

Mélenchon, “La France Insoumise”, populism: questions about the 2016-2017 electoral cycle and its implications

Thursday 20 July 2017, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2017).

This piece was written for the German monthly *Sozialistische Zeitung (SOZ)*, and so its target audience are foreign readers not expected to know a great deal about the situation in France. It’s also my way of wading into the debate on the recent elections and the campaign waged by Jean-Luc Mélenchon on behalf of the *La France Insoumise* (“France Unbowed”) movement. The debate covers a range of important questions, especially around the notion of “populism”, and I hope it will continue.

Note: written just after the recent round of elections, this article is now clearly out of date. In any case, its aim was not to provide a comprehensive overview. La France Insoumise is holding a convention in October; that should be the occasion for a more open discussion on the questions raised by this novel experience in French politics.

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Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s presidential and legislative campaign this year was different from the previous ones. There was a huge change in the relationship to political parties in general and to his former Left Front allies in particular. It’s important to understand the reasons for this change, as well as the implications and the specific context in which it took place.

First, let’s take a quick look at who Mélenchon is. He called on voters to “get rid of” traditional politicians, successfully skirting over the fact that he himself is a rather caricatural example of such figures. He was a member of the ‘Lambertists’, a current of Trotskyist background with a symbiotic relationship to the apparatuses of Social Democracy, the Freemasons and the Force Ouvrière trade-union confederation. In this capacity, he was sent into the Socialist Party (PS) in 1976 and built a career there. In 1983, he was elected as a municipal councillor and then to the departmental level. He became a professional politician and didn’t put down roots in any particular constituency; he moved up to the Senate, in a country where senators aren’t elected directly by universal suffrage but indirectly by other elected officials, and then was elected as a member of the European parliament on the PS party list. He was appointed to cabinet in the government of prime minister Lionel Jospin,

who himself had come out of the Lambertists. Only now has he finally been elected directly to the parliament, but only after parachuting himself in to a constituency in Marseilles, the large Mediterranean port city. Lacking local roots, he was still able to lead the left-wing *Gauche Socialiste* current within the PS. This was a genuinely activist current that enabled him to leave the PS in 2008 and found the Left Party (PG).

What are his political points of reference? As I said, he originally comes out of the Lambertist current, not exactly the most democratic strain of French Trotskyism. He didn't burn his bridges with this part of his past but nonetheless fully immersed himself in the Socialist Party. In fact, one of his main points of reference, and perhaps the main one, is François Mitterrand, French president from 1981 to 1995, to whom he was close. He considers Mitterrand to be a political genius. Though somewhat of a loner, Mitterrand was able to take over the PS, turn the Communist Party (PCF) into a junior partner by forging an alliance with it (the Union of the Left), win the presidency and hold on for two seven-year terms (a record for longevity, though not for radicalism!).

Mélenchon feels absolutely no connection at all to the revolutions of the 20th century. It's almost as if they had never taken place. There's before – the Paris Commune, Jean Jaurès; and there's after – for example, Hugo Chavez. It's a huge understatement to say that he feels no empathy whatsoever for my generation's revolutionaries [1].

He is part of a current of opinion that's quite strong in France – one that is simultaneously left-wing on socio-economic questions (public services and so forth) and nationalist. I'll come back to this later.

2012-2017: from presidential ambition to the benches of parliament

What has made Mélenchon tick since he left the PS in 2008? Well, Mélenchon has made Mélenchon tick, and it's not a clever one-liner to say so but rather an important insight into what he believes. He identifies with figures who embody important political change (beginning with Chavez – but also Mitterrand in 1981 after 25 years of right-wing rule in France). It took me some time to get my head around the idea, since it seemed so odd and so foreign to me, but it was indeed Jean-Luc Mélenchon's ambition to become president in the 2012 and 2017 elections. If you haven't understood that, you haven't understood anything. The change in orientation from 2012 to 2017 was tied first and foremost to a sense of *opportunity*. He chooses the character he will play and the political tack that he pursues on the basis of a tactical assessment of the period rather than a strategic project. This is the point *Podemos* citizen-council member Jorge Lago makes in his description of how Mélenchon changed tactics in 2017 after realizing that he had misread the presidential contest (with Fillon winning the right-wing nomination, not Sarkozy; Hamon as the PS candidate, not Valls or Hollande; and Bayrou supporting Macron) [2].

