

# The French elections and our strategic project

Tuesday 1 May 2007, by [BENSAÏD Daniel](#), [GAUDICHAUD Frank](#) (Date first published: 23 April 2007).

**The first text below is a reflection on the outcome of the first round of the French presidentials, written immediately after the outcome was announced. The second is an interview with Daniel Bensaïd by Franck Gaudichaud [1], carried out on 2 April 2007. Because of the obvious overlap in the subject matter we have decided to present these two pieces together.**

## **Assessment of the outcome of the first round of the French presidential election**

The day after the first round of the presidential election, the morning press saluted the return to a classical polarisation between right and left, after the traumatising episode of the Chirac/Le Pen duel in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round in 2002. However this judgment needs to be nuanced. Certainly Le Pen lost about a million electors (more than 6 per cent of the vote) and Sarkozy, with 30 per cent, attained a historic first round result for the government Right. But this success is to a large degree a result of his campaign of seduction aimed at the electorate of the National Front, of his use of the theme of immigration and French identity, in short of a 'Le Penisation' of his discourse.

On her side, Segolene Royal did not conduct a classical left campaign, but a catch-all campaign, flirting on one side with nationalism and moral and family order, with a few symbolic gestures of social compassion on her left. So Segolene's Left is a Left that has been largely "Blairised", with few electoral reserves on her left (the main one being the million and a half electors of Olivier Besancenot).

On the other hand, with more than 18 per cent, Bayrou's centre has established itself in a position of arbiter. Even in the case of a victory of Segolene Royal, it would be difficult for her to envisage forming a parliamentary and governmental majority without some kind of agreement with Bayrou. In a certain sense it is the cycle of the Union of the Left and of the 'Plural Left' (1972-2002) which is coming to an end, the perspective now being that of a centre- left coalition between social democrats and democrats who are social, in other words, a sort of French-style Prodism. Having said that, looking at the result of the first round, the election of Sarkozy on May 6 remains the most likely hypothesis, even if the game is not yet over.

The radical Left, or left of the left, had won in 2002 around 13.5 per cent of the vote (Arlette Laguiller 5.7 per cent, Olivier Besancenot 4.3 per cent, the Communist Party 3.5 per cent), and the Greens 5.5 per cent. This left of the left experienced an important drop in its support, since it totaled this time a little less than 9 per cent (4.1 per cent for Besancenot, 1.9 per cent for Marie-Georges Buffet, 1.4 per cent for Arlette Laguiller, and 1.3 per cent for Jose Bove). The Greens only got 1.5 per cent. So the drop is due to a collapse of the electorates of the CP, LO, and the Greens.

Everyone recognizes that only Olivier Besancenot maintained his result in percentage terms and improved it in terms of the number of votes (with more than a million and a half) compared to 2002. He certainly lost a good third of his electors of five years ago, who had voted for him for the novelty

of it, and bitterly regretted it when they saw Le Pen in the second round. On the other hand he solidly established his vote in the working-class regions and milieux, and according to the first indications, he got results among new young electors which were markedly higher than his national average.

Why was there this drop in the vote for the left of the left? The first reason is certainly the traumatism of 2002. The fear, built up by the media and by the leadership of the Socialist Party, of seeing a second round between Sarkozy and Le Pen weighed heavily in the last two weeks of the campaign. This appeal to vote out of fear from the first round led to confiscating a vote based on choice and conviction, which is supposed to be expressed in the first round, to the advantage of a vote of elimination, a vote against, independently of the programme and the project of the Socialist candidate or of Francois Bayrou. This mechanism functioned all the more in that the electoral mobilisation was exceptional, around 85 per cent, and we can assume that a good number of these intermittent electors voted for the lesser evil.

A second reason for this drop is the change that has taken place since the victory of the No in the referendum of May 29, 2005 on the European Constitutional Treaty. This No won by 55 per cent. But this majority was split between a right No and a left No. Even if it is probable that left No was dominant, the respective shares of the two electorates remain uncertain. The illusion of some people, in the left of the left (in particular in the entourage of Jose Bove) consisted of conceiving of the presidential and legislative elections as simply a prolongation of the referendum, and of overestimating as a result the potential of the radical Left.

Electing a president of the Republic and creating a government majority around a project for five years is something else entirely than replying by Yes or No in a referendum. Moreover the "No-ists" of the Socialist Party (Fabius, Montebourg, Melenchon) did not waste much time in letting themselves be synthesized, under the leadership of Segolene Royal and behind the majority of the party that had been favorable to the treaty.

