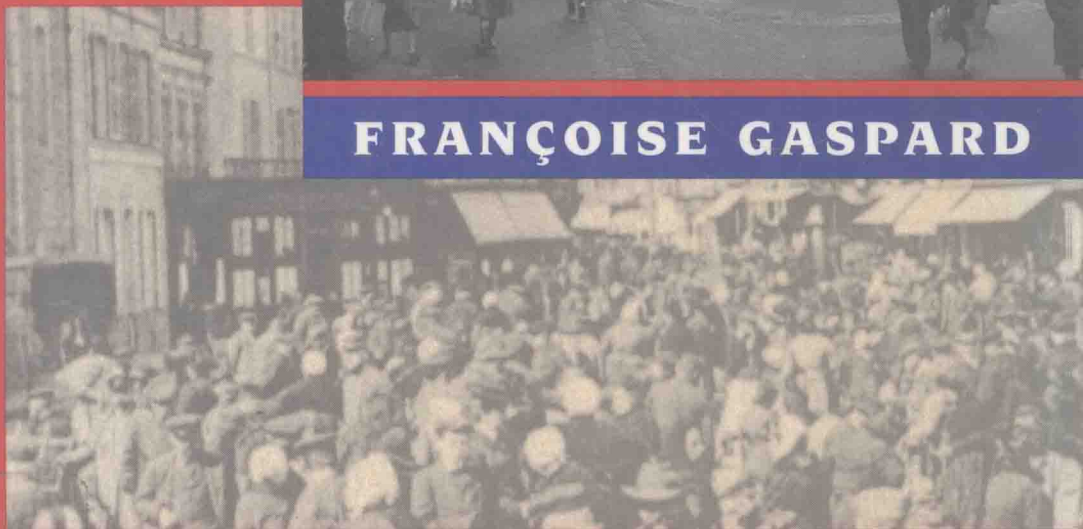


A Small City in France



FRANÇOISE GASPARD



A SOCIALIST MAYOR CONFRONTS NEOFASCISM



FOREWORD BY EUGEN WEBER

Translated by Arthur Goldhammer

A Small City **in France**

Françoise Gaspard

♦ ♦ ♦

Translated by
Arthur Goldhammer

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Foreword by Eugen Weber

In July 1821, a nineteen-year-old poet set out on foot from Paris to woo the girl he loved and who loved him. Her parents, who opposed the marriage of young people with no expectations, had decided that renting a summer place in the environs of the capital, as they usually did, would bring the suitor running to spoil their holiday. They rented a house in Dreux instead, then a picturesque old township some sixty miles west of Paris on the road to Normandy (today's National Highway 12). A stagecoach ride that far cost twenty-five francs and Victor Hugo did not, they were sure, have twenty-five francs. But he had good legs. The Fouchers and their daughter, Adèle, left Paris on July 15; Hugo followed on the 16th. On the 19th he was in Dreux and on the 20th gained the parents' consent to his courtship. In 1822 Adèle Foucher became his wife; and a plaque on number 16 of the rue Godeau in Dreux commemorates his triumph, though the date it gives for the whirlwind visit is off by ten days. Why insist on accuracy in a romantic tale?

An inn still serves fine meals in the vale of Chérisy, three miles from the town center, where Hugo bathed in a stream beneath the birch trees and wrote a plangent poem about the sorrows of a lonely life. But Chérisy is no longer lonely. Dreux has grown out toward it, as it has grown all around.

It would take the townlet another eight score years to reenter the history of France. But when it did, it did so with a bang. In 1983, municipal elections held there reverberated through the land when Jean-François Le Pen's National Front candidates won 16.7 percent of the votes cast, compared to 2.56 percent in 1981; and when, in coalition with more moderate right-wing groups, they took over the municipal council. Jean-Pierre Stirbois, one of the leaders of the Front, became assistant mayor. Dreux became more than a simple symbol of radical-right advances: it was a springboard for the Front's national success.

