

Overhauling French Politics - A week before the first round of the French presidential election

Monday 17 April 2017, by [BUDGEN Sebastian](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 17 April 2017).

At stake in Sunday's French election is the specter of the far right, the neoliberalism of the extreme center, and Mélenchon's challenge to the system itself.

The first round of the French election is April 23, and the traditional parties are being eclipsed in the polls with the surge of right-wing populist Marine Le Pen, the newcomer Emmanuel Macron, a slick, young center-right neoliberal.

This happens in the context of the rise of right-wing populism around the world. But in France, there is a left, to the left of a Socialist Party thoroughly discredited for its austerity and anti-labor legislation. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's surprise emergence as a contender for the presidency cannot be discounted, then.

Sebastian Budgen, an editor for Verso Books, a contributing editor at *Jacobin*, and an editorial board member of *Historical Materialism*, talks with Suzi Weissman about the candidates on the Left, especially Mélenchon, as well as the broader political-economic scene in France.

Suzi Weissman - Let's begin with the presidential campaign. Can you give us the political economic context?

Sebastian Budgen - Politically, the situation is one of crisis. Deep crisis. The two historic blocs that alternated power in France in the Fifth Republic since the early 1960s, the parties of the center-right and the party of the center-left that is sometimes aligned with parties to the left of it, such as the Communist Party, or the Greens — those two blocs are deeply fissured and disintegrating. It's quite possible that out of the result of these elections, there may be very little left of these traditional parties.

This vacuum has caused new forces, or rejuvenated older forces, to enter the scene. The force that is of course the best known outside of France is the National Front (FN), which is a far-right party, which has changed its image and language but is still a far-right party. The FN is very high in the polls, with the highest poll rating in the moment for the first round. There are two rounds of voting: the first round in April, then a runoff between the two highest candidates in May. It is extremely likely that Marine Le Pen, the leader of the FN, will be one of the two candidates in the runoff.

This is quite unusual. We've seen other electoral upsets around the world — say, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, parties that formerly either didn't exist or could not have contested the main political parties, but are now frontrunners. Is this a new situation for France in that regard?

Absolutely, yes. France is catching up with some of the countries of the south of Europe inasmuch as there is a complete implosion of the center parties, and the parties on the far right and the far left have new space to grow and to organize.

The vacuum is being filled on one hand by the National Front on the far right, and on the left, in a much more fragmented scene but clearly dynamic campaign being run by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who is to the left of the Socialist Party.

It is a political crisis, and obviously also in the context of very low economic growth, high levels of

unemployment, austerity, and recently, big social conflicts over labor law reforms. It is also a moral or political legitimacy crisis. There is an extremely deep distrust of the political class by the vast majority of the population, and there is an extremely high level of uncertainty about how people are going to vote. A third of voters still say they don't know who they want to vote for, which is unusual for French standards at this late stage in the election. It's quite possible there will also be a high level of abstention.

So there is a four-pronged crisis: a political crisis, a social crisis, an economic crisis, and a kind of moral crisis.

These spectacular strikes, blockades, and demonstrations, notably Nuit Debout, really rocked the world's stage, but especially the French stage, just one year ago. Can you describe the shift in that period? Is it because of the terrorist attacks that things moved, or the worsening economic situation, or the rise of populists elsewhere? Or is it something else?

The terrorist attacks happened before the spring protests. They happened in January (*Charlie Hebdo*) and then November 2015, so before the spring protests against the labor law reforms. Since then, the whole political situation has been polarized in both directions — both in a “law and order” direction, and a “state of emergency” kind of direction, and fortunately also in the other direction around social conflicts, but it's really been pulling in both ways.

This is all in the context of a François Hollande government that was elected with a certain degree of enthusiasm, or at least relief, by many French voters. The Hollande government wasn't promising enormous reforms but was claiming that it was going to rein in the power of finance, was going to fight for greater social equality, and would generally be a more reasonable and less embarrassing kind of government than the Sarkozy government.

It has proved to be quite the opposite — it has proved to be a completely incompetent government which has failed in all of its social promises and actually pushed very aggressive neoliberal reforms that a right-wing government wouldn't have been able to push through and which is also involved in many war zones now in Africa and the Middle East.

