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„The Protean Nature of the French Left: Cohn-Bendit, Mitterrand, and Hollande“

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Abstract

The French left-wing of 2024 is a far-cry from its heyday in the mid-20th Century. This thesis analyzes the development of the Left in French national parties from 1968 until 2018. It employs a biographical approach focusing on key leaders as emblematic of the ideological, societal, and political characteristics of the Left in 3 key moments: Daniel Cohn-Bendit in 1968, François Mitterrand in the 1970s and 80s, and François Hollande in the 2010s. The disciplines of both history and political science are used to unpack the key features of left-wing politics during these periods and the evolutions which these figures presided over. This thesis finds that changing socio-economic realities in France pushed society into consumerism and a comfortable position within a social welfare state. Subsequently, revolutionary left-wing politics lost their appeal and in following the events of 1968, the Communist Party was unable to adapt. Seeing this trend away from radicalism, Mitterrand took office in 1981 and tried to implement a new political program based on the lessons learned from 1968. However, he was unable to stop the ongoing economic crisis in France, due ironically in part to the same changes which caused 1968, and as result, adopted a centrist approach, morphing the PS into a mainstream, reformist organization and mouthpiece for the executive. This evolution subsequently set the stage for Hollande, who continued the neoliberalism of his predecessor and the party largely followed suit. Though, this centrism and neoliberalism ran its course and failed to resolve the issues plaguing France, resulting in a decline in socialist popularity as new parties sprung up. In the end though, the socio-economic trends which broke onto the scene in 1968, and which Mitterrand and Hollande tried to capitalize on, also forced a decline in their party as both their ideology and political platform became increasingly incoherent and irrelevant, pushing both centrist and leftist supporters away.

Zusammenfassung

Die französische Linke im Jahr 2024 ist weit von ihrer Blütezeit in der Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts entfernt. Diese Arbeit analysiert die Entwicklung der Linken in den nationalen Parteien Frankreichs von 1968 bis 2018. Dabei wird ein biografischer Ansatz verfolgt, der sich auf wichtige Führungspersonlichkeiten konzentriert, welche für die ideologischen, gesellschaftlichen und politischen Merkmale der Linken in drei Schlüsselphasen stehen: Daniel Cohn-Bendit im Jahr 1968, François Mitterrand in den 1970er und 80er Jahren und François Hollande in den 2010er Jahren. Die Disziplinen Geschichte und Politikwissenschaft werden genutzt, um die wichtigsten Merkmale linker Politik in diesen Zeiträumen und die Entwicklungen, die diese Persönlichkeiten leiteten, zu entschlüsseln. Diese Arbeit stellt fest, dass die sich verändernden sozioökonomischen Gegebenheiten in Frankreich die Gesellschaft in den Konsumismus und in eine bequeme Position innerhalb des Wohlfahrtsstaates drängten. In der Folge verlor die revolutionäre linke Politik ihre Anziehungskraft, und die Kommunistische Partei war nach den Ereignissen von 1968 nicht in der Lage, sich anzupassen. Mitterrand, der diesen Trend weg vom Radikalismus erkannte, trat 1981 sein Amt an und versuchte, ein neues politisches Programm auf der Grundlage der Lehren von 1968 umzusetzen. Er war jedoch nicht in der Lage, die anhaltende Wirtschaftskrise in Frankreich zu stoppen, die ironischerweise zum Teil auf dieselben Veränderungen zurückzuführen ist, die 1968 ausgelöst wurden, und verfolgte infolgedessen einen zentristischen Ansatz, indem er die Sozialistische Partei in eine reformorientierte Mainstream-Organisation und ein Sprachrohr für die Exekutive umwandelte. Diese Entwicklung bildete die Grundlage für Hollande, der den Neoliberalismus seines Vorgängers fortsetzte, während ihm die Partei weitgehend folgte. Dieser Zentrismus und Neoliberalismus waren jedoch nicht mehr in der Lage, die Probleme Frankreichs zu lösen, was zu einem Rückgang der Popularität der Sozialisten führte, da neue Parteien entstanden. Die sozioökonomischen Trends, die 1968 einsetzten und aus denen Mitterrand und Hollande versuchten, Kapital zu schlagen, führten schließlich auch zu einem Rückgang ihrer Popularität, da sowohl ihre Ideologie als auch ihr politisches Programm zunehmend inkohärent und irrelevant wurden und sich sowohl die Anhänger der Mitte als auch der Linken abwendeten.

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Introduction

France of the 20th and early 21st centuries was home to a series of profound evolutions and changes both in socio-economic and political aspects. Particularly impacted by these developments were the parties and politicians of the French left-wing, notably those of the Communist Party (PCF) and the PS (PS). Ranging from the post-war economic boom and subsequent challenges to the status quo in the 1960s, exemplified in 1968, to the neoliberal turn of the end of the century, the Left has consistently faced shifting tides and implications to which it needed to adapt itself.

While the PCF and PS attempted to ride these changes in their pursuit of their own political projects, they still struggled to adapt themselves to these changes which would allow them to both perform well electoral as well as maintain ideological or political consistency. First suffering from the decline in traditional working-class bases from the economic boom of the Trente Glorieuses, these flagship parties of the left additionally found themselves confronted by the new dimensions added to the political discourse from the popular student movements of 1968, which reshaped the left-wing to include new areas such as environmentalism. The rise of the New Left represented a profound challenge to the existing order in French politics. Unsatisfied with the traditional left-wing parties, figures like Daniel Cohn-Bendit rallied around a new conceptualization of politics which emphasized personalized and individual concerns.

As time went on and France entered into an era of neoliberalism, the Left still struggled to maintain its identity and performance, even after finding its greatest victory until that point. Under notable leaders like Mitterrand or Hollande, the Left, primarily the Socialists, tried to reform itself along liberal lines and then capitalize on the centrism present in society. However, despite winning centrist support, the Left became alienated from its main parties, prompting the arrival of new, populist, and radical parties to offer a return to the left-wing principles that had been left behind.

This thesis explores the intricate and protean connections between the French left-wing and the socio-economic evolutions in French society as a whole. In this pursuit, this investigation will combine elements of both history and political science to investigate the causes, effects, and impact this relationship had on the French left, beginning with the events of 1968 up until the end of François Hollande's term in 2017. The content of this thesis, then, will take a biographical approach with three main subjects: Daniel Cohn-Bendit, François Mitterrand, and François Hollande. These three were chosen as they were at the forefront of the left-wing during a period of change. As such their backgrounds, roles, and impacts will be

discussed within a greater context of French society and politics. By analyzing the roles these men had and the evolutions undertaken during their respective periods, this thesis aims to provide an understanding of how broader developments within French society impact the nature and political culture of its political parties.

Daniel-Cohn Bendit: The Heterodox Left

1968, the students at Nanterre are angry. What began as a protest against what was, in their view, draconian rules on visitation hours for the gendered dorms, had evolved into a broader critique of the university system at large. While seemingly innocuous enough, these protests have garnered noticeable local support for their numbers to steadily increase over time. At the same time, Missoffe had previously launched a program which sought to create a dialogue between the youth of the country and the national government. Surely, these protests would be well within his domain.

Missoffe was invited to inaugurate the newly built university pool on Jan. 8. However, he was met only with the yells and shouts from protests throughout his tour of the university campus. It was at the pool though, when Missoffe would have his most famous interaction of the visit. There, Missoffe was greeted with the phrase: “300 pages on the youth and not a word about sexuality”.¹ The critique had been launched by a brash young student with a head of fiery red-hair, Daniel Cohn-Bendit. The minister’s reply was swift, telling the young man that he ought to take a cold shower if his sexual urges were so strong.

While this verbal joust can be hardly called a conversation, it nevertheless was a weather vane for the social, cultural, and economic climate France found itself in. Within a few short months, students nationwide would erupt in protest over a multitude of issues: lack of job prospects post-grad, anti-war, anti-consumerism, anti-hierarchy, among others. These protestors would largely refuse naming a leader in the traditional sense, yet one among them certainly rose to prominence. The same Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who had so far only made a name for himself by insulting a government minister, would become emblematic of the *événements* of May-June 1968

Cohn-Bendit: Background and Times

Daniel Cohn-Bendit was born in 1945 to Jewish German parents who had fled their homeland during the rise of Nazism. Born a refugee, Cohn-Bendit was given no citizenship upon his birth, leaving him without a country until 1959 when he would seek German citizenship in lieu of completing the compulsory military service in France. Nevertheless, Cohn-Bendit’s education was emblematic of the incoming European community. He was educated in a German high school near Frankfurt but would pursue his studies once again in

¹ Laurent Besse, “Un Ministre et Les Jeunes : François Missoffe, 1966-1968,” *Histoire@Politique*, 2008.

France, at the Sorbonne in 1966. There, Cohn-Bendit planned to study sociology before the protest movement would set him down a much different path.²

Cohn-Bendit's family life was full of the same left-wing attitudes he would later be known for. While his parents had fled partially due to their Jewish heritage, they also fled for political reasons. Cohn-Bendit's father, Eric, was an active member of a communist organization in Berlin and was eventually pushed to leave by the nascent Nazi regime in 1933. Eric and his wife Herta would attempt to resettle in Paris, but were quickly dissuaded once Eric was briefly arrested due to his German citizenship during the debut of the war. The two would again flee and relocate to Montauban, where they would spend the war and Daniel would be born. By the time Daniel was born though, the Cohn-Bendit were stripped of their German nationality following the war and were officially regarded as apatriots.³ These experiences would mark Daniel's upbringing, leading him to identify fully neither with Germany nor France, instead opting to label himself as a citizen of Europe.

The mid-20th Century was a dynamic time for all of France, lest not only the Cohn-Bendit family. Since 1945, France has been undergoing significant economic and socio-cultural changes. Thanks in part to both de Gaulle's *dirigiste* economic policy and the American Marshall Plan, the French economy experienced a period of growth and prosperity, the likes of which it had not seen before. This period of time later became known as *Les Trente Glorieuses* (The Glorious Thirties) by French economist Jean Fourastie.

Between 1945 and 1973, the French economy saw an average GDP growth of 5% per year. In comparison, the American and British economies were growing 3.93% and 2.93% respectively per year. This economic growth was coupled with a multitude of lifestyle and socioeconomic changes inside France as well. Between 1946 and 1975, the total French population had risen from 40.5 million to 52.6, an increase of 29%. Conversely, the employed percent of the total population had dropped in the same time frame, from 51.4% to 41.4%.⁴ (see Figure 1 for more figures from the Trente Glorieuses)

The economic and demographic growth seen in France also translated into France's evolution into a consumption society *à la* the United States. The post-war brought France fully into modernity with the creature comforts and shopping habits to show for it. According to Fourastie, the French quality of life by 1975 was more than triple that of 1938, and the

² Éditions Larousse, "Daniel Cohn-Bendit - LAROUSSE," [www.larousse.fr](https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Daniel_Cohn-Bendit/114030), accessed June 7, 2024, https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Daniel_Cohn-Bendit/114030.

³ Prisma Média, "Daniel Cohn-Bendit - La Biographie de Daniel Cohn-Bendit Avec Voici.fr," Voici.fr, December 1, 2015, <https://www.voici.fr/bios-people/daniel-cohn-bendit>.

⁴ Jean Fourastie, *Les Trente Glorieuses*. (Fayard, 1979).

purchasing power of households had nearly quadrupled in the same period. These increases in the livelihood of ordinary Frenchmen had the additional effect of increasing the student population. The total number of youth pursuing their studies had increased nearly seven times over, growing from 650,000 to four million.⁵

By the time Cohn-Bendit began his studies at the Sorbonne campus in Nanterre, the effects of the population boom and increase in students were already becoming increasingly visible. The Sorbonne for many conjured up images of a prestigious campus located in the heart of Paris, but for those in Cohn-Bendit's class they found themselves in anything but. In response to the unprecedented increase in students, the university administration opted to hastily construct a university enclave away from the main campus in the suburb of Nanterre. The buildings were hastily constructed and new professors were brought in to handle the education of these newfound collegians.⁶ Unlike the prestigious education the main Sorbonne campus was known for, Nanterre's professors were quickly scrutinized for their lack of ability and polish.⁷ Clearly, the system was buckling under the weight of its own success.

The response to these difficulties and changes was multifaceted. With the standard of life rising and more people getting access not only to education but to tertiary professions, where their social and economic status could be elevated, or at the very least maintained, the implications of a consumer society were weighing heavily on the philosophy and ideology of this new generation. Groups such as the Situationist Internationale openly called into question the merits of this society and blamed this new consumerism for the existential ennui plaguing many of its citizens. For them, consumerism and capitalism were diluting human connection and society into nothing but images expressed through commodity consumption.⁸ This represented a new evolution in the social and political theories prevailing in French society. Conversely traditional critical parties, notably the Communists, rallied around strict ideological interpretations which were immovable, they were thus unable to fully address the incoming socio-political changes they found themselves in. New theories, like the Situationists, represented a break from this dogma and a growing acceptance of a new sort of political critique. This critique on offer, while clearly accepting a Marxist worldview, did not focus on unmoving ideas of political economics but rather on individual experience and expression, in other words, there was room for interpretation and modification, which the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Asma Benhenda and Camille Dufour, "Massification de l'Enseignement Supérieur et Évolutions de La Carte Universitaire En Ile-De-France," *Regards Croisés Sur L'économie* 16, no. 1 (2015).

⁷ Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrooke, "The Rest Is History" (Goalhanger Podcasts, 2023).

⁸ Anna Trespeuch-Berthelot, "Les Vies Successives de La Société Du Spectacle de Guy Debord," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue D'histoire* 122, no. 2 (2014): 135, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ving.122.0135>.

Communist Party, the main opposition force in politics at the time, could offer no one. The actual impact of these ideas on the upcoming student protests was marginal at best, yet this evolution in social critique is indicative of larger changes in French society, notably a rejection of strictly orthodox interpretations of politics, an aspect which was nothing short of a political zeitgeist for the students.

This small but noticeable shift towards a new sort of politics was not only popular among students but indicative of the new French middle class as a whole. The French middle class itself was growing substantially, both demographically and ideologically. Up until the 1950s, the middle class was a relatively unimportant sector of French society. While it certainly was able to exert itself financially more than the working class, their inherent lack of numbers prevented the middle class from being observed as a real player within the socio-economic organization of the country, seen by the Communist Party's reticence to view them as anything other than another appendage of the bourgeoisie.⁹ Still, the middle class received a multitude of benefits from the growing economy and evolving political environment. Like all elements of French society, the middle class enjoyed an increased purchasing power as well as improved government regulation and management of health, social security and the opening up of education. As such, the doors into the middle class were wide open and the protections offered to them from the state fostered an adherence to this state model. In other words, the middle class became invested in a state system in which their interests and way of life were heavily protected, thus ensuring a loyalty to the system at large.¹⁰ This growing acceptance of the status quo has often been attributed as the death of ideology. However, it might be more apt to label this as complacency more than ideological apathy. The welfare state and pro-business interventionism of de Gaulle provided the state apparatus with wide support from both the public and businesses.¹¹ As such, with their quality of life assured and a degree of social mobility promoted, the growing French economy and state had plenty of reasons to avoid seeking radical changes, even in the face of new issues. In the end though, with the opening of universities, the increase of general household wealth, and a steady decrease in the presence of the traditional working class, the middle class found itself on the rise and subsequently, the champions of the working class were at a loss.

⁹ Thierry Pech, "Two Hundred Years of the Middle Class in France (1789-2010)," *L'Economie Politique* 49, no. 1 (January 27, 2011): 69–97, <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-l-economie-politique-2011-1-page-69.htm>.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Monica Prasad, "Why Is France so French? Culture, Institutions, and Neoliberalism, 1974–1981," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 2 (September 2005): 357–407, <https://doi.org/10.1086/432778>.

However, while the growth of the economy and reorganization of society pushed for profound changes, the political realm of France remained by all measures rigid. France certainly went through a domestic crisis in the wake of the Algeria Crisis yet in its aftermath the newly created Fifth Republic was known for its intense lack of upheaval. As part of his national rebirth, de Gaulle's new republic centered around the concentrated power of the executive, to which all aspects were subservient.¹² As such, despite the unprecedented evolutions in the middle of French society, changes which questioned the organization and hierarchy of its current form, the French government and state system remained unmoving. Yet this power afforded to the presidency is another piece of the puzzle to understanding the political and social climate which produced the events of May 1968.

While all these changes seem like disparate manifestations of semi-related changes within French society, they are nonetheless key to understanding the story of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and the movements of May 1968. The combination of increased social mobility, reduction of inequalities, presence of consumerism, unchanging and interventionist state apparatus, and complacency to the system are all key elements to not only understanding the causes of May 1968, but also the outcomes and changes the events were indicative of. As this section will explain, 1968 represented a breaking point in French politics, especially the left-wing. The system was meeting the benefits of millions of people and despite its problems, many did not want fundamental change to risk their security and social mobility. Furthermore, the economic growth provided challenged the notion that the capitalist system was doomed to fail. Before the events and impacts of 1968 can be examined though, it is worth going over the state of the French left-wing until this point.

