

INTERVIEW

# Parliamentary elections (France): A Mélenchon Government Would Shake the Foundations of Neoliberalism in Europe

Monday 13 June 2022, by [KOUVELAKIS Stathis](#), [PALOMBARINI Stefano](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2022).

**Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing coalition is neck and neck with Emmanuel Macron's party in polls for today's French parliamentary elections. The coalition's victory would shake the neoliberal order in France and across the European Union.**

For France's left-wing leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon, today's parliamentary elections are a "third round" of the presidential election held earlier this spring. Fresh from his 22 percent score in April's presidential contest, he is hoping that the June 12 and 19 rounds of the legislative elections will hand his allies a majority in parliament — allowing him to become prime minister and defy the neoliberal course set by President Emmanuel Macron. Mélenchon heads into the contest as the lynchpin of a broad left coalition, [Nouvelle Union Populaire écologique et sociale](#) (NUPES), which enjoys a narrow lead in most polls, albeit not in seat projections. The alliance brings the Greens, Socialists, and Communists behind the core planks of his own France Insoumise movement's program, [L'Avenir en commun](#) (The Future in Common), promising a radical transformation of the French economy. Its key rivals are Macron's recently rebadged Ensemble vehicle and, further behind in polling, the far right, led by Marine Le Pen.

Stefano Palombarini is author, together with Bruno Amable, of [The Last Neoliberal](#), an analysis of how Macron reshaped the French political map in recent years by uniting free-marketeer, pro-EU elements of both the center left and center right. He spoke to Stathis Kouvelakis about the radicalization on the Left, the continuing collapse of the traditional parties, and what change a Mélenchon government could bring to France and Europe.

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## STATHIS KOUVELAKIS

What does Emmanuel Macron's victory in the presidential election tell us? Has the "bourgeois bloc" won, and what are the prospects for further neoliberal reforms?

## STEFANO PALOMBARINI

He didn't just have the same social base, or the same strategy, as five years ago. The strategic continuity lies in the centrality of the European question and neoliberal reform. The other element is the social bloc behind him, essentially based in the middle and upper classes. If you look at the

electoral data for the first round, the higher you go up the income ladder, the bigger Macron's vote. So this remains a bourgeois bloc.

But what changed is that Macron anticipated the crisis on the traditional right. He made a good analysis — the same one we made in our book — namely, that the failure of the Right in 2017 didn't just owe to its candidate's scandals or similar contingent factors. There was a real structural crisis of the right-wing bloc.

Throughout his first term, Macron's strategy sought to win this right-wing electorate and thus broaden his own base, which remains a minority in the country. In short, the "progressive" hues of 2017 — reminiscent of the early Tony Blair — were completely forgotten. Instead, we had the rehabilitation of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the displays of affinity with [anti-immigration politician] Philippe de Villiers, and [other messages](#) of this type. More concretely, we had attacks on civil liberties and the violent repression of social movements.

This repressive policy had material effects, but it was also designed to send ideological signals. Certainly, from the administration's perspective, a social movement like the [gilets jaunes](#) had to be held in check; but there was a deliberate spectacularization of its violent repression. Similarly, tearing down the migrants' tents and evacuating the Place de la République sent a message to the right-wing electorate, as did the campaign against "[Islamism](#)" and the [maintenance of the ministers](#) who pursued it, like Jean-Michel Blanquer, Frédérique Vidal, and Gérald Darmanin.

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*Macron anticipated the crisis on the traditional right.*

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This turn has produced a recomposition of Macron's social bloc, with a breakthrough among the right-wing electorate. In 2017, half of [conservative] François Fillon's voters were pensioners, and in 2022, they were 43 percent of Macron's base. Five years ago, half of the bourgeois bloc behind Macron were former Parti Socialiste voters, and one might think a president who willfully followed a right-wing strategy would lose some of this electorate. In the end, he lost some but not many.

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## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

This left-wing electorate he retained is mainly wealthier ex-Socialist voters. But even if retreating a bit, he also has a small but hardly negligible blue- and white-collar base, indeed bigger than the traditional right had in 2017. This element is also important to his success. What explains why this 16 to 18 percent of workers and employees continue to support him?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

While it mainly comes from bourgeois categories, it's true that his electorate also has an element from the popular classes. One hypothesis would be to say that this electorate lives in a virtual realm where Macron is the continuator of socialist history, representing progress against the forces of the

Right.

