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France

Some notes on the political situation

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We knew in France that 2017 would be politically polarized by the preparations for the presidential election. It is true, in more than one respect, but this polarization also reveals the general crisis of the institutional parties and the institutions in general and the chasm that separates the leaders of the Socialist Party (PS) and the right wing party Les Républicains (LR) from those they are supposed to represent. Also its dynamic could, perhaps, escape the ritual of the suffocation of the social movement.

The successive fall of Holland and then Valls is the first manifestation of the institutional crisis.

That the outgoing President was unable to seek re-election, and that the Prime Minister was defeated in the PS primary elections by a candidate from the left of the party is the true balance sheet of five years of PS rule, and the party has been plunged into its deepest crisis since its creation.

As for the UMP, the picture is no prettier. While the reactionary electorate had moved *en masse* to eliminate Sarkozy and elect a Mr. Clean playing on Catholic traditionalism and probity, the revelation of a diversion of 900,000 Euros of public funds, two fictitious jobs in the *Revue des deux mondes*, handsomely paid jobs for his student children, fifteen bank accounts (according to what we know up to now) has heavily compromised the presence of François Fillon in the second round, and even the simple maintenance of his candidacy. [1]

This "Penelope Fillon affair" is especially revealing of two things:

– Their world is not ours! Political leaders generally consider that the state coffers are at their disposal and that they can use public money like they use their official cars. The same people who support all the social attacks against workers, by slashing all the systems of redistribution, justifying all the redundancies and protesting at allowances for the unemployed, leaving more and more people in poverty, think it normal to help themselves handsomely from those coffers. It is the behaviour of a plutocratic class, which is surprised even to be asked for accounts. Fillon and his friends do not even feel the need to justify a remuneration equivalent to more than 40 years pay for somebody on the minimum wage, for someone who "helped" and "morally supported" her husband. Without speaking of 100,000 Euros for a few lines of literary criticism. These people live in a world cut off from the vast majority of the population.

– Note moreover that after the revelations in *Le Canard Enchaîné* and the articles on Médiapart, political leaders studiously avoided any "lynching" despite François Fillon's complaints of persecution. Because these "revelations" illuminate the functioning of a political system cultivating these financial payments. Parliamentary deputies enjoy a scandalous level of remuneration and 10,000 Euros per month at their disposal for aides. The senators of the right have been hitting the jackpot for years, as everyone knows.

These systems, nepotistic or not, benefit all the elected members of Parliament – including Dupont-Aignan [leader of a small right-wing party] and the National Front, as silent as the other, Jean-Marie Le Pen has even stated his support for Fillon. The National Front is currently the subject of a claim from the European Parliament for the repayment of 300,000 Euros apparently used to pay salaries for FN full-timers. More than 20% of deputies (of all groups) employ members of their family as assistants, for real functions or not.

This strengthens the basic democratic demands: the abolition of the Senate – an assembly of bigwigs elected by bigwigs – and the abolition of the payment to deputies of 12,800 Euros per month (without counting the allowance of

9,561 Euros for aides).

Barely three months away from the presidential elections, Les Républicains have no choice but to “stand firm” and try to stifle the scandal, fearing that organizing a new primary could be catastrophic. It is also clear that none of the direct opponents of Fillon will put oil on the fire because it is the whole operation of the parliamentary system of the Fifth Republic which is put at issue by a practice which is formally legal. But this collusion is exposed day after day by the continuation of the judicial proceedings and the pressure of the media revelations from *le Canard*.

The crisis of the PS is now open. The primary vote reflects an electorate directly cut in two, the balance swinging markedly toward Hamon with the votes of young people, workers and white-collar workers, and Green and Front de gauche voters. [2] An anti-Valls vote punished the Macron and El Khomri laws on removing nationality and the state of emergency. But, on the other side, both the vote for Valls and the reactions since Monday show that a political breakdown is taking place within social democracy. Within the PS, Hamon represents the current around motion B which won less than 30% of the vote at the last congress in 2015, a resistance which has crystallized the hope of maintaining a PS in the traditional social democratic left, neither more nor less.

In concrete terms, the choice of Hamon marks, for his voters, the rejection of the Hollande-Valls orientation, the social liberal orientation of the bulk of the apparatus, aiming at the construction of a republican-democratic force in the image of [former Italian PM] Renzi's Democratic Party. This resistance can obviously be compared to the vote for Corbyn in the British Labour Party or the Sanders current in the US Democratic Party.

