

The French Socialist Party

Taking Stock

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The French Socialist Party's primaries to select its candidate for the presidential election promised to be a close race. Nevertheless, the victory of Benoît Hamon, a prominent figure in the Socialist Left since the turn of the millennium, was far from expected. It represents a sea change within a divided and weakened Socialist Party.

Much Wavering

Benoît Hamon's nomination draws the curtain on a long period of evolution that began at the start of the 1980s; it may also mark the end of the Socialist Party established by François Mitterrand at the Épinay congress in June 1971. That year, the majority that united around the former leading light of the Fourth Republic completed the transition that had begun two years previously, after the disastrous presidential elections which had seen the official Socialist candidate, Gaston Defferre, garner a paltry 5% of the vote. This electoral scandal led to the demise of the old French Section of the Workers' International, which was to be replaced by the "new Socialist Party".

Mitterrand's Socialism turned its back on the centrist policies of the "third force" that had been in place since the first stirrings of the Cold War. The continuing electoral success of the Communist Party, a renewed Right-Left polarization encouraged by the new regime of the Fifth Republic, and vigorous pay disputes (which made themselves felt in the strikes of May and June 1968) rendered the old system obsolete.

Mitterrand therefore brought in a leftist discourse: "those who do not agree to break [...] with capitalist society, those people, I tell you, they cannot be members of the Socialist Party" (Mitterrand, at the Epinay Congress). At the same time, he initiated dialogue with the Communists in order to draft a Common Programme for government, which was signed in June 1972.

We know that, in spite of the Communists' hopes, it was the Socialist Party which immediately benefitted from the signing of that document – even though the Communist party alone that had been calling for it since 1962. In the presidential, and then parliamentary, elections of 1981, Mitterrand's strategy came up trumps: the Socialist Party won a solid victory and was more successful than its Communist allies for the first time since 1936. He wasted no time in shifting political course. In 1982, after being seduced by a “different politics”, meaning a break with the monetarism that was dominant in Europe, Mitterrand decided to commit the government to a policy of austerity: of reducing public spending in an effort to fight inflation.

Initially, the policy was presented by some Socialists as temporary, in the spirit of Léon Blums “pause” [in social reforms] in February 1937. Very soon, however, this temporary austerity turned into a structural methodology, one justified by the limitations of the international climate. In this way, France's Socialist government, born of the “union of the Left”, turned out to be one of the first governments to internalise the international triumph of neoliberalism that had been set in motion by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

But unlike British Socialism, which experimented the “social-liberal” route, French Socialism retained the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of its discourse during the “pink wave” of the first half of the 1970s. In the run-up to the 1988 presidential elections, François Mitterrand did attempt to force an overarching return to the centre (this is what was put forward in his “Letter to the French People”, which launched his electoral campaign). But while this strategy aided him to victory against the Right in the second round of the presidential elections, it was not accepted by left-wing voters at the next parliamentary elections.

For several years, French Socialism took pains to emphasise that it was different from Tony Blair's New Labour model. In 1997, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin launched his slogan: “Yes to the market economy, no to the market society”. The Socialist Party, which had never endorsed the ideas of the 1959 Godesberg Programme of the German Social Democrats, intended to remain faithful to a balance anchored in the tradition of moderate regulation of post-war European social democracy.

But abject failure in the 2002 presidential elections (which saw the Prime Minister knocked out in the first round) created major upheaval. The inroads made by the Right, which had radicalised around Nicolas Sarkozy, gave rise to the idea of a Socialism that was less markedly leftist. Ségolène Royal's 2007 presidential bid lent momentum to this change of heart, which was supported by a large section of French Socialism. But the experience of

2007 turned out to be fragile: in 2008, an attempt by Ségolène Royal's supporters to install her as party leader failed – narrowly – amidst clear indications of vote-tampering. It was then a figure from the Socialist Left, Martine Aubry, who became Party leader. The upper echelons of the Socialist Party performed a balancing act, with a leftist discourse but a practical strategy of cautiously courting globalisation.

The Turning Point in 2012

On the face of things, the 2012 presidential elections did not look as though they would shake the political landscape. Former Socialist Party leader François Hollande was far removed from the Left of the party, but he worked hard to distance himself from the social-liberal wing embodied by Manuel Valls. He was trying to perform a balancing act. Spectacularly, in his first campaign speech in January 2012, he chose to mark himself out as a leftist (“My enemy is finance.”). Nonetheless, he gave an important position on his campaign team to his rival in the primaries, Manuel Valls, who had, however, been broadly rejected by grass-roots Socialists and sympathisers.

In fact, he was biding his time, waiting to take office. It was this new mandate, from 2012, that marked the decisive change. François Hollande decided to put an end to the ambiguity at the heart of the French Socialist Party and rally behind the prevailing wisdom of European Socialism, in the tradition of Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, and, nearer still, Matteo Renzi. In 2014, after disastrous local elections, he even decided to force change: he replaced Jean-Marc Ayrault with Manuel Valls as Prime Minister – intriguingly, with the support of part of the Left, including Arnaud Montebourg and.... Benoît Hamon. Competitiveness for business, a flexible labour market, reducing the public deficit, limiting government spending, and accepting the “state of war” and “stable order” became the new pillars of a “Socialism of supply”.

