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FRANCE AND MACRON'S EUROPE

- Économiste, auteur - Politique -



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As French President Emmanuel Macron enters his fifth month in office, journalist Benjamin Joyeux talks to Green economist and philosopher Alain Lipietz. What is the current state of play in France and what is Macron's vision for Europe, and whether there is space for alternative and progressive pro-European forces?

After Brexit, and the victory of Donald Trump, many were predicting a populist wave sweeping over Europe, with France the next victim. Can Macron's victory then be interpreted as a European surge in France?

Indeed! The European question will have been the 'hidden face' of this presidential election, and most French people chose not to follow Brexit. Are they eurosceptics? Yes, and with good reason: Europe has to keep on demonstrating its superiority over old national solidarities. Europhobes? Well, no, but it's only a 'no to the No to Europe'.

The 'No to Europe' was expressed by two populist candidates, Marine le Pen on the Right, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the Left. Let's be clear, though: 'populist' refers to a kind of politics defined as the claiming of a direct relationship between a leader and 'the people'. Emmanuel Macron is also a populist, 'against the system', but ... pro-European.

Marine le Pen, with her working-class support, was the more radical: "We are leaving the Euro and Europe". Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with his more educated supporters, was more subtle: "We plan to return the European Union to simple international co-operation, returning monetary sovereignty to nation-states, and if they refuse, our plan B is Frexit".

These positions hit a glass ceiling a fortnight before the first round of the election: they were making no more progress in the opinion polls. Any one of the four leading candidates, neck and neck in the polls, could have won. A vote for le Pen or Mélenchon was thus no longer a 'message' to the 'elite', but a decision to trigger Frexit for real. And, after reflection, voters concluded 'In that case, it's No', and voted Macron.

Macron, without having run a specifically pro-European campaign, thus appeared like an insurance against Frexit.

Are Emmanuel Macron's European plans, particularly for the economy (Eurozone budget, European Minister for the Economy and Finance, a core of basic European social rights), and defence, sufficient - and above all credible - in the eyes of partners like Germany, for a successful re-launch of the EU?

Macron did not announce a European politically mobilising programme, one that would be tackling the democratic crisis (strengthening parliament, majority voting, simplification of referenda by popular initiative). For this, the ideal of a federal Europe, and the primacy of European sovereignty over national administrations, would have to be accepted. Sadly, security policy is still the only common 'mobilising' policy he has mentioned ... not a green and social transition.

He has in his sights, with good reason, the social dumping that is resulting from the Posted Workers Directive, which now leaks like a sieve. In substance, he is right to oppose the Polish government, but he is putting grandstanding before the patient work of gaining a majority at the European Council and Parliament, thereby pushing Polish public opinion into the arms of its nationalist government.

He is adopting a two-speed Europe, the 'core' being the Eurozone, naturally including southern Europe, which is after all pretty substantial! A two-speed Europe is doubtless a heart-breaking prospect for europhiles, but, as I see it, it is

simply about those countries which wish to, going further, and the non-euro countries keeping to the current 'Acquis Communautaire' (body of European Union law). Poland would hence no longer act as a brake, but would remain subject to the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Yes, we need a substantial 'federal' Eurozone budget, but Macron is obscuring the fact that this would necessitate borrowing capacity, massive inter-regional transfers, and social and environmental objectives imposed by the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Investment Bank. It would also take judicious cancelling of some of southern Europe's debt, and submitting Eurozone mechanisms (particularly European 'solidarity mechanisms') to the same level of democratic control as the EU itself.

More forward-looking budgeting is needed, and to earmark monetary facilities for future investment. But the Germans are against 'on tap' facilities for governments considered to be irresponsible and demagogic, and want a rule based regime and perhaps independent institutions. It is doubtless possible to negotiate a compromise with German public opinion by establishing criteria for ecological transition, defined by the European Parliament and imposed on the European Investment Bank, which would be the exclusive beneficiary of the ECB's 'monetary laxity', and the authorising power for budget transfers.

