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THE DECEPTIVE OPPOSITION BETWEEN NATIONALISTS AND PROGRESSIVES

by Anne-Claire Defossez and Didier Fassin

Thinking he could replay the scenario of his 2017 presidential campaign, during which he had presented himself as a bulwark against the far right, the French President Emmanuel Macron made the alternative between progressives and nationalists the central issue in the European elections. But is his authoritarian neoliberalism so far removed from the positions of those he claims to fight? And does overcoming the opposition between right and left not lead to the abandonment of democracy?

During the 2017 presidential campaign, Emmanuel Macron presented himself as above the right-left opposition, declaring it obsolete. He presented himself as the main defence against the far right, embodied by Marine Le Pen. This tactic worked so well that it received the support of many socialist leaders, such as former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, and even communists, such as former secretary-general of the party, Robert Hue. As we know, Macron won the second round by a wide margin, with two thirds of the votes. But also with a record abstention rate. For the 2019 European elections, the French President wanted to play the same card again. With a weakened right and a divided left, his party, La République en Marche, had as its main opponent the Rassemblement National, which polls showed to be neck and neck in the months leading up to the vote.

In July 2018, he declared to the French MPs and senators gathered in congress in Versailles that “the real border that runs across Europe today is the one that separates nationalists from progressives”. He clarified this in his letter to the citizens of Europe by contrasting the threat of “nationalist withdrawal” promoted by “exploiters of anger” with the hope of “European humanism” that would foster the “standards of progress”. This is a double rhetorical, if not ideological, shift from the discourse that

In a society where inequalities are increasing, announcing the twilight of the left is very exaggerated. Didier Fassin and Anne-Claire Defossez @the_IAS



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brought him to power. On the one hand, it replaces the initial idea of the man of providence standing above the parties with that of the politician engaged in the fray to fight sovereignists and populists. On the other hand, the political vision of the new world against the old gives way to a moral distinction between values of the future and illusions of the past, and ultimately between good and evil.

If we can understand what the nationalism of Salvini, Orban, Kaczynski, Wilders and Le Pen corresponds to, we need to ask ourselves what characterises Emmanuel Macron’s self-styled “progressivism”. Two years after his accession to power, two lines of action can be identified through the policy he is pursuing at national level. One is clearly neoliberal, both in tax reform and labour deregulation, as well as in the reduction of social benefits and the privatisation of public assets. The other has increasingly emerged as authoritarian with the use of decrees to enforce important legislation to the detriment of parliamentary debate, the

adoption of security laws incorporating the main measures of a state of emergency, the harsh repression of street demonstrations and repeated violence against foreigners. Far from being unprecedented, this combination is a modern version of Thatcherism and is clearly on the right of the political spectrum.

The French President is trying to present his vision more positively, which two of his former advisors have summarised in a book, “Le progrès ne tombe pas du ciel” [Progress does not fall from the sky]” by Ismaël Emelien and David Amiel, who received his blessing. They argue that progressivism is based on an individualistic conception of society that must give everyone the opportunity to achieve their full potential. Emmanuel Macron’s praise of the “lead climbers” and his remark to a job-seeker that it would be enough to “cross the street” to find work reflect this conception. It implies a direct relationship between power and citizens, without the intervention of intermediate bodies, and between power and employees, without union mediation. However, it does not exclude the consolidation of a national community and even the promotion of patriotism.

In addition to the fact that Emmanuel Macron’s progressivism seems to be nothing more than the disguise of a deliberately authoritarian neoliberalism, the division he proposes between his camp and that of the nationalists, far from being a central opposition at European level, is for now only a secondary one. Indeed, the two coalitions that dominate the European Parliament are the conservative European People’s Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, which relegate the liberal group, which La République en Marche has joined, as well as the Greens and the various nationalist groups, which may not even manage to join forces, to the second level.

There is also some irony in the fact that one of the French President's main partners in his alliance is the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte. During Rutte's first term in office, he governed with the support of the far-right 'Party for Freedom'. It is also ironic that the head of the list of La République en Marche, Nathalie Loiseau, presented herself on a union list when she was a student that was composed of members of the main far-right group at the time.

If Emmanuel Macron's tactics have once again succeeded at the French level by placing his party and the Rassemblement National in direct competition with each other, it is less because his analysis of ideological relations is correct than because the political configuration specific to France is favourable to him: the right has become weaker by seeking to imitate the far right and the left has marginalised itself through its wrangling and divisions. But these tactics have their limits at the European level, which shows that the balance of power between a moderate right-wing and a social-democratic left is undeniably still in place. France is an exception in this respect, but Emmanuel Macron does not seem to have understood this.

The short-sighted analyses which, following his election, had diagnosed, as he himself did, the twilight of the right-left opposition are not only inaccurate - they are also dangerous. The progressive-nationalist opposition, as far as it exists, consists of a Manichean division between progress and withdrawal, good and evil. It is a vertical and exclusive moral distinction: who would want to be on the side of withdrawal and evil? In this sense, it is anti-democratic. The opposition between right and left, however, is political, horizontal and inclusive. It calls on everyone to choose between two models of

society: one dominated by the market economy and border protection, the other more concerned with social justice and the integration of foreigners. The French President's policy is now in line with the first model, but his rhetoric about the end of traditional parties aims to conceal this with a head-to-head confrontation between the right and far right.

Even if weakened, the left reminds us by its very existence that a society is made up of relationships of power and domination and that, in a society where inequalities are increasing, the announcement of the left's death is very exaggerated.

The progressivism of #EmmanuelMacron in the face of the #nationalists: a misleading illusion Didier Fassin and Anne-Claire Defossez @the_IAS



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