwar gender roles, and were even said to indicate sterility.

Books such as Victor Margueritte’s *La Garçonne*, a novel Roberts makes great use of, followed an interwar pattern. The woman, protagonist or not, scorns her traditional role as wife and mother, reproducer of the race, and leads a hedonistic life. Her masculine habits, smoking, short hair, scandalous clothing, and promiscuous sex

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61 Ibid.,
leave her ultimately empty inside, indicative of a personal malady. Finally, the woman sees the error of her ways and marries and reproduces, and all of her ills are cured.62

Even the title implies the biological understanding of France’s demographic issues, “garçon” means “boy,” but by feminizing the word, the title takes on a far more subtle meaning, the titular woman that is a boy (not a man) or boy that is woman can only be seen as fundamentally flawed in this light. Novels roughly following this trope enjoyed enormous popularity during the 1920’s owing, of course, to the contours of the demographic crisis.63

The widespread gender discourse revealed here might seem to reflect only the perceived roles women were meant to play, but the language is also markedly linked to health and illness, both that of the individual bodies of men and women and of the abstract yet gendered body-politic of France. *Femmes Modernes*, so the common trope suggested, not only flew in the face of traditional and ‘proper’ gender roles, but they put their bodies at physical risk by delaying ‘healthful’ pregnancy. The obvious link between the health of the state and reproduction was extended to that of the individual. Shifting gender roles were clearly perceived as a threat to the health of the nation, but also to the individual. The bold new fashions of the so called *années folles* (Crazy Years), what Americans call the “roaring twenties,” were deemed a threat not only to the moral health of France, but tellingly to the reproductive health of the individual. The *Femmes Modernes* or, to the shock of the more conservative establishment, young girls imitating

62 Ibid, 46.
63 Ibid, 47. *La Garçonne* itself sold 300,000 copies in its first year alone. The novel continued to sell exceptionally well throughout the decade and enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the 1930’s with the release of an Edith Piaf film based on the work.
their styles, supposedly put themselves at serious risk to bodily harm as scandalous new fashions exposed women and girls to the harsh elements. It is especially telling that the asserted connection between ‘immoral’ fashion and the body’s individual health was widely framed in terms of the reproductive organs. In this way, the fundamental fear of a continuously under-populous, sick France is directly tied to the woman’s body. Gender imbalance, reproduction, demographic crisis, and the health of the body-politic clearly stood out in the French imagination in that decade, but far less has been said about the tumultuous 1930’s. The same structures and ideas persisted throughout the interwar era, perhaps unsurprisingly, considering that the birth rate actually declined.

**Mikhail Bakhtin and Discourse Analysis**

As with the examination of illness discourse in formal party politics, Bakhtinian literary analysis provides an ideal system to dissect the gendered discourse of the individual gendered body, the body-politic, and metaphorical illness. Though the political left and right stood diametrically opposed to one another intellectually and conceptually, all of the French people experienced the same trauma in terms of demographic decline, and relied upon similar gendered tropes about the roles and responsibilities of men and women to explain and counteract the crisis. Underlying perceptions of gender and reproduction transcended the finite scope of the political spectrum, especially in the discursive association of physical and cultural malaise. Bakhtinian literary theory can elucidate the matter through the useful categorizations of heteroglossic and unitary language. The different means of communication unique to a

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64Mary Louise Roberts, 72.
particular group of speakers or writers, the heteroglossic language, constitutes a divisive system of rhetorical construction.

“The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls.”

Here Bakhtin explains his system of discursive analysis; the multiplicities in speech, or heteroglossic language, appear as fundamentally different from one another. Ultimately, however, these unlike discourses are joined through a broader unitary language which joins overarching discourses together, in his terms “heterogeneous stylistic unities.” For the purposes of gender analysis in the interwar era, heteroglossic speech can be seen as the rhetorical and ideological differences between left and right, and unitary language as the overwhelming discourse of illness and malaise which permeated the era and transcended the political spectrum.

Fascism and the radical right are already often associated with incredibly paternalist gender constructions often relegating women to the sole role of reproducers of the race with no political rights or responsibilities beyond this task. In the demographically challenged interwar era, however, French leftists, even the far left, also supported the repopulation of the ‘sick’ nation. A 1934 edition of the communist newspaper *La Barricade Organe de défense des travailleurs des 13e et 5e édité par le Parti Communiste* included an invitation to women to attend a concert and dance against abortion, which it termed as a “Discussion of on the question of clandestine abortions.

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Social scourge and the protection of maternity and childhood.” Further, the event was delivered within the framework of medical discourse in that the speech was to be delivered by a doctor and “member of Doctors Against War.” The involvement of an organization of medical doctors, already politically motivated, in the movement against abortion indicates the medical lens through which gender roles were seen across the political spectrum. Framed as a “social scourge,” abortion constituted a perceived medical threat to the French reproductive capacity which was intimately tied, here, to the role of women given the stated purpose – the defense of motherhood and childhood.

This connection characterized women as reproducers, not as equal workers in the communist struggle, the more typical communist treatment of women amongst their ranks. An October, 1935 edition of the communist journal furthered the medical discourse of gender in its discussion of the unhealthy conditions of working class girl’s schools and nursery schools. The article attacks the poor conditions of the schools as a direct assault on the health of children and girls specifically. Inadequate heat, for instance, was implicated as “brusque changes in the temperature which could be adverse to their health.” These girls’ schools were considered breeding grounds for infection, opening a revealing window to the Communist conceptualization of gender in France. The underlying charge in the article is that the classes were “overcrowded” in the schools, but rather than focus on the educational disadvantages that this might entail, *La Barricade* chose instead to view these failures of the capitalist state as an affront to the

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66 La Barricade, February 1934  
67 Ibid.  
68 La Barricade, October 1, 1935.
health of babies and young girls. “The consultation area has no sink where the doctor could wash their hands” charged the article. Further, there were no showers and the nursery school was not protected from the harsh north wind, a danger “for the health of children.” Finally, the buildings were said to filled with a “…multitude of rats of a strong size, excellent propagators of contagious disease.”

By focusing on disease and health the newspaper emphasized the ultimately reproductive nature of the supposedly feminine role in society. The article dedicates very little space to the educational qualities of the school system, and even then it is an attack on the religious influence on schooling. Health became the chief focus of the article, specifically the fear of disease resulting from the societal malaise; in this particular case the failures of capitalism to provide adequate educational facilities. The heteroglossic rhetoric of the Communist paper certainly stands out, but is ultimately consumed by the overarching unitary language of societal and physical malaise. Here, the fact that school was meant for girls and babies elevated the importance of physical maladies over education itself. It is certainly quite possible that the school system in the Place Jeanne d’Arc constituted a serious threat to children’s health; however the overwhelming prominence of medical discourse tacitly re-affirms the connection between reproductive young girls and the future of the French people.

**Léon Blum and *Du Marriage***

Léon Blum’s importance as a representative of the left cannot be overstated, making his biological understanding of gender meaningful when discussing the discourse

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69 La Barricade, October 1, 1935
on gender in the Third Republic. His long and interesting career, or more accurately, careers, spanning literature to politics, redefined the very means by which French politics functioned, especially on the political left. His main political innovation was to bridge the divide between economic leftists, specifically socialists, and republicanism. He broke with the longstanding Marxist traditions of socialist and communist activity in France that mandated revolutionary activity and inculcated bourgeois democracy as an enemy of the proletariat. Blum ascended to the head of the SFIO and government work following the assassination of Jean Jaurès, whom he greatly admired. Unlike his more traditional Marxist antecedents and contemporaries, Blum envisioned France’s republican system as valuable and worth defending, but he was not an enemy of class revolution, even going so far as to intimately link the two seemingly antithetical ideas. If socialist revolution were to come to France, it must be done so democratically unlike the recent and violent events in Russia.

