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France: The Meaning of Macron - New forms of racism, authoritarianism, neoliberalism

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'I'm a Maoist ... a good political programme is one that works.'— Emmanuel Macron

The 2017 French presidential elections were historical in many ways. The first crucial aspect is, of course, the fact that the Front National made it to the second round — eliminating the right-wing party (Les Républicains) and the Socialist Party (PS). Secondly, a very young, new president was elected: Emmanuel Macron.

François Hollande's five-years French presidency seems to have reshaped the French political landscape. The fact that the PS was humiliated led some commentators to the conclusion that the 'PS is dead'. On the contrary, the 6% vote achieved by Benoît Hamon absolutely does not mean that the Hollande era is done. Rather, the Macron-presidency represents the political continuity both of the Sarkozy era and the Hollande-era.

This does not mean that there is nothing new in Macron's presidency. Macron is Hollande's political son. He represents the latest manifestation of the extreme centre that has ruled French policy since the 1990s. To paraphrase Tariq Ali, in his book *The Extreme-Centre. A Warning*, this 'increasing Americanization (...) offering a Tweedledee or Tweedledum choice' is now concentrated in the 'En Marche'-era.

Nevertheless, in such a racist country as France, Macron appears as less aggressive than Nicolas Sarkozy or former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, for example. Indeed, during the presidential campaign, Macron famously claimed that French colonialism was a crime against humanity — going farther than most of the reformist Left ever has. Furthermore, he seemed to be willing to end the continually renewed state of emergency which France has been living under since the 2015 Daesh-inspired attacks in Paris.

However, this is a difference of style rather than substance. Macron, rather than breaking with the established trend toward more racist authoritarianism, is leading us into a new kind of authoritarian populism that fits perfectly with the neo-liberal reform he wants to pursue in France. Indeed, Macron is reorganizing France precisely so as to secure the neo-liberal hegemony which has had such disastrous effects for the whole French working class, and especially for those workers originating from France's former colonies.

Moreover, instead of ending the state of emergency, Macron seems intent on creating a legalized permanent state of emergency, which will not be the exception anymore, but rather the rule—and whose effect will be to repress any attempts coming from the Left to organize against Macron's reforms.

Here I want to investigate the French situation in order to draw some strategic hypotheses resulting from the huge changes in the French Left this past years. It is commonplace to say that today, the French Left is very weakened. Nevertheless, a solution exists if one looks closely at the evolution of

the balance of forces within the Left. Hence, a real chance exists to build something like a counter-hegemonic bloc that includes not only the 'traditional' organized Left but also the antifascist autonomous Left as well as anti-racist organizations. But this means that we will have to take into account the fact that the new left-wing generation that has emerged from opposition to the El Khomri labour law movement – an autonomous tendency distinct from the Nuit debout movement – not only has brought new methods but has been politicized in a completely different environment from that of the 'traditional' radical and reformist Left. The Left should take this into account rather than arrogantly describing them as 'ultraleftist' or as playing the police's game.

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During the first round of the French presidential election, the Socialist candidate, Benoît Hamon, gained the lowest share of the vote in the whole history of the PS. This was not very surprising, since the outgoing president, François Hollande, managed to be less popular than his right-wing predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy—quite an achievement. Hence, one would have thought that the PS-era was done.

Nevertheless, this would be a naïve reading of the French presidential results. Macron is Hollande's political creation (something that Macron admits) and the worst neoliberal reforms during the Hollande-Era were the result of Macron's policy in his brief as finance minister. Hence, it is no surprise that Macron's current policy is in the direct continuity of the past five years.

The so-called 'XXL labor law' currently being readied by the administration shows that Macron has learned nothing from the opposition to the El-Khomri labor law, and wants to take Hollande's agenda further. In addition to the proposed laws, making it easier to fire workers and creating a more precarious labour market, Macron has cut spending on women's rights (down by €7.5 million), schools (€75 million), Higher Education and Research (€331 million), and social security (€5 billion).

