

The European Union and the Left in times of crisis

Left strategies strategies between the Symplegades of national and international Political Arenas

Short preamble: Today the notion of Left clearly has very different meanings, depending of the countries concerned. Beyond the debate of a political nature that it can initiate, the sociological reality of France is so that the Left is understood as the set of forces that goes from the Socialist Party, itself divided into currents including a Left wing, to the "extreme Left" (NPA and Workers Struggle and other small parties whose common characteristic is to reject any alliance with the Socialist Party). To answer the questionnaire, we therefore in most cases refer to the Left including the Socialist Party (PS), the Greens and the Left Front (Front de Gauche), the other groups having had a rather low electoral influence through the recent years).

1. What was the strategy of the Left parties in your country vis a vis the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the Eurozone?

The various parties that make up the Left in France have adopted different positions relative to the Maastricht Treaty and the Monetary Union. This is almost a constant fact, the Left regularly dividing itself on European issues.

The Socialist Party, François Mitterrand being president and Jacques Delors the driving force behind the Treaty, has naturally been active for the "yes" when the Maastricht Treaty was submitted to a referendum in 1993 (it was adopted by 51, 05% of the votes cast, with a participation in the vote of less than 70%). This very small majority - just 35% of registered voters - was a warning shot for the advocates of European integration considered being too liberal by opponents to the Treaty from the Left. The reluctance to transfer sovereignty was also present, especially for the Communist Party).

The referendum was the occasion of a first internal dissidence within the Socialist Party, its "sovereignist" leaders following Jean-Pierre Chevènement, one of the most prominent leaders of the party, campaigned actively for the "No". However, it should be noted that the left current of the Socialist Party (with Jean-Luc Mélenchon) had followed the majority of the party and advocated the "yes".

The small *Parti radical de gauche*, a traditional ally of the Socialist Party (and despite its name, a centre-left party), was also a supporter of the "yes".

The Greens voted against the Maastricht Treaty. The parties at the left of the Socialist Party (the Communist Party, which at the time represented more than 10% of the electorate, the Trotskyist parties) have actively fought the Treaty and called for the "No" vote.

These parties have taken the same view about the euro (possibly with proposals for a common currency and not a single currency) and the Eurozone.

2. Has the crisis of the Eurozone affected/changed the strategy of the Left in your country regarding European integration and the EU and in what way?

Even before the current crisis, one must take into account the large victory (almost 55% of the voters) of the "No" vote on the draft Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the effect it had on people's consciences.

Parties at the left of the Socialist Party held a prominent role in this campaign. For them, fighting the draft Treaty, was fighting the neo-liberal orientation of the European construction. With the crisis and austerity policies imposed by the Troika in Greece and in other countries, this very critical attitude was reinforced. It may be noted that in this context, the idea of active resistance to the EU policies, including a unilateral refusal of European injunctions, is now widely shared in the radical Left and in the social movement¹.

The Socialist Party splitted up on this occasion, many of its leaders (including Laurent Fabius, a former prime minister of Francois Mitterrand, now Foreign Affairs Minister in the Ayrault government) campaigning for the "No". Yet for much of the social-democrats but also the social movement, it was previously unthinkable to question radically the way European construction was developing, both because they considered it being the only way towards social progress and for Euroscepticism was considered as the mark of "sovereignism" that was not very popular among the Left, with the exception of the Communists. Saying "No" to TCE was in this context a transgression for the a great part of the Left (there were in fact also "no votes" coming from the Right and far right, a fact which has been sometimes forgotten,) .

Later, in the context of the crisis, Arnaud Montebourg, campaigning for "de-globalization", got an unexpected result (over 17% of the votes) in the first round of the Primary election the Socialist Party organized in October 2011 to designate its candidate in the 2012 presidential election. Admittedly, it did not propose anything questioning the European Union as such (neither the euro). But he put forward radical proposals to change EU policies (eg, that of "putting immediately the social and fiscal convergence in the agenda of the European Union", which breaks with the dominant consensus in France). And, most importantly, he introduced the idea, new within the Socialist Party, of unilateral measures in France until their generalization at the level the EU (eg, "anti-dumping proceedings, that is to say, mechanisms of unilateral ban - Interim or not - of certain products [from outside the EU] in case of aggression through commercial unfairly low prices. "

These proposals have of course not been adopted by the Socialist Party. But in the election campaign, when the EU became very unpopular because of the austerity policies imposed by the crisis, Francois Hollande has endorsed this idea of "resistance" and challenged arrangements between Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel. Which gave the French official stands, for a while at least, a more critical appearance against the neo-liberal policies of the EU. It may be noted, moreover, without this being of course an absolute guarantee, the strong presence in the present government of personalities having voted in favor of the "No" in 2005, and among them the Foreign Minister (Laurent Fabius) and the Minister for European Affairs (Bernard Cazeneuve). And this while most political "commentators" were convinced that the major European leaders would not accept such a situation!