As a result, the question of Europe (which will come back onto the agenda from the end of this year) was largely absent from the campaign, as if what had happened was just a squabble which could quickly be forgotten. The Right, which had suffered a resounding defeat in the referendum, had no interest in talking about it. The Socialist Party, which had patched up its divisions, and which probably does not know how it is going to handle the issue of Europe in the coming period, had no interest in talking about it either. So the question was sidelined. Lastly, the division of the candidacies on the left of the left certainly had an influence on part of the electorate which was disconcerted by such a multiplication of candidates.

But from a strictly electoral point of view, this is certainly not, contrary to what Bove is beginning to say, the main reason. A unitary candidacy on a clear political basis would certainly have had a dynamic that would have been attractive for those who were hesitating, but experience proves that unity is not a simple question of addition, and that a part of the respective electorates of the CP, LO, and the Ligue would not have identified with a unitary candidacy. So we can seriously doubt that in the difficult conditions of this campaign such a candidacy would have had the cumulative result of 8.5 per cent.

Why is Olivier the candidate who best resisted the siren calls of "vote usefully"? Over and above the dynamism of his campaign, his personal talent, his very positive image in working class milieux and among youth, the answer is to be sought in the fundamental orientation of his campaign. He was the one who most clearly kept his eye on the issues, who developed a serious and well argued programme, who most clearly asserted his independence in relation to the Socialist Party, including in the hypothesis of the victory of Segolene Royal and of a left government. He thus gained sympathy

which goes well beyond his million and a half electors, as was witnessed, on his blog and in direct conversations, by the number of messages from people excusing themselves in a rather shamefaced way for renouncing voting out of conviction in order to “vote usefully”, out of fear of a new April 21<sup>st</sup> (2002).

This result of the campaign, which cannot be counted in terms of votes, is obviously very important, because it sows the seeds of resistance and struggles in the future, whatever the result on May 6<sup>th</sup>. Thus, we should take note that Olivier’s result is very homogenous in the different departments, generally between 4 per cent and 5.5 per cent, with peaks in the departments that have a strong working-class and communist tradition (the North, the Pas-de-Calais, Limousin, Meurthe-and-Moselle), including in Seine-Saint-Denis, where Marie Georges Buffet is an MP. So it is the much lower vote in the bourgeoisified centres of the big cities (and in particular Paris) and in the overseas departments and territories (although Olivier came in fourth in Martinique), which explains that his average came down to a little over 4%.

What now? What follows will obviously be different depending on whether Sarkozy or Segolene Royal wins on May 6<sup>th</sup>. But in both cases we will continue, as Olivier did in his meetings and then in his intervention on the evening of April 22<sup>nd</sup>, to call for an anti-capitalist alliance of the left of the left. If Sarkozy is elected, we will have need of a radical Left of resistance and struggle to the left of the Socialist Party. If it is Segolene Royal, we will also have need of a left opposition that is independent of her governmental coalition. The form and content of such an alliance remain to be discussed with our potential partners. Furthermore, it is obvious that these partners are likely to be different in the two hypotheses. For our part, we will be meeting them as soon as possible. We will draw, in the course of a meeting of our national leadership meeting on April 28<sup>th</sup>, a balance sheet of the election and of these meetings, in order to define our orientation in the coming weeks and to make proposals.

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## INTERVIEW WITH FRANK GAUDICHAUD

### **“We are faced with the challenge of a process of social reconstruction” - the battle in France now and the long term fight for socialism**

*Franck Gaudichaud: Recently the philosopher Alain Badiou [2], in an interview with the Italian newspaper Il Manifesto, still asserted the idea of communism as a “common sense” to be defended. However today, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, faced with the commodification of the world and the expansion of neo-liberalism, some people believe that liberal democracy is the horizon beyond which we cannot go. Under these conditions, how can we continue to assert the idea of communism and also of “revolution”?*

Daniel Bensaïd: Finally, the idea of the revolution, with or without the word, is not very difficult to defend today. What makes people afraid, in general, is the association of the idea of revolution with that of violence. On the other hand, if we understand by “revolution”, the need to change the world and, more precisely, to change social relations, the logic of production and distribution, this concept remains entirely relevant today. Throughout the rise of the movement that has criticised liberalism, privatisations and the dislocation of the world, since the middle of the 1990s, approximately since the Zapatista insurrection and the demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, this idea has reconquered

legitimacy. The doubts relate much more to the ways and the means. In other words: are there strategies to achieve this goal which are valid within the framework of globalisation? So one question concerns the effects of globalisation on the reorganization of political space: because changing the world is not an airy-fairy idea, it involves territories and relationships of force.

