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IDÉES OPINION

Snap elections (France): Macron's slanderous and historically ignorant attack on the New Popular Front

Monday 24 June 2024, by [PLENEL Edwy](#) (Date first published: 16 June 2024).

Having called a snap election, the French president quickly nailed his colours to the mast. The far-right Rassemblement National is preferable to the leftwing New Popular Front: that is the underlying message of Emmanuel Macron's slanderous attack - supported by his allies - against the union of the Left and the greens, an alliance that has been dubbed shameless and been accused of anti-Semitism. But in his criticism of this new front the French head of state is displaying both an ignorance of history and duplicity, writes Mediapart co-founder Edwy Plenel in this op-ed article.

"It would be hard to exaggerate the anxiety that the advent of the Popular Front in 1936 caused among the ranks of the affluent classes, even among the most ostensibly free-thinking men." Rereading them today, at a time when another Popular Front has formed ahead of the Parliamentary elections of June 30th and July 7th, these lines from the great historian and future Resistance martyr Marc Bloch inevitably make one think of the violent counter-attack currently being unleashed against this freshly-formed leftwing alliance. For the presidential camp has reserved all its attacks for the New Popular Front, including the lowest blows, while sparing the far right and downplaying its danger.

[Marc Bloch](#) penned these words in '*L'Étrange défaite*', ('[Strange Defeat](#)'), which was written during the summer of 1940 at the start of the [Pétainist](#) collaboration with the Nazi occupier. The 'Vichy France' regime, as it became known, was at the time backed by the majority of the country's economic and political elites. Eventually published in 1946, two years after the death of its author - Bloch was a clandestine Resistance fighter in Lyon who was arrested, tortured, and then shot on June 16th 1944 - this posthumous work is a painful and clear-sighted examination of conscience by a patriotic Frenchman faced with what was a national humiliation.

Popular Front prime minister Léon Blum in 1936 at a peace rally in Saint-Cloud, Paris. © AFP

Its author was a republican as stubborn as he was moderate, to the point that he spared little in his criticism of the Popular Front leaders themselves who, he says, "fell without glory". What he writes about the panic-stricken fear of the dominant classes and the ruling elites in the face of the Popular Front, which led to Léon Blum becoming the head of government, is even stronger. "Anxious, discontented, embittered", this bourgeoisie had, asserts Marc Bloch, "ceased to be happy", and showed its disdain for the "ordinary voter" and, above all, its social arrogance.

He describes the panic of the ruling elites confronted by "crowds with raised fists, demanding and

somewhat aggressive, whose violence betrayed great innocence” and criticises its “inexcusable” attitude. Bloch also recalls how these elites condemned popular protests and those protests’ most symbolic achievement, [paid holidays](#) - when the mass of workers finally got access to some leisure time. “They mocked, they boycotted,” he writes, summing up the disdain of those privileged elites who, having comfortable and secure lives, believed they “belong to a class destined to play a leading role in the nation”.

In contrast, the historian praises the sense of freshness in the popular uprising that revived and renewed the founding hopes of the original Republic. “Whatever the faults of the leaders may have been,” writes Marc Bloch, “there was, in this desire of the masses for a more just world, a touching honesty, one which it would have been hard to imagine anyone with their heart in the right place being insensitive to. [...] In the Popular Front - the real one, that of the crowds, not of the politicians - there lived once more something of the Champ de Mars, of the bright sunshine of July 14th 1790 [*editor’s note, a reference to the [Fête de la Fédération](#) or Festival of the Federation, a celebration held one year after the beginning of the French Revolution*].”

Meanwhile, recalling this sensitive history, which is as vivid as a memory of a moment of high danger - Marc Bloch was fond of saying that history only exists in the present - serves to emphasise the vile nature of the accusations made by Macron’s camp since the president’s [chaotic dissolution](#) of the National Assembly. These accusations have sought to discredit the miraculous union of social and environmental groupings on the Left. “If there’s one person who must be turning in his grave today, it’s Léon Blum,” Emmanuel Macron declared during his [press conference](#) on June 12th, a refrain echoed by all shades of the reactionary front against its opponent, the New Popular Front (NFP), which has been dismissed as a “shameless alliance” with a “far left guilty of anti-Semitism”.

We must fight against all those who spread hatred against Jews.

The New Popular Front manifesto, June 2024

In his [blog on Mediapart Club](#) Léon Blum’s great-grandson, Antoine Malamoud, has already dismantled this argument in a response to former prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve, one of those figures who says that the various groups on the Left are “irreconcilable”, figures who are even more lost and isolated than ever before, now that former president François Hollande, socialist Raphaël Glucksmann, and even Aurélien Rousseau (who was once a communist) have joined the reconciled alliance. Since then, the New Popular Front’s manifesto ([see here in French](#)) has removed any ambiguity, if ambiguities there were, about the firm and clear commitment of its members against anti-Semitism. “We must fight against all those who spread hatred against Jews,” it states.

