

French Socialism Embraced Neoliberalism and Signed Its Death Warrant

In the 1980s, François Mitterrand brought the French Socialists to power. A generation later, they're in danger of extinction — and they brought it upon themselves.



François Mitterrand in Strasbourg, Germany, 1979. (Jean Muscat / Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

France was one of the last countries in Western Europe to elect a social democratic government after the war. When François Mitterrand became the country's president in 1981, he established the Parti Socialiste (PS) as a regular party of government. For the next thirty-six years, the French Socialists took turns in office with their conservative rivals.

But the old party system collapsed in the last presidential election and doesn't seem to be coming back. The PS candidate Benoît Hamon dropped to fifth place with a single-digit vote share, and the party's current standard-bearer, Anne Hidalgo, is flatlining ahead of this year's presidential election.

What was the history that brought the French left to its current state of crisis, and does it show what other countries are going to experience in the future?

Fabien Escalona is a journalist for the French publication *Mediapart*. This is an edited transcript from an episode of Jacobin's [Long Reads podcast](#). You can listen to the episode [here](#).

Daniel Finn

What was the position of French socialism when the Parti Socialiste (PS) was launched in 1969, replacing the old SFIO [French Section of the Workers' International]? And how did it relate to the French Communist Party, which was much larger at the time?

Fabien Escalona

In 1969, the SFIO was very weak. Its electoral performance at the presidential election that year was a disaster, with only 5 percent of the vote. The performance in the legislative elections the previous year had been less catastrophic, but the party belonged to a wider center-left coalition, which got a little over 16 percent of the vote, behind the French Communist Party (PCF), which got 20 percent.

Ever since France's liberation from Nazi occupation, the Socialists had been outstripped by the PCF, having previously been the leading force of the labor movement before the war. France was thus one of the few West European countries, along with Italy and Finland, where the Communist Party dominated the class cleavage. The Socialists were quite close to the Communists at the very start of the postwar period, but after 1947 and the beginning of the Cold War, they allied with other parties of the center and right to prevent the PCF from becoming part of any governmental coalition.

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Things became more complicated after 1958 because of the regime change that ended the postwar Fourth Republic. Charles de Gaulle was called on to put an end to the Algerian crisis and he established a Fifth Republic, which was based on a much more presidential logic. You had a new regime with electoral rules that encouraged polarization between right and left, with less space for centrist coalitions than there had been during the Fourth Republic. The Socialists no longer had an effective strategy and needed to move closer to the Communist Party.

Daniel Finn

When François Mitterrand became the dominant figure in the party during the 1970s, what was his strategy for the conquest of power, and what was he hoping to achieve in office?

Fabien Escalona

Mitterrand was a man of the Fourth Republic, but he provided the Socialists with a strategy that was very well adapted to the new institutions. He combined a critique of the Gaullist regime with a form of social criticism that spoke to all sections of the Left. At the same time, he knew that the presidential election was the crucial one in the system of the Fifth Republic, and he recognized that only a non-Communist candidate could win this election by gathering all the votes of the Left in a second-round contest. He followed this strategy quite consistently before and after having taken his place at the head of the Socialist Party in 1971.

Mitterrand definitely wanted to modernize French society in quite a democratic way. But he had only vague ideas in economic matters. The broader goal was to find a third way between capitalism and collectivism, but on a very gradualist path, to be achieved over an indefinite period of time. He certainly didn't anticipate the neoliberal counterrevolution that came once the Socialists were in power in the 1980s.

Daniel Finn

Why did the alliance between the Socialists and the French Communist Party break up on the eve of the 1978 parliamentary elections, which the Left was expected to win? What were the consequences of that split?

Fabien Escalona

The PCF felt that it was losing its dominant role within the French left. The Communists always knew that Mitterrand's goal was to assume the leadership of the entire left, but they believed that they could avoid this scenario, thanks to the fact that they possessed more of a popular base than the PS. However, they ultimately had to recognize the Socialists were better placed to capture the frustrated

aspirations of May 1968.

