

« La compétence, je la prends »¹
***Redefinition of elected role and migratory phenomenon:
introducing as a national leader when you are a regionalist one***

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This paper focuses on the role of elected representatives in relation to the migration topic in the particular case of Corsican nationalism. It forms part in a thesis on the elected nationalists and the transition from militancy to the head of local institutions, with their victory at the regional elections in 2015 and 2017. It analyses on Corsican nationalism's institutionalization and the trajectory of its representatives.

We will show the adaptive role of nationalist representatives in a specific event: the offer to welcome *Aquarius* humanitarian ship on Corsican coasts in 2018. The *Aquarius*² was a rescue ship chartered by SOS Méditerranée which had been patrolling the waters of the Mediterranean sea since February 2016 in order to assist migrants boats that have failed to reach Italian's coasts.

Chronology

On Sunday, June the 10th of 2018, Matteo Salvini – speaking on the behalf of the Italian state – refused to let the *Aquarius* dock in any Italian port. The ship 600 migrants on board and was overloaded. Malta followed Italy: both countries claimed than more than 400 migrants out of the 600 on board were not shipwreck survivors and that welcoming the boat would be rewarding smugglers.

The next day, while France's reaction was still waited for³, Jean-Guy Talamoni, the Chairman of Corsica, offered to let the ship dock in a Corsican port.

On Tuesday, June 12th, Gilles Simeoni, elected leader of the Corsican Region, reiterates the proposal, while Emmanuel Macron denies the *Aquarius*' request – a delay condemned by a large part of French political leaders. The boat was eventually welcomed in Valencia,

¹ “The authority, I take it.” Interview in *Libération* (newspaper) of Gilles Simeoni (Corsica region leader), https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/06/12/accueillir-l-aquarius-en-corse-la-competence-je-la-prends_1658446

² To understand this global event chronology of this particular crisis: https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/video/2018/06/15/comprendre-la-crise-de-l-aquarius-en-trois-questions_5315807_3214.html

³ See article in the *Le Monde*, 12 June 2018, “« Aquarius » : Macron dénonce la « part de cynisme et d'irresponsabilité du gouvernement italien »”.

and Spain was the only nearby country who offered to accept the boat, since France decided not to.

This event participated in increasing the popularity of the two Corsican leaders as the discussions around the assistance of the ship went viral on national media. Despite this, some can argue they were overstepping the role created by the institutions, or that they used the situation to extend their authority, and transformed it into what they think nationalist role should be.

The concept of the role as defined in sociology by Jacques Lagroye is a “set of behaviours that create and are an integral part of a certain position, behaviours which have to be conformed to in order to fulfil the expectations of others”. The role is defined by the idea of expectations. Jacques Lagroye quoted in this case the example of the *Poujadistes deputies* (populist party in the 50’s) who were mocked by their colleagues when they arrived in National Assembly because they were not behaving as they should have been.⁴

Here, the lack of response to a crisis from the government lead two regionals representatives to take on a “higher” position from the one they have been allocated. It might also be a position they claimed their own. This paper will discuss the representatives’ role and the boundaries between the roles of leader, representative and nationalist activist⁵ during the migration issue.

1. Keeper of “*communauté de destin*” and Corsican identity

To understand the nationalist leaders’ stance on the *Aquarius* crisis, it is important to explain a fundamental notion of their discourse: the “*communauté de destin*”.

In 1988, January 31st, the “*Front de Libération National Corse*”⁶ decides, following the Algerian independence movement, to popularize this concept which which partly replaces the one of “settlement colonization”. In october 1988, a motion is introduced at the Corsican Assembly by the nationalists of the time claiming a juridical recognition of the Corsican people, with this notion: “The Corsican people stands for the Corsicans by origins and the one by adoption, regardless of origins, religion or skin color who decided to build a shared future on the land of Corsica”. It implies a large definition of the Corsican community. By this approach, the FLNC tries to make up with a part of the island’s population judged progressive and after his campaigns with the slogan *I Francesi Fora* (French go home) judged xenophobic. This idea of a Corsican “*communauté de destin*” which would overcome the idea of a simple population from the island, become a mantra in the 1990’s and 2000’s that is find in numerous programs and other texts. It is also based on two points, one historical form when Corsica was independent from 1755 to 1769, with Pasquale Paoli government and the other demographic with the idea that Corsican people would risk extinction if they do not change the citizen vision.

