

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > France > Political regime, parties, ideologies (France) > **Political regimes: Emmanuel Macron's France Is Authoritarian Because It's (...)**

Politics - Conjectures

Political regimes: Emmanuel Macron's France Is Authoritarian Because It's Run Like a Business

Saturday 7 August 2021, by [QUIJOUX Maxime](#) (Date first published: 5 August 2021).

Upon becoming president, Emmanuel Macron promised to make France into a “start-up nation.” But imitating workplace hierarchies has made his government deeply authoritarian — subjecting democratic institutions to the tyranny of the boss.

Contents

- [New Management](#)
- [The Boss Is Always Right](#)
- [Keep the Shareholders Happy](#)

Elected to the presidency in May 2017, Emmanuel Macron promised to turn France into a “[start-up nation](#).” Helped by his youth and his “techy” profile — as shown by his cool demeanor upon [opening Paris's Station F startup hub](#) in July that year — Macron expressed bold ambitions for the future of the French economy. He promised to attract talent by making it easier to get a visa and raise capital, as well as simplifying bureaucratic procedures and strengthening Europe-wide business ties.

But soon enough, Macron's project went beyond creating an “ecosystem” of start-ups, and revealed an underlying philosophy of government, widely criticized and even mocked for its blatant arrogance. This was the Macron who spoke of the “[nobodies you come across in the Gare du Nord](#)” — the president who advised a T-shirt-wearing unemployed man that he ought to “work to afford a suit,” and said that the jobless needed to “cross the street” to find employment.

These comments expressed a certain state of mind — an “ethos,” us sociologists would say — indicative of the intellectual schemas that govern this “start-up nation.” Here, the divisions that pervade society are justified by the different levels of effort we each put in and, especially, the genius of “those who make it there first.”

In this view, injustice in society isn't owed to the mechanisms of inequality that mold these individuals — their circumstances, their elite schools, and their social capital. Rather, it's an effect of the lack of solidarity these new pioneers show toward the rest of the population. The recent new government slogan “[freedom, brotherhood, equality of opportunity](#)” provides further proof of this outlook: this distortion of the old republican motto weakens its original collective dimension in favor of individualist, meritocratic principles.

This is a remarkable message to send when we have long known — at least since the 1960s and the [work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron](#) — that [meritocracy is a smoke screen](#), falsely

presenting class-based cultural privileges as a question of individual talent. At a time when France is one of the countries with the highest educational inequalities in the world, the substitution of “equality of opportunity” for “equality” is nothing but a brazen ideological move.

Since the beginning of Macron’s presidency, all of France’s social and economic policies have sought to boost the world of business — and make France a beacon of “twenty-first-century entrepreneurial initiative.” But as we have seen, this also means making the CEO’s state of mind into a mentality for the state itself.

New Management

The business world’s hegemony over the French state is itself hardly novel. From privatizations to the outsourcing of state tasks or the enshrinement of “[New Public Management](#),” for decades, France’s institutions have been subject to transformations that have considerably shrunk its public services.

Even so, Macron’s presidency does seem to represent a step further. This is expressed not so much in his socioeconomic policies — which are perfectly in line with the [ones that came before](#) — as in his approach to the practice of democracy itself. As he approaches the end of his first term, it is clear that Macronism has also imported another aspect of the private firm: its authoritarianism.

As the political scientist Michel Offerlé shows, the business world has little inclination to do away with the social divides that set capital owners and employers at odds with people who have nothing but their ability to work. While there are *some* institutions in France that represent workers — works councils (CSE) and even worker-owned cooperatives (SCP) — the world of work is mostly remarkable for its undemocratic aspects.

Most French firms have no kind of staff representation — thus making workers subject to their bosses’ whims. Even when such institutions do exist, the [obstacles to union rights](#) are legion: workers’ representatives are either co-opted by management or discriminated against in their own work benefits and career progress. Companies are more often than not subject to a reign of fear and arbitrary decision-making — sometimes leading to dramas like that revealed by the [Orange trial](#), when layoffs caused by the 2005 privatization of France Télécom led to nineteen suicides. Workers who dissent normally have to either give in or leave entirely.

Assisted by a political system centered on the concentration of powers, Macronism has found fertile ground for spreading the principle of top-down authority from the world of business to public policies in general. Having never held any elected office before becoming president, Macron is less attached to the logic of democratic institutions than to the often-opposite principles of the company model.

The Boss Is Always Right

This is first apparent in the way Macron relates to what the French call “intermediary bodies” — institutions between the state and the individual, like trade unions and pressure groups. Like most bosses, Macron has little time for dialogue or any perspective other than the schemas he’s already got in his head. Obsessed by his own “visionary genius,” Macron’s business-shaped exercise of power makes him incapable of understanding the approaches that emanate from other channels.

