

Resistance to neoliberalism in France

Saturday 22 December 2007, by [THOMAS Adrien](#) (Date first published: December 2007).

This essay was published in the 2008 Socialist Register (www.socialistregister.com), published by Merlin Press (see below).

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All eyes are once again on France in the wake of hard-Right candidate Nicolas Sarkozy's victory in the 2007 presidential elections. Main-stream media and academic commentators, especially in the Anglo-American sphere, have heralded the Sarkozy victory as a tremendous opportunity to carry out the neoliberal reforms we are told the country requires if it is to emerge from the years of conflict and stagnation that these same commentators decry with alarm and indignation. They fervently hope that president Sarkozy will stay the course of free-market reform, whatever opposition he encounters from 'over-protected' and 'conservative' sectors of the population. [1]

However, while the results of the presidential and legislative elections have further tilted the relationship of forces against those millions of men, women, students and youth who have taken to the streets in recent years against neoliberal reforms, it would be premature to declare the definitive triumph of neoliberalism in France. Sarkozy faces two major difficulties. The first is the breadth of the resistance to neoliberalism in France, and the eroded political legitimacy of the neoliberal project on a global scale. In the first part of our essay we explore the strengths and weaknesses of resistance to neoliberalism in France - focusing on the cycle of anti-liberal struggles and critical thinking that began with the massive strike and protest movement of late 1995, and the striking resilience of anti-neoliberal resistance since that time. The second difficulty Sarkozy faces is the particular character of his victory. Precisely in order to reckon with the depth of anti-neoliberal feeling in France, Sarkozy's neoliberal fervour often takes a back seat to neoconservative and populist appeals to xenophobic and authoritarian sentiments. Indeed, his victory depended quite heavily on a strategy aimed at obscuring socio-economic questions and capturing the electorate of Jean-Marie Le Pen's neofascist Front National. Though very much a part of the right-wing political establishment going back many years, and tied into the country's most powerful industrial and media interests, Sarkozy has also succeeded in portraying himself as an outsider poised to rescue France from crisis and various real or imagined internal and external threats.

To be sure, it is very worrying that such a figure should occupy the Elysée Palace and have a parliamentary majority at his disposal. But it is not clear that he will have a much freer hand than his predecessors to attack the various key pillars of the French welfare state that remain standing, even if badly battered after a quarter century of neoliberal reforms under both the Left and Right: strong public pensions, healthcare and education, and relatively stable long-term employment contracts with comparatively generous benefits for a large majority of workers. These institutions

are as cherished by many of the retirees and workers swayed by Sarkozy's straight-talking, populist 'law and order' posturing, as they are by many of the millions of working and middle-class people who voted for Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal.

Quite clearly, the success of the Sarkozy enterprise depends on his ability to continue polarizing the country around the questions of 'law and order', 'national identity' and 'moral decay' that he raised with surprising virulence in the latter days of the presidential campaign. A key episode in Sarkozy's rise to power was the November 2005 confrontation in the *banlieues* (urban periphery) of the country's main urban centres - the largest social disturbance in the country since May 1968. In hindsight, it is tempting to see the entire episode as a surreal pantomime deliberately provoked by Sarkozy, when he was the Interior Minister, to outflank his rival for the presidency within the ruling party - and Chirac's preferred successor - prime minister Dominique de Villepin. But it is also important to consider the underlying reasons for the uprising in the poorest *banlieues*: the depth of anger and frustration brought on by more than twenty years of neoliberalism under Left and Right, on the one hand; and on the other, the accumulated failures of the Left in countering the Right and far-Right's attempts to ethnicize and criminalize socio-economic questions. With this in mind, we devote the second part of our essay to the condition of the poorest *banlieues* and the disproportionate number of non-white youth of immigrant origin who live there.

The failed 'normalization' of France

In 2005-2006 France was shaken by three major episodes of resistance to neoliberalism: the No vote to the European Constitution in May 2005, the riots in the French *banlieues* in October-November 2005 and the student-led movement in February-April 2006 against the CPE labour-law reform (*Contrat Première Embauche*). The backdrop to these events was the enduring and mounting socio-economic difficulties faced by broad sectors of the population, signalling the slow demise of the 'French social model'. This model was built up during the *trente glorieuses*, the 30 years of post-war economic growth and rising living standards that followed the post-Second World War socio-economic and political compromise between Gaullists and Communists. While this model was much more related to reconstructing and planning a capitalist social order than paving a 'French Road to Socialism', and was at times contested by social movements (most spectacularly in May 1968), it nevertheless offered forms of social stability to the working class and a path to integration for immigrants. For the last 25 years, the country's political and economic elites have sought to dismantle this model through the social and political 'normalization' of France and its alignment with the Euro-Atlantic mainstream, but they have repeatedly faced strong resistance from broad layers of the population.

Especially since the 1980s, European integration has come to be seen by centre-left and centre-right modernizers alike as a way out of a 'French exception' whose origins are described as stretching back to the Jacobins. In this widely-held view, the French 'malady' stems from the poisonous relationship between an omnipotent state and a disorganized civil society prone to irrational outbursts of potentially violent collective action. [2] Another feature of the 'French exception' is said to reside in the 'archaic' antagonism between the political Left and Right, seen as an obstacle to efficient technocratic governance. French elites have promoted and regularly hailed the demise of this supposed exception in a world seen as increasingly conforming to the Anglo-American model. [3] They celebrated the end of both Gaullism and Communism, the main features of this French exceptionalism, as a sure sign the stage was finally set for such a 'normalization' of the country, hand in hand with the accelerating process of European integration. However, the referendum on the European constitution, a document presented as the crowning achievement of European integration, ironically provided an occasion for the popular rejection of a neoliberal Europe, with the

vote turn-ing into a referendum on neoliberalism. During debates on the European Constitution, the word *libéral* became definitively established as a political insult in France with the No campaign from the left being waged under the slogan *Non à l'Europe libérale (No to liberal Europe)*.