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After a short Eurocommunist phase, the PCF chose to retreat to an old-fashioned Leninist and above all conservative identity. This proved to be the most destructive decision of the French Communist leadership, which in the process lost the last opportunity to avoid the party’s subsequent fate. During the 1980s, the PCF entered into a sharp decline, losing both votes and members on a huge scale.

In the short term, the breakup of the alliance led to an electoral defeat for the left parties in 1978, at a time when many people expected the first exchange of power from right to left in the history of the Fifth Republic. However, in the longer term, it certainly helped the Socialist Party to win the national elections of 1981, for two reasons. On the one hand, the Socialists managed to appear, for those who still wanted a union of the Left, as the nonsectarian force in comparison to the PCF. On the other hand, the moderate voters were less fearful than they had been in the past, because they could now see that a victory of the Left would not amount to a Communist victory.

Daniel Finn

What was the platform on which Mitterrand was elected as French president in 1981? How far did his government go in attempting to implement that platform once they were in office?

Fabien Escalona

There were a lot of democratic reforms, such as the abolition of the death penalty, an agenda to improve women’s and LGBT rights, and so on. At the beginning, the economic program was very important, of course. We could describe it as a “Marxo-Keynesian” program — an attempt to blend the ideas of Marx and Keynes. It combined an effort to boost aggregate demand through redistributive social and fiscal measures with a policy to improve the country’s productive capacity through a wave of nationalizations.

This program was also implemented. But within two years, there was a U-turn under pressure from the financial markets and the European Monetary System (EMS) of the time, with a substitution of orthodox economic goals and austerity measures to curb inflation. The Socialist government also began to deregulate finance. I should add that the management criteria for the state-owned companies were aligned with those of the private sector.

There was no real attempt to preserve the initial economic program. Mitterrand himself had no precise intentions in this area and did not want to bring about a real socialist transition to an alternative model of production. The people he appointed to economic and financial posts in his government were very middle-ground figures with a Keynesian background that was challenged by the conjuncture of neoliberal counterrevolution. They had neither a Marxist background or ideology, nor radical, transformative intentions.

Daniel Finn

How did the French Socialists relate to the project of European integration as it took shape in the 1980s and after?

Fabien Escalona

It’s a complicated question. There was a left faction within the PS called CERES, led by Jean-Pierre Chevènement, which was very critical of European integration. But on the whole, the PS remained attached to the project of integration from the 1980s. One of the reasons why Mitterrand abandoned the “Marxo-Keynesian” project was that he found the idea of exiting the EMS too adventurist at this time.

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After the 2008 crisis, we had similar debates around the euro, which was a much more ambitious

project than the EMS. It was a common currency — a kind of new golden standard — which rendered left policies very difficult, as did the European single market, with the free movement of capital and goods in particular. It was quite a perverse situation, in the sense that the project of European integration superseded socialist ideals while being presented as their necessary precondition. Many socialists in France and elsewhere during the 1980s and '90s were united by the idea of “social Europe” and the hope for “Euro-Keynesianism,” but these remained fantasies.

Daniel Finn

By the time Mitterrand stepped down in 1995, what had his government done to change France? And how had the PS itself changed while in office?

Fabien Escalona

The PS brought some democratic advances, but clearly the most important legacy was that it helped change the French socioeconomic model in a neoliberal direction. The Socialist Party initiated the transformation from a *dirigiste* state to what we might call an anesthetist state, characterized by neoliberal reforms, with still quite high levels of public expenditure to cushion the impact of those reforms on the population. Ever since then, we have had a hybrid economic policy or political economy in France.

Meanwhile, the party lost its militant strength and melded with public institutions, both national and local. The introduction of primaries to select candidates accentuated the “presidentialization” of the PS. Its electoral influence decreased in the declining industrial basins of the eastern and Mediterranean departments. Its strongest areas can still be found in the west and southwest of the country, where the service sector continues to thrive.

Daniel Finn

What was the experience of the so-called plural left coalition government that was led by Lionel Jospin in the late 1990s? Why did Jospin himself perform so badly in the 2002 presidential election, allowing Jean-Marie Le Pen to reach the second round against Jacques Chirac?

