

INTERVIEW

# The French [Governmental] Left's Long March to the Right

Wednesday 14 March 2018, by [HALIMI Serge](#), [ZAMORA Daniel](#) (Date first published: 12 March 2018).

**Le Monde Diplomatique's Serge Halimi dissects the collective suicide of France's center-left — and how its new far left can pick up the pieces.**

The historic collapse of France's Socialist Party is one of the most spectacular upheavals in recent European politics. To understand the roots of the implosion, Daniel Zamora of the Belgian magazine *Lava* spoke with one of the French left's sharpest political analysts, *Le Monde Diplomatique* editorial director Serge Halimi. In this interview, Halimi dissects the disastrous presidency of François Hollande, the nature of President Emmanuel Macron's "new center," and what made Léon Blum's Popular Front government of the 1930s so unique.

**Daniel Zamora (DZ)**

**In your 1993 book *Quand la gauche essayait* (When the Left Used to Try), you offered a detailed analysis of the various moments when the Left was in power in France (1924, 1936, 1944, 1981). Your last chapter, even then, was titled "The Final Fall," about the betrayals of the Mitterrand presidency. Where do we stand today?**

Serge Halimi (SH)

In 1993, when the first edition of my book came out, the Socialist Party (the Parti Socialiste, or PS) had just experienced the worst electoral disaster in its history. It was a deserved rebuke, in my opinion, even though it brought the return of a pretty awful bourgeois and reactionary Right, led by prime minister Édouard Balladur. At the time, I wasn't buying it when the Socialist Party — after pursuing right-wing economic and social policies — sought to mobilize left-wing voters by warning in its posters, "Help, the Right is coming back!".

In any event, in March 1993 the PS lost 80 percent of its seats in the legislative elections. The outgoing prime minister, Pierre Bérégovoy, was so deeply affected by the outcome and by the fact that his "friends" were trying to blame it on him rather than on Mitterrand, as well as by suspicions about his own integrity, that he killed himself a few weeks later. At the time, it was thought that the PS would take a long time to recover.

Yet by 1995, Lionel Jospin arrived in first place in the first round of the presidential elections (Jacques Chirac was elected in the second round). And then two years later, the "plural left" (PS, Communist Party, and Greens) won the 1997 legislative elections and formed a new government. So the socialists' recovery came much faster than we imagined in 1993.

Today, the situation is different. In 2012, François Hollande was elected with exactly the same majority as François Mitterrand in 1981 (51.7 percent), and had an absolute majority of socialists in the National Assembly, a socialist majority in the Senate, control of every regional government in France but one (Alsace), a majority of departmental governments, big cities. Never in France's

history has a head of government of the Left held so many of the levers of national power. And what did he do with it? One of his ministers, Arnaud Montebourg, summarized it well: "When they voted for the socialists, the French people didn't know they were voting for the program of the German right."

The outcome, in its details, was thus even more disappointing than Mitterrand's two terms. A number of left-wing promises weren't kept (the European Stability Pact wasn't renegotiated, unemployment did not start falling, there was no Tobin tax on financial transactions); a number of Hollande's right-wing policies were adopted without having been announced beforehand (Emmanuel Macron's "responsibility pact," formulated when he was a top aide to the president, was a €30 billion tax giveaway to business, financed by spending cuts). And then Hollande, his prime minister Manuel Valls, and the PS took things to the point of negating major elements of the Left's identity (the labor law reform reduced protections for workers; the proposal to strip citizenship for perpetrators of terrorist acts legitimated an idea that had come from the far right).

Finally, in foreign policy, the record was dismal, probably the worst for a socialist head of government since Guy Mollet revived the Algerian war and ordered the Suez expedition in 1956. Hollande's France participated in the strangling of Greece, for example. Same-sex marriage and the Paris climate summit were nice, but they don't amount to much next to all that.

As it turned out, left-wing voters weren't fooled. In 1993, the PS went from having 275 deputies in the National Assembly to 57 deputies. It's very rare to lose 80 percent of your seats. Well, last year, the PS lost 90 percent of its deputies — there are now only thirty left! — after taking only 6.3 percent of the vote in the presidential election, barely more than Nicolas Dupont-Aignan [a quasi-fringe candidate of the Right]. For the party of an incumbent president, that's a rout, and maybe this time an early sign of death.

**DZ**

**You quote Mitterrand, who as far back as 1985 said: "left, right — it's true these words are a bit worn out." Reading your book, one quickly gets the impression that from 1983 onward, political discussion has taken place solely within the framework of a market economy. All alternatives are buried. The historian Michael Scott Christofferson wrote recently that "2017's new center emerged from the collapse of another political force: the center that took shape in the late 1980s." Do you agree?**

**SH**

In March 1983, François Mitterrand, Pierre Mauroy, and Jacques Delors made a strategic choice in favor of the option they referred to at the time as "European solidarity," instead of pursuing the original "socialist plan" from 1980, which they said would have doomed them to a sort of economic autarky. But Europe being what it was in 1983 — with the Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl in power in Germany and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom — that European solidarity almost automatically meant a policy of strict austerity. It went against the Keynesian reflation policy adopted by Mitterrand in 1981.

