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France

# "The Presidential campaign is rotting French political life"

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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**The philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, a militant in the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), looks at the electoral campaign in an interview conducted for the Swiss daily *Le Courrier* by Benito Perez.**

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/obdb.jpg>] **Olivier Besancenot interviewed. Behind him, Daniel Bensaïd.**

In the prolific panorama of the French left, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) undeniably occupies a place apart. Anti-Stalinist Communists, this movement born out of the student struggle of May '68 was always marked off from its Trotskyist co-religionists by its opening to the new social movements and to those that proletarian orthodoxy characterised as "petty bourgeois".

Yet the party of Alain Krivine and Olivier Besancenot has remained firm on its anti-capitalist positions. No question of becoming the appendage of the left of the Socialist Party, nor of conceding to the zeitgeist of "politics without parties". Inflexibility? Coherence? Whatever, the LCR of the popular postman Besancenot is today a little isolated. Its refusal to rally to the "unitary anti-neoliberal candidacy" proposed in the midst of the élan of the "left no" to the European Constitution has chipped away at this image of openness that it carefully tends.

Often presented as the theorist of the LCR, the philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, a renowned specialist on Marx and Benjamin [1], was recently in Switzerland at the invitation of the bimonthly "solidaritéS". In an interview given to the "Courrier", the Toulouse intellectual defends the intransigence of his movement, while leaving the door open to a future anti-neoliberal union. The former leader of May 68, today a lecturer in philosophy at Paris-VIII, also enlightens us on the electoral process underway in France. **BP.**

**After a presidential election in 2002 marked by the law and order question, the traditional themes of the left - housing, taxation, ecology - are very much to the fore this year.**

**Daniel Bensaïd:** This early in the campaign, it's a very significant change! The question of housing has allowed the debate to be placed on the terrain of social rights and justice. That's a good thing. And I think that this will continue, because it combines both the gravity of the social crisis and the necessities of each candidate's electoral strategy.

The polls show that social concerns, notably unemployment, are considered more important than law and order. As for the sociological surveys, they reveal an increased fragility and a relative pauperisation of the so-called middle classes which in fact includes today a number of employees whose status is nearer to that of the worker than that of the manager.

So all the candidates are competing to win back the popular electorate which was lost in 2002 notably to the Front National and to a certain extent to the radical left. It is not then by chance if we hear Ségolène Royal mentioning Rosa Luxembourg and radicalising her discourse, including against the European Central Bank. Or that Sarkozy spoke of Zola and Jaurès during his nomination speech.

**What other themes should the campaign be about in your view?**

First, it would be good if there were themes... For the moment, more is said about the gaffes of the candidates. Unhappily, I fear that both sides are skirting around the European question. This latter is not only crucial but is already on the agenda, [German Chancellor] Angela Merkel announcing a constitutional vote for 2009! The question

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of war and the role of France in Africa, in the arms economy or in NATO is also forgotten by common agreement.

It is however a fundamental element of the world situation today.

Finally, I think that the candidates will avoid too much emphasis on the institutional question. It is however a significant debate. The current crisis of the regime is worsened by the introduction of five yearly presidential terms, which has again strengthened the presidentialist logic. Indeed this latter is rotting the whole of French political life. Its plebiscitary character renders any debate over programmes difficult. And this at all levels, with campaigns focused on image and personality now being reproduced at the level of the regions, or indeed any institution.

We should however also look into the majoritary voting system. Personally, I am for introducing a good dose of proportional voting. Consider: at the parliamentary elections of 2002, 30% of voters were excluded from all political representation. If we add the abstentionists, that is half of the population which is not represented in the Assembly. And then they complain about the political crisis...

**Faced with this nebulous bipolarity, some on the left are tempted to say that there is no difference between Royal and Sarkozy. Others, however, are ready to do anything to avoid the victory of the candidate of the right.**

In my view, these represent two pitfalls to avoid. When Ségolène Royal raises the stakes about a certain moral order, about family policy, on law and order, she effectively flirts with Sarkozy's themes. All the same, her campaign for the nomination - appealing over the head the PS institutions - marked the victory of the democracy of public opinion over the parties. All this emphasises the "Blairite" turn of the socialists. The intention and the discourse are there. And yet, in fact, things are more complex. Ségolène Royal had to work to mend the breach opened by the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/royale.jpg>] **Ségolène Royal**

The support she has had from Montebourg and Chevènement (partisans of the "no" vote, contrary to the majority of socialists - ed.) have shown her capacity to relegate this fracture to the second level, at least symbolically. That isn't nothing. Blinded by the discourse "Anyone but Sarkozy", a part of the critical left has finally rallied without fighting. The big difference between Sarkozy and Royale is that the latter cannot free herself from the electoral and social realities of the left! She is in a force field that she cannot escape, above all since the "no" victory in the referendum... The socialists know that they are not sheltered from a social explosion.

**Do you think that Nicolas Sarkozy represents a rupture on the right?**

I think so. His candidacy turns the page on Gaullism, this French oddity. Since the war, France has been marked by the twin roles of Gaullism and the Communist Party. They represented two discourses with populist concerns, two forms of nationalism, with an anti-American connotation. With Nicolas Sarkozy, we are in an entirely different register. [<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sarkosy.jpg>] **Nicolas Sarkozy**

Even if the death of Gaullism was inevitable given the evolution of the world and the construction of Europe in particular, his victory will seal this disappearance and will inaugurate an offensive of great violence against the public services, pensions and the labour code.

