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*Editorial*

THE CENTRE CAN HOLD

*The French Spring*

**F**RANCE, GEOGRAPHICALLY and politically the hinge of the European Union, where its northern and southern tier join, has undergone a more drastic change of position within it than any other member state. Germany, already with the largest economy and population before unification, has since become—once again—the dominant power of the continent, and as its franker spirits make no secret, hegemonic in the Community. Spain, long marginalized by poverty and dictatorship, has lived entry into the Community as status-promotion to European prosperity and respectability. These have reason for satisfaction with the EU. Italy less so: its economic slippage under the single currency, however, has not substantially altered what was always a supporting rather than leading role in the Community. France, on the other hand, which was once premier among the six founders—capable under De Gaulle of bending the other five to its will, French functionaries and language first in influence and use in the Commission, and down to the turn of the eighties still diplomatically senior partner with Germany—has seen a remorseless fall from former heights. In part this was an inevitable consequence of German reunification, which automatically gave the Federal Republic a still greater demographic and economic advantage. But in larger measure its sources were endogenous.

The indices of the country's loss of standing, most of them well advertised in native debates, are legion. Many go back to the nineties, but have become starker since the crisis of 2008. Economically, growth

has crawled, averaging less than 1 per cent a year; unemployment increased to 10 per cent—among youth 25 per cent;<sup>1</sup> the budget not been in the black for over forty years; public debt risen to 96 per cent of GDP; per capita income scarcely moved. Diplomatically, Paris has more and more taken its cue in Europe from Berlin and in the world beyond from Washington, its elites barren of significant independence in either arena. Culturally, English has become the *lingua franca* of the Union, official and popular. Socially, no other large country in the Eurozone has seen such levels of social and racial unrest, or consistent expressions of popular dissatisfaction with the state of the nation. For years now, with the briefest intermissions, *morosité* has become a settled mood.

## I

Politically, the Fifth Republic created by and for De Gaulle, with a unique concentration of executive power in the Presidency and a legislature rigged to exclude trouble-makers, functioned more or less smoothly for thirty years after his death, down to the end of Mitterrand's time in the Élysée. By then the era of fast growth and rapid rise in living standards that had underpinned its original success was long over, and the effects of the global downturn since the mid-seventies were beginning to tell. Mitterrand's sharp turn of 1983, abandoning public spending to prime the economy for austerity to stabilize the currency, talk of socialism for rhetoric of financial discipline, was widely greeted as putting the political system on a sounder basis. In neutering French communism as a helpless junior accomplice to the change, and discrediting the pernicious revolutionary strain in the country's culture, he had laid the foundations of a stable Republic of the Centre: no longer dependent on the individual charisma of a national hero who was distrustful of parties, but now solidly anchored in a cross-party ideological consensus that capitalism was the only sensible way of organizing modern life. With the PCF at last eliminated as any serious presence from the scene, France could look forward to the kind of alternation between a Centre-Left and Centre-Right, differing on details but agreed on essentials, that was the certificate of a liberal democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Two-fifths of the jobless are long-term unemployed; 86 per cent of new jobs in 2016 were temporary, four-fifths of them on contracts of less than a month: 'The economy that France's next president will inherit', *Financial Times*, 8 May 2017.

So, on the surface, it came to pass. At the Élysée, Mitterrand from the former was succeeded by Chirac and his faithless minister Sarkozy from the latter, followed by Hollande from the former: nineteen years of presidential rule by the Centre-Left, seventeen years by the Centre-Right. Until 2002, when the Presidency was abbreviated from seven to five years, making elections to the executive and legislature coincident, there was even alternation within alternation—‘cohabitation’—as one side captured the Premiership with a majority in the National Assembly while the other continued to hold the Presidency: Chirac and Balladur under Mitterrand, Jospin under Chirac. But below the surface, for deep-lying cultural reasons, the equilibrium was always less stable than it seemed. From the eighties onwards, as elsewhere in the West, the continuous imperative of the time was neoliberal radicalization of the operations of capitalism: deregulation, privatization, flexibilization. In France, this was an agenda calculated to provoke tensions within the electorates of both Centre-Right and Centre-Left.<sup>2</sup>

Gaullism, of which the Centre-Right presented itself as the—albeit increasingly notional—heir, had never attempted to undo the local version of the post-war welfare state, if anything expanding it as fiscal revenues rose, and always secured at least a third of the working-class vote, while holding fast the traditional bastions of conservatism in rural and small-town society, topped up by the modern entrepreneurial and technocratic elites at the switches of French capitalism. Liberalism had never been much of a watchword in post-war France, where it was typically associated with unbridled *laissez-faire*. The arrival of neoliberalism—the prefix scarcely even necessary to raise hackles—predictably opened up a fault line in the Centre-Right bloc between its business, bureaucratic and professional components, over time increasingly eager to benefit from a striking off of outdated fetters on the pursuit of profit, and its provincial notables and petty-bourgeois clerks or artisans, not to speak of workers, who stood to suffer or be sidelined by them; similar tensions arising when in a subsequent phase divisive moral questions—should there be a market in reproductive rights, should marriage be gender-neutral?—were added to economic issues.