Essentially, Paris aligned itself with Bonn's monetary policy (German reunification had not yet happened) and France would now condition any "adjustments" to its national currency (the euro did not yet exist) on the consent of a country, Germany, that accounted for a third of France's trade deficit. Once that choice was made, the question of socialism's future in France was settled.

Some understood this right away, like Jean-Pierre Chevènement, who had written the 1980 "socialist plan." Others understood fairly soon. In 1986, Henri Emmanuelli, who was then on the left wing of the PS (Benoît Hamon would later be a close ally) summarized what happened: "Socialists have long

dreamed of a third way between socialism and capitalism. It appears that is no longer possible. The solution is to clearly choose one of the two systems and modify its excesses. We chose the market economy.” And four years later, at a time when the party’s turn had become definitive — the Single European Act, negotiated by the Left and ratified by the Right, was in effect — Emmanuelli extended his analysis: “We have carried out our Bad Godesburg. We did it on March 23, 1983, at 11 in the morning. The day we decided to open the borders and not leave the European Monetary System, we chose a market economy.”

On June 2, 1982, when he was still on the offensive, François Mitterrand declared at the International Labor Organization: “I have outlined three objectives; first, jobs at the center of European social policy.” Three years later, after unemployment had risen further, the economic policy turn was complete as Mitterrand capitulated and announced on television: “Our great priority is inflation.”

The new center of 2017 — Macron basically — is the result of both the socialists’ conversion to liberalism and monetarism, and the desire no longer to be bothered with the themes and language of the left, even during election season. Whereas opportunistic and unscrupulous socialists like Laurent Fabius once felt the need to quote Jean Jaurès or Léon Blum, Macron couldn’t care less about that history. So he’s able to come right out and express his affection for the writings of Philippe de Villiers, a right-wing intellectual and politician who celebrates Catholic and anti-revolutionary France.

## DZ

**This electoral disaster seems to extend to the other social democratic parties in Europe — in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium. Social democracy is at risk of nothing less than being wiped off the political map. What do you make of this bloodbath and the rebirth from its ashes of new political forces like Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders, who openly contest the neoliberal turn? How can they escape that sad fate?**

## SH

Although the battle of ideas can’t explain everything, one is struck by the poverty of thinking among European social democrats or American Democrats over the last thirty years whenever they’ve tried to distinguish themselves from their more left-wing and labor-aligned predecessors. There are certain things you have to inflict on yourself at least once in life to get a full sense of this theoretical impoverishment.

For example, read Gary Hart’s book *A New Democracy*, published in 1983 when he was starting up his campaign against Walter Mondale, who at the time embodied the wing of the Democratic Party that was closest to the American trade unions. Or Bill Clinton’s 1996 book, *Between Hope and History*. Or, in 1998, Anthony Giddens’s and Tony Blair’s *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*. Reading these, you feel like your brain has shut down, like you’re turning the pages of a catalog of clichés and empty words invented by some PR firm.

Basically, what all of these writers tell us is: the past is behind us, the future beckons; we must embrace risk, stimulate creation; new ideas are replacing old, outdated categories; the ownership of the means of production is no longer a real issue; cooperation between labor and capital is replacing class struggle, which is ultimately a kind of social conservatism; free trade and open borders are birthing a society that is open, modern, diverse, etc. For more than thirty years, this managerial stew has been the philosophical framework behind social democracy and the chatter of journalists. After computers spread, they just added the phrase, “We need a new operating system” to the list of older slogans like “left-wing realism,” “reconciling with business,” “carrying out our own Bad Godesberg.”

Corbyn and Sanders, but also Jean-Luc Mélenchon, are breaking with these ideas, reviving a social language that foregrounds the inegalitarian and environmentally destructive logic of the market. Their programs vary; sometimes, especially on foreign policy issues, Sanders concedes too much to his political allies, the Democrats, who've always been the loyal managers (and even the architects) of America's imperial policies. But for now, Corbyn, Sanders, and Mélenchon are sticking to a line that rejects both Third Way liberalism and the lefty academic and postcolonial verbiage churned out in elite American institutions. Here I'm thinking of the obsession with "diversity" that, in celebrating all identities, often hardens and essentializes them — as long as the identities in question aren't class identity defined by one's relationship to capitalist production.

So how can the new forces escape the fate of the socialist parties? I think the first answer is precisely to win back the social groups that once made up the backbone of a left coalition: those who were sacrificed by the policies carried out by socialists and who will never be persuaded by leftist blather that's more preoccupied with deconstructing language than with ensuring free tuition. But we also have to understand why the social-liberals abandoned the people.

There's a whole analysis behind it. And as harsh as I was about Anthony Giddens's intellectual work, I have to acknowledge the quality — and the candor — of Dominique Strauss-Kahn's (DSK) thinking fifteen years ago when he explained the developments that had been going on in Europe, which he intended to extend and deepen. Basically, he was theorizing the social democrats' prioritization of middle-class and upper-middle-class voters, and their concomitant abandonment of the working classes to the far right and abstention. Put more bluntly, it's a preference for what Christopher Lasch called "civilized minorities" over what Stendhal termed the "filthy majority."