Considered by nationalists as a sort of unquestionable basis and one of the most important stand of their programs. This concept is still discussed by a large part of Corsican peo-

⁴ “On ne subit pas son rôle”, interview with Jacques Lagroye, in *Politix*, 1997, n° 38.

⁵ See the researchs of Rémi Lefebvre on the role of socialists elected, their representation and their activities: Lefebvre (R.), “Se conformer à son rôle. Les ressorts de l’intériorisation institutionnelle”, in Lagroye (J.), Offerlé (M.) (dir.), *La sociologie des institutions*, Paris, Belin, 2010, pp 219-247.

⁶ National Liberation Front of Corsica.

ple for different reasons (its weakness and no final definition), in her recent interview about her latest book, Liza Terrazzoni explains that the “The *communauté de destin* not a political element strong enough”⁷. We can also mention the exhibition catalogue of Bastia Museum “*Identità, les corses et les migrations XVII^e-XIX^e siècles*” (Identity, Corsicans and migrations 17th century to 19th century) defines the Corsican “*communauté de destin*” as a “challenge for the Corsicans, linked to their own past”. It pushed the nationalists to create a new kind of identity. “*Communauté de destin*” is far away from an achievement.

But as soon as they are elected, the nationalists had to face this issue. In december 2015, the affair of the *Jardins de l'empereur*⁸ went public: after an attack against firemen during Christmas Eve, there were numerous xenophobic strikes with the slogan of *I arabi fora* (Arabs go home). The nationalists representatives, facing this issue, take a stand by condemning harshly the vandalisation of houses of worship. They are saying that nationalism is above everything “progressive” and that “Corsica has always been a place which created Corsicans”. A few months then, other events take place in Sisco, in the north of Corsica. August 2016, migratory issue is again highlighted and the two leaders of the region are again forced to define their visions on “*communauté de destin*” meanwhile many French editorialists point fingers towards nationalists arguing there is a link between their electoral victory and multiplication of communitarian issues.

The fact that *Aquarius* events has a migratory dimension is important for nationalists. It gives them the opportunity to define what it is a nationalist agenda: the nation. It is essential for them because it is their identity, a part of their DNA. They introduce the “*communauté de destin*” as a progressive idea, far away from the image they are been given in national media.

In the case of *Aquarius*, Jean-Guy Talamoni explains the necessity of an action towards migrants or not should be the responsibility of his jurisdiction: “Here is not France, it is Corsica. So, it is Corsica that welcome migrants.”⁹ An assertion we also find in his text on “*communauté de destin*”. It is the nationalism itself and his definition that it is played in this case. We can wonder if it is not the nationalist’s place to introduce himself has a governor in this case?

2. Already independents ? Gilles Simeoni, “La compétence, je la prends”¹⁰

Overcoming their regional representatives fonctions is at the basis of nationalism. The purpose of Corsican nationalism, for both independentists and autonomists, is to “create a country”.

It is Gilles Simeoni’s leitmotiv.¹¹ His commune list with independent party Corsica Libera (Jean-Guy Talamoni’s party) is called “*Un paese da fà*” (“A country to build”). The na-

⁷ Liza Terrazzoni’s interview about her book “*Les autres en Corse. Pour une sociologie des relations interethniques*”, 2019. <https://www.francebleu.fr/loisirs/evenements/la-communauté-de-destin-un-principe-pas-suffisamment-fort-et-construit-pour-fonctionner-selon-une-1562010528>

⁸ A district in Ajaccio.