Another reading — I think a better-founded one — would read this as a sign of a possible Italian-style evolution of French politics. That would mean the Left collapsing for good, and the crisis of the right-wing bloc deepening, thus producing a bipolar system, with the bourgeois bloc facing an alternative bloc based on the far right.

Moreover, there were specific factors in this campaign linked to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It's typical to see a certain rallying around the incumbent government faced with such crises.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

In your book, you analyze the far right's efforts to detach itself from neoliberalism during the 1990s, especially after Marine Le Pen took over the leadership. Yet she has also changed since 2017. There is no longer any talk of leaving the euro. She says that she wants to pay off the entire French debt. She abandoned talk of undoing the Hollande administration's labor reforms, or of restoring pensions at sixty, and her cost of living measures were nothing beyond lowering social security contributions and certain taxes which don't concern the working classes. What explains this — and what has the effect been on Rassemblement National candidates.

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

Yes, the comparison of the programs in 2017 and 2022 suggests a turning point. In reality, the Front National began turning toward neoliberalism already during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency. In 2017, Frexit from the euro was already out of the question. Le Pen's strategy is symmetrical to Macron's. Both start from the collapse of the traditional right. That was Le Pen's basis for pursuing the normalization of the far right, with the abandonment of themes that signal a break with the existing order. This, too, is aimed at seducing part of the traditional right-wing electorate.

This shift also corresponds to what I just described — a completed neoliberal system, without any opposition to the dominant institutional forms. We would then have an American-style system, in which the "Left" are those who favor the free movement of goods and people, and the "Right" are those who are more associated with identitarian themes, possibly with a protectionist component. Even insofar as this "Left" and "Right" exchange power, neither would fundamentally question the neoliberal institutional architecture.

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*From Macron and Le Pen's standpoint, they must first together prevail in the battle over the structure of the political conflict before they can really fight each other.*

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This is Le Pen's perspective, and we can also see it in the campaign for the parliamentary elections (June 12 and 19). Macron did everything possible during his term to designate the far right as his legitimate adversary, and Le Pen is doing the same today, indicating that it is only normal that the newly elected president should have a majority in parliament that will allow him to govern. The two strategies validate each other and push in the same direction.

The right-wing bloc that has dominated French political life since 1945 was an alliance with both bourgeois and popular components. It has given way to two almost complementary blocs: on the one hand, a bourgeois bloc, Macron's, that also includes a minority popular component, and, on the other, a far-right bloc gathered around Marine Le Pen, which has a much stronger popular component.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

If Le Pen has abandoned all opposition to neoliberalism and bets on Macron's success in the parliamentary elections, can't this also be read as a reaction to the rise of the Left around Mélenchon and to the creation of the NUPES, the president's main contender in the parliamentary elections? Isn't this a sort of nod to Macron: "Listen, we have the same enemy, but it's up to you to beat him"?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

In an interview with *Positions* in March 2021, I said that if there is still a "republican cordon sanitaire" in France, it is directed against Mélenchon and the radical left, not the far-right. We can see that Macron's enemy number one is not Le Pen but the Left, and that her number-one enemy is not Macron but the Left. The media system works in the same way: any event, even the most insignificant, will be exploited to the full against the Left.

What explains this? It's that there is a conflict between, on the one hand, the Left that is for a rupture with neoliberalism and, on the other, Le Pen, Macron, and all the supporters of neoliberalism. As in any crisis situation, this conflict isn't just between different public-policy proposals within a given playing field but over the very definition of that field.

There is indeed an objective common interest between Le Pen and Macron, which is to move toward a system structured around a "pole of progress" and a "pole of identity," both operating within a shared institutional framework. What hinders this dynamic is the presence of a left around France Insoumise that seeks a rupture with this system. While Mélenchon did not manage to qualify for the second round of the presidential elections, his results in 2012, 2017, and 2022 show a rise in this left's power. It is therefore a countertrend to the neoliberal transition, and a real problem for those who would like to see that transition succeed.