The French Communist Party up to 1968

While the French political landscape was home to a variety of left-wing parties, none were nearly as popular or electoral viable as the Communist Party (PCF). In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Communists leveraged their participation in the Resistance to earn widespread support among the French population, even entering into government in the short-lived Fourth Republic. However the Communists were never able to secure the executive branch of either the Fourth or Fifth Republic and as such were relegated to an opposition party, a position which worked wonderfully for their party program.

¹² Christine Pütz, "Chapitre 9 - La Présidentialisation Des Partis Français," in *Partis Politiques et Système Partisan En France*, ed. Presses de Sciences Po (Presses de Sciences Po, 2007).

As is typical with Communist parties, the French Communists took a large portion of their support from trade unions and the working class. The largest trade union in France, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) was working hand-in-hand with PCF leadership as well.¹³ With this substantial support base, the Communists were an important voting bloc in France. Yet, there were increasing signs of decline in electoral performance for the party as time progressed further past the Liberation of France. Whereas in the 1940s until 1956 the Party commanded roughly 25% of the vote, from 1958 until 1979 that percentage had dropped to 20%.¹⁴ Additionally, while the CGT represented the largest union in France, it was predominately strongest in sectors of the economy which had begun to be phased out, such as mining or manufacturing.¹⁵ The economic changes which had lifted many Frenchmen into the middle class had also robbed the PCF of its traditional voting bloc as now they were able to move beyond manual labor.

However these changes are not an inherent cause for electoral trouble for the PCF. It is the combination of changing socio-economic conditions and a party leadership unwilling to accept this that put the PCF on a path of decline. The Party leadership was profoundly loyal to the Soviet Union, even more so than their neighboring Italian Communists. The most indicative evidence of this commitment is through the actions and writing of long-time party leader Maurice Thorez. After Stalin's death, Thorez adamantly defended the actions and legacy of the Soviet leader even as other communist parties had begun to distance themselves from Stalinism.¹⁶ Thorez did eventually go back on this defense but he still was adamant about maintaining PCF ties to Moscow at all costs. Even as Soviet tanks entered Budapest in 1956, the PCF refused to reconsider its commitment to the Soviet Union.

The commitment to Moscow manifested itself internally through the ideological orthodoxy and revolutionary rhetoric used by the PCF throughout the mid-20th Century. A strict adherence to Moscow entailed an equally strict adherence to orthodox Marxist-Leninism and as such the party's worldview was entirely beholden to this ideological dogma. The PCF maintained that it was the vanguard of a worker-led revolutionary movement which would seize control of the state and its functions at the right time, once the workers had been

¹³ Julian Mischi, "Le PCF et Les Classes Populaires," *Nouvelles FondationS* 6, no. 2 (2007): 15, <https://doi.org/10.3917/nf.006.0015>.

¹⁴ David Bell and Byron Criddle, "The Decline of the French Communist Party," *British Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 4 (n.d.).

¹⁵ Institut Nationale de la Statistique et des Études économiques, "Professions et Secteurs d'Activité – Emploi, Chômage, Revenus Du Travail | Insee," www.insee.fr, June 30, 2022, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6453692?sommaire=6453776#tableau-figure2>.

¹⁶ Ibid

sufficiently educated and mobilized during a moment of bourgeois weakness. Even when the PCF had adopted reconciliatory tones with other left-wing parties, such as the French Section of the Workers Internationale (SFIO, the predominant socialist party), Thorez maintained that the dictatorship of the proletariat was the goal of their actions, as orthodox Marxism-Leninism taught.¹⁷ As such, the Party must be a worker's party first and foremost, as any other class character or lack thereof would have engendered the party's entire *raison d'être*. Unfortunately for the Communists, the demographics of their supporters would prove detrimental to their cause.

While the Communists were certainly entrenched in the traditional working class, they were gaining additional support from atypical sources such as farmers, small business owners, and artisans. These groups did not figure into the ideal supporting bloc as the PCF had envisioned yet nonetheless they identified with the PCF for a variety of reasons. Chief among them was the PCF's history as a protest or opposition party. In the face of a growing state apparatus which pushes for incursions in the private sector, the Communists represented for many a continuation of a revolutionary or anti-statist tradition which had been a longtime feature of French politics. Alongside these groups, the PCF additionally appealed to other socio-economic groupings such as students, teachers, veterans, and wine-makers. In sum, despite the PCF's commitment to Marxist orthodoxy it had overtime become closer to a big tent party held together by this ideological rigidity.¹⁸ Still this heterogeneous composition proved problematic for the future of the PCF, as now they had to appeal to a broad variety of groups at once, each with their own interests in the socio-economic order of France.

An additionally significant factor in explaining the PCF's commitment, albeit secretive, to the electoral system are the changes to French governance brought by General de Gaulle in 1958. As previously mentioned, in response to the parliamentary paralysis which had previously held French politics in a gridlock, de Gaulle reformed the country's constitution to have an increased concentration of power in the executive, thereby bypassing the gridlock wholesale. However, this had an unintended consequence of shifting the focus of the country's politics to a race for the conquest of power, as now the parliament was secondary.¹⁹ As such, the PCF was encouraged to contribute to this political state of affairs

¹⁷ Roy C. Macridis, "The Immobility of the French Communist Party," *The Journal of Politics* 20, no. 4 (1958): 613–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2126800>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Christine Pütz, "Chapitre 9 - La Présidentialisation Des Partis Français," .

through the hope of winning the presidency and therefore controlling an unprecedented amount of the state apparatus.

In sum, the PCF was simultaneously maintaining a orthodox Marxist party platform and outlook while ignoring yet still embracing a shifting socio-economic climate where their traditional voter base was declining and a middle class, who might be critical but still ultimately comfortable in the system, was taking increasing importance on the political stage. By the time of 1968, the PCF was then in a precarious position. Their importance was notable yet they were still at risk of losing their support if they cannot maintain this tight balance between the various interests of their electorate and their own ideological interests. Conversely, by both maintaining their ideological commitment to revolutionary Marxism and appealing to an increasingly broad, moderate electorate, the PCF became able to oscillate between the two messages at will. As we will see later in 1968, the party would use this double-sided nature to great effect during and after the protests.

The 1968 Student Protests: Cohn-Bendit and Students in the Limelight

The protests of 1968 represented the epitome of both the underlying socio-economical and cultural shifts at work in France as well as the difficulty the systems in place had in dealing with these changes. It is important to note though, that the events of May to June 1968 are not important entirely in terms of their direct impact on French society and politics but rather how they were indicative of the changes that were already underway. Simply put, the protests were the expressions of a new generation who found themselves in a society where the socio-economic reality was not reflected in politics. Once the systems reached a boiling point then chaos erupted. While the actual events themselves are not central to this investigation to the French left, it is still worth revisiting them to provide a basic overview of the events and actors involved.

As the aforementioned protests at Nanterre continued, they began to adopt an increasingly overt political tone. The protesters had begun to occupy university administration buildings as part of their strategy against bureaucracy in the university system, as well as a plethora of broader issues such as the Vietnam War.²⁰ This occupation became known as the March 22 Movement and Cohn-Bendit was one of its central organizers. Importantly, the movement rejected traditional ideas of leadership as part of their commitment to libertarian

²⁰ Académie de Paris, “22 Mars 68 : Nanterre En Folie ?,” Académie de Paris, accessed June 7, 2024, <https://www.ac-paris.fr/22-mars-68-nanterre-en-folie-123316>.

strains of socialism.²¹ In response, the university administration began to suspend those involved, even once they had left. Protests now emerged about the treatment of these students, causing the Nanterre campus to close and subsequently the protest moved into Sorbonne proper, in Paris. The treatment of students only escalated as police were called in to deal with the protests, which both garnered media attention and fueled more students to join their colleagues. The police action against the students was only fueling their discontent and pushing them to continuously lash out against the systems in place.

In response to the crackdown, Cohn-Bendit unambiguously declared the anti-state and anti-system nature the protests were adopting. The young activist declared: “We say that the state is an active participant in class antagonism, that the state represents a class. The bourgeoisie seeks to preserve a section of students, future executives of society. The powers that be possess the radio and the television, and a parliament in the palm of their hand. We will explain ourselves directly in the street, we will practice direct democracy.”²² In no ambiguous terms, Cohn-Bendit was taking aim directly at society at large, pushing forth a critique which demanded institutional and political change to resolve.

The unrest reached a tipping point on May 6 when the French student union and protestors called for marches in Paris, coinciding also with the Vietnam Peace Marches. Despite being banned, thousands march anyway causing a strong police response. The students build barricades and attempt to halt further police action to no avail. Eventually violence between the police and students erupts.

The next day, even more students joined the movement, due in large part to images and reports of the police treatment of their fellow students. This pattern of police action followed by strengthened student numbers continued for days. Eventually even students outside of Paris join the movement and begin to protest in their cities as well. In a futile attempt to regain normalcy, de Gaulle and Prime Minister Pompidou attempt to reopen the Sorbonne which subsequently prompts the students to occupy it and even declare a revolutionary government.

While the events so far have been relegated solely between the students and government, the left-wing parties of France have largely stayed out of the action. For the PCF, these protests represented little more than petulant children of the bourgeoisie lashing out for increased privileges. To a certain degree, these critiques were not entirely without merit.

²¹ Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism* (London: André Deutsch Ltd, 1968).

²² Daniel Cohn-Bendit, “Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Déclaration Du 5 Mai 1968 – Média LAROUSSE,” *Larousse.fr*, accessed June 7, 2024, https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/sons/Daniel_Cohn-Bendit_d%C3%A9claration_du_5_mai_1968/1102241.

Typically, French university students were the children of families who were already within the upper middle class, typically those of clerks, businessmen, or other educated professionals.²³ As such, universities developed a reputation for being a bourgeois locale within the country. However, with the opening of universities for the burgeoning middle class, the student make-up steadily becomes more diverse in terms of socio-economic background. Nevertheless, the Communists maintained that this was not a worthy cause, a claim compounded by the fact that many students did not have a concrete idea of what they were exactly protesting anymore. Certainly there were extremely politically motivated student actors, such as Cohn-Bendit, but they were not indicative of the entire movement as a whole. The Communist attitudes began to change, however, with the outbreak of spontaneous strikes in factories across France.

The students thus far had been alone in their struggle against the state, but not for lack of trying. They had certainly wished to have contact with the workers, which were regarded as somewhat equally unfavored in the capitalist world. It was not until mid-May 1968 when the workers would begin to strike simultaneously, demanding better wages and conditions. Unlike the students, the striking workers had clear goals that were attainable within the existing capitalist system. By the 23rd of May, over 10 million workers were striking, a crippling blow to the country's economy.²⁴ The government attempted to meet the workers' demands but at that point it was too little, too late and the worker's rejected it. At this point, the students are making direct overtures towards the workers to form an alliance between the two and further each other's cause reciprocally.

Important to note here as well, is the deportation of Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Due to being emblematic of the students' protests since the beginning, Cohn-Bendit was an easy target for the state in their retribution against the students. Cohn-Bendit, despite being born in France, was not naturalized and only held German citizenship. As such, the police detained and deported him, ultimately banning him from France for ten years.²⁵ While the state wanted to make an example out of Cohn-Bendit, known by his *nom de guerre* as Danny le Rouge at this point, they ended up turning him into a martyr whose exile only fanned the flames in the student camp.

²³ Raymond Boudon, "Sources of Student Protest in France," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 395, no. 1 (May 1971): 139–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271627139500113>.

²⁴ Fondation Charles de Gaulle, "Chronologie de Mai 1968 - Fondation Charles de Gaulle," Fondation Charles de Gaulle, March 22, 2018, <https://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/lhomme/dossiers-thematiques/mai-1968/documents/chronologie-de-mai-1968>.

²⁵ France 24, "Expelled Leader of May 1968 Uprising Granted French Citizenship," *France24*, May 25, 2015, <https://www.france24.com/en/20150525-france-cohn-bendit-1968-french-citizenship>.

By the end of May, France was on the verge of full-on revolution. The situation had deteriorated to the point where de Gaulle himself secretly fled the country to Baden-Baden, West Germany where the French occupation of Germany was headquartered. With the state in disarray and the head of state gone, what stopped the protestors and workers from taking power? Ironically, it was the PCF. While in Germany, de Gaulle made the call for general elections in France, a demand to which the Communists acquiesced. By giving into the demand for elections, the Communists took all the steam out of the revolutionary fervor which had engulfed France.²⁶ Pointing back to their dual nature as promoting revolutionary rhetoric while also committed to a complacent populace, the Communists ultimately found revolution undesirable for themselves.

As a result, by June 13th, the Sorbonne was cleared out of its occupiers and France entered into a state of normalcy again. Unfortunately for the left-wing though, this acquiescence to electoral politics would prove to be their downfall in the moment. As the election came and went, de Gaulle won again in a landslide victory, absolutely crushing the Communists. While de Gaulle did step down a year later and was replaced by Pompidou, the Left wouldn't manage to take power again until 1981 and the election of Mitterrand. For the moment, it seemed, the left had finally fallen out of favor.

Cohn-Bendit and the Lessons of 1968

The Communist acquiescence to the Gaullists came as a shock to many, including the communist rank-and-file. Many were questioning how the revolutionary atmosphere resulted in a return to normal electoral politics in which little ever changed. Despite his exile, Cohn-Bendit manages to provide interesting answers to this through his writing. While many of the protestors lacked a clear ideological goal or aims for their actions, Cohn-Bendit was one of the few who had clear political end goals for the movement.

Cohn-Bendit, like his more politicized comrades, rejected the explicitly hierarchical and top-heavy orthodox Marxist-Leninist version of communism. Instead, they opted for a form of communism which offered direct democracy and *autogestion*, an enlarged workplace democracy where all the actions of a firm are agreed upon by the workers therein. This goal of reinventing the workplace put these non-PCF communists in direct conflict with the PCF for control over the working class. Cohn-Bendit himself voiced his disdain for the PCF clearly in

²⁶ Mitchell Abidor, "1968: When the Communist Party Stopped a French Revolution | Mitchell Abidor," The New York Review of Books, 2018, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/04/19/1968-when-the-communist-party-stopped-a-french-revolution/>.

his work *Obsolete Communism*. Despite Cohn-Bendit belonging to a minority of the protesters, in that they had actual objectives ultimately, he nonetheless should still be regarded as a voice for the socio-economic and political changes due to himself being emblematic for the movement in general. It was Cohn-Bendit who led the charge and it will be him that describes its political currents.

Of Cohn-Bendit's criticisms of the PCF, he clearly targets the immobile and bureaucratic nature of the party and its unquestioning fealty to orthodox Marxism-Leninism, as well as its flip flopping between revolutionary undertones and adherence to electoralism: "The Communist Party, which once represented the revolutionary consciousnesses of the proletariat, has been subject to yet another process of degeneration: It has become a mere appendage of the Soviet Union.....During periods of conflict, the Communist bureaucracy brandy about revolutionary phrases; during lulls they inevitably adopt a patriotic and reactionary tone." Cohn-Bendit's critique cuts to the core of the perceived inadequacies of the PCF in the eyes of this new generation of Frenchmen. This disdain for the Communist party was not reserved solely to those who were heavily involved in politics, it was widespread among left-wing voters. Following the events, the PCF began to perform terribly in the polls, in comparison to their stable position pre-protests.²⁷ In trying to appeal to both a traditional worker movement as well as a middle class which did not want their newfound security threatened, the PCF managed to alienate an upcoming generation who might have otherwise found leadership under the Communist banner. Instead, the PCF finds itself outflanked now on the Left by Cohn-Bendit and the like who remain committed in both rhetoric and action to a revolutionary future. While once the Communists may have been able to maintain control over the left-wing, their authority became questionable.

Cohn-Bendit himself became increasingly involved in the new type of left-wing he tried to bring about in France. Following his exile into Germany, Cohn-Bendit joined the German Green party in the 1980s, continuing his alternative approach to left-wing politics. Furthermore, Cohn-Bendit was elected to the European Parliament in the 1990s, further exemplifying his commitment to the European project, even from a leftist perspective as he was a member of the Green's coalition.²⁸ Overall, Cohn-Bendit's career following his role in 1968 was emblematic of the internal changes in left-wing politics and political culture he wished to see. Focusing on a combination of contemporary social issues as well as maintaining a left-wing economic stance, Cohn-Bendit was continually embodying the New

²⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Dilemma of the French Communist Party," 1968.

²⁸ Larousse, "Daniel Cohn-Bendit".

Left which had emerged in opposition to the top-heavy, dogmatic left-wing which had previously held a monopoly on their side of the political aisle. Furthermore, as a career politician, Cohn-Bendit routinely advocated for grassroots organization and participatory democracy, a direct continuation from his days as a member of the student protests. While Cohn-Bendit may have left the limelight in France, his career and activism nevertheless stood as the crystallization of the changes in the Left's politics and political culture which were sought after in 1968.