No wonder, then, that the former right-wing president, Nicolas Sarkozy, expresses such admiration for Macron. Indeed, according to the satirical French journal *Canard Enchaîné*, Sarkozy raved about Macron: 'This guy is amazing! He hasn't made the slightest mistake. If he does not make the same mistakes that I did, he will go very far and he will be unstoppable.' Hence, Macron really appears as a new embodiment of the different sections of the French bourgeoisie — dispensing with the artificial boundary between the Socialist Party, the Center and the right-wing Les Républicains. Macron's bourgeois bloc managed to unify some sections of the traditional right-wing, a section of social democracy, and even some elements of 'civil society.' The mythical division between state and 'civil society' is a very important source of legitimacy for Macron. By assembling politicians who are not members of established political parties, he created a sort of contemporary Third Estate in order to secure the political hegemony of the French bourgeoisie. By speaking of and for 'everyone', and representing himself as being above the traditional political structures which had disappointed so many French citizens, he presented macronism as a new way of doing politics. In reality, the *la République en marche* (LREM – Macron's organization) is mostly made up of important figures in the French bourgeoisie – obviously, there are no workers, or unemployed.

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Nevertheless, during his presidential candidacy, Macron was sometimes perceived as a liberal who could be a lesser evil on issues of racism and state repression against social movements. Indeed, not only did Macron condemn colonialism, and criticise the 'Burkini ban' (targeting Muslim women for what they might choose to wear on the beach), he also made an important promise: he would end the state of emergency. Thus, Macron could appear to be less aggressive and less racist than Sarkozy or Valls for example – each of whom established some of the most racist and repressive

laws.

However, this apparently 'less aggressive' aspect of macronism is part of a new strategy of what Sadri Khiari calls the French colonial counter-revolution. First, racism cannot be apprehended only as an 'ideological content'. Rather, it is the ideological modality of racial contradictions which are organised politically. French racist policies should not be seen only in light of the overtly racist claims of some politicians, but in view of their political strategies and the way the state is (re)organized by them. Clearly, if Macron's neoliberal policies are disastrous for the whole French working class, their effects will weigh far more heavily on non-white people who are more likely to suffer from cuts to the social wage and labour market precarity. Neoliberalism is a perfect ally of the extension of racial contradictions, targeting white and non-white people in different ways. This focus on racism is not only important because of the huge role racial contradictions plays in the organization of French capitalism, but also because of the strategically critical role that neoliberalism's racial effects have in securing the current social order.

The other very important point of Macron's presidency is its relationship to what Claude Serfati calls the 'permanent state of emergency'. While Macron seems to want to end the formal 'state of emergency', his proposal is in effect to legalize it, to include it in the common law. Hence it will no longer be a state of 'emergency' but just the regular state under which France will exist. As a matter of fact, his current draft legislation, entitled 'law for the reinforcement of the fight against terrorism and for the reinforcement of homeland security,' legalises many of the tools of the state of emergency. These include home-search, house arrest, closing of places of worship (obviously, this will mainly target Muslims), monitoring private communications, and so on.

This complex set of repressive state apparatuses, while mainly targeting Muslims, will also likely play an important role in the repression of the emerging social front that will try to organize itself against macronism. The repression and control of non-white populations has proved to be a kind of laboratory for the repression of last year's movement against the labour law. It is therefore important to have a look at the state of the French left and the anti-racist movement, in order to have a more accurate view of the balance of forces and of the possibility of resistance against macronism. Since the presidency of Macron, by cultivating the racist and authoritarian dimensions of the state, could well pave the way to a far-right presidency in five years, it is important to include anti-racist organizing in our analyses of the Left as an essential element of any counter-hegemonic blog against the Macron presidency.