The dominant strategic field of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that of the nation state, and it is not obsolete. The proof of that lies in the relationships of forces which are being established on this level in Venezuela and in Bolivia. But this goes also for Europe, with the French and Dutch "No" to the European constitutional treaty. However, at the same time, these national spaces, which continue to have strategic relevance, are now closely intertwined with what I would call "a sliding scale of spaces": regional, national, continental, even on the world scale, depending on the themes and the questions that are involved. The state remains one of the nodes of relationships of force, but the relationships of economic and political power are also redeployed on the level of space. So the difficulty is rather from the point of view of redefining actors and spaces, i.e. more on the strategic level, than on the relevance of revolution today.

As for the idea of communism, Alain Badiou's interpretation of it is certainly somewhat particular, as is, besides, his entire political analysis... I have some sympathy with this thinking, which goes against the grain of the liberal order, but his interpretation is close to a kind of "metaphysics of communism". A metaphysics which largely avoids historical problems and the critical examination of history (for example, a critical examination of Maoism, or China, or indeed of bureaucracy). There is with Badiou more a succession of sequences, interspersed with events "that surge out of a vacuum", as Slavoj Žižek [3] would put it, therefore closer to a miraculous conception of events. It is this philosophical credo which Badiou calls "communism". After all, the word has a history and also a meaning, even considered from this angle. Much more, in any case, than many of the present-day platitudes. But this theoretical matrix makes difficult what, for my part, I regard as a political approach, of accumulating forces and taking a long-term view of things. By way of example, Alain Badiou's political current manages to make a principle out of not participating in elections, in a way which is close to intellectual affectation...

*FG: And, on this basis, how would you define your communism, if it is possible to summarise it in a few sentences?*

DB: To answer that, one could draw on the repertory of definitions. First of all a dynamic conception: communism is precisely not a Utopia and a set of fixtures of which one could make an inventory. It is rather "the real movement which abolishes the existing order", as Marx put it. This definition is certainly insufficient, because it is too "elastic", but it has the merit of being coherent and it was a response to the polemic with the utopian theories of the 1830s and 1840s. In this connection, as I try to demonstrate in a book which I am preparing at the moment, our epoch has certain similarities with this context of reaction, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An epoch which was very well described in Musset's *Confessions of a Child of the Century*. And the criticism of the utopian socialisms in the last part of the *Communist Manifesto* has, in this sense, a certain topicality. "Feudal socialism" as described by Marx, a current which sought to return to the imaginary pastoral times of medieval society, has some resemblance to certain contemporary ecological currents, in particular the "Deep Ecology" current. In the same way, "true" or "philanthropic" socialism can be found in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, accompanied by a feeling of political powerlessness, for example in the current vogue for micro-credit. Not that we should reject micro-credit as such, but from there to presenting it as the answer that has finally been found to the development of the Third World, or to advocate it in the way that Paul Wolfowitz does... [4] We could give many more examples. And there are also the contemporary libertarian Utopias, just as there were the Proudhonian Utopias at that time. Despite their undeniable interest, these ideologies have as their common characteristic the

fact that they seek to avoid politics and the question of power. For them it is just a question of creating spaces for a nice sort of counter-society, evacuating the problem of political power. And at the other extreme, one could speak about a neo-Keynesian Utopia which is trying - and there too one can find a real interest - to develop proposals on the public sector and the role of the state. But, there again, the political link in the chain and the essential question of the instruments for applying their ideas are missing. In France, I am thinking of the work of writers like Thomas Coutrot or Yves Salesse, who come into this category.

As regards sketching an outline of communism, and without seeking "to cook today the dinner of the future", we can look at the Paris Commune. Engels said: if you want to know what the dictatorship of the proletariat is, look at the Paris Commune. And what was the Commune? Votes for everyone, pluralism, elected officials subject to recall, socialisation of property, dissolution of the professional army, and... no president of the Republic! Finally, whatever major problem you want to deal with in a serious way (ecology for example), you inevitably come to the question of property.