The decline of PCF authority over the left-wing is ironic in the sense that despite trying to not alienate less extreme supporters and voters, it still lost support from both directions. By committing to neither the revolution or electoralism, it found itself only taking half measures with both, and in a manner which appeased no one. Refusing to take the side of the students lost the PCF its revolutionary credibility and then its coalescence with the CGT at the end of the events to further alienate the middle class voters who preferred their stable livelihoods over radical change. Ultimately, the PCF became a lame duck in terms of electoral support following the events.

François Mitterrand: the Left's Pyrrhic Victory

During the PS Congress at Épinay in 1971, in front of a conference of hundreds of left-wing politicians and party members François Mitterrand declared, "those who do not accept the rupture with the established order...with capitalist society, those, I say, cannot be members of the PS."²⁹ Through this declaration, Mitterrand was creating a unified left-wing to challenge the resurgent Gaullists, only four years after their crushing defeat in the elections of 1969.

At this point, the Left was down but not out. Reeling from its electoral loss, the PCF found itself increasingly on unstable ground as its actions during the unrest only fueled further critiques. During this period of tumult, the once-sidelined socialists retook their primacy in the Left's electoral politics notably due to the presence of their enigmatic leader: François Mitterrand.

A political careerist, Mitterrand had already been on the Left's presidential ticket in 1965 but to no avail. Despite being a careerist Mitterrand was one of the few politicians on the Left to fully take note of 1968 as a major political event in France and utilize its lessons for

²⁹ INA, "François Mitterrand 'Celui Qui N'accepte Pas La Rupture...Il Ne Peut Pas Être Adhérent Du Parti Socialiste' | INA," [www.ina.fr](https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i09082533/francois-mitterrand-celui-qui-n-accepte-pas-la-ruptureil-ne-peut-pas-etre), accessed June 7, 2024, <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i09082533/francois-mitterrand-celui-qui-n-accepte-pas-la-ruptureil-ne-peut-pas-etre>.

his political projects. Throughout the 1970s Mitterrand embarked upon a revitalization of French socialism and the Left as a whole, leading him to his successful bid for the presidency in 1981.

Mitterrand's rise and tenure as president are still regarded today as milestone's in the development of the French left-wing, especially during the 5th Republic. However all that glitters is not gold, as the adage goes. While Mitterrand managed to bring the Left to a historic high-point, as this section will describe, this meteoric rise came at a remarkable cost.

The Life and Times of François Mitterrand

Mitterrand was born into a bourgeois, conservative, Catholic family in Jarnac in the south of France. Already his background would not hint at a future in left-wing politics, yet nevertheless he began his political career at a young age. In the interwar period, Mitterrand was an ardent supporter of the ultranationalist Croix-de-Feu organization, working as a member of their youth division, the National Volunteers. Additionally during this time, Mitterrand wrote for the Parisian daily *L'Écho de Paris*, notorious for its staunch opposition to the socialist government of Léon Blum.³⁰ Many years later, Mitterrand would speak on this period in his life, claiming that it was the result of being brought up in a staunchly conservative environment. However, it was during the Second World War when his ideals would be both challenged and shifted.

Upon the outbreak of the war, Mitterrand was sent to the Maginot Line to defend his homeland, however ended up a prisoner of war. After the French capitulated to the Germans, Mitterrand was released and entered into the Vichy government. Mitterrand's role in the government was primarily handling and negotiating exchanges of prisoners of war. In this role, Mitterrand would serve Pétain and the Vichy regime dutifully, eventually being awarded the *francisque*, the highest honor of the regime. He was not entirely loyal to the regime during this time though as Mitterrand also created ties with the French Resistance during this period. While unusual, Mitterrand was far from the only so-called *vichysto-résistant* of the period. Pétain's regime certainly cooperated with the Germans but that did not imply that its members were just as loyal to their occupiers.

In his biography of Mitterrand, Michel Winock described his adherence to the Resistance as motivated primarily due to his commitments vis-a-vis prisoners of war.

³⁰ Fabien Escalona, "François Mitterrand Gave French Socialists Power at the Price of Their Soul," jacobin.com, May 21, 2021, <https://jacobin.com/2021/05/francois-mitterrand-french-socialism-parti-socialiste-40th-anniversary>.

Important to note though, as a part of the Resistance, Mitterrand was not attached to General de Gaulle but rather General Giraud, who commanded the Resistance from within Vichy. As part of the Giraud's Resistance, Mitterrand was still concerned with the transfer and facilitating escapes of prisoners of war. For these actions, Mitterrand sought official recognition from de Gaulle in Algiers. Flying to meet him, Mitterrand and the General could not see eye-to-eye on the issue, with de Gaulle insisting that Mitterrand fall under the command of Michel Cailliau, who de Gaulle appointed in the same role as Mitterrand, only in his own government. However, Mitterrand rejected this proposal, instead wanting to keep his autonomy. As a result, the two men were at odds with one another, the animosity of which remained with Mitterrand for years after. While unusual, Mitterrand was far from the only so-called *vichysto-résistant* of the period. Pétain's regime certainly cooperated with the Germans but that did not imply that its members were just as loyal to their occupiers.

Once the war was over, he entered local politics as a member of the centrist Democratic and Socialist Union of the Resistance (USDR), running on a staunchly anti-communist platform. Anti-communism was not unheard of in France yet it was highly unpopular for the time. In the aftermath of the occupation, as previously mentioned, the Communists bought themselves enough goodwill both domestically and abroad, that Marxism-Leninism became the unquestionable leading ideology of the French left. Mitterrand's defiance of this left-wing zeitgeist was a hallmark of his career, even as he eventually made alliances with the PCF post-1968. Still, Mitterrand was no stranger to the left as he shifted the USDR's platform to the Left during his tenure in the party.

As a member of the USDR, Mitterrand profited from the party's central position in French politics, managing to secure electoral alliances with other centrist parties while also excluding both the Right and the Left.³¹ This adaptability and side-switching on view here would go on to become emblematic of Mitterrand's political style, which will be seen later as well. Still, Mitterrand's ability to move according to shifting political tides was a great aid to him, as he was elected 14 times to a minister position during his tenure in this centrist role. Already, his talent for reading situations and adapting accordingly was reaping benefits. However, he was still limited in his achievements thus far as he never made it to prime minister or president during this time.

The political order in France began to change though, as the Fifth Republic under de Gaulle began in 1958. Returning from his apparent retirement, the General was called upon to

³¹ Ibid

reinstall order in France following the Algerian Crisis. Supported by the military and his fans within the public, de Gaulle took power in a move which his critics, including Mitterrand, labeled a putsch. Despite de Gaulle's right-wing credentials and flagrant violation of French law, the SFIO did not oppose his takeover. Still, a minority of the socialists, along with the republicans, of which Mitterrand was a part of, vehemently opposed de Gaulle's takeover and establishment of the Fifth Republic. Mitterrand's disapproval was based on two factors: his own dislike of de Gaulle stemming from his time in the Resistance, and an adherence to republicanism.³² Amidst this political shift, the socialists began to fracture. Some accepted de Gaulle's takeover, and the subsequent presidentialization of politics while others protested in a defense of democracy. These dissenters broke off from the SFIO, forming the Parti socialiste autonome (PSA). Seeing them as potential allies, Mitterrand attempted to join but was rebuffed because of his past in the Vichy regime.³³ Instead, Mitterrand actually managed to cozy-up to the Communist Party, motivated by a shared dislike of Gaullism.

In the legislative elections of 1958, Mitterrand came in third in the first round for the Nièvre departament, trailing behind the socialist and gaullist candidates. Under Mitterrand, though, was the PCF's candidate, who subsequently dropped out of the race and called for more support to Mitterrand. Thanks to the Communist Party voters, Mitterrand managed to come ahead of the socialist candidate in the second round but still could not defeat the Gaullist. This alliance between Mitterrand and the Communist Party was overall a marriage of convenience between the two, with the express purpose of defeating Gaullism.³⁴ Seeing the utility of this and the disunity within the Left as a whole, Mitterrand was convinced of the necessity of an anti-Gaullist left-wing union. This ideological shift away from his centrism was the result of his opposition to de Gaulle above all.³⁵ With the right-wing in de Gaulle's corner, it was only natural for Mitterrand to seek refuge amongst the opposition; the enemy of my enemy is my friend after all. The strategy worked in Mitterrand's favor quickly enough. In 1959, Mitterrand was finally elected as the deputy of the Nièvre in the Assembly as a member of the *Groupe de la Gauche démocratique* (Group of the Democratic Left), due in large part to communist support.

This was the beginning of Mitterrand's long career in the French left-wing, a rather unexpected departure from his nationalist roots. Mitterrand was going to use the new

³² Michel Winock, *François Mitterrand* (FOLIO, 2016), 71-72

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ L'Institut François Mitterrand, "1958-1965 : De La Nièvre à La Première Élection Présidentielle – Institut François Mitterrand," L'Institut François Mitterrand, March 9, 2011, <https://www.mitterrand.org/1958-1965-de-la-nievre-a-la.html>.

³⁵ Winock, 145-46.

institutions of the Fifth Republic and anti-gaullism on the Left to his advantage, to claim victory against his opponent. For its part, the USDR was no longer a viable option for Mitterrand, and he subsequently distanced himself from the party.³⁶ By 1962, Mitterrand managed to hold on to his position in the Assembly and was subsequently presented with a major opportunity. That same year, de Gaulle's government proposed a referendum which would allow the election of president by a direct vote with universal suffrage. The referendum was accepted by the French public. With the path to the presidency now enlarged, Mitterrand set his eyes on the upcoming presidential election in 1965.

Despite his lack of left-wing credentials, Mitterrand was already emerging as a leading candidate in opposition to the right, thanks to his staunchly adversarial relationship to de Gaulle. Seeking to capitalize on this, Mitterrand founded a new party, the Committee of Institutional Action, quickly renamed to the *Convention des institutions républicains* (Convention of Republican Institutions; CIR). Under this new banner Mitterrand united left-wing and republican dissidents to aid him in his anti-Gaullist crusade. In spite of his increasing popularity amongst the anti-gaullist left, Mitterrand was opposed by Gaston Defferre, who was the first to seek a non-communist left-wing union. Defferre eventually withdrew his candidature though, as he could not muster enough support without bringing the communists on board as well. With no other left-wing candidates, Mitterrand subsequently earned the support of both the socialists and the communists.

Ultimately, Mitterrand's 1965 bid for the presidency did not succeed. However, he did manage to put up a fight against de Gaulle and went into the second round against the General. Earning 44% of the vote against de Gaulle, Mitterrand may have lost but in the process he managed to ingratiate himself in the Left and in the election's aftermath he founded the *Fédération de la gauche démocrate et sociale* (Federation of the Democratic and Social Left; FGDS), a union of non-communist left-wing parties, including the SFIO.

For the legislative elections of 1967, Mitterrand and the FGDS brokered a common program with the Communists and managed to secure a near majority in the Assembly. However, the tenuous balance between Mitterrand's non-communist alliance and the PCF was thrown into disarray during the events of 1968. However, unlike the PCF leadership, Mitterrand tried to take part in the events and understand them.³⁷ He was seen in the midst of several protests and spoke in favor of the students in the Assembly. However, Mitterrand

³⁶ L'Institut François Mitterrand, "1958-1965: De La Nièvre à La Première Élection Présidentielle."

³⁷ L'Institut François Mitterrand, "1965-1981 : Une Longue Marche Vers Le Pouvoir – Institut François Mitterrand," L'Institut François Mitterrand, March 9, 2011, <https://www.mitterrand.org/1965-1981-une-longue-marche-vers.html>.

quickly made a massive blunder trying to capitalize on the movement. Following de Gaulle's flight to Baden-Baden, Mitterrand called for the formation of a provisional government with Pierre Mendès-France at its head. The state-run television capitalize on this, televising the declaration nationwide and subsequently labeling it as a coup d'état by Mitterrand.³⁸ At the same time though, de Gaulle was returning from his stint in Germany and called for general elections to resolve the crisis. As previously mentioned, the Left was crushed in these elections. Many pointed the finger at Mitterrand for their defeat, citing his premature declaration as a major cause.

Despite this major blunder, Mitterrand's rise to the presidency began amidst the aftermath of 1968 and the elections of 1969. In the wake of the Left's defeat, the SFIO was reformed into the modern Socialist Party (PS), which encompassed not only the previous worker movement but also left-wing republicans and Christian left elements. However, as the Socialists were still reeling from their defeat in the snap elections, the party's direction was uncertain at the time. Fortunately for Mitterrand, this situation was ripe for him to re-enter the political scene. Having learned from 1968 and the conditions which spurred it on, his return to the socialist movement precipitates not only the culmination of his political ambitions but also a profound ideological shift in French socialism. Mitterrand's talent for adapting to shifting political currents, already seen in his *ad hoc* alliances with the PCF, made him the perfect person to take advantage of an adrift PS. Thankfully, there was a clear moment when this evolution began: the PS Congress of 1971, at Épinay.

Épinay 1971, Mitterrand Sets the Stage

The 1971 Party Congress of Épinay was notable not only for bringing Mitterrand's own strain of socialism into the fold of the Socialist Party, leading to his election as Party Secretary, but also for setting the ideological and rhetorical course for the party. This was not without debate however. Up until this point, the PS was divided primarily upon a single axis: reform or revolution. This division characterized much of the divide between the socialist factions, with Mitterrand notably being non-committal throughout. In the light of 1968 however, Mitterrand would seemingly settle the debate, at least on the surface.

Following his election as Party Secretary, Mitterrand addressed the crowded room with arguably his most famous speech. In his address, Mitterrand states frankly that the Party's goal is not to continue the status quo that Gaullism had established but to break

³⁸ Ibid.

entirely from this system. “Those who do not accept the rupture with the established order, with capitalist society, those people cannot be followers of the Socialist Party,”³⁹ Mitterrand declared on stage. This statement should come as a shock considering Mitterrand’s past as a staunch anti-communist and lack of direct critiques of capitalism. However it nonetheless follows Mitterrand’s own pattern of re-orienting himself along the political or ideological lines most present at the time, in service of his own pursuit of power. The lines which Mitterrand re-oriented himself along were clearly influenced heavily by the events of 1968 as well as the underlying causes thereof.

After the dust had settled following 1968, the impact it would or will have was initially unclear. For Mitterrand though, the lesson was quite clear. The failure of the Socialists and Communists to ride the wave was due in large part to an anachronistic insistence upon ideological orthodoxy in their rhetoric as well as a vested interest in maintaining the current political party system. Mitterrand, ever the politician, would play on both of these aspects. His declaration would color the Socialists as a staunchly oppositional force to the Gaullist order, stealing from the legacy of the Communists in the same role. Additionally, his non-specific word choice gave him enough leeway to potentially include the new forms of economic reformation which the more politicized adherents of 1968 would opt for, such as self-management of factories or workplaces.

One would be forgiven for wondering still, how committed Mitterrand was to this idea of the “rupture” and, consequently, to left-wing ideals as a whole. After all his political career is rife with changing sides and ideas. However, Mitterrand seemingly bought into his socialist convictions wholesale, at least for the moment. In his 1970 work, *Un Socialisme du possible* (Socialism of the Possible), he wrote extensively on his views and plans for the future of French socialism. In a particularly poignant passage he writes, “The socialists who have posed as reformists, have finished by collaborating with the system of capitalist values and thus with the politics of the right. Collaboration struggles to escape its fate which is to betray.....French socialism, from 1947 to 1965, closely collaborated in the defense of capitalist society...Opportunism and treason have seriously compromised reformism.”⁴⁰ His critique of reformism as merely opportunism is supremely ironic given Mitterrand’s own personal history with the Left. His entrance into this side of the political aisle was, after all, resulting from an

³⁹ Chloé Leprince, “Quand Mitterrand Disait : ‘Celui Qui N’accepte Pas La Rupture Avec La Société Capitaliste Ne Peut Être Au PS,’” France Culture, May 10, 2017, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/quand-mitterrand-disait-celui-qui-n-accepte-pas-la-rupture-avec-la-societe-capitaliste-ne-peut-etre-au-ps-3720290>; Translated by author.

⁴⁰ Translation by thesis author.

alliance of convenience between him and the PCF. His subsequent adherence to the Left is then a result of his own opportunism in his relentless quest for power within the Fifth Republic. Additionally, whether or not Mitterrand himself believed in any form of socialism is besides the point. Whether he did or did not believe in socialism, he nonetheless managed to lead the PS into a new era, one which would pay dividends, as well as set both the political and ideological agenda for both his tenure and the future, as will be shown.