Emmanuel Macron’s manipulation of the past displays both historical ignorance and duplicity. Compared to the current divisions and quarrels within the Left, notably between the Socialist Party (PS) and La France Insoumise (LFI), the rift that separated the [SFIO](#) (the French Section of the Workers’ International), the PS’s predecessor, from the [PC-SFIC](#) (the French Section of the Communist International), was immeasurably wider. This was exactly where Léon Blum’s greatness

lay; aware of the immense peril posed by the far right, he sought and achieved their rapprochement to overcome the violent rift that had been caused when the two groups split at the [Tours Congress](#) of 1920. This was despite the fact that Stalin's Soviet Union, which controlled the French Communist Party (PCF), was by now accelerating along its path towards totalitarianism with three major [Moscow show trials](#) taking place from August 1936 to March 1938, which were a deceitful showcase for bloody purges.

Until the unifying turnaround of 1934, which ultimately led to the Blum government of 1936, the sectarian line of Stalinist communism - known as "class against class" - had branded "social traitors" and other "social fascists" as their worst enemies, fostering fratricidal violence to the detriment of the common fight against Nazism and fascism. It was the grassroots militants who led the calls to the parties' leaderships for unity in the aftermath of the far-right demonstration in Paris on February 6th 1934, a year after Hitler's rise to power in Berlin. Léon Blum would later recount in his memoirs the unexpected coming together of the socialist and communist marches on February 12th 1934, during the protests against that earlier violent episode.

"We advanced," he later wrote in 1947, reliving this unlikely event. "The gap between the two front lines diminished by the second and the same anxiety gripped us all. Would the encounter be a collision? [...] I had taken too personal a part in this day for my sense of responsibility not to express itself in deep emotion. The two front lines were now face to face and from all sides the same cries burst forth. The same songs were taken up in unison. Hands were shaken. The front lines merged. It was not a collision, it was fraternisation."

As for anti-Semitism, no social environment has ever been immune to it, the world of work no more than any other, as evidenced by the slow republican awakening in defence of Captain Dreyfus at the end of the 19th century, in which the young Léon Blum played an active part. The French Communist Party (PCF) itself did not shy away from exploiting the conspiratorial (and anti-capitalist) myth of "Jewish money" in the 1930s, with its leader Maurice Thorez readily attacking Léon Blum on this vile basis, depicting him as an "intimate of the greatest cosmopolitan financiers", a "vile lackey of City bankers", whose offices were "at the heart of the Sentier, the business district, the modern temple of the Golden Calf".

Nowadays, nothing so disgraceful can be attributed to any of the groups that make up the New Popular Front, even though the Left's underestimation of the fight against the resurgence of anti-Semitism and the [mistakes](#) made, out of lack of sensitivity or ignorance, by the LFI's founder and past presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, have been [noted](#). And, more particularly, given the context of the pogrom-like massacres of October 7th and the genocidal war in Gaza, this [use of anti-Semitism](#) as a badge of political shame serves to absolve the long-standing anti-Semitic tradition of the French far right, with the attendant risk of legitimising the notion that there is a [war of civilisations](#) between the West and the rest of the world.

Leftwing activists holding placards reading 'Ok to repeat history but not just any history' during a protest against the far right in Paris, June 15th 2024. © Valentin Izzo / Hans Lucas / Hans Lucas via AFP

By now seeing anti-Semitism as only being on the Left, Emmanuel Macron contributes to rehabilitating and making respectable political forces that are inseparable from a racist and murderous ideology that has characterised French anti-Semitism - something which has never been the case, either now or in the past, with leftwing parties. "The Jewish cabinet has been completed. [...] The Blum cabinet raises the national question. It is a debate between nationals and anti-nationals." Those are the words of Charles Maurras, the leader and theorist of the far-right [Action Française](#) at the start of the Popular Front government on June 5th 1936.

Anti-Semitism is inseparable from this insidious refrain which is typical of the far right, and still heard today; a chorus about “anti-France”, the party of the foreigner, the enemy within that is supposedly constituted by the diversity of origins and the plurality of cultures of the French people. “France for the French!”: the inventor of this slogan was the theorist of modern anti-Semitism, [Édouard Drumont](#), the author of ‘[La France Juive](#)’ (‘Jewish France’), who made it the subtitle of his newspaper [La Libre Parole](#). And it is this xenophobic furrow that the far right has always ploughed, up to the present day, with an anti-immigrant obsession which Emmanuel Macron has ended up legitimising with his recent [immigration law](#), adopted with the votes of the far-right Rassemblement National party.

The entire campaign rhetoric deployed by the Macron camp boils down to saying: “Better Rassemblement National than the Popular Front”, a sentiment reminiscent of the ruling classes of the 1930s who preferred Hitler to Blum.

In 2022 Emmanuel Macron’s interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, even signed off on this convergence with the far right in a reference he made - as symbolic as it was perverse - during the initial Parliamentary debates on that immigration legislation. Supposedly seeking to affirm that “immigration is part of France and the French”, he could find nothing better to use than a quote from [Jacques Bainville](#), one of the major figures in Action Française. It was on the day of Bainville’s funeral, on February 13th 1936, that Léon Blum was the victim of an anti-Semitic attack as he left the Chamber of Deputies at the French Parliament, amid cries of “Blum is a murderer!” and “Death to Blum!”