Municipal elections generally turn on local issues. In 1983, in the wake of the Socialist victory of 1981 and of the subsequent economic debacle, local and national issues happened to coincide. The Front's performance at Dreux could be a portent of things to come, and so it was to prove in the short run. In the European parliamentary elections of 1984, the National Front improved its Drouais showing further, to capture 19 percent of the vote. In 1989, a National Front woman candidate would be elected to the National Assembly from the Dreux region with over 61 percent of ballots cast. How could an erstwhile citadel of the moderate left and, briefly, of socialism have made so radical a turnabout?

Until the later 1950s, the town set in a bend of the Blaise River near the Eure had lived as it had always lived, closer to the rhythms of Victor Hugo's day than to those of Mitterrand and Le Pen. Its mayor from 1908 until his retirement in 1959 was Maurice Viollette, one of the great respectable figures of centrist socialism, best known for his ill-fated attempt in 1936 to grant citizenship and voting rights to Muslim Algerians. After Viollette's departure when he was eighty-eight, a right-wing coalition bent on urban growth and modern management began to develop the town: new industries, public housing projects, and real estate developments increased the population to over 30,000, but exacerbated local problems too.

Lying close to the Paris basin as it does (2,000 of its people travel to work in Paris every day), Dreux in the 1960s and 1970s

experienced all the growing pains of a middling-small city expanding fast—too fast. From Hugo's day to 1950, the population had not even doubled; it doubled then in just twenty years and added another 10,000 in the 1970s. Growth outran urban equipment and traditional approaches to town management. The urban infrastructure sagged beneath demands for which it was not prepared. But right-wing gogetters, eager to attract taxpaying enterprises and to increase employment, were riding for a fall. In 1977, overwhelmed by intractable pressures on housing, traffic, schools, and social services, the right was turfed out. The left, led by a feisty local woman, Françoise Gaspard, conquered (or perhaps recaptured) the town hall, just in time to be hit full blast by the problems of the late seventies: soaring unemployment, careering immigration, and all the sociopolitical tensions wrought by their conjunction, notably an inclination to blame the town's troubles on its newcomers.

As early as 1971, *Le Monde* quoted the mayor of that day as expressing fears that the foreign population had reached the danger level, the *côte d'alerte*. Between 1975 and 1982, the French-born population of Dreux went down as the foreign-born population kept rising. The proportion of foreign residents—Turks, Portuguese, many North Africans—15 percent in 1975, stood at 21 percent in 1982, with concentrations as high as 60 percent in some parts of town. The proportion of foreign children in local schools varied from 6 percent in the center to as high as 72 percent in outlying housing projects, where half of the pupils were North Africans. A doctoral dissertation completed in 1983 spoke of the situation as “abnormal, extreme, excessive,” and noted the creeping racism that it bred. Linking joblessness, delinquency, insecurity, and general social costs with invasive immigrants, Stirbois and his supporters cashed in on this: “What is the use of building at great expense schools, nurseries and cheap housing, when these are reserved not for the French who pay for them, but for the foreigners flowing in from every corner of the world? . . . How long will you accept being thrown out of your homes, out of your

neighborhoods? . . . Don't be embarrassed to speak up: it's you who belong here!"

The backlash on which Stirbois and his allies rode to success was focused on Gaspard who, in the midst of economic crisis, had tried to reconcile French and non-French, natives and newcomers, and failed. More forthright and more determinedly socialist than Maurice Viollette, Gaspard was nevertheless his heir in terms of her social concerns and in certain aspects of her personality. "He had a difficult character," President Mitterrand said of Viollette, "which means that he had a lot of character." Gaspard had a lot of character too. Young, female, radical, a veteran of the restive sixties, she had also been elected to parliament as a Socialist deputy in 1981. Now she was denounced as a Marxist, a virago, and, of course, as an intellectual incapable of solving her town's problems, and only creating more. In the end, wearied and disgusted by a cruel, violent campaign, she stepped down as mayor even before the right-wing victories.