When Mélenchon speaks of a “citizen insurrection”, he means a “revolution through the ballot box”. His aim was to quickly secure the presidency – with the hopes of doing so either in one fell swoop in 2012 or by becoming the “third man” in those elections with a view to winning in 2017. In the event, he came fourth in 2012 – behind National Front (FN) candidate Marine Le Pen. He ran as the candidate of the Left Front (FdG), an electoral alliance between the Left Party (PG), the PCF and the various groups and networks that came together in the *Ensemble!* grouping. With 11.2 percent of votes cast, he took the bulk of “radical Left” votes. This was a respectable result; but in his eyes it was altogether insufficient.

Debates at the time ran along familiar lines, having especially to do with the question of electoral alliances with the PS, on which the PG (Mélenchon) and the PCF disagreed. The PCF has a number

of elected officials whose re-election often depends on reaching agreement with the PS, whereas the PG had very few (and ironically those they did have had been elected while still members of the PS).

In reaction to this initial setback, Mélenchon opted to break free any constraints placed on him by the established parties – free from his allies in the Left Front, but also free from his own party, the PG [3]. He made a “Bonapartist” turn by declaring his candidacy for the presidential election without consulting or negotiating beforehand and by creating his own movement vehicle for the elections, *La France Insoumise* (“France Unbowed”) (LFI). He has aggressively pursued this tack and it’s no longer a matter of rallying forces together (behind him) but rather of *replacing* forces much further afield.

Mélenchon always builds in opposition to something or someone, carefully selecting his target. For many years it was the Front National (FN). He took on Marine Le Pen one-on-one in the 2012 presidential elections and again in the northern constituency of Hénin-Beaumont in the subsequent legislative elections. He lost each time. In 2016-2017 he switched targets. “Kick them all out” became the new rallying cry. In the 2017 legislative elections, he ran in Marseilles – not in a constituency where the FN is strong but rather in one where he had done very well in the first round of the presidential elections and where the outgoing MP (from the PS), Patrick Mennucci, no longer had any hope of being re-elected – going down to defeat along with most PS MPs.

The economic program has not changed qualitatively. It’s essentially a radical Keynesian approach, absent any kind of anti-capitalism, with a far greater emphasis on ecological questions than in the past. Over the months, though, language, symbols and communication techniques did indeed change. Mélenchon has taken a close look at what has worked in other countries, such as Obama’s use of social media and the Sanders campaign in the USA, or the history of *Podemos* in Spain. He has taken stock of the traditional media’s declining influence. He has worked on his image down to the smallest details (such as the clothes he wears on different occasions). He likes PR stunts, such as using holograms to address two rallies simultaneously – an expensive trick that has already been used abroad (contrary to what he has suggested), and especially by Indian prime minister Modi. He works very closely with PR consultants. He is a professional politician, more than at any time in the past.

Facing a threat on the Left from dissident PS candidate Benoit Hamon, he intensified his campaign’s populist profile. Jorge Lago approvingly highlights this turn and only regrets that it came rather late, and for reasons of tactical expediency rather than strategic commitment:

“[Mélenchon’s] campaign has been superbly crafted. For example, the campaign video depicting how France will look in 2018, one year after his election, is really smart because he speaks the language of government and state. [...] The French understand and identify with this kind of language. When I lived in France, the fact that this language of government and state was so widespread among people is one of the things that struck me most. In short, the idea of obliterating the language of the traditional Left and radical-Left shibboleths, and of banishing red flags and certain references from campaign rallies, was executed really well in my view, albeit perhaps a little late in the day.”

Speaking the language of government and state, obliterating the traditional language and shibboleths of the radical Left, banishing red flags, Mélenchon has systematically and deliberately built LFI by breaking with the historic references and symbols of a class identity (and not only of the so-called “traditional Left”). Though promoting the creation of a Sixth Republic, he has fully immersed himself in the Fifth Republic tradition by which the presidential election creates a personal relationship between a man (rarely a woman) and the French people. He has catered to the rejection of political parties, just as Emmanuel Macron has. From this angle, a candidate’s *profile*,

his media brand and what it embodies are more important than the content of the campaign program. Before getting to that, though, a few more words on the elections.