The project for a EU constitution aimed to enshrine the main tenets of neoliberal economic policy. Its rejection by 55 per cent of voters was achieved against all odds. The major political parties and the media vocifer-ously supported the treaty, whereas the coalition in favour of the 'No' formed a heterogeneous grouping with limited representation in parliament and in the mainstream political sphere. The referendum outcome highlighted the breadth of the gap between the population and the political elite. Leaders and activists from the social movements, the Communist Party (PCF) and the mainly Trotskyist far-Left organizations led the No campaign, joined by minority currents from the Socialist and Green parties (the largest trade union, the formerly Communist-oriented CGT, also came out in favour of the No, but did not actively campaign due to internal divisions). Since far-Right and marginal figures of the centre-Right also came out in favour of the No, biased media reports depicted No voters as driven by xenophobic resentment. But the dynamic of the grass-roots campaign against the treaty, as well as the opinion polls, showed that among the No voters social consid-erations (fear of heightened unemployment and of further outsourcing, lack of social guarantees) prevailed over nationalist concerns (immigration, and the proposed accession of Turkey to the European Union).

The rejection of the European Constitution was seen as a disaster by French elites, who interpreted it as an explosion of xenophobia and national isolationism on the part of the backward masses. A few days after the refer-endum the conservative historian René Remond declared on public radio, 'I am tempted to say that it's as bad as Munich'. As in other countries, the European Union had come to be regarded by elites as an undertaking whose greatest advantage was that it was insulated from popular demands. Europe-an integration had been initiated primarily by conservative Christian Demo-crats, for whom fascism had largely been the product of the base instincts of the masses. After fascism, the Second World War and the social upheavals of the post-war years, these founding fathers saw an elite-centred European unification as a way to let rational and dispassionate political decision-mak-ing by the knowledgeable prevail over national self-interest and unpleasant annoyances such as the class struggles in the different member states.

In the context of the Cold War and Franco-German post-war reconcili-ation, European integration was seen by many progressive forces in France as playing an essentially protective role; in more recent times, however, the European unification process has come to be seen as a threatening, destructive battering ram for the neoliberal order. In no other European country is there such widespread scepticism about the free-market economy, as evidenced both in opinion polls [4] and in the number and strength of social protests against neoliberalism in recent years. [5] On the other hand, France is one of the developed countries where financialization and liberalization of controls on foreign investment have gone furthest. After having been protected until the 1980s from international competition by a benevolent state and stable alliances between the main capitalists, French industry has entered the age of globalization. The progress of neoliberalism has been accompanied by the financialization of the French economy. Whereas in 1985, foreign investors controlled only 10 per cent of the firms listed on the Paris stock exchange, by 2000 the proportion had risen to 44 per cent - even higher than in Great Britain (30 per cent) or the United States (less than 20 per cent). [6] The resilience of anti-free market sentiments and social movements, on the one hand, and the rapid transition to Anglo-American-style shareholder capitalism, on the other, have deepened the contradictions of French society.

The financialization of the French economy has gone hand in hand with the stagnation or regression of wages, the adoption of new labor manage-ment strategies and an extension of market relations through the privatiza-tion of public services. [7] But the most devastating effect on the balance of

forces between labour and capital has come from the constantly high level of unemployment (around 10 per cent over the last two decades) and the expansion of precarious working conditions (part-time jobs, short-term contracts). The reduction in support payments to the unemployed, along with measures designed to further deregulate the labour market on the workfare model, has led not only to the stigmatization of the unemployed and social-welfare recipients, but also to a destabilization of employment in the core sectors of the economy. The fear of unemployment and its attendant personal and social consequences has had a chilling effect across the breadth of society, a fear regularly reinforced by threats of offshoring which allow employers to roll back wages and increase working time without any financial compensation (as in the case of the electronics manufacturer Bosch which in 2004 threatened to shift a car parts factory from Vénissieux, near Lyons, to the Czech Republic).

Mobilizations and struggles against the growing precariousness of employment and social welfare encounter numerous difficulties. The unemployed are isolated and without strong unifying organizations, while wage-earners with precarious jobs are not shielded from employer pressures given the great weakness of trade unions in the private industrial and service sectors where these types of jobs are most numerous. The unions have also had tremendous difficulty waging general campaigns and struggles on the issue of precariousness. The defeat of the 2003 movement against the pension reform illustrated the difficulties French trade unions have in uniting public and private-sector workers. Although the public sector, and especially schoolteachers, mobilized quite massively, even the major industrial segments of the private sector saw only very limited strike activity. [8] The 2003 conflict, as well as the defeat without much of a fight in 2004 over a reform of the public healthcare system, showed that French trade-unionism cannot be sustained on the basis of its strength in a few areas of the shrinking public sector. [9] All this puts the very essence of trade-unionism - its ability to nurture solidarity and act collectively - under threat.