By 1972, Mitterrand and the nascent PS launched a new political platform for future elections, encapsulated in their slogan of “Changing life”. With this platform, the Socialists remained publicly devoted to the break with capitalism and Gaullism which Mitterrand proposed. This program was also key for maintaining an electoral alliance with the PCF. Having previously fought over the details of their respective platforms, especially on the matter of nationalizations, this latest program from the PS managed to appease the PCF enough for them to agree to it as their common program.⁴¹ Despite conceding to the Gaullists and agreeing to disastrous snap elections in 1968, the Communists still commanded a sizable voting bloc in France, even if their ideological reputation had been tarnished. Therefore, while Mitterrand may be reticent to commit to communist goals and ideals, he still needed their support to solidify his electoral base and stand a chance against the Gaullists.

Mitterrand was frank about his ambitions and personal goals for the PS-PCF alliance. While PCF First Secretary Georges Marchais envisioned the alliance as one where the communists would lead and the socialist would play a secondary role, the reality was quite the inverse. In the 1973 legislative elections, the communists won one-fifth of the vote yet that only translated to 73 seats in the Parliament, compared to the Socialists’ 103 seats. Clearly, despite the PCF’s apparent power, they were facing a usurper in the form of Mitterrand’s party. Mitterrand openly stated his own intentions for the alliance, namely causing a migration of voters from the PCF towards PS. The day after the alliance was brokered, on June 27, 1972, Mitterrand addressed the Socialist Internationale in France, stating “Our fundamental objective, is to remake a great socialist party on the territory currently occupied by the PCF itself, in the goal of demonstration to the five million communist voters, that three million can

⁴¹ Judith Bonnin, “Mitterrand - L’Union de La Gauche,” François Mitterrand - Le verbe en images (Institut national de l’audiovisuel), accessed 2024, <https://fresques.ina.fr/miterrand/parcours/0019/l-union-de-la-gauche.html>.

vote socialist.”⁴² Additionally, the actual content of the agreed program was significantly more in line with the views of PS than that of the PCF.

While certainly left-wing, the PS retained many major differences in terms of ideological and political plans in comparison with the PCF. Namely, the PS was not an avowed Marxist party under Mitterrand with him stating, “I am one of those who does not find themselves in Marxism.” Overall, Mitterrand’s shaping of the identity of the PS had more in-line with social-democracy than anything else. The party was focusing on Keynesian redistributive methods, nationalizations, fighting inflation, as well as cultural policies targeting education, justice, and the family, instead of bringing about a new anti-capitalist reality. With this political program, Mitterrand once again entered the race for the presidency in 1972, however he could not beat Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, resulting in another loss.

Following this defeat, Mitterrand would continue his renovation of the PS, bringing in the United Socialist Party (PSU) of Michel Rocard into the fold. Among the various socialist factions, Rocard and the PSU were further to the right than most, and his inclusion would eventually lead to more tensions within the party, as will be shown later. Aside from Rocard, Mitterrand additionally brought in numerous young intellectuals to modernize the capacities of the party. In this flurry of onboardings, Mitterrand subsequently distanced himself further from the left-wing of the party, notably exemplified by the *Centre d’Études Républicaines et Socialistes* (Center for Republican and Socialist Studies; CERES). Mitterrand was clearly making overtures to a less radical section of French politics, which managed to pay off in the municipal elections of 1977, resulting in the PS winning 37 towns.

At the same time, however, the party’s communist allies were still faltering in their electoral performances. By 1978, the PCF remained at 20% of the vote, much like in previous years, however the PS was now leading them with 23%, a complete reversal of the roles.⁴³ As a result of this upset and Mitterrand’s overtures to the center, the PCF ended their common program with the PS, resulting in a right-wing victory in the legislative elections of 1978, despite a strong left-wing performance overall.⁴⁴

⁴² Bernard Meixner, “M. Mitterrand : Notre Objectif Est de Refaire Un Grand Parti Socialiste Sur Le Terrain Occupé Par Le P.C.,” *Le Monde*, June 30, 1972, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1972/06/30/m-mitterrand-notre-objectif-est-de-refaire-un-grand-parti-socialiste-sur-le-terrain-occupe-par-le-p-c_2390604_1819218.html. Translated by thesis author.

⁴³ Perspective Monde, “Élections Législatives - Élections Du 12 Mars 1978,” Perspective Monde, accessed 2024, <https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMElection?codePays=FRA&dateElection=FRA1978312&codeInstitution=1>.

⁴⁴ Philippe Tétart, “La Rupture Du Programme Commun : Déclaration à La Presse de Marchais et Fabre - Lumni | Enseignement,” Lumni Enseignement, June 29, 2023, <https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000000137/la-rupture-du-programme-commun-declaration-a-la-press-e-de-marchais-et-fabre.html>.

Following their defeat and the dissolution of the PCF-PS common program, Mitterrand and the socialists re-evaluated their strategy. Rocard, meanwhile, had openly critiqued the party's direction and program, labeling it as "archaic". In the 1979 Party Congress at Metz, Mitterrand managed to remain the party's head in an election with Rocard, due in large part to rekindling support from CERES. Mitterrand had resumed his left-wing orientation within the party, separating himself from Rocard and thus relaunching himself as the primary candidate of the PS yet again.⁴⁵ In response, Rocard further entrenched himself in the reformist and centrist section of the party, labeling themselves as the "Second Left". Rocard was additionally joined by Pierre Mauroy, a former member of the SFIO who had been a leader in the PS since 1971. Together they called for a rapprochement with the social democracies of Europe and committed to market economics. Mitterrand, however, stayed steadfast in his recommitment to the Left, especially in regards to searching for an additional alliance with the PCF. In the party elections, Mitterrand trounced Rocard, leading him 40% to 20% respectively.⁴⁶ What is additionally key to understand here is that while Mitterrand and his followers had made an alliance with CERES, they were still nonetheless significantly less radical. Mitterrand's alliance with the left-wing of PS was for political reasons, not ideological.

Mitterrand may have resisted Rocard's calls for reformism and social democracy *à la* Scandinavia, despite a party platform being more in-line with these principles, he still nonetheless equally resisted association with Marxism or radicalism. The year before the Metz Congress, Mitterrand wrote, "I admit that Sweden is not as Socialist insofar as, despite an unparalleled redistribution of income between social groups and individuals, it has not struck at the heart of capitalism... But the USSR is not socialist either, insofar as it has failed to take into account the freedoms of social democracy."⁴⁷ Neither committing to social democratic-style reformism nor radical Marxism, Mitterrand tried to play on both trends simultaneously. By making more overtures to the radicals on the left, like CERES, Mitterrand was attempting to cozy-up to the ideological legitimacy of the Left while simultaneously running on a party platform which refrained from any of the same radicalism.⁴⁸ Furthermore, during the race between himself and Rocard, Mitterrand relied on Laurent Fabius, one of the

⁴⁵ Pierre Simon, "Metz : Un Congrès à Méditer," Fondation Jean-Jaurès (Fondation Jean-Jaurès, March 21, 2014), <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/metz-un-congres-a-mediter/>.

⁴⁶ Jean-François Merle, "Congrès de Metz (1979) : à Quitte Ou Double," Michelrocard.org (Fondation Jean-Jaurès, April 2016), <https://michelrocard.org/app/photopro.sk/ROCARD/publi/PAGESCMS/analyse-metz#sessionhistory-ready>.

⁴⁷ Gérard Grunberg, "Le Parti d'Épinay : D'une Rupture Fantasmée à Un Réformisme Mal Assumé," *Histoire@Politique* 13, no. 1 (2011).

⁴⁸ Ibid

young intellectuals he recently brought into the party leadership, to explain to Rocard that “in-between the market and the plan, that is socialism.”⁴⁹ This ambiguity on where his faction within the PS landed between radicalism and reformism lent itself to Mitterrand’s own electoral strategies. Ironically similar to the PCF which he had recently crippled, Mitterrand’s ambiguity and oscillation between these two currents was really in the service of his own pursuit of power.

Mitterrand expressed this ideological ambiguity and flexibility in his own works. In *Ma part de la vérité* (My Part of the Truth), Mitterrand openly states that any party platform would not be a mere election strategy, but the manifestation of the PS agenda outright. “I believe it harmful the habits adopted by the social democratic political formations, of placing the party program and electoral platform as two different plans without any real link between the two.” In other words, if the PS, once in power, acts within the bounds of a capitalist system, that is then an accepted part of their ideological framework. Later on in the same work, Mitterrand goes even further and admits that the economic goals of the PS refrain from dismantling the capitalist system. “For the coming time, the socialist economy will develop itself on the basis of the double sector under the domination of the public sector and will respect the laws of the market under the dominance of the plan. It will be up to the next generation of politicians to determine the next stages in the socialist project.” As such, Mitterrand implicitly further rejects any notion of radical change or revolution in society under his PS. Instead, Mitterrand proposes a seizure of power using electoral means and then the gentle implementation of their own brand of left-wing policies. Despite this reformism, Mitterrand still did not lose favor with his party nor with left-wing voters.

Ultimately, through this ideological evolution of the socialists, it becomes clear that the consistent goal of Mitterrand is no ideological or party-affiliated project but the conquest and exercise of political power. His personal ability to re-orient himself time and time again allowed him to bend his commitments in service of this goal. As a result though, his leadership of the socialists put the entire party on the same path of electoralism and reform. That is not to say that Mitterrand did not believe any of his writings or political affiliations, he certainly may have, however to determine so is outside the scope of this current investigation. Still, regardless of his own internal commitments and ideals, it is undeniable that under Mitterrand’s leadership, the socialists changed their fundamental outlook and ambitions, all in the service of elections within the specific confines of the Fifth Republic. As seen in the

⁴⁹ Alain Duhamel, “Les Déboires de Laurent Fabius,” *Libération*, September 21, 2005, https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2005/09/21/les-deboires-de-laurent-fabius_533103/.

events of 1968 though, this strategy was indeed prescient. While some left-wing voters did still stick to their ideological belief in revolution, many instead wanted changes within the bounds of the current system, changes which would not endanger the economy and social welfare which had brought many into an enlarged middle-class. As a result, Mitterrand's push for reformism can also be seen as an answer to this socio-economic shift.

1981: Mitterrand (and the Left) Triumphant

The presidential election of 1981 represented for many on the Left the culmination of their ideological and political desires which had gone unanswered for a quarter of a century. The first socialist president of the Fifth Republic, Mitterrand carried with him a great deal of expectations. As his tenure began, Mitterrand did attempt to follow through with the sweeping array of promises he made during the campaign. However, this earnest attempt to implement his form of socialism was cut short due to 1983, ironically due to the continuation of the same socio-economic and political changes which had helped him arrive to power.

Mitterrand's presidential campaign relied on a set of promises to the French people, all of which fell into his subtly reformist view of socialism. The platform *110 Propositions for France* encompassed vastly different areas of French economics, life, and politics which were appealing for many. For starters, Mitterrand promised to get the Soviets out of Afghanistan.⁵⁰ While this is clearly an unattainable promise to make, it nonetheless sends a clear message. While the French communists spent decades in Moscow's pocket, a position which earned them the ire of many in France, Mitterrand instead proposes the exact opposite: to defy Moscow. While this certainly appealed to the non-Marxist left, Mitterrand also followed this anti-Soviet proposition with an anti-American one. His second point was to condemn the United States for meddling in the affairs of Latin American nations. Already, Mitterrand pushed for appeals on multiple sides of the French left and electorate. By opening up to the anti-imperialists and the non-Marxists simultaneously, Mitterrand is able to both distinguish himself and the party away from the dogmatic communists and from revolutionary socialism, as well as defend himself from accusations of pro-liberal or pro-capitalist critiques.

Mitterrand then goes on to list countless proposals which were aimed at ameliorating the worklife of millions of Frenchmen. From raising the minimum wage to implementing workplace democracy, Mitterrand directly addressed the concerns and demands of the students and workers during May 1968.⁵¹ Clearly learning both from the protestors and the

⁵⁰ Parti Socialiste, "110 Propositions Pour La France," *Le Poing et La Rose*, February 1981.

⁵¹ Ibid

left-wing political establishment, Mitterrand promised a lot without promising too much to the point where he risked losing the political center. In the end, Mitterrand's strategy paid off as he was elected on 10 May 1981, with 51% of the votes. However, even though Mitterrand was playing on popular demands at the time, his victory of course did not happen in a vacuum and ongoing economic changes had helped push his campaign, as well as hold dire implications for his political project.

By 1981, the Trente Glorieuses had been over for six years. The booming economic and population growth which had characterized France following the Second World War had come crashing down and the country could feel it. The 1973 oil crisis had sent the global economy into a downturn and the Gaullist government of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was struggling to handle the situation. France suffered high inflation and to combat this, the dirigiste governmental policies re-adapted to include price and salary controls as well as monetary supply measures. Still, the country's economic performance continued to be lackluster and as a result, voters grew tired of the Gaullist form of economic management.⁵² Mitterrand offered them something different. Instead of gaullist dirigisme, Mitterrand offered a decentralized economic policy which prioritized public sectors as well as defending salaries and workers in the face of economic instability.

It must also be noted that by the time Mitterrand arrived into the presidency, the French economy had become a full-fledged member of the internationalized global economy, notably thanks to the European Economic Community. This meant that France's economy and policies were no longer only a domestic matter but also must consider this new global order.⁵³ Therefore, while Mitterrand's approach to the economy did offer something new for the French, he must also contend simultaneously with its implications on the global stage. Meanwhile in the Anglo-Saxon world, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were already in office by the time of Mitterrand's election, and the two were busy undertaking their own visions of economic governance, known commonly as neoliberalism. So while Mitterrand offered the French a new interpretation of left-wing politics, focused on the public sector and new strategies of government intervention into the economy, he was largely alone in this endeavor, a fact which would come back to haunt him later in his presidency. For the time being though, this newfound approach to the French economy was, as a result, an important reason for Mitterrand's electoral success, yet it was not the only one.

⁵² Anne Tipsmark Bouchet, "Les Années Giscard d'Estaing : 1974-1981," in *La France de La Cinquième République* (Éditions Sciences Humaines, 2013).

⁵³ Philippe Guillaumet, "Les Relations Commerciales Entre La France et l'Europe Depuis 1850," *Revue de L'OFCE* 82, no. 3 (2002): 49, <https://doi.org/10.3917/reof.082.0049>.

The often fraught and contentious relationship between Mitterrand and the Socialists with their Communist counterparts played an additionally vital role in his election. As the past 13 years of French political history has shown, the communist vote was still important even if not as large as in yesteryear. While the initial common program between the two had dissolved in 1977, by the time of the second round of votes in the 1981 election, the Communist Party called for their voters and sympathizers to vote for Mitterrand against Giscard d'Estaing. This support was entirely necessary to push Mitterrand into office as the Socialists alone could not offer the numbers needed.⁵⁴ Yet, and perhaps more interestingly, the dissolution of the common program between the two also likely helped to push Mitterrand over the line during the election. While the communists were no longer the radical, oppositional force they once were, their rhetoric and supposed ideological commitments were outlandish enough that the French political center would not reliably vote for them. Ergo, with the alliance dissolved, Mitterrand was once again free from these ideological and political ties, thereby freeing him up for support from the center as well. This support from both the far-left and center points to the continuously ambiguous nature of Mitterrand and his platform. Unlike the traditional left-wing parties of 1968, Mitterrand's views and platforms were not rigidly adherent to orthodox interpretations of socialism or communism, thereby allowing him the flexibility to put forward a message which appealed to a wider audience than the Communist Party was able to before him. Furthermore, his promises of new economic reform which revolved around the notion of self-management and improvements to the conditions of workers in a consumerist society, without calling for its destruction, gave him credibility with the center and less-radical left.⁵⁵ In this regard, Mitterrand learned the lessons of 1968 well. His platform carefully avoids the pitfalls observed by the Communist Party during the events and addresses the priorities the French hold, namely the continuation of their welfare state and support for the middle and lower class.

Through his victory, Mitterrand had effectively outflanked the communists and managed to beat them in the electoral competition. The failure of the Communists to readapt, as Mitterrand and the Socialists clearly had done, post-1968 cost them dearly. As opposed to earlier votes, the communists only received around 15% of the total vote during the first round of the 1981 election. In contrast, Mitterrand received roughly 25% of the vote (see Figure 2)⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Claude Estier, "François Mitterrand et Les Communistes – Institut François Mitterrand," L'Institut François Mitterrand, Spring 4, 2008, <https://www.mitterrand.org/francois-mitterrand-et-les-408.html>.

⁵⁵ Grunberg, "Le Parti d'Épinay".