Bouncing back from his defeat in the presidential election, and emboldened by his 19.6 percent score in the first round, Mélenchon called on voters to elect an LFI majority in the legislative elections – which would have made him prime minister, setting the stage for a conflictual cohabitation with the Macron presidency. In the event, LFI's first-round legislative score had a sobering effect even if Mélenchon was happy with his own win in Marseilles.

In the end, having run for the presidency, Mélenchon had to be content with his own election to the lower house and with that of enough fellow LFI candidates to form a parliamentary caucus – LFI has 17 MPs in total and 15 are required to form a caucus. This was actually a better result than what the polls forecast. In fact, all opposition parties gained from a relative demobilization of the Macron electorate in the second round of the lower-house elections. The PCF, for example, won in 11 constituencies and the FN in eight – depriving Mélenchon of the satisfaction of indirect revenge over FN leader Marine Le Pen.

The PCF has formed its own parliamentary caucus, separate from LFI, thanks to the addition of five overseas MPs, who enable it to hit the 15-member cut-off.

The new LFI caucus has positioned itself clearly on the left. Like the PCF, it has made defending the labour code its main focus. It's too early to know how Mélenchon will remould himself or what he will do with *la France Insoumise* (whose remit, in its present form, was time-limited to the election campaign). Still, we can and should look at the recurring features of Mélenchon's orientation and at the implications of the “populist moment” of 2017.

Populist symbolism

Mélenchon often demonstrates a keen sense of political timing. This was the case, for example, when he broke with the Socialist Party in 2008 in order to create the Left Party (PG) and then the Left Front (FG) with the PCF. That same year, we had launched the idea of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and received a very favourable response – a fact which probably hadn't escaped Mélenchon's notice at the time. The NPA could only be built as the outcome of a lengthy and complicated process; whereas the PG was built overnight on the basis of forces already organized within the PS.

The NPA process was initiated at a time when the Left Party (PG) and Left Front (FG) didn't yet exist. But the NPA's actual foundation took place after their creation and when they were very much on the offensive. As a result, the entire dynamic surrounding the launch of the NPA was thrown off kilter.

When the Left Front began to run out of steam (created for purely electoral purposes, it ultimately became an empty shell), Mélenchon tried to break free from the arrangement in a number of ways, in particular by launching the Movement for the Sixth Republic (M6R). At the time, I found this initiative to be completely off the radar, since working-class concerns were primarily socio-economic in nature. Though the M6R itself was stillborn, the idea of the Sixth Republic did get some traction, with the crisis of the Fifth Republic's institutions and the related system of parties going into full-blown crisis in 2017.

Mélenchon is always on the lookout for novelty, and this is certainly one of his qualities. He's also an excellent stage performer, a talent he uses and even abuses. In a presidential system like France's, this is an asset. The PCF was unable to find a candidate that could rival him in this respect, and this

allowed Mélenchon to dominate – and subsequently abandon – the Left Front.

Here we come up against the question of an individual embodying a political future; with a project closely tied up with their own personal fate. I submit that this is the common ground between Mélenchon and the protagonists and theoreticians of Left populism: especially Chantal Mouffe and Ernest Laclau; and Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón.

On the Verso Books website, Chantal Mouffe herself supports Mélenchon as a “radical reformist against a mounting oligarchy” [4]. She makes a careful distinction between the Latin American context (societies with powerful, entrenched oligarchies) and Europe (where the Left-Right divide remains key). But in Europe, too, she argues, it’s a matter of bringing an end to the domination of an oligarchic system, by way of a democratic reconstruction.

One of Mélenchon’s spokespersons and a member of his inner circle, Raquelle Garrido, is less finicky in an interview with *Jacobin* [5]. The watchwords of the 2017 campaign were humanism, populism, patriotism and Constitution. LFI is a “a grassroots citizen movement, our ideology is humanist populism. In many ways we have adopted the populist strategy of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. [Populism] “is a program. It is a demarcation strategy between a ‘them’ [the oligarchy] and an ‘us’ [the people].[...] our movement [...] is intended to build something beyond parties. It has constructed itself by design — really deliberately — as something different from the cartel of parties we had in 2012.” The situation is “ripe” for “what we’re saying — that we need a peaceful solution” to the numerous tensions that run through French society. In 2012, Mélenchon may have appeared “too radical, too subversive”. He now “seems wise”.