Building upon this ideological basis and the tempestuous political situation of the day, Blum’s influence fundamentally altered the political landscape of the left. In keeping with his democratic revolutionary principles, Blum joined a political alliance with Edouard Daladier’s Radical government following the apocalyptic violence of February 6, 1934, breaking with the longstanding divisions between left-wing parties and the Marxist refusal to participate in electoral parliamentary politics. Three left-wing political parties: Blum’s socialist SFIO, Maurice Thorez’s communist PCF, and Edouard

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71 Ibid, 58.
Daladier’s Radical party united, putting aside doctrinal and political differences to
combat the rise of fascist sentiment in the country and forming the Popular Front alliance.
The tenuous alliance withstood the pressures of the 1936 elections in which the left-wing
Front gained a governing majority with Léon Blum at the head. Blum led these strange
bedfellows in a historical alliance as Prime Minister of the Third Republic. Léon Blum’s
writings, therefore, reflect the evolving ideas of the political left. His Popular Front
alliance did away with traditional partisan divisions and created a forum for left-wing
politicians and thinkers to come together and combat the influences of fascism, royalism,
and various other strains of the far right. However independent and free thinking the
Popular Front may have been in their heteroglossic discourse, they too were ultimately
participants in the larger unitary discourse of sickness and malaise pervading France.

By the 1930’s the already omnipresent language of illness and the corporeality of
the state and its problems had thoroughly permeated every level of politics. The
understanding of a corporeal France, suffering from some temporary malady transcended
the heteroglossic language of political ideology or formal parties. It is already fairly well
established historiographically that the political right and the emergent fascist movement
of the day were rife with pro-natalism and alarmist discourse. Less well established,
however, are the particular forms of left-wing pro-natalist discourse. Even Léon Blum,
the First Jewish and first socialist Prime Minister of France explored the question of
France’s demography in terms of gender roles and medical discourse, especially in his
early years as an academic. In his well-known work *Du Mariage* or “On Mariage,” first
published as early as 1907, Blum dissected the issues of modern day matrimony. Here,
the author applied the kind of optimistic prose which was typical of the heteroglossic
discourse of the left. Interestingly, however, the socialist thinker was still clearly
concerned with the demographic issues which plagued the day, and discussed them in the
thoroughly medical language of illness that constituted the unitary language common to
the political left and right, even frequently citing the inspiration of his work as
*Physiologie du marriage*, which, as the title implies, holds a physiological understanding
of the institution.

Blum makes the gravity of the depopulation and the demographic situation quite
clear in *Du Marriage* by going so far as to rhetorically flirt with the idea of completely
deserting the institution as it was practiced all together, and replacing it with a modern
form of polygamy: “…to demonstrate that marriage, or legal monogamy is an institution
which functions poorly, I asked myself if it was appropriate to radically abandon it in
order to create modern forms of polygamy, that is to say multiple and precarious unions,
or if it was possible to fix it.”72 This exploration was merely a rhetorical device meant to
soften the blow, rather than an actual endorsement of plural marriage. Blum actual
remedy to the “poorly functioning” institution of marriage, but the mere fact that such a
seemingly outrageous suggestion even saw print reflects the dire situation regarding
gender and population that many thinkers saw as plaguing France. In fact, Blum’s real
advice struck many as just as radical as if he had proscribed polygamy as a solution to the
state’s ills. Rather than polygamy, he suggested, the institution of marriage should
radically re-evaluate the traditional gender roles that had made marriage an intrinsically

unequal and unhealthy endeavor to begin with. Toward that end, women much like men should be allowed to engage in pre-marital sex with whichever partners they chose. In this way, marriage could be an equal partnership, and, crucially, women would be ready to have children at the beginning of their legal unions. Needless to say, such a suggestion was quite shocking in Catholic France in 1907.

In this way, Blum’s work clearly participates in the medical discourse of illness and the conceptualization of the French state as a corporeal body-politic in two major ways. Firstly, the actual language of the text is laced with references to illness, medicine, and ‘natural’ gender roles. This is especially apparent in Blum’s description of the flaws he saw in the contemporary practice of marriage which utilizes the explicitly medicinal discourse of “… in the present state of morals. [Marriage] is neither a poison nor a panacea. It is a healthy food, but one which must assimilate to our times.”73 Poisons and panaceas alike imply the presence of a conceptual and ill body, and the metaphorical employment of healthy food further reinforce the discursive connection between social ills and physical ones. Further, such unequal marriages breed a kind of physical disharmony as well. The second chapter of Du Marriage makes the bold claim that as couples live and age together “…the most serious, the most frequent of all the disharmonies: the physical disharmony, that is to say the bad adaption of the bodies, and the poor development of pleasure.”74 This shocking claim suggests that the physical issues of a married couple’s bodies themselves as well as the particulars of achieving “pleasure” (specifically sexual) constituted the most serious and common hurdle facing

73 Ibid, 6.
74 Ibid, 27.
any marriage. The corporeal nature of this assessment reflects the unitary discourse of the day. Any marriage suffering from these physical and sexual problems served as a microcosm of France herself. That this work was published as early as 1907 begs the question of how much more explicit the language of corporeality and malaise would have become after the massive losses and gender imbalance of the First World War, but the strains of party politics seem to have forced Blum to distance himself somewhat from his previous expressions as an academic.  

The second telling aspect of *Du Marriage* in terms of the language of illness and malaise in French discourse stems from his underlying assumptions about what he saw as the problems with marriage itself, and Blum’s solutions. On one level it seems that Blum’s work attempts to challenge the social construction of gender itself by arguing for equality in the societal mores and between both partners in marriage. However, deeper analysis reveals that the underlying principles of the work itself implicitly accept the inherit differences between man and woman, and ascribe sexuality as both the function and challenge of any marriage. Blum’s employment of gender roles clearly hails from a left-wing political and social tradition, and lacks much of the more patriarchal proclamations more common to the right, yet none the less describes women with incredibly gendered language. The overall effect is a book which places a natural order as the ultimate goal in any healthy relationship, and suggests that society has corrupted nature, certainly a symptom of a greater malaise.

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Du Mariage is rife with language describing a kind of natural and healthy order of life, suggesting that the healthiest and most natural system is marriage between two sexually experienced equals, resulting in an environment of love and functionality. Most men, he argued, already practiced marriage in this way, but women, on the other hand, were bound by the constraints of society. “I claim to prove that we cannot violate the natural laws with impunity.” This strong language seems indicative of Blum’s sense that some malaise haunted French relationships, and like the right-wingers of the “crazy years” who hailed short haircuts as a sign of sterility saw an innovation in gender roles as both the solution and problem. The thinker’s corporeal understanding of marriage would allow couples to differentiate love and marriage and allow the two to work in harmony. This, he saw as a return to a natural state, rather than the creation of an entirely new system, the remedy to society’s ills: “Death is necessary, and we take it for the greatest of all evils. Marriage is necessary since it corresponds to the normal state of our nature, and in fact, is the source of innumerable conflicts and suffering.” These conflicts and suffering, here tied to death itself, arrive out of discord with nature, therefore, reforming the institution of marriage to reflect a normal and healthy state can serve as the only remedy to the problems of an individual marriage, and by extension, society itself.

Blum’s conceptualization of the “normal state” or “natural laws” were explicitly corporeal and gendered. Marriages suffered through unhappiness and unnatural states of being, read childless, due to the restricted nature of women’s role in society. Bearing in mind that Blum’s solution was not, after all, polygamy, but rather the societal sanctioning
of women exploring their sexuality outside the legalistic confines of marriage or before it, the chief ill facing French marriage stood as women’s sexual inexperience. In discussing this already implicitly gendered construction, Blum seems to rely upon the tropes of what was perceived as a women’s nature, in spite of the fact that the entire work was intended to deconstruct, in some manner, exactly this kind of construction. He argues that the failure of inexperienced women to achieve sexual satisfaction in their marriages posed a dire threat to the health of the marriage itself, and by extension the body politic. “Ignorance of the woman in that she is fragile and secret, inexperience of feminine sensuality in that its mechanism is delicate and difficult, so here is the first wrong of husbands, here is the beginning and the ordinary cause of physical disharmony.”78 This selection is revealing not only in its gendered language (referring to feminine sexuality as “fragile and secret” for instance) but also because of how Blum conceptualizes the roles of men and women, and the ultimate importance of a gendered corporeality to the most fundamental unit of French society – the family. Put more plainly, Blum’s deconstruction of gender roles and his emphasis on a natural order of gendered life reveals that even the socialist left saw the state of France’s reproductive capacities as somehow ill. Women needed sexual experience, he argued, and men needed to learn their “secrets,” without this sexual knowledge the relationship between the two would be flawed.