3. Has the European crisis affected the feelings of the general public and of political forces in your country regarding other countries? How has the Left reacted to this development?

There was a debate, especially about Germany. Criticism of the German position sometimes led, even by leaders of the Left, to verbal blunders which could be understood as forms of Germanophobia. Coming from prominent politicians, such slips have certainly had an impact in public opinion. Arnaud Montebourg has for example called for a harsh confrontation with Angela Merkel, accused of "*killing the euro*," of conducting "*a Bismarck like policy*"² and ensuring that

1 It may be noted as a paradox that this idea is partly inspired by the decision of a right-wing government, that of General de Gaulle, practicing the politics of the empty chair from June 30, 1965 to January 30, 1966 to block decisions in Europe. The crisis was resolved by the Luxembourg compromise in January 1966, which affirmed the necessity of taking a unanimous decision for important votes.

2 In his defense, Arnaud Montebourg said that Sigmar Gabriel, the president of the German Social Democratic Party,

Germany would "*make a fortune*" on "*the ruins*" of other countries in the eurozone. Other leaders of the Left or the Greens have distanced themselves from such statements, that their author has also reduced thereafter.

More broadly, Germany has emerged as the country seeking to export austerity "*as the ultimate financial strength*" (Daniel Cohn-Bendit), conducting a selfish policy for its own interests. In the internal debate in France, Nicolas Sarkozy has appeared as an "accomplice" of the German government and its policy, but as a dominated accomplice, while himself claimed discussing with her on an equal footing.

4. To what extent the current crisis modified the relations of political representation between the social classes, protest movements and the party system in your country? What is the position of the Left in the new political landscape? Did it manage to broaden its social bases?

One of the most striking phenomena of recent years, already evident before the onset of the current crisis, is the loss of confidence of large sections of the electorate in the ability of political parties to really change things. In part, this is obviously a reflection of the ideological campaign of the Liberals for thirty years on the theme : There is no alternative. From this perspective, the economy is seen as the motor of history, the political decision is assumed to have little influence on the "laws" of economy, considered being "natural". This skepticism concerning the effectiveness of political action is certainly one reason for abstaining becoming stronger, even in elections where it is traditionally the weakest, that is to say for presidential election³. This trend seems to be even more pronounced in the lower classes.

But it is also reflected by the fact that "*sortir les sortants*" (*get the former ones out*) emerged as a strong motivation for Francois Hollande voters in 2012. Investigation revealed that 55% of them wanted to "throw Nicolas Sarkozy out", against 45% saying they wanted Francois Hollande becoming President. In the electorate of Sarkozy, the opposite was true: the rejection of Holland (46%) proved lower than adherence to the candidate (54%). That said, the correlation between social categories and voting is still a reality. Among workers and employees, the result of Jean-Luc Melenchon is actually 13% according to various surveys, as against only 11.1% of all voters (ie + 17%). For Francois Hollande, this over-representation is also true, though less (57.5% among workers and employees against 52% for the electorate as a whole, or + 10%).

The links between social movements, trade unions and left-wing political parties were rather strengthened. This is a fairly constant phenomenon in France when the government is right-wing led, especially if it has been for a long time and if thus the disappointments of the time when the Left ruled (for the last time, between 1997 and 2002) a little blurred . The main union, the CGT, was rather distancing itself from the left political parties since the 1990s. This time, for the first time in years, it has openly called for "turning Sarkozy out". Many of its activists have actively participated in the election of Jean-Luc Melenchon, including its national campaign council.

The Left Front has become, by far, the main force left of the Socialist Party. It has expanded its social base, the result of Jean-Luc Melenchon in the presidential election (11.1% of the votes cast) being the best ever obtained by the radical Left since 1981 (then about 15% for the Communist

had himself compared Merkel and Bismarck. But it is clear that this reference does not arouse the same feelings in both countries. In France, it plays on old nationalist resentments, dating from the nineteenth century and the lost war against the "Prussians" in 1871 (and of the crushing of the Commune for the Left).

3 There are at least six different political elections (municipalities, counties, regions, national legislative, presidential, European), each with their own schedule, without possible grouping together in general. Abstention rates vary according to the type of election: around 20% for the presidential election, 40% for the legislative elections, regional and district (county), over 50% for the European elections in average.

Party). Yet, it was greeted with some disappointment. The polls were indeed much more favorable (more than 15% over the last weeks of the campaign). The explanation for this difference is to seek at least in part in the so-called "useful vote», a concept launched by the Socialist Party in favor of voting for Francois Hollande and relayed by many media. Added to this first cause of disappointment, the fact that Marine Le Pen, the National Front candidate, got 18%, while Jean-Luc Melenchon had made National Front a target of his campaign and hoped to precede it in the vote.