It continues to be said of Mélenchon that he is an eternal “Jaurésien” (after the early 20th century French socialist leader Jean Jaurès), maintaining the reference to class but squarely within the reference to the Republic. The election campaign nonetheless saw a deliberate blotting out of the symbols of class-struggle politics. As the weeks went on, red flags vanished, giving way to a sea of French tricolor flags; and the *Internationale* made way for the French national anthem, *The Marseillaise*. The word “humanist”, unqualified, was seen as self-sufficient. Going the way of the hammer and sickle, even the raised fist has been upstaged by the Greek letter *Phi* (φ).

Phi has become the movement’s logo, used everywhere including on ballot papers. There’s some wordplay here (*Phi* sounds like LFI’s usual acronym “FI”, just as Emmanuel Macron’s initials, EM, are the same as those of the *En Marche!* vehicle created to support his presidential run), but much more. *Phi* evokes philosophy, harmony and love and is unburdened by a political past. A symbol of neither Right nor Left. When it comes to harmony, Mélenchon often disrupts things with his deliberately arrogant and contemptuous remarks, but *Phi* remains a neutral marker all the same.

Labour issues were at the heart of the Mélenchon campaign (against stripping workers of labour-code protection; on paycheque and taxation questions; and more), but not social classes as such. The idea of the “99 percent” is about the people against the oligarchs. On repeated occasions, Mélenchon organized the biggest rallies of the campaign season. For the tens of thousands of people in attendance, class identity had been rendered invisible. This will have consequences, since France is among those Western European countries where class identity has been effectively pushed from centre stage to the fragmented margins – much more so, I would argue, than in Belgium or Britain, for example. A win for the neoliberal ideological offensive. In fact, although both come out of a left social-democratic tradition, in this respect Mélenchon is the antithesis of British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

In Left politics, is populism a temporary tactic? For one of the founders of *Podemos*, Juan Carlos Monedero, it should only be used temporarily, during what in Spanish he calls the movement’s “*fase*

destituyente” (“deconstruction phase”) – and then surpassed in the “*fase constituyente*” (“constituent phase”) [6]. He specifically criticizes Íñigo Errejón’s approach:

“Defenders of the ‘populist hypothesis’, and especially Íñigo Errejón, felt that it was enough to mobilize those sectors who could deliver victory and that we shouldn’t raise issues that might lose us votes. That is, that we should only raise abstract matters in order to secure the broadest support possible: country, [the oligarchical] caste and corruption. [The idea] is to empty signifiers, but in fact it’s the very possibility of change that ends up being gutted. When Laclau says that politics and economics are the same thing, he brushes aside the material conditions for class struggle. I think that’s a mistake.”

It’s possible that Mélenchon will opt to resurrect a class-based approach in parliament and not leave it to the PCF alone. Still, and the question can just as well be directed to Monedero, is it really so easy to rebuild something that you have deftly dismantled in the first instance?

“Replacement” and *La France Insoumise*

“Replacement” has become a central part of Mélenchon’s message and political choices. There’s nothing to regret about the death of the PS, which long ago ceased to be a “workers party”. Nor should anyone want to breathe new life into it. If that were all this was about, then “replacement” would be fine and dandy.

However, for Mélenchon the era of parties is finished. So long live the movements! He doesn’t merely take note of the decline of said parties, he actively contributes to their marginalization. This dovetails nicely with the current situation in France, and it’s precisely how Macron and his *En Marche* (now *La République en Marche* — LREM) movement have succeeded.

In the present context, the consequences of this approach might be especially serious. With whom can a coalition of social and democratic resistance against Macron be organized when one’s ambition is to “replace” all of one’s possible party allies? After having carefully separated the field of electoral politics (a matter for politicians) from that of socio-economic action (a matter for trade unions), Mélenchon now appears to be portraying himself and his parliamentary caucus as the natural parliamentary expression of the struggles that the trade-union movement will undertake.

There is an urgent need to unite all resistance forces at the risk of being summarily defeated by the offensive that Macron is preparing around a range of questions – from granting employers more workplace-level powers; to enshrining in ordinary law the temporary measures of the present state of emergency in the country.