Again, the music is stronger than the words. Hamon stresses his reluctance on the extension of the state of emergency, the rejection of the NDDL airport plan, the closure of nuclear power plants, control of GMOs, an improved in-work welfare benefits system for young people, refusal to stigmatize Muslims and rejection of banning the headscarf. Also, he surfs on a whole series of social and democratic demands that exist in the popular classes. In this, moreover, the profile of Hamon comes close to that of Mélenchon (except on the headscarf!), even if the latter is more republican, and plays more on the profile of the “providential man”. We will see what will happen to the contradictory electoral cohabitation that Mélenchon must accept, especially if the PCF makes him pay for his arrogance in forcing it to accept the dictates of his movement France Insoumise. [3]

A big problem is now posed to the PS apparatus and its elected representatives. With the vicissitudes of Fillon, Macron seems to be in a position to qualify for the second round. Hamon has every interest in asserting a campaign with a left identity, encroaching on the Mélenchon and Green voters, distancing himself from the balance sheet of Holland/Valls. But such a candidacy breaks with the orientation of the majority of the PS, and no polls show him qualifying for the second round, so it goes against the grain for the apparatus and the majority of elected representatives. All the more so in that the presidential logic introduced since the introduction of the five year term in 2002 makes the presidential elections the launching pad for the legislative elections. By and large, the PS group (295 members) could repeat the experience of 2002 after the ousting of [former PS prime minister] Lionel Jospin and the re-election of [rightwing president] Jacques Chirac: 141 members, or a 50% reduction.

A number of PS deputies are in the process of deserting to Macron, whose campaign is structured by several PS notables such as Ferrand and Collomb. [4] The reformist pole (Savary and so on) is calling for withdrawal from the party, and some of them are rallying to Macron. [5] But this choice would be difficult for the party apparatus and its main leaders. The PS is a structure, a party that cannot dissolve itself into the Macron campaign as it is constructed. In addition the rejection by the leadership of the candidate legitimately chosen from the primary would be a factor of total explosion.

Therefore, the centre of the party will navigate between these pitfalls and try to do a very difficult balancing act: influence the Hamon campaign, reconciling support for the last months of the Cazeneuve government with “support”

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for the candidate of the party, to calm the rebellious “right”, while turning a blind eye to those who will campaign for Macron for the presidential elections, while trying to keep a grip on the investitures for the legislative elections. [6] A perilous exercise that it will be difficult to guide.

In all this, one thing is sure: the apparatuses and candidates of the two traditional parties of the Fifth Republic, the PS and LR, formerly the UMP, face this “major” election in a position of crisis. And this crisis, in its two symmetrical reflections, manifests the discredit, the erosion of the institutional parties who have been the managers of austerity policies. To such a point that all candidates claim to be “out of the system”, or even “anti-system”. Both Fillon and Hamon have benefited from this rejection of the “old faces” like Sarkozy, Juppé, Valls and Montebourg. [7]

Of course, it is a total sham since both Fillon and Hamon are former ministers (as is Mélenchon), professional politicians, of a system whose nature is illustrated by the most recent scandals.

Macron has the paradoxical status of a candidate outside party and exempt from the balance sheet of Hollande, whereas he was deputy general secretary to the Presidency as early as 2012 and was at the origin of the CICE tax break for business and the pact of responsibility, and was then minister of the economy, bringing in the two laws most despised by the popular classes (the one which bears his name and the El Khomri law).

Marine Le Pen faces some difficulty after the right and left primaries. The candidacy of Fillon removes her best media opponent, Sarkozy, and means competition for the ultra-reactionary traditionalist vote. Similarly, the absence of a socialist candidate defending the balance sheet of Hollande destabilizes her profile. Her own involvement in scandals will make it difficult to take advantage of Fillon’s difficulties. Nevertheless, it is notable that she still remains ahead in the polls, without having started her campaign or made a policy declaration for several weeks, the main receptacle of a reactionary, racist protest vote based on rejection of the parties who have managed the country for 20 years. Even if it cannot be excluded that Marine Le Pen is knocked out in the first round, it is likely that only a “national union” (around Macron or Fillon if he is still candidate in the weeks to come) for the presidential elections and the undemocratic system of election of deputies will prevent the National Front emerging as winner of the upcoming elections.

All this further emphasizes the urgent need to build a real anti-capitalist alternative, a new political representation of the exploited and the oppressed.

This is what is needed to counterbalance the attraction of the FN to the masses. The party still appears to give an outlet to popular frustration in a programme that is xenophobic and reactionary. Stopping this sham depends on the relationship of forces created, among the workers and exploited, by an anti-capitalist political force based on the solidarity of all the exploited and on social justice. Similarly, the support for Hamon also shows the rejection of neo-liberal policies, of the police state and Islamophobia, the need for urgency on the climate, without his programme showing the slightest way of questioning capitalist austerity.

