

France Rebels - Jean-Luc Mélenchon's campaign, humanist populism, patriotism, Constitution

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Jean-Luc Mélenchon isn't seeking leadership of a marginalized left. He's aiming to transform the whole of French politics.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's campaign for the French presidency has exploded in recent weeks — reaching third, within touching distance of the second round in some polls. In addition to sending jitters through the financial markets, the success has transformed the French election, offering a left alternative to the battle between the establishment and the far right.

But what are the politics of the campaign? And what is behind its success? The movement behind it, France Insoumise (“Rebellious France”) [[1](#)], borrows from the Latin American and Spanish populist experience, most prominently exemplified by Podemos.

Raquel Garrido, one of its national spokespeople, is a long-time comrade of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, having cofounded the Left Front with him in 2008. In this interview, translated by David Broder, she speaks to journalist Cole Stangler about the campaign and its aspirations for a Sixth Republic.

Cole Stangler - Can you tell me a little bit about what distinguishes this campaign from the one Mélenchon ran in 2012?

Raquel Garrido - The main theme for this campaign is to change our constitution and to allow the French people to do it themselves through a process called the constituent assembly, which is a direct reference to the French Revolution. The idea is to abolish the current regime, which we call the “presidential monarchy.” We consider it an oligarchy and want instead to have a republic: for the people, by the people.

I think that's why we're being talked about so widely. One of the reasons why the current regime is lacking consent in French society is because the process for electing officials allows them to behave inconsistently with their campaign promises. The main cultural characteristic of the current political class is impunity. They do whatever they want because they are absolutely unaccountable.

That culture of impunity starts with the president himself. We're the only self-identified democratic country where you have one man who has such concentrated power — elections of hundreds and hundreds of people in different institutions and he actually decides what the parliament will be talking about, the parliamentary agenda. The president behaves in such an unaccountable fashion that it actually spreads like a cascade across the entire political class.

Most elected officials in France today lack legitimacy, are elected with very low turnouts. There's a deep sense of disgust among citizens with this political class. That creates chaos and instability. When the *Magna Carta* — the core rules you're not supposed to be discussing — those rules that are supposed to allow political discussion and conflict in a democratic society, when those core rules are not agreed upon by most of the people, then your society is unstable.

In 2012, because we were talking about overthrowing the old regime and having a new one, we were

considered to be introducing anxiety and instability. Today, French society has changed. The fear is there, the chaos is there. Violence between communities, violence between the police and the youth, terrorism, terror attacks committed by French people against other French people. I think the time is now ripe for what we're saying — that we need a peaceful solution to these tensions.

And that's why the same person, Mélenchon, — who in 2012 people maybe thought, "Wow, this is too radical, too subversive" — now seems wise. Because he has been critiquing this, has experience and a transparent methodology for bringing us all together as one people, the idea with the Constituent Assembly is to refound the nation itself.

What is a people, what is the nation, *le peuple*? It's a community of people who are exercising power together. If you're not doing that, you're a *multitude* of individuals mostly competing for bits and pieces of what the capitalist system will leave you, fighting for a job, fighting for aid and help.

There are other big themes of the campaign — wealth redistribution and social justice — which are classic proposals in a situation of great inequality. Then you have climate change and protecting the only ecosystem which allows life for human beings. But before we address those issues, we need to gain the power to actually have an impact. That is the constituent assembly.

In 2012 Mélenchon stood as a candidate of the Left Front, an alliance of left-wing parties. This time he is standing as a candidate of France Insoumise, can you explain what that is?

It's a grassroots citizen movement, our ideology is humanist populism. In many ways we have adopted the populist strategy of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.

That means asking: what is populism? It is not a regime; it is a program. It is a demarcation strategy between a "them" and an "us." That could mean an ethnically pure "us" set against foreigners — and that is far-right populism. But it can also be the "us" of the people against the "them" of the oligarchy. That is our strategy and our movement, which is intended to build something beyond parties. It has constructed itself by design — really deliberately — as something different from the cartel of parties we had in 2012.

Indeed, France Insoumise is the instrument which allows the widest aggregation and the greatest effectiveness in setting the debate as the people versus the oligarchy. Rather than in terms of left versus right, which does not mean a lot for most French citizens today.

What was your inspiration for this project?