In such a context, it is significant that it was mainly a student-led mobilization in 2006 that produced a setback for the neoliberal project of labour-market deregulation in the form of the successful struggle against the CPE labour-market reform which aimed to create a new category of precarious employment by making it easier to lay off young workers. Over a period of three months, with the support of student organizations and trade unions, young people and their parents took to the streets against the CPE. During the working week, post-secondary and high school students occupied universities and schools, held general assemblies and protested in the streets. Their parents and other wage earners, called into action by the unions, joined them in huge demonstrations on the weekends and in several *journées d'action* - protest days with partial nationwide strikes, culminating in countrywide protests involving three million people on April 4, 2006. [10]

Although the riots in the Latin Quarter of Paris received tremendous attention from the international media, they were not the most important dimension of the conflict on the CPE. Far more important than the symbolic re-enactments of May '68 around the Sorbonne were the links made between students and trade unionists, and the amazing geographical spread and self-organization of the movement. Indeed, the most vibrant and enduring initiatives were not necessarily taking place in Paris, but in smaller cities and towns. The protests finally forced the initially inflexible government of Dominique de Villepin to yield and repeal the CPE - although the law had already been adopted by parliament. In the end, even employer organizations called on the government to give in. The government's stubbornness had become counter-productive, threatening the viability of future deregulation initiatives.

Neoliberalism dead ends

France's entry into the age of deregulated capitalism has meant the parallel demise of 'social Gaullism' and of the social-democratic Keynesian project. 'Social Gaullism' was founded on the idea of overcoming class conflict by means of a personal relationship between a people and its leader, and through the limited involvement of wage-earners in company decision-making - topped off by a strong state presence in infrastructure projects. The difficulties of the centre-right in establishing a stable post-Gaullist identity stem from its inability to push through a neoliberal reform agenda, given the enduring attachment to state regulation of the economy. The about-faces of former president Jacques Chirac illustrate these difficulties. He ran his 1995 campaign with the promise of healing the *fracture sociale*, but once elected was eager to prove his allegiance to the neoliberal model by initiating a re-form of the public healthcare system and several public-sector pension plans - sparking the 'winter of discontent' of November-December 1995, during which the country was paralyzed by a railway strike. [11] It remains to be seen if Sarkozy will be better able to impose his neoliberal agenda.

One of the outcomes of the 1995 rejection of Chirac's frontal attack on the welfare state was the Socialist Party's (Parti Socialiste, PS) victory in the 1997 legislative elections. However, the PS failed to fulfill expectations of at least a partial reversal of neoliberal policies. Not only was the PS unwilling to reverse the retrograde measures of the defeated right-wing government, but from 1997 to 2002, under prime minister Lionel Jospin, it actually proved itself to be a worthy successor to the right wing in its dismantling of the welfare state. It pursued an agenda of privatization and deregulation of public services and tax cuts, and accepted the idea of raising the retirement age. As a result, the party widened the gap between itself and the working-class electorate. While the PS managed to make headway among highly-paid white-collar workers, especially in the trendy city centres of Paris and Lyons, it did not succeed in creating a broader class alliance.

The gap between the French socialists and the working class has reached a point where in the run-up to the 2002 presidential election the former Socialist prime minister Pierre Mauroy felt compelled to warn his comrades: 'You know, "worker" isn't a four-letter word!' The distance between the PS membership and the working class is also a sociological one. Party members are increasingly drawn from the middle classes, and even primarily the up-per middle classes. [12] Working-class disaffection from the PS is spectacular: in 2007, only 25 per cent of the workers who participated in the election voted for Ségolène Royal in the first voting round, against 20 per cent who voted for the neofascist Jean-Marie Le Pen, and 20 per cent for Sarkozy. [13]

Nearly three decades ago, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were able to present neoliberalism as a form of utopia. But this is not possible for Mr Sarkozy. Nowadays, unbridled capitalism provokes fear and resentment - not enthusiasm and support. Even when neoliberalism was rolled out in France in the mid-1980s there were no promises of a better world. Rather, it was seen as a temporary adjustment to the economic crisis and to changes in the economy that were beyond the country's control. Austerity policies were meant to give way relatively soon to renewed stability and security. But today it is clear that neoliberal reforms have not led to the establishment of a new, stable order. Instead, one neoliberal reform merely paves the way for the next, without any improvement on the employment front. The inability to build a historic bloc in favour of neoliberalism results from its failure to offer forms of social stability to broad layers of the population.

Growing economic distress, combined with the dismantling of workplace collectives and of traditional industrial workplaces, has brought about a fragmentation of the working class and an erosion of class solidarities and consciousness. [14] In a context where individual success is

celebrated and 'losers' are derided, social Darwinism has gained ground to such a degree that some sectors of the working class have come to look favourably upon those pro-moting the exclusion of immigrants and their children from employment, social benefits, and the country itself. Spewers of anti-immigrant vitriol, the neo-fascist Front National - the federation of neo-Nazis, fundamentalist Catholics and embittered and nostalgic remnants of France's colonial empire led by Jean-Marie Le Pen - has thrived on these sentiments since its first electoral successes in 1983. It has been in the vanguard of those who want the issue of immigration to push questions of socio-economic well-being into the background, a process that has been described as the *Lepénisation des esprits*.

The revolt in the *banlieues*

The 2005 uprising in the *banlieues* was a powerful illustration of the social and political processes of resistance and fragmentation at work in contemporary French society. Late in the afternoon of October 27, 2005 in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, two teenage children of Malian (Bouna Traoré, age 15) and Turkish-Tunisian (Zyed Benna, age 17) immigrant parents died of electrocution while hiding from police in an electrical substation. [15] Their deaths sparked a three-week period of rioting and confrontations with the police that spread to the *banlieues* of a number of French cities. It was the most significant episode of confrontation with police and security forces since the events of May 1968.