Here, Léon Blum represents a fairly left-wing and almost libertarian model of gender and sexuality, yet remains grounded in the language of illness and malaise. He

78 Ibid, 27.
can be safely said to represent a leftist vision given that he was a socialist and later the leader of the Popular Front. The stresses of the interwar era certainly lent themselves to political radicalism, however, and far more left-wing, though less typical and representative, political movements bear some mention as well. Even the ultimate left-wing extremists of the day, anarchists, who were known at the time for assassinations and literal bomb throwing were permeated by the corporeal and gendered understanding of France being somehow sick. Anarchists and other avant garde figures hardly constitute monolithic or easy to characterize groups, but a few trends seem common throughout. Unlike the mainstream of French politics in which both political left and right were united in terms of their pro-natalist agenda some anarchist groups maintained a neo-Malthusian stance. Even so, anarchist still attached themselves to gendered constructions of sexuality and health, including thinkers such as E. Armand, a prominent interwar anarchist who advocated forms of free love with strict population control. One major difference, painting in broad strokes, lies in the fact that many neo-Malthusian anarchists saw over-population as a key source of conflict and warfare throughout the world, yet even this ultimately suggests a fundamentally biological understanding of politics. To them, the nature of France’s illness was over, rather than under population. Yet in spite of this major conceptual divide the socially constructed roles of gender were still seen as intimately linked to the corporeality of the individual body and gender.

80 Ibid.
Masculinity, Disease, and the War

Léon Blum wrote his treatise in the *Fin de Siècle*, but as previously mentioned, the stresses and demographic impact of the Great War intensified the underlying concerns about the health of the French body-politic. With the increasing concern about the body-politic, the language of illness and malaise became more important to French discourse. Disease, just as war losses before, was an important and practical concern during the conflict. As Michelle Rhoades has demonstrated in her work on French armies that during the Great War, gender roles weighed heavily in the minds of the French. Even before the gender imbalance the war itself created, the medical establishment forged conceptual connections between sexuality, gender roles, and sickness. Cultural understandings of French masculinity and virility further drove the situation by linking effective performance on the field of battle to constructions of sexual virility. One result of this was an increase in the spread of syphilis, which traveled with the army across France. Unlike American troops in the war, however, French poilus were not expected by the military or medical establishments to abstain from sexual activity. As Michelle Rhoades has shown, French society, informed by the Military, informed by medicine, directly associated masculine military valor with sexual performance. The relationship between constructions of masculinity, the military, and disease all contributed to the corporeal medical lens created by the suffering of the Great War.

The urgency of the war forced the French to re-conceptualize their notions of gender and marriage. Medical doctors and the military establishment accepted that

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French men could not be controlled in their sexuality in spite of the frightful physical consequences of the spread of venereal disease. Warfare and venereal disease worsened the already poor demographic state of French reproduction, leading medical doctors to tie gender roles and illness to France’s already ailing population. Fear spread throughout France’s military medical establishment that syphilis would return with a soldier on leave, infecting his wife, children, family, and eventually the entire community constituting a medical threat to French fecundity. Despite this, the constraints of masculine identity amongst soldiers were strong enough that doctors and military bureaucrats did not expect poilus to stop their sexual dalliances, even though they were seen as directly imparting illness to the population. Official responses meant to counteract the spread of syphilis functioned within these constructions, including the regulation of prostitution and the distribution of prophylaxis, but rejected educational campaigns meant to teach soldiers, essentially, to control themselves.

The exploration of venereal disease and gender in the First World War sheds a useful light on the ways in which demographic crisis deeply influenced the constructions of French gender roles and established connections between the health of the individual body and the population more broadly. Here the medical and military bureaucracies’ technocratic approach transcended the heteroglossic political divisions to create a larger discursive understanding of the social malaise that would come to epitomize the interwar era.

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82 Ibid, 306.
The widespread perception that the country suffered from a serious population crisis led to the creation of myriad pieces of legislation and organizations dedicated to bolstering France’s anemic population. The National Alliance for the Increase of the French Population was a long standing organization for exactly this purpose. Naturally, the National Alliance engaged in the same constructions of gender that defined the era, ultimately linking the health of the state to the success of the re-population. Much like the medical establishment of the First World War, or the emphasis on women and reproduction among the far right, the National Alliance placed the burden of reproduction on French women. Unsurprisingly, they National Alliance firmly supported the 1920 ban on contraceptives (except condoms) and “propaganda” promoting its use. The organization further supported a ban on abortion, which they saw as an affront to the “French race.”

An April, 1923 edition of the Alliance’s journal, *Revue de l’Alliance Nationale pour l’Accroissement de la Population Française* endorsed the recent passage of just such a law. The National Alliance’s contribution, so they claimed, was to communicate to the public and to politicians that “…abortion is not just an individual crime, but a crime against the country; it must be made aware to judges that it is their duty to protect society against abortion professionals and condemn them with the greatest severity.”\(^{84}\) The organization’s review framed the legislation as a great victory, and described the practice of abortion in the direst of terms, even going so far as to say that “…abortion,

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\(^{84}\) Revue de l’alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population Française, April 1923, pg. 118.
from a social point of view, was just as serious as infanticide.” Naturally the pro-natalist organization opposed the practice of abortion, and saw it as a dire “crime against the county,” but interestingly, they also framed this idea in terms of health saying that abortion posed a “mortal danger” to France’s population. Women were forbidden from seeking abortions and limiting the potential for France’s future health, yet the poilus of the Great War were expected to behave in a ‘masculine’ way, and continue to physically risk the population with syphilis. Women, therefore, were largely seen as reproducers of the French culture and race, and by committing the societal crime of abortion they threatened the health of the body-politic. Clearly these gender roles were fundamentally colored by demographic crisis and separated by perceived notions of health. Considering that the National Alliance was dedicated to the repopulation of France, the connection to the body is to be expected. However, the focus on the body and the language of malaise exhibited itself in other areas as well.

**Gendered Imagery in Je Suis Partout**

Historians gender lens falls more frequently on the discursive conceptualizations of the political right with good reason. Pro-natalist organizations and agitators typically fell on that side of the political spectrum, especially where race was concerned. After all, the importance of eugenics in the interwar era was related to demographic crisis, which was ultimately a racial question, in that pro-natalists sought to increase the French birthrate without immigration. However, even outside the category of race right-wing and fascist organs such as Robert Brasillach’s *Je Suis Partout* regularly decried the

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85 Ibid, 118.
86 Ibid, 118.
Malthusian state of the French population often asssociating the population with gender and sickness. The fascist newspaper was regularly inundeted with language and imagery betraying the corporeal conceptualization of French politics and population, and relied upon gender constructions to act as a bromide against the emergent political and demographic malaise as they saw it. In fact, fascist thought, and by extension the newspaper itself, was so permeated by the discursive understanding of illness that reflections of these ideas often appeared in somewhat unexpected places.

Some of the most fascinating windows into the mind of the fascist readers of Je Suis Partout appear, surprisingly, in advertisements. This may seem counterintuitive at first given that ads are commissioned by non-newspaper employees and only serve the function of selling products, but the laser like focus of an advertisement – to sell a product - can actually reveal a great deal about the social understanding of readership. The infamous journal was clearly flooded with the corporeal, racial, and gendered understandings of the French body-politic throughout, as is typical of fascist publications; and the prominence of medical themed advertisements promoting all manner of snake oils, and the interesting cultural symbolism used for this promotion reveals the way in which the political far-right saw France as sick. Even a brief perusal of Je Suis Partout’s pages reveals two important facts about its advertisements: the newspaper allotted the overwhelming majority of its commercial space to companies advertising products intimately associated with the body, and secondly, a sizable portion of these ads, and those appearing most frequently, offered to remedy the problems of the body, including
those issues also perceived as endemic to the state itself. Here, once again, gender proves to be a useful conceptual lens.