The legislative elections resulted in a relative weakening of the Left Front, which has lost nearly half of its members to keep only 10 members of the National Assembly (out of about 600). This is an effect of the electoral system, the results being on average better than in 2007, both in number of votes and percentage terms. But these results make it difficult for the Left Front to really influence the decisions through Parliament, the Socialists having an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly (and also the majority, with their allies in the Senate, the Second Chamber of French Parliament). In this sense, and in an ultimately paradoxical way, there is the risk that the radical Left and through it the anti-liberal forces being permanently weakened in the new political landscape (where Greens have abandoned any real decision-making autonomy by making an election deal with the PS, which ensures certainly a place in government and parliamentary representation much higher than the score obtained by their candidate, Eva Joly, but no guarantee of being able to influence really). Hence, in the next future, the importance of extra-parliamentary activities and alliances with social movements for this purpose.

5. In what way the European crisis affected the political relations between the key players of the Left (parties, trade unions, movements) in your country? Is there a shift in the relations between the Left, Social Democracy and the Greens? If yes in what direction?

The links between key players have tended to strengthen. It should however be borne in mind that the French political situation has been marked in recent years by two related but not identical phenomena: the crisis on the one hand, as in all European countries, and secondly the exceptional unpopularity of the Sarkozy-Fillon government, who in 2007 took steps systematically favoring the richest and who has frequently put trade unions before a fait accompli, in defiance of social dialogue (traditionally already not so much developed in France). Weakness of the unions (less than 5% of union members in private sector, only 8% on average by counting the public) was thus no longer compensated by their institutional recognition in the context of this dialogue. A similar phenomenon occurred with the associative sector, whose grants have been systematically reduced (which is certainly also an effect of budgetary constraints at all levels related to the crisis). Moreover, the way Nicolas Sarkozy has held his position from the beginning (the *bling-bling* president, displaying his relations with the very rich and boasting of uninhibited relationship with money and social classes who possess it) has catalyzed a wide opposition, with a partly symbolic content (eg was criticized Nicolas Sarkozy for the deny of the constraints of the presidential function, the public display of his private life, etc..)

The downside is that this opposition to Sarkozy took place on a negative way (rejection of Nicolas Sarkozy) and not, for example, for alternatives to liberalism. A clear divide remains between the new socialist / green majority as it prepares to accept the European pacts and thus to continue the austerity and the Left Front, which refuses. As was stated in the answer to question 4, The Greens have passed an electoral pact with the Socialist Party, which ensures a better parliamentary representation but at the cost of some loss of autonomy. The Left Front has refused to participate in the Ayrault government, although it campaigned for Francois Hollande in the second round. Its members of Parliament therefore are not part of the parliamentary majority but said they would not make systematic opposition. They came to abstain in the recent vote of confidence for the government. This question is being debated in the Left Front. The position of the Communist Party is a bit ambiguous. It may seem difficult indeed to understand the difference between government

majority, left-wing majority in Parliament and parliamentary majority. One feels there a difficulty to disengage from his old demons. Does that mean that the party is struggling to abandon its old alliance with the Socialist party and the role of stimulus he sought to play, sometimes but rarely with real results? Time will tell if the Left Front is able to adopt a more dialectical and leave a binary conception of a majority / opposition system. For now, what dominates is the willingness to take an autonomous position regarding the socialist majority and its Social Democrat partners. That means without sacrificing the freedom to act and without adhering to a presidentialist model of policy making, bringing down the government's and the majority's agenda to the program that Francois Hollande presented alone in the first round of the presidential election of May 2012.

Organizationally, the Left Front continues to strengthen, especially with the arrival of various groups leaving an NPA in crisis.

6. Faced with the European Crisis what kind of national strategy is the Left in your country favoring along with other political forces, trade-unions and social movements at the national level? Is this national strategy related, and in what way, to a strategy for the transformation of Europe?

The prevailing idea in the Left is that the main cause of the crisis in Europe, is the policies that the EU has been waging for years. It denies the thesis that the EU crisis would be the simple consequence of a global crisis in which it has no responsibility.

The Left therefore seeks to bring together in the country as many as possible forces (political parties, trade unions, associations) to oppose these policies, including by refusing to implement it on the national level, unilaterally if necessary. The word "resistance" is often used in this regard with all the strength it has in the French political imagination since the 39-45 war.

This idea of resistance (or disobedience, which "will spread out in the EU and the Eurozone", as specified in the programme of the Left Front), possibly in one country in the beginning, combines with the conviction that such an attitude would provoke a salutary shock and would be relayed in Europe and in other countries. In this sense, it is thus also a part of a transformative strategy at European level.