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Last year's demonstrations and mobilizations against the El Khomri labor law have played a huge role in highlighting the state of the political and social conflict that exists in France. Beyond the traditional organisations of the Left, the autonomous Left played a decisive role in these mobilizations, and the latter must consequently be regarded as an important ally in the struggle against macronist repression. The autonomous Left is comprised of a new generation of militants who have emerged - young and politicized through European austerity, as well as the revolutionary movements in north-Africa and in the Middle East. Some Parisian antifascist militants point out that what is called the 'cortège de tête' (head of the demonstration) is the result of the political struggles that have shaken France and the way in which they have clarified the conflict between the wider social movement and the French repressive state apparatuses, and the role this repression plays in the organization of French capitalism. Hence, the struggle against the repression that targets the French Left and the French anti-racist movement is not a narrow struggle but one that cuts to the heart of the situation, and would be critical to the development of a real counter-hegemonic struggle against macronism.

Macron's neoliberal reforms and legalised state of emergency will unquestionably provoke new conflicts. Here, the 'traditional' Left will have to accept the importance of the autonomous antifascist Left. Tactically, given the volatility of the French situation, it would be a mistake to bind the social movement to one particular, recognised form of struggle: we can only judge tactics based on the development of the conjuncture. Further, since Macron's policies create the conditions for new fascist growth, the Left cannot afford to dismiss the autonomous, antifascist Left just because of its confrontations with the police. Rather than counterposing electoral activity to street activism, we should expect and foster a dialectical relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles. But the threat of an Islamophobia-fuelled fascist renewal means we have to foreground another axis of struggle: political anti-racism.

In recent years, the intersection of violent repression of social movements by the police and the police violence and killings against non-white people, forced the traditional Left to mobilise alongside anti-racist militants on an issue on which it has traditionally been cautious. Hence, the organization of a huge March for dignity and against racism in March 2017 brought together families of police victims—like the families of Hocine Bouras, Amine Bentounsi, Lahoucine Ait Omghar, Abdoulaye Camara, Lamine Dieng, Ali Ziri, Théo Luhaka, etc.—with anti-racist organizations—like the Parti des Indigènes de la République, the Brigade Anti-Nérophobie, the FUIQP, etc.—and some organizations of the reformist and radical Left (even if some parts of the Left were really divided on this March). This march was historic, in the sense that it was led by the families of victims of police violence, supported by anti-racist organizations and, supported by left-wing organizations and militants. This was not just an 'instrumentalisation' of the anti-racist movement by the Left: rather, and this is a departure from previous practices, the left followed the tactics and organisation of the demonstration by the victims' families and anti-racist organisations. Last year not only represented a reshaping of the Left but also the emergence of a large anti-racist bloc — one which has existed in some form for several years, but which has now been accepted and supported by large sections of the Left.

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With Macron at the head of the state, the Left will face new challenges. The political hegemony of the French extreme centre, never very strong in the Fifth Republic, will now either be made or broken. Facing those challenges means, yes, street protests, but it also entails linking protests to a wider strategy which acknowledges a wide repertoire of struggles, from occupations, demonstrations riots and strikes to electoral and even theoretical struggles. The fact that state violence, which has always targeted non-white people, now also targets the social movement more intensively than before, and the fact that the banlieues have always functioned as a colonial laboratory in which state repression has been refined, gives the Left no choice but to put anti-racism (and thus anti-imperialism) at the front and centre of its strategy. This means working with ideologically 'impure' or 'reformist' anti-racist organisations. The strong contradictions that exist within the social movements can only be resolved in practice, in the common struggle against the new order.

Last year's mobilizations against the El-Khomri labour law, and against racism and police repression, created new a political spaces. But they also changed the balance of forces within the French Left. The struggle against neoliberalism and racism cannot be artificially separated any longer. Macronism, and the fascist monsters it is likely to breed, demands a new anti-racist rigour on the Left.

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P.S.

* <http://salvage.zone/uncategorized/the-meaning-of-macron/>

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