Inevitably, the advent of neoliberalism split the Centre-Left electorate too. There Mitterrand’s skills had left the Socialist Party in all but

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<sup>2</sup> For the most acute analysis of these, see Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini, *L'illusion du bloc bourgeois. Alliances sociales et avenir du modèle français*, Paris 2017, *passim*.

complete command of the situation, with a Communist remnant obliged to tag behind it by the two-round electoral system. The majority of Centre-Left voters came from the lower end of the income pyramid: workers, schoolteachers, poorly paid white-collar and public-sector employees, with superimposed above them better-off professionals, semi-managerial personnel and state administrators, flanked by the country's large, well-endowed media-intellectual establishment, and in control of the PS machine. Hayekian doctrine had little to offer the former, but a growing attraction for the latter, increasingly persuaded that the basic drivers of a much needed modernization of society could only be the firm and market. The fissure in the Centre-Right was thus reproduced on the Centre-Left. On each side, the dominant layer of the bloc was committed to advancing the neoliberal turn Mitterrand had set in motion in the early eighties. But since both had to win elections to achieve power, neither could risk alienating essential voters by campaigning too openly for a neoliberal agenda, or provoking violent social reactions by pursuing it too radically in office. The result was the unsatisfactory record of half-measures deplored by every right-minded organ of liberal opinion—the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*—abroad. Public spending remained far too high; the welfare state was not cut down to decent size; business was not set properly free; budgets were not in surplus; unions were not broken; post office, prisons and too much else remained in the hands of the state. In their timidity, Centre-Right and Centre-Left shared responsibility for the failure of France to embrace modernity.

## 2

In point of fact, the symmetry was incomplete. There was a significant difference in the problems that neoliberalism posed to each coalition, and the ways each handled it.<sup>3</sup> For the Centre-Left, the component of its electoral base that stood to lose from any French version of the achievements of Thatcher or Blair was larger than the corresponding segment of support of the Centre-Right, and bound to lose more, as socially most vulnerable at their receiving end. To meet this difficulty, the PS required an altogether more affirmative ideological lamination of its course,

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<sup>3</sup> Missing from Amable and Palombarini's excellent account is sufficient attention to this.

capable at once of embellishing and distracting from its objectives. This was bequeathed it by Mitterrand: the inspiring ideal of Europe. It was in its service that the French were called upon to liberalize and modernize themselves. In private, Mitterrand—more candid than his successors—knew what that meant, as he confided to his familiar Jacques Attali at the outset: ‘I am divided between two ambitions: the construction of Europe and social justice. The European Monetary System is a condition of success in the first, and limits my freedom in the second.’<sup>4</sup> Once the EU was in place, every market-friendly initiative could be extolled or excused as required by solidarity with Brussels. Not infrequently, the Centre-Right too found this a convenient *exutoire*, but it could never resort to Europe as an all-purpose ideological trump without renouncing its claims to some memory of Gaullism, and did not need to. Neoliberal aims came more naturally to a larger part of its constituency, requiring less borrowed finery for them.

Yet at the same time, the Centre-Left was the better equipped of the two blocs actually to introduce neoliberal reforms. Resistance to these was always most likely to come from the popular classes where the larger part of its own social base lay, in particular—though not exclusively—from the trade-unions, where only the collaborationist CFDT could be relied on to swallow virtually anything. For the Centre-Right to provoke a head-on conflict with unionized workers or student movements, not to speak of broader popular layers in sympathy with them, was to invite defeat, as Juppé discovered in 1995 and De Villepin in 2006. By contrast, still claiming to represent the injured and oppressed—and interpret their best interests—the PS was in a more favourable position to neutralize such opposition, as Valls’s success in ramming through a labour law to please business in 2016 showed. So too it was no accident that over the years the Centre-Left privatized many more public enterprises than the Centre-Right.

### 3

Inevitably, the long-standing difficulties, going back to the eighties, in the way of a neoliberal makeover of French capitalism intensified once the

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<sup>4</sup> Attali, *Verbatim I*, Paris 1993, p. 399.

financial crisis of 2008–09 struck the country. The deteriorating condition of the economy, as growth fell and unemployment rose, made harsh remedies of the market even less tolerable to those suffering at the bottom of society, yet even more urgent—if France was to become competitive again, the only route to all-round prosperity—in the eyes of those at the top of it. The crisis hit France under Sarkozy, who tacked as best he could between the need for reform and the need for re-election, in the end securing neither. With the Centre-Right stymied, alternation kicked in once again, putting the Centre-Left into office. But if Sarkozy's presidency was a let-down for the former, Hollande's proved a disaster for the latter, stretching its already frayed tightrope between electoral promise and political performance to breaking point. After campaigning with a more radical rhetoric than his predecessors, announcing that 'my enemy is finance', and pledging revision of the Stability Pact written by Berlin and Brussels, taxation of the rich and succour for the poor, Hollande was soon presiding over a government more conspicuously tilting to business and tailing Berlin than Sarkozy's, and relying still more on military adventures in Africa and the Middle East for temporary injections of national adrenalin. Growth failed to quicken, the budget to balance; per capita income continued to stagnate; the number of jobless, far from falling, rose.

Within a year of his election, Hollande was already the least popular President in the history of the Fifth Republic. Sarkozy was disliked for his swagger, and disappointed expectations of his rule. But when he ran for re-election, he could still muster 48.4 per cent of the vote. By contrast, Hollande was despised for his indignities, and—much more decisively and ruinously—angered or alienated the vast majority of those who had voted for him. With less than twelve months of his mandate remaining, his ratings in the polls had fallen to single digits. Such a collapse in support was unprecedented. It looked certain that the tightrope was about to snap, precipitating his fall. Yet such was Hollande's sense of self-importance that with the Presidential contest of 2017 only six months away, he was still bent on running for re-election, reckoning that he could use the authority of office to keep the PS behind him and with it have a fair chance of keeping the Centre-Left in power. Of the first, at least, he had reason to be confident: the party was very unlikely to unseat a sitting President as its candidate. All such calculations were shattered by the publication that autumn of a 650-page book in which two journalists from *Le Monde* recounted their conversations with him, recorded across five years from 2011 to 2016. A suicidal

*sottisier* of footling grudges and vanities, its effect was that of a French version of the Nixon tapes—incredibly, not concealed but conceived as self-advertisement.<sup>5</sup> Overnight, what remained of his reputation was destroyed. Finally realizing his candidature was hopeless, in short order he was out of the race.