The pseudo-scientific product known as “La Sudation Scientifique” stands as one of the most frequently advertised products featured in *Je Suis Partout* from the years of 1934 – 1938. The device, essentially a mobile steam sauna, consisted of a heated reservoir of water, and a plasticized cape to drape over the body. In this way, a French consumer could take healthful steam baths wherever he or she might go without being tied to a larger sauna facility. “La Sudation Scientifique,” like most of the medically themed products advertised in the right-wing newspaper’s pages, emphasized the rejuvenation of the individual body. The mobile steam bath chamber claimed to be an easy remedy for an impressive litany of ailments, many of which are intimately linked to the ailing body-politic of French society, including rheumatism, arthritis, gout, obesity, emphysema, bronchitis, and many more.

Perhaps most interestingly, advertisements for the device underwent substantial changes in their layout and major ideas between 1934-1938. In 1934 the device itself was depicted prominently complete with a cartoonish woman exposing her leg from beneath the plastic curtain, hardly demonstrating a particularly gendered piece of discourse. However, as time went on the ad became increasingly gendered and even sexualized; in fact, by mid-1935 it was featured at least once in each issue of the paper, and the cartoon depicting the apparatus’ use moved to a diminutive position in the corner.

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87 These years are especially useful for analyzing the fears of the far right-wing readers of the newspaper, given that they roughly coincide with Léon Blum’s tenure as Prime Minister. If French fascists viewed France as suffering some kind of metaphorical illness, the years sent under a socialist and Jewish leftist would certainly do little to assuage their fears.
replaced by a large portrait of a nude woman and the headline “A Source of Well-Being and Health!” Though a nude woman can clearly represent many ideas, its presence in the advertisement in the body-obsessed and gendered interwar era in a fascist newspaper certainly seems indicative of a particular bio-political understanding of the relationship between women and ill health.

Figure 2

1934 Je Suis Partout advertisement for “La Sudation Scientifique.”
The final and most sexualized version of the advertisement, promising “Youth, Health, Well-being” with the image of a fertile woman.

Figure 3

July, 6 1935 Je Suis Partout
Advertisement for “La Sudation Scientifique.”
The 1930’s gender imbalance placed the burden of reproduction on women, and their individual reproductive health constituted a major resource for the troubled Third Republic. Eventually, a third redesign cemented the relationship between La Sudation Scientifique’s claim to heal the reproductive body, and by extension the body-politic of France. It featured an even more explicit nude woman, and the telling new headline “Youth – Health – Well Being.” The juxtaposition of the nude woman and the proclaimed attributes of youth and health suggested an important discursive relationship between the fascist newspaper and its consumerist readership, by emphasizing an understanding of rejuvenation of the individual body. That this notion apparently struck a chord in the French right’s imagination and comprehension of symbolic interaction is significant in that it serves to illustrate that the conceptualization of the corporeality of France’s demographic issues was abundant.

Another pseudo-scientific product, which appeared somewhat less frequently in Je Suis Partout, demonstrates an even more interesting insight into the body and medical focused discourse of the day in terms of gender. “Hormonotherapie et Sexologie” treatments claimed to target the aging of the skin, constipation, obesity, and a laundry list of other personal ailments. The major focus of the advertisement, however, was to combat the “falling of the breasts,” claiming to target the sexual hormones particular to the mammary glands and skin. The outward symbol of maternal reproduction and femininity, the breasts, were certainly an interesting choice for the treatment’s application if it was indeed as far reaching and effective as claimed. The piece includes a four panel image of, supposedly, the same woman’s breasts as they changed throughout the
hormone therapy treatment, in a sense showing her become more healthful in her reproductive capabilities. Two aspects of the advertisement’s language stand out immediately: the lacing of scientific (or perhaps pseudo-scientific) jargon throughout and the fact that this language is explicitly tied to the unhealthful effects of the First World War, and the stressful interwar era. These two aspects, along with the intrinsically sexual nature of the product suggest a conceptualization of the world thoroughly wrapped up in a corporeal and medical understanding of France and her population as a collection of ill bodies experiencing the same malaise.

The Hormonotherapie et Sexologie advertisement tells in surprising detail the history of the treatment as the result of recent scientific improvements. Sixteen years of study, so the narrative suggests, allowed Professor Magnus Hirschfeld to create the new science of sexology. He attached his “incontestable scientific authority” to the new subfield of sexology, hormone therapy. It is quite interesting that the rejuvenation of the physical individual woman’s body, specifically the breasts, seemed important enough to give Hirschfeld such glowing praise in the fascist news organ, considering the fact that he was a German Jew known for advocating the rights of sexual minorities, especially those of homosexuality. It was only an advertisement, after all, but its mere presence in the infamous newspaper indicates far deeper fears of France’s reproductive malaise and sexual health than dedication to anti-Semitism. Further, the advertisement’s scientific jargon gave the impression of complete technical confidence in the connections between hormones, combating “falling breasts,” and social ills. Ultimately, the pseudo-scientific language permeating advertisements for “Hormonotherapie et Sexologie” treatments
illustrate the discursive mindset and connections between society and malaise in interwar France.

Most interestingly, however, the advertisement begins by explicitly framing this gender discourse in relation to the after-effects of the First World War, and the terrible consequences the conflict had on the health of a generation. “Every period which follows a great conflict suddenly and inevitably suffers a backlash and the after-war (l’après-guerre) is the most convincing demonstration of this rule.”88 This interesting introduction for a hormone therapy treatment contextualizes the presumed cause for hormonal problems on a wide scale in French society. Bad skin, constipation, and most crucially in the advertisement’s own admission, sexual maladies were all conceived of as the aftermath of the bloody First World War. Utilizing this dual scientific and political language, the article even seems to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the entire French society in biological terms saying “These glands [the endocrine system] whose working roles … it appears is extremely important, are closely interdependent. A modification of the function of one of them causes changes in others, and creates troubles in the entire organism.”89 This may seem like more banal technical babble employed to give the treatment the aura of scientific authority, but on the tail of reference to the First World War and the social-medical backlash it created, this likely takes on far more importance. At first glance these advertisements may seem somewhat banal and meaningless, after all, they are only meant to sell the products they promoted. However, the fact that advertisements are so purpose-driven may actually make them perfect

88 *Je Suis partout* advertisement
89 Ibid.
windows to the cultural understanding of the era. These ads took advantage of cultural discourse about health and reproduction to strike a chord with consumers, even leading them to draw upon themes of fertility and illness for products that did not necessarily relate to the product because the saliency of these topics to the French public. The sheer frequency with which body related medical advertisements appear within the pages of *Je Suis Partout* is clearly indicative of the kind of bio-political malaise which permeated every level French discourse.

**Conclusion**

It is not especially surprising to see evidence of demographic fears and resultant gendered constructions from voices on the political right, infamous for pro-natalist and patriarchal ideologies. The mere presence of a pseudo-medical discourse in every level of *Je Suis Partout*, even filtering down to the overwhelming majority of advertisements indicates the level to which subconscious conceptualizations of the corporeal and gendered aspects of France’s malaise had reached. More interesting however is the level of parity between the political left and right in terms of medical understanding of the world around them. Léon Blum’s *Du Mariage* outlined both a gendered and corporeal thesis explaining the problems facing France’s body politic. Women, he argued, were unfairly constrained by society in their sexual behaviors. This, in turn, translated into what Blum himself termed the “most serious” and “most frequent” problem facing any French married couples: a specifically physical and sexual problem. The very fact that the then literary figure turned so much attention to France’s social mores regarding
gender roles indicates a clear connection between the state of political affairs, demography, and a corporeal understanding of a sick France.