From Macron and Le Pen's standpoint, they must first together prevail in the battle over the structure of the political conflict before they can really fight each other. And their common opponent in this struggle is the Left.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

Isn't the formation of NUPES already seriously disrupting this scenario? The new fact is that it's now obvious that the Left is the common enemy of both Macron and Le Pen. And it is a rising force, grouped around its main actor, Mélenchon and France Insoumise, which is challenging the neoliberal framework to the point of fighting for a majority in the parliamentary elections. Independently of its success, are we not close to a reconfiguration of political conflict — and perhaps a return to something more like the classic right-left conflict?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

I think it's an open question. Many people saw three distinct poles of more or less equal weight emerge in the presidential election. My analysis consists of saying that, in the long term, only two will remain. There's two possibilities. One is the one I outlined earlier: the Left disappears. But if it

consolidates itself, then the positions of Macron and Le Pen will become even closer. We would then have a neoliberal bloc with more or less identitarian hues — though looking at the likes of Blanquer and Darmanin, why couldn't they be ministers for a president Le Pen?

If the Left seeking a rupture with neoliberalism establishes itself, we will return to a right-left divide, but in the sense of a neoliberal right facing a left that proposes something other than neoliberalism. In this sense, Mélenchon and France Insoumise have played their hand very well in proposing an alliance of the Left. Why? Because if the other scenario were to prevail, the Socialists and Greens would become satellites of the bourgeois “progressive” bloc. But since the situation is open, you can still draw them away from the Macron camp.

Yet we don't know whether these parties take this for an alliance with real strategic and programmatic ambitions or just a tactical agreement to steady the ship after their recent setbacks. If it's just about electing a few MPs, that'll become clear soon enough. Will the Socialists and Greens — and even the Communists — commit to joint parliamentary work? Is the NUPES program a real basis for governing or even for leading a common opposition to Macron? Or, once elected, will everyone go their own way?

### **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

You have suggested that the term “anti-neoliberal left” does not satisfy you, that this Left proposes something other than neoliberalism. But what is this “something else”? And what does the dominant force on the Left propose?

### **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

I said that France Insoumise and the Union Populaire cannot be described simply as an “anti-neoliberal left.” They have a structured program like rarely seen before in French political history, or even beyond France, which reflects a great deal of work. I think that an effective reaction to the neoliberal course requires such work, because the issue is not just slowing it down or weakening it but making another path conceivable and possible.

The Union Populaire's program starts from an observation. Whether in terms of production, workers' working and living conditions, or the ecological balance and the future of the planet, the neoliberal machine that has been running for almost half a century is leading us to an unsustainable situation. Let's take the example of the water cycle, which Mélenchon often mentions. Some people found this odd, as the subject seems far removed from the immediate concerns of the French. But the reality is that from this summer onward, half of France will experience drought. There are many such examples.

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*Mélenchon and France Insoumise's great merit is that they have proposed a credible alternative to the neoliberal trajectory.*

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Today there is widespread dissatisfaction and danger, but not yet a political awareness that a cycle is coming to an end. This still has to be built and this process is based on understanding the origin of very concrete problems. So yes, things are going to the wall, but there is a different path that will

allow us to avoid it and we will not get out of it through adaptations of neoliberalism.

This is why I speak of “rupture.” Thirty or forty years ago, we could have thought it possible to solve the environmental issue by driving less quickly, by lowering the heating a little, perhaps even by sending fewer emails, as the new minister for the energy transition is proposing. Such measures can’t change the course we’re on. The effects of climate change are irreversible without a radical change in the overall organization of production relations, consumption patterns, and in our relationship with nature. I think Mélenchon and France Insoumise’s great merit is that they have proposed a credible alternative to the neoliberal trajectory. An alternative not only in the sense of the social interests it defends but also, as Mélenchon would say, of the general human interest.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

Undoubtedly, but there are also powerful interests that oppose this change of course, which raises the question of what this rupture actually means. Is it one that leads us to something qualitatively different from capitalism? In this case, can we conceive the *Avenir en commun* program as what a certain tradition calls a “transitional” program?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