A historian by training, Gaspard today is back at her scholar's desk, writing and teaching at the Ecole d'Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. *A Small City in France* is that rare commodity: a piece of history and social anthropology written by one of the principal actors in the events it recounts. The former mayor and deputy places her experience in historical context, both *courte* and *longue durée*, outlining the local past, the context and conditions of the conflict, and not least the traditional local orientation to center-left that made the National Front's breakthrough all the more striking. Gaspard describes society, economy, demography, and lets them explain what happened: slow growth between the wars, explosive growth after the 1950s, stagnation after the 1970s, the influx of foreign labor at first ignored amidst general upward mobility, then increasingly resented and, finally, as economic doldrums turned to serious crisis, condemned.

The greatest immigrant nation in the world after the United States, France has always relied on assimilation and integration. These no longer work. Faced with unassimilable numbers in a

declining industrial economy, the great French tradition of cultural integration first cracked in the 1980s and then broke down. The people of Dreux had grudgingly tolerated French outsiders, then European ones. The inflow of Africans, especially North Africans, with their more marked “outsiderness,” made their fore-runners appear less unacceptable while focusing resentment almost exclusively on the latest, and most different, arrivals. Temporary industrial need, social indifference, even good intentions, were all outrun by escalating socioeconomic problems.

Françoise Gaspard’s book is a document of our times, but also a parable *for* our times, even though the National Front tide is ebbing; regarded nationwide, it tends to crest at 11 or 12 percent of the vote. In Dreux as elsewhere in France, this radical-right vote appears as a protest against situations where urgent problems are not being solved—but also as an expression of feeling against the many people in positions of power who tend to dismiss frustrations and resentments as beside the point. This is the larger picture that the shaft of light cast by this book on one part of it can make a bit more comprehensible, as it comes to view in different contexts and in other nations.

Essential for students of twentieth-century France, this tale of a small town far away seems just as relevant to Americans caught up in their own problems and debates over surging immigration, racism, “America-first,” and the like. Gaspard does not moralize, does not preach. Detached, scholarly, informative, and readable, her book provides material for reflection and, perhaps, regret.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Birgitta Hessel, whose suggestion that I reread William Sheridan Allen's *The Nazi Seizure of Power* led to my writing this book; to l'Abbé Villette of Chartres and Madame Edouard of Dreux, who kindly read over the sections on Dreux's history; and to the newspaper *La République du centre*, which made its files available to me. F. G.

Translator's Note

Because of the complexities of French politics, I have silently added brief explanations and designations to benefit the non-French reader. A. G.

“Six sympathizers of the extreme right, armed with blackjacks, baseball bats, a smoke grenade, knives, and a canister of tear gas, roamed through the center of town Monday night shouting ‘Vive Le Pen!’ ‘Arabs out!’ and ‘France for the French!’ and attacked nine youths (all French) from the Saint-Jean workers’ dormitory on rue Godeau in Dreux. The assault left two people injured, one of them a young woman battered with ‘Doc Martens,’ the boot prized by so-called skinheads for its metal edges . . . The police arrested the six hoodlums on rue Godeau about twenty minutes after the assault, at 9:50 p.m. After all-night questioning, the individuals in custody confessed their involvement and identified themselves as sympathizers of the National Front.”

—*L’Echo républicain*, 6 December 1989

The day before this incident, Marie-France Stirbois, the National Front candidate, was elected to the National Assembly from the second district of Eure-et-Loir, with an incredible 61.3 percent of the vote.