Conflicts in the *banlieues* are not new. The first contemporary instance was in the periphery of Lyons in the early 1980s, and they have become more frequent since the mid-1990s. They follow a predictable pattern, in which an incident involving the mistreatment or death of a youth at the hands of the police ignites a wider conflict between young people and the police and acts of vandalism to cars, shops and public buildings. The human cost of the conflicts is generally minimal, usually limited to injuries to both the youth and the police directly involved in the running street battles. Though similar in all other respects, the November 2005 events were striking because they strayed from this pattern by lasting longer and being more widespread. [16]

It is important to focus on the immediate and specifically political cause of the *banlieue* explosion. In hindsight, it is clear that the events were a key chapter in Mr Sarkozy's ultimately successful quest for the presidency. Immediately following his return to the Ministry of the Interior earlier in the year (in the cabinet reshuffle that followed the government's humiliating defeat in the EU constitutional referendum), Sarkozy pursued a very deliberate strategy of insulting and provoking residents of the poorer *banlieues* in the country. After the death of the two teenagers, and as the riots continued, Sarkozy and his entourage within the ruling party continued to make false and inflammatory claims about the deceased teenagers and refused to acknowledge any police responsibility for the deaths or apologize for police excesses committed in response to the riots - such as the tear-gas canister hurled at a community mosque, and the racist and sexist insults hurled at women fleeing the gas-filled mosque. [17] The Interior Minister, his entourage in the ruling UMP party, and police spokespeople variously blamed criminal gangs, foreigners, far-Left and Islamic 'extremists', and even 'polygamists', for the riots.

A leaked November 23 internal report from the French intelligence service (DCRG) rejected claims of involvement by Islamists, criminal gangs and the far-Left. The Islamists kept a low profile and in some instances sought to calm things down, whereas the far-Left was entirely caught off guard by the uprising, and criminal gangs generally require calm and stability to conduct their affairs. The DCRG report describes the riots as a 'form of unorganized urban insurrection... a popular revolt of the housing estates, with neither a leader nor a programme, involving young people with a strong feeling of identity based not solely on ethnic or geographic origin but also on their social condition of

people excluded from French society'. [18] When, on November 8, the government decided to resurrect a colonial law of 1955 to declare a state of emergency, the number of incidents had already peaked and started to decline; the state of emergency was renewed for a further three months on November 15, even though disturbances had been tapering off for some time. [19] Clearly, there was a political dynamic at play in government circles that went well beyond the specific requirements of restoring calm and order to the affected neighbourhoods. [20]

The uprising in the French *banlieues* has often been presented as yet another example of the failure of the French social model and compared – unfavourably – to the situation in certain American inner-city ghettos. This is quite misleading, and it is necessary to probe more deeply into the causes of the *banlieue* revolt and its implications. Sarkozy's cynical manoeuvring notwithstanding, the tragic deaths in Clichy-sous-Bois would not have provoked such a response had the poorest *banlieues* not been at the confluence of three deep crises: a socio-economic crisis, a post-colonial crisis and a crisis of political representation.

As far as the socio-economic crisis is concerned, there is no getting around the repercussions of the neoliberal restructuring on the poorest of the peripheral urban areas. In this respect, France is no different from other Western countries that undertook massive restructuring of their economies in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1970s. In the working-class areas of the *banlieues* this meant the fragmentation of an entire social universe based on full employment, rising living standards and expanding forms of social protection. Combined with deregulated housing policies from the mid-late 1970s onwards, involving a shift from support for social-housing projects to incentives for private ownership, this accelerated the flight from these areas by the white-collar and skilled workers who had long been the primary social force in the PCF-controlled municipalities. [21] Increasingly, the bastions of the PCF and the confident working classes it represented were becoming sites of social segregation for the working poor and the unemployed churned out by a leaner and meaner social dispensation. [22] Not only was there heightened competition for a reduced number of increasingly precarious unskilled and semi-skilled industrial jobs, but the flipside of the steep increase in enrolment in secondary and post-secondary education from the 1970s onwards was a growing disdain for these types of jobs. A working-class hero was no longer something to be.

Most of the places affected by the events of November 2005 have been classified as Sensitive Urban Zones (ZUS) since 1996. The ZUS designation – applied to 751 areas inhabited by 4.7 million people, or eight per cent of the entire population – was an extension of the urban-planning initiatives taken by the Socialists in the early 1990s in response to riots in the Lyons and Paris *banlieues*, to address the deteriorating situation in these working-class zones. The unemployment rate in the ZUS is two to three times higher than the national average. The incidence of low-wage, precarious work and underemployment is also much higher. Dramatically high school drop-out rates and youth unemployment rates – regularly surpassing 30 and 40 per cent – are even more significant when one considers that families in a ZUS are generally larger and under-25s often account for upwards of 50 per cent of the total population in these areas. Housing in the ZUS is insufficient, overcrowded and often dilapidated. Finally, rates of petty criminal activity (vandalism, burglary, fights, drug dealing) are high too. [23]

The government response has generally been to treat these problems as stemming from insufficient 'social mixing' and poor urban planning. They have focused efforts on luring the socially more 'desirable' categories of the population into these declining neighbourhoods and providing a wide range of tax cuts and incentives to businesses that invest in the ZUS, which are often situated on or near strategic transportation arteries. The methods involved include demolishing some of the older housing estates, keeping social housing to a minimum and bringing in public-private partnerships to build more attractive (and often private) housing. The aim is to subject the poorest areas of the *banlieues* to the same treatment applied in

the 1980s and 1990s to deteriorated housing stock in the city centres - replaced by gentrified residential neighbourhoods, expensive office property and cozy tourist hideaways. While such an approach may shuffle around and mask the problems of these areas - and enrich a few developers and real-estate speculators - it cannot resolve them. Worse, with social and racial 'rebalancing' set out as an explicit objective, it tends to further stigmatize and atomize the precarious and marginalized layers of the population whom such policies are supposed to assist. [24]