*FG: In your work, in particular in Marx For Our Times or La Discordance des temps, you assert a "hot" current of Marxism, a living and dialectical Marxism. However, there are many intellectuals, including among critics of capitalism, who now speak of a "post-Marxist" era, or who reduce the contribution of Marx to that of a "theoretical toolbox", among many other things. We could cite the French sociologist Philippe Corcuff, who invites us to go beyond a "holistic Marxism" or insists on the need to get rid of "Marxist" interpretations of Marx.*

DB: I think that these are serious questions and that there is a sometimes a degree of light-mindedness in the way these intellectuals treat them: Marx is still a "big fish". Admittedly, we can go beyond him, he is not eternal... But, in my opinion, the hard core of his critical theory is of burning relevance for today, whether you approach it from the angle of globalisation, the labour theory of value or crisis theory. And for a sound common-sense reason: what Marx analysed in an incipient state, starting from European capitalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has become the law of the whole planet. And, I do not see any theorist who has confronted this theory and really gone beyond, whether we are talking about Castoriadis, certain liberals or others. Some people have also tried "do-it-yourself" starting from Marx, but it remains precisely do-it-yourself... Behind these attempts, there is an epistemological debate on the rejection or the fear of systems and totalising theories.

It is true, there are totalities that are open or only partial, but that is not a reason to abandon thinking in terms of systems. The ecological problem, for example, proves the validity of the theory of systems (ecosystems!). As Régis Debray once said: "If you refuse everything, you will get the whole lot". That sums up well post-modern thought, which sanctions the juxtaposition ad infinitum of particular characteristics and is incapable of thinking in terms of universality. It is true that, in history, abstract universalities could be used as alibis for oppression - colonial national, gender, etc... But the oppressed were able to give a concrete content to "universal concepts" such as freedom, equal rights, tolerance. And from Toussaint Louverture in Olympe de Gouge, they knew to seize hold of them for their emancipatory battles. At the end of the day, post-modern rhetoric has done a great deal of damage. If you read again what Deleuze wrote in connection with the "new philosophers", it is formidable. However, what they are making of his ideas today - an ideological "Deleuzism" - deserves better than to serve as a mask for a post-modern rhetoric that is isomorphic with the liberal discourse.

*FG: In one of your texts, you confirm Foucault's idea according to which we have gone from the total, committed, Sartrean intellectual to the figure of the specific intellectual, or even to the time of intellectual collectives. However, the appearance of certain mediatised, dominant and post-modern thinkers or the fact that the "specific" intellectuals seem increasingly turned in on themselves and situated outside the political sphere, tends to make us regret the figure of the great critical*

*intellectuals.*

DB: This question forms part of the controversy with Bourdieu. Bourdieu explicitly rejected the formula of the organic intellectual, in reality through rejection of the perverse relation between the intellectual and the party that we experienced in the Stalinist tradition (especially in France), where the intellectual is just a petition-signing justification for the party. But for Gramsci, the organic intellectual is not necessarily a professional intellectual. He is above all the intellectual whom a social class produces in the course of its development, as the workers' movement was able to do in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with innumerable working-class organic intellectuals. Today, on the pretext of the disappearance - and we should not regret it - of the figure of the total intellectual, thinker and conscience of the world, we find ourselves with a collection of specialists, often competent, but completely detached from any political or militant project: there is no coagulation around a force, around a common project. We are then faced with the risk of an intellectual technocracy, of a caste of experts, even counter-experts, which ends up having the same defects as the oligarchy that it is contesting. In relation to this risk, my personal choice has been related to the figure of the "Prince", in Gramsci's sense of the term, that is to the political party as a collective intellectual, which shares and socialises the various sources and forms of political knowledge. It is not populist to say that a political organization can make it possible to weave together these different kinds of political knowledge. For my part, I learn a great deal from contact with militants, because they have different approaches, they come from different horizons, different generations, as is the case with Olivier Besancenot [5].

We learn from each other, and especially we think and act collectively. I know that the idea of a party is very much discredited: the party is said to equal bureaucracy, authority, hierarchy, discipline, etc... All these dangers are real, but bureaucratisation is not limited to the party form. On the contrary! Since Max Weber, we have understood that it is a profound tendency of contemporary societies, which is also expressed in the trade unions, in the state administration, in NGOs and in various collectives. Under these conditions, and paradoxically, the party form is rather a protection and a democratic defence against the bureaucratic danger. Informal bureaucracies, the co-optation of public spokespersons, the illusion of freedom outside of the party are no less dangerous. Because a political organisation, if we remain vigilant, makes it possible to create a space for democratic debate, where the members obtain means of discussion which are not dependent - or which should not be dependent - on the power of money or on media pressure. It is always a difficult position, because historically the relationship between the intellectual and the party has sterilised more than one intellectual! Thus, Henri Lefebvre [6] seems to have liberated himself when he left the Communist Party, as is shown by the abundance of his work after he left. [7] in his introduction to *For Marx*, writes of how he suffered from not being recognised by his peers, from being perceived as an ideologue in the service of a party line (which was, in fact, not untrue). For my part, I do not have the feeling that my political commitment has curbed my curiosity, my desires for reflection and the expression of my ideas, quite the contrary.