## 4

With polls giving it a wide lead, the Centre-Right looked set for an easy victory, France poised for its customary alternation. In the wake of Hollande's self-destruction, the party Sarkozy had relabelled Les Républicains held a two-round primary to pick its candidate for the Presidency. To general surprise, neither Sarkozy nor Juppé, the favourite, emerged victorious. Instead, it was Sarkozy's former premier François Fillon who swept the board with a heterodox mixture of Thatcherism and Gaullism: a more radically neoliberal socio-economic programme than ever presented before in France, breaking with consensual welfare commitments, combined with a more independent foreign policy than either camp had ever dared envisage since De Gaulle, breaking with EU and US taboos on Russia and the Middle East. With a large lead in national polls—in early December, touching 30 per cent of first-round preferences—he looked all but certain to be the next President, given the automatic cross-party rush to back whoever faced off against his closest challenger Marine Le Pen, running 7 points behind him but virtually guaranteed to get to the second round, where over 60 per cent of the electorate could be counted on to vote for her opponent.

Six weeks later, a thunderbolt put paid to this prospect. On 24 January, *Le Canard enchaîné* revealed that Fillon had for years been using his staff allowances as a deputy in the National Assembly to pay his wife, and later also his children, for imaginary services. Immediately put under judicial investigation—which during the primary contest he had said, in a scarcely veiled attack on Sarkozy, long threatened by the same, should

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<sup>5</sup> In October 2015, he was still taking a second mandate for granted. Especially damaging were his aspersions on the judiciary ('cowards'), his ministers ('inaudible', 'diaphanous', 'unidentifiable'), the world of culture ('hard and ungrateful'), not to speak of the lamentable figure he cut when talk turned to his two mistresses: Gérard Davet and François Lhomme, '*Un Président ne devrait pas dire ça . . .*', Paris 2016, pp. 155, 388–9, 81–95, 125, 129 ff.

disqualify anyone from running for the Presidency—his standing in the polls collapsed. A week later he had dropped to third place, and never recovered. The Centre-Right, unable to force him to withdraw, was suddenly out of the game.

In eliminating Fillon, *Le Canard enchaîné* became the country's Great Elector, its intervention effectively deciding the race for the Presidency, whose outcome was predictable within hours of its story. The spectacular nature of its scoop aroused virtually no curiosity as to its origin. Yet there certainly lay the key to the *dénouement*. Fillon's malversations were in no way out of the ordinary in the French political class. One estimate is that something like a hundred deputies in the National Assembly used their allowances in not dissimilar fashion—if more frequently, perhaps, mistresses than wives on the payroll. The sums of money involved, considerable by the standards of ordinary people, were small change at the high end of political corruption in France—little more than 'shoplifting', as one scathing critic put it. Evidence, however, requiring access to bank accounts, tax returns and the like, was harder to come by. How did the *Canard* acquire these, at so strategic a moment? The weekly, billed as France's top scandal sheet, bears comparison with *Private Eye* in Britain, each offering a mixture of satire and exposé. If the elephantine humour of the French version makes its British counterpart look like rapier wit, the larger difference lies in the intimacy of the *Canard* with the tenebrous world of back-door manoeuvres in the political class, and manipulative operations of the French intelligence services, of both of which it has more than once been a willing instrument.<sup>6</sup> The timing of its exposure of Fillon was an unambiguous indication that this was not the fruit of months of patient independent investigation, but simply a package—agreeable to the paper's political orientation—handed to it by interested parties in the state apparatus. These could have been placemen of the ps in the Ministry of Finance, acting to thwart the probable victor of the opposite camp; confidants of Sarkozy, of which there were still many in the police, exacting revenge on Fillon for having

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<sup>6</sup> For abundant documentation of the interpenetration of personnel, and connivance of the paper, with the ps under Mitterrand, with whom its editors were infatuated, and its particularly odious role as a conduit for the efforts of his regime to conceal its responsibility for the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior and killing of a Greenpeace activist in New Zealand, which *Le Canard* worked zealously to attribute to the British rather than French secret services, see the unappetizing record in Karl Laske and Laurent Valdiguié, *Le vrai Canard. Les dessous du Canard enchaîné*, Paris 2008, pp. 245–347.



done his best to cast suspicion on his rival in the Jouyet affair;<sup>7</sup> or the military-diplomatic security complex, moving to destroy a threat to Franco-German unity on Crimea and Western sanctions on Russia, in much the same way as its American counterpart checkmated Trump's inclination for overtures to Moscow. Whatever the source of the dossier, its effect on the election was larger than all the campaign speeches of the different candidates combined.

## 5

The *Canard* published its story two days after the first round of the primary in the Socialist Party had revealed the full extent of the disarray in the Centre-Left. Once Hollande had stepped back, his Premier Manuel Valls, who had long been eyeing the opportunity, announced he would run for President. France's best known admirer of Blair, Valls had never been popular in the party, as too muscular a politician on its right, calling too openly for it to drop any pretense of socialism. He hoped however to capitalize on his position as head of the government, and image as a tough-minded foe of terrorism. The sharp neoliberal and authoritarian bent of his last year in office, however, had provoked enough revulsion in the base of the party to undo him. Well ahead in the first round, and a landslide winner in the second was another of Hollande's ministers, Benoît Hamon, who had resigned from the government in late 2014, and ran as a candidate of the left of the party. A pallid figure, enjoying little or no support in its establishment, and scant appeal beyond the shrinking perimeter of its base, his victory simply advertised the condition to which the PS had been reduced: hollowed-out and divided—Valls refusing even to vote for him. His nomination, sealed just after Fillon was effectively knocked out of the ring, took the Centre-Left as cleanly out of contention as the Centre-Right had been five days earlier. In April he would pick up just 6 per cent of the electorate.

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By the second week of February, with both stanchions of alternation removed, it was already clear who would be the next President. In

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<sup>7</sup> For which see Davet and Lhomme, '*Un Président . . .*', pp. 445–56.