And here we come to the post-colonial crisis. Compounding and per-petuating the problems of the poorest banlieues is the discrimination faced by the youth from these areas, especially the non-white children and grandchildren of North African and sub-Saharan African immigrants. The effects of the economic restructuring of the mid-late 1970s onwards were particularly harsh on the unskilled North African labourers who, by the mid-late 1970s, were just beginning to see some of the fruits of their labours and sacrifices, thanks to the struggles waged in the post-1968 period and the declining stigmatization of their status as (former) colonial subjects. [25] This in turn had a knock-on effect on the children of these immigrants - the repercussions of the economic crisis on their families and their status in the new zones of social segregation now deprived them of many of the opportunities for social advancement that they and their parents had previously expected. [26]

These youths face discrimination in every aspect of their lives. In the school system, they face streaming, stigmatization for their difficulties with the French language, harsher disciplinary measures and greater intrusion into private and family affairs from school authorities. [27] In the job market, qualified applicants are less likely to be hired than their non-immigrant counter-parts. [28] And, as comes up over and over again in the accounts of the youths themselves, the police and special security forces (CRS, BAC) subject them to regular harassment and verbal and physical abuse. [29]

It would be wrong to conclude from this, however, that the poor ban-lieues are ghettos or racialized slums of the kind one finds in the United States. As Tyler Stovall writes, most scholars have observed that these areas have nowhere near the level of racial homogeneity one often finds in African American ghettos. [30] In fact, they continue to house large white, working-class populations, who live alongside the families of immigrants from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and, increasingly, East and South Asia. Stovall also explains:

These areas also lag far behind their American counterparts in their access to firearms, not to mention the frequency of violent death. The level of disinvestment and public abandonment of American slum neighbourhoods has no parallel in a France which retains a certain commitment to the interventionist state. [31]

Indeed, when one considers the treatment of North African migrant workers in the 1950s and 1960s, one can actually speak of a process of de-ghettoization in the 1970s and 1980s. From this period onwards, these workers and their families began to gain admission into the mainstream of working-class life - for example by being granted far greater access to normal public housing. This represented a real break from the preceding period, during which most North African workers first lived in abject shantytowns only to be subsequently transferred into the notorious Sonacotra hostels. Established in 1956, in splendid isolation from shops, services, transportation and other residential neighbourhoods, these hostels were a direct extension of colonial policy. While living conditions were harsh, it appears that the draconian rules imposed by hostel directors - a majority of whom were retired army officers who had served in the Algerian War - were even more humiliating. [32]

Missed opportunities in the eighties

The shift from the margins to the mainstream of French society was accelerated by the expansion of public education and by the rising expectations and confidence of the children of these immigrant workers - which blossomed into a full-blown mass movement for equality in the early-mid 1980s. The great tragedy is that this social progress and political assertiveness coincided with the deepening of the social and political crisis of their working-class surroundings - creating an especially fraught context for the encounter between the rising, militant sectors of youth of post-colonial immigrant origin, on the one hand, and the declining and distraught sectors of the native working class that remained in the poor *banlieues*, on the other. The outcome is what Olivier Masclet refers to as a *rendez-vous manqué* (missed opportunity) - the Left's failure to seize the opportunity presented by the emergence of a generation of politicized post-colonial youth in the early-mid 1980s. This failure further weakened the Left in working-class areas and created enormous frustration and despair among the youth themselves.

On the national stage the failure took shape in a different way. Between 1983 and 1985 the new assertiveness of the children of North African migrant workers on the local level translated into a series of mass marches that criss-crossed the country with the primary objectives of demanding equality for the children of North African immigrants, and creating an autonomous organizational framework for pursuing this goal. The movement emerged in the *banlieues* of Lyons following the 1981 disturbances there and gained steam nationally precisely at the moment (1983) when the Socialist government elected in 1981 was making its neoliberal turn and the Front National was beginning to rise in the polls and made its first electoral breakthrough in the city of Dreux. It is not surprising, then, that the movement became a hostage to forces well beyond its control. The governing Socialists seized on the popularity of the movement to revive their own fortunes by building a broader, abstract form of 'feel good' anti-racism focused on rallying a broad range of forces against the FN. In the process, the post-colonial youth at the origin of the movement were co-opted or sidelined, and the initial radical dynamic was undercut by the emergence of SOS Racisme, very much a creature of the governing PS and its youth organizations. [33] This experience on the national stage was mirrored locally in the working-class *banlieues* by the PCF's growing fear of being associated too closely with these radicalizing immigrant youth, lest this fuel local support for the FN. As a result, virtually an entire generation of politicized children of post-colonial immigrants was effectively shut out of the political sphere.

As the 1980s drew to a close, events on the national and international stage gave rise to an often hysterical debate about the Republic, secularism and Islam, out of all proportion to the marginal public role of religious feeling - leave alone fundamentalist belief and activity - among post-colonial immigrant communities in the *banlieues*. The backdrop for the impassioned national debate touched off in September 1989 by the *affaire du foulard* (involving the suspension of three schoolgirls for wearing the Muslim head-scarf) was a France understandably scandalized by the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa earlier in the year against British writer Salman Rushdie; and shaken by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, which signalled the end of the post-War division of Europe - and France's special place within that world.