*FG: While we are on the subject of your political commitment, I propose that we come on to the political situation in France. After five years of a government of the Right, of a brutal liberal offensive and of, in reaction to that, several important social movements, some analysts are speaking - at the end of the long reign of President Chirac - about a crisis of the regime of the Fifth Republic. A few weeks from the presidential elections, what panorama would you draw up of the political context in the Hexagon [8] ?*

DB: Unquestionably, there is a real crisis of regime: the ideological heritage and the institutional system that came from Gaullism are in complete decomposition. The two pillars of this system, that is to say, Gaullism as the dominant political force and the Communist Party (CP) in its years of prosperity, are in crisis. There is not much left of Gaullism in the majority party of the Right, led by

Sarkozy [ UMP - liberal/neo-conservative ]. And the CP may well have the worst result in its history, even compared to the presidential election in 2002, when it was already at its lowest ever. We are thus faced with a transformed political landscape. The reasons for this transformation are obviously to be looked for first of all in social relations. Certain sectors of society have been reduced in importance, have even collapsed, in particular those sectors which provided the social base of the CP. It should be recalled that the Communist electorate represented in France up to 25% of votes (in 1969). Even among the middle layers, it seems that the SP and social democracy is losing part of its electoral support, including among teachers. Through privatisations and the liberal counter-reform, all the values of public service, of the role of the state, which were one of the foundations of its support, are being called into question. This evolution can also be detected within the Socialist elites, whose links with the private sector and the boards of directors of the big capitalist groups are now much closer. This regressive context creates a phenomenon of social disaffiliation, of atomisation, encouraged by the policies of flexibilisation of work, of individualisation of wages, of destruction of solidarity and social security, to the advantage of private interests. On the electoral level, that leads to a phenomenon which political economists call "dissonance": in other words, a growing distancing between the parties and their electorates; in fact there is an increasingly random link between the two. And finally, the privatisation not only of public services but also of violence, the substitution of law by contract, etc., all that has led to emptying the public space of any serious political content.

Among the perverse aspects of the institutional edifice of the Fifth Republic, although it is not the most important, we could cite the hallucinating system of sponsorships of candidates in the presidential election, which has been largely commented on in the press of late [9] . All in all, these institutions are typical of the Bonapartist heritage. Marx designated France as the founder of this type of political functioning, which we find from Napoleon I to De Gaulle, via MacMahon and Clémenceau [10]. Moreover, if Sarkozy wins, we are likely to have five years of "Napoleon the Very Small!". In these conditions the "double bind" is very constraining for the party which will win the elections. Either it does not touch the institutional structure and continues with the idea of instituting a classical presidential way of functioning, combined with the two-party system. This choice implies further excluding those who already feel that they are not represented by the current system, since it in reality excludes about half of the electorate from being represented. The other possible choice would be a reform of the voting system, limited to the introduction of proportional representation. In this case, they would be unleashing an Italian-style "centrifugal effect", where the dominant parties try to conclude compromises in the political superstructure, with the result, for example, that Prodi has more than one hundred ministers in his government. Of course, we are in favour of complete proportional representation, by regions and with a national calculation of surplus votes, so as to represent more closely the reality of the electorate. But a real institutional reform would, in order to be coherent, have to abolish the presidency of the Republic and the Senate, grant voting rights to foreign residents, abolish the supervision of local authorities by the [government-appointed] Prefects, recognize the right to self-determination of the overseas departments and territories, in short undertake a real constituent process!

In France, the fact that the big parties have not succeeded in imposing a two-party system, which would be the logical complement of the evolution towards a strong presidential system, is the reflection of an undecided and fluctuating relationship of forces between the classes. We have a panorama where the social movements lose, certainly, but where they resist, which has political effects. Furthermore all these movements of resistance divide the ruling class as to the means of responding to them. The fact that the leader of the centre-right, Francois Bayrou [ UDF - Christian Democrat ], has not rallied to the idea of a grand coalition of conservative republicans, in the American style, reminds us that the contradictions in society also operate in the political sphere.