Ultimately, *Du Mariage* makes fundamentally similar conclusions about the natural or healthful state of gender relationships, and what they mean for France as the pseudo-medical discourse common to *Je Suis Partout*. Fascist dialogue of the body and illness, often directly tied to the First World War, as is the case in the hormone therapy treatment advertisements, suggested that social ills could be remedied through improved physical health of the individual body. Though each pole of the political spectrum certainly held vastly different ideas from one another and spoke to internationalist movements independent of French discourse and ideas, they still shared the fundamental conceptualizations of a corporeal and ill nation in light of demographic crisis. Though left-wing thinkers like Blum responded by advocating for women’s sexual freedom, and thinkers on the right rarely considered such practices the political differences between the rhetorical heteroglossia of the two unlike communities.

This heteroglossic form of language was divisive and formed smaller groups, the political and social discourse distinct to a particular group. Left-wing heteroglossic language carried with it a certain optimism: socialists boldly marching into the bright future. The political right and fascists, on the other hand, utilized more pessimistic, and even punitive, discourse in their constant battle against the bourgeois excess and complacency they saw as marking the evils of modernity. However, in spite of these major ideological and rhetorical differences, both the political left and right shared the unitary discourse of the language of illness and malaise. France was somehow ill, and
the whole of the French population experienced the same malaise. In this sense, given that the French people shared the same political and cultural milieu, it is quite logical that fundamentally similar views and conceptualizations would arise.
CHAPTER 3

RACE

Of all the valuable historical lenses which shed light on the complex nature of the unitary and heteroglossic discourse of illness in interwar era France, race is far and away the most subtle and complex. Its complexities, however, certainly do not prevent the recognition of interesting and important connections and characterizations. The 1930’s saw the rise of fascism throughout Europe and the racialization of politics around the world, and France was no exception. Whether it is the blatant and overwhelming racism expressed by the fascist writers and editors of Je Suis Partout or the more subtle race discourse of the left, each political pole employed its own particular rhetorical styles, yet ultimately shared some fundamental level of unitary discourse in their common characterizations of France as suffering some metaphorical illness intimately linked to the corporeal understandings of the body and the state as a whole. Further, the analysis of racial discourse in this context ties together the previous categories of historical analysis. Race can be seen as a unifying strand throughout the discourses of politics and gender throughout the interwar era.

Though the underlying racism of the fascists and radical right, and the discourse and imagery they used to promote it, were as obvious as they were ubiquitous, the particularities of how racial discourse functioned certainly deserve analysis. It is especially important in that it shed insight onto three issues: the relation between gender
and race, the corporeal-racial understanding of foreign affairs, and the malaise pervading France’s domestic affairs. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the importance of the constructed gender and metaphorical illness, race took on gendered aspects plainly apparent in political discourse. These racial-gendered understandings of French malaise heavily reflect the corporeal conceptualizations of the body-politic. In terms of foreign policy critiques, Je Suis Partout’s racist wording and imagery belies the overall fascist understanding of foreign affairs. If the fascist conceptualization of history was fundamentally biological, a kind of Darwinian competition of destiny, then combat between peoples provides a valuable discursive lens. The radical newspaper’s focus on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia reveals a sympathetic stance toward the belligerent power and an incredibly radicalized understanding of the conflict. Finally, and perhaps most revealing in terms of France’s supposed malaise, the fascist/radical right racialized perspective on domestic affairs reflects an overwhelming sense of the degeneration of the body-politic.

The political left too participated in the discourse of racial malaise though in far more subtle ways. The Popular Front depended less upon racial constructions and anti-Semitism, unlike the radical right and fascist organizations or writers, but was also not immune to it. The heterglossic linguistic differences between left and right reflected both fundamental ideological differences separating the two political poles, and merely rhetorical ones. As demonstrated in terms of formal politics and gender the left and the right both perceived of France’s population as suffering from a kind of malaise that often took on racial aspects, in participating in the unitary language of metaphorical illness
afflicting the nation. Even the category of the ‘nation’ itself indicates an understanding of a “French race.” As with most of the discourse of the day, this unitary dialogue transcended the political spectrum and divisions of international politics and ideology, by framing France’s ills as just that: illness.

Race and Gender: Feminizing of the Other

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, masculinity seemed under attack to some thinkers as early as the Belle Époque. Constructions of race were intimately woven throughout the discourse of gender, especially where the issue of Judaism was concerned. Jewish identity was constructed from the outside in terms of antithesis to normative “Frenchness,” that is to say, Jews were neither white nor masculine in the eyes of anti-Semites.90 The mere fact of Captain Alfred Dreyfus’ position in the French general staff as a Jew, coupled with the fears of diminishing masculinity typically plaguing the day to produce the political media firestorm of the affair. Anti-Semitism along with other forms of racism have long and unfortunate traditions in France, where many seemed to associate French Jews or other non-white people with whatever political malaise was most relevant at the time. French perceptions of race were incredibly flexible and constantly changed to suit the political issues and leaders of the day.91 The conceptual degenerative place of French men and male bodies in society occupied a prominent position in the imagination of Je Suis Partout’s writers and readership, lending itself to the further reinvention of French notions of race. The French political right applied

feminization of the other, an internationally common discursive trope, to many racial categories for long after the Dreyfus Affair.

In the interwar years, Je Suis Partout’s coverage of Italy’s imperialist adventure in Ethiopia, the “conflit italo-abyssin” as they referred to it, expressed not only enthusiastic approval of the war, but also a fundamentally gendered understanding of the race war. The newspaper implicitly deemed both the African victims, and the European international community which diplomatically disapproved of the conflict, as feminine others who lacked the manly vigor necessary for combat. A September 14, 1935 article entitled “The belligerent action of French-Masons and the International” criticized the Blum administration’s delegations to an international conference in Geneva, and decried the negative impact of feminism on international affairs.

“Les Grotesques: Feminist associations are largely represented in Geneva. A female delegate of one of these associations approached M. Laval in the corridor and, with a strong Anglo-Saxon accent and in uncertain French asked: ‘What can you do with women?’ The President, a little taken back asked if he himself debated repopulation… ‘They could have at least sent me someone prettier’ concluded M. Laval.”

Foreigners, feminists, Masons and the International (read: France’s own Popular Front establishment) were all indicted. Here several clear gender implications were interwoven with national-ethnic stereotypes. The presence of feminist organizations in the Geneva conference and their characterization as “Les Grotesques” (grotesqueries or absurdities) denotes a fear of the feminization of political affairs. Further, the author saw fit to forcefully reference the feminist representative’s “strong Anglo-Saxon accent and… uncertain French.” This directly associated foreigners, especially the English, who

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92 L’action belliqueuse de la Franc-Maçonnerie et de l’Internationale, Je Suis Partout, September 14, 1935
opposed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, with femininity. The association between the foreign and the womanly combines the categories of race, gender and politics. The article even went so far as to make explicit reference to the connection between women and repopulation. France’s weak malthusian population, or at least the Je Suis Partout belief in the demographic malaise, prioritized population crisis and assigns femininity to corruption and non-French identity. Laval’s dismissive and sexist retort only served to strengthen the connection. Womanly foreigners or foreign women represented an international threat to the French body-politic’s already challenged virility in the rubric of the far right.

Racial constructions of virility and femininity permeated Je Suis Partout’s coverage of the Italian-Ethiopian war in words and images. Almost every article about the conflict included in the fascist journal was surrounded by racist political cartoons, many of which served to feminize Ethiopians or the British, and operated within the corporeal racial conceptualization of health and degeneration. An article ostensibly meant only to outline the military progress of the dispute “The military aspects of the Italian-Abyssinian conflict” was littered with no fewer than seven cartoons parodying and mocking the Ethiopian people complete with gendered subtext. A corpulent John Bull, calling to mind the already established connection between obesity and masculine crisis was depicted lightly tapping the shoulder of an African child bearing the caption “John Bull and his little protégé.”