As it stands today — and I’m talking about what exists, not about what I would wish for — this is not a program for leaving capitalism behind. It’s a program that *could* possibly lead to an exit from capitalism, but not necessarily. It’s a set of radical measures, a break with the past, which must be taken as a matter of urgency; at the same time, integrating a certain number of imperatives into a government program obliges us to rethink productive relations and the overall way society is organized. The program is there to say, If tomorrow we are called upon to govern, this is what we will do. But what we’ll do tomorrow pushes us toward a collective reflection that could lead to an exit from capitalism. The best label we can put on this program is, indeed, a transition program. Toward what? That depends on the people who commit themselves to making it happen.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

Let’s talk more specifically about the social class interests that oppose this “general human interest,” and which are also human in the sense that the ruling classes are also made up of human beings, not robots or machines. There is an institutional form that crystallizes them at the continental level — i.e., the European Union. One strong point of your analysis is showing that European integration is not only a project that has made it possible to coordinate and lock in neoliberal policies from above. It has also helped to legitimize them and to create the conditions for their implementation. Neoliberal reform has thus been presented as a modern Europeanist project overcoming the Old World of nation-states and radically reordering the political system. Having become a pillar of this project, social democracy led to the disintegration of the Left’s social bloc and, in France, part of it drifting toward the bourgeois bloc.

This explains why breaking with this European project was a condition for rebuilding something on the Left. In your book, you outlined what was then emerging around Mélenchon, saying that he occupied a position clearly hostile to the European project. But we get the impression that between 2017 and 2022, some of the elements of rupture have been softened or hollowed out entirely. This is particularly the case for plan B, which could go as far as leaving the euro and the European integration framework, though there’s still the idea that the treaties are a blockage to the application of the program, and the principle of disobeying them. How do you see the evolution of Mélenchon and France Insoumise regarding the EU?

## STEFANO PALOMBARINI

Your question has several aspects. Let's start with Mélenchon's position. If we compare the 2022 campaign with 2017's, the European question is presented differently. It is no longer a question of plan A and plan B. But if we look at what Mélenchon said this time around, it comes down to this: "I will go to Europe to say, we have a program, we will apply it. If you don't agree, we'll apply it anyway." And he stopped there. But if the others don't agree, what do we do? Mélenchon's answer was: "You'll see they can't oppose it. We're France. They can't kick us out of the EU." But it was clear to me that if they said, "Either you respect the treaties or you leave," well, we'll leave. This remained in the background in 2022. In 2017, it was more explicit, but I don't see how things could be otherwise when we know Mélenchon's political positioning.

The second aspect: The EU in 2022 remains a profoundly neoliberal construct, but the weight of constraints on national policies is not the same as in 2017. Over the last five years, there has been a widespread debate about non-respect of the treaties, including, in a way, by the European Central Bank (ECB). The ECB now finances public debt by buying up securities on the secondary market, which is a departure from its mission as defined in the treaties. This lesser degree of constraint also explains why the subject is less divisive than five years ago.

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*Macron's victory has somehow made NUPES' unity possible.*

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The third aspect is NUPES, which is an alliance between parties with opposite positions on this issue. France Insoumise, throughout its existence, has shown great coherence. It is in opposition to the logic of European construction; it has not deviated from that. The Socialists and Greens are on the other, Europeanist side; they have their internal divisions, but overall don't want to hear about breaking with the EU.

Paradoxically, Macron's victory has somehow made NUPES' unity possible; because under his presidency, a series of questions, such as euro exit, cannot be asked. The constitution gives the president the power to negotiate and ratify international treaties, which implies that fault lines that run through NUPES are overcome by the fact that Macron is president.

## STATHIS KOUVELAKIS

To play devil's advocate, though: the 2017 France Insoumise program envisaged a de facto exit from the euro, not a formal exit from the treaties that would have required the president's signature. This would involve taking over the Bank of France, and therefore taking control of the money supply, if the ECB reacted as it did with Greece — that is to say by cutting off the supply of liquidity.

Of course, one can say that France is not Greece, that the budgetary policies of the last few years have been relaxed, notably because of the COVID crisis. There is also a turnaround visible in the ECB's policy of indirectly buying up public debt, which was not the case between 2010 and 2015. We are no longer in the strict austerity of that period, at least not immediately. Nevertheless, the treaties prevent the application of fundamental measures in the program, like the constitution of public poles or public monopolies in strategic sectors, because they contravene the principle of free and undistorted competition.