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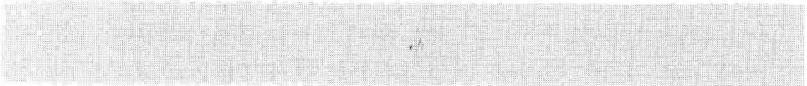
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Revisiting Dreux



Dreux is a small city tucked away in the heart of France. For someone driving to Brest from Paris, which is less than an hour away, the town marks the almost imperceptible passage from the Ile-de-France region into Normandy. A motorist headed from Rouen toward the Loire enters the Beauce region right after leaving Dreux. But you have to pay attention: the landscape changes gently, and Dreux is hard to spot. Located at the junction of three river valleys, those of the Avre, the Eure, and the Blaise (the latter a stream that passes through the town itself), Dreux is a modest town, a subprefecture of the Eure-et-Loir département. Signs on the highway alert passing motorists that they are entering Dreux and a few miles later that they are leaving, and it's easy enough to exit the place without noticing that you've been there. The only signs of Dreux's existence are the rather ordinary buildings on its outskirts, just like those found on the outskirts of nearby cities such as Evreux and Chartres.

A small city? Some may question the adjective. By French standards Dreux ranks as a "medium-sized city," for it boasts slightly more than 30,000 inhabitants, this being the official criterion by which a town in France is no longer classified as small. The threshold was crossed around 1970, when times were good. But in 1982 the city had a hard time proving that it had not fallen back into the

lesser category. This was a matter of some importance, for the size of subsidies from the national government depends on it, not to mention the salaries of municipal officials.

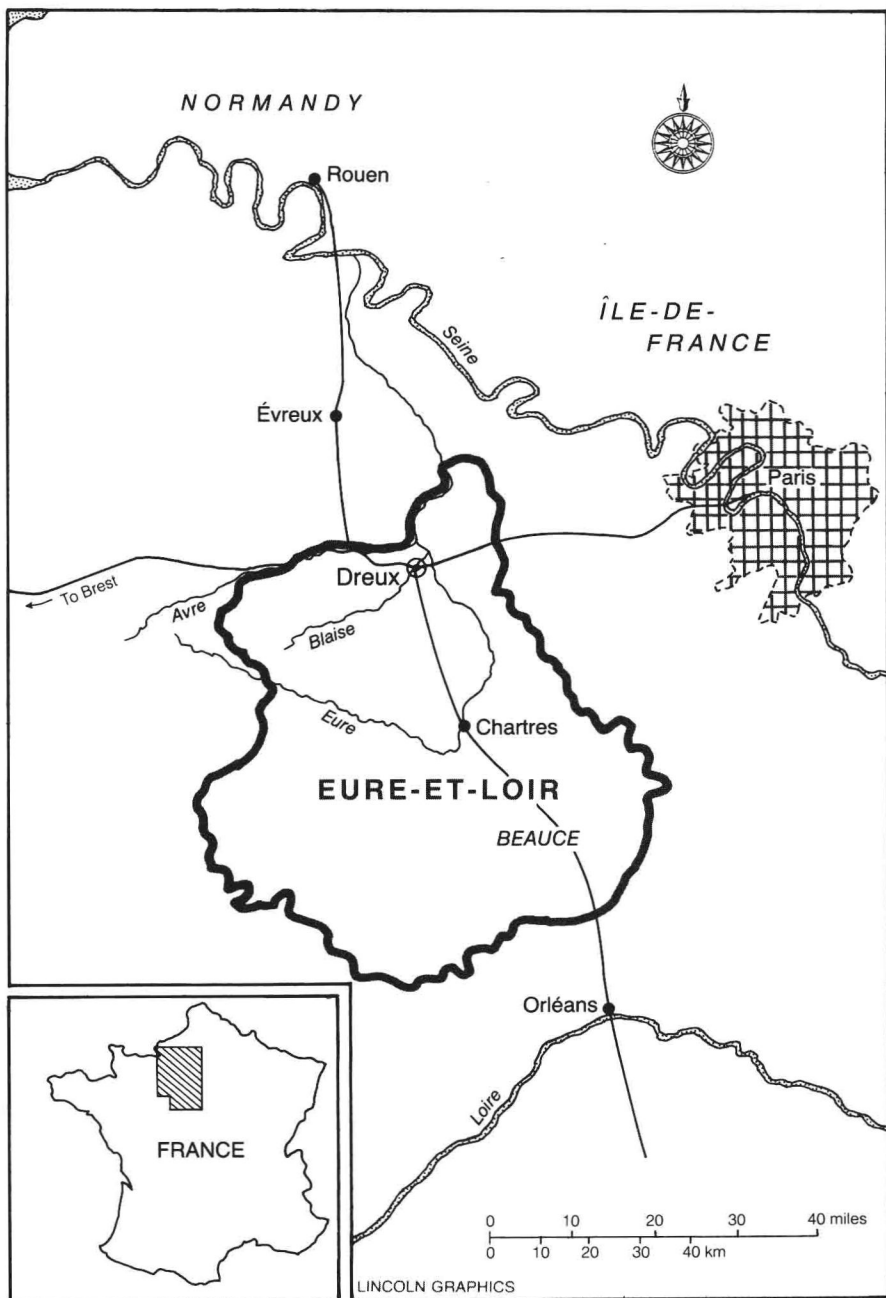
The same problems continued to plague city officials in 1990. During the most recent census, one of them, interviewed by a local paper, issued an appeal to the town's population that might seem surprising in light of the tense political climate at the time. All residents, including undocumented, clandestine aliens, were urged to demonstrate their civic spirit by cooperating with census takers: "Clandestine workers have every reason to do so, for they will be helping the city of Dreux. The greater the population, the more substantial the aid we will receive."¹ Three cheers for foreigners as long as their numbers help to fill city coffers! Preliminary estimates from the 1990 census put the population of Dreux at around 35,000. It is a small city nonetheless. Thirty or forty years ago its population stood between 12,000 and 15,000. The remnants of what used to be no more than a large town have not altogether disappeared. The old town lives on in local memory as a state of mind, a network of rumor, and a focal point of nostalgia. And those who remember the old town today share certain feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger.