The problem is that replacement is the antithesis of unity.

Question: what’s going to happen to *La France Insoumise*? What does it mean to say that the era of (traditional) parties is over?

Mélenchon toys with the notion that it’s possible to circumvent parties, totally marginalizing and shattering them [7]. But he hasn’t explained what will replace them. LFI wasn’t conceived to be a lasting formation but as a temporary instrument for the 2017 elections. It was created in February 2016. No one could join, it was impossible to pay dues and the only thing you could do was make financial contributions for the upcoming elections. Dues imply membership and the rights and responsibilities that go with it. Signing up to the LFI process entailed neither rights nor responsibilities. Nothing is expected of you and you have no formal power.

There were perhaps up to 500,000 Internet clicks of people supporting LFI. That's a lot. Internet users submitted their ideas online. A "synthesis", or program, *l'Avenir en commun* [8] ("Our common future") was posted for approval and about 97 percent of respondents were in favour. Restrictive rules were handed down: LFI support groups were not to have more than 15 members, and shouldn't straddle constituencies or coordinate their work between each other within larger geographic zones. There should be no local LFI conventions or general assemblies. These highly unusual rules (which haven't always been abided by locally) obviously strengthen the authority of top leadership, while not necessarily doing away with the need for electoral horse-trading among different competing internal party-type groupings. Overall, horizontal functioning was at once very informal and circumscribed, with tight vertical control by the core leadership.

Activist teams were established, often at the initiative of the top leadership, and took on a number of tasks – in particular doing an excellent job of getting out the LFI message on social media. While there have been analogies to the Spanish party *Podemos*, it's not quite so simple. We didn't have a mass movement on the same scale in France and there was no space within LFI for a founding organization like the Spanish far-Left group *Anticapitalistas*.

The core leadership group was drawn from the Left Party (PG). There's an all-in-the-family feel to it, with people who have a long history together. Some of them are now LFI members of parliament, some of whom had been LCR/NPA members before getting involved in the *Ensemble!* group.

Close identification to the leader has given rise to highly sectarian forms of behaviour from the Mélenchon fan club, which swarms together against any criticism online, to the point where their targets' online accounts have occasionally been blocked. Mélenchon himself is no fan of criticism. I really want to stress this point because it's part of a deplorable trend on the radical Left, where debates on substantive issues are mediocre at best and demonization has become commonplace. Disagreement is seen as illegitimate as soon as it touches upon a "sensitive" question.

So that's how things have gone so far, but where are we headed? Mélenchon and the tight-knit group around him have to spell out the kind of lasting movement they hope to build. And they have to explain how the pluralism of society will be expressed if, as they have argued, it is not meant to do so via the plurality of parties.

It's not hard to see why parties have been discredited. It's not because of Macron or Mélenchon. The PS in particular self-destructed under the recently concluded Hollande presidency. And nor should the PCF and far-Left blame their own failures on anyone else. The same goes for the parties of the Right. But what must we (re)build now?

LFI's social roots are very shallow. It would be quite ironic were it to make the same hegemonic claims as the PCF used to during its Stalinist phase. Long-time PCF member and faithful Mélenchon supporter Roger Martelli raises this very question in decidedly measured terms [9]:

"Like the PCF in its heyday, La France Insoumise could very well choose to argue that there is no space outside its ranks for politics that are both realistic and revolutionary. Yet at a time of crisis and reconfiguration, where broad regrouping and collective invention are the order of the day, it is advisable to steer clear of any approach that in one way or another appears to call on other forces to pledge allegiance."

The people and patriotism

Mélenchon sings the praises of France and always has. He sings the praises of France as global

power, spanning all the world's seas and oceans. He wants France to quit NATO – but “à la Charles de Gaulle”, in order better to defend its interests and prestige around the world.

This has nothing to do with the actual relationship of forces in today's world, but it was very much part of LFI's campaign. Running for the presidency, Mélenchon enjoyed speaking as the country's (future) commander in chief of the French military, whose capacities he wants to strengthen (and whose nuclear weapons he wants to keep).