What will be the European authorities' reaction? The policy of fines, for example, is an extremely weak means of constraint and unlikely to be effectively applied. On the other hand, the ECB has real means of action. It operates on the interbank market, and can strangle any banking system in Europe, if it decides to, by declaring that collateral from that country's banks will no longer be accepted. Even more so if, as the NUPES program foresees, the generalist banks are nationalized, even if the Socialists and the Greens don't agree with that. Do you think that the ECB, the battering ram of the European neoliberal project, will stand idly by faced with a left-wing government in France that pursues a real break with neoliberalism? And what means of defense are there?

**STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

The ECB can simply raise interest rates whenever it wants, so it does have powerful means of action. Would it? I am not sure, but it is possible. We're entering uncharted territory, because the European landscape would be profoundly altered by a victory for the Left in France. My view is that the neoliberal content of the European project is the result of the strategies of national governments. I don't think that the European institutions are genetically and irrevocably neoliberal. They are neoliberal because the governments of the major European countries, especially France and Germany, are. And this also applies to the ECB.

**STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

Which is nevertheless independent of any political control.

**STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

The ECB is independent, of course. The status it has been granted always existed in Germany, and later in Italy, in France, etc.

**STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

Indeed, the ordoliberal model has been exported to the European level, and thus become a structural fact. Once in place, these institutions have a relative autonomy, as they say, with its own effectiveness.

**STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

I tend to think that this autonomy is very relative. The European Commission and the ECB are capable of integrating and reacting very quickly to a change in the political balance. Obviously, this depends above all on the order in which these balances are altered. France has a lot of weight in such a process. This is something we say in our analyses. There is no neoliberal logic being imposed on France from an external, quasi-autonomous authority. What comes to us from Europe is partly what French leaders have encouraged.

**STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

OK, but there is no abstract neoliberal logic hovering over the real world. There are class logics, conflicting social interests. The French ruling class will surely not fail to react if a policy of rupture with neoliberalism is pursued. We will see capital flight, investment strikes, reactions from employers, reactions from the financial system. The European institutions serve these interests, not some abstract logic. Are you telling me that the interests of the ruling classes can be called into question without provoking a reaction inside and outside the country, where the social interests have their power bases?



## STEFANO PALOMBARINI

Not at all, of course there would be a reaction. But if a left-wing government formed in France, it would also profoundly change the European balance. It would be mistaken to think of it on the pattern of Greece, for example — i.e., as one country trying to deviate from the trajectory imposed on it and faced with a monolithic bloc determined to pursue a neoliberal strategy. This bloc responds to political balances. So I agree, there would be a reaction. But to grasp it, we also have to think about the link between a realignment in France and the political balance of Europe. This doesn't mean ruling out a fierce reaction from the economically dominant classes. Simply, when I speak of uncharted territory, it is because the countries that really count in the European dynamic have been following a neoliberal trajectory for decades. If France turned away from this, we would be in an unprecedented situation. The strategy of the European institutions — the ECB, for example — would necessarily incorporate this novelty. Perhaps the result would still be to go to war, but this is not a certainty.

## STATHIS KOUVELAKIS

Since we cannot rule out such a reaction, what do we do if it does happen?

## STEFANO PALOMBARINI

There's a range of responses, from total renunciation to breaking away entirely if faced with a response like the one [Alexis Tsipras](#) got. As I said, with Macron as president, a rupture scenario in Europe would also involve a major political crisis in France. But between renunciation and exit, there are intermediate possibilities that did not exist for Greece and that rely on France's capacity to negotiate compromises at the European level.

Where would we stand on this spectrum? I have no idea. Any compromise obviously implies a degree of renunciation, which depends on the power balance that the French government can establish, possibly with the support of other European forces. Here again, I am perhaps less pessimistic than you. A NUPES victory would have the effect of awakening a European left which, it must be admitted, is in a very bad state. Another factor relates to what I said earlier. Is the NUPES really a union around a programmatic and strategic axis, including, even, as the program explicitly states, disobeying the treaties? This position also implies being prepared for a conflict.

## STATHIS KOUVELAKIS

Don't you think that it also depends on the degree of popular pressure?

