

## The French elections and the democratic left

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The first round of the French Presidential elections has raised important lessons for the democratic left – about both organisation and ideas. The media is talking about how well the far right did. But the socialist left did well too. More than one in ten electors voted for the Front de Gauche. Their candidate argued that austerity falls unequally and unfairly and damages the economy. He said that neoliberalism is a choice and that the problems of it and of capitalism are systemic rather than conjunctural. Mélenchon argued for equality, a society based on humans first and for democratic control of the economy. His good showing is the latest sign that socialism is alive and well, in his case in a reformist party via parliamentary democracy, but as an alternative to new social democracy.

Another sign of the continuing relevance of socialism came from the financial crisis. On one hand the crisis showed the strength of capitalism. Despite this existential challenge, it survived, just as in the 1930s. This demonstrated how robust capitalism is and subjection of it to stringent global regulation was avoided. But while pundits said no-one had predicted the crisis this was not true. Socialists, and especially Marxists going back to Marx himself, have been predicting such crises for a long time. They have pointed to the dangers of short-term risk-taking incentivised by the rewards that can be gained. They have warned about crises this could lead to especially in the most liberal systems of Anglo-American capitalism. They may not have predicted it would all kick off in the American sub-prime mortgage market or the date but they said it was coming. This analytical power is one sign that socialism is alive and well. But the outcome of the crisis shows that socialism's relevance lies more in analysis than as a clear and present political alternative.

Occupy has also continued to show the life in socialism. It has raised socialist arguments and analyses just when they seemed to have slipped below the mainstream political radar. The workers movement has been exposed as sluggish and slow by the student and protest movements of the last two or three years and social democracy has been shown up for what it is, committed to austerity with a human face, less cuts and slower ones rather than a genuine alternative based on growth, fairer taxes, equality and social goals. Occupy's ideas have not just put socialism back on the agenda, they also have resonance with the public. In an ICM poll in 2011 more than 50% of respondents said they supported Occupy calling time on a system that puts profit before people.

Protests in the student movement and Occupy have turned to a defence of the welfare state. In the '60s and '70s there was a new left that consisted of students, workers and others, that was bottom up and had an anti-capitalist and libertarian message, and theorists such as Herbert Marcuse. They were critical of social democracy and the welfare state for being paternalistic, bureaucratic and serving to keep the exploitative system of capitalism on the road. Occupy and the student protests of the 2010s have many of the characteristics of this old new left, in terms of agency, organisation and message. This has been added to, of course, by social media and social changes such as the rise of the precariat and the graduate with no future. However one message they have made is a defence of social democracy and the welfare state. They have called for free higher education for all,

a universal state health system not subject to privatisation and the market, and welfare support for the poor. This is about the very welfare state the old new left was critical of. And the new new left has had to take this cause up because new social democracy has abandoned it. Rather than defending the welfare state, which made such great achievements for human beings in the postwar period, new social democracy apologises for its own creation and goes along with the privatisation and marketisation of public services, just less radically so than the right. In fact in the UK it was New Labour who initiated many of the processes of commodification, privatisation and marketisation of education and health.

So the space for a socialist alternative lies with social movements like Occupy and, within the democratic system, with left parties like the Front de Gauche, the Latin American left of Chavez and Morales et al and parties like Die Linke in Germany.

But while the ideas and analysis of socialism are strong as ever there are issues of agency and organisation. The left has long relied on the industrial working class but this group has shrunk and new groups at a disadvantage have sprung up - the precariat, the insecure middle classes, the graduate with no future, politically alienated youth, and immigrants. Democratic socialism needs to appeal to a constituency that is diverse and includes such groups, alongside the industrial working class. A wider base will also help the democratic left to incorporate issues it needs to pay more attention to, and I will come back to that.

