

# **Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise: the manufacturing of populism**

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## **Abstract**

In the run-up to the 2017 presidential election in France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon who, so far, had been associated with the radical left, formed a new movement called France Insoumise (Unbowed France - FI). Mélenchon’s populist strategy in launching FI was blatant. This was an attempt to organise the masses along the lines of an agonistic cleavage between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, and this was also a radical break with the collective forms of leadership and action on the French left. The gamble paid off as Mélenchon received significant support from segments of left-wing voters in the first round of the presidential election. In true populist fashion, the FI leader wants to federate ‘the people’, and not simply left-wing voters. He has ceased to use the notion of left altogether. What defines FI’s populism is the role and the centrality of the leader. One may wonder whether populism is the best strategy to broaden the left’s electorate as left-wing and right-wing populisms do not tap in the same culture and do not express the same feelings. On the left, the anger is directed at free market economics. On the far right, the hatred of foreigners and immigrants is the main motivation. Both

feelings and mindsets are incompatible: the former has a positive mindset whereas the latter is based on resentment. Mélenchon's style, strategy and politics have energised fragments of the left-wing electorate (the young and working-class voters notably) but they have also created tensions with other parties of the left. Those organisations fear that Mélenchon's 'populist moment' may be detrimental to the future of left-wing politics in France altogether.

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1 Populism and the French left***

Populism does not sit well with the French left. Historically, the left-wing forces in France have rejected populist movements, ideas and leaders. In the original version of the Internationale, the anthem of the socialist movement worldwide, Eugène Pottier wrote: 'There are no supreme saviours, neither God, nor Caesar, nor eloquent speakers, producers, let's save ourselves.'<sup>1</sup> Those verses are a clear refutation of leader-centric populism.

From Napoleon III (Marx 2008) to Charles de Gaulle (Mitterrand 1984), in recent times, populism has characterised right-wing or extreme-right regimes or leaderships. It has helped label demagogic policies and the art of exploiting people's fears and frustration. Given the near-exclusive association of populism with the far-right, the diagnosis of populism often extends to 'demonisation' (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis 2014: 120). Conversely, the left in France has always supported collegial forms of leadership and put the emphasis on collective endeavours. For communists and socialists, populism neglects class struggles because it focusses on an undefined 'people' (Blin 2017). Consequently, 'populism' and 'left' are arguably incompatible notions because a proper populist strategy can only appeal to far-right voters (Fassin 2017: 81).

It was therefore unexpected to hear Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a leader of the radical left, declare in a 2010 interview: 'I don't want to defend myself anymore against the accusation of populism. People are disgusted by the elites. Do they deserve anything better? They should all quit! I'm calling upon the energy of the many against the

arrogance of the privileged classes. Am I a populist? Yes I am!’ (Mélenchon 2010b). Thus, as early as 2010, Mélenchon could be described as a ‘populist,’ and he was indeed among the very few politicians in Europe to willingly embrace the characterisation (Marlière 2010).

Presidential candidate for the Left Front (Front de gauche / FDG) in 2012, Mélenchon ran again in 2017 as an independent candidate supported by a ‘citizen’s movement’ called France Insoumise (Unbowed France / FI). He has been called a ‘populist politician’ by many on the left and right, not least by some of Mélenchon’s close political allies (Clavel 2017; Stangler 2016). What is Mélenchon’s brand of populist ideas and policies? How original is his ‘populist stand’ compared to other left-wing forces which also refer to the notion of ‘left-wing populism’, such as Podemos in Spain? What is his strategy to conquer power?

### ***1.2 Populism in theory***

Populism is a frequently used yet problematic concept; the term is often ill-defined and randomly applied. The concept is problematic due to its unsystematic (notably pejorative) use in public discourse. The notion of ‘populism’ is regularly used to denote anti-incumbent/elite rhetoric or to describe politicians who pander to public opinion. Other authors define populism as a political strategy, and they consider populism to be a tool for a leader to seek and exercise power. Some argue that populism is a political strategy, a rhetoric designed to tap feelings of resentment and exploit them politically (Betz 1993).

There are normally four core values at the heart of populism (Stanley 2008: 102): a) the existence of two broad units of analysis: ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’; b) the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite; c) the positive valorisation of ‘the people’ and the denigration of ‘the elite’; d) The idea of popular sovereignty.