93 Je Suis Partout July 27, 1935
Here John Bull’s obesity represented Great Britain’s bourgeois complacency, a biopolitical symbol of malaise, and the Ethiopian child clearly indicates that the nation did not deserve any respect. Conceptually, both the obese English and child-like Ethiopians were portrayed as less than healthy masculine adults. The corporeal understanding of gender is even more explicitly underlined in the adjacent cartoon. “The Masculine Fashion in London Yesterday and Today” depicted an English gentleman leading a bulldog on a leash, replete with masculine gentility, juxtaposed to a colonial soldier leading a black child on a chain. Again, Africans were portrayed as child-like and less than human and the English as cruel meddlers challenged in their masculinity. Each of these depictions depended upon the corporeal conceptualization of the body and its intimate connection to the health of the state and the individual.

94 Ibid.
This page is typical of the newspaper’s coverage of the “conflit Italo-abyssin,” permeated with racist images. Note John Bull and the Ethiopian child, and the “Masculine Fashion in London” cartoons.
Race and Foreign Affairs

The newspaper’s racist depictions of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia often times focused on the perceived physical differences between the white European Italians and the black Ethiopians. These tropes attaching the weakness of nations to the body and gender certainly appeared in the actual textual analysis itself---consider the imagined connection between feminists, masons, and English identity for instance --- but they are even more pronounced in the ubiquitous imagery which allowed for the between-the-lines implication of race constructions. The invading armies enjoyed, so the fascist organ suggested, the advantages of healthful masculine bodies easily acting on the weaker feminine bodies of the Africans. Obviously, this racist characterization is false, and ultimately Italy failed in its colonial endeavors, but this racist conceptualization of the body offers an important window into the outlook of French fascists. One particularly egregious cartoon featured a strong white soldier kicking an offensive caricature of an Ethiopian man, with a noticeably weaker body, from a cliff into the ocean. It bears the caption “Abyssinia asks for an opening to the sea. …And here is contentment!”95 Once again, the newspaper juxtaposed images of the ostensibly strong white male body to the weaker black body.

95 *Je Suis Partout* July 6, 1935
“Abyssinia asks for an opening to the sea. ...And here is contentment!”

Note the strong and masculine depiction of the Italian soldier as compared to the caricature of the Ethiopian man.
Figure 6

*Je Suis Partout*, August 17, 1935.

“Abyssinia As Used By Foreigners: The throne of the Lion of Judah in the photographs published in Europe and in reality.”
The paper also worked to portray the African state as inferior and savage, while simultaneously disparaging the coverage of the country in the European media. A cartoon labeled “Abyssinia As Used By Foreigners: The throne of the Lion of Judah in the photographs published in Europe and in reality” depicted a luxurious European style throne and regal emperor in one panel, and an impoverished African farm scene in the other, with only the edifice of a throne. The clear suggestion here is that the press exaggerated the status of Ethiopia as a state while it was supposedly only an inferior backwater. As in all the images concerning the Ethiopian conflict, it includes racist pictures of the Africans, who were depicted as skinny, weak, and savage. The prominence of displays showing an imagined feminine and weak African body demonstrate the underlying conceptualization of racial and international politics in terms of the health and gender of the individual body, and its broader relation to the body-politic. It may seem counter-intuitive to attack other countries based on these criteria, considering that France herself was seen as suffering from just such a malaise, but it demonstrates that the discourse of gender, race, and health or strength in terms of corporeal representations of societies was alive and well.

**Anti-Semitism, Racism, and the Degeneration of France**

The fascist corporeal interpretation of foreign affairs reveals quite a lot about right-wing French understandings of race, gender, and the perceived degeneration of society. Turning the lens inward toward domestic affairs can shed even more light on the racial aspects of French perceptions of malaise. Both in the realm of formal news,

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96 *Je Suis partout* August 17, 1935
however politically colored as in *Je Suis Partout*, and in the larger literary world and the republic of letters, the discourse of a racially tinged bio-political malaise permeated interwar writing. Popular 1930’s novelist Louis Ferdinand Céline, for instance, gained great popularity for his pessimistic portraits of life in the modern world. The right-wing writer ascribed France’s problems to the degenerating and emasculating influence of Jews in the nation. Literary critics trace a narrative of national decrepitude throughout his works, which was intimately linked to a perceived biological degeneration. The corrupting presence of Jews constituted a threat to French masculinity and blood in the right-wing author’s view. The popularity of his novels and his place amongst well esteemed French literary figures of his time reflects the broadly-accepted conceptualizations of the connection between racial hygiene and the health of both the individual body and the broader state. Céline was far from the only literary figure who attached himself to a bio-political understanding of anti-Semitism and an emergent French cultural biological malaise.

*Je Suis Partout*’s staff drew their ranks from literary circles and operated under many of the same bio-political conceptualizations which cast society as fundamentally ill. As such, the newspaper’s view of domestic politics often times framed the nation’s ills in terms of the degenerating effects of Jewish influence on the state. Once again the political imagery and cartoons were rife with conspiratorial and corporeal critiques of French society. One political comic suggested intimate government involvement in the protection of participants in the Stavisky Affair portraying Marianne, the symbol of the

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Republic with an enormous nose. The indulgent jazz age partiers dance on her nose complete with a caption proclaiming “While Marianne [the French state] occupied herself with her neighbors, she did not see what was dancing on her nose.” The prodigious size of her nose reflects the unfortunately common anti-Semitic physical stereotype. In other words, the supposed Jewishness of Blum’s administration, was complicit with the bourgeois excess and scandal, portrayed through a physical aspect associated with Judaism.

Another more explicitly anti-Semitic cartoon directly linked Prime Minister Léon Blum and his administration with conspiratorial and racial complicity in the financial scandal – one of the biggest sources of political malaise of the era. This image showed Justice personified in judicial robes chained in a pillory bearing the symbol of Freemasonry. He is surrounded by newspapers with clear headlines including “Stavisky Affair” and “Assassination of the Prince” and other reflections of France’s problems. Léon Blum himself holds the chain and aims a pistol at the victim, clad in working class clothes. The caption read “Everything escapes Justice; she knows the punishment of the Masonic pillory, and Blum himself thumbs his nose!”

The cartoon casually reasserted the imagined Judeo-Masonic connections that radical right-wingers ascribed to the political left. These connections, as demonstrated earlier, carried with them implications about the deleterious effects of foreigners and feminists in light of repopulation issues. These conspiratorial constructions built upon unfortunate long standing anti-Semitic

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98 *Je Suis Partout*, March 17 1934.
99 Ibid.
“While Marianne occupied herself with her neighbors, she did not see what was dancing on her nose.”
tropes about Jewish and Masonic involvement in all levels of societal control, rife with corruption.

The undeniable racial aspects this ideology reflect the underlying ideology that France’s political and social malaise, shown in the newspaper headlines, were in some way a result of Jewish power.

Finally, moving beyond merely anti-Semitism as a racial outlook common to the French interwar far right, a broader racism directly linked to the French political malaise
in an apocalyptic image which nicely suits the tone of the racist and alarmist French right of the era. The cartoon depicts a parliamentary body locked in argument, completely overshadowed by celestial horse-men. Each one is a clear caricature of a perceived racial enemy of France, including a skeletal Soviet, a hyper-masculine African, and an Asian, all bearing weapons. Labeled “The knights of the apocalypse over Europe” the three figures fall under the headline “Chase out Marxism… if it’s possible.” In this way the racial constructions attached to foreigners were attached to Marxism, and the perceived failings and threats to the French state. The charge that racial mixing sapped the energy and life force of the French body-politic are not so far removed.

**Maintaining the French Race**

Racial hygiene provided a popular answer to France’s bio-political malaise. *Je Suis Partout*’s racist and anti-Semitic imagery deserve interpretation given that the journal was so inundated by racist political cartoons. Further, these images nicely serve to demonstrate the biological rather than cultural understanding of race, and assert its negative impact on the virility and health of the “French race”. However, unlike some of the cartoons featuring crassly depicted Ethiopians as juxtaposed to the somewhat more restrained articles which accompanied them, these images are somewhat less revealing than the actual prose that dealt with racial societal degeneration and physical malaise. One article even went so far as to endorse the forced sterilization of the mentally challenged and ill in order to strengthen French blood. Though this was not an atypical

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100 *Je Suis Partout* February 27, 1934
Figure 9

*Je Suis Partout*, February 27, 1934.
agenda for fascists to support, there is an interesting component to the article in that it intentionally couches the issue in terms of societal illness not just that of the individual and it focuses on the practice in other countries. The later implies that countries that did or did not engage in the cruel practice were either respectively stronger or weaker. In this way, race, politics, and the discourse of illness all came together.