⁵⁶ Romain Brunet, "'An Extraordinary Politician': François Mitterrand's Presidential Victory, 40 Years On," France 24, May 10, 2021,

While the communists did support Mitterrand in the final round of voting, a move which earned them some seats in Mitterrand's cabinet, they ultimately would falter further following this vote. After winning the presidency, Mitterrand dissolved the Assembly and called for legislative elections, which the Socialists then won handily, the first time since de Gaulle took power in 1958. While the communists and socialists both made up the majoritarian bloc in this newly created legislation, it was the socialists who held the vast majority of the seats.⁵⁷ Despite collaborating with and relying on the Communists' support, Mitterrand had effectively de-fanged the party and absorbed a great deal of its political strength. The communists had begun their descent into political irrelevancy, the ultimate culmination of their decline starting in 1968. In the next presidential election in 1988, the PCF would only receive an abysmal 6.8% of the total vote. Even up until today, the PCF has yet to break 10% in any presidential election since 1981.⁵⁸ While Mitterrand may have put the final nail in the proverbial coffin of the PCF, their downfall was ultimately in progress well before the arrival of the PS in the Elysée. As seen in their handling of 1968, the Communist refusal to adjust their ideological commitments according to shifting socio-economic and political conditions as well as open their ranks to potential divergent viewpoints from the Left, ultimately forced the communists into irrelevance as the rest of the Left adapted and re-adjusted their strategies to meet the demands of a changed France. Case in point, over three-quarters of Mitterrand's supporters in the 1981 election were from the working class, who were seeking improvements in their purchasing power and economic situations from the PS party platform.⁵⁹ The traditional supporters of the PCF had now left them behind and the Left belonged to Mitterrand's PS, and they planned to make the most of their power.

Despite Mitterrand's history as a political weathervane and with an affirmed pursuit of power, he did indeed follow through with his promises, at least some of them, once in power. To aid him, he named Pierre Mauroy as his Prime Minister. Mauroy and Mitterrand had a relationship which frequently oscillated between hot and cold. Mauroy joined the SFIO

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210510-an-extraordinary-politician-fran%C3%A7ois-mitterrand-s-presidential-victory-40-years-on>.

⁵⁷ Perspective Monde, "Élections Législatives," Perspective Monde, accessed 2024, <https://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMElection?codePays=FRA&dateElection=FRA1981614&codeInstitution=1>.

⁵⁸ Laurent de Boissieu, "Résultats Électoraux Du Parti Communiste Français PCF," France-politique.fr, 2019, <https://www.france-politique.fr/elections-pcf.htm>.

⁵⁹ Jacques-Marie Vaslin, "Le Plan Mauroy, Ou La Relance Ratée de 1981," *Le Monde*, February 18, 2009, https://www.lemonde.fr/talents-fr/article/2009/02/18/le-plan-mauroy-ou-la-relance-ratee-de-1981_1131179_3504.html.

following 1968 and had initially supported Mitterrand's election as Party Secretary at Épinay in 1971. However, Mauroy became increasingly disillusioned with Mitterrand during the 1970s due to the replacement of former SFIO officials with Mitterrand's allies, culminating in Mauroy allying himself with Rocard during the 1979 Metz Congress, which he later apologized for.⁶⁰ Despite this criticism, Mauroy was still named Mitterrand's spokesman during the latter's presidential campaign, subsequently earning him a spot as Prime Minister. Regardless of past conflicts though, Mauroy and Mitterrand together embarked upon a presidential term which aimed to make good on the various electoral promises made.

Among the first acts implemented was an unprecedented economic reform. These acts are known as the "relaunch", meant to signify a turning point in French history. Mitterrand and Mauroy's government put forward new legislation which would nationalize some of the biggest industrial groups in France as well as 39 banks.⁶¹ Codified in the Law of February 13 1982, this reform was primarily in response to the ongoing economic downturn which had been plaguing France since the oil shocks of the 1970s. Nationalizations had been a longtime talking point and goal for French socialists, however Mitterrand's implementation would be the high-water mark for any sort of radical economic reform.⁶² The effects of these nationalizations were immense for the French economy and society. Following the passage of the law, one out of every three French workers was now in the public sector, and the state had control over 40% of its GDP.⁶³

Alongside the nationalizations, other laws were introduced to democratize the workplace, notably in the public sector. These laws dictated the way in which public companies operated as well as how and to what extent employees participated in their own management.⁶⁴ This form of workplace democracy and self-management may not be as profound as the sort envisioned by Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his compatriots during 1968, but it nonetheless signaled to many that Mitterrand was committed to making noticeable changes in the country. Yet it must also be noted that while these reforms were a step in a different direction from Mitterrand's Gaullist predecessors, they did not represent a massive step away from the capitalist society that the PS had derided. In fact, while Mitterrand's proposals

⁶⁰ Anne Corbett, "Pierre Mauroy: A Big Man in Every Sense," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2013, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/10/pierre-mauroy>.

⁶¹ Georges Saunier, "La Politique Économique de La Gauche et Le Tournant de 1983," Fondation Jean-Jaurès, June 6, 2016, <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/la-politique-economique-de-la-gauche-et-le-tournant-de-1983/>.

⁶² "Les Nationalisations de 1982 et Leurs Antécédents - Lumni | Enseignement," Lumni Enseignement, 2007, <https://enseignants.lumni.fr/fiche-media/00000000825/les-nationalisations-de-1982-et-leurs-antecedents.html>.

⁶³ Winock, 150.

⁶⁴ Winock, 149.

offered to reduce the inequality present in France they were decidedly within the bounds of the consumerist society which had arisen from the Trente Glorieuses. Thus it can be said that Mitterrand clearly knew the limits of his ideology both in practical terms as well as a presidential platform and thus was committed to very limited forms of economic reorganization, none of which included a socialization of the whole economy, already exhibited in his previous ambiguity *vis-à-vis* reformism versus revolution. Still, Mitterrand aimed to improve the economic well-being of many Frenchmen. Alongside the nationalizations and self-management, he increased the minimum wage by 10%, added one week to the nationally mandated maternity leave, and increased the amounts given through governmental family aid programs.⁶⁵

The redistributive Keynesian policies which Mitterrand implemented may have been an appealing act from a political viewpoint, but they nonetheless held dire ideological implications for himself and the PS in power. The so-called “relaunch” was only reinvigorating consumerism within a capitalist system, as well as falling in-line with the global liberalized economy through the European Monetary System. The only real signal that Mitterrand was attempting to realize his famous rupture with capitalist society were the nationalizations of major industrial groups and banks in the country, of which he was immensely defensive. At the 1981 Party Congress at Valence, Mitterrand addressed his socialist comrades saying, “I remain one of your own: socialist candidate in the presidential election, I remain a socialist in the presidency.....Not everything can be done in a few weeks nor in a few months. If I am no longer with you in the party, I remain with you, with your ideas and your hopes. Since we have the time, we need to know how to manage it and ensure that the steps we’ve taken are solid, before we move any further.”⁶⁶ Clearly, Mitterrand’s policies were not as extensive as members of his own party had hoped. Nevertheless, he remained committed to the socialist project his party had envisioned and tried to reframe his progress within this context.

In another vein, Mitterrand would additionally keep with his promises of complete reorganization of the French administrative system. As a longtime opponent to de Gaulle’s heavy-handed, paternalistic approach to administration and governance, Mitterrand instead proposed that the individual regions of France be allowed to handle their own executive

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ François Mitterrand, “Message de M. François Mitterrand, Président de La République, Au Congrès Du Parti Socialiste à Valence, Vendredi 23 Octobre 1981,” Vie Publique, 2024, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/135409-message-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-larepublique-au-congres>.

functions, primarily through elected councils.⁶⁷ The subsequent “Law of March 2 1982 Relating to the Rights and Liberties of Communities, *Départements*, and Regions” was the first step in realizing this ambition, which would be followed up and reinforced by subsequent related laws, finally culminating in the elimination of the Jacobin system of administration which had been the norm.

Overall, Mitterrand entered office riding on the hopes and dreams of a left-wing which had been out of power for three decades at this point. Despite his best efforts though, his socially-conscious reforms could not change the reality of his situation. The French economy was in dire straits and needed strong measures to be taken to ensure its viability. Keynesian redistribution may be appealing but it does little to change a 14% inflation rate or a deficit of 4 billion francs.⁶⁸ Additionally, Mitterrand’s own political projects were putting a strain on French finances. The nationalizations which were one of the major centerpieces of his entire platform, had cost the government billions and would continue to be a major expense. Ironically, some of these issues also stemmed from the socio-economic evolution which had spurred on Cohn-Bendit and others in 1968. Not only had France further industrialized and moved into tertiary employment (i.e. office workers, salaried employees), but its economy was also globalized. This opening of international markets also meant that capital could come and go easier as well as subjecting the national economy to fluctuations elsewhere in the world.⁶⁹ Therefore, while Mitterrand learned the political lessons of 1968, the economic implications were only now making their presence known in his policies. Ultimately, Mitterrand will give in to these pressures and put the PS on a new path thanks to his turn to austerity.

The Pivot to Austerity

Despite the public’s hopes of installing a new socialist reality in France, Mitterrand and his government could not escape the reality of their situation. Their economic policies, while appealing to many, could not resolve the ongoing economic problems which had been

⁶⁷ Ministre de l’Intérieur et des Outre-Mer, “La Décentralisation a 30 Ans,” [https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-des-dossiers/2012-Dossiers/La-decentralisation-a-30-ans,](https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-des-dossiers/2012-Dossiers/La-decentralisation-a-30-ans, 2011,) 2011,

<https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-des-dossiers/2012-Dossiers/La-decentralisation-a-30-ans>.

⁶⁸ Serge Wolikow, “Chapitre II. Une Crise Durable,” in *La France Ouvrière* (Éditions de l’Atelier, 1994).

⁶⁹ Rawi Abdelal, “Le Consensus de Paris : La France et Les Règles de La Finance Mondiale,” *Critique Internationale* 28, no. 3 (2005): 87, <https://doi.org/10.3917/criti.028.0087>.

plaguing the country since the 1974 oil shocks. To counteract the negative impacts on the economy, Mitterrand was left with few options.

The first measure taken was to devalue the franc, which was done thrice successively. The first devaluation came in 1981 in the middle of the other economic and social reforms, with the next two occurring in 1982 and 1983 respectively. This first devaluation from Mitterrand's government was a desperate measure, as Mitterrand himself viewed devaluation as admitting symbolically a defeat for their leftist economics. However, after the first devaluation did little to improve France's situation, Mitterrand and Prime Minister Mauroy took even further steps to improve the nation's situation. Alongside the devaluation of 1982, Mauroy also implemented a freeze on both salaries and prices for four months, a limit on budget spending, and a one percent increase on the national value added tax, all with Mitterrand's permission. The turn to austerity had begun to show its face.

Even though these measures were a radical departure from his initial economic plans, Mitterrand was not yet fully convinced towards a wholehearted adoption of austerity. His cabinet was divided into two camps: one advocating for protectionism and leaving the EMU, and the other pushing for austerity and remaining in the EMU. Important to note was that Prime Minister Mauroy and Economic Minister Delors were firmly in favor of austerity while Laurent Fabius, future prime minister, was in the opposing side. Mitterrand himself was uncommitted for the time being. In accordance with his own belief in a unified Europe, he was somewhat uncomfortable with France turning its back to its continental allies now.

⁷⁰Conversely, Mitterrand was acutely aware what turning to nationalism would mean for him electorally and more broadly for the PS' ideology and politics. After running on promises of strengthening social welfare and reforming the economy, a turn to austerity would call his entire platform into question.

It wasn't until March 1983 when Mitterrand would make his decision. After putting the discussion on ice until the municipal elections that year had passed, Mitterrand committed to an austerity plan drawn up by Mauroy and Delors. The plan included limiting the spending of French citizens abroad as well as reducing the national deficit by 20 billion francs, not to mention the third franc devaluation.⁷¹ In the midst of this economic pivot, Mitterrand and the PS were in an additional bind: how to defend this ideologically.

⁷⁰ L'Institut François Mitterrand, "1981-1986 : L'exercice Du Pouvoir – Institut François Mitterrand," L'Institut François Mitterrand, 2011, <https://www.mitterrand.org/1981-1986-l-exercice-du-pouvoir.html>.

⁷¹ Ibid

Leader of the PS, Lionel Jospin, initially defended Mitterrand's turn to austerity by labeling it as "parentheses" in between realizing the socialist renewal of France.⁷² According to Jospin, this turn was an ephemeral phrase in which Mitterrand was responding to the economic context he found himself in. Once these problems were dealt with, Mitterrand and the Socialists would return to their original project. Following Jospin's lead, other prominent party members would use similar defenses for the pivot, attempting to maintain any ideological credibility.

However, this "parenthesis" theory was put to the test rather quickly, as in 1984 Prime Minister Mauroy resigned and was replaced with Laurent Fabius, who continued the austerity measures further. Alongside Mauroy, the Communist ministers in Mitterrand's government left as well, and their party followed suit, leaving the Union of the Left entirely.⁷³ This pivot was clearly no longer a temporary measure but a complete re-directing of Mitterrand and his cabinet's direction. The only element of their initial plan which remained intact was the nationalizations, however even those were endangered in the austerity plan. Due to the immense size of the nationalized groups and banks, the government could not afford to spend the amount required to maintain them, thanks to the austerity budget cuts. As a result, in 1985 the government turned to private capital to invest in these firms.⁷⁴ The nationalizations quietly underwent privatization and the vestiges of Mitterrand's initial socialist promise died with a whisper.

The economic unrest and pivot to the center had left a bad taste in the mouth of the French electorate and as a result the Left lost immensely in the legislative elections of 1986, resulting in the first instance of *cohabitation* in the government, meaning that the president and prime minister are of two different parties. The new administration led by Jacques Chirac went further with privatizing the formerly nationalized groups. Despite their political differences though, Mitterrand still supported the measure, saying "It's time for the stock market to once again become the place where savings are invested to create and build, and for an economy of short-sighted speculation to cease to triumph."⁷⁵ Clearly, Mitterrand was not disputing his own role in the economic evolutions taking place. However, he still disputed that these evolutions implicated any changes in his socialist convictions. In a letter addressed to

⁷² André GAURON, "Seize Ans Après Le Tournant Économique de Mars 1983, Jospin Clôt Ce Qui Ne Devait Être Qu'une Parenthèse. Le Nouveau Visage Du Socialisme.," *Libération*, September 6, 1999, <https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/1999/09/06/seize-ans-apres-le-tournant-economique-de-mars-1983-jospin-clot-c-e-qui-ne-devait-etre-qu-une-parenth-282953/>.

⁷³ L'Institut François Mitterrand, "1981-1986".

⁷⁴ Winock, 300.

⁷⁵ Winock, 301.

the French people, Mitterrand proclaimed, “It’s false to say that I changed. My convictions are the same. But I learned that the new reality resisted political willpower. See, in 1982 we nationalized the credit system. And what good did that do us? It didn’t give us an ounce of extra power.”⁷⁶ Mitterrand was unwilling to admit any ultimate change in course for himself or for the PS. While they had encountered setbacks, they still held on to their ideological grounding in the “rupture”. However, the impact this pivot was having on their internal ideological and political consistency was noticeable. In 1987 during his re-election campaign, Mitterrand never used the word socialism to describe his program, a noticeable departure from 1981.⁷⁷ Even following his re-election Mitterrand did not return to his initial socialist promises. The privatizations were complete, and with them any notion of socialism under the president.

Economic impact aside, this pivot-turned-plan had far-reaching impacts on Mitterrand’s relationship with and in the PS. In spite of the complete repudiation of their initial plan from 1981, Jospin and the party adamantly defended Mitterrand from criticism. By consistently giving him ideological cover from criticism, both internal and external, the PS was changing from an oppositional force in French politics into a mouthpiece for its executive. The Party was no longer representative of a combined political will but rather an extension of its leader. As a result, the Party leadership went along with the continuing turn to neoliberalism in Mitterrand’s second term.

Eventually, the Party’s ideological line itself changed. Instead of seeking a rupture with capitalism, instead the Party’s goal was to construct a “society of solidarity in a market economy”. This was the culmination of Mitterrand’s control over the party as well as the implications from the economic shifts he undertook. Ironically, Mitterrand and the Party were undergoing the same lessons the Communists learned in 1968. While their ideological flexibility and adaptability, as well as socially-minded practical measures helped them perform electorally, it nonetheless now meant that they could not hold their own as an ideological-motivated, opposition force and instead became a mainstream political party, dedicated to the market economy and institutions it had previously marked as its enemies. The party ideology no longer reflected an *a priori* commitment to socialism but rather an *ad hoc* justification for the current political or economic developments their leader was charged with. This shift away from radical ideology to a reformist outlook is largely similar to the change in the German left-wing, resulting in them adopting an openly social democratic stance. Still

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Winock, 302.

despite the similarities and openness about the ongoing internal changes, the PS and Mitterrand never disavowed socialism nor accepted social democracy. For them, the current context was merely laying the foundation for future generations of socialists to later build upon and then realize the socialist project in earnest. So we see how far Mitterrand and the Party have changed in their outlook.