All but unknown before 1980, Dreux became famous overnight. Television crews from many nations converged on the city. Jane Kramer contributed a long article on Dreux to *The New Yorker* (February 1986). The city's name came up in conversations between world leaders.² Nowadays, when travelers pass through Dreux, certain events, names, and images from that era will come to mind.

Dreux owes its recent celebrity not to its cheese or to its historical monuments or to some remarkable discovery made by one of its citizens. Its reputation comes from the substantial number of votes that the extreme right has been able to garner there over the past dozen years. With each new election, this number increases.

Yet there has been no in-depth study of Dreux, despite an impressive number of newspaper reports published in the heat of

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events and a large number of editorials treating events in Dreux as symptomatic of the political condition of France as a whole. No political scientist or sociologist has studied the city in order to understand the process that transformed a quiet town rooted in a tradition harking back to the Third Republic (France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) into a symbol of endangered democracy. Dreux, moreover, is generally described as a "special case." What happened there, we are told, could not have happened anywhere else in France. Dreux is somehow unique.

In 1983, when 16.7 percent of Dreux's voters favored the National Front slate in a local by-election, polling pundits, armed with mysterious knowledge wreathed in mathematics and backed up by high-speed computers, vied to reassure the public that there was nothing to worry about. All the surveys agreed: in France as a whole no more than 2 percent of the electorate favored the extreme right.³ Although a tiny party like the National Front, which reflected the views of only a small fraction of the voting public, had managed to attract enough votes in Dreux to disturb the calculations of the major national parties, it was attributed to "specific" local reasons: the population of the city included large numbers of immigrants; local political rivalries had created an opening for a new party; and the election in question was a simple by-election in which voters felt free to express their discontent precisely because no major national issues were at stake.

