
French politics has experienced 40 years of marked instability and it seems unlikely that the upcoming 2022 French presidential election will be an exception. Characteristically, as Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini show in *The Last Neoliberal: Macron and the Origins of France’s Political Crisis*, “[s]ince the end of the 1970s, each French government seeking a fresh mandate at the polls has met with defeat” (p.12). The 2017 presidential and legislative elections, on which the book focuses, were an extreme example of that trend. The Parti Socialiste (PS) – the party of the outgoing president, François Hollande – lost a staggering nine million votes compared with 2012 (p.153) and is today on the verge of extinction. This spectacular collapse was mirrored by the more relative fall of another historical party on the right, Les Républicains (ex-Union pour un Mouvement Populaire [UMP]), while new sovereigntist parties – Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (ex-Front National) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise – continued to rise. The reshuffling of the French political spectrum crystallised in the meteoric rise of a brand-new party, En Marche!, built around the figure of its creator, Emmanuel Macron – a former banker and political adviser with no previous electoral mandate, who nonetheless was elected president of France.

Amable and Palombarini’s book provides helpful insights into the long-term political crisis that made the advent of “Macronism” possible. But the title chosen for this English translation of the 2018 French second-edition is somewhat misleading. This is neither a book about Macron nor about his potential fall, as the titular word “last” seems to suggest. As explained in the afterword to the English edition, most of the book was actually written prior to the 2017 elections. Chapter 5, which is the only chapter directly about Macron, was written in Spring 2018 for the augmented second edition; that is, in the early days of Macron’s mandate and a few months before the start of the gilets jaunes (“yellow vests”) protest movement.
As suggested by its original title *L’illusion du bloc bourgeois: Alliances sociales et avenir du modèle français* (“The Illusion of the Bourgeois Bloc: Social Alliances and the Future of the French Model”), the book instead offers a larger reflection on the structural instability of French politics, mostly by analysing it through the lens of an enlightening neo-Gramscian framework (Chapter 1). The authors explain the changeable character of the French electorate – which Macron presented as a feature of the quasi-hereditary Gallic “resistance to change” (BBC News 2018) – as a crisis of representativity, or, as they put it, a crisis of “political supply” (p.96). According to them, the traditional parties and the policies they have promoted no longer match the expectations and needs of the social alliances – or “social blocs” – that supported them and whose interests they were supposed to defend; as such, they have eroded their foundations. The social alliances that composed the left-wing and right-wing blocs were themselves unsettled by internal disagreements around the question of Europe and the rampant neoliberal reforms that came with EU integration and were imposed by governments from the left as well as from the right. The slow dissolution of these right-wing and left-wing blocs has made the composition of new social alliances possible (Chapter 4), and particularly the emergence of a “bourgeois bloc” (Chapter 3) that transcends the left/right cleavage, is mostly supportive of neoliberal reforms, and is committed to European integration above all else.

While acknowledging that both right- and left-wing blocs have experienced similar identity crises, Amable and Palombarini’s real target is the *Parti Socialiste*, to which they devote some of the most valuable passages of the book (Chapter 2). They suggest that the PS was primarily responsible for the splintering of the left-wing bloc, initially composed of an alliance of “public-sector managers and employees, blue-collar categories in general, and intellectual professions”, as well as a “majority of private-sector employees” (p.36-37). Influenced by a minority within the PS (Michel Rocard’s “Second Left”, Pierre Mauroy, Jacques Delors, but also the young François Hollande) and by the political calculations of François Mitterrand (president of France from 1981 to 1995), the party shifted its focus to championing European integration, disregarding the demands of the working class and its
common programme with the *Union de la Gauche* (which included the *Parti Communiste*). It wholeheartedly embraced the cause of “modernisation” and neoliberal reforms from 1983 onwards, as illustrated by some rather damning textual sources compiled by the authors. Most striking here is a selection of quotations (p.55-57) from a 1985 book, *En sortir ou pas*, co-authored by Jacques Delors, where the future president of the European Commission exposes his distrust for social protection, his admiration for Reagan, and his belief in the necessity for all the French to convert to market forces.