Fabien Escalona

In 1997, two years after a very important social movement in France, there were early legislative elections. The different parties of the Left formed a loose agreement to maximize their seats and govern together in case of victory. Jospin, the leader of the PS, became prime minister, with Jacques Chirac as the right-wing president. He claimed that he would reconcile budgetary and price stability with a more interventionist policy to reduce unemployment.

Jospin's government implemented the reduction in working hours. It was a very important policy and a great success, despite the lies from the Right about it since then. But with the global economic downturn from 2000 onward, this was combined with a restrictive financial policy at the European level which brought renewed social insecurity. The deterioration of working conditions was neglected by the left government, which made more and more concessions to neoliberalism until 2002.

“Many people in France still say the Socialist failure in 2002 happened because there were too many left candidates.”

As well as this, the electoral agenda that year was dominated by law-and-order issues, and the Left has always been weak on this subject in the eyes of public opinion. Jospin was therefore unable to gather enough votes to reach the second round. Many people in France still say that this happened because there were too many left candidates. But the fragmentation of the Left doesn't explain why Jospin's own electoral level was so weak in comparison with the past. It was the fault of Jospin himself.

Daniel Finn

In 2012, François Hollande became the first Socialist president since Mitterrand. Five years later, his party slumped to fifth place in the presidential election with a single-digit vote share. What were the

main causes of that decline?

Fabien Escalona

It's a very striking case of near death for a party, the PS, which lost its previous status as the largest party of the Left. But nothing appeared to indicate such annihilation was in prospect before 2016. It was just a classic electoral defeat, if I might put it that way, which people expected. However, there were two initiatives of Hollande's government that proved to be destructive, as they shocked the very core of the Socialist electorate in 2016.

The first, which was later abandoned, was the proposal to enshrine in the French constitution the stripping of French nationality from those who had been convicted of terrorist crimes. The notion of stripping someone of their nationality conflicted with the cultural liberalism, not only of the PS electorate, but of the entire left.

The other reform concerned the labor market, loosening up employment regulations. It represented another rupture with the social and doctrinal compromises which the PS had maintained until then. The party had previously carried out neoliberal reforms in the financial system and other areas, but it was very cautious as far as the labor market was concerned. As a result, this reform was crucial: it shocked the core of the Socialist electorate.

Daniel Finn

How much of the old PS as an organization has simply crossed over to Emmanuel Macron's new party?

Fabien Escalona

It's difficult to say. Many grassroots members have left the party, but they went nowhere else. Several Socialist MPs joined Macron's party, but not the majority. So did the mayors of some important cities, but again, it was a minority of PS mayors who did this.

"Someone once told me that they experienced a kind of liberal pride thanks to Macron. They didn't have to pretend any more that they were genuine socialists."

Most of these people came from the right wing of the PS. We could mention Gérard Collomb, the former mayor of Lyon, who became ministry of the interior from 2017 to 2018. Someone once told me that they experienced a kind of liberal pride thanks to Macron. They didn't have to pretend any more that they were genuine socialists. There has been an ideological clarification. But we should remember that the most important jobs in the government were held by men with a right-wing background around Macron.

Daniel Finn

What do you think are the wider prospects of the French left in the upcoming presidential election, or in a more long-term perspective?

Fabien Escalona

Honestly, the prospects are bleak. There is still a significant left constituency, but the political left is fragmented, with no force able to take the leadership — neither La France Insoumise of Jean-Luc Mélenchon nor the Greens nor the Socialist Party, which has lost much of its credibility — although many forces still believe that they are entitled to claim a leading role. It's quite an inextricable situation, in an institutional system that is still governed by the presidential election, with no proportional representation, which doesn't help us.

However, I must say that when French people are interviewed about their values and expectations, not just on economic matters but also on cultural or ecological issues, there appears to be some fertile ground for left-wing and even radical ideas. The main problem lies with the current parties and their leaders: perhaps it is a little unfair to put it like that, but there is also a lot of truth in it. We have a real problem of political supply, rather than political demand, with the French left. Even five years after Hollande's disastrous term, the period of reconstruction that is necessary may be long.