Developments in the years that followed only further inflamed the debate about France's Muslim population, the largest in Europe: the October 1990 riots in the Lyons *banlieue* of Vaulx-en-Velin; the French (Socialist) government's support for the first Iraq War in 1991; the bloody civil war in Algeria and related terrorist incidents in France in the mid-1990s; the further degeneration of the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Territories; the September 11, 2001 attacks and the US-led 'war on terror' that followed; and chapter two of the '*affaire du foulard*' in 2003.

This led to a major shift in the wider public perception of the *Beur* (Parisian *banlieue* slang for the children of Arab immigrants) and *Black* sons and daughters of post-colonial immigrants. By the early-mid 1980s, they had acquired the positive (if somewhat paternalistic) public image of charming and dynamic *potes* (buddies), bulwarks against fascism and veritable reservoirs of youthful dynamism for an ageing nation. However, over the two decades that followed, they would come to be seen as criminal deviants, symbols of an insufficiently stern Republic's inability to integrate its youth, as well as a potential fifth column for Islamic extremism. In a context of economic crisis, the Left's turn to neoliberalism, and the ideological disarray accompanying the stagnation and subsequent collapse of the Soviet bloc, broad sections of Left and progressive opinion would find solace in a rigid and ahistorical version of 'republican values'. This approach has had little to do with the real situation on the ground, and has become a substitute for seriously addressing the problems confronting post-colonial youth, and the broader crisis these problems betoken.

In summary, from the 1970s onwards we actually find increased ethnic mixing and growing social and physical proximity between the post-colonial population and the established (or 'native') working class - and not the widening gap between black and white one finds during the same period in the United States. It is in a specific context of economic crisis, geopolitical tension and Left disorientation and failure that one ultimately sees a rise in support for authoritarian and xenophobic politics among the native working class in these traditionally Left areas. [34] What this suggests is that while 'post-colonialism' may be a useful analytical category, one cannot trace a straight causal line between France's colonial past and the present-day treatment of French youth of North African and sub-Saharan African origin. Certainly, France has had tremendous difficulty coming to terms with its colonial past. [35] This is centrally important for understanding the present impasse in dealing with the role of the post-colonial population and Islam in the country.

However, a full understanding of this injustice requires that one give equal attention to recent factors - and much older ones. We have examined the factors at play over the past quarter century. The historical factors are beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that the foundational revolutionary events of 1789-1794 have bequeathed a very specific approach to matters involving foreigners and foreignness. A particular feature of French political life since the Revolution has been the polarization that has re-asserted itself at key junctures in the country's history. This polarization has been political - between Left and Right; and social - between propertied sectors and the working classes. On the one hand, this polarization has been a mechanism for incorporating millions of immigrant workers and their descendants into the nation over the past century - largely through participation in the labour movement, the Left and the fight against fascism. On the other hand, the rejection of origins (social, ethnic, regional, religious, racial or otherwise) that was part and parcel of the radically anti-aristocratic, egalitarian content of the Revolution soon became intertwined with the setting-down of fixed frontiers to be defended against the many invaders that besieged the nascent Republic. This has tended to create a blind spot on the Left - especially in periods of popular retreat such as the present, when the social and political lines of division become blurred. In such periods, the Left - including its most radical sectors - often seems unwilling to engage seriously and specifically with enduring systematic ethnic and racial discrimination, for fear of shattering the original republican framework of Left and popular advance. [36]

Taken together with the other forms of socio-economic and political dislocation we have examined, this has left much of the post-colonial population in a political and social no-man's land - further divorcing the Left from working-class realities and giving greater margin for manoeuvre to the Right. Overcoming this state of affairs presents a complicated challenge to the Left. On the one hand, it must sustain and nurture the antagonistic relationship between Left and Right, and between the working class and propertied elites. In general, this is the life blood of any project for radical change; in France, it has been a pre-condition for the very survival of a viable Left. On the other

hand, the Left cannot adopt a siege mentality (as most currents did during the second '*affaire du foulard*' in 2003) in relation to those sectors of the population who now find themselves incompletely - or differently - incorporated into the accumulated gains of the French social model and republican project. [37]

A very positive effect of the 2005 uprising in the *banlieues* was to spark an important debate on the radical Left about the nature and origins of the difficulties faced by those living in the urban periphery - and on the strategic implications this has for the work of Left rebuilding and renewal that must now take place. This debate has shown that particular attention will have to be paid to the specific problems faced by the post-colonial population in these areas and the way the Left incorporates these issues - and the non-white youth most directly affected by them - into its strategy, campaigns and organizations. [38]

One thing is clear: those seeking to turn back the neoconservative tide cannot afford another *rendez-vous manqué* in the *banlieues*.

Conclusion: the crisis of political representation

This brings us to the crisis of political representation - and to our conclusion. The re-emergence of a xenophobic and authoritarian bloc in the mainstream of French affairs is a relatively recent development. Fundamentally, one can associate this criminalization and ethnicization of socio-economic questions with the neoliberal turn in economic policy - initiated in 1983 under a Socialist government and president and pursued by every Left and Right government since - and with the rise of the neofascist Front National; all taking place in a context of economic restructuring and persistent high unemployment, a declining trade-union and Left presence at the workplace and in working-class neighbourhoods, and overall disaffection from the formations of both the mainstream Left and Right.

There has been considerable hope that the period of resistance and remobilization opened up by the spectacular social movement of late 1995 would in relatively short order resolve the crisis of political representation for the forces of the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist Left. Many on the European and international Left have rightly seen France as standing at the forefront of resistance to neoliberalism - shoulder to shoulder with the resurgence of radical forces in a number of Latin American countries. Following the successful activist-Left campaign against the European Constitution, and the victorious struggle against the CPE labour reform, it even seemed to some that a break with the neoliberal model might be possible in the short term.