*FG: Speaking of the contradictions in the political sphere, the radical Left has its own contradictions. Over the last few months, there have been many debates in France about whether or not it was possible to present a "unitary" candidacy at the presidential election, bringing together militants from the CP and the LCR, but also trade unionists, activists in various associations, ecologists, etc... In an article, you write that political activity is a "school of modesty". However today, some militants reproach the LCR with not having been modest enough and for having above all defended the interests of its own organisation at the time of the discussions on a possible "anti-liberal unity". What would be your answer to them?*

DB: Without wanting to be polemical, I do not think that the lack of modesty was particularly on our side in these debates. I would even tend to think exactly the opposite. What happened? We had just come away with a victory. One of the rare political victories of the last decade: the rejection of the European constitutional treaty in the referendum in 2005. And with as an essential element of this victory, the fact that the majority "no" vote was from the left, with a marked social character, a "no" from the working-class neighbourhoods, without xenophobia, in solidarity with immigrants. This event gave rise to a hope, and at the same time an illusion, both of them understandable and expressed by the idea that it was then possible to prolong this "no" on the political and electoral terrain. Moreover this idea fell into the trap of the presidentialist logic of the preceding Socialist government, which had reversed the electoral calendar, so that the presidential election now comes first in chronological order and sets the terms of the elections that follow [legislative elections, then municipal elections in 2008 ]. Within this rather unfavourable electoral framework, there was the hope - and the illusion - that the presidential election would be the natural prolongation of the "no" in the referendum. To come to an agreement on rejecting a liberal treaty is one thing; to propose a project for the country, thus a governmental project, is another! The problem at the time of the debates around a common anti-liberal candidacy did not relate mainly to the political platform, because although there were important points of disagreement, they could surely have been surmounted, even left to be dealt with later. But what we especially wanted was a clear political debate on the question of alliances, i.e. about the necessary independence in relation to a future parliamentary and governmental majority which could come out of the elections. This problem is central and it is part of the election campaign. To refuse to settle this question immediately was to create illusions and disappointments in the future. For our part, we were ready to undertake a campaign around a unitary candidate who would not come from the LCR, although I think that Olivier Besancenot [ the spokesperson of the LCR ] had shown in the referendum campaign c that he was probably the best spokesperson.

Moreover, that is what the present campaign seems to confirm, and for several reasons: the clarity of his discourse, his experience of militant social activity, the fact that he is not a professional politician and, finally, the generational effect. Despite everything, the LCR was ready to sacrifice these assets in favour of a unitary dynamic. But we demanded in return a guarantee that we were not going to conduct a campaign for a candidate who would negotiate, the day after the election, a place in a government under the hegemony of the Socialist Party. A Socialist Party unified around its majority which had had called for a "yes" vote in the European referendum! All the more so as the question of the European constitutional treaty is not behind us: it will come up again in 2008. We wanted a clear political answer, which was really not an exorbitant demand, and we did not get it. It was essential to get political agreement on this subject with the various political currents which took part in this discussion, and in particular with the CP, an agreement which did not exclude the individuals who entered the battle of for the "no" without having any political affiliation. It was also necessary to respect the school of the democracy which these discussions should have represented. But the way in which this movement was run by the organisers of the Unitary Collectives was an anti-school of democracy. Democracy is knowing how to do things together, which means that what we decide commits us collectively. That also means establishing strict criteria for voting.



However, such criteria were not established, in the name of an improbable “double consensus”, and that is what made it possible for the CP to create many collectives at the last minute, without that being controlled by anyone. Some people complained that the Communists were hijacking the unitary collectives. For my part, I think that it is difficult to reproach them with such practices, since no common criterion prevented them. The CP still has 60.000 members and we cannot prohibit it from having its militants intervene in the collectives! Therefore, the problem to be regulated with the CP was really a political question. On the contrary, the people in charge for the collectives nationally helped to bury the political debate and especially the question of an alliance with the SP, and to centre the debates around questions of persons: in other words, who was going to be the candidate. As for the candidacy of the peasant union leader Jose Bové, it is confused, without being unitary. Jose Bové initially withdrew his candidacy at the time of the discussions within the unitary collectives, and then re-launched it after the failure of the collectives, following an electronic “plebiscite” via Internet. I think that all that is part of the same drift as the evolution of the SP, where Ségolène Royal was designated by public opinion and not as the result of internal political debates in the party. The fact that the SP created the famous “membership for 20 euros”, making it possible for anyone at all to take part in designating the candidate of the SP, represents a degradation of the democratic debate within the SP. So I would reaffirm the formula according to which to be active in a party, which has its rules and its statutes, is indeed a school of responsibility and modesty. Of modesty, because it is a collective undertaking and because you cannot just think on your own. Of responsibility, because we have accounts to render to the members. Which is not the case of everyone...