As for Charles Maurras, he wrote much worse about Léon Blum: “human detritus, to be treated as such”, a “man to be shot, but in the back”, a “little Carpathian, Balkan or Rhenish Jew, who arrived in a filthy caftan”, and so on, culminating in the ultimate assertion that with him “the Talmud will be the law of the new Assembly”. It was the name of this same Maurras that Emmanuel Macron, speaking at the annual dinner of the CRIF (Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France), in March 2018, said he regretted had been removed from the [book produced by the Minister of Culture](#) to commemorate important dates, events and figure in French history. The head of state argued that such a figure should not be “hidden”. And he insisted: “We must view him as part of the history of France.” Similarly, in February 2020, [speaking](#) to his party’s Members of Parliament about immigration and “[separatism](#)”, the president had no hesitation in evoking the distinction Maurras made between a person’s “legal country” and their “real country”, which is one of the populist refrains of the far right.

Just like the complicit manoeuvring of the Élysée advisers with the [media group owned by French billionaire Vincent Bolloré](#), these references are not simply some obscure attempt at [political triangulation](#) but involve [open complicity](#). Emmanuel Macron’s invocation of Léon Blum reveals the particularly [toxic nature of this presidency](#), which manages to transform living memory into a dead past. Dishonest and slanderous, the entire campaign rhetoric deployed by the Macron camp over the past week essentially says: “Better Rassemblement National than the Popular Front”, a sentiment reminiscent of the ruling classes of the 1930s who preferred Hitler to Blum.

During his press conference on June 12th, Emmanuel Macron let slip a startling confession which has been too little reported. "I've never been here to protect the political system," he declared (at 38 minutes 48 seconds [in this video](#)). Taken at face value, since it was spoken by the person who is supposed to ensure respect for the Constitution and its [institutions](#), it means that far from protecting our democratic life, the current president of the Republic is prepared to hand it over to his adversaries. We had already had a foretaste of this in an open and unguarded comment made by the president the day after the European elections and his dissolution of the National Assembly, when he was marking the commemorations at [Oradour-sur-Glane](#), the village in central France where hundreds of inhabitants were massacred by an SS Panzer Division in 1944. He [said](#) of the dissolution: "I've been preparing this for weeks, and I'm delighted. I've thrown my grenade at their legs. Now we'll see how they deal with it..."

The difference between Blum and Macron is that the former was an authentic democrat, one forged by Parliamentary life, with its inherent need for listening and compromise, but also shaped by the life of an activist in a party that was then deeply rooted in society, its trades, its professions and its working classes. When, in the summer of 1934, the Communist Party called for unity of action with the socialists for the first time, Léon Blum set out, in an article in *Le Populaire* newspaper on July 10th, what the "aim" of this "common action" would be. Faced with fascism, it would be to defend "democratic freedoms" and that "array of freedoms [*which*] are the basis of what we call democracy".

Léon Blum is here on the side of society, its sudden surges, its vibrancy and its potential. He is on the side of a movement that is inventive, which goes beyond party boundaries, their leaders and their party apparatuses, to a point where it helps them go beyond themselves, giving them enough strength and courage to overcome their sectarianism and conservatism. Unity of action and grassroots action: this is what brought the Front Populaire into our [political mythology](#), despite its limitations, the tragedy of not intervening alongside the Spanish Republicans, and its eventual failure after Blum's departure from the government.

The creation of that front was the culmination of a political relay, passing from the grassroots to the top, which went from the [Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes](#) (founded in March 1934) to the workers' strikes and factory occupations of June 1936 (which led to the [Matignon Agreements](#) that extended workers' rights and against which Blum refused to intervene, declining to succumb to the pretext of disorder, a now-common justification for the repression of popular uprisings). The process also included along the way a [huge demonstration by the Left](#) on July 14th 1935 and a unifying [trade union congress](#) in March 1936 which reunited the two branches of the CGT which had been split since 1921.

The original Popular Front thus took two years to form, whereas we have only two weeks left to prevent - through mobilisation on the ground, in the streets, in the countryside and cities, in workplaces and living spaces, and then through the power of casting a vote in the first round of voting on June 30th in favour of the New Front Populaire - the unimaginable catastrophe of seeing the far right at the head the French government. It is therefore up to all of us to stand united. At the grassroots, as in 1934-1936. Hesitation is no longer an option. We can neither dither nor divide, as Louis Aragon so aptly expressed it in his poem '*La Rose et le Réséda*': "When the wheat is under hail / Fool who stands on ceremony / Fool who thinks of his quarrels / In the middle of a common struggle..."

Edwy Plenel

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<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/190624/macrons-slanderous-and-historically-ignorant-attack-new-popular-front>

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- The original French version of this op-ed can be found [here](#).

English version by Michael Streeter