There is a great deal of disillusion with the political process as a whole. The far right has been growing consistently — there have been ups and downs, but the trend has been upward for the last fifteen years. So this is no surprise. It is clearly a protest vote against what is seen as “the establishment.”

It is similar to what has happened in the United States; people have voted out of disgust, of outrage, of wishing to shake things up.

How would you describe Marine Le Pen's political stance? It seems an almost working-class program — one that is anti-austerity and supports the welfare state. It's not the kind of right-wing populism that we see elsewhere.

In the 1980s, under Marine Le Pen's father's leadership, the FN was very pro-Reagan, neoliberal, pro-Europe, against trade unions. All this was in accord with the traditional base of the FN, which was its *petit bourgeoisie*, the lower middle class, which believed that by stripping the state of its present obesity, the market would be freed up.

That base is regionally specific; it's strong in southern France, partly because of the presence of French white people who fled North Africa when Algeria gained independence after World War II and continue to be pretty right wing, especially on questions of immigration.

Now, the discourse has radically shifted. The FN under Marine Le Pen is pro-welfare state, anti-austerity, anti- what they call “ultraliberalism,” anti-“globalism.” This has been successful in picking out votes among traditional working-class areas in the north of France. Generally they've picked up voters from the right-wing, working-class vote. They have picked up some former left voters too, but there is also a very high degree of abstention in working-class areas. Workers who do vote are voting overwhelmingly for

Marine Le Pen and the National Front.

Is there a strong anti-immigrant stance that complements Le Pen's defense of the welfare state?

Le Pen is combining the notion that France needs to protect itself from globalization, from "ultraliberalism," from the globalized elite, and needs to engage in a protectionist, national-centered form of development, which defends the welfare state, with the notion that immigration needs to be radically reduced. They then ally that with the notion that within France itself, the problem isn't just immigration, but radical Islam or what they call "communitarianism" around Muslim communities, which are supposedly not integrating themselves into French culture.

All these things are linked together in a quite effective and shrewd way, and it is presented as a program to defend the common people.

What about the position of "Frexit," the French exit from the eurozone. Is that very important in this election?

Le Pen says that if she wins the election, she will call a referendum on exiting the euro, and probably also the European Union, and she claims that she will accept the result whatever it turns out to be. The working-class part of her electoral base is probably quite favorable to that, the more petty bourgeois base less so — they think it's too "left wing" and are quite worried about Frexit and obviously would upset French capital enormously, it is a theme she is not putting forward consistently but it is one of her programmatic planks.

What happened to Fillon? And what does Macron stand for?

François Fillon was the surprise winner of the center-right primary. Most people thought that the primary would be a runoff between Nicolas Sarkozy, the previous president, and Alain Juppé, who was the prime minister under Jacques Chirac and presented a more traditional, moderate, center-right image.

In fact, neither of them won, and François Fillon, the third man in the campaign, won with an overwhelming surprise victory on an extremely radical program of massive cuts to the welfare state and massive changes to labor law regulations and working hours conditions. It was an extremely radical, neoliberal victory.

But he has plunged now in the polls because of the number of scandals that he has been implicated in, involving him employing his wife fictitiously as a parliamentary assistant, various scandals with suits that were given to him by rich businessmen who were clearly trying to get favors. His whole image which distinguished him from Sarkozy was that he was a guy on the right but who had integrity, wasn't dishonest, was somebody who was going to represent the traditional French bourgeoisie. He's been discredited by these scandals.

His initial electoral program wasn't going to be a real winner for the election anyway, though, because there's not a lot of enthusiasm in France for attacks on the welfare state and on social security.

On the other side of the traditional spectrum, the center-left, the Socialist Party has also plunged into the depths with a surprise winner of the primary process. Benoît Hamon comes from the left of the party, won the primary process against Manuel Valls (the former prime minister). Hamon is very much a left-wing Socialist Party figure, but has been completely dropped and stabbed in the back by the traditional leadership of the Socialist Party, who many assume are going over to join Emmanuel Macron.