October Emmanuel Macron, Hollande's Minister for the Economy, had resigned from his post to run against his patron. The previous April he had created a movement adorned with his own monogram, En Marche!, with the obvious intention of testing the waters for a bid to capture the Élysée, and in November duly announced it. A typical product of the upper reaches of the political class, an *énarque* moving effortlessly between public service and private enrichment, from Inspector of Finances to instant millionaire with Rothschild, he had joined the PS in 2006, dipping out of it in 2009, after making the connexions levitating him into Hollande's personal entourage in 2012, where he became deputy chief of staff and in short order, at the age of 36, a leading minister in the government. Entranced by this *enfant choyé*, Hollande saw in him an earlier version of himself, adorning his regime with a touch of youthful glamour. *Macron, c'est moi*, he told his journalists.<sup>8</sup> So far as policy went, he was not wrong: little or nothing divided them, Macron's background guaranteeing he would be a business-friendly icon of deregulation of the kind Hollande wanted. That formally he was no longer a member of the PS hardly mattered, since privately Hollande was already saying the party was a thing of the past. But in thinking that Macron would be a loyal princeling, since he owed his elevation to Hollande, he was deluded. Close up, Macron could see the likely fate of his regime, and at the right moment had no hesitation in helping to bring it down to further his own ambitions. By the time he announced his candidacy, he had assembled business, bureaucratic, professional and intellectual backers galore, along with a commensurate war-chest, and bathed in fulsome media coverage, could step forward as the embodiment of all that was dynamic and forward-looking in France.

Ideologically, from the outset Macron had launched En Marche! as a movement transcending the outdated opposition between Right and Left in France, for the creation of a new, fresh politics of the Centre, liberal in economics and social in sensibility. This was, of course, itself a time-worn appeal, repeatedly offered by assorted politicians of one kind or another, and corresponding to a real demand in the middle of the spectrum of political opinion, but never successfully dislodging the dichotomy of Left and Right; in part because of the polarizing logic of the electoral system, but equally because the dominant opposition was between two blocs

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<sup>8</sup> Davet and Lhomme, '*Un Président . . .*', p. 357: later, this pearl: 'Emmanuel Macron est un être qui n'est pas duplice', p. 366.

each of which could legitimately claim the same prefix: Centre-Left and Centre-Right. Now, however, that both of these were disabled, a 'pure' self-declared Centre could for the first time command the stage. In projecting his construction, Macron had to deal with the last pretender to the role, the Catholic politician François Bayrou, who had run for the Presidency in every election since 2002 (achieving a high point of 18.57 per cent of the vote in 2007), and could subtract electors from Macron if he ran again. The political party from which he had come, the UDF, was a creation of Giscard in the seventies, and in its subsequent metamorphoses—it is now the UDI—served as a traditional, if not invariable, ally of the much larger party of originally Gaullist extraction led by Chirac—of whom Bayrou had been a Minister—and Sarkozy.<sup>9</sup> It had always been a more significant component of the Centre-Right bloc than any counterpart element in the Centre-Left. Since Macron could scarcely conceal his passage through the PS, it was all the more important he secure the support of Bayrou, to ensure that his candidacy had visible endorsement from the opposite field, where the banner of the Centre had always been most consistently raised. On 22 February, Bayrou came aboard without undue tergiversation. Macron immediately gained 5 points in the polls. The Centre was now truly his own. Well ahead of Fillon, with Hamon languishing low behind either, he had locked down the Presidency.

## 7

Such was not, however, the narrative in the French, let alone international media. There, the election featured as a dramatic, even nerve-wracking contest, dominated by the threat of the Front National—thinly veiled fascism or rabidly toxic populism, according to taste—coming to power, in a nightmare Gallic version of Trump's victory in America. In part, the typical logic of press and television dictated this. News is not news if it is predictable: titillating frissons of fear sell better than boring assurances of comfort. But also, and much more important for the purposes of the second round, was the standard logic of the established order: the more lurid the danger from the extreme right, the more overwhelming the need for all decent citizens to rally behind the champion of democracy,

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<sup>9</sup> After his performance in the election of 2007, Bayrou had split from the UDF to create his own MoDem party, to offer a somewhat less conservative brand of centrism.

whose identity could at first be left tactfully blank, before becoming, to general relief, an enchanting young banker.

The realities of the FN today have little to do with all this. Formed in the early seventies by the ex-paratrooper Jean-Marie Le Pen, it was originally a small party of the far right, of classic anti-communist and anti-semitic outlook, which a decade later achieved its first, still modest electoral breakthrough (9.65 per cent), picking up working-class votes disillusioned by Mitterrand's turn to austerity. Ideologically, it remained—and this was not so usual for far-right parties of the period—militantly pro-European and free-market, anti-statist.<sup>10</sup> After Maastricht, it dropped its enthusiasm for Europe and gradually increased its popular audience, as the only party that was not implicated in the visible corrosion of the political system, and the deterioration of conditions of life under it. In 2002 it came as a shock to the establishment when Le Pen got through to the second round of the Presidential election, before being crushed by Chirac's 82 per cent landslide against him,<sup>11</sup> and five years later reduced to a tenth of the electorate. In the wake of this setback, Le Pen withdrew, and his daughter Marine took over leadership of the party. Thereafter, the combination of the Great Recession, Marine's much greater political skills, and the free fall of the Hollande regime, put the wind in its sails. Crucial to its ensuing success was Marine's repositioning of it as not only a hammer of the EU, but also—another 180-degree transformation—a champion of welfare protection and state intervention, against the devastations of neoliberalism. In 2014, the FN came first in the European elections in France, with a quarter of the vote.

Sociologically, this rise was a conquest of the working class, where the party came to occupy much of the space vacated by French communism. This was not the unionized factory proletariat of old, largely destroyed by de-industrialization, but its atomized successor, eking out a precarious living on short-term contracts in smaller enterprises, generationally removed from its predecessor in daily experience and surrounding

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<sup>10</sup> Foreign journalists, thrilled that Macron should play Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy', adopted by the EU as its official anthem, might have been startled to learn that in the late eighties the same musical kitsch blared through the amplifiers at Jean-Marie Le Pen's meetings for the FN.