Finally, Mélenchon and France Insoumise open no perspective in this direction. By playing the role of the providential man, and trying to impose submission to his autocracy on all those who want to support him, he has made a risky bet. Relying on the nomination of Holland or Valls, he sought the role of the anti-Sarkozy, then of the anti-Fillon, white knight of the anti-austerity left wing. Now destabilized by the nomination of Hamon, this profile alone cannot be sufficient. This is all the more the case in that pressure is growing for a single candidacy to the left of Macron. It is more than likely that the PCF will join this campaign as well as a part of the campaign and trade union movement which is very hesitant in relation to Mélenchon, even if many considered him as the “useful” vote.

This unitary dynamic, unfortunately, is going to be built solely within the institutional framework of electoral

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mechanics, rather than putting down the bases of the construction of a popular anti-capitalist forces, bringing together those in the workplaces and the popular neighbourhoods, with all the transversal links to those who fight the system and want to build a force which is anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, anti-discrimination, internationalist and ecologist. The political bases and the methods of France Insoumise and the PS are obviously not oriented to this path, so an alliance of the two will not resolve any of their faults. A useful vote within the framework of the electoral circus and the loaded dice of the parliamentary system of the Fifth Republic will not suffice to overcome these faults. We do not need a super champion to fight in the circus, we want to finish with the circus.

By contrast, the situation opened by the current crisis is new, it is necessary to engage with it. There will surely be a many discussions in the days and weeks to come, of possible frameworks for discussion of activists in the social and political movement. This must be the opportunity not only to defend our ideas, but also to put forward proposals for the social and political rallying of all those who are fighting on all fronts. The Fillon scandal, the destabilization of the PS, all this opens up spaces, reinvigorating the activists of the social movement in a period usually little conducive to this.

Paradoxically, the coming weeks could see a re-emergence of movements “from below” with the demand for an end to delegation, to the parliamentary bureaucracy of leaders and parties, using and abusing privileges while continuing to manage the affairs of the capitalists. Even if this is polarized today around the question of a Mélenchon-Hamon candidacy, we provide another content on the basis of social demands, convergences between activist currents, ceasing to be spectators of the presidential jousts and mechanics and taking our fate in our own hands.

We must not therefore have the attitude that all of this does not concern us, because our [NPA]’s candidacy, with Philippe Poutou, speaks to a large number of those who want to find a new hope, a new institutional window to the social combats. [8] We are not on that institutional terrain, and especially we stress a perspective of anti-capitalist rupture which is not shared by Hamon or Mélenchon. However, we can, at least locally, give another perspective, and discuss rallying around common social and democratic demands. In this, the new situation can be a breath of fresh air, highlighting all the ruptures necessary and the paths to be taken.

[1] These payments to Penelope Fillon, wife of François Fillon, as his “parliamentary assistant” were revealed by the satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné*. Not only is there no trace of any job contract or other presence in the French parliament but in a 2007 interview with the British *Sunday Telegraph* Penelope Fillon stated she had never worked for her husband. *IV*

[2] Benoît Hamon won the PS primary for presidential candidate, beating former prime minister Manuel Valls in the run-off. Hamon was a student activist in the 1980s and has since had a career in the PS apparatus. *IV*

[3] Formally speaking the party founded by Mélenchon the Parti de Gauche (Left Party), the French Communist Party (PCF) and Ensemble!, an organisation formed by the fusion of several smaller groups, are members of the Front de Gauche, Left Front. However Jean-Luc Mélenchon launched his own movement France Insoumise for this presidential campaign, and for the parliamentary elections which will follow, in February 2016. The PCF finally voted, reluctantly, to support Mélenchon rather than stand their own candidate. The decision of Ensemble! to support Mélenchon was also the subject of debate and divergence in that organisation. *IV*

[4] A former member of the PS, Emmanuel Macron was minister for economy and industry from 2014-16. He founded his own political movement En marche in early 2016 and resigned from the government in August. He announced in November that he would be a candidate for president; he refused to participate in the “open primary” of the left (essentially the PS and some small parties around it. Richard Ferrad is a PS regional councillor in Brittany. Gerard Collomb is also a PS elected representative, senator and mayor of Lyon. *IV*

[5] Alain Savary is a former Minister of Education of the Mitterrand era. *IV*

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[6] Bernard Cazeneuve is the current prime minister. He replaced Manuel Valls when the latter resigned to launch his campaign in the primaries.

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[7] Nicolas Sarkozy was president from 2007-2012. Alain Juppé, mayor of Bordeaux, started his political career alongside Jacques Chirac in the 1970s. Manuel Valls was prime minister for President François Hollande from March 2014 to December 2016. Arnaud Montebourg is a well-known PS figure, having been deputy, minister, spokesperson at different times since the 1990s. *IV*

[8] Philippe Poutou, a worker at Ford, Blanquefort near Bordeaux, is the prospective presidential candidate for the NPA (New Anticapitalist Party). The NPA has not yet obtained the necessary 500 sponsorships from mayors that would enable Poutou's presence on the ballot. *IV*