*FG: Let us envisage the situation after the presidential election: there is in France a relatively important radical and anti-capitalist Left (in any case in comparison with other countries of Europe); and also a level of real social conflict. Marx said that France is the country of politics, Germany of philosophy and England of the economy: is this really the case and how should we consider the post-electoral situation in France, from your point of view?*

DB: First of all, that will depend largely on the electoral result. More especially as for these elections, we are breaking somewhat from “routine”. I consider as not very probable the presence of François Bayrou in the second round; and if he did make it then that would represent a political earthquake, with the going over of part of the SP to a kind of Democratic Party of the centre-left, a kind of French version of “Prodism”; and with important readjustments on the right. On the left, if the SP loses the elections, there will undoubtedly be some very violent settling of accounts within the party: the various currents which were divided over the European referendum are already preparing for that! Furthermore, if the CP is beaten for the second time by candidates of the radical Left, whereas the party had regained, during the European campaign, some of the ground it had lost, that would confirm that the CP is indeed in a historical dead end, and that it is no longer able to rise again. There is a life after the second round of the presidential elections and after the legislative elections which will follow. And everyone will be forced to think. However, in order to approach this new situation confidently, the more forces we will have accumulated, the more we will be prepared, the more we will be able to face up to the new process of political reconstruction which awaits us. Because we are only at the beginning of this new stage and it is necessary to measure the effects of the defeats that have been suffered and the damage that has been inflicted over the last 25 years.

As for “France, the country of politics”, it is of course a convenient simplification, but there is nevertheless a French singularity (rather than a “French exception”). This singularity remains relative. For example, we also find a strong radical Left in several European countries, such as the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Dutch SP (which is not a social democratic party), the Scottish Socialist Party, Communist Refoundation in Italy (until recently at least), Respect in England, etc... It is true that they are extremely unstable phenomena of radicalisation. The case of Communist Refoundation

(RC - Italy) is eloquent on this subject. This organisation was much more radical than the French CP at the time of the big European Social Forums, and it was one of the pillars of the global justice movement. However, in only three years, and in a country which experienced the strongest anti-war movement in Europe against the invasion of Iraq, the RC took part in a governmental coalition where institutional solidarity means that its elected officials vote as one (with only one or two exceptions) in favour of sending troops to Afghanistan, the austerity budget, the continuation of privatizations and, probably, the new version of the European constitutional treaty, of which Prodi is one of the fathers... This example reveals the brittleness of these movements which represent a political shift to the left. It is a very fluid phenomenon, in particular because of the continuing imbalance between an increase in social conflicts, a reactivation of resistance and the absence of political victories. That explains the ease with which some of the militants who have fought zap their social commitment in favour of an illusory policy of the "lesser evil". That was the case with "anything but Berlusconi" in Italy, a reflex that we can perfectly well understand. In France, it is a scenario which is giving us "anything but Sarkozy". Some voters, carried away by this logic, are hesitating as to who to vote for in the first round, between Olivier Besancenot, following their convictions and... Francois Bayrou, according to a calculation which makes them consider Bayrou as the candidate best placed to counter Sarkozy! So there is a hesitation between a vote, from the first round, for Royal or Bayrou, defined as "useful" or of the "lesser evil" and a vote of political conviction. Under these conditions, the radical space on the left remains extremely unstable and itself crisscrossed by fairly different political projects. Thus, we still do not know whether the CP will be ready to go back into a government of the plural Left under the hegemony of the SP (or to support it), and there are certain possibilities that it will again take up this option if Mme Royal wins. In any case the hypothesis is open and the CP has still not given an answer...

*FG: You have been active in the revolutionary Left for more than 40 years. In an autobiographical work, you describe your political trajectory and you speak of this "slow impatience"... Do you think, rationally, that there is a real possibility, in the medium term, for a big anti-capitalist political force in the Europe of today?*

DB: If we don't try, nobody will know whether it was possible or not! The possible does not always become real, but it is a part of reality and, historically, there have always been defeated possibilities... Compared to the "long march" where indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, we were young people in a hurry, we have learned that "the future lasts a long time" [11] and so we must be patient. At the same time, we are faced with a situation of urgency, as the state of the planet illustrates: the current context is much more alarming than it was in the 70s or during the long post-war boom. We were then "happy revolutionaries", to paraphrase Roland Barthes when he spoke about Voltaire as a "happy writer". We were anti-colonial revolutionaries, and those were important fights, which were in no way "a picnic" (as Mao put it). On the other hand, we bathed in the idea that communism was at the end of the period of prosperity and economic growth. Now, faced with the ecological urgency and the social urgency, the reasons to revolt and resist are much stronger and more pressing.