The *Parti Socialiste* conversion to neoliberal theories follows the trajectory of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, such as “New Labour” in the UK. Yet, as a founding member, France and the successive governments that represented it – especially socialist governments – played a central part in the institutional development of the European Union. What Amable and Palombarini argue is that the socialists played a double role in the neoliberalisation of French institutions. On the one hand, they shaped the EU as a neoliberal institution, for instance by participating in the elaboration of fixed rules about budgetary and monetary policies. On the other hand, they used the European rules they had helped to develop as a means of imposing budgetary and monetary constraints on French society and politics. They committed France to structural reforms and ensured there would be no easy way back by entangling its destiny with the EU’s. But, by overlooking the interests of their electorate, they endangered their own re-election, which triggered the need to actively identify a new electoral base or to mobilise a new social bloc. Chapter 1 discusses some of the attempts by the PS and its associated think-tanks (such as *Terra Nova*) to redefine its electorate around the centre-left and centre-right. They targeted socio-economic profiles corresponding to the “bourgeois bloc”: well-off and educated, pro-European, supportive of reform, and open to cultural difference.

For Amable and Palombarini, this strategy was ultimately a failure for the PS, as it remained associated with its left-wing origins and failed to lower unemployment. In contrast, Macron succeeded in rallying the bourgeois bloc because his patiently crafted “outsider” aura enabled him to seemingly transcend the right/left cleavage and incarnate a resolute
commitment to Europe and structural reforms. Chapter 5 is clairvoyant in its assessment of Macron’s early policies (like the reform of unemployment or the withdrawal of the Solidarity Tax on Wealth [Impôt de Solidarité sur la Fortune or ISF]) and of what was to come after them. The authors highlight Macron’s haste in leading his structural reforms and his willingness to see inequalities deepen before an alleged betterment of economic prospects once reforms bear their fruits. In an echo of Naomi Klein’s (2008) work, Amable and Palombarini understand these shock reforms to be instrumental in consolidating the bases of the bourgeois bloc, as a means to “impose the almost complete transition of French capitalism towards a neoliberal model”. The afterword complements this analysis by briefly reflecting on the authoritarian turn taken by the regime when facing the revolt of the gilets jaunes and the 2019-2020 strikes against pension reform. Here again, the statistics speak for themselves. As reported by the authors, between December 2018 and February 2020, one person died, 25 people lost an eye, and five lost a hand in the brutal police repression of demonstrations (p.171).

Despite its analytical strength, the structure of the argument is at times over-intricate or repetitive. For instance, the preface delineates three “socio-economic models” (neoliberal; socialist-ecological; “illiberal”-identitarian), but they somewhat disappear afterwards and seem to be replaced by the identification of “eight political projects” in Chapter 4 without clarification of how models and projects work together. I took this peculiar structure as a legacy of the way the book was conceived at three different moments. This defect is largely compensated for by the richness of the conceptual framework and the way it comes to illuminate long-term trends in French political life. For anyone interested in the topic, the book will provide precious tools for reading the upcoming 2022 French presidential elections – although some prior knowledge of French politics might be required to navigate the book confidently.

The book makes two other worthwhile interventions. First, it offers a good illustration of the inherent authoritarian tendencies of neoliberalism, as also analysed by Ian Bruff (2014). Through the statistical and textual material it analyses, it also provides an interesting
account of neoliberalism à la française – thus indirectly contributing to what Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (2002), as well as Jamie Peck (2010), call “actually existing neoliberalism”: the context-specific interactions between inherited regulatory framework and neoliberal norms. Specifically, Amable and Palombarini briefly analyse how French neoliberalism merged with another ideological current, “modernism” (as represented, for instance, by Pierre Mendès-France) which aspired to put an end to France’s (alleged) decline and fix the social question by the enlightened interventions of a technocratic elite.

Nonetheless, while the authors clearly differentiate the two currents at a theoretical level in Chapter 2, their mutual interaction and respective influence becomes harder to differentiate in the rest of the analysis and would gain from being made more explicit. Is Macron more of a modernist or a neoliberal?

Lastly, the implicit neo-Gramscian stance of the book means that it is also attempting to define a strategy that could oppose the bourgeois bloc. This strategy seems to entail forging new alliances and making compromises that could help “a left that is actually left-wing” (p.101) emerge from its current impasse. Amable and Palombarini provide a solid account of the left’s profound divisions on the questions of Europe, Frexit, and the exit from the Eurozone. They view positively La France Insoumise’s attempt to rally together different classes and the youth, while still defending the interests of popular classes. In the last paragraph of Chapter 5, they suggest some possibilities for crafting a new federative consensus, like defending “the principle of solidarity and social justice” (p.164), redirecting public debates away from issues of identity and towards economic, environmental, and social questions, as well as reasserting (against Macron) the relevance of the left/right cleavage.

These propositions, however, remain a bit too broad to be fully effective – thus reminding us of the work that still need to be done to rebuild the left-wing bloc, a project that is sadly unlikely to be completed before the 2022 elections.
References


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