The Hollande government came to power on an anti-austerity plank, then proceeded to announce this new neoliberal labor legislation that provoked a giant surge of demonstrations that seemed to unite not just young people and traditional trade unionists but most of the working class. How are those protests reflected in these candidates?

The Hollande government made a number of very stupid mistakes by, first of all, giving enormous tax breaks out to the employer class, then opening a whole debate about stripping citizens of their French nationality if they were guilty of terrorist attacks, which opened a whole debate about dual French citizenship, which is considered a problem by many people on the Left. And then there were these labor-law reforms that provoked enormous protests.

In the process of taking all these measures, a minority within the Socialist Party, the so called “frondeurs,” constituted itself and started voting consistently against the government in the parliament, becoming something of a pebble in the shoe of the government. And Benoît Hamon, who was minister for the first couple of years of the Hollande government, resigned as minister, became a key figure among opposition MPs, and campaigned in the primary process largely against the Socialist Party government.

He won the primary process in a quite surprising way. Everybody was expecting, according to normal equations, that Manuel Valls, former prime minister, would win on a kind of strongman ticket: strong against terrorism, identification with law and order. He was roundly beaten by Benoît Hamon, who was able to outflank him — not only by criticizing the Socialist Party government’s record but also putting forward new themes, such as universal basic income (UBI) and arguing that we need to think about economic growth and employment in new ways. He enthused a whole layer of the Socialist Party electorate, especially the young people.

Is UBI a theme that is being expressed generally in the election or just by Hamon?

It’s a theme that has imposed itself on the political debate. In the candidates’ TV debate, UBI was criticized by all the other candidates. It’s clearly identified with Hamon. It has a limited purchase, because it essentially appeals to younger people. Hamon also took a quite brave position, at least for French standards, rejecting Islamophobia and the exploitation of state secularism as a way of harassing and oppressing Muslims.

Hamon was able to carve out a niche for himself as somebody who was new and fresh, and who wasn’t tainted by his association with the Hollande government.

It looks like the polls are showing a surprising surge for Macron. What are his views?

Macron is a kind of empty figure. But as an empty figure, he is a good representation of the vacuum that has emerged in French politics with the corruption of the two traditional polls. He is a very young candidate, thirty-nine. He studied philosophy, then he was the assistant of Paul Ricœur, the French philosopher. Then, after going to the elite public administration training school, the ENA, he moved into investment banking for a couple of years for Rothschild’s bank and made a lot of money. Then he became an adviser to Hollande, associated with neoliberal figures such as Jacques Attali, and then minister of the economy, and then resigned a few months ago.

Macron is a very slick character. He reminds me of Tony Blair in his early days: quite attractive, doesn’t seem to be aggressive, doesn’t seem to be carrying any deep personal issues unlike some of the candidates. But he has a completely empty discourse. He is clearly a neoliberal. He is openly in favor of neoliberal reforms. He claims not to be of the Left or the Right, but wants to take good ideas from both sides. He makes me think of an automaton, a robot constructed in a laboratory to look like a pleasant human being, but something is not quite right.

In the first televised presidential debate, he had some well-delivered lines, but they meant nothing. They were completely empty of any content — except when he’s talking about the neoliberal economic reforms that he wants to put forward. He has a very strong commitment to the European Union and to maintaining all the European Union’s constraints on government spending and policy.

It sounds like he’s the kind of figure that we’re used to seeing these days — an empty suit perhaps. But the *Financial Times* says that Macron is advocating a Nordic-style economic model for France, “mixing more moderate spending cuts of 60 billion euros over five years with a 50

billion euro stimulus package over the same period, lower taxes, and an extension of the welfare state.” You’ve said that he is well within the neoliberal political-economic world.

Is Macron doing well in the polls because people are worried about the other two extremes?

First, he is a neoliberal candidate — he is not a Scandinavian-style social democrat, whatever the *Financial Times* might say. Fillon is the neoliberal candidate with a snarl, and Macron is the neoliberal candidate with a smile.

The cuts and reforms he is proposing are less severe, less radical than those proposed by Fillon, he claims that in return there will be some version of “flexisecurity” or this or that kind of compensation, but they are neoliberal reforms. Nobody doubts that at all.

