

Local elections in France, Europe and lessons - Austerity, the Hard Right and the French Election: Two Views

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Presentation:

Barely two years after assuming office François Hollande finds himself to be the most unpopular French president in history. This past Sunday his Parti socialiste suffered serious defeats in local and municipal elections as French voters either abstained or supported parties of the Right. Although the conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) was the main beneficiary of the socialists' electoral debacle, the far-right Front National led by Marine Le Pen made significant gains. Le Pen's party won thirteen mayoralities and managed to elect over 1400 councillors; this is up from zero and 60, respectively, from the previous elections. In a few cases the Front National even won over towns considered to be historic bastions of the French Left. The results are further proof that the traditional parties of the Left in Europe are willing to risk electoral defeat than to break with the policies of neoliberalism and austerity. At the same time, these latest elections have failed to result in a breakthrough for political forces positioned to the left of social democracy. Indeed, a closer look at France reveals that the Front National enjoys a momentum, which enables it to tilt the political spectrum dangerously in its favour, by focusing on questions of immigration and national identity.

Below we publish two analyses and commentaries by observers of the French elections published in the days between the first and second round of voting (March 21 and March 30). Rossana Rossana excoriates European political elites, including Italy's new Prime Minister, for the harsh austerity they mercilessly impose without regard for the inevitable social and political consequences. Annamaria Rivera outlines how racism now plays a central role in political competition in France since the advent of the Sarkozy presidency.

Socialist Project

A French Thrashing

Let's hope that the solemn blow taken by the socialists in the French municipal elections erases the vapid smiles from the big faces of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, until now untouched by doubt that the policies of austerity pursued by the European Commission would benefit right-wing parties. And not the type of Right, to be clear, of Mario Monti, but of the extreme and fascist(-ized) parties. It is pointless to acknowledge that one such figure is, without pretence, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, who held the European presidency for six months. These are also the forces that are everywhere smashing the residual bipolarities between the 'democratic' right and left. The latest sensational case is France where on Sunday, March 23rd, elections took place in 36,000 municipalities, and where the Front National of Le Pen, anti-Semitic, xenophobic and anti-European, not only became - where it was present - the first place party, but drove the Socialist Party, which was in the lead in the presidential election two years ago, not into second but into third place, while the Communist Party and the front of left-wing parties frequently slipped to fourth place.

This was to be expected when unemployed and precarity affects four million French citizens; not much different than Italy. For a couple of years now, almost daily, a large or medium-sized French firm relocates or closes, and the Holland government, who had won pledging to fight against finance, has not been able to defend employment, neither in general nor when a firm shuts or relocates while announcing lavish profits. The workers emerge from their departments determined to fight; they receive the solidarity of the mayor if, as often, the effected company was also the most important in the surrounding region. The usual result is that at the end of three weeks one has to be content with negotiating a so-called 'social plan,' other and for the most part distant jobs or compensation, and with the condolences of trade union centrals and the ministries concerned. Last week, three days before the municipal elections, the firm La Redoute shutdown. It was the oldest and most famous catalogue mail order company, which alone accounted for a large share of the consumption by the middle classes, but now drags entire industrial cities into ruin, eroding the possibilities for consumption by the mass of workers and the petite bourgeoisie.

Was all this visible and predictable? Yes, except for a socialist government, similar to our PD (Democratic Party) in Italy, for whom treaties dictate non-interference in order to avoid disturbing free competition; and for a government that hopes to get away with costly and difficult military endeavours in the former French imperial colonies in Mali and in the Central African Republic. This while the president and the foreign minister Laurent Fabius clamour for a heavy hand against Putin in Crimea; as if the well-known nationalism of l'Hexagone could make people forget the growing conditions of impoverishment.

Confronted with the results last night the entire staff of the Socialist Party was taken aback, while Marine Le Pen was rolling in the triumph of the blue wave that carried her name. Satisfied with the result is also the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) of Sarkozy, assured that the government will call for national antifascist unity, legitimating the vote for the republican Right, like at the time of the fall of Lionel Jospin in the presidential elections of 2002. Will the European Commission take note? Will the heads of the EU take note of the evidence that the Europe of monetarism and austerity is reviving the extreme Right for the first time since the Second World War? And that the Front National is becoming the leading populist party in France? Will the many in Italy take note, who are benevolently observing Matteo Renzi and the game of three-card monte, which consists of (maybe) putting more into the pay checks of low income earners who will then lose out in public services cuts and in local taxes?

The PD is in fact following the same path as Hollande, and its feeble internal Left does not appear

capable of getting it to change course. And what of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) of Susanna Camusso, who is in an uproar after recently having approved a labour relations accord with Confindustria (Italian Employers' Federation) considered too extreme even for our battered neighbour? And what of the FIOM (Metal Workers Union) of Maurizio Landini, which, isolated, is also hopeful of Matteo Renzi?

In short, we can only hope that the hard blow in France, difficult to recover from in the second round, will function as a severe lesson against the excesses of folly during the last twenty years in Europe.

Rossana Rossanda

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Economic Crisis, Social Fractures, and the Rise of Racism: The Case of France

The crisis of the European Union is not only economic and financial; it is also, perhaps first and foremost, a political-ideological crisis, as reiterated by Slavoj Žižek. One of the most manifest and alarming expressions of this crisis is the presence in Europe of growing sectors of public opinion voicing intolerant attitudes toward others; of populist political parties sharing anti-immigrant and anti-Roma programmes and rhetoric; as well as of fringes that are openly racist, neo-Nazi, and often homophobic.