<sup>11</sup> For the background to the election in Jospin's manipulation of the constitution, his fiasco at the polls, and the left's futile abasement in the second round of 2002, see *The New Old World*, London and New York 2009, pp. 174–7.

culture, and capped not by teachers and lesser public employees as in the PCF, but by petty entrepreneurs and self-employed professionals or artisans in the FN. United by hostility to politicians and technocrats above and immigrants and vagabonds below, the contradictions of this bloc were objectively no less than those of the two competing camps of the establishment. But they were not put to the same subjective test: since the Front was excluded from the political system, it could not be blamed for its misdeeds—it was the only organized force plainly innocent of them, and too often the only one speaking the plain truth about them. Under Marine, it had become the first party of the French working class. In the first round of the elections this year, the number of workers who voted for it was far ahead of any other party—37 per cent; in the second round, 56 per cent. As inequality of income and insecurity of employment steadily increased under the system of collusive alternation, so have those willing to cast their ballot for the FN: 4.8 million in the Presidential election of 2002, 6.8 million in the regional elections of 2015, 7.7 million in the first round in 2017, 10.6 million in the second round—the last figure, however, an artifice of the distortions imposed by the *double tour*. Its real level of support is about a fifth of the electorate, less than those—mainly workers too—who abstain, vote blank or spoil their ballots.<sup>12</sup> There was never the slightest chance that Marine could win the Presidency. Far from being a deadly threat to the system in place, the FN is an eminently functional part of it, clasping together all respectable opinion that might otherwise waver or question it, in an anxious or self-righteous defence of the status quo: the ideal scarecrow of a neoliberal republic.

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Ranged beyond the system on the opposite flank was the recent creation of La France insoumise, led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Younger by a

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<sup>12</sup> Prior to 2017, it has been reckoned that less than one in seven workers actually cast a ballot for the FN, so widespread was proletarian abstention: Patrick Lehingue, “L’électorat” du Front National. Retour sur deux ou trois “idées reçues”, in Gérard Mauger and Willy Pelletier, eds, *Les classes populaires et le FN*, Paris 2016, pp. 33–7, who concedes, however, that over half the FN electorate is working class of one kind or another, and that more workers are represented on its electoral lists than in any party. This layer of its support is concentrated in the North and North-East; in the far South its electorate is more conservative, coming from a small to medium bourgeoisie tinted with Catholicism.

generation than Benn, and a dozen years than Lafontaine, Mélenchon is the last major figure from the European parties of the Socialist International to turn, late in their career, sharply to the left—in his case, even discarding the label as too confining. From a *pied-noir* family that relocated from Morocco to France in 1962, after an early formation in the Lambertist branch of French Trotskyism that produced many cadres of the PS, he became an ardent admirer of Mitterrand and, rising rapidly through the Socialist Party, at the age of 35 the youngest senator in the history of the Fifth Republic. Active in the internal arguments and disputes of the party from a position of the left in it, for some three decades he remained loyal to its leadership, defending Mitterrand's conversion to austerity, voting for Maastricht, becoming a minister under Jospin, and approving his ruinous change to the constitution.

In 2005, however, he came out against the proposed European Constitution, overwhelmingly backed by the PS, and rejected by a large majority in the ensuing referendum. Three years later, he abandoned the party to create a small one of his own to the left of it, with which he negotiated an alliance with the PCF to fight the elections of 2012 together as a *Front de Gauche*, himself running as its Presidential candidate. The experience was not a success, Mélenchon getting 11 per cent of the vote, scarcely more than the combined score of various smaller left organizations in 2002, and the FG only 7 per cent in the legislative elections. Mélenchon had hoped the Front would unite disillusioned socialists and residual communists in a French version of *Die Linke* in Germany (Lafontaine was present at its foundation); but the PCF, clinging to its long-standing local deals with the PS, had no intention of letting itself be merged in this fashion, and nothing came of it.

Changing tack, four years later Mélenchon created an entirely new movement, *La France insoumise*, to run for the Presidency again, this time independent of any other force. The change was more than just organizational. Fascinated for some time by the success of heterodox governments in Latin America, he drew particular inspiration from the example of Rafael Correa in Ecuador, like him a former minister of a social-democratic party, who had pioneered the idea of a 'citizen's revolution', rewriting the constitution, redistributing wealth and protecting the environment. This was the way forward, to abandon the exhausted schemas of the traditional European left for a radically progressive populism, summoning the people to battle against the elites in

control of a bankrupt political and economic system. Impressed with the strategic insight of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, encountered in Argentina in 2013, Mélenchon set about applying their lessons at home.<sup>13</sup> With a platform not unlike Correa's—heading its demands is the call for a Sixth Republic, to be founded by a Constituent Assembly doing away with the presidential monarchy and rigged electoral system, to create an equitable parliamentary democracy with right of recall and referendum initiative<sup>14</sup>—La France insoumise banned red flags and the Internationale for the tricolour and Marseillaise at its meetings, appealing to all patriots regardless of class or age to rise up against the decaying order of the Fifth. Borrowing the cry that drove out Ben Ali in Tunisia, *Dégagez!*—'Clear out!'—became the leitmotif of the campaign. Widely acknowledged as victor of the television debates, addressing with unmatched rhetorical verve mass meetings projected from city to city by hologram, Mélenchon achieved the largest increase in support—some 7 percentage points—of any candidate in the closing weeks of the campaign.