Why is he so popular? First, because he is not a politician. He is a non-politician politician. He has never been elected, his membership of the Socialist Party was extremely brief, evanescent one might say. He was never seen at any meetings and never participated in the internal life of the party in any serious way. He is “from civil society.” Those who support him see him as someone fresh, somebody who is not tainted by the incompetence and corruption of the traditional political class.

Secondly, those who are in favor of neoliberal reforms think that perhaps he will sweep away the resistance in a way that the traditional parties of the Right or the Left can’t do any more. He claims he will have a cabinet full of entrepreneurs, people from civil society, and representatives of both the Right and the Left.

It’s a kind of wet dream of those who want to explode the party system, get rid of the left-right division in French politics, move towards some kind of consensual “extreme center”-type politics, without having to deal with parties.

Success is also breeding success at the moment. He’s imposed himself on the scene as this new force who has filled this vacuum, as they say, produced by the corruption of the right and left poles. Things may change in the next few weeks, but at the moment, he seems like the person who would be facing off Marine Le Pen in the second round. So now there’s a whole argument about whether it’s a wasted vote, to vote for Benoît Hamon or any other candidate, given that the key issue is to keep Marine Le Pen out of the Élysée Palace. So, that kind of self-fulfilling prophecy aspect has also been at work.

Let’s talk about the left challenge — where does Mélenchon stand politically? How did he relate to the wave of protests last year?

Jean-Luc Mélenchon was, in his youth, a Trotskyist, and he then joined the Socialist Party in the 1970s. He was one of the youngest senators for the Socialist Party. He was very close initially to François Mitterrand — he still sees Mitterrand as a kind of political hero. But he was on the left of the party consistently through the 1980s and 1990s, in the minority of the party.

The shift really happened for him in 2005, during the campaign against the European Constitutional Treaty - which was proposing to “constitutionalize” the European Union’s neoliberal direction, for example by putting front and center the notion of “free and unfettered competition in the market” — which was supported by both the Right and the Socialist Party. They entire economic, political, and media elite campaigned for a vote for the European Constitutional Treaty. There was a popular campaign against it, which was successful in the end.

Mélenchon was involved in this campaign, and I think he saw the possibility finally for life outside the Socialist Party after many decades of being inside trapped within it. He left the SP a couple of years later to create his own formation, called the Left Party, then hooked up with the Communist Party and some other forces to create what was known as the Left Front. He ran in 2012 on this platform and got a very respectable result of 11 percent, some four million votes.

Currently, there are two radical-left milieux. There is the Left Front, which is an electoral front that brought together the Communist Party, the Left Party, a number of former members of the New Anticapitalist Party, and some other smaller groups. (In practice, the Left Front has now been outflanked by the Podemos-style formation created by Mélenchon without his former partners for this election — La France Insoumise (Unbowed France). And then there are the various far-left groups such as Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle), the New Anticapitalist Party and so on.

But, from the mid-1970s onwards, Mélenchon never had anything to do with these latter groups, so he can't be seriously described as being "far left." He describes himself as a republican socialist, very much identifying with Mitterrand and the traditional left current within the Socialist Party. But he is an interesting candidate because he is extremely effective debater and orator. He can also be wickedly funny, and he has much greater cultural range than any of the other candidates, he is highly cultivated person — indeed, he happily describes himself as an "intellectual" — and he has a political vision which is much more ambitious than anybody else on the Left.

There are a number of things that are highly problematic with his political vision — but one cannot deny that it's a very complex vision about geopolitics, about ecology, about the constitution. He wants to call a constituent assembly that would then institute a new "Sixth Republic" — namely a new constitutional arrangement that would break completely with the "presidential monarchical" system introduced by De Gaulle in 1958 and which is highly centralized, personalized, and undemocratic, in favor of a parliamentary system with greater democratic control over the people's representatives — and then he claims he would resign from the presidency once that was instituted by referendum.

He has a very complex and rich political program which is much more impressive and deeply thought through than any of the other left candidates.

How exactly would you characterize it?

It's left social democratic, but it's left social democratic that's able to hitch onto new themes.