Mélenchon's showing also tells us something about party. Social democracy used to offer a compromise between socialism and capitalism. But that has been abandoned by new social democrats at the expense of the socialist side. It has been complicit in dismantling the compromise it helped secure. Now it offers not just incorporation into capitalism but neoliberalism, and even austerity, with a human face. On the other hand there is no foreseeable chance for the international insurrection that revolutionary parties support. Popular uprisings have come from spontaneous movements organised through social media, libertarian in approach, in some cases as anti-authoritarian as anti-capitalist, rather than via revolutions through organised workers parties. For socialists these exciting movements are one alternative. Another is parties like Le Gauche, to the left of social democracy but within the parliamentary system. They are still socialist while new social democracy has abandoned its aim of pools of socialism within capitalism. They operate inside parliamentary politics so have a chance of an impact in the here and now, pushing the political agenda to the left, through their role in parliaments, or even the possibility of governing in coalitions.

But there are issues the left does not pay enough attention to and the French election highlighted these too. The Green party did poorly and ecology did not feature much in the campaign. Yet we have an ecological crisis greater than the financial crisis in the implications it has for the future of humanity. Socialists need to bring this to the centre of the political debate and incorporate it into their political approach, or adapt their ideology to fit the issue. This may mean changes to commitments to growth, productivism and industry that socialists and social democrats have held dear to because of their loyalty to the industrial working class.

Socialists have also seen work as a solution, to unemployment, economic hardship and social inclusion. They have aimed to change work through social ownership to end exploitation and alienation and enact workers control. But the French have put a priority on freedom from work too, from the post-Marxist philosopher André Gorz to the Socialist Party's securing of a shorter working week. Even collectively controlled work will be experienced as imposed. Freedom from compulsion should be as much an aim for the left as better work. This does not mean days of watching day time TV, although it could do. It will often mean work, but creative, self-chosen and self-directed work, for fulfilment rather than as a wage slave. A basic income for all is the foundation for a society which values free work alongside paid labour.

The far right did well in France and its campaigns against immigration. Unfortunately new social democracy has also adopted anti-immigration rhetoric. It is as if only the hard-up from your own country matter. Those from other lands are treated with hostility even though they are equally human and just as much part of the poor. The Marxist left has been better at internationalism and recognising the unity of the dispossessed regardless of national boundaries. Social democrats appeal to anti-immigration sentiment because they think it engages with the insecurity of the white working class, because of a perceived failure of multiculturalism, and to draw votes from the far right. But endorsing anti-immigration is as likely to assist the far right as take support from them and every vote gained from fascism is one lost from liberals or greens. Anti-immigrant arguments do not stand up anyway. Immigrants do jobs natives cannot or do not want to do, they pay tax, support public services, boost economic growth and are often escaping hardship or persecution. There is an economic and moral argument for supporting immigration rather than beefing up hostility to outsiders and racism. The left should use social democratic arguments about the need for public housing and strong trade unions rather than blaming migration for accommodation shortages and low wages.

The French election shows that parties outside new social democracy are where socialism can be pursued democratically. Such parties need to ally with the social movements of our time, from Occupy to students and others, because it is from social movements that the best and most imaginative ideas come, and ideas that relate to the young, about development, health, environment, gender equality, rights on the basis of sexuality and ethnicity and, indeed, rights for workers from the movements that led to workers parties. Allying with libertarian movements can help prevent the mistakes made when people tried to introduce socialism in authoritarian ways in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Democratic socialism needs to appeal to the diverse dispossessed in modern societies and incorporate issues highlighted in French politics: the marginalisation of ecological concerns, fulfilment outside the compulsion of work, and the rights and benefits of immigrants. This means a shift away from new social democracy and from too tight a focus on worker and productivist concerns and bases, while maintaining a continuing emphasis on the economic and egalitarian politics that gained the Front de Gauche one in ten votes in the first round of the Presidential election. In the immediate term it means democratic socialist campaigns for investment and growth, fairer and greener taxes, social goals over liberal economics, the free movement of people and, maybe, a basic income for all, for security and freedom.

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