Alongside the ideological shift, Mitterrand and his policies provoked a change in the PS' role in the French political landscape. Whereas their rise to power was predicated upon providing an alternative that was not only potentially popular and viable but also based on left-wing ideology, the PS of Mitterrand's tenure morphed into a decisively mainstream, electorally-minded force. As Mitterrand himself said, "I remain loyal to a certain ideal of the union of the left, which above all means the union of those who vote...I believe that this is an issue we must not lose sight of."⁷⁸ In other words, the PS was committed, not to an ideological or idealized project they must enact, but to an electoral strategy predicated upon holding onto the votes they took from the PCF. The socio-economic context in which these evolutions of the PS certainly played a significant part in this shift, but Mitterrand himself is also culpable. His history and nature as a political animal, concerned primarily with the conquest of power, lent itself to reforming the PS into a talking piece for himself.

Whether or not Mitterrand was wholly committed to the idea of socialism is debatable. While it may never be certain how committed he was to socialism in terms of his own belief, he nevertheless entered office riding on a wave of support based on his socialist policies. As Michel Winock said in his biography of Mitterrand:

"He seemed to have believed in his socialism, from the moment he deemed it a necessary instrument in his conquest of power. He forced himself a little, did some reading, started singing *The Internationale*, adopted Leon Blum's wide-brimmed hat, talked about class struggle and battlegrounds...The belief came to him. Belief, half-belief, quarter-belief, we don't know, but cynicism, no. An eminently political man, he realized that "French-style" socialism had more in common with the imaginary than with the possible. This return to reality, so difficult to accept, he resisted during the controversy over stimulus and austerity; he

⁷⁸ Élysée, "Première Interview de M. François Mitterrand, Président de La République, Accordée à France 3 Le 18 Février 1993 En Réponse à Des Questions Posées Sur Le Minitel, Notamment Sur Le Chômage, Les Acquis Sociaux, l'Après-Législatives et La Cohabitation Éventuelle et l'Avenir Du PS.," elysee.fr, February 18, 1993, <https://www.elysee.fr/francois-mitterrand/1993/02/18/premiere-interview-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-la-republique-accordee-a-france-3-le-18-fevrier-1993-en-reponse-a-des-questions-posees-sur-le-minitel-notamment-sur-le-chomage-les-acquis-sociaux-lapres-legislatives-et-la-cohabitation-event>.

was gradually convinced of its trivial necessity, so little in keeping with his ambition to enter History through the left."

His adoption of socialism, internally genuine or not, did reflect a commitment to this political project on his part, especially seen as he held onto elements of this project even during the neoliberal turn. Still, Mitterrand's use of socialism and the PS in his relentless pursuit of power and anti-Gaullist crusade meant that both the ideology and party became mere instruments for him and the executive as a whole. Whereas earlier socialist leaders, such as Leon Blum, did govern inside the limits of a capitalist society, they did not however result in a complete ideological and structural reformation of their respective movements. Blum and others may have written off their participation in capitalism as a necessary step, much like Mitterrand, but they presided over socialist parties which differed greatly than that of post-Épinay Congress. Most notably, the socialists of yesteryear were only part of a broader landscape within socialism that differed greatly in approaches and outlooks. Conversely, the conquest of power within the PS by Mitterrand, the elimination of potential dissidents from the party, and the party's subsequent instrumentalization meant that whatever changes the PS endured, were in turn changes to French socialism on a fundamental level. Mitterrand's unification of the socialists was necessary for him to reach the office he so clearly sought, but by his second term this unification was resulting in the complete destruction of any previous revolutionary socialist vision. No longer were other socialist factions able to continue as they previously had. All had fallen in line with Mitterrand in the name of his electoral politics, and now they were all condemned to the same fate.

The tragedy of the French left under Mitterrand could not be complete without the Communists though. Communist leaders were rewarded with ministerial roles in Mitterrand's first administration, but by the time of Mitterrand's re-election and embracing of the austerity turn, the communists were long gone. The refusal to participate in the shift to austerity may have granted the Communists some further ideological credibility, however this was nearly useless at this point. After all, Mitterrand openly admitted he wanted to take voters from the communists, robbing them of any political force in the top-heavy 5th Republic. As a result, the Communists were de-fanged and the Socialists were the primary party of the Left. Ultimately this meant that by the time Mitterrand and his administration underwent their ideological and political shifts, there were truly no other options for left-wing voters. Caught between a reformist PS and an irrelevant Communist Party, there was no way out for them.

Overall, the turn to austerity was taken as a seemingly necessary maneuver by a government in charge of a severely weakened economy. However the political, ideological, and hierarchical impacts were unprecedented, and fundamentally altered not only Mitterrand's tenure as president but also the nature and function of the French PS. No longer representative of an outsider, oppositional force, the party became a fully-fledged member of the electoral machinery. With the communists irrelevant and any divergent socialist parties brought into the fold, the changes in the PS created a fundamental rift between itself and the French socialism of yesteryear, trapping them in a political landscape of their own creation. As Mitterrand's tenure as president and life draw to a close, the PS' character remains irrevocably changed.

The Final Years of Mitterrand's Presidency, and his Life

To commence his victory over Jacques Chirac in 1988, Mitterrand appointed Michel Rocard as his Prime Minister. The appointment of Rocard, who was still part of the "Second Left" within the PS, was further confirmation of Mitterrand and PS' turn to the center. Rocard only served three years as Prime Minister though, and was replaced in 1991 by Édith Cresson, who proved to be immensely unpopular. Cresson resigned less than a year following her appointment and was replaced by Pierre Bérégovoy. All throughout these successive governments, not once did Mitterrand's administration cease following the reformist, social-democratic policies which he began in his first term. Rocard aptly summarized the direction of the party as now to build a "society of solidarity in a market economy."⁷⁹

By the end of Mitterrand's second term, things were not looking good, neither for him nor his party. Approval ratings were plummeting due to lingering economic troubles, even within the left-wing voters, and members of the PS were caught in a nationwide embezzlement scheme, further destabilizing the public's trust in the current party. To make matters worse for Mitterrand, a new investigation had come out and released detailed accounts of his early years in politics, threatening to undo any legitimacy he held as a socialist.

Titled *A French Youth*, Pierre Péan recounted Mitterrand's entrance into politics as an affiliate of the extreme right in interwar France. While Mitterrand himself denied these claims, Giles Martinet, a PS ambassador in Rome, confirmed them. However, according to Martinet, any affiliation Mitterrand may have had was not attributed to internal sympathies for the right-wing but rather the goal of creating an alliance network with possibly important figures. This alliance network, Martinet argued, continued into the PS where Mitterrand used

⁷⁹ Wincok, 309-310.

his connections to further his pursuit of power and as a result molded the PS as he saw fit, attributing to them the same ambiguities he himself had.

Any culpability for or reasons behind Mitterrand's potential involvement with the French right-wing are ultimately irrelevant here. What this anecdote shows though is that the left-wing was ready for Mitterrand to leave. This, then, left a large question: Who will succeed Mitterrand on the Left? In regards to any sort of succession, the Socialists were left in disarray. Michel Rocard and Jacques Delors both refused to enter into the presidential election, leaving only Lionel Jospin as a frontrunner for the socialists. The PS faced a difficult electorate though. Having again underperformed in the 1993 legislative elections, the socialists were feeling their unpopularity, only reinforced by a conservative prime minister, Édouard Balladur.

The second cohabitation of Mitterrand's career was short-lived, as the presidential elections were only two years away from Balladur's arrival in government. Nevertheless, the victory of the right-wing in 1993 signaled a curtain call for the PS in government. Winning only 20% of the vote, down from 37% in 1988, the PS was in its worst position since Mitterrand took power. Furthermore, it was not only centrists and right-wingers who were opposing Mitterrand and PS now, but also members of the Left. 77% of all Frenchmen and 69% of left-wing voters indicated in polls that they were opposed to the socialist government, fueled in large part by its inability to address rising unemployment.⁸⁰

In the face of this unpopularity and with Mitterrand unable to run again, the PS was left only with Lionel Jospin for the elections in 1995. Jospin was subsequently trounced by Jacques Chirac, losing with 47% compared to Chirac's 52%. The Socialists and Mitterrand were thus out of power, ending 15 years of their leadership in France. However, for Mitterrand this was not only a political ending but also the ending of his life. For his entire presidency he had been keeping a grave secret from the public and from most of the PS: he was diagnosed with cancer in 1981.

Following his departure from office, Mitterrand retired and underwent treatment for his illness. Despite surviving for significantly longer than initially anticipated, Mitterrand died in his sleep on January 8, 1996. France as a whole entered into a period of mourning for their former president, including both the Left and the Right. With both his career and person dead, all which remained of Mitterrand was his legacy, but what would that be?

⁸⁰ Winock, 382.

Looking at his extensive political career, Mitterrand's biggest strength for himself was his ability to continuously adapt. While he managed to lead the socialists to their biggest triumph in the Fifth Republic, it came at a significant cost. Not only was Mitterrand's own politics subsequently turned to the center, but that of the party as well. Jospin and Rocard, two of the party's largest figures, were avowed supporters of this centrism. Additionally, in his pursuit of power, Mitterrand removed the Communists from any relevant position in the French political landscape. Capitalizing on their defeat in 1968, Mitterrand turned the tables and offered the French public a left-wing agenda that focused on socially conscious issues which they had previously made clear, such as further protections for employment or increasing purchasing power. As a result, there were little practical options for left-wing voters other than the Socialist Party. In spite of their social democratic turn, the Socialist Party remained the premier party of the Left and as such set the tone for mainstream left-wing politics in France. The Socialists and the Left at large would remain out of the presidency for nearly 20 years after Mitterrand's departure. During this time, the Socialists would largely stay the course set by their first president. Jospin would be brought into government in 1997 thanks to a renewed coalition with other left-wing groups, including the PCF. As Prime Minister under Chirac, Jospin continued the socially progressive but economically liberal politics of the Mitterrand era, implementing universal medical insurance while also pursuing privatization. Clearly, the impact of Mitterrand was not going anywhere for the time being. At the same time though, in 1997, a relative newcomer to the French national political arena would become the First Secretary of the PS, François Hollande.

François Hollande: the Neoliberal Left

After five tumultuous years in the Elysee Palace, Hollande left the PS in complete disarray. His presidential term was marked by a weak economy, terrorist attacks, as well as remarkably low public support. Hollande's tenure as president was effectively a continuation of the trends Mitterrand set into motion during his own presidential terms nearly 30 years prior.

However, unlike Mitterrand, Hollande did not command near complete control of the French socialists, much less the Left in general. Outflanked on the Left during his initial presidential election, he was also coming face-to-face with the left-wing faction inside his own party which had grown increasingly disapproving of the party's centrist stance since Mitterrand. It was Hollande's term as president which was the final straw though, as the

austerity and liberal policies had run their course and the French economy was struggling nonetheless. As a result, Hollande did not seek re-election.

Hollande's single term as president was remarkable in how unremarkable it was. Still, his tenure and departure were the final nail in the coffin of the French left, which was still reeling from the Mitterrand years. As a result of these long-term evolutions, the PS, still the main party of the left, crumbled and suffered a record loss at the voting booth in the presidential elections of 2017. The crisis of the PS was the final act in a long process of socio-economic evolutions which in turn caused profound changes in the political culture of the French left-wing. As a result, Hollande presided over a PS in decline and ultimately set the stage for the Left of the 2020s.

The Life and Times of François Hollande

Hollande's background is, ironically, very similar to that of his predecessor, Mitterrand. Born on August 12, 1954 in Rouen, Hollande was raised in a household divided upon political lines. His father, an ear, nose, and throat doctor was a staunch supporter of the far-right whereas his mother, a social worker, was on the left-wing of the political spectrum. As a result, Hollande was already caught between two political extremes and simultaneously a member of neither, at least for the time being.

Fortunately for him, Hollande received a relatively prestigious early education. Beginning at a Catholic boarding school as a child, Hollande completed his secondary education at Lycée Pasteur, a notable high school in Paris which prepares students to enter the elite *grandes écoles* and has offered an equally prestigious teaching staff, Jean-Paul Sartre being a notable example. Following his secondary education, Hollande studied at the École des Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC Paris) and elite business school. Following this he additionally studied further at Sciences Po Paris and then pursued an additional master's at the *École nationale d'administration* (ENA), the foremost state university dedicated to preparing the future administrators of the French state. ENA remains notable in French society and politics for helping shape the careers of countless leaders and ministers within the country.

What Hollande's background shows is a motif that will characterize his entire political career, namely a lack of anything revolutionary or out of the ordinary. His education is certainly respectable and difficult for any person to achieve, yet it is typical of French leadership. In other words, Hollande himself is a product of the machinery of French politics and society. Unlike Mitterrand or Cohn-Bendit, Hollande was, since the beginning, a mainstream part of French society. He had neither the unorthodox, trailblazing past of

Cohn-Bendit nor did he have the political savvy and ambition of Mitterrand. For all intents and purposes Hollande was as ordinary a politician as one could ask for. Of course, this is not to say that his upbringing was his own fault. Growing up in the top-down 5th Republic and coming-of-age following the student moment of 1968, Hollande was the product of his environment. He only knew a political landscape in which the presidency was the prize and that ideology had been replaced by an individualistic, flexible, electorally-oriented strategy. As a result, Hollande's life did not ask of him to become an ideologue or representative of a grand movement. Instead, as Hollande entered politics, it was clear that to win the ultimate prize of the presidency, one had to be broadly appealing, combining enough elements of their respective political wing without alienating the center.

Hollande first entered politics in 1979 as a member of the PS during his time at university. Ironically enough, Hollande was inspired to enter politics as a result of Mitterrand's leadership and challenging of the dominant right-wing.⁸¹ After finishing his education, Hollande worked briefly in the Court of Auditors before re-entering politics as a candidate for the legislative elections in Corrèze in 1981 against Jacques Chirac. Despite being defeated in this election, he was spotted by the Mitterrand administration and brought into the fold as an economic advisor. Seven years later, in 1988, Hollande ran again in Corrèze, successfully winning a seat in the National Assembly for the region as a member of the Socialists. However, he was unable to win re-election in 1993 following the massive surge to the right during the legislative elections that year, primarily as a negative response to Mitterrand's administration. Eventually, Hollande was re-elected in the same department in 1997 and would serve in the National Assembly until 2012.

Alongside his electoral engagements, Hollande was an active and influential member of the PS. The same year as his re-election, 1997, Hollande became the First Secretary of the PS following the ascension of the previous secretary, Lionel Jospin, to Prime Minister under President Jacques Chirac. Hollande would occupy this position until 2008. In this role, Hollande was extremely close to positions of power within the French government, as his party had formed the basis of the government despite a conservative president. Hollande's proximity to power and the limelight would only grow in 2002 when Jospin retired from politics following a dramatic loss to Jean-Marie Le Pen in the presidential elections of that year. In the leadership vacuum left by Jospin, Hollande became the face of the PS nationally.

⁸¹ Bouchet, *La France de la Cinquième République*.

As the head of the socialists, Hollande attempted to stem the electoral defeats in the legislative elections of 2002, but despite his best efforts, the socialists lost nationally overall.

By 2008, Hollande was already preparing to run for the presidency. Despite being the face of the PS, he was not the favorite to win the nomination. Instead, Martine Aubry and Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) were the forerunners in the internal race. However, DSK was eliminated before the primaries could even begin due to a court case involving sexual misconduct. With one rival out of the way, Hollande won against Aubry in the second round of the primaries, winning 56% of the total vote. The path to the Élysée was open to Hollande now.

At the same time as Hollande was beginning his presidential run, France and the rest of the world became embroiled in a new financial crisis beginning in 2008. Due to the subsequent widespread austerity policies undertaken nearly everywhere, left-wing parties suffered at the polls, especially in Southern Europe. The reduced maneuverability of a smaller budget left little in terms of resources and as a result, right-wing parties enjoyed an increase in popularity.⁸² Within the EU, matters were additionally complicated by the policies of the German-dominated European Central Bank, which notoriously used austerity as a bludgeon for bringing wanton spending under control, as in the case of Greece. In this context, the French PS faced a challenging road ahead of itself. However, in comparison to other similar parties in other European states, such as Germany or Italy, the French socialists had actually been in government more consistently, signaling that they remained appealing to the French public still for the time being.

Once underway, Hollande's presidential campaign was primarily against the incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy. Similar to Mitterrand's campaign in 1981, the socialist was running against an unpopular right-wing president who was presiding over a downturn in the French economy. As such, Hollande's campaign platform focused heavily on revitalizing the ailing national economy. Part of his plan included raising taxes on big businesses, creating new subsidized positions in struggling regions, and creating a new bank specifically for public investment.⁸³ However, Hollande did make overtures towards the party's critics, citing a need to reinvigorate the Left. In 2011 during his announcement to seek the socialist candidacy, Hollande stated, "The Left must rise to the challenge. Tell the truth. Raise hopes. Open up a

⁸² Jon Henley, "2017 and the Curious Demise of Europe's Centre-Left," the Guardian, December 29, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2017/dec/29/2017-and-the-curious-demise-of-europes-centre-left>.