Which are the main obstacles, on the European and international scale, that the French president must overcome, and how can this be done to bring about the sort of politics for France and Europe that is up to the enormous challenges of the 21st century, in particular climate change and the refugee crisis?

Prioritising problems is part of the problem! You rightly leave out 'Islamist terrorism' which Macron declared his 'number one priority'. It is a priority, but not number one. And you forget the other global ecological crisis: food and health, with the worrying example of hormone disruptors.

We are indeed facing a two-fold global crisis: a crisis of liberalism, and a crisis of productivism. The first has both financial and social aspects (social and fiscal dumping), not to mention the clearing up of past extravagances, and the resulting hidden bankruptcies (Greece). The second has two dimensions: energy/climate (as well as nuclear and biofuel crises), and food/health (famines, junk food, and chemical pollution). They can only be resolved at an international level, starting at the European scale.

There are also historical legacies which are fuelling the new wave of nationalism, leading to wars, and resulting 'refugee crises'. And tomorrow's crises are already looming: ageing populations and plummeting biodiversity.

A great deal can be done locally. Macron could encourage the existing 'transition town' and 'resilient city' movements. In the light of its own population crisis, Germany has understood the benefits of an influx of adult migrants, who have been so brutally 'selected' along the way, and are amongst the best qualified and most assertive in the world. France did not, Poland even less so. Hence it is first and foremost a crisis of identity issue on the part of host countries.

Nevertheless, a great federalist leap forward in Europe would facilitate all these solutions, and in some cases be indispensable. But the fact that 'Nonism' was defeated at the presidential election (though let's not forget that the 'No' campaign did gain more than 40% of the votes!), does not mean that the French are ready for this. To do more, and greater, things in Europe, we must first create Europeans. This is the responsibility of Macron, but also of ecologists, in uncompromising dialogue with what remains of the Left. It is also the responsibility of the media, and large Green and Trade Union organisations, which are pro-Union at the European level, but in France are not challenging the nationalist 'sovereignism' of their members. And, finally, it is the responsibility of the EU: it must demonstrate daily that it is 'worthy of being loved'.

Finally, faced with a very pro-European, but clearly economically neo-liberal, French president, what place is there in Europe for an alternative force which is pro-European but deeply critical of the current economic orthodoxy? What, for instance, do you think of the approach of someone like Yanis Varoufakis? What role can ecologists play between now and the 2019 European elections?

The key issue is that if we are not to conflate euroscepticism (politically and methodologically legitimate) with europhobia, we must no longer defend Europe by repeating that "without Europe we can't do anything", or, in particular, "without Europe we cannot oppose other countries' social, fiscal, or environmental dumping". For if we defend a Europe which cannot even protect against dumping between its own member states (not to mention dumping from other countries, which we can only counter with a strong and exemplary EU seeking support from social forces within those countries), people will continue to slip from "Why defend that Europe?" to "Why defend Europe at all?", until the europhobes emerge victorious.

You are right to emphasise that before criticising 'that Europe', let's start by standing up to 'that France' (Macron's), 'that Germany', and 'that Poland'. There are thousands of areas at the national level where we can counter the economic liberalism and productivism supported by most of Macron's coalition, before we start yelling at liberal Europe. Of course, we are bound to come up against the argument "If other European countries reduce protection for workers and the environment, France will lose jobs and competitiveness". And this is where we see the need for 'more Europe', a Europe where Europeans decide the rules together, and thus a more federal Europe than the one we see today.

But we mustn't focus right from the start on the necessary institutional reforms. On the contrary, we must focus on reforming content, and on the resourcing of the European project:

"Believing that Europe, reunited after bitter experiences, intends to continue along the path of civilisation, progress, and prosperity, for the good of all its inhabitants, including the weakest and most deprived; that it wishes to remain a continent open to culture, learning and social progress; and that it wishes to deepen the democratic and transparent nature of its public life, and to strive for peace, justice and solidarity throughout the world, Convinced that, while remaining proud of their own national identities and history, the peoples of Europe are determined to transcend their ancient divisions and, united ever more closely, to forge a common destiny, Convinced that, thus "united in its diversity", Europe offers them the best chance of pursuing, with due regard for the rights of each individual and in awareness of their responsibilities towards future generations and the Earth, the great venture which makes of it a special area of human hope ..."