First of all, Latin America from the late 1990s onward, the return of the constituent figure as the approach to accessing sovereignty. That had a great impact on us at the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, we knew the constituent assembly as a French invention. Yet for years, no one in France proposed such an assembly. We understood that the constituent process abolished an *ancien régime*, in terms of both economics and political parties.

With the disappearance of the *ancien régime* — which, for instance, in Ecuador they called the *partidocracia* (partyocracy) — there is again this same division: an oligarchy versus the people. The aim is to make the *ancien régime's* political instruments disappear with that system. Through the constituent process, new political instruments take form.

We watched this very closely, and in France it took some time for us to learn. We were still hesitating, we did the Left Front . . . But now I think that those [Latin American ones] are our most immediate reference points, because the political instruments for reaching power — whether in Venezuela, Ecuador, or Bolivia, for example — are new. Not the old Communist parties or the old social-democratic parties or trade-union movements. This is not a question of recomposing or reorganizing parties in crisis.

We were watching when the constituent assembly crossed the Atlantic and came to Iceland with the financial crisis. Then there was the Arab Spring and the constituent assembly in Tunisia. The one in Egypt,

which was tragically massacred. And then finally, indeed, we were happy to see Podemos's constituent process, because we have the same historical roots as Podemos. That is to say, a reference point in populism, a humanist populism. That is the case even if now their situation is more complicated, since Podemos ultimately returned to discussions with the United Left.

But in any case, we are confident that what we are doing in France really is a new experience. Meaning, for the moment we are in a stage of creation. We have common reference points, but there is nowhere where we can look and say "We're doing exactly what they're doing." We take on this responsibility of being pioneers, in constructing the new.

How does France Insoumise relate to the Left?

France Insoumise is a political instrument designed for constructing the Sixth Republic. The reason we want the Sixth Republic is that its construction is a social and economic project. In the ancien régime the wrong people are making the wrong decisions, destroying the planet and impoverishing millions. So the [Sixth Republic] is not neutral, in the political sense of the term. It is not neutral or featureless, it is not a blank page. And we are saying what we want.

For example, when there is outsourcing we want workers to have a right of over their work resources, in the form of a co-operative. That is one example of an anticapitalist measure. Or again when we want to prioritize the protection of the ecosystem, including by restraining the omnipotence of property rights, for example. In our program there are very marked left references, but the word "left" does not appear.

We do not appeal to the identitarian patriotism of those who think that we have to "save the Left" or 'be "left-wing." It is far too minoritarian. We want to win. I think we are similar to Bernie Sanders in that way, who rarely spoke about "the Left," but about the people against the 1 percent or the billionaire class. Everyone knows who Jean-Luc Mélenchon is, where he comes from, from what position he speaks. But we do not ask of people that they first proclaim themselves left wing before they can have a concern with democracy.

This also has impacts on our policies. One measure in the 2017 program that was not in the 2012 program is the right to recall representatives between elections. This is our way of putting ethics into politics, of bringing responsibility to political behavior. That measure was not there in 2012 because the parties who made up the Left Front would not agree to it. They said, "Well, elected officials in general do not agree with this measure." Parties have a tendency to be trade unions for representatives rather than frameworks in which citizens can organize themselves on the basis of their political affinity.

So in the Sixth Republic will there be parties? Yes, there will be forms of organization based on political affinity, since there needs to be a confrontation of ideas. If there is no conflictuality, there is no democracy. But not the parties of the Fifth Republic, which are already in decline. They will die together with the Fifth Republic. No party today has a constitutional program, they are not made for that. They are organized to hold power within the Fifth Republic. There will be a new political terrain. The idea is not to recompose or repair the damaged parties of the Fifth Republic, but to allow new instruments to organize.

What do you see as the future of France Insoumise, as a movement?

The movement has a historic vocation: to achieve the Sixth Republic. So when we have 130,000 people marching from the Place de la Bastille to the Place de la République with French flags, with Phrygian caps, with all demands that are linked to fundamental rights from abortion to assisted suicide, even to the internet and net neutrality, things that correspond to a certain era, I feel that the people are fighting for a refoundation. They will not return to a classic way of doing politics. So this is a fight until victory. The most difficult part of our work, discrediting the Fifth Republic, is already done.

