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Social Regression in France

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What is happening in France? It is a constant and sometimes mystifying question, especially in France. The answers given in France—across the political spectrum—almost always reveal confusions, blindness caused by ideas and interests embedded in existing institutions and political mentality.

The problem is that the system of social “welfare” and “security” created after the Second World War—undoubtedly progressive and liberating for millions of people—carried and still carries within it the seeds of its present destruction. It is easily understandable that a right-wing government empowered by a liberal, free-market ideology and, especially, by the strictures of the financial elites whose bidding the government serves, should carry out its present project. But it is less understood how the Left has been and continues to be complicit in this same process.

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Before going into this somewhat occult story, let me first affirm the existence of a powerful, radically social progressive undercurrent in France today that is historically unique in its liberation from previous mindsets on the Left. However, this does not yet mean it has the conceptual clarity and the political resources necessary to vanquish the present reactionary onslaught against previous gains.

Over the past year or so, the French population has been educated in very real terms by those opposed to the reactionary “reforms” of the Sarkozy government. In particular, it has been explained how the system of social security and the administration necessary to its functioning was created.

Rather than going over this history myself, I prefer to quote from one of the dozens of critical publications that have emerged on a “grassroots” level in attempts to counteract propaganda from Right, Left, and Center. In the September issue of “Fakir” presented as the “journal fâché avec tout le monde. Ou Presque” (tr. The newspaper angry with everyone. Or almost”), the creation of the present system of social security is explained lucidly and in no uncertain terms.

I was first attracted by the front-page title on this four-page paper from the northern city of Amiens. “La revanche des collabos!” (tr. The Revenge of the Collaborationists!), it blazoned. Now, “collabos” is a highly derogatory slang term referring to that majority of French people who, in one way or another, supported the Vichy government during the Nazi occupation of France. Yes, I thought, let’s use this simplistic dichotomy, this division of the population into those who resist and those who collaborate. Here are words that raise hackles in a country still uneasy about what happened during that time of accommodation, when the logic of appeasement meant sending Jews, Gypsies and others off to work in camps and factories in Germany or to die in extermination centers, while some others seized the time to profit for themselves, and a relatively few engaged in collective resistance activities.

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Today, as well, there are those who accept fatalistically the new “reforms”, and there is the actively resisting minority. “Fakir” explains that the system of “social security, retirement, and public services” that we know today was built “in a country in ruins at the time of the Liberation by our grandpas and grannies who fought in the Resistance. Today, however, although France is the fifth greatest economic power in the world, it is said that we no longer can afford this ‘national solidarity’.”

How did it happen? Well, first there was a political void when France was liberated from Nazi control and the Vichy government. The political Right was totally discredited, either fleeing towards Germany or taking on protective color by joining the Resistance before it was too late (one such case, among legions of others, was that of eventual

“socialist” president François Mitterrand).

The powerful capitalists had temporarily lost their political representation. In the late 1930s they had done everything to overturn the gains resulting from the short-lived Popular Front government, even to the extent of preparing the defeat of French forces before the Nazi *Blitzkrieg*. This was the “strange defeat” evoked in a posthumous publication by the historian and resistance chief Marc Bloch after being tortured and executed by the Nazis in March 1944. His suggestion that the French oligarchy preferred German occupation and fascism à la française to any kind of progressive social reform is now detailed by Annie Lacroix-Riz in her astonishing book published in 2006: *Le Choix de la défaite. Les élites françaises dans les années 1930* (tr. Choosing Defeat: The French Elites in the 1930s).

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The French capitalists were so complicit in fascist affairs they had to keep a very low profile in a radically changed context. The political field was left to the renegade military officer Charles De Gaulle returned from London, to the prominent members of the Resistance and, especially, to the French Communist Party now in 1945, thanks to its participation in the Resistance, the largest political party in terms of voter support.

Given this set of political circumstances and the need for national reconciliation, De Gaulle and the Communist Party concluded a pact. The agreement was based on a program elaborated by the National Council of the Resistance, in which working people and political dissidents were integrated into the national effort to reconstruct the economy. The creation of a comprehensive system of social security coverage including health, unemployment and retirement benefits resulted. The decrees were issued in October 1945 and were then incorporated into the Constitution of the Fourth Republic by popular referendum.

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The general principle was that state and nation have a financial obligation to go the assistance of citizens, and especially those most vulnerable—women, children and elderly workers, exposed to social risk. The retirement system was based on this now constitutional premise. The National Council of the Resistance demanded retirements “permitting elderly workers to finish their lives in dignity.”

In order to ensure the continuity of the social programs, state control over industries directly affecting the social wellbeing of the population was deemed necessary. The National Council of the Resistance called for “the return to the nation of all the important monopolized means of production, the fruit of collective work: the energy sources, the mineral resources, the insurance companies and the big banks.” From 1945 to 1948, this was generally accomplished, including the electrical, natural gas and aeronautics industries. At the same time, an elaborate system of state administration was created in which the major labor unions became integral participants. In particular, Maurice Thorez, general secretary of the French Communist Party, became minister of “the public function” and required that union officials play an equal role in policy determination alongside the government and industry.