The English, already established as enemies to the fascist newspaper, as a “worn out people.” Further this malaise stems from a lack of hygienic maintenance of the race: “The number of abnormalities is difficult to determine. The report used the figure … 300,000 for England and Wales. Of this lamentable army, *which weighs heavily on the nation*, 250,000 live in freedom. But this number, which doubled since 1901, would be much smaller than reality.” (Italics added.)\(^\text{101}\) The burden which the supposedly over-300,000 mentally ill, in their words “idiots,” “the feeble of spirit,” and the “infirmed” imposed upon Great Britain is framed explicitly in terms of a physical harm to the larger society. The English race suffered a conceptually physical malaise by the lack of genetic maintenance.

As the French fascist journalists pointedly noted, the English committee investigating the feasibility of sterilization made up of “…doctors, biologists, gynecologists, psychologists, were heard to agree that mental disorders, both permanent and periodic render one unfit for paternal tasks.” They unanimously agreed that while mandatory sterilization should not be framed into the law, voluntary sterilization was desirable. Interestingly, the purpose of the proposed sterilization was to strengthen the

\(^{101}\) *Je Suis Partout*, January, 27 1934.
race, and the English failure to do so struck the writers at *Je Suis Partout* as a blow to the health of the British people. Conversely, countries which did engage in eugenic practices such as the United States, Switzerland, and of course Germany were said to have counteracted the problem of “heavy blood” (generally ill, a hereditary malaise). *Je Suis Partout* perceived the English as too quick to reject the *racial* aspects of forced sterilization. “…[The acts were] tainted by concerns of race and politics, appeared impure to the English scientists.”\(^{102}\) The English rejection of racism and sterilization of the mentally ill or handicapped would enact terrible consequences on the English race. Their economy could not stand so much “dead weight” because, in the words of the article: “…[H]eavy blood risk[ed] … [weighing] down by tainted heredity risk contaminating healthy elements little by little?”\(^{103}\)

French blood supposedly suffered the same problems given that obligatory sterilization of the mentally handicapped was forbidden there, as in Great Britain to the supposed detriment of France’s health. The competition between nations implicit to the article, and its focus on improving the genetic pool of a given people, belies the subtle yet fundamentally racial underlying principle. In the call for the forced sterilization of the mentally handicapped and mentally ill demonstrates a classic example of the heteroglossic language of French fascism thoroughly couched in the unitary terms of the nation’s health, or perceived lack thereof. The fascist organ blamed the failure to enact forced sterilization on the socialists who feared that the process would hurt their working-class political base. Socialists offered the argument that no one has the right to interfere with

\(^{102}\) Ibid.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.
their bodies, yet still advocated voluntary sterilization. Obviously, this was a cruel attack on the political opponents of the radical right, but the association between those suffering from hereditary mental dysfunction and the poor reveals the corporeal understanding of French malaise in politics.

Further, the category of gender linked both health and race in the call for forced sterilization. The stated purpose of the proposal, to maintain the health of the hereditary lines of the “French race” and strengthen the state, both physically and mentally, implicitly built upon the gendered constructions of reproduction. France suffered from demographic crisis and desperately needed people to reproduce, but not the mentally ill. Much like the larger gender constructions of the time, the onus of reproduction fell upon women, but it was framed in terms of masculine responsibilities. The article explicitly says that mental illness renders one unable to fulfill “paternal tasks,” not maternal roles. Further, there is even reference to men and women having no rights to their own bodies, a tempting proposition for pro-natalist fascists.

Ultimately, fascist discourse regarding race is rather unsurprising. The editors and writers at *Je Suis Partout* made no secrets of their racist ideology and practices. However, it is worthwhile to read their analysis of race as a reflection of deeper French concerns about the health of the individual and of the state. Race, for fascists, became a fundamental category of society threatened by the metaphorical and physical illness often associated with the troubled interwar era. This is evident in the focus on the imagined physical characteristics of races and nationalities, and crucially, the way these aspects were seen as bearing important influence on the health of the state itself, constituting a
kind of degeneration. The heteroglossic, or divisive and specific discourse of the radical right is clear. Fascists saw weakness in the French ‘race’ as a malady of modern times. The corrupting influence of Jews, like Léon Blum and his administration, plagued the apocalyptic imaginations of Je Suis Partout readers. However, the unitary language of metaphorical sickness remains a constant presence throughout the racial pronouncements of the far political right.

**Race and Health to the Left**

The more moderate political left in France also concerned itself quite seriously with the business of race. This is not meant to suggest that Popular Front representatives or sundry other partisans of the political left advocated the same kind of cruel bigotry so typical of the far right, instead only that within the constraints of their own heteroglossic rhetorical devices the political left still participated in the unitary discourse of metaphorical illness and the corporeality of the state. Though the Popular Front largely rejected the kind of crass racist ideology so typical of the radical right, they still functioned in the ultra-racial 1930’s and under the overwhelming discourse of metaphorical illness and malaise physically afflicting France both in the individual and the metaphorical body-politic. The demographic crisis and the resultant gender imbalance forced even mainstream French thinkers and politicians to seek out new immigrant populations and pro-natalist reforms. All of these movements were in some way dedicated to the maintenance of a particular racial understanding of French identity. The influx of post war immigrants intrinsically altered the make-up of the racial category
Ultimately, thinkers on both poles of the political spectrum were subsumed into a broader discursive understanding of the Third Republic as suffering from the degenerative effects of a physical malady, especially in terms of the racial hygiene of the nation. It is clear that in some way, the understanding of France as a “white” nation provided a meaningful goal in terms of the maintenance of race in the country. Otherwise, the demographic crisis could have been easily remedied through a broader incorporation of colonial peoples, many of whom already enjoyed status as French citizens. Therefore, the category of demographic crisis was intrinsically motivated by understandings of race.

The Third Republic had a long background of racialist understandings of the population problem. The nineteenth-century demographer and anthropologist Arsène Dumont gained notoriety for his extensive writings on the deleterious effects of depopulation in France. As early as the 1880’s, Dumont began to articulate his thesis, which indicted France’s tradition of individuality and the nation’s economic success for the degeneration of the French people. These ideas would seemingly have been quite compatible with the interwar fascists of France who regularly decried bourgeois excess as the source of the malaise and the failings of the individual body. However, Dumont predated fascism itself, and certainly did not neatly fit into the mold of the radical right. Further, his argument is explicitly framed in terms of both physical and metaphorical illness afflicting France. Chiefly concerned with the limited military capacity of the nation, logical considering the recent French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, Dumont

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charged that individualism had rendered the French people ill and unable to defend themselves against any invading armies. The “French race,” a “branch of humanity” as he described it, was sick.

“At this moment, France looks like a sick branch: her population is stationary or partially decreasing; other more robust branches of humanity tend to take over the tree themselves, while we become a lateral offshoot. It is an accident of birth, a disorder [un trouble] in our national evolution which menaces our future.”

Dumont’s metaphorical tree envisioned races as separately evolving branches of humanity, and was laced with references to the metaphorical and literal health of each branch, all with an eye toward the betterment of the French place on the tree: France’s racial health. Toward this end, Dumont applied his medical lens to the population make-up, birth rates, mortality, and immigration in the individual departments and cities of France. His intrinsically racial examination of the state sought, in his own words, to “… study it [depopulation] in its nature, its causes and its remedies” (Italics added.)

Overall, the social scientist painted a portrait of the France “branch of humanity” suffering from a deep societal malaise, both social and physical.