For example on ecology, he has engaged in a whole mea culpa about his former left identity being tied to notions of endless growth and productivism. Now he's put forward this clever idea of what he calls ecological planning, which brings together the Left's theme of planning and the notion of ecology, saying that only by planning can ecological dangers be addressed in a systematic and realistic way. He wants to introduce into the constitution a "green rule," which means that no resources can be taken from the Earth that cannot be replaced.

He's also able to hitch onto some questions about gender politics. He is very active and popular on social media, and his enthusiasm for new technology has led him to use holograms so that he can address several mass meetings simultaneously across the country!

It is traditional, left social democracy in some ways, but it's been able to renew itself with new themes and new forms of communication.

He's polling at 20 percent today, which in American terms, would be quite significant.

His campaign is extremely effective. In the political debates, everybody thought he was the best or tied with Marine le Pen. The way he refused to just come out with rote responses and made jokes at the expense of other candidates was extremely effective. (At one point, Le Pen accused him of talking like a Robespierre, and he fired back that he didn't take that as an insult.) There is a real dynamic momentum in his campaign at the moment.

However, there are lots of important criticisms that one can make of both his political stance on numerous questions and his *modus operandi* as a politician. The campaign he is conducting this election is quite different from the campaign he conducted in 2012, for at least one important feature.

In 2012, he was campaigning under the banner of the Left Front. Mélenchon was the presidential candidate of the Front. For this campaign in 2017, he has created a completely new organization called La France Insoumise, “Unbowed France” or “Nonsubmissive France.” He is the candidate of this almost structureless organization.

He has now left behind the Left Party, his own party. This is a much more personalized campaign than in 2012, and this tyranny of structurelessness that he has created reproduces a lot of highly problematic features, namely a campaign focusing on one charismatic figure and a lack of democratic structures for building grassroots organizations.

The campaign is being conducted in a different style as well. That’s not necessarily all bad, but there are some real limitations to his campaign.

The other criticisms one could make are much longer-standing ones of his political perspective. Jean-Luc Mélenchon has described himself as a republican socialist, and he takes that definition very seriously. He identifies the new Sixth Republic he wants to realize and the social project behind him as a kind of continuation of the French republican tradition going back to the French Revolution.

Of course there are lots of positive features about the French republican tradition, but there is also a dark side of complicity in colonialism, in colonial massacres, and the exclusion of all sorts of groups which he doesn’t really face up to.

So there is an idealization of the republican tradition within his political thought, which means, on questions like race and religion, he takes a very abstract universalist position, which seems fine on face value. When you dig deeper, it’s actually a complete refusal to take seriously questions of the racialization of whole populations of North African origin in France, or Islamophobia.

And he is very strongly identified with a laïcité state-secularist position, which he claims is evenhanded against the Catholic Church, Islam, and other religions. But it’s not the Catholic Church that is suffering from oppression — it’s Muslims.

There is a real problem with his very stubborn refusal to take seriously the question of Islamophobia and racism, which is in contrast to how he has progressed on a number of different issues, like ecology, trans issues, and lots of other issues related to what used to be called the new social movements. On Islamophobia, he just refuses to integrate it at all.

And then there is the fact that he identifies with the French state in every aspect. He really sees the French state in its republican form as defending the common interests of humanity. On one philosophical level, this is a sort of extension of the French Revolution’s emancipatory gesture, but it also translates into an identification with the French state in its actual repressive form.

So he’s very complimentary about the police, about the French army, including its role in different military fronts that François Hollande opened up. The grandiosity of his discourse about France being a strong power which needs to assert itself is positive in the sense that he wants it to assert itself independently from the United States, he wants France to pull out from NATO, but there is still identification with what is basically the legacy of French imperialism.

He is quite cautious not to apologize for French colonial crimes. He doesn’t identify with French colonialism, but he doesn’t want to apologize for them, either. He wants to have it both ways.

This identification with the French state, with its power, with its ability to position itself on the world stage and so on, is really quite problematic because it means that he cannot develop an independent left foreign policy that doesn’t take some very bad geopolitical positions, which verge towards apologies for certain regimes.

There have been rumors of an alliance or a vote-sharing pact between Hamon and Mélenchon.

Can you talk about that?