**The presidential election of 2002, the rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty (ECT), then the victory of the anti-First Employment Contract law [2] show the weight of the radical left in France. Isn't it paradoxical that the socialists have not taken account of this in choosing Royal and that no real alternative has emerged to the PS?**

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The paradox stems perhaps in the reading of the political dynamic. In 2002, the left critical in relation to the PS had fully fulfilled its electoral potential, that I estimate at 10%-13% [3]. It was a vote sanctioning a socialist legislature that hadn't changed much in social policy, nor in Europe, and which had spectacularly rallied to privatisation.

Today, the electoral reflex is not the same. We have had a rightwing government and the fear of a new presence of Le Pen in the second round favours the idea of the useful vote from the first round. I think, moreover, that the demoralising effect of the defeat of the social movement of 2003 on pensions and education is underestimated. It was a struggle much more rooted than that against the First Employment Contract, of which nearly nothing remains twelve months later.

All that weighs on and explains the fact that the potential of votes to the left of the PS is less significant today. And that's true whether the far left presents a single candidate or not. To say, as some have done, that we could obtain a score in double figures, is a joke! The so-called votes of the radical left do not necessarily add up. If you count things up, a single candidacy of José Bové or Clémentine Autain [4] would amount to less votes than you would have with a number of left candidates, because Bové would have lost a big part of the CP electorate while Autain is absolutely unknown among working class voters.

### **That explains the defeat of the unitary anti-neoliberal approach?**

No. A single candidacy was despite that desirable. For its dynamic and to consolidate the political space opened during the left campaign against the ECT in 2005. It was nonetheless illusory to believe that the significant dynamic of the "left no" could prolong itself in a linear manner to the presidential election. In a referendum, it is a question of yes or no, not a programme or a well defined political orientations. Of course, a platform had been drawn up by the anti-neoliberal collectives [former "no to the ECT" collectives - ed]. Despite some points of disagreement, inevitable in this type of unitary approach, we would have been able to follow on this basis a pluralist but common programme.

But, in our view, there was an unavoidable question, which would become increasingly present the closer we got to the vote, that of the future governmental and parliamentary majority [the parliamentary elections are scheduled for a month after the second round of the presidential - ed]. Would there have been a "new left majority", as Marie George Buffet [candidate of the CP - ed], said, under the domination of a Socialist Party whose programme and candidate are known?

The LCR will do all it can to beat Sarkozy but we refuse to see the alternative unitary project dissolve itself immediately in a "plural left mark 2" coalition of which we know in advance the results. We have the responsibility to not make promises that we know we will be obliged to betray.

**I can understand that the animators of the collectives chose to temporise on this question while waiting to see if Laurent Fabius was chosen for the socialist candidacy. But starting from the choice of Ségolène Royal, there was no longer any reason to be indecisive: Yes or no, was it possible to envisage such an alliance?**

For us it was ruled out. For the CP, it was not, for two reasons: it needs the Socialists to save its parliamentary group next June and because some Communists are counting on returning to government. Negotiations have moreover begun. There has not been a misunderstanding but a political disagreement. While convergences exist between us, there is no agreement as to a strategy of reconstruction of a left worthy of the name.

**Has the failure of the anti-liberal collectifs closed the door on the possibility of a union**

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It's a handicap because it has created a lot of frustration. But the political scenery won't stop changing with the 2007 elections. The question of unity of the anti-liberal left - or anti-capitalist, I don't see an impassable barrier between the two - has been on the cards for 20 years, since the presidential candidacy of Pierre Juquin. In our opinion this union will not be possible around one single political forces but nor will it be possible without the political parties. Whatever anti-party demagoguery says they won't disappear or be made to disappear like that. There is no other choice than to bring together with patience and conviction an arc of political forces. This union can't be tactical and punctual but has to be built around a real project of rebuilding the left. The LCR contacted the PCF along these lines even before the referendum.

### **What are the other forces that could come together?**

There is the left of the Greens and Lutte Ouvrière. Even though there is not much hope of convincing LO to get involved we must continue to call on them to do so.

### **In this context what's the meaning of Olivier Besancenot's candidacy?**

First of all to defend a programme, an alternative project on the left of the PS - and independent of the PS - which will not compromise on principles at the first elections. This is a long-term project. We also want to put the social questions at the centre of the ensure that the election campaign is a serious argument about social rights, public services and so on, that there is real disagreement expressed. Our goal is to speak to young people, Olivier Besancenot was one of the only people to be listened to during the suburban riots in November 2005. His strength is to be able to speak to many different social categories because he has both developed political thinking and a social image.

[Link: Visit the site of the Olivier Besancenot campaign](#)

Link: [French public sector workers strike over pay and job cuts](#)

*IV386 - February 2007*

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[1] Author notably of "A Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique" (Verso, London, 2002)

[2] The "CPE" was an employment contract for the under-26s which had no protection against being sacked. It was withdrawn by the government last spring after major student and trade-union mobilisations.

[3] Arlette Laguiller (Lutte ouvrière, 5,72%), Olivier Besancenot (LCR, 4,25%), Robert Hue (PC, 3,37%) and Daniel Gluckstein (Parti des travailleurs, 0,47%). On the left were also Lionel Jospin (16,18%) and 13% accumulated by the Green NoÃ«l Manère, the radical Christiane Taubira PS and the MDC Jean-Pierre Chevènement

[4] The peasant leader and the feminist activist - a deputy mayor in Paris - were two of the main candidates for the candidacy in the anti-liberal collectives.