⁸³ François Hollande, "Les 60 Engagements de Hollande," Libération, n.d., https://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/01/26/les-60-engagements-de-hollande_791303/.

period of change and progress. To offer the next generation a future, a life better than ours.”⁸⁴ Despite Hollande’s lack of radicalness, it seemed that he might still try to break with the legacy of austerity which had been in the French government since Mitterrand. After a tight race, Hollande won the election on May 6 2012, with 51.6% of the vote. Even in the immediate aftermath though, it was clear Hollande’s victory had little to do with his own policy agenda. As *Le Monde* wrote, “Like François Mitterrand thirty-one years ago, François Hollande knew, in a well thought-out and poised campaign, to take advantage of the strong demand for change...François Hollande was able capitalize on the ‘anti-Sarkozyism’ which the leaving president had generated over the course of his term and then in his campaign, through his personality as much if not more than by his policies.”

The quinquennat: Hollande in Office

Upon his election, Hollande made it clear that his priority was to revitalize a France which had been struggling since the global recession in 2008. His presidential platform, titled 60 Commitments for France, laid out his plan, with great stress placed on revamping the economy.

Of the 60 propositions levied, roughly ⅓ dealt with the economy, employment, finances, or the monetary system in some way. Some of the largest proposals Hollande made related to reinvesting in French industry and production, as well as efforts to reduce the elevated unemployment rate which had been troubling the nation. However, unlike his predecessor, Hollande made no effort to base his policies around an idealized socialist future for France. In fact, Hollande’s program was so in-line with contemporary capitalism that *Economy and Political Weekly* published an entire editorial dedicated to debunking the idea that Hollande’s socialist title meant any danger for finance capital. The article quite frankly described Hollande as yet another extension of neoliberalism which had become the norm since the days of Mitterrand. Interestingly though, Hollande proposed a law which would forcibly separate the loan and credit functions of banks from any sort of speculation, which was seen as harmful to the economy.⁸⁵ Though this proposal seems like an attack against the powers of finance, it must be understood in the post-2008 context. Instead of a charged attack on the ever-growing powers of international finance and capitalism, this reform was largely in

⁸⁴ Alain Albinet, “L’appel de Tulle de François Hollande,” *Le Monde.fr*, March 31, 2011, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2011/03/31/l-appel-de-tulle-de-francois-hollande_1501495_823448.html.

⁸⁵ Vie Publique, “Loi Du 26 Juillet 2013 de Séparation et de Régulation Des Activités Bancaires,” Vie-publique.fr, 2013, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/20660-separation-et-regulation-des-activites-bancaires-banque-speculation>.

response to the crisis and even had analogues in the concurrent American and British governments. As a result, this was no profound attempt to restructure or reorganize the economy. Hollande was decisively in the bounds of capitalism and had no desire to leave. Even on the international level, Hollande was decisively in-line with the rest of capitalist Europe.

Unlike Mitterrand, there was no question whether or not France would remain part of the broader, internationalized economy. This, of course, was already out of the question largely because of the development of the European Union and the furthering of the integration process over time -another lingering effect of the Mitterrand years. What Hollande proposed was reorienting the strategy of the European Central Bank to help the economy. As he said during his campaign, “I will propose to our partners a pact of responsibility, of governance, and of growth to leave the crisis and the spiral of austerity which aggravates it...by privileging growth and employment, and in reorienting the role of the Central European Bank in that direction.”⁸⁶ Hollande did manage to follow through on this, and achieved further financing with the goal of expanding employment opportunities for the youth in particular. Nevertheless, this was the extent of Hollande’s economic reforms. Lacking any sort of great break-away from the norm, the economic policy of Hollande was decisively unremarkable. The turn to austerity had now culminated in a defanging of the Left entirely, leaving behind only another neoliberal party with some open-minded ideas for social programs, yet still a far cry from the revolutionary fervor of yesteryear.

Though Hollande’s economic policy was mainstream and centrist, that did not mean it was popular in France. His initial Minister of the Economy, Arnaud Montebourg stepped down from office in 2014, citing a need for liberty.⁸⁷ In his place, a no-name politician named Emmanuel Macron was brought in to take over. Macron was previously the deputy secretary-general of the Élysée, a high-ranking position within the cabinet, and during this time he proposed various economic reforms including increasing the 35-hour week to 27-hours, as well as holding back on tax increases. The differences between Macron and Montebourg were immediately clear. Montebourg was a left-wing eurosceptic who wanted France to prioritize bringing back industry and manufacturing to its own shores, whereas Macron was decidedly more centrist and interested in a pro-EU, social democracy.⁸⁸ While

⁸⁶ Hollande, “60 Engagements.”

⁸⁷ Media6, “Démission Du Gouvernement : Montebourg Rétablit Sa Vérité,” *Le Point*, October 6, 2014, https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/demission-du-gouvernement-montebourg-retablit-sa-verite-06-10-2014-1869927_20.php.

⁸⁸ *Le Monde* and Agence France Presse, “Emmanuel Macron, La ‘Sauce Libérale’ Du Gouvernement ?,” *Le Monde.fr*, August 26, 2014,

Macron was a member of the PS, his involvement in the Hollande administration is reflective of an insistence upon centrism and pragmatism in policy.

Macron very quickly began to propose and implement more measures along the same business-friendly lines that Hollande wanted. By far the most notorious measure is the so-called “Macron law”, officially titled the Law for the growth, activity, and equality of economic chances. The law was a package of multiple reforms at once, targeting, among others, working on Sundays, remuneration of notaries and lawyers, and facilitating driver’s licenses. The law is certainly a mixed bag but is ultimately an extension of the neoliberalism at work in Hollande’s government, and more broadly the PS post-Mitterrand.

It should not be mistaken that this article is only Macron’s project. Hollande and the PS were instrumental in its passage. To pass Macron’s law, the government made three uses of Article 49.3 of the Fifth Republic’s constitution, which permits them to pass a law without a vote in the Assembly, so long as they pass a subsequent vote of no-confidence. The use of this article meant that the Prime Minister and PS majority in the Assembly were all in favor.⁸⁹ Its passage was a clear signal of the neoliberal, business-oriented priorities of the socialists, continuing where Mitterrand had left off.

Following Macron’s law, another economic reform was introduced that caused even greater kickback and outrage. On February 17, 2016, Minister of Labor Myriam El Khomri introduced a reform proposal targeting employee-employer relations. More specifically, the law, known as the El Khomri law, facilitated lay-offs for economic reasons, reduced overtime payments, and cut down on mandated severance payments that workers are entitled to if fired. Despite this law being in the same neoliberal, supply-side vein as the Macron law, Macron himself did not take part in this and instead was busy trailblazing his own political career alone, which will come back into the picture later. Quickly, the El Khomri law became the subject of controversy, with labor unions across the country speaking out against it. In a turn of historical irony, the PS now found itself at odds with the labor movement, which it had at one point claimed to represent.⁹⁰ Now fully embroiled in a centrist agenda, Hollande and his administration were clearly striking out against their own socialist affiliations. The law was opposed by left-wing members of the PS in the Assembly, yet they could not stop its passage as the government made use again of Article 49.3.

https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/08/26/emmanuel-macron-la-sauce-liberale-du-gouvernement_4477208_823448.html.

⁸⁹ Jean-Marc Vittori, “Pourquoi Le Marteau Du 49-3 Est Un Outil Indispensable,” *Les Echos*, February 24, 2015, <https://www.lesechos.fr/2015/02/pourquoi-le-marteau-du-49-3-est-un-outil-indispensable-200315>.

⁹⁰ Leonardo Sampaio, “The ‘El Khomri Law’ on François Hollande’s Employment and Competitiveness Politics (2012-2017),” December 2022.

Not all of Hollande's policies were as profoundly centrist though as his social reforms were arguably the most progressive part of his platform. Most notably amongst these was the legalization of gay marriage, which was passed May 17, 2013. This was one area where Hollande managed to outflank his predecessor on the left. Mitterrand did attempt to enact social reforms in this direction but was forced away alongside the turn to austerity. Now, the PS managed to follow through on their promise and bring marriage equality to France. This measure was not without any resistance though. The invocation of gay rights in a country so mired in Catholic history had the unintended consequence of pushing the right-wing into action on the streets. As a result, Hollande's great social reform ended up becoming also a revitalization of religious right talking points as well.⁹¹ Reprisals aside though, the focus on legislation dealing with intimate, personal affairs reflects the evolution of the French left and the PS up until this point. Now within the bounds of a globalized, consumer society and having replaced ideological consistency with flexible *ad hoc* interpretations, legislation and measures dealing with the personal had become the extent of any political will to enact a long-term project. Whereas Cohn-Bendit and his comrades challenged the notion of ideology as unconcerned with the individual and remaining too static, the French left wing is now in the complete opposite direction with a focus on pragmatic, possible measures.

In fact pragmatism is the key word for understanding Hollande's tenure as president. Again similar to Mitterrand, Hollande was inheriting a France in a weakened economic status with a society torn between accepting the social progress he proposed or retaining the old image of France as the right-wing would wish. Within these confines and lacking any grand ideological vision, Hollande's term was largely reduced to pursuing pragmatic, attainable goals. In fact, Hollande rallied against the idea of the left pursuing grand transformations or ruptures with the present society. In an interview, Hollande commented, "The left must hold out great hopes, but it cannot reduce itself to great moments. Its vocation is not to intervene every twenty years to make reforms. On the contrary, I want the Left to be a long-term force. I didn't become a candidate in order to get rid of the Right, introduce a few political and social innovations, and then make way. I want to initiate a long-term transformation of society that is convincing even beyond the left. My responsibility is to be the president of the way out of the crisis. This presupposes an economic, energy and ecological transition - and a generational one too - that will enable young people to fulfill their own destiny."⁹² With this in mind,

⁹¹ Bouchet, *La France de la Cinquième République*.

⁹² François Hollande, *Changer de Destin*, 2012. Translated by thesis author.

Hollande's own political project was then to be the fulfillment of this pragmatic, foundation building for the Left to expand upon after, at least in his own eyes.

However this pragmatism came at a dire cost to both Hollande and the PS. Mitterrand had the excuse of immense financial pressures which ruined his socialist project, but Hollande entered office with no such pretensions and continued the pragmatic, centrism that Mitterrand shifted to. This centrism from Hollande's policies didn't sit well with many in the PS, especially those who retained more radical left-wing visions. Even outside the party though, Hollande was struggling. Pragmatism was not enough for his policies to succeed in turning the tide of the French economy, and the nation continually suffered high unemployment as well as cuts to the national budget, thus continuing austerity. As a result, not only was the economy not improving but public perceptions of Hollande were rapidly declining. By the end of his five years in office, Hollande had an approval rating of only 18%.⁹³ This combination of ineffective policies, unprecedented unpopularity, and growing rifts in the PS set the stage for a catastrophic end to Hollande's tenure as president.

2017: The Crisis of the PS

Seeing the writing on the wall, Hollande made it clear before his term was over that he would not seek re-election. This was another first for the Fifth Republic, as every prior president had sought re-election. However, Hollande was caught in a bind he could not escape, as he was now unpopular with both the public and members of his own party. As a result of his concession, Benoît Hamon became the Socialist nominee for the presidency.

Hamon had earned his ideological bonafides through a career already committed to the remaining left-wing currents in the PS. A previous supporter of Rocard during his tenure as Prime Minister, Hamon was previously a member of an organized caucus within the PS, advocating for a return to socialist principles and away from the market-orientation which had dominated the party since Mitterrand.⁹⁴ Hamon eventually became a frontrunner in the party election for First Secretary before being chosen as Hollande's Minister of National Education. This position would end before the year was over though, as Hamon disagreed too much with

⁹³ Geoffroy Clavel, "EXCLUSIF - Hollande Quitte l'Élysée Avec Une Popularité Qui Replonge," Le HuffPost, May 4, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/exclusif-hollande-quitte-l-elysee-avec-une-popularite-qui-replonge-sous-la-barre-des-20_99677.html.

⁹⁴ Stéphane Alliès Huet Donatien, "Valls, Peillon, Montebourg, Hamon, Une Génération Contrariée," Mediapart, January 1, 2017, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/010117/valls-peillon-montebourg-hamon-une-generation-contrariee>.

Hollande's policies. By 2017, Hamon was representative of the PS's left-wing, who was already splitting from the Party due to Hollande's centrism.

In a clear rupture between himself and Hollande, Hamon's campaign centered around a return to traditional socialist principles. He promised a universal basic income, reduced workweek, the legalization of cannabis, as well as state investments into renewable energy. Even on a rhetorical level, Hamon made it clear he was not a mere continuation of the centrism brought about 30 years prior by Mitterrand. He openly derided neoliberalism saying in an interview with *Franceinter*, "It will be completely unreasonable to see that today there is urgency to change our methods of production and of consumption. If the obstacle is the level of debt, excuse me, but the level of debt is the market, it is the banks, we can negotiate with them. We do not negotiate with the planet."⁹⁵ Regardless of how ideologically credible Hamon's program was, he still found himself in the midst of a party in the throes of an internal conflict over its candidate and, by extension, its future. The old division between the centrists and socialistic loyalists of the party was boiling over, and President Hollande was only contributing to the problem by not committing to any candidate for some time. Ultimately, the choice in candidate lay between Hamon and Prime Minister Valls, who represented the left-wing and centrist factions of the Socialist party respectively. In the primaries, it was Hamon who prevailed over Valls' centrism. Hamon could be seen now as a verified left-wing contender and a strong break with the neoliberal centrism of Hollande. There was one problem though: he was not alone.

The divisions between the centrists and leftists within the PS resulted in a profound fragmentation of the French left. One of the most notable departures was that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in 2008, who was now the largest rival to Hamon on the Left. Mélenchon had been a member of PS since the days of Mitterrand and was an outspoken advocate for the left-wing of the party. However, unlike Hamon, Mélenchon could not accept further alliances and commitments to the party's center and in 2008 left the PS to found the Left Party the following year.⁹⁶ Mélenchon additionally entered the 2012 election against Hollande, but only received 11% of the total vote. In 2016 though, Mélenchon founded *La France insoumise*

⁹⁵ Le Point magazine, "Benoît Hamon : 'La Croissance Est Devenue Une Quasi-Religion,'" Le Point, December 9, 2016, https://www.lepoint.fr/video/benoit-hamon-la-croissance-est-devenue-une-quasi-religion-09-12-2016-2089119_738.php.

⁹⁶ Agence France Presse, "Jean-Luc Mélenchon Quitte Le PS," Le Figaro, November 7, 2008, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2008/11/07/01011-20081107FILWWW00341-jean-luc-melenchon-quitte-le-ps.php>.

(France Unbowed; LFI), a eco-socialist party which expanded upon the Left Party's 2012 presidential election platform.

A tried and true Leftist, Mélenchon effectively outflanked Hamon in the election. With a platform additionally advocating against free trade and even establishing a Sixth Republic with specific regard for environmental protections, Mélenchon was a radical departure from the politics of the PS. As such, LFI was able to bring various left-wing politicians into a coalition for the legislative elections of 2012, including some members of the communists as well as anti-capitalist party *Ensemble!*.⁹⁷ LFI was unable to secure a majority in the elections but still managed to win 17 seats in the National Assembly, an impressive first outing as a political party. It was clear then that Mélenchon was a force to be reckoned with. Unconstrained with centrist alliances or the baggage of an ideological iconoclasm, LFI and Mélenchon were the face of a new left wing in France, a post-PS left-wing.

Additionally, LFI represented a different political culture than that of the PS now. While both stood for left-wing ideals in the presidential race, the PS remained tied to the political mainstream and subsequently was running a party platform with electoralism in mind. Furthermore, the PS, despite its internal problems, remained a single, unitary party. Conversely, the LFI platform was decisively outside the mainstream of French politics. Furthermore, the party had alliances with and enjoyed support from other diverse left-wing groups including the French Communist Party, the Greens, and Mélenchon's former party, the Left Party. What this meant was that LFI was not a top-down, paternalistic political machine like the PS had morphed into under Mitterrand. Instead, LFI represented a much more horizontally oriented, inclusive political movement. Ironically this dichotomy between the two frontrunners of the French left evokes much from the differences between the communists and socialists during and after 1968. In fact, the differences in political culture and party functions nearly mirror the situation of half a century earlier. The Socialists made the same mistakes as the communists, namely losing status as an outsider or protest vote and instead becoming enveloped in the political machinery of the Republic. Furthermore, much like the Communist Party, the Socialists became dependent upon a centrist vote which hampered them both ideologically and politically, as now radical measures were unpopular. Granted, these two parties fell into these mistakes for differing reasons, but the fact remains that the PS of 2017 was close to a mirror image of the communists in 1968 and its aftermath.