Scholars suggest that populism is more than a rhetoric, describing populism as an ideology, albeit a ‘thin’ or ‘thin-centred’ one (Mudde 2004). A thin-centred ideology is an ideology that does not provide a comprehensive programme about how a particular society should function. Parts of existing, more wide-ranging, ideologies

can and should be added to the populist core (Marlière 2014). Thus, populism lacks core values and it is ‘chameleonic’, since the ideological colour it adopts depends on the context and the values of the constituency to which it appeals (Taggart 2000). The lack of a programmatic centre of gravity actually makes it difficult to speak of a populist ideology (Canovan 1999). In the end, one should reject the idea that populism is an ideology – however ‘thin-centred it might be – and should conceive it as a ‘discursive frame’ (Aslanidis 2016).

One might note that mainstream parties have used populist methods and strategies themselves as a response to the challenge of populist actors, leading to the dawn of a populist *Zeitgeist* (Mudde 2004). Thus, Emmanuel Macron led a very personalised presidential campaign in 2017. He shunned traditional political parties and refused to take part in the centre-left primary election. What is more, he argued that traditional left-right politics is now obsolete. Although Macron did not explicitly pit the people vs. the elites, his rhetoric and positioning bore all the marks of populism (Marlière 2017a).

Most political scientists insist on the ‘plurality of populist hybrids’: ‘[...] [O]ne should try to strip definitions of any bias and thus effectively de-hypostasise populism’ (Katsambekis 2016: 391). By so doing, one comes to embrace Ernesto Laclau’s definition (Laclau 1977: 172-3), who construes the notion as a political and discursive distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the oligarchy’ (or in certain circumstances ‘the cast’ or ‘the establishment’).

Giovanni Sartori defines populism as a ‘cat-dog’ concept. The term is used to describe political actors that in fact cannot be placed in a single category (Sartori 1991: 243-57). Due to the lack of a clear definition, populism is used rather randomly. This leads to the erroneous inclusion of many actors and movements under the header of populism (Marlière 2013).

Therefore, if populism is not an ideology per se, but essentially a strategy which divides the political field into two antagonistic sides (the people vs. the oligarchy) while using a particular brand of rhetoric, then the case for FI’s populism can be made.

In the first instance, I shall identify the personal and organisational backdrop of FI, a movement which was officially born in February 2016. As the organisation was launched by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a self-appointed leader and candidate in the 2017 presidential election, the personality of FI's leader is key for understanding what particular type of populism the movement embodies.

Mélenchon's and FI's brand of populism will then be closely examined: what kind of 'populist hybrid' does it incarnate? Large constituencies of the French left have always avoided being associated with populism. Thus, how did FI manage to become the main party on the left in such a short period of time? Is it really a left-wing movement? What are the main ideas and aspects which make FI a 'populist movement'?

Finally, I will try to clarify the extent to which did FI's populism facilitate the movement's electoral breakthrough at the 2017 presidential election and, to a lesser extent, at the subsequent legislative election.

## **2. From Mitterrandism to populism**

### ***2.1 A mainstream professional politician***

Between 1972 and 1976, Jean-Luc Mélenchon was a member of Organisation Communiste Internationale (International Communist Organisation / OCI), one of the Trotskyist parties in France. OCI has always maintained close links with the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party / PS), Force Ouvrière (Workers' Strength / FO), a reformist union - and freemasonry. Mélenchon joined the PS in 1976. He moved up to the Senate (1986-2000 and 2004-10), and was appointed to cabinet in the government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin as Minister of Vocational Education (2000-02). From the early '90s onward, Mélenchon was one of the leaders of the Socialist Left (Gauche Socialiste), a militant left-wing faction within PS.

Having diagnosed that social democracy was a spent force as a progressive organisation (Mélenchon 2009), Mélenchon left the PS in 2008 and launched the Left Party (Parti de Gauche / PG). He was elected twice a member of the European

parliament (2009-17), and elected FI deputy (member of the National Assembly) in June 2017.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the candidate representing FDG in the 2012 presidential election. He won the fourth place and achieved 11.10% of the share of the national vote. Since founding PG and being seen as the de facto leader of FDG, Mélenchon was the staunchest opponent to François Hollande and the relations between the two men were always fraught and tense (Berdah 2017).