As everyone now knows, the mass mobilizations in France over the past several months, culminating in November 2010, did not stop the passage of the “reform” consisting of certain regressive modifications of the retirement system. The movement failed in relation to those of 1986, 1995 and 2006 that had succeeded in rolling back more limited but similar measures. This is so in spite of a strong current of resistance and a « revolutionary tradition » that is an important part of political culture in France.

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The question is why and how Sarkozy and his government have been successful in the pursuance of their program to reverse historical gains. Their relative success is all the more impressive in the context created by the financial collapse occurring one year after the formation of this government.

Firstly, and paradoxically, the answer is to be found in the success of the system of social security. Access to efficient, subsidized health services, low-cost education at all levels, unemployment compensation of various types and retirement benefits is so general that it tends to be taken for granted, even when this access is threatened.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly in the present context, the administrative structure of public services in France has largely contributed to social divisions and accompanying injustices. At the same time, it has reinforced a trend towards a de-politicization, a consequence of alienation from labor unions and political parties that were once seen as vital in the defense of popular interests. Two generations ago, the anti-capitalist unions and political parties were important vectors of popular education, but this is no longer the case.

When, because of the postwar compromise, the labor unions and the state entered into a partnership expressed in the construction of a specialized administrative bureaucracy, public education, and public utilities (including electrical and gas production and distribution, the national rail system, the postal services, health care, etc.), two sources of tension were created.

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The first source of tension is linked to the job security enjoyed by state “functionaries” and to the modalities of promotion existing within the “corps” into which one has been inducted. Once in the state administration, employment is guaranteed until statutory retirement, but membership in a major labor union is essential in order to be promoted.

Maurice Thorez and the other Communist members of the first postwar governments established a rigidly hierarchical system of individual advancement within the new bureaucracies. They did this to ensure their continued political influence. On the capitalist side of things, a National School of Administration (Ecole Nationale d'Administration or ENA) was also created in 1945 to provide “expert” directors for appointment to all branches of the new state system. The new administrative elites dominated managerial functions.

On a lower level, then, the unions dominated. This was a system tending towards a kind of totalitarian control in that the unions (the powerful CGT—General Federation of Labor—was informally controlled by the Communist Party) brokered decisions relative to professional promotion. Towards this end was established a military-like pyramid of echelons, grades and “classes” that held out a carrot of salary increments throughout an individual's whole career, right up until retirement.

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Where is the problem? It is in the simple fact that considerations external to the quality of individual job performance—such as the strategies of the local administration and the employee's union membership—are primary. For ambitious employees, conformity to union discipline and to local political expectations is the ticket to advancement. For the less ambitious, the security of their employment allows a minimization of their efforts. They are not bothered as long as they play the politico-administrative game. Laxity and absenteeism are generally recognized as a major phenomenon in all areas and levels of French bureaucracy.

All this is an open secret in France. Those in labor unions and “progressive” political parties know it, but will not talk about it for fear of angering their constituencies. In the recent strikes and demonstrations, the union bureaucracies acted mainly because of pressure from the rank and file. Almost everyone on the thick bottom of the social pyramid, and especially the masses of the unorganized and those who are not politically aware, tends to “feel” the indifference or even contempt expressed to them by the behavior of many administrative “functionaries”.

The second source of tension is within the general political “Left” in France. (I put the word “Left” within quote marks because, as it is well known, virtually all prominent French politicians of this tendency, even if they sometimes use

anti-capitalist rhetoric, refrain from calling into question the class-collaboration that the present administrative system implies, and was even designed to produce.)

There are only a few voices on the radical Left venturing criticism of how the impressive and vital social services are administered in France. One such voice is Pierre Sommermeyer's. As he said five years ago (in the journal *Réfractations*, winter, 2005): "For all those who have decided that the public sector is contrary to private interests and for those who resented those believed to be privileged, lazy functionaries, the bell of revenge has tolled against those who take advantage of their petty authority to lord it over people outside the protection of the state employment umbrella. [...] The path is short and straight between a society administered by the state and a society in the hands of profiteers."

The question of state control versus the alternative of participatory, democratic decision-making and administration is, of course, extremely complex. What still exists in France may be very attractive to those elsewhere who struggle against the ravages of institutionalized corruption and free-market ideology, and where political culture may be even more debased. But the so-called "French model", so often touted outside of France, is on the point of collapsing under the pressures of political implosion in France and from the "harmonizing" directives of the European Union.

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The new industrial-financial oligarchy has no real need for continued partnership with the labor unions or the (now almost extinct) Communist Party. Even the professionally trained administrative elites of the previous generation are endangered by the changes. And yet the tendency for people ensconced in the system is to hunker down and protect their relative social advantages. This has been particularly evident in the universities where massive collaboration with the noxious reforms reflects the still privileged status (but for how long?) of state employees—whether technical, administrative or professorial personnel—in relation to the private sector.

Overwhelmingly, the drastic decline in union membership, and the discrediting of the established Left parties, has contributed to an increase in public ignorance and confusion. This is a major reason why Nicolas Sarkozy was elected in the first place, and why he and his government have been so successful in manipulating opinion and forcing through their regressive social "reforms".

Post-scriptum :

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