⁹⁷ Etienne Baldit, "Les Militants Du PCF Choisissent de Soutenir Mélenchon Pour 2017 (Contre La Décision de La Direction)," [lelab.europe1.fr](https://lelab.europe1.fr/les-militants-du-pcf-choisissent-de-soutenir-melenchon-pour-2017-2911928), November 26, 2016, <https://lelab.europe1.fr/les-militants-du-pcf-choisissent-de-soutenir-melenchon-pour-2017-2911928>.

Granted, there were other left-wing parties present in the 2017 elections. Both the *Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste* (New Anticapitalist Party) and the *Lutte Ouvrière* (Worker;s Fight) presented candidates for the presidency, while the French Communist Party actually managed to gain seats in the Assembly in the legislative elections. However, they failed to reach the same coverage or results as PS or LFI.

What was not anticipated, however, was the emergence of Emmanuel Macron as a candidate for the election. Hollande's Minister of the Economy had founded his own party in 2016, *La République en marche!* (The Republic on the Move), or just En Marche for short. Bizarrely, even as a member of his own party, Macron initially remained a member of the government, only stepping down to focus on the election campaign. The obscure and young politician was now running as a centrist, social-liberal candidate. Macron quickly distanced himself from the socialists, stating outright "Honesty obliges me to tell you all that I am not a socialist", and subsequently defined himself and his movement as "neither Left nor Right."⁹⁸ While this is certainly an apt description of Macron's policies and commitments, this avowed centrism nonetheless distinguishes Macron from the other candidates in the race. The presidential race was primarily defined upon a classic left-right dichotomy, with the PS being the flagship party of the Left. As a centrist though, Macron stood alone, which subsequently allowed him to naturally stand out.

One area in which Macron and Mélenchon had common ground was their distaste for the traditional party politics of France, which they also shared with right-winger Marine Le Pen. All three candidates disapproved of the existing parties for their own reasons yet they all were capturing a sense of tiredness the general public had in regards to their political system. All three managed to use this disdain to their advantage, advocating for their own solutions. For Macron this meant leaving party divides behind and rallying behind a single common cause: progress.⁹⁹ Left-wing firebrand Mélenchon instead pushed for *dégagisme*, a hard to define term which roughly refers to pushing those in power out, without an *a priori* plan for what comes after.¹⁰⁰ In other words, Mélenchon wanted to stop continuing the cyclical back

⁹⁸ Nathalie Raulin, "Macron: 'L'honnêteté M'oblige à Vous Dire Que Je Ne Suis Pas Socialiste,'" *Libération*, August 19, 2016, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/08/19/macron-l-honnetete-m-oblige-a-vous-dire-que-je-ne-suis-pas-socialiste_1473437/.

⁹⁹ Marie Wolfrom, "Emmanuel Macron, Ovni Politique 'Ni de Droite Ni de Gauche,'" *Public Sénat*, April 23, 2017, <https://www.publicsenat.fr/actualites/non-classe/emmanuel-macron-ovni-politique-ni-de-droite-ni-de-gauche-59152>.

¹⁰⁰ Antonin André, "Jean-Luc Mélenchon S'approprie Le 'Dégagisme,'" *Europe 1*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/jean-luc-melenchon-s-approprie-le-degagisme-2966513>.

and forth in the hopes of something new. Finally, Marine Le Pen utilized a general anti-system sentiment to further her own right-wing agenda. In spite of the differing approaches and backgrounds of this repudiation of the party system, all three candidates enjoyed increased popularity due in part to these stances.

By the time of the election though, it was clear that Macron was the frontrunner. His centrist politics as well as relatively youth and outsider status helped him win the election with 66% of the vote in the second round. Le Pen came after, securing 34% in the second round. Unfortunately for them, all the left wing candidates were eliminated in the first round. Among them though, Mélenchon received a respectable 19% in the first round. Conversely, the then-face of the Left, the PS, only received an abysmal 6%, a massive upset. Their defeat in the face of a relative nobody in the political scene was of course due in large part to their preceding crisis and internal division vis-a-vis their centrist turn. In the bigger picture though, this defeat is the culmination of evolutions and developments within both France itself and the left-wing.

A Post-Hollande and Post-PS Left

The effect of the 2017 election on the PS, echoes the impact of the PCF's defeat in 1969. No longer appealing to the center or the left, the PS was abandoned by its former supporters, who migrated to these newer political parties which might better suit them. Even though Hollande was still president until into 2018, he could offer little to help guide his party out of this crisis. Complicating matters further is the fact that Prime Minister Valls called for socialist supporters to vote for Macron in the second round vote.¹⁰¹ Valls' call to action was unsanctioned by the party and only further underscored the internal divisions the party was suffering from.

Much like the PCF before them, the PS now set about rebuilding its image in the eyes of the public. However it would have to do so with a weakened support structure as well as the departure of more members, who joined the other nascent parties. In the wake of the election, then-First Secretary Cambadélis resigned and later Olivier Faure was elected to take his place in March 2018. As the head of the party, Faure attempted to bridge the gap between the centrists and the leftists.¹⁰² During Hollande's term, Faure supported many of the centrist

¹⁰¹ Service politique de Le Monde, "Le Jour Où... En 2017, Manuel Valls Trahissait Sa Promesse de Soutenir Benoît Hamon et Se Rangeait Derrière Emmanuel Macron," *Le Monde.fr*, March 30, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2022/03/30/le-jour-ou-en-2017-manuel-valls-trahissait-sa-promesse-de-soutenir-benoit-hamon-et-se-rangeait-derriere-emmanuel-macron_6119823_1819218.html.

¹⁰² Sylvia Zappi, "Olivier Faure Renforcé à La Tête Du PS Avec Sa Stratégie Unitaire," *Le Monde.fr*, July 13, 2020,

propositions, including the El Khomri law, which earned him the ire of the Left. However, Faure did also want to differentiate his party from that of president-elect Macron, and subsequently announced that the socialists would oppose the newly elected government.

As part of his renewal strategy, Faure struck alliances with other left-wing parties like the PCF or the Greens.¹⁰³ While the party was rebuilding its left-wing image, it still remained less radical than Mélenchon and as a result initially refrained from forging alliances with LFI. Alongside these electoral alliances, Faure's plan included fostering local support in legislative and municipal elections. Fortunately for Faure and the socialists, their alliance with the Greens paid off in the local arena in the elections of 2020 as they managed to win over key large cities including Paris, Lyon, and Bordeaux. On the national level though, the party was still struggling. In the European elections of 2019, the PS threw its support behind Raphaël Glucksmann, member of a pro-EU, eco-friendly party. The choice of Glucksmann here is significant, not only because it underscores a renewed emphasis on ecological issues for the PS but also because it was the first time since 1971 that the party was not running their own candidate in an election and instead was letting one of its partners lead the way. The European election turned out to be an even greater disaster for the socialists than the presidential two years prior. Glucksmann received only 6.19% of the vote for the election, setting a new low for PS' electoral performance. Worse yet, the internal divisions of the party seemed unchanged since the end of Hollande's term.

Faure was making headway in his alliances with the other parties of the Left but still found opposition from within the socialists themselves. Long-time politicians opposed making overtures to the left, especially any regarding Mélenchon.¹⁰⁴ The divisions became even more pronounced as the 2022 presidential election inched closer. Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, emerged as the party's frontrunner. However she found little support from Faure, who instead wanted to propose a joint-candidate with other left-wing parties and accused Hidalgo of imposing herself upon the party. Faure likewise prophesied that Hidalgo would underperform electorally if they could not secure any alliances.¹⁰⁵ Despite this conflict

https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/07/13/olivier-faure-renforce-a-la-tete-du-ps-avec-sa-strategie-unitaire_6046019_823448.html.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ La Rédaction de la Dépêche, "Législatives : La Réponse de Carole Delga Au Rapprochement Entre Le PS et La France Insoumise," *ladepeche.fr*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2022/04/29/legislatives-la-reponse-de-carole-delga-au-rapprochement-entre-le-ps-et-la-france-insoumise-10266144.php>.

¹⁰⁵ Prisma Média, "'Sache Que Je Ne l'Oublierai Pas' : Anne Hidalgo Menaçante, Un Échange Très Tendu Dévoilé - Gala," *Gala.fr*, October 25, 2022, https://www.gala.fr/l_actu/news_de_stars/sache-que-je-ne-loublierai-pas-anne-hidalgo-menacante-un-echange-tr-es-tendu-devoile_505069.

though, Hidalgo remained the party's candidate, however she could not count on complete support from her colleagues as numerous party members organized themselves around supporting incumbent Macron.

Still, the political culture which began under Mitterrand and continued under Hollande was coming to an end in the PS. The divisions inside the party may have remained but nonetheless it was still reconsidering the centrism which had defined its policies for decades. In a speech in 2019, Faure stated that the party must "become again the premier party of the Left."¹⁰⁶ Faure's ambition was clearly to distance the party from the pro-business neoliberalism of Hollande, as well as distinguish itself from the radical LFI, ultimately in the service of rehabilitating the image and electoral performance of the PS.

These changes were clearly not the result of any decision from Hollande but precisely his inaction. By merely continuing the trend Mitterrand had established during his turn to austerity, Hollande deepened the internal tensions and public disapproval of the PS. The centrism which was deemed necessary in 1982 had become a hindrance to the socialists and no longer capable of winning them support. As a result, Hollande's adherence to this orientation was the proverbial final straw and facilitated the emergence and prevalence of newer parties as well as a reshuffling of the socialists. Hollande's single term as president is then best understood as the final amalgamation of the socio-economic trends and their political impacts which the socialists had been attempting to ride since the events of 1968. However, in their attempt to master these trends to their benefit, the PS ultimately got caught up in these evolutions and were unable to retain their left-wing identity under Mitterrand. Hollande was the continuation of this changed PS, which had been running on an ideological autopilot since Mitterrand's departure. As a result, Hollande offered nothing new or radical for the party, leading to its breaking point in 2017.

The changes made in response to Hollande, and by extension Mitterrand, have somewhat reclaimed the left-wing identity of the socialists. No longer caught between a left-wing veneer and centrist politics, the Socialists have even brokered alliances with LFI and Mélenchon, much to the chagrin of the remaining centrists. Still, the PS is struggling to remain relevant in a changed French political landscape. The 2022 presidential election was yet another electoral disaster, as Anne Hidalgo only received 1.74% of the vote in the first round -a new record low. Unable to regain the voters which had migrated elsewhere, the PS is

¹⁰⁶ Rédaction Europe1.fr, "Olivier Faure : 'Notre Rassemblement N'est Pas Une Option, Il Est Impératif,'" Europe 1, March 16, 2018, <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/olivier-faure-notre-rassemblement-nest-pas-une-option-il-est-imperatif-3601346>.

no longer the flagship party of the left. Since then, the party joined the NUPES coalition (*Nouvelle union populaire écologiste et sociale*; New Popular Ecological and Sociale Union) under the leadership of Mélenchon, despite protestation from the less radical members.¹⁰⁷ Breaking with their centrist streak may have re-established the socialists on the left, but their time has passed; the French left-wing has entered a post-PS era, and there is little to be done about it.

¹⁰⁷ Franceinfo, “Manifeste Pour ‘Une Autre Gauche’ : Le Socialiste Olivier Faure Fustige Les ‘Gens Qui Cherchent à Créer de La Tension,’” Franceinfo, September 4, 2022, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/melenchon/manifeste-pour-une-autre-gauche-le-socialiste-olivier-faure-fustige-les-gens-qui-cherchent-a-cree-de-la-tension_5342041.html.

Conclusion

The socio-economic changes and subsequent shifts in political culture in France throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries catalyzed the evolution and later decline of the major left-wing parties, the PCF and PS. The economic boom and transition following the Second World War spurred on the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, of which Daniel Cohn-Bendit and 1968 are emblematic, pushing for a new conceptualization of the Left which included increasingly personal and individual concerns. These changes however also brought French society as a whole into greater economic prosperity and linkages with the global marketplace. As a result, the demand for revolutionary prospects waned and the Left was forced to adapt to this changing landscape. While the PCF floundered during the events of 1968, unable to readjust themselves ideologically and organizationally, the PS emerged during this time to claim the role as lead party of the Left. Seeing the demand for socially-minded reform as well as economic protections, the PS under Mitterrand scored a major victory for the Left in the 1981 presidential election. However, the same changes which the PS sought to capitalize on also forced them to re-evaluate their progressive plan. The growth of France into a modern, consumerist, globalized, market economy meant that Mitterrand could not invoke a radical change as he had planned. The economic troubles of the 1970s and 80s, as well as a French electorate which grew accustomed to the strong welfare state, demanded that Mitterrand stay the course and implement a pragmatic, economically liberal plan, undoing his progressiveness. However, in his pursuit of power, Mitterrand changed the nature of the PS to serve his interests, becoming instrumentalized by the executive. As a result, the party shifted to accommodate Mitterrand's liberal shift, losing sight of its original radical, left-wing character. This shift continued into the 21st century under Hollande, who was the final crystallization of this trend rightward. Unable to provide any radical departure from this centrism and also unable to remedy an economy impacted by the 2008 crisis, Hollande oversaw a crumbling PS as well as the rise of new parties to challenge their dominance.

The socio-economic and political shifts which had brought the Left to power in the 1980s had ultimately resulted in its decline and fragmentation, which remains to this day. The traditional parties of the Left were unable to fully master these tides, for both external and internal factors, resulting in their slide into irrelevancy. With the emergence of parties like LFI and the renewed emphasis on alternative politics, like environmentalism, there remains the potential for a new Left to rise from the ashes of the PCF and PS, reclaiming its dominance in the French political landscape.

The Left still faces a difficult road ahead of itself though. As the PS declined and the Left became fragmented, the right wing, especially the far-right, has grown in importance. With Marine Le Pen contesting the presidential election twice in a row, as well as her party emerging increasingly popular in the European elections, the Left likely must contend with her brand of far-right politics instead of Macron's centrism. In the end though, it remains uncertain how the Left will manage the coming years in politics. While Mélenchon remains the face of the contemporary Left, he is not without his critics. With a political culture focused around securing electors and maintaining the welfare of a moderately-minded public, Mélenchon and the Left will likely have to consistently re-adapt to remain not only on the forefront of any issues but to also retain their identity, lest they repeat the fate of the PS.

Annexes

Charts and graphs

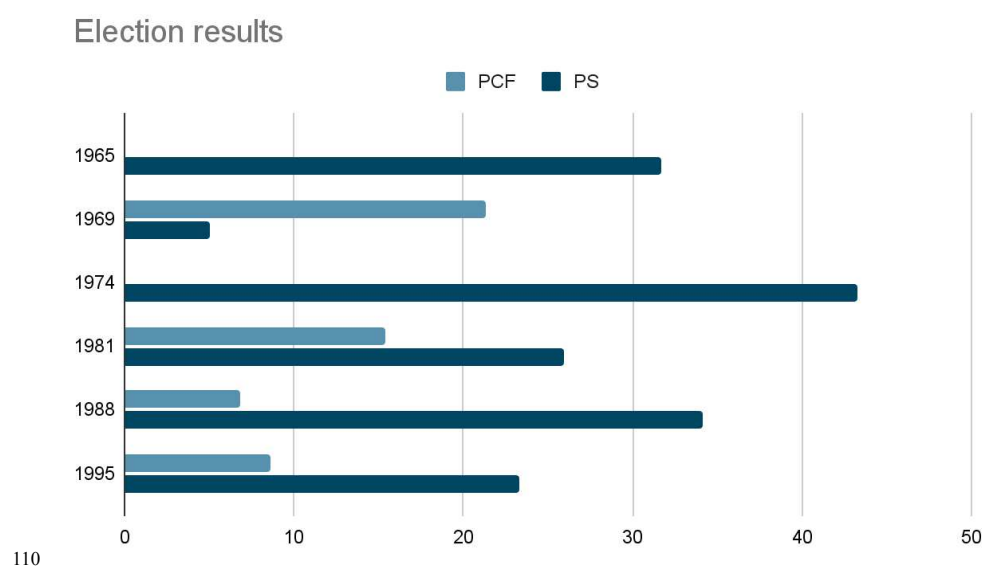
Figure 1: Key Figures of Evolution of French Economy during Trente Glorieuses¹⁰⁸

	1946	1975
Total population (millions)	40.5	52.6
Active population (millions)	20.5	21.8
Distribution of active population professions:		
Primary (agriculture and animal husbandry)	63	10
Secondary (Industry and construction)	32	38.6
Tertiary (other workers, i.e. office workers, salaried employees)	32	51.4
Number of personal cars in circulation (thousands)	1,000	15,300
National Quality of life (for reference, 1938=100)	87	320
Purchasing power of average hourly salary of maids ¹⁰⁹ (1939=100)	125	420

¹⁰⁸ Fourastie, *Trente Glorieuses*.

¹⁰⁹ Maids (femmes de menage) are a standard referencing point in Fourastie's analysis of French economics.

Figure 2: PS and PCF Election Results 1968-1981



¹¹⁰ De Boissieu, Laurent, “France-Politique.fr”

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*Note all translation from French to English were done by the thesis author

On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

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