The “people” is a national-people, the foundation for patriotism. In an imperialist country, patriotism is not a sure bet for the Left! For Mélenchon, though, France is not imperialist. LFI doesn't fight against French imperialism because such a fight is unwarranted. Its view of foreign policy is not based on an internationalist outlook but a geostrategic one [10]. So its view of the situation in the Middle East is based on an assessment of the relationship between global powers – hence the calls to cooperate with Russia and too bad if this means negotiating terms with Assad.

The same approach of rival global powers can be applied to Europe – so the target becomes Angela Merkel's Germany (with borderline Germanophobic rhetoric).

Mélenchon also sees the unity of the Republic – France's “one and indivisible” character – as sacrosanct. He inveighs against the country's Regional Languages Charter; he attacked Hollande when he called for strengthening Corsica's regional powers; and on and on it goes. All this prompted a retort from Philippe Pierre-Charles of the Martinique GRS [11], which concludes:

“The moral of the story is that progressives on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean cannot evade a serious and fraternal debate on how to bring about the total eradication of colonialism.” [12]

It has to be said, though, that Mélenchon's stance around these matters has not elicited much response within the French “radical” Left. It's a worrying and indeed demoralizing symptom.

Contradictory impact

It's quite natural, especially from abroad, to see LFI's success solely as a hopeful sign of radical-Left recovery and renewal. And it is indeed the case that to a large extent people voted for LFI for left-wing reasons. The flipside, though, is that this success was also built upon a policy of shattering the Left's identities, symbols and historical reference points (in the true meaning of the word “Left”).

This apparent paradox can't be grasped within the usual analytical framework. But we must come to terms with what is taking place. The danger is that the net outcome will be more negative than positive – with the destructive ramifications on people's consciousness weighing more heavily in the balance than the underpinnings of renewal and reconstruction. LFI requires a specific analytical framework that takes in its contradictory features.

LFI is clearly a multi-faceted space. A number of radical-Left activists have gotten involved based on the compelling argument that we should be in those spaces where things are happening. Unfortunately, this involvement took place without in-depth debate (with a few exceptions, such as Samy Johsua). In any event, a chapter is now closed. The long 2016-2017 election cycle is over. The important choices now are the ones that will be made over the coming days and weeks. There can be no getting around a substantive debate on the very notion of “Left populism”, its ambiguities and the serious dangers that they entail. As Samy Johsua and Roger Martelli have pointed out, “populaire” (“working-class”) and “populist” are not the same thing [13]:

“Of course, there’s nothing disgraceful about finding populism appealing; there are solid arguments in its favour. But these same arguments can also lead us into a dead-end. Populism claims to be combative but it could well be paving the way now for future defeats. We aren’t about fighting with the far-Right for control of the nation; rather, we seek to extend the realm of popular sovereignty toward all political spaces without distinction. We aren’t about wresting collective identity, be it national or of any other sort, away from the far-Right; rather, we advocate the free embrace of identities and belonging – with a massive increase in equality, the only lasting basis for common endeavour. We aren’t about taking populism back from the far-Right; rather, we undermine their influence by building an emancipatory force rooted in the working classes. ‘Populaire’ (‘working-class’) is not the same as ‘populist’. Our efforts must focus on building this force for working-class dignity.”

Once again on the political situation

Overall, the results of the presidential election are very worrying. In the first round, the top three candidates were of the Right and far-Right. Emmanuel Macron is man of the Right in every respect – economic, of course, but also “philosophical” (his conception of the role of the individual in society); his profile differs only in that he hails from a modern Right on societal questions, unlike the very conservative Catholic third-place finisher François Fillon. As for the second-place finisher Marine Le Pen, she is the figurehead of the far-Right Front National (currently facing internal challenges following the calamitous end to her second-round campaign and the broad range of voters that coalesced against her).

The presidential race also shed light on the fragile state of bourgeois “governance” in the country, given the important role played by unexpected “bumps in the road”. After the right-wing primary, Fillon was seen as a shoe-in to win the presidential election. But he then got embroiled in a series of what can only be described as unprecedented financial scandals. The striking thing about it all, though, was how his party was unable to find a replacement, placing the hangman’s noose around its own neck. Had it been otherwise, Macron wouldn’t have won in 2017.