Generally, when you are young, you are told you can be right wing, left wing, centrist, whatever you like, but don't touch the constitution, because that's the foundation. Form political opinions, but don't think about the legitimacy of the constitutional rules. But once major sections of society start talking about the

legitimacy of this or that article of the constitution, that means that the constitution itself falls to the level of conflictual deliberation. So it loses its constitutional force. The definition of a constitution in the sociological sense is that of a higher norm that enjoys a consent going beyond the majority. It is not just majoritarian. It is extra-majoritarian. It is a consensus. But in France we have the inverse.

There is a consensus for saying that our system is a presidential monarchy. No one disputes that. For example, when we have the debates no one contests the idea that we are in a presidential monarchy. Today, the debate is whether we can revise and change this constitution a little from within, using the current MPs, or do we have to start again? What remains to be built is the desire for the constituent assembly.

That is a patriotic desire, one to assemble a people, and that is a lot more difficult in a society like ours, bruised by poverty, violence, hatred, and racism. It is difficult, but we will get there. Or else the fascists will. Basically, the future, it's us or them.

How can we explain the rise of the National Front (FN) and Marine Le Pen?

Today there is a bedrock of voters in France, a very coherent vote, that explains the problems of society by saying there are too many immigrants. Theirs is quite a simple analysis: if the immigrants weren't here, there would be more work for me, my children, etc.

There are other themes put forward by Marine Le Pen such as the critique of the European Union, competition from Eastern countries, the euro question. But the critique of the European Union exists among other candidates too, including ourselves. Ultimately what makes the Le Pen vote is the question of xenophobia, a certain conception of the nation as an ethnic rather than civic question. This idea that we cannot make a people together with Muslims, or anyone not descended from what a Frenchman was "across the ages." These are mythologized concepts — after all, there is no French ethnicity.

They really are populists in that regard, in the sense that Laclau and Mouffe give that word. They construct a "them" and an "us," and it is very clear what that is. The "them" are the refugees who arrive fleeing war, the economic immigrants, the Muslims with their demands to be able to worship, etc.

There are people in France who agree with that. I would not say it is 20 percent of voters. When they get high percentage scores, for example at the European elections, that corresponds to disastrous levels of abstention. At the European elections they got 25 percent. That is a very strong score. But there were four million FN voters out of sixteen million. I really think that the challenge is turnout. They thrive on civic apathy.

So it is in their interest that there is no campaign. That those who are disgusted by politics remain disgusted. The context looked OK for them: there was a situation on the Right where the candidate is mired in scandal, the Socialist Party (PS) was a totally off-putting spectacle, with its betrayals and its unkept promises. So they thought that they, too, will abstain. People were watching all this at a distance and thinking, what a horrible spectacle, I will stay at home. That was the FN's campaign. It does not go to the people to campaign, it does not stimulate debate, it has no event to gather the people. It has a strategy to make its significance felt, to give its own solid base more relative importance. And that base is ideologically solid.

There has always been a far right in France. And yes, it is strong right now. But our task is to drown out these people with the non-fascist votes. And that is what we are seeking to do. As we have spoken not to the Left but to all those who are disgusted, as we have opened the campaign, we have built an effective antifascist strategy.

As a campaign we orient towards the independents, the "disgusted," we have to speak to them. For example, Jean-Luc Mélenchon is the only candidate who talks so much about work. Really, about the fact, quite simply that as we live our lives, there are things that are made by human beings — workers. That is work. From this point of view Jean-Luc Mélenchon has a discourse very much connected with the working

class. But we do not speak to them as the Left, we speak to them as the working class. Speaking about the Left is not the same as talking about work. The word “left” is not present in Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s discourse. But he does talk a lot about the working-class condition.

Has this influenced your thinking on a joint candidacy with Benoît Hamon?

Yes, because I think our strategy of speaking to the disgusted, which can lead us to victory, would be compromised if we took on board part of the people who are disgusting them. And the Socialist Party [PS] is dying together with the Fifth Republic. That is not the fault of Benoît Hamon, who is a good person. It’s not his fault, it is the end of a cycle. So we have to choose between Fifth and Sixth Republics. We would be compromising our chances of victory if we headed off to save the PS soldier.

So perhaps we would gain a point or two from among the center-left, but we would lose any chance of speaking to those who are not associated with the parties. And it is among them that our chances of victory lie. And our objective is to win, not to recompose the Left or to take over the leadership of the Left. If our objective was to take over the leadership of the Left we could do that. But it isn’t. Our objective is to win the presidential election. So we need to speak to the disgusted. And if we go and talk to them saying, look, now I am friends with Valls, with Hamon, with all the others, then it will be finished, they will no longer be with us.