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It was an impressive feat. The final vote for the first round saw the four leading candidates closely bunched, Macron with a clear lead at 24.01 per cent, the other three separated by scarcely more than a single percentage point: Le Pen 21.30, Fillon 20.01, Mélenchon 19.58.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> See his own account in Jean-Luc Mélenchon, *Le choix de l'insoumission*, Paris 2016, pp. 310–6. 'In sum, Chávez, Correa, Mujica, Laclau and Mouffe liberated my language and my political imagination.' The Latin American chapter of his experience was 'what allowed me, before others, to supersede the old fixation on organized wage-earners'. In Spain, 'Podemos has made the same attempt. All its leaders have learnt from revolutionary Latin America. Yet in France as in Europe, how many have participated in this stirring together of ideas? So few! Most are still bogged down in the old schemas of the traditional European left, despite the evident failure of methods': pp. 315–6. Chantal Mouffe would be a leading presence on Mélenchon's platforms.

<sup>14</sup> Detailed in Mélenchon, *L'Avenir en commun. Le programme de la France insoumise et son candidat*, Paris 2016, pp. 23–7.

<sup>15</sup> In the last month of the campaign, Fillon edged his ratings upwards, without ever closing on Macron, by mobilizing a Catholic neo-conservatism that in recent years has shown surprising growth among educated youth, providing much of the energy for his triumph in the Centre-Right primaries.

populist turn of La France insoumise had paid off. Mélenchon displaced Le Pen from her long-standing position as the most popular politician among the nation's youth, winning 30 per cent of the 18–24 age group, and the unemployed, taking 31 per cent, with a striking degree of support too among immigrant youth in the *banlieues*. In four out of France's ten largest cities—Marseille, Toulouse, Montpellier, Lille—he came first. With a smidgeon below Podemos's share of the vote in Spain the previous summer (21 per cent), campaigning on a much more radical programme, by reducing Hamon to just over 6 per cent La France insoumise achieved what the Spanish movement had sought and failed to do, crush the Socialist Party at the polls.<sup>16</sup> But it had not overtaken the FN, Marine retaining a big lead among both blue- and white-collar workers, and the two lowest income groups. Together, the FN and LFI won a full 40 per cent of those who marked a name on a ballot in late April. Another 24 per cent abstained or voted blank.<sup>17</sup> No other West European country has seen such a radical rejection of the established order. Two out of five voters, shuddered mainstream commentators, were apparently ready to embark on any demented adventure.<sup>18</sup> Where might it end?

In reality, the two anti-systemic forces, rather than aggregating to a common populist insurgency, largely cancel each other out. However similar their critiques of the social and economic system, insuperable moral and ideological differences on immigration hold them apart at opposite ends of the political spectrum, where each freely demonizes the other.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Its task was, of course, easier: in Spain the PSOE was in—admittedly lame—opposition to a Centre-Right government rather than comparably discredited by a Centre-Left debacle.

<sup>17</sup> For the data, see the Ipsos Report, *Premier tour. Sociologie des électors et profils des abstentionnistes*, 23 April 2017.

<sup>18</sup> For a typical outburst, see France's version of Elizabeth Drew of old, or Philip Stephens of today: Alain Duhamel, 'La tentation de l'aventure', *Libération*, 20 April 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Not in equal measure: where the fire of the FN has been overwhelmingly directed at the revolving door of the mainstream parties, mocked by Marine as the indistinguishable UMPs, Mélenchon has often taken the FN as his primary target. There is also an asymmetry on the central issue dividing them: whereas the FN proposes clear-cut xenophobic solutions for immigration, the FI—like most of the European Left in general, bereft of any comparably specific answers—tries to avoid the subject altogether. *L'Avenir en Commun*, its programme for the 2017 election, contains 83 headings: the word immigration is not to be found in any of them.



So long as the FN has the edge in the competition between the two, it provides the requisite spectre for ritual unity around the Fifth Republic, and in the second round of the Presidential election performed the same service as fifteen years earlier. This time, however, the appeal of a *union sacrée* was less. Mélenchon declined to urge his voters to fall in line behind a victor so obnoxious to them, who had no need for their support, and two-fifths did not, abstentions at their highest level for almost fifty years. Macron cruised home with a huge margin, virtually double Le Pen's vote—if nationally not quite at Chirac's level, matching him in Paris, with an Uzbek score of 90 per cent, gratifying enough. Out of an electorate of 47.5 million, Macron won 20.7 million, 16.2 million abstained or voted blank, and 10.6 million opted for Le Pen.

What the figures made clear was the political source and social background of Macron's support. In the first round, he took 47 per cent of those who voted for Hollande in 2012, and 43 per cent of those who voted for Bayrou, in each case virtually double that of any other candidate, as against a mere 17 per cent of those who had voted for Sarkozy; and in the second, by far his highest score—71 per cent—was among those who had voted for Hamon. Socially, he led in the two highest income categories during the first round.<sup>20</sup> In other words, his core support was a recycled version of the Centre-Left bloc that put Hollande in power. Not exactly the same, because this time part of it deserted to Mélenchon and a smaller slice remained faithful to Hamon, losses offset by Bayrou voters who had gone in similar numbers to Sarkozy in 2012, and about a third of the UDF, which after Bayrou abandoned it had stayed with the Centre-Right. The relative weight of the two components in the victorious camp has thus changed: Macron's coalition lies further over to the Centre. But within it, there was no doubt which party supplied most of the key personnel and political-organizational software for the new ruler. The small political coterie around him derive either from the team assembled by Strauss-Kahn, before his disgrace, for his own run for the Presidency, or former aides in the Ministry of the Economy of a PS government. Paradoxically, the contingencies of vanity and scandal journalism—*Le Monde* and *Le Canard* between them—have produced the most ironic of all upshots: the least popular President in living memory, heading the most discredited administration, has resulted in a

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<sup>20</sup> For these figures, see Ipsos Report, *Deuxième tour. Sociologie des électors et profil des abstentionnistes*, 7 May 2017.

succession headed by a figure out of the same stable, whom he created and saw as his *Doppelgänger*. He would come to regret his confidence that *Macron, c'est moi*, but the degree of political continuity between the two is there for all to see.