Associations, trade unions, and elected officials have near-unanimously spoken of the indifference or

even contempt that the president and his government have shown toward them. There are countless examples of this, from the reform of secondary education to unemployment benefits, the university system, and pensions reform raising the retirement age for millions of workers.

The latest example is the “[health pass](#),” which demands that people be vaccinated or have a negative COVID test to access not only private spaces like cafés or museums but also public ones like hospitals. The law also provides for employees’ contracts to be suspended if they do not meet these criteria.

As for the rare moments of dialogue Macron has organized, they distinctly resemble the social- or greenwashing well-known from the world of corporate social responsibility. The “[Great Debate](#)” following the Yellow Vests movement, like the [citizens’ convention on the environment](#), served only to clean the government’s brand, stained by its [authoritarianism during the *gilets jaunes* protests](#).

The second indicator of Macron’s business-style authoritarianism has to do with electoral processes themselves. Since he reached the presidency in spring 2017, soon followed by the election of a crowd of MPs for his La République en Marche! (LREM) party, Macron’s government has been remarkable for his sole individual authority. This is notable for any politician, albeit less so for a captain of industry. Legislative activity seems to have been constantly directed by the president himself, prompting no little mockery of the LREM MPs deemed his “yes-men” or “Playmobils.” Many of these new lawmakers are themselves drawn from the world of business, and their amateurism has only strengthened top-down dynamics typical of the workplace.

Few of these MPs have ever challenged the subordinate role the president has reduced them to — sometimes meaning they do not even understand the reforms they are voting for. The 2019 changes to the pension system were a case in point: the justifications given by LREM legislators and then-labor minister Muriel Pénicaud — herself former general manager of big companies like Danone — were often [more than shaky](#).

The decisions made since COVID-19 hit France have also been commandments from above, with Macron often happily substituting his own insight above that provided by health experts. From his disdain for collective endeavor to his belief in his own decision-making superpowers, Macron ultimately displays a mindset rather typical of a captain of industry.

Indeed, corporate executives usually hate anyone standing up to them. As the sociologist Karel Yon has shown, today’s variant of “social dialogue” serves above all to negotiate the terms of decisions that bosses have already made. Faced with concerns among the workforce, some managers have no hesitation about interfering in trade unionists’ private lives — as in the case of [IKEA France, fined 1 million euro](#) after its general manager spied on hundreds of workers with police complicity — or even tried [to murder them](#), as in one family business in the Ain département near Lyon.

Such extreme examples are rare. Yet in general, bosses have little time for workers challenging them — and they have no hesitation in resorting to repressive measures like getting rid of irksome employees. Once again, the analogy with Macron’s practice in government is troubling: since 2017 the means of “keeping order” have been radicalized, with a [proliferation of “nonlethal” weapons, tear gas, and police kettles](#) — leading to a vast increase in the number of seriously injured protesters. And if the response to the Yellow Vests movement was emblematic of Macron’s intransigence, it has been apparent in response to other demonstrations and even social events, like the 2019 police crackdown on the Fête de la Musique in Nantes, causing the [drowning of a twenty-four-year-old partygoer](#).

Keep the Shareholders Happy

Like any good CEO, Macron wants, above all, to coddle the shareholders who keep him in charge of the firm. Elected on a relatively liberal program regarding social questions — for instance, the demonization of Muslims — he soon moved onto the favored ground of more right-wing voters, most likely to keep him in power. Faced with the competition from potential substitutes with more “disruptive” agendas, he has shown no hesitation in getting his ministers to join the race to the bottom, for instance in the hunt against “[Islam-leftism](#),” at odds with the posture he struck in 2017.

Following the regional elections in June, which saw [record abstention — two-thirds of eligible voters didn't turn out](#) — Macron said nothing to this silent majority. Rather, he preferred to speak only to the minority who had voted, especially for the right-wing *Républicains*. He suggested a further increase in the retirement age — from sixty-two to sixty-four — as he made clear signals to older and better-off voters on the Right.

Nine months ahead of the 2022 presidential elections, this is Macron's way of shoring up the vote among those most invested in his reelection to the start-up nation's board. It's worth remembering that half of Macron's 2017 presidential campaign was financed by large fortunes: [investment bankers, fund managers, lawyers, and web entrepreneurs](#), from the richest parts of the French capital and abroad (mainly the UK, United States, and Switzerland).

In that contest, Macron benefited from discontent with France's established political parties. Four years later, we can only survey the damage done by a figure who has passed over from the world of big business to high office in the world's sixth-biggest power. The violence of the workplace has turned into a way of running a country's political life — with all the arbitrary rule, repression and contempt for the working class that results. At a time when the French are ever more uninterested in voting, revitalizing democracy will rely on a fight to rein in the power of the boss — [including in the workplace itself](#).

Maxime Quijoux

P.S.

- Jacobin. 08.05.2021:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/08/emmanuel-macron-france-startup-nation-business>
- Maxime Quijoux is a CNRS researcher, sociologist, and political scientist.