The discursive effect of Dumont’s pseudo-medical wording ultimately denotes a moral and cultural understanding of depopulation, which in turn contributed to the degeneration of the race. This stands in stark opposition to the radical right-wing position of the 1930’s which conceptualized of France’s social ills as the result of the

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106 Ibid.
physical and racial contamination of the population. Conversely, Dumont argued that what he saw as the emergent selfishness and individuality of the nation adversely affected the fecundity of French couples, and by extension the racial health of the state. In spite of this, the language of illness permeates Dumont’s writings, giving the impression of an encroaching and dire epidemic facing the branch: “Fortunately, depopulation is a slow disease which includes periods of remission.”\textsuperscript{107} Once again, despite the rhetorical differences of the political left and right’s heteroglossic language, the unitary phraseology of metaphorical illness stands out.

Dumont did not fall precisely into the same categories of racism as Brasillach and his \textit{Je Suis Partout} comrades would years later, but certainly theorized about intrinsic genetic difference. Interestingly, his analysis of race simultaneously established a racial hierarchy and called for the spread of the “French race” throughout colonies, a task that would likely require racial mixing. In discussing France’s imperial holdings overseas, a curious racial double standard emerged: “…for the nations which have colonists to export, colonies are an expansion of the race and a guarantee of a future in the world, a promise of hegemony, the subordination of inferior races opens infinite horizons.”\textsuperscript{108} Dumont argued that foreign immigration too represented a medical threat to the fecundity of the French people, and in a related work he argued that the reproductive strength of the Jewish people hailed from a genetic desire to maintain pure blood, not from the strength of religion.\textsuperscript{109} Throughout his works, his unwieldy racial system is constantly

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Ibid, 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 33.
  \item \textsuperscript{109} Arsène Dumont, \textit{Dépopulation et civilisation: Étude démographique}, (Paris: Lecrosnier et Babé , 1890), 51-52.
\end{itemize}
underpinned by a pseudo-medical discourse of malaise and sickness. The physical strength of the individual, coupled with the moral strength of society, made a race great and powerful in his view, but *Belle Époque* France had failed on both these fronts.

The mere existence of such blatantly medical discourse of illness and race amongst the left in nineteenth century France is telling enough, however the demographic tribulations of the Great War, and the toll it took from the French ‘race’ only served to increase the popularity of Dumont’s argument. Obviously, the radical right and fascists were quick to blame all of France’s ills on the mixture of foreign blood and the bourgeois excess of individualism, whether or not directly inspired by Dumont’s writings. The political left, on the other hand, maintained a far more subtle understanding of race, but one still thoroughly grounded in the metaphorical understanding of the corporeality and sickness of French society. By the interwar era, the issue of depopulation reached a fevered pitch and Dumont’s theories on the degenerating racial effects of excessive individualism and depopulation enjoyed a resurgence. Even Emile Durkheim, the giant of the social sciences and not a right-wing thinker by any stretch, personally authored and published reviews of Dumont’s works.

By the 1930’s, when demographic crisis and perceived societal degeneration dominated French cultural discourse, the population of France was seen as a problem. The well-known *Annales* journal touched on the issue as well. The *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* journal was widely regarded for its radically different approach to the study history. *Annales* writers employed a particular mixture of history over an extended period of time coupled with an emphasis on the interdisciplinary application of
the social sciences to the analysis of the past and present. This particular blend was openly dedicated to a political vision firmly entrenched on the republican and socialist left of the political spectrum. In fact, the journal’s two founders, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, cut their teeth on politics early on in their careers by supporting Captain Alfred Dreyfus and proclaiming his innocence during the Belle Époque. Each issue of the journal was divided between historical essays making use of the new theoretical lens and discourse regarding contemporary affairs. In an article dedicated to the later titled *Problèmes de démographie française*, left-wing Annales scholars contributed to the racial medical discourse of illness as a result of the demographic crisis.

Here, the discourse is less blatantly racial than Dumont’s anthropological approach to the moral and health ramifications of French depopulation, yet the focus on the particular attributes of immigrant groups clearly suggests some form of underlying race ideology. Even in the incredibly progressive *Annales* journal, excessive immigration was linked to the cause of the “problems of French demography.” Typical of the journal’s scientific interdisciplinary style, the article proceeded to analyze the particular economic output of different ethnic groups and their influence on French population:

“…a quantitative immigration provoked by industrialization of the country and the diminution of the French birth rate… essential to his subject this organized immigration which began in the years before the war (1906-1913) – the Polish in agriculture and Italians in industry.”¹¹⁰ This is banal enough on the face of it, but after the Great War, the journal noted a demographic shift in terms of immigration and France’s ability to

¹¹⁰ P. Leuillot, "Problèmes de demographié française," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 5, no. 23 (1933): 489-491,
produce. “The war provoked a demand for colonial and Chinese hand-laborers, - equally white. After the Armistice the accruing needs accentuated the movement; it was necessary to produce! France, for its part, was the only European country to not experience demographic congestion – to the contrary.”111 In other words, the Annales academics suggested that in light of the demographic demands of the World War, the incorporation of colonial peoples and other immigrants into French society was necessary. Again, medical language laces the piece, suggesting the bio-political importance of the French demographic crisis, even referring to the integration of immigrants and the study there of as “… the description of these organisms.”112

Much like the anthropological style of inquiry employed by Arsène Dumont the journal focused on analysis of the particular origins of these immigrants and their geographical placement throughout the republic. The article even ascribed qualities to different immigrant communities and further demanded the quick integration of these peoples into French identity. German Jews and Poles, concentrated in the Hôtel de Ville neighborhood in Paris, were deemed to be the most easily assimilated to French society, and could quickly, it was thought, become part of the “French race.” If this were to be achieved the Annales argued, “… the assimilation of foreigners presented itself as completely favorable perspective.”113 The article even went so far as to directly tie the integration of these most assimilable immigrants into society to the “racial hygiene” of the state. The left, therefore enjoyed a diversity of opinions regarding race and

111 Ibid 489.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid, 490.
depopulation in interwar France, but ultimately viewed society as functioning within the same constructions of race, bio-political reactions to depopulation, and an overwhelming discourse concerning the perceived illness of France.

**Heteroglossic and Unitary Discourses of Malaise**

Throughout the troubled interwar era, race served as a powerful conceptual viewpoint common across the political spectrum. All of the French people saw themselves as suffering from the same cultural malaise as a result of the overwhelming demographic crisis, and resultant gender imbalance, forcing people of every background to consider what it truly was to be French. For the most part, French identity was understood in genetic terms, whether it was blatant racism shown by the staff of *Je Suis Partout* or the still racist yet more nuanced discussions of the French “branch of humanity” and the particularities of its blood and evolution, described as an interesting combination of Lamarckian and Darwinian influences described by Dumont. The understanding of race differed wildly even amongst varieties of fascists or between sundry left-wing thinkers, and certainly across the spectrum. These differences certainly spoke to the intellectual, doctrinal, and emotional divides which separated ideologies from one another. Ultimately however, many discursive differences were predominantly rhetorical and heteroglossic.

Politics, however, were not the only structure for understanding the world, and the rigors of demographic crisis did more to color conceptualizations than the international black or red. The view that France was somehow fundamentally ill, both metaphorically and literally, arose out of the perceived intellectual and social malaise of the era,
constituting a shared unitary discourse. The discursive understanding of illness and malaise allowed for a deeper communication across barriers, and transcended the political spectrum itself. Through this discursive conceptualization of the world, “French race” could be seen as falling prey to other races in a vicious world due to its own medical frailties. On the radical right, this is reflected by the constant chatter suggesting Judeo-Masonic conspiracies, the dangers of mixing blood with immigrant peoples, or the importance of forced sterilization for the mentally handicapped or ill. These racist reforms were thought to be fundamental in the rebuilding and strengthening of a weak and sick body-politic. On the political left, conceptualizations of race are more complex but still ultimately depend upon one simple and common goal: maintenance of the health and hygiene of the “French race.” Across the political spectrum, race served not only as a social construction but as an actual historical force deserving of maintenance.
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