This policy destabilised opinion on the Left, radicalized the Right, and enabled a massive breakthrough by the National Front. In spite of the collapse of his public image and catastrophic ratings, Hollande was banking on the incumbent's advantage and hoped for an economic upturn that would enable him to defeat the rival he expected to face in 2017, Nicolas Sarkozy. History decided otherwise. The favourites in the opinion polls for the Right, Alain Jupé and Nicolas Sarkozy, were knocked out in the first round of the primaries. François Hollande, hopeless in the face of rock-bottom ratings, announced his withdrawal, and Emmanuel Valls faced a reinvigorated Left represented in the primaries by the trio from

2003: Benoît Hamon, Arnaud Montebourg and Vincent Peillon. And just like in the right-wing primaries, it was the “third man”, Benoît Hamon, who emerged victorious, with a little under 59% of the vote. The brutal shift forced through by the Élysée and Matignon had failed.

A Game-Changer?

The outcome of the Socialist primaries is certainly put into perspective by the fact that turnout was significantly lower than in 2011 (1.7 million vs. 2.7 million in the first round; 2 million vs. 2.9 million in the second). But the victory of the left-winger is, undoubtedly, a turning point – similar to the victory of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK or the changes in the Portuguese Socialist Party. It is an extension of the failure of Matteo Renzi (who had made a show of his closeness to Manuel Valls) in Italy. Once-dominant social liberalism is now treading water in three major Western European countries.

But can we really call this a game-changer? It is still too early to say. Benoît Hamon’s victory must be tempered by several factors. First of all, it was thanks to the votes of the grass roots and sympathisers. The exit polls suggest that the party faithful were more in favour of the former Prime Minister. Not only that, but just like in the UK, we can see a very clear-cut distinction between the establishment (party staff and elected representatives) and the grass-roots. Is this gap as large as that in the UK, which might imply that Benoît Hamon has a good chance of taking control of the party after the elections? As yet, there is no clear indication.

Finally, the shift towards the Left is happening in the aftermath of a major haemorrhaging of grass-roots supporters. At the end of 2006, the Socialist Party had 280,000 registered supporters. In late 2013, there were only 170,000 left, and then only 130,000 by mid-2015. In late 2016, the Socialist Party officially declared that it had between 120,000 and 130,000 registered supporters, but that only slightly more than 40,000 had kept up with paying their membership fees. Attentive observers have been saying for some time now that the Socialist Party (and it is not alone in this respect) is no longer a party of the people, but one of graduates, city-dwellers and public sector staff who are open to globalization and to running regions. Will a strategic change of course swap one exodus for another, changing the social make-up of the party? Here, too, nothing is certain.

In fact, the Hamon vote will develop based on factors that depend on more than just the wishes of the candidate himself. Fundamentally, he is emblematic of the compromise position that continues to prevail in the French Socialist party. Since the turn of the millennium, he has been an imposing figure on the Left; but he was involved in the governmental experiment of

2012 and he was even played a part in installing Manuel Valls' government, serving as a minister for several months. Having won the primaries, he must now also show that he can unite all Socialists, not just those further to the Left. He has therefore taken pains, while criticizing the government's record, to explain that it is not indefensible.

This balance will also undoubtedly have an impact on the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Currently, it appears that most of the candidates selected by the Socialist Party have been active supporters of government policy, far removed from the attitude of rebel Socialist deputies. If, in the face of a disoriented Right, Hamon managed to win the first round and be elected in the second, he would then have to pursue a major policy shift with a parliamentary majority that would not be on board.

Indeed, his victory in the primaries has not solved the structural problem which has dogged the Socialist Party for several months. Those who voted for the president in 2012 are now divided into three groups: the Socialist candidate needs to address, to his right, the centre-leaning supporters of Emmanuel Macron, and, to his left, the supporters of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who drew 11% of the vote in 2012. But even if he manages to rally the votes of the Greens and benefits from a degree of support from the Communist Party (which, with some reservations, supports Mélenchon), he will have to face up to this double competition – one rendered even more challenging by the not insignificant body of support for Manuel Valls and François Hollande that could vote for Manuel Valls' former Finance Minister Macron

Everything will, then, depend on the balance of electoral power, and, first and foremost, of that in the first round. If Hamon comes out on top of the trio, then this will bolster his mandate for a change of course, and give him every chance of winning the party leadership race. If he manages to outdo Mélenchon, then he will demonstrate that he can rally the whole of the Left and that Mélenchon's plan to "unite the people" was a mirage. If, though, he ends up coming third, then he will have proven that a compromise is not capable of reviving French Socialism.

Which of these scenarios comes to pass will define the very future of the political playing field. Specifically, what will be at stake over the next few months is a sustainable balance for the Left in a time of unprecedented political crisis.