In truth the question is not even being posed. The PS has never, ever thought about giving up in our favor. If they did, then the question would be posed in a different way, of course. But they have never posed it like that: they have always thought that we would have to give up to support them. Even today — and they believe the polls, and that they are at 8 percent and we are at 19 percent — they continue to believe that we need unity behind them.

In the parliamentary elections it is even worse. All these Socialist MPs who have supported the government’s policies have today lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the people. So our candidates are candidates who will support the Sixth Republic. This is not a “fratricidal” struggle between the true left and the false left, or between traitors and purists. That would be gauchiste; that would be a far-left campaign. And we are anything but. The hard core of people with Mélenchon came out of the Socialist Party, and our objective has always been to govern. And we have been preparing this presidential campaign since 2004.

In the campaign you have proposed a critical strategy towards the European Union — a Plan A to reform it from within but a Plan B to exit if this does not work.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the first to bring a real response to what happened to Tsipras in Greece. No one had really formalized the idea that in order for there to be negotiation you have to be psychologically prepared to break it off. Otherwise you are not really negotiating. This is the origin of Plan B.

It is a quite basic proposal. If you go looking for a job, or you demand a wage increase, and you say “I will not work unless you pay me five thousand dollars a month” but in truth are prepared to work for one thousand, that is not a negotiation. If, conversely, you tell yourself you really will not accept less than three thousand dollars, that you would go and look for another job, then you really are negotiating, because the guy facing you understands that he will lose you. That is conceivable at the level of everyday human relations, but no one on the European left had thought seriously about how to apply it at the level of European negotiations. All of the large forces thought, “We will negotiate but stay whatever happens.”

To run a campaign on the basis of having a Plan B is a departure and it is important. Plan A already speaks about fiscal and social harmonization, that means having a framework which is not setting workers into a generalized competition, but on the contrary allows a better quality of life for everyone. And if that is not possible, then we will do the same thing — a harmonized framework — with those who are willing. And that principally means targeting the countries of the European south. Putting monetary and economic policy, and public investment, back into open discussion. We face challenges, such as the ecological question, of planetary importance. So it we must have supranational action.

But the recent experience of the European Union is proof that first of all we have to resolve the problems with our own domestic oligarchy. Rather than divide political life between those who are for leaving the European Union and those who are for liberal Europe — and that is the dividing line the far right draws — we have drawn a dividing line between the French people and the oligarchy. The far right simply wants to destroy the European Union, we want to make people see what is wrong with it.

A critique leveled at this campaign is that it is more nationalist than before. A few weeks ago at the Insoumis march from Place de la Bastille to Place de la République many commented how many French flags there were. Could you comment on these changes?

We are patriotic, not nationalist. Patriotism is love for one's own, while nationalism involves hatred for others. In fact, according to the literary and political definitions, that is the difference. The far right is nationalist. We are patriotic. And patriotism is an empathy, an affect towards one's compatriots. We really think that, insofar as our nation has been a civic nation since the French Revolution, it is not defined by any religion or skin color or even language, it is universal. Our homeland [*patrie*] is republican.

Our patriotism is universalist. It is a patriotism of the Enlightenment. We think that precisely what our patriotism allows is the affirmation of citizens' right to govern themselves. That is what our national sovereignty is, first of all meaning a popular sovereignty. Before anything else it is the question of the people's political power. And fortunately for us, in our national history these two things are linked. That is why we think that the far right is not truly for sovereignty, because it supports only national, not popular sovereignty. It is for Marine Le Pen having power, not the French.

And what about the singing only of the “Marseillaise” at the end of rallies, rather than it with “The Internationale” as before?

At the Place de la République Jean-Luc did ultimately sing “The Internationale.” It was not on the speakers. But ultimately he started singing and then it spread and people sang along a bit.

We are not about wiping away a piece of history. But it is true that we recognize some problems. In 2012 our campaign was bright red and “Left Front” was written in big letters. Now we are in pastel hues of grey and blue, the logo is the [Greek letter] *phi*, which represents philosophy, the love of knowledge. We have a different code, because we think it's urgently necessary.

P.S.

* “France Rebels”. Jacobin. 4.12.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/france-insoumise-melenchon-elections-sixth-republic-national-front/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://jlm2017.fr>