That's extremely unlikely. I think there are various people on the Left who would like one of them to pull out of the race in the interests of having a united left vote. But that doesn't mean there would necessarily be a higher likelihood of the candidate getting through to the runoff, as you can't count on the votes transferring smoothly from one to the other candidate. It's an extremely unlikely scenario.

Mélenchon is certainly not going to withdraw his candidacy. He started his campaign a year ago, and it has the most momentum. Hamon will only withdraw if his campaign collapses completely. He is certainly declining rapidly at the moment, but it is extremely unlikely [he will withdraw] because it would really spell out a suicide note by the Socialist Party.

Does Mélenchon have a critique of the eurozone's policy on deficit spending?

He has made a lot of progress since 2012 on this issue as he now participates in a number of conferences across Europe for a "Plan B for Europe." If he is elected, he will argue with Germany to try and change the criteria for the European treaties to allow for deficit spending and other things. But he has a Plan B in his back pocket. He is not going to the table naked as the Greeks did, and, if resisted, some kind of exit from the euro would be argued for.

He thinks there is a Plan A, which is disobey the treaties and try to get them changed, and a Plan B, which is, should that fail, a left Frexit strategy would have to be put on a table through a referendum.

Since you characterize Macron as someone from the mainstream right, it may end up that the two top candidates come from the Right. The Left, even though it has significant support, may not be present in the runoff. How does this first round and second round work in France?

There will be a first round on April 23 from which the top two candidates will then move to the second round on May 7. The key problem for the Left in the first round is that it's divided. There are four candidates representing the Left — two small candidates have the far left, plus the Socialist Party candidate, plus Jean-Luc Mélenchon. And if there was any one candidate for the Left, it's quite possible it would make it to the second round. But that is not how things worked out, so the left vote is divided. It's quite likely that the Left will not make it to the second round, although Mélenchon has experienced a big spurt in the polls very recently.

So the key question will not be who makes it through to the second round, but what the exact placing will be, whether Jean-Luc Mélenchon will beat this Socialist Party candidate to become the fourth or perhaps even third best-placed candidate. That would be an enormous event in terms of French politics and would probably spell the end for the French Socialist Party.

If the second round has two candidates from the Right and none from the Left, that is, the center-right Macron stands against the right-wing populist Le Pen, what's at stake if Le Pen wins?

All bets are off in such a scenario. It would depend on whether she got a majority in the legislative elections, which are a month later, in June. That's extremely unlikely, so you might get a situation where she's elected president but doesn't have a majority in the National Assembly. Then you would have some complex process where perhaps the spectrum of the Right would want to try and do a deal with her, to pass certain measures, at least.

You're starting to make it sound very much like the Trump administration and the hard right of the Republican Party.

It would certainly split the right-wing parties and probably lead to the end of them too.

In terms of the measures, it shouldn't be forgotten that she still represents a far-right force; she is still

very close to a number of open neo-fascists. The National Front controls its members in terms of their violence toward immigrants or leftists, but it is clear that many of them are straining at the leash. A lot would depend on the response to such an eventuality. Would people be so cowed and depressed by the result that they would not react? Or would it lead to a massive upsurge against the far right, leading to a potentially insurrectionary situation, with occupations, blockades, general strikes?

The whole gamut of possibilities is open. Even if she doesn't win this time around — if Macron wins and pushes through his neoliberal reforms — he will simply be warming the seat for her in 2022.

If Macron wins, it would be a continuation of the status quo, but a little bit further to the right. Given the situation of the economy that you've described, and the discontent brewing throughout society, what would happen if he became president of France?

He would want to push through his neoliberal reforms in a much more consistent and unhesitating way than previous governments have done. He would do it with this appearance of novelty, this appearance of openness, this appearance of somehow breaking with the system.

He has positioned himself as an anti-system candidate, which is very ironic given his social background and his political positioning. Again, everything would depend on the level of resistance. Would these lead to a situation where everybody was conned into believing that it is going to be a better situation? Or would it lead to a federation of the radical left, and the trade unions to oppose him at every step?

The most optimistic and the most pessimistic predictions are allowed at this point.

P.S.

* Jacobin. 4.17.17:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/04/france-insoumise-elections-melenchon-le-pen-national-front-macron-socialist-party/>

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