The European strategy is based on the refusal of the Lisbon Treaty and the proposal of "Etats généraux for the refoundation of Europe" gathering all available political and social forces in Europe.

7. Crisis has fuelled the claim that transformation and emancipation is not possible within the EU. Is this view shared by the parties of the Left in your country? What are the arguments pro and contra and what is your personal view on the matter?

Here we find again the dividing line mentioned in the previous questions. The Socialist / Green Alliance is built around a political programme that is certainly different from the programme of the Right by its attention to justice in all areas. But this programme is designed by the parties concerned in the framework of the EU pacts and directives. The Left Front believes on the contrary that it is this framework that is in question because it is under the influence of financial markets. Hence his demand for refounding Europe, which reflects the belief that empowerment and transformation are possible and depend on political decisions, not on the supposed constraints of the intangible economy.

8. Some intellectuals and parties of the Left claim that the crisis has proved that the ruling elites (classes) of Germany and France are imposing an imperialist policy on all EU countries and especially those of the European periphery. Do the parties of the Left in your country agree with

this view? What are the arguments pro and contra and what is your personal view?

In the French Left, the view is not quite that one. Left intellectuals and economists think rather that the economic and social policy implemented for several years in Germany (and initiated by the Schröder government) has created imbalances, particularly in trade, which are now a major cause of the crisis in Europe. These imbalances are the direct cause of loss of competitiveness in most other countries, including France. The Left is therefore rather reproaching Nicolas Sarkozy for not having done enough to resist the German influence.

Were it some imperialism within the EU, it would rather be an imperialism of the countries of the "North", those "of the South" and the periphery being in a dominated situation. France, for its part, would be in an intermediate position.

The apparent symmetry of the term "Franco-German Tandem" and that of "Merkozy" are therefore misleading and hide the fact that Sarkozy has consistently lost to the German positions at the expense of the French economy.

9. Is there an emergence of an anti-systemic sentiment in the political system of your country? If yes how is it expressed? To what extent is this sentiment fuels the far Right? Analyze the position and strategy of your party towards anti- systemic politics?

It seems necessary to clarify what is meant here by anti-systemic and, therefore, what system is put into question. The answers given here suppose that it is the parties system and the institutional system in general.

In this sense, the anti-systemic definitely seems stronger. Prove of it, for example and among other causes, is the rise of abstention in the elections. But it can take different political expressions.

According to researchers who have studied the issue, this feeling is reflected in what may be termed an *ethical skepticism* within popular classes: politicians are criticized for lack of ethics, that is to say being only concerned by themselves, being selfish, etc. It may be noted here also a form of naivety. This means in effect that it would be enough to have better politicians (from a moral point of view) and problems of the working classes would disappear.

In other parts of society, particularly the intermediate classes, investigations at election time are rather highlighting what researchers call a *political skepticism*. It is not the same as the previous one and does not have the same effects. It leads to a somewhat nomadic vote and a type of electoral vote which can be called *effective*: we do not believe too much on the ability of political parties to really change things, thus we are voting for parties that are most likely to win elections. Which plays objectively in favor of the ruling parties! This notion of *effective* voting should not be confused with that, often cited in France, of *useful* voting, already mentioned and directly coming from the 2002 presidential election that saw the National Front's candidate exceed (eliminate) the Socialist candidate. To prevent this from happening again, one should vote *useful*, that is to say socialist, even if you prefer for example the Left Front. Needless to say, the Socialist Party handles this argument in every election since 2002. The Left Front rightly sees the *useful* vote as an obstacle to its own electoral development.

It seems likely that, in popular circles, skepticism towards the political system may lead to vote for the National Front. But that does not mean that these voters share the values of the National Front. Surveys show that the National Front candidates are sometimes favorably considered in popular circles, on behalf of the fact that they have «clean hands», having never participated in any government. Voting for them would therefore have to do with saying: "These are the only ones we

have not tried."

Even if it differs from the dominant system marked by an alternation in power between conservatives and socialists, the radical Left does not benefit from this prejudice, having already in various forms, participated in government (and holding in positions of power at regional or local levels, where its representatives sit in managing bodies).

To the Left Front, reducing this anti-systemic feeling, that is to say rehabilitate politics (and political leaders), is obviously of vital importance, especially to regain the electorate that should be its natural support. Several ways can be envisaged for it. Relaying popular demands in one of it. But experience shows that unfortunately this is not enough to convince (or even simply to be listened to). Focus on popular education (including political education) through party structures but also various intermediate structures (education associations, etc..) is another way, which will probably be given greater importance in the future in the political activity of the Left Front.

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