⁹ “Ici, ce n’est pas la France mais la Corse. C’est donc la Corse qui accueille les étrangers.”

¹⁰ See note 1.

¹¹ See his interview for CorseNetInfos the October 15th 2017, “Gilles Simeoni: « Le sens de notre combat n’est pas de gagner des élections, mais de construire un pays »”.

tionalist coalition wants “an autonomy of full right and full exercise, with a legislative, regulatory and a fiscal power”, this basis is one who reunites both independentists and autonomists militants. On their mandatory first day their first act were to take an oath on a 18th century book la *Giustificazione della Rivoluzione di Corsica*. This oath comes from a book written by the abbot Salvini, who was a philosopher from Paoli’s time.¹² It was a way to make a statement and show that beyond their election, they are here to defend a cause, the Corsican one, for which they milited for on each side (independentists and autonomists) for two decades.

From a militant perspective, the nationalists’ activism can be paralleled to the French communists’ post-WWII. Both introduce themselves as activists before anything else. Léo Battesti (former FLNC leader and nationalist representative in the region from 1986 to 1992) explained that he gave all his representative salary to his movement. He underlines his devotion and his commitment towards his movement.¹³ For him and for others nationalists elected that will come after, being elected at the Assembly when you are a nationalist involve more duties than for other “French” parties or clanists one. Today, now they are representatives and have the majority in the Assembly it is essential to remain as militants for voters.

In the same time, becoming leader of the assembly give them a different statute. Representatives, leaders of the Assembly and the regional executive, consider themselves as real Corsican presidents. It is “the first government of Corsica since Pasquale Paoli”, wrote Jean-Guy Talamoni. For them, what is going on on the island level is what is going on a national level. In this way, their role is no more “just” a local one.

In this case, they have to grapple with the state, their most ancient partner and most ancient opponent at the same time. The nationalism in Corsica was built through a complicated history with the French state. Between backdoor deals with FLNC leaders and open talks including the new island statutes (Creation of the Corsican region in 1982, Joxe Statut in 1991, Matignon process in 2001). These meetings engaged with the higher institutions of the French state, have given more importance to Corsican struggle for nationalists militants. They have given to nationalists leaders a different idea of their role.

In fact, the phenomenon is not quite the same today: the actual nationalists’ legitimation is not linked to the armed struggle but is now an institutional demand/claim. There is now a claim of public action. This vision appears in Gilles Simeoni’s quote “*La compétence, je la prends*”: the migratory question is in essence a sovereign competence. Nationalists representatives, are not just only regional elected, they are both militants and leaders and of course nationalists, they perform all these roles at the same time. There is a theatrical way of their actions that appears towards French opinion polls but also to their militants? Are they beyond their roles as it has been written on newspaper.

¹² Pasquale Paoli was the corsican independency leader from Republic of Corsica from 1755 to 1769.

¹³ Battesti L., 2017, “*La vie par-dessus tout*”, p 130.

3. Limits of the rebel vision of this act

There are several similar cases of representatives overcoming their roles. In 2011, the mayor of Sevran¹⁴ asked for the intervention of peace keepers¹⁵ to prevent his fellow citizens from killing one another. Socialist senator of Bouches du Rhône, Samia Ghali, made a similar claim in 2012, when she asked for the French army to help fight drug trafficking in Marseille with a roadblock in some parts of the city. Afterward she said she understood Marseille citizens who decided to set fire to an illegal Romani camp because they were a State weakness. In both cases there is the idea of performing a different role on the one they are assigned. Here the mayor role or senator one is an opposition toward the weakness of the State.

Jacques Lagroye is once again helping us by speaking about role. The politist lists two dimensions for the role, one theatrical who is characterized by a form of staged and one more tactical. Sevran mayor just as Marseille senator have in reality an agenda: there is in their intervention, as in the nationalists representatives, a tactical dimension in the *Aquarius* issue.