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Neon-lit with hype in a jubilant international and sycophantic domestic press, Macron is presented as France's version of Trudeau or Obama, or for those with selective memories, Blair. The similarities of ideology and image are real. But there are not insignificant differences. Personally, although much has been made of his charm, half the country has so far proved immune to it: on the eve of the first round, 46 per cent of the population expressed their dislike of him, his campaign having left among many an impression of arrogance, pretension and stridency. Arrogance: an *énarque* of *énarques*, exuding money and disdain for lesser fry, surrounded by his kind—five out of seven of his inner circle hailing from the ENA too. Pretension: his banal campaign manifesto entitled nothing less than *Révolution*—a trumpet for himself, oblivious to ridicule in its claims of intimacy with the finest flowers of the nation's literature and philosophy ('I am very Camusian'), mingled with excruciating pronouncements of *patriotard* bombast.<sup>21</sup> Stridency: the shrillness of a televangelist, arms aloft shouting at the top of his voice at mass meetings. Once enveloped in the dignity of the Presidency, these liabilities will, of course, be under greater control.

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<sup>21</sup> Sample flights: 'I learnt from Colette what was a flower, from Giono a cold wind in Provence and the truth of characters. Gide and Cocteau were my irreplaceable companions'; 'I took the road of characters in Flaubert, Hugo. I was consumed by the ambition of Balzac's young bloods'; 'André Breton, who loved Paris so well, arrived one day by chance in the backland of the Lot and cried: *I have stopped wanting to be anywhere else*. I will never tire of contemplating the motionless, fugitive soul of France'; 'In the spirit of France there is an aspiration to the universal that is at once an unceasing indignation at injustice and oppression, and a determination to tell others what we think of the world, here, now and on behalf of everyone. The spirit of the Encyclopaedists directed by Diderot offers the quintessence of this mad ambition, but that ambition is us.' Emmanuel Macron, *Révolution*, Paris 2016, pp. 14, 19, 45, 51–2. Elsewhere, in a publication curated by a veteran from *Le Monde*, Balibar, Ricoeur, Deleuze, Bourdieu are put to service in similar fashion, as naturally Camus, Chateaubriand, Char, etc. *Macron par Macron*, Paris 2017, pp. 18–22, 31, 41, 46, 84–5, 91. After all, 'Politics is a style, a magic', he explains to his interlocutor.

Behind them, on the evidence, lies a ruthless political will and intelligence leaving his Atlantic analogues at the post. None of them shot to power with such speed or bravado, and so little ballast. Nor is that Macron's only advantage over them. Both the office he has captured and the field he confronts afford him much greater freedom of manoeuvre. The powers of the French Presidency, unconstrained by any surly mid-term election of Congress, let alone a refractory Supreme Court, far surpass those of the American, and are immune to British backbench rebellion: designation of them as royal is not purely metaphor. Beyond these familiar prerogatives, moreover, an exceptional clearing now lies open before him. For over three decades, neoliberal reformation of France was a sequence of halting difficult steps in the right direction, that could never acquire full momentum because of party-political alternation between a Centre-Right and a Centre-Left, each striving their best to forward it, each impeded by significant parts of their constituency, and locked by the electoral system into a bi-polar competition with the other. In 2017, with the meltdown of the PS and extenuation of its rival, there is suddenly every chance the deadlock will be broken.

Historically, no newly elected President of the Fifth Republic has ever failed to win a majority in the National Assembly, and not a few have won a landslide. But the majority was always a partisan construction, composed of deputies representing a pre-existing party or coalition of parties, and since the eighties, subject to contradictory pressures or demands from its electorate. Macron, cresting on his two-thirds vote in the second round, could be confident of the rule—deliberately reinforced by the constitutional change of 2001—that in the wake of victory, an incoming executive can rely on sweeping up the legislature too. But, unlike his predecessors, he could produce an Assembly to his liking virtually *ex nihilo*, stocked with the novices and transfuges of his new-born machine, La République en marche, as dependent on their creator as once were members of Forza Italia in Italy. If the initial nucleus of this construction comes from the PS, encrusted with contributions from Bayrou's MoDem and a few spangles from 'civil society', the strategic aim is to amplify it with the co-option of leading figures of the Right. Encouraged by the timely selection of one of their own—Édouard Philippe, yet another *énarque*—as Prime Minister, and another, Bruno Le Maire as Finance Minister, a good number are already eager to jump on the bandwagon, and more will no doubt follow. Logically, the result should be a homogeneous Centre with a super-majority, capable

at last of accomplishing the modernization of France according to the best prescriptions.

## II

The exclusionary electoral system still in place, at institutional level there is little to stop this. In 1958, with 20.4 per cent of the vote, De Gaulle secured 198 deputies, while the PCF with 19.2 per cent got 10. By the first week of June, so predictable had the upshot in the Assembly become that in the first round of the legislative elections, over half the electorate didn't even bother to vote—51.29 per cent abstaining, with another 2.23 per cent voting blank or spoiling their ballots: a figure without precedent not only in France, but in any West European country since the Second World War. With the support of just 15.39 per cent of the electorate *La République en marche* was on course to take up to 80 per cent of the legislature, the largest partisan avalanche in the history of the Fifth Republic.<sup>22</sup> The *Républicains*, demoralized by the disgrace of Fillon and weakened by desertions, are in no mood, or position, to make much trouble. On the streets, the unions—CFDT excepted—will try to resist, but having proved unable to block the *El Khomri* labour law under Hollande, they are unlikely to fare better with Macron, at least at the outset, in the honeymoon period of a new government. Domestically, Macron will enjoy the benefits of the current upswing of the business cycle, and no doubt be able to push through most of his programme, a French version of Schröder's *Agenda 2010*—deregulating the labour market, cutting public spending, priming start-ups, reducing corporate taxation, streamlining the welfare system—without excessive difficulty. He will be careful to make it a compensatory rather than disciplinary variant of neoliberalism, with a few side-payments to the least well-off. With household debt still quite low—57 per cent of GDP, against 53 per cent in Germany and 88 per cent in Britain—there is plenty of room for a credit bubble. Buoyed by a ruler who is one of its own, the animal spirits of capital can be counted on to revive, lifting investment.