In his 2002 book *La flamme et la cendre* (The Flame and the Embers), DSK, who had been economics minister and would later head the IMF, explained that socialists should stop defending "the proletariat that has nothing to lose but its chains," and instead defend those who have "acquired culture, education, sometimes a little bit of money, an apartment. In other words, not the least fortunate, but not the richest, either. They represent the backbone of a society like ours." Basically, not the bottom 20 percent, or even the bottom 50 percent — though not (or not yet) the top 1 percent — but rather "the middle group."

So the bourgeoisie owning "a little bit of money and an apartment" became the favored constituency of a socialist movement born in the nineteenth century thanks to working-class trade unionism intended to unite the proletariat of all nations. DSK, charitably, doesn't entirely forget the poor: he suggests "caring about them, helping them, training them to try to bring them into the middle layers." But he suggests no longer "relying on them, because most of the time they don't want to participate in political life, since they feel excluded."

Thus, instead of combating the ongoing slide back towards nineteenth-century-style limited-suffrage politics in Western countries (last June, zero blue-collar workers and forty-six business people were elected to the National Assembly), European social democracy gave its blessing in every sphere to the domination of the upper-middle classes, the educated bourgeoisie. With the DSK-style left (in other words, that of Hollande, the German SPD, Matteo Renzi, Justin Trudeau, etc.) finding itself ever more abandoned by a working-class milieu that can see it's being abandoned, in turn, by the Left, it looks to other social groups for political support.

This disdain for the people easily becomes an aristocratic fear of the proles. A bit like Tocqueville writing on the 1848 June Days, DSK writes: "One unfortunately cannot always expect participation in a parliamentary democracy from the least privileged groups. It is not that they lack interest in History, but their irruptions sometimes manifest in the form of violence."

Yet this “least privileged group” was long the left’s core base! And caring about it, giving it power, was its *raison d’être*. So it seems to me that, with the socialists having abandoned this group, and having forgotten along the way that blue-collar workers still make up around 50 percent of the population, the “new forces of the left” that you speak of ought to turn to them. Are they doing enough? I’m not sure. Are they trying to? I think they are.

DZ

**In your book, you emphasize that, except for June 1936 under the Popular Front government, workers have generally been kept at a distance when the French socialist left has been in power. It never really made them the agents of a new politics. So it’s interesting to note that the reemergence from the wilderness of a “left-wing of the left” has gone along with a return to a more activist vision of politics — the idea that being president or prime minister isn’t enough to change the course of events, to transform the balance of power.**

SH

The case of 1936 illuminates many things, but most of all the connection between political action and social movements. The Popular Front’s electoral program didn’t call for any of the social achievements we associate with that period: paid holidays, a forty-hour week, collective bargaining agreements, etc. And yet, these measures were voted in parliament not only by the Left, which hadn’t put them in its election platform, but by a good part of the Right, which had fought against the Popular Front on the grounds that it was already going much too far. The Chamber of Deputies passed paid holidays 563 to 1; collective bargaining agreements by 571 to 5; even the forty-hour week was voted by a 408 to 160 landslide.

And yet this historical precedent doesn’t mean that spontaneity, direct action, council-ism would be so much more effective than political strategy, parties, alliances. Because without the agreements that radicals, socialists, and communists painstakingly reached starting in 1934, without the Popular Front’s resulting electoral and parliamentary victory in April-May 1936, there wouldn’t have been a strike movement in June. It broke out only after the election results were announced, as if the workers had been looking for a signal, as if they wanted to be sure that this time their government wouldn’t let them down.

So the lesson of the Popular Front, and really the lesson of the Left in power, is more that we need to relearn how to walk and chew gum at the same time, to do politics and social movements, and if possible to activate both simultaneously. There is every reason to believe that our current institutions make it impossible to take power without immediately running up against many constraints — though people also said that about earlier institutions.

One might then conclude that change will necessarily have to come from elsewhere: from the unforeseen event that sweeps everything away, or the little utopia built up within a community of like-minded peers, or the “symbolic battles” that transform our way of seeing the world and might allow us to prevail three centuries from now.

But it would be better not to forget that many of the past victories we’re now defending, or the “reforms” we’re currently fighting, were produced through politics — that is, among other things, by electoral majorities, laws, government decisions. So it would be unwise to abandon the tool of state power, the conquest of power, on the grounds that we’ll always find it harder to use than our enemies; or to forget that when we do make use of this tool, it will never be enough unless simultaneously combined with, and supported, by social mobilizations.

---

## **P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 03.12.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/the-french-lefts-long-march-to-the-right>

Republished from Lava:

<https://lavamedia.be/fr/>

For the integrated links, see the original article.

### **\* ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Serge Halimi is the editorial director of Le Monde Diplomatique.

### **ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER**

Daniel Zamora is a postdoctoral sociologist at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and Cambridge University.

### **ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR**

Seth Ackerman is on the editorial board of Jacobin and a doctoral candidate in history at Cornell.