From September 1983 through March 1989, however, the extremist vote in Dreux was overshadowed by the success of the extreme right throughout France. In June 1984 the National Front obtained 11 percent of the vote nationwide, considerably exceeding the 5 percent level required for parliamentary representation. By the time of the 1986 legislative elections, the left had instituted proportional representation, and the National Front's 9.65 percent of the vote was enough to capture 35 seats in the Assembly. Even more impressive, the leader of the extreme right captured 14.4 percent of the vote in the first round of the May 1988 presidential elections, confirming the emergence of a new

political force and casting the Dreux results back into the shadows. All across France, in cities from Marseilles to Roubaix to Mulhouse, the National Front outdid its success in Dreux. There was no denying the facts: the vote for the extreme right was a national, not a local, phenomenon.

People soon began to speak of a “conflagration.” Everyone invoked the past: as at other times in French history—in 1934 with the Liges and in 1956 with the Poujadists—an economic crisis had brought about conditions in which right-wing extremism could spread like wildfire. Eventually the flames would subside. Economic growth would take care of things. Historians, demographers, and sociologists produced statistics intended to demonstrate that, worrisome though the cancer might be, it afflicted mainly “problem” cities, those with high levels of immigration. This comforting idea was eagerly accepted, all the more so because the return to majority voting (rather than proportional representation) had virtually eliminated the National Front from the National Assembly in 1988. The Front managed to elect only one deputy, who survived a three-person contest, and the party seemed to have lost its national audience. To make matters worse, the logic of parliamentary politics led the Front’s only deputy, Yanne Piat, to affiliate with deputies from the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), a party of the traditional right. The results of the March 1989 municipal elections seemed to confirm, further, that the National Front’s victories came mainly in cities with problems.

In November 1989, however, the world’s spotlights once again focused on Dreux, along with Marseilles, when both cities were holding parliamentary by-elections. To the surprise of most observers, the Socialist candidates were eliminated in both places after the first round of voting. In Dreux, the National Front candidate, a woman, was elected in the second round, even though most politicians and political scientists had clung to the belief that, except in the case of a three-way contest, it was impossible for a Front candidate to win a local election.⁴

Having failed to predict the scope of the National Front's impact heralded by the Dreux results in 1983, were the commentators more cautious this time around? Did what happened in one district (*circonscription*) in the Eure-et-Loir, confirmed by election results in Marseilles and other places,⁵ suggest that the National Front had made progress in its efforts to woo French voters? The experts unanimously responded in the negative. For François Goguel, one of France's leading political scientists, "the role of the personal factor was decisive . . . The fact that the Socialist Party failed to choose Françoise Gaspard as its candidate in Dreux . . . was a miscalculation." For Jérôme Jaffre, a polling expert, the Dreux and Marseilles results proved that these two cities were not typical of France as a whole, for they had been "hotbeds of National Front support since the phenomenon first emerged."⁶ Dreux, with its immigrants and internecine political battles, was still seen as atypical, a sort of minor Marseilles north of the Loire.

The analysts also discussed Dreux from the vantage point of Paris. Meanwhile, the public formed an impression of the situation in Dreux on the basis of newspaper and magazine articles, some of them so inaccurate that they even got the statistics wrong.⁷ At times it seems as though scholars are afraid to come to Dreux lest they find there an epitome of all the problems facing France in this final decade of the twentieth century. "The Unsavory City of Dreux," read the headline of one weekly newsmagazine after the December 1989 elections.⁸ Are we afraid of the truth behind the headlines?

In my case, no pilgrimage to Dreux was necessary. I was born there, my roots go far back, and I have held political office in the city. So I wondered if I might be in a very good position to trace the origins of the present political situation. And I came to the conclusion that I was, since no one else showed any intention of studying the city at first hand. As for my objectivity, there is no such thing as a "pure" historian or sociologist, one without local, regional, philosophical, religious, or political ties. My biases are well known.