The difference here is that example of Sevran mayor or Samia Ghali met a demand for more State intervention while the nationalists obviously express their desire to be the State. The theatrical dimension is in those two examples a particular event, a wave of crime and murder on one hand, and a migrant issue on the other. But this particular events are not just simple events: they imply a more general issue. This why it is not only a communication act here.

Playing a role in an institution implies mobilising all possible means. If everyone always have in mind all limits that pertain to this role so they can avoid all possible sanctions. It is essential in order to conquer power or maintain your position. There is always the possibility to question if those “spectacular” interventions are a “lower cost” for representatives since the nationalists only took a stand on tv set or medias. Actually, they have not taken a competence, even they said so, and their intervention is going less far than Ghali’s one.¹⁶ So are they overstepping their role? It depends of what is the definition of their role. By being out of the regional leader role they are in fact in the role they have defined militant and nationalist.

In conclusion Simeoni and Talamoni are in their militant role by giving a lesson to the State on how it should handle this crisis. This rhetoric is an intellectual construction built by decades of struggle. With the *Jardins de l’Empereur* crisis and the Sisco events, they have created a solid rhetoric based on tolerance, human rights, and humanism. Multiple references of Corsican history are used in this rhetoric: in Jean-Guy Talamoni personal blog, the chairman quotes the example of Pasquale Paoli giving right to vote to a Jew in Ile Rousse or mentions Corsica as the “*île des justes*” (“righteous island among nations”) as no Jews were deported by nazis in WWII in Corsica.¹⁷

¹⁴ Sevran is a city in the northeastern suburbs of Paris.

¹⁵ “Forces d’interposition, des casques bleues”.

¹⁶ Article *Le Parisien* <http://www.leparisien.fr/laparisienne/femmes-de-tete/portrait-samia-ghali-la-surprise-des-quartiers-nord-15-10-2013-3227737.php>

¹⁷ Jean-Guy Talamoni blog, <http://jeanguytalamoni.over-blog.com/article-les-attentats-de-paris-l-islam-et-la-corse-125393306.html>

Conclusion

In an interview, Talamoni's chief of staff (Sébastien Quenot) said his administration "has not had the time to unpack when everything happened"¹⁸ during the events at the *Jardins de l'Empereur*, implying his administration was quickly confronted to power. The tension that surrounds the "*communauté de destin*" speech are weighing heavily on nationalists agenda.

That explains why the *Aquarius* event became a big temptation, it is a double help it built a national image while struggling with medias clichés.

Giving a lesson to the French State, their principal opponent at a time this state his stuck in his own contradictions was tempting. Furthermore, it is a way to keep an attach with their militant base that want their parties conflict with State. It is a way to develop the idea nationalists would be better at handling migratory flow by convening Paolism as an humanism. It is a way to say nationalism is always the good answer.

On the role itself: Remi Lefebvre on a text about municipal socialism in the north of France, question the militant representative role. In this text what is really interesting is the "ethos partisan" (an all common set of manners for a militant group) and the capacity of actors to mobilize it. Lefebvre took the example of socialists representatives who have to meet the prefect: a representation of the bourgeoisie in the socialist mind who see themselves as close to the working class.

It seems that the institution forced everyone to work together. Socialist identity is complex: they are local militant with an ideology and have representatives. For them, questioning the role is an obligation. It seems from now they have to redefine their role: elected on the field, ideologist, militant, leader. The power had this effect on them.

The same thing appears with nationalists elected : militant, regional representative, and national willing. Nationalists play all roles at the same time. By their activities, they institutionalize their role and answer a real question: what is an elected nationalist role? In fact, as surprising as it can be, it is possible to say that nationalists have fulfilled their role as much as when they offered to welcome the *Aquarius*.

¹⁸ Interview with Sebastien Quenot in January 2016.