*FG: Admittedly, but if for your generation it could seem that "History was snapping at your heels", this great history seems a little toothless today, doesn't it?*

DB: Indeed, History had to lose a few teeth along the way! We are defeated, but there are defeats from which one learns much. We lost many political battles, of different kinds, in particular in 1968 and afterwards. But there was above all a major defeat on a planetary scale, which was the fall of the Berlin Wall, even if one can - in no way at all - regret the end of the Soviet bureaucratic regime. This defeat was the brutal reintroduction into the world market of a third of the labour force of the planet, and thus of tens of millions of workers. It was obviously a defeat, since that means (for several decades) a considerable downward pressure on the conditions of the resistance of labour.

We are faced with the challenge of a process of social reconstruction that is made up of small resistances and partial victories. It is also a political challenge, where we have to redefine a strategic horizon which has broken down. We must even reconsider the categories we use, because all the revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries corresponded to a paradigm, to the same body of political categories, which was born with the 17<sup>th</sup> century: citizenship, yes, but social; war, but popular; Paris Commune versus Versailles; etc... The terms of the debate on reform or revolution between Lenin, Rosa Luxembourg, Kautsky and others, are not uninteresting today, but they are insufficient. This necessary theoretical reconstruction must confront the ideological bubble of post-modern thought, which talks about "society in pieces" or "liquid society", and which maintains the confusion between the flowering of individualities and the retreat into individualism. Because ideas that are critical of the established order have also suffered 25 years of defeats in the face of liberal counter-reforms. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been the beginning of a recovery: 1994 with the Zapatista insurrection in Mexico, 1995 with the great strikes in France, then 1999, Seattle and the Social Forums. In 12 years, the landscape has changed fairly quickly, but there is still a long way to go. Personally, I did not think that there would be the start of a comeback so quickly, after the extent of the shock of the neo-liberal offensive. We "start again by the middle", as Deleuze always put it. And it is still only a beginning...

## NOTES

[1] Doctor in Political Science, Franck Gaudichaud is a member of the alternative information collective Rebelión ([www.rebelion.org](http://www.rebelion.org)) and of the editorial board of the review Dissidences ([www.dissidences.net](http://www.dissidences.net)).

[2] Alain Badiou is a contemporary French philosopher, writer and playwright. He is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris VIII and the International College of Philosophy. Very influenced by Louis Althusser, he was also a Maoist militant. He still leads a small post-Maoist political organisation, "the Political Organisation", which is active in support of the struggles of undocumented migrants.

[3] Contemporary Slovenian philosopher and essay writer, close to the global justice movement. An iconoclastic writer, he applies psychoanalysis to the problems of contemporary society and criticises the evolutions of capitalism. He is in particular the author of *A Plea For Intolerance* (2004).

[4] US politician, Assistant Secretary of State for Defence between 2001 and 2005 in the government of George W. Bush and president of the World Bank since June 1, 2005.

[5] Olivier Besancenot is a spokesperson for the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and the organisation's candidate in this year's presidential elections, as he was already in 2002. In the first round of the election on April 22 he obtained 4.11 per cent, nearly 1.6 million votes.

[6] Henri Lefebvre (born 1901, died 1991) was a very prolific French Marxist intellectual. Active in the Resistance during the Second World War, he became in 1962 a university professor of sociology. His ideas influenced not only the development of philosophy, but also sociology, geography, political science and literary criticism.

[7] Althusser Louis Althusser (born in Algeria, 1918, died 1990) was a French Marxist philosopher. He is regarded as a major figure in the structuralist current of the 1960s, along with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. According to him, it was necessary to return to a scientific and deterministic reading of Marxist theory, which he explained in his book *For Marx* (1965).

[8] Name given to France because of the hexagonal shape of the country.

[9] In France, to be able to be a candidate in the presidential election, it is necessary “to be sponsored” by 500 elected representatives (members of parliament, regional and county councillors, mayors), who give an administrative authorisation to the candidate so that he or she can stand. This law makes it possible for the big institutional parties to put pressure on the mayors and other elected representatives, so that they do not sponsor candidates coming from parties that contest the established order, and particularly those of the anti-capitalist Left.

[10] Patrice de MacMahon: marshal of the Second Empire and president of the Third French Republic from 1873 to 1879; Georges Clemenceau: French politician and journalist (1841-1929), he was called the “first cop of France” for his repressive methods as President of the Council (prime minister)

[11] The Future Lasts a Long Time is the title of an autobiographical work by the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (Paris, Stock, 1992).

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## **P.S.**

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\* Daniel Bensaïd is one of France’s most prominent Marxist philosophers and has written extensively. He is a leading member of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).