Almost everywhere the growth of intolerance is fostered by the social effects of the economic crisis and the increasing fracture that divides the class of the super wealthy from the multitude that comprises the poor, wage earners, the unemployed, the socially declassed, and those who live in fear of social declassment. Also important is the crisis of representation, and in great measure, what has been defined as democratic racism, practiced by parties of the centre, and even of the Left, who attempt to regain popularity and electoral approval by competing with the Right.

An exemplary case is present-day France, an increasingly segmented society, marked by increasing difficulties in coexistence between its diverse people; beset also by a serious crisis of identity. Here the spectacular electoral advance of the Front National, led by Marine Le Pen, has triggered a rush to the right by the parties of the centre and even of the Left on the subjects of 'national identity,' immigration, the presence of Roma, and the role of Islam. Le Pen had the cunning to embellish her discourse with rhetoric defending secularism and republican values, making her programme more easily digestible, which, even so remains essentially racist.

It was in the vain attempt to counteract the rise of the Front National, by depriving the Lepénistes of the securitarian sceptre, that Nicolas Sarkozy, at the outset as president of the Republic, hardened immigration policies and fostered a debate on 'national identity,' whose basic idea, implicitly, is to purify the nation from the debris of foreigners.

The mediocre presidency of Sarkozy under the banner of law-and-order - only for others, since he is at the centre of numerous political and economic scandals - left a profound impression on public opinion and on the political class. Consider the torsion in his party, the UMP, in the direction of

intolerance, in some cases open racism, and of the policies that the Socialist Party conveys on the questions regarding immigration and above all the 'Roma question.'

When one considers that the Roma population in France does not exceed 20,000 persons, of which half are children, one can grasp how this 'question' is skilfully inflated, reviving widespread anti-gypsy hostility; a feature constitutive of French history, like the tendency to make the Roma a scapegoat. It is enough to recall the law of 16 July 1912, which established the requirement for an anthropometric document reserved solely for 'nomads,' with a photograph, fingerprints and information such as eye colour, length of right ear, left foot, middle finger, and left elbow, etc.

This infamous law was only abrogated in 1969, substituting the document with an obligatory "right of movement." In 2010 *Le Monde* revealed that OCLDI (Central Office for the Fight against Mobile Organized Crime Groups), an agency of the French gendarmerie, created and maintained until 2007, completely illegally, a catalogue of Roma, with genealogical data for the mapping of "gypsy families" and "groups at risk"; almost to reaffirm the old racist biological theorem that classified the Roma as delinquent by nature.

In particular, from the presidency of Sarkozy up to the current one of Hollande, racist statements or acts otherwise disrespectful of basic human rights against the Roma increased exponentially. This includes the mass expulsions of persons, despite being citizens of the European Union, and even attacks with corrosive acid, in the heart of Paris, against Roma adults and children on the part of "exasperated people." To say nothing of the violent clearing of informal settlements, sometimes requested by mayors of the Left and Far-Left, as in the case last November with the mayor of Saint-Ouen, Jacqueline Rouillon, of the Front de Gauche.

While advocating for the removal of the word "race" from the constitution, the 'socialist' Interior Minister, Manuel Valls, [1] rehabilitated the 'good old' racism legitimizing, on 24 September 2013, the theory of the non-assimilability of the Roma. This is in continuation, at bottom, with what a couple of months before Gilles Bourdouleix, of the UDL (Union of Democrats and Independents), another so-called centrist party recently established, dared to declare publically: "Hitler did not kill enough of them."

"The name is erased in order to make the unmentionable reappear," observed the philosopher Michel Feher in an interview in *Les Inrocks* on 26 September 2013. The demure racism of the bien-pensants, differentialist, as we have defined it, now often gives way to that which is expressed, even coarsely, with 'classic' racist attacks and insults, as for example, those against minister Christiane Taubira, who was depicted several times with ape-like features, and even mocked by a group of children shaking bananas, incited by parents hostile to "marriage for everybody."

In the meantime, as reported by the most recent report prepared by the CNCDH (National Consultative Commission on Human Rights), 2012 witnessed, next to as always a progression of islamophobia, "a disturbing return" of anti-Semitism, and for the third consecutive year, an increase in racist acts against persons presumed to be religiously Muslim, identified only with North Africans and considered "a separate social group." This is the old colonial spectre, still present in the imagination of the French political class and a section of the citizenry.

Data from the report brings to light "the growing rejection of foreigners, perceived increasingly as parasites if not as a menace," at the bottom of an alarming spread of xenophobia and intolerance, and of a "public liberation of racist discourse": fostered, in turn, by the instrumental use of themes such as French identity, immigration, and secularism on the part of the political class. Further proof that popular racism is always nurtured and/or exploited by the dominant elites.

In times of economic crisis and increasing social despair, like in the present one, only in the short term can this strategy serve to divert public attention from real problems and from the inadequacy of the elites to resolve them. In the long and medium term it is a highly dangerous game, as history teaches us.

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P.S.

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* Translations by Sam Putinja.

Footnotes

[1] Shortly after the elections in a governmental reshuffle, Hollande replaced Jean-Marc Ayrault with Manuel Valls as Prime Minister.