However, the election of Nicolas Sarkozy has delivered a serious setback to such a perspective. The present situation provides grounds for both fear and guarded optimism. The juxtaposition of two separate polling results captures this quite well. Following the three-week uprising in the poorer *banlieues* of the country's main cities in November 2005, 70 per cent of respondents said they approved of the way in which Sarkozy as Interior Minister had handled the crisis; yet just four months later, 70 per cent of respondents said they sympathized with the massive and victorious student-led protest movement against the CPE labour-law reform. [39]

On the one hand, then, there appears to be considerable support for an authoritarian and racializing response to the tensions engendered by record levels of unemployment, precariousness and deteriorating infrastructure in poor neighbourhoods - the results of the decline of France's post-war model of social and economic development and 25 years of neoliberal counter-reform. Yet, at the same time, and in spite of this long period of setbacks for working people, broad sections of the population are prepared to support

and participate in periodic mass campaigns of resistance against attacks on the gains of almost a century of working-class struggles.

President Sarkozy has a consistent right-wing political agenda – one that seeks to defeat this mass resistance by exploiting the enormous margin for manoeuvre provided by fears and prejudices about and within the banlieues and by attacking the social movements, the Left and the non-white population on many fronts. For defensive struggles to grow into a counter-offensive against neoliberalism and its representatives, one key requirement is that the high levels of mobilization must finally find some form of political representation. The fragmented forces of the social movements and the equally fragmented forces of the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist Left require a common framework that will enable them to unite their efforts. But the division of the radical Left in the recent elections is but the latest example of how elusive an objective this has been so far. It is fair to wonder if France, though somewhat further ahead than most of the rest of the world in this respect, must also go through a long period of rebuilding and renewal of the Left and social movements before the specific matter of political representation can be resolved – and hopes of a breakthrough against neoliberalism can materialize. Yet while the short-term forecast may be gloomy, France's remarkable capacity for resistance has most certainly not spoken its final word.

P.S.

* From Socialist Register 2008 (www.socialistregister.com), published by Merlin Press, Suite 4, 96 Monnow Street, Monmouth, NP25 3EQ, Great Britain. Copyright Merlin Press Ltd. The book itself can be ordered at www.merlinpress.co.uk.

Footnotes

[1] 'France's Presidential Election: Sarkozy's Moment and, Mercifully, a Fresh Start for France', *The Economist*, 10 May 2007. Also see Timothy Smith, 'The Socialists are the Real Conservatives in France', *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 5 May 2007.

[2] For example: Pierre Birnbaum, *Logique de l'Etat*, Paris: Fayard, 1982; Michel Winock, *La fièvre hexagonale. Les grandes crises politiques de 1871 à 1968*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1981; Samuel Barnes and Max Kaase, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, London: Sage, 1979.

[3] In 1988, on the eve of the bicentennial of the French Revolution, the French historian François Furet declared 'the end of the French exception' and the emergence of a 'Republic of the centre' thanks to presidents Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterand. François Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon, *La République du centre*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1988. In 1995, Furet gleefully declared: 'From now on we are condemned to live in the world in which we live'. Furet, *Le Passé d'une illusion*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995.

[4] An international survey found that only 36 per cent of the French considered the 'free-market economy' the best system on which to base the future of the world, whereas 65 per cent of Germans and 66 per cent of British citizens did so (GlobeScan, June-August 2005).

[5] See Isabelle Sommier, *Le renouveau des mouvements contestataires à l'heure de la mondialisation*, Paris: Flammarion, 2003.

[6] See Laurent Mauduit, *Jacques le Petit*, Paris: Stock, 2005, p. 162.

[7] Especially on the new flexible work organization, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2006.

[8] See Jean-Marie Pernot, *Syndicats: lendemains de crise?*, Paris: Gallimard, 2005, pp. 23-68. The overall rate of unionization is 8 per cent and less than 5 per cent in the private sector.

[9] Even the supposed strength of French unionism in some parts of the public sector may be more of an illusion, as was shown by the relatively smooth pri-vatization of the energy sector in 2004. See Adrien Thomas, 'En apesanteur. La CGT face à la privatisation d'EDF et Gaz de France', *Variations*, 3, 2006, pp. 63-72.

[10] On the anti-CPE movement, see Stathis Kouvelakis, 'From Revolt to the Alternative', 12 May 2006, available from <http://www.europe-solidaire.org>. For a detailed defence of the movement against its many detractors in the neo-liberal press, see David R. Howell and John Schmitt, 'Employment Regula-tion and French Unemployment: Were the French Students Right After All?', April 2006, available from <http://www.cepr.net>.

[11] Daniel Singer, 'The French Winter of Discontent', *Monthly Review*, 49, July-August 1997; Raghu Krishnan, 'December 1995: The first revolt against Globalization', *Monthly Review*, 48, May 1996.

[12] Rémi Lefebvre and Frédéric Sawicki, *La société des socialistes. Le PS aujourd'hui*, Paris: Editions du Croquant, 2006.

[13] CSA-CISCO poll, 22 April 2007.

[14] The stark example of the automobile industry, previously the industrial core of Fordism, is examined in: Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière. Enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbelliard*, Paris: Fayard, 1999.