## STEFANO PALOMBARINI

Yes, certainly. But only in part, because as we saw in Greece, there can be betrayals even when there is great popular pressure. This does not only concern European issues. You were right to point out that when we talk about the general human interest — an expression that I understand in the sense of avoiding us all going to the wall — that doesn't erase the very deep, very powerful conflicts of interest, including in France. French employers can strangle the French population just as much as the ECB. So there will be a time of conflict, probably in Europe, certainly in France.

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*The challenge of breaking from the neoliberal trajectory requires simultaneously a left-wing government and a strong, autonomous social movement.*

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There is no absolute guarantee against renunciations and betrayals. The means to make them less likely is to have a powerful popular movement. I'm not talking about a movement that supports the government but a movement with real autonomy and critical distance that can react vigorously when things don't go in the right direction. Historically, when the Left wins, there is a certain delegation — the social movement loses momentum because it is imagined that the government will take care of responding to popular interests. But the challenge of breaking from the neoliberal trajectory requires simultaneously a left-wing government and a strong, autonomous social movement.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

However the elections may turn out, it's clear that a new period is beginning for the Left in France, and especially for what Pierre Bourdieu called the "left of the left." How do you see the question of giving structure to this left, making it a force rooted in society, able to build hegemony over the long term?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

What is certain is that the Left will either be a left of rupture or it will not be. Now there is no more possible playing along with neoliberalism. The left that did play along implemented neoliberal reforms while also trying to mitigate the negative social consequences. One aspect was the timing: the reforms that would directly cause the most suffering were left until last. Of course, financial liberalization or free-trade treaties, which came first, were part of a strategy which would sooner or later also involve an assault on the employment relationship and social protection. But it's also thanks to the Socialists that workers who started working forty years ago were able to partly escape the fallout of the flexibilization of labor relations. This made sense of that left's existence. Now we are at the end of this path; and to complete the transition to the neoliberal model, the employment relationship and social protections have to be reformed. So the political space for [that kind of left](#) no longer exists.

The fact that the left flank of the bourgeoisie, which was the social pillar of that kind of left, went to Macron in 2017. It reflects the disappearance of this political space. During his first term, this class fraction was subjected to a real test of its resistance. Nothing that might have aroused a reaction was spared: Macron's repression of social movements, attacks on civil liberties, top-down rule, contempt for parliament, the decisions taken by his defense council in a totally undemocratic way. . . . I'm not talking about social and economic measures but the themes to which this "bourgeois left" is supposedly attached. Despite all this, 80 percent of them remained loyal to Macron. This demonstrates a rather acute class consciousness: the formerly "left" bourgeoisie, which wanted neoliberal reform but in a compromise with a fraction of the working classes, knows that this possibility has disappeared. The efforts by the likes of [François Hollande](#) and [Anne Hidalgo](#) to revive such a left were all in vain.

So how can the Left of rupture offer a viable and lasting alternative? This raises the question of the party form. Even if we can be very critical of the internal organization of France Insoumise, it was surely an unusual construction. There was tight centralization in the group around Mélenchon, but also a degree of openness which accompanied this centralization of decision-making, which I have never seen elsewhere in politics.

We see this openness, for example, in the candidates for the parliamentary elections, who are far

from limited to France Insoumise cadre. We can also see it in the development of the program *L'avenir en commun*. In a classic party, to contribute to the program you have to get involved in the local sections, get on the committees, have congress delegates, present motions, etc. But the program of France Insoumise, and then of Union Populaire, is very open: it is the product of a real collective construction; it did not come from the top down, even if there were some such decisions imposed, it's true, for example on the European question.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

No doubt, but there is no space that allows ordinary militants to participate actively in the discussion.

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

I can talk about my concrete experience during the presidential campaign, as a member of the Union Populaire's parliament (PUP). This is not a classic democratic structure: I was co-opted into it, like all the others. Half of the PUP is made up of people who are not involved in France Insoumise, as in my case. There are trade unionists, teachers, labor inspectors, figures from associations, etc., whereas an election process would inevitably have led to an assembly of militants. So there is certainly a very strong degree of centralism, an undemocratic one if you like — but which also allows a greater degree of openness than in more traditional formations.