And what was that? It was the preamble from the 2005 draft treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (eliminated in the feeble Lisbon Treaty), expressing the 'Yes Europe' that we must work to win back.

The question which therefore arises, for ecologists as for all socially progressive forces, is of the balance of power within Europe. In *Stratégie ouvrière et néocapitalisme*, the book he wrote in 1964 (just seven years after the Treaty of Rome!), André Gorz, who would become well-known as one of the key political ecology thinkers, had already got it: workers' movements either focus political action at the European level, or are crushed. That is where we are now.

For Greens, the meaningful dimension was already the planetary dimension, well before the first global crises (acid rain and the ozone layer). But, of course, the perverse effects of competition, and the necessity for taking the power struggle between labour and capital to the global level, imposes (even more than for the socialist movement) the need for a European politics that above all fosters public opinion that is pro-ecology and pro-social. For, as the Brundtland Report stated so clearly when it defined Sustainable Development, we must take as our benchmark the condition of the poorest, thus placing social matters at the heart of ecology.

The struggle by the Tsipras government and its minister Yannis Varoufakis to spare the Greek people the inhumane treatment imposed not by the IMF (who constantly argued for the fullest possible cancellation of the debt), but by the Commission, and the ECB, is admirable. Many of their Syriza party activists had previously split from the Greek Communist Party precisely because of their pro-European sympathies. We must also welcome the unfailing loyalty of the Greeks towards the European ideal, despite the hell which its real-life institutions have put them through. And in particular the loyalty of Varoufakis, who is keeping the flame alive for a pro-European eco-socialism, and did not hesitate to tackle Mélenchon's 'France Insoumise' (France Unbowed) during the French presidential election, going as far as to reveal the discrete support he received from Macron, then French Minister for the Economy, at the height of the confrontation with the 'Troïka'.

This 'eco-socialist pro-European' position held by Varoufakis is a real political magnet, probably shared by a broad section of European trade union movements and environmental organisations (see their unanimous positions against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP), and doubtless also by religious organisations (see Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*). This attractive vision simply requires expression as a political platform, which can only be realised by the European Green Party. The Right, along with the traditional Left, are torn between a pretty pathetic europhilia ('Let's not mention it - that's divisive'), uncritical euro-worship ('Any Europe is better than no Europe'), and euroscepticism contained in europhobia ('The Europe we have today is more and more unpopular - let's follow the lead of voters').

As for the new forces, such as France Insoumise or Podemos, whose progressive discourses go hand in hand with explicit claims to be 'populist' (i.e. seeking to rally 'the people' around a leader, in opposition to an 'enemy'), we must distinguish between them. Some have chosen as their enemy 'the elite', which is indeed understandable: responsibility for the maintenance of the productivist model is universally, but very unequally, shared. Others have chosen as their adversary Europe herself, a strategy that can but fail. But, even with the latter, common struggles and common public policies can, at local or national level, work for democracy, solidarity, and the environment. It is for us to show them that the difficulties encountered in these struggles, in these public policies, would have more chance of succeeding within the framework of a Europe that is more united and more ecological - and therefore more federal.

For political ecology conflicts with populism, in that it doesn't build 'its people' around the creation of an enemy (as in the strategy going back to the Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt), but, in contrast, through a 'politics of goodwill', which consists of rallying friends, more friends, and allies. Diehard enemies of ecology exist - of course! - but in the politics of goodwill, the enemy is what is left when the circle of friends has got as wide as it can get. 'Unite progressives for ecology and solidarity, rally the undecided, and isolate the hardliners' - this should be our tactic.

Post-scriptum :

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