[15] A third teenager, Muhittin Altun, survived the electrocution. The three teens were returning home from a soccer match in a neighbouring town when they encountered another group of youths being chased by police following a rob-bery. Not carrying their identity cards, having spotted one of the policemen preparing his flash-ball gun, and resenting the repeated ID checks they had endured in the past, the three youths decided to run for cover. Rejecting Interior minister Sarkozy's repeated denials of any police responsibility, an inquiry from the Inspector General of Police Services (IGS) concluded that a policeman had indeed seen the youths climb into the substation and notified his superiors but that both he and his superiors chose not to help the teens.

[16] Laurent Mucchielli and Abderrahim Aït-Omar, 'Les émeutes de novembre 2005: les raisons de la colère', in Véronique Le Goaziou and Laurent Mucchielli, eds., *Quand les banlieues brûlent... Retour sur les émeutes de novembre 2005*, Paris: La Découverte, 2006.

[17] 'Une grenade lancée à l'heure de la prière', *L'Humanité*, 2 November 2005.

[18] Quoted in 'Le rapport explosif des Renseignements généraux', *Le Parisien*, 7 December 2005.

[19] Stéphane Berger and Jérôme Leguay, 'Chronologie' in Collective, *Une révolte en toute logique. Des banlieues en colère*, Sainte Colombe: L'Archipel des pirates, 2006.

[20] Nasser Demiati, 'Nicolas Sarkozy, ministre de l'Intérieur et pompier-pyromane', in Goaziou and Mucchielli, eds., *Quand les banlieues brûlent*.

[21] Olivier Masclat, *La Gauche et les cités: enquête sur un rendez-vous manqué*, Paris: La Dispute, 2003. Our overall understanding of the crisis in the *banlieues* owes a great deal to this fascinating look at the evolution of a housing complex in the Gennevilliers suburb of Paris.

[22] Loïc Wacquant, 'La marginalité urbaine au nouveau millénaire', *Contretemps*, 13 May 2005.

[23] These figures are all drawn from Laurent Mucchielli, 'Les émeutes de novembre 2005: les raisons de la colère', in Goaziou and Mucchielli, eds., *Quand les banlieues brûlent*.

[24] Patrick Simon and Jean-Pierre Lévy, 'Questions sociologiques et politiques sur la "mixité sociale"', *Contretemps*, 13 May 2005.

[25] Laure Pitti, 'Différenciations ethniques et luttes ouvrières à Renault-Billancourt', *Contretemps*, 16 May 2006.

[26] Laurent Mucchielli, 'Immigration et délinquance: fantasmes et réalités', in Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, ed., *La république mise à nu par son immigration*, Paris: La Fabrique, 2006.

[27] Laurent Ott, 'Pourquoi ont-ils brûlé les écoles?', in Goaziou and Mucchielli, eds., *Quand les banlieues brûlent*.

[28] The International Labour Organization (ILO) recently released the results of a study involving 350 'testers' responding to 2,440 job ads. The study revealed that in 67 to 80 per cent of cases employers selected candidates from the 'majority' population over citizens of North African and 'Black African' origin with similar credentials and experience, see E. Cediey and F. Foroni, 'Les Discriminations à raison de 'l'origine' dans les embauches en France', Genève: Bureau international du Travail, 2006.

[29] 'S'il y a des personnes qui arrivent à accepter ça, moi je n'accepte pas', in Collective, *Une révolte en toute logique*.

[30] Cinematic depictions of these areas also reflect this multi-ethnic, multi-racial reality. See for example Mathieu Kassovitz, *La Haine* (1995) and Abdel Ke-chiche, *Games of Love and Chance* (2003).

[31] Tyler Stovall, 'From Red Belt to Black Belt: Race, Class and Urban Marginality in Twentieth-Century Paris', in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty - Histories of Race in France*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

[32] Mireille Ginésy-Galano, *Les immigrés hors la cité - Le système d'encadrement dans les foyers (1973-1982)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984.

[33] Saïd Bouamama, 'De la visibilisation à la suspicion: la fabrique républicaine d'une politisation', in Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, ed., *La république mise à nu par son immigration*, Paris: La Fabrique, 2006.

[34] Loïc Wacquant, 'Ghetto, banlieues, État: réaffirmer la primauté du politique', *Nouveaux regards*, 33, April-June 2006. Initially the preserve of traditional right-wing sectors exasperated by the victory of the Socialists in the early 1980s, and then of small-business sectors worried for their future, the FN made its first breakthrough in traditional Left, working-class areas in the 1995 elections. See Nonna Mayer, *Ces Français qui votent Le Pen*, Paris: Flammarion, 2002.

[35] This was illustrated most recently by the February 2005 parliamentary passage of a measure obliging schools to 'recognize the positive role' of French colonialism - and by the presidential repeal of the same measure one year later! Michael Haneke's disturbing film *Caché* (2005) deals with repressed memories of the country's colonial past and their link to the post-colonial present.

[36] See Gérard Noiriel's pioneering work, *The French Melting Pot - Immigration, Citizenship and National Identity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. See also Sophie Wahnich, *Impossible citoyen, l'étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1997.

[37] For an interesting point of view on French republicanism and the Left, see Denis Sieffert, *Comment peut-on être (vraiment) républicain?*, Paris: La Découverte, 2006.

[38] For an overview of the questions involved in this debate, see Didier Fassin and Eric Fassin, eds., *De la question sociale à la question raciale? Représenter la société française*, Paris: La Découverte, 2006; and Karim Bourtel and Dominique Vidal, *Le mal-être arabe*, Marseille: Agone, 2005.

[39] The idea of juxtaposing the two polls comes from Dominique Mezzi, 'Une guerre de mouvement gagnée par la droite dure', 15 May 2007, available from <http://www.europe-solidaire.org>.