To stay with my experience, with a few members of the PUP, we could freely set up a group of about fifteen economists whose contributions were widely disseminated by France Insoumise and had an impact on the campaign. I'm not defending this structure per se, I'm simply saying that compared to a party with a central committee, and a pyramid of organization, a series of steps are made more quickly and, in a sense, more freely.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

OK, but you're talking about a very high level of expert influence, which also existed, albeit in different forms, in the classic parties. My experience as a simple member of the France insoumise action group in my neighborhood, along with dozens of other members, is that we didn't have the slightest grasp on this development. Isn't this a problem?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

I'd emphasize the existence of two somehow contradictory but also connected aspects. There is a hard core, with no democratic structure around it, and, as a result of this centralization, a possibility of openness.

I don't want to compare my experience as a university lecturer in PUP to that of the "ordinary member of an action group" you speak of.

But my personal case is perhaps of more general interest. I have only met Mélenchon once in my life, more than a year ago. I have never exchanged an email, a phone call, or even a text message with him. When we met, we chatted mostly about Latin America, a little about Italy, not much about France. But he read our book, and, at the end of our meeting, he said to his team, "Let's buy twenty-five copies, and everyone should read it."

This kind of power can obviously be exercised in different directions — that's both the advantage and the danger. But when we see, for example, how Mélenchon and his movement advanced over the last decade in their understanding of ecology, we understand that it's the same mechanism

that's at work. This issue has been deeply integrated into the program at a speed that a traditional party could never have followed.

## **STATHIS KOUVELAKIS**

Is such an operation sustainable in the long term?

## **STEFANO PALOMBARINI**

No, at least if we reason in terms of the rising strength of a left that pursues a rupture with neoliberalism. Let me explain. In a context of deep crisis, in which political structures are very mobile because there are social blocs that collapse and others that are formed, the speed that I mentioned is a factor that has something to do with the fact that, in France, we have a left of rupture that scores 22 percent — and that does not exist elsewhere. On the other hand, I think that France Insoumise's particular organizational form is ill-suited to a movement that aims to have a significant institutional presence, whether nationally or locally. This type of structure, with its flaws and advantages, is a kind of pirate ship. It can quickly make an analysis of the situation and also quickly choose the right trajectory. Let's compare it with the Communist Party, for example. The latter has the advantage of being much more democratic: it holds congresses, there are votes, etc. But it has the disadvantage of enormous inertia, and we see the results. Having said that, if the parliamentary elections go as we hope, this type of centralized logic will struggle to reflect the richness and diversity of a movement which is becoming institutionalized and which will perhaps elect a hundred-odd MPs.

So how should it be organized? For one, we need to increase the degree of democracy in decision-making. For anyone who wants to get involved in a movement, it's clearly fundamental that their views should be taken into consideration. But we also need to safeguard this capacity to react quickly, because the crisis context we are experiencing will continue in the coming years, and probably even intensify.

What about the old party structure, to which I myself am greatly attached? There are aspects of the party form that we absolutely must recover — for example, having a local, territorial presence. We need local sections. When we look at the results of the first round of the presidential elections, we see that Mélenchon is much stronger in urban areas than in rural areas and small towns. We can do politics through social networks, the internet, and YouTube channels, but if we limit ourselves to this, we miss out on a whole part of the population not connected to these media.

So we need more democracy and more territorial presence, but also to devise something that allows us to quickly adapt our strategy to our analysis of the situation. The situation is going to change rapidly on all fronts. We will face a series of crises, not just political crises in the strict sense. If we have to wait for the next congress, scheduled for three years from now, present a motion and then hope it wins and then integrates parts of the losing motions, that won't work. I say that in full awareness that we need to increase the degree of democracy. I don't have the right formula, but we will probably have to be inventive.

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## **P.S.**

- Jacobin. 06.12.2022:

<https://jacobin.com/2022/06/nupes-melenchon-government-european-union-neoliberalism-legislative-election>

- Adapted from [Contretemps](#).
- Stefano Palombarini is assistant professor of economics at the University of Paris VIII. He is co-author, together with Bruno Amable, of *The Last Neoliberal: Macron and the Origins of France's Political Crisis*.

Stathis Kouvelakis teaches political theory at King's College London. He formerly served on the central committee of Syriza.