PS party rebel Benoît Hamon had a stroke of luck, securing his party’s nomination in the Socialist primary. At one point, he was ahead of Mélenchon in the polls. But he was unable or unwilling to break with the PS and the apparatus of the moribund party clipped his wings. Had this not occurred, it’s not certain that Mélenchon’s campaign would have taken off in time to reach his final 19.6 percent result.

Mélenchon’s campaign crossed over into shooting distance of the presidency during a short period of time and in a number of stages – first, the shift of polling numbers from disgruntled Hamon supporters; then a TV debate where he got the better of the four other candidates; and finally, the growing sense that he could make it into the second round.

Macron and Mélenchon were adept at seizing the opportunity that the paralysis of the two government parties opened up for them. As a result, the political-institutional stage in France is now dominated by two movements that are “works in progress” – on a large scale on the Right (Macron and LREM) and on a small scale on the Left (Mélenchon and LFI). There has been an unprecedented 72 percent turnover among members of parliament. We are in uncharted waters.

That being said, I think that the outcome of the legislative elections, coming on the heels of the presidential contest, have revealed the limits of the changes that have taken place. The president got his majority, but it wasn’t a landslide. In the first round, opposition tickets experienced the usual decline relative to their presidential candidate’s scores. They rebounded somewhat in the second

round thanks to the estrangement of many Macron voters, no doubt troubled by new scandals involving newly appointed ministers (Richard Ferrand and François Bayrou among others). And through it all, abstention broke all previous records – hitting 57 percent in the second round of the legislative elections!

Mélenchon probably paid a price for refusing to make a clear call to come out against Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election (as part of an attempt to hold together the wide range of voters that supported him in the first round); and for appearing excessively ambitious at each stage. Macron paid a price for scandals involving ministers in his first cabinet. But ultimately there was neither left-wing insurrection at the ballot box nor right-wing landslide. Even at a time of great party-political and institutional upheaval, political disaffection remains the dominant feature [14]. The democratic crisis is deepening.

Emmanuel Macron knows full well that he has not won a landslide. He also knows that his opponents have been seriously weakened, for the time being. So he does indeed have room for manoeuvre – and will do so for the worse. We are in a defensive position. We will probably need time to build a broad coalition of social and democratic resistance (instances of resistance already exist, but they are still marginal). No such coalition will be built without unity and absent renewal of political practice on the radical Left and in social movements.

Pierre Rousset

P.S.

* Translation from French: Nathan Rao.

Footnotes

[1] See ESSF (article 39537), [Nous n'acceptons pas de voir notre passé commun insulté par Jean-Luc Mélenchon](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39537):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39537>

[2] See ESSF (article 41318), [L'hypothèse populiste – Du Front de gauche à la France insoumise : quelles influences de Podemos ?](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41318):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41318>

[3] On the 2015 crisis in the Left Party, see ESSF (article 36297), [What Happened to the French Left? – Mélenchon, the rise and crisis of the Parti de Gauche](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36297):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36297>

[4] See ESSF (article 40838), [French presidential candidate – Mélenchon: A Radical Reformist Against Mounting Oligarchy](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40838):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40838>

[5] See ESSF (article 40763), [France Rebels – Jean-Luc Mélenchon's campaign, humanist populism, patriotism, Constitution](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40763):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40763>

[6] <http://lvsl.fr/6278-2>

[7] See the formulations he uses in the piece “Le peuple et le ‘mouvement’ ” and Samy Johsua’s comments, ESSF (article 40781), [La France insoumise – « L’ère du peuple » et « l’adieu au prolétariat » ?](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40781>

[8] <https://avenirencommun.fr>

[9] See ESSF (article 41359), [France insoumise, PCF – Réflexions stratégiques sur l’après législatives](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41359>

[10] See Pierre Rousset, ESSF (article 25138), [Jean-Luc Mélenchon, l’habit présidentiel, l’arme nucléaire et la gauche française](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article25138>

[11] See ESSF (article 25065), [Mélenchon, le PCF et les colonies](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article25065>

[12] See ESSF (article 25835), [La question oubliée : la République, la gauche et les colonies](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article25835>

[13] See ESSF (article 40365), [Considérations sur le populisme de gauche – « Un pôle populaire et non populiste »](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article40365>

[14] See ESSF (article 41383), [Abstention – Jean-Luc Mélenchon : la légitimité à géométrie variable](#):

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41383>