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<sup>22</sup> Of votes cast, *LREM-MoDem* took some 32 per cent, *Les Républicains* 16 per cent, *FN* 13 per cent, *La France Insoumise* 11 per cent, the *PS* 7 per cent. With 3 per cent more votes than the *FN*, *Les Républicains* could get ten times as many deputies: figures like these making complaints the *FN* is undemocratic little short of farcical.

Whether results will match expectations is another matter. Germany's export boom, returning the country to moderate growth and falling unemployment, was powered by wage repression, not by Agenda 2010, whose contribution to recovery was minimal, and accompanied by increasing inequality and precarity—over double the percentage in France of workers earning less than two-thirds of the median wage. A *Biedermeier* political culture, and comparison with less fortunate neighbours, has kept the country socially sedated. These are not conditions that can readily be replicated in France. A competitive export surplus along German lines is out of reach, a fallacy of composition. French political culture, however much the last *trente inglorieuses* have diluted or doped it, is still potentially more explosive terrain than the tranquil landscape across the Rhine. If growth and employment picked up rapidly, a Second Empire atmosphere could settle over the country once more. But it is far from guaranteed.

## I 2

Critical for the success of such a prospect is the more important side of Macron's agenda, for which domestic reform is conceived as a down-payment. The larger stake in view is the future of the Eurozone. There, the consensus in Paris has for some time been that monetary union in its present form has not only caused problems for the weaker economies of the Mediterranean belt, but difficulties for French growth too—the imposition of a 3 per cent ceiling on any deficit only tolerable because circumventable with the complicity of Brussels.<sup>23</sup> In the contest for the Presidency, the most striking proposal to issue from respectable opinion for dealing with this long-standing headache for France came from Hamon's camp, where Thomas Piketty and fellow spirits drew up a draft 'Treaty for the Democratization of the Eurozone'—twenty-two articles, with a stirring preamble. T-Dem, as they baptized it, would create a Eurozone parliament composed of deputies from each national

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<sup>23</sup> For the imperturbable mutual cynicism of the Commission and of Hollande in demanding and accepting the ceiling, both knowing perfectly well that France would not respect it, merely in order to discourage other member states from flouting it, see Hollande's exchange with his flabbergasted interviewers: Davet and Lhomme, '*Un Président . . .*', pp. 516–7. The only rule of the rule of law ritually held aloft by the Union is that it can be ignored whenever required.

parliament, chosen by each party in proportion to their weight in it (topped up with a small similar tranche from Strasbourg), which would vote taxes for a common Eurozone budget to serve ‘lasting growth, social cohesion and economic convergence’, mutualize all public debts over 60 per cent of GDP, and elect a Eurozone finance minister to administer the resulting budget. To reassure voters of the residual PS that this package would be to their liking, Piketty and his co-authors explained, figures in hand, that in such a Eurozone parliament, the left could count on a solid majority.<sup>24</sup> The political naivety of the scheme—as if in addition to all its other provisions, each less acceptable to German opinion than the last, this calculation would make it more palatable to Bavarian Social-Christians or Dutch Liberals—needs little emphasis.

Macron’s version was prudently vaguer, calling for a Eurozone parliament—even less realistically, composed just of all ‘members of each national parliament’, a body that would run into the thousands, meeting once a month—and Eurozone finance minister to launch a bold investment plan, without specifying where the resources for one are to come from.<sup>25</sup> For the Finance Ministry in Berlin, this vision could probably be forgiven as campaign fluff, not to be taken too seriously. The German political class is well aware that Macron is its ideal interlocutor, unlikely ever to be bettered, and will do its utmost to bolster him—Schäuble declaring even pre-election that he would ‘do everything to help’. So some give on the Eurozone is virtually assured. But the odds are that it will be largely cosmetic, falling well short even of another impotent assembly and figurehead minister, duplicating existing Union structures. As things stand, anything more serious would face fierce opposition not only in the Federal Republic, but in the Dutch, Finnish and other parliaments. The balance of forces in a neoliberal but not yet neofederal system of power militates against dramatic changes.

On the margins of the system, more radical responses to what the Union has become can be found. In France, the single currency is prized by neither populism, of left or right, though the right has for some time taken a much clearer position against it than the left. In the election campaign, Mélenchon came closer than in the past to envisaging an exit

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<sup>24</sup> Stéphanie Hennette, Thomas Piketty, Guillaume Sacriste and Antoine Vauchez, *Pour un traité de démocratisation de l’Europe*, Paris 2017, pp. 61–2, 74–5, 31–8.

<sup>25</sup> *Révolution*, pp. 235–6.

from it, but both he and Le Pen—aware that the prospect frightens most voters, and especially the elderly—denied any intention of unilaterally scrapping it. What then? Mélenchon alone put the question in its appropriate framework. The problem of recasting monetary union was not a technical issue, as typically depicted, but a geopolitical one. France had the economic and demographic weight, if it had the political will, to bring an unaccountable European Central Bank—the real sore, not the euro—to book, and compel Germany, an ageing society that was not as strong as it seemed, to accept social and economic democratization of the Union, on pain of breaking it up.<sup>26</sup> It was the relationship of forces that must ultimately matter. France, and with it Europe, would remain at the mercy of financial and bureaucratic elites until the French recovered their nerve. No language could be more foreign to the country's new ruler. Why quarrel with Germany, when it is all that France and Europe should be?

12 June 2017

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<sup>26</sup> *Le choix de l'insoumission*, pp. 381–3.