This being said, Jean-Luc Mélenchon is no standard left-winger. He has consistently argued that he does not belong to the far Left or the radical Left (AFP 2017). Mélenchon can be seen as a seasoned career politician who comes from mainstream politics although he was always on the left-wing of the PS (he was nonetheless a faithful supporter of President Mitterrand). This is a major difference with other leaders of left-wing leaders of the radical Left in Europe, who tend to be younger and come from the radical left (Pablo Iglesias in Spain, Alexis Tsipras in Greece, Catarina Martins in Portugal). Only Oskar Lafontaine in Germany has followed a similar political trajectory (from SPD to Die Linke).

### ***2.2 A break with the left's traditions***

This is how Jean-Luc Mélenchon describes himself: 'I am a republican, I believe in representative democracy and in elections. That is why I call for a citizen's revolution through the ballot box' (Mélenchon 2010a). He is inspired primarily by Jean Jaurès's democratic brand of socialism which relies heavily on French republican values and a 'humanist' brand of Marxism (Mélenchon 2016a: 45-91).

Contrary to most constituencies of the French left, Mélenchon has to-date always defended François Mitterrand's entire political legacy (Alemagna & Alliès 2012). While the late Mitterrand was still in power, Mélenchon, then a young senator, was a vocal and indefatigable supporter of the socialist president (Mélenchon 2016a: 91-140).

In February 2016, one year and three months before the presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon ‘proposed his candidacy’ to the nation on TF1, the main private channel in France. By making the decision to run, without consulting his FDG allies, Mélenchon followed a true ‘populist’ strategy. Firstly, this officialised the death of the moribund FDG. His decision to go it alone was motivated by his contempt for the PCF’s electoral strategy throughout Hollande’s presidency: although the communists opposed the socialist government’s policies in parliament and in the country, they were still willing to make local alliances with the PS in order to safeguard its electoral positions.

Mélenchon is on record as saying that this ambivalence eventually discredited FDG because Hollande had lost all credibility before his electorate and was in turn rejected by the majority of the population.<sup>ii</sup> Hence Mélenchon’s reluctance to use now the notion of ‘left’ as he considers that it has become an empty and confusing label for the public.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon was deeply hostile to the left primary election, which was in theory open to all components of the left (from FDG to PS, as well as Europe Ecologie Les Verts / EELV). In late 2016, Mélenchon believed that Hollande would run again and would win the primary contest. Had he competed and lost in this left primary, the FI leader did not want to put himself in the awkward position of having to support a candidate he had fiercely opposed the past five years (Mélenchon 2016b). Left-wing critics argued that the FI leader should have run that risk: if his ideas were so strong and popular on the left, he would have no doubt won the primary election (Filoche 2016).

Mélenchon’s ambition was to run a campaign ‘above political parties.’ In 2012, he received the support of several left-wing parties and was clearly identified as a leftist candidate (Marlière 2012). In 2017, he ostensibly turned his back on the history, culture and unity of the left (Marlière 2016). In a typical populist fashion, he sought the support of ‘ordinary people.’ ‘Unbowed France’ is not a party, but a ‘mass of citizens.’ Since then, he has aggressively pursued this tack. His goal is no longer a matter of rallying left-wing forces together (behind him) but rather of replacing them, and reshaping the partisan and political landscape.

France Insoumise eventually received the support of PG, Nouvelle Gauche Socialiste (New Socialist Left / NGS, a splinter group from the PS), PCF and Ensemble!, another component of FDG. None of those parties played a part in setting up Mélenchon's agenda. The PCF and Ensemble! were profoundly divided over the issue. Some argued that Mélenchon was the only credible candidate the radical left could support. Others were of the view that Mélenchon's candidacy was deeply divisive and dangerous because of its 'populist turn.'

Mélenchon speaks of a 'citizen insurrection,' an expression which refers to a revolution through the ballot box. In the 2012 presidential election, he targeted Marine Le Pen as his main opponent, and he took on the FN leader in the northern constituency of Hénin-Beaumont in the following legislative elections. He lost each time.

In 2012, the campaign's rallying cry was: 'Qu'ils s'en aillent tous!' (They must all go!) The 'they' referred to the 'corrupt elite.' (Mélenchon 2010: 13) This is the like-for-like translation of ¡Que se vayan todos!, a slogan borrowed from the Piquetero movement in Argentina in 2005 (Philip & Panizza 2011). In 2017, Mélenchon referred to 'dégagisme' (the act of clearing off), an expression coined during the revolutions in North Africa, notably in Tunisia (Andureau 2017). It is worth noting that he had started tapping in the rhetoric and imaginary of various populist movements across the world several years before the 2017 presidential election.

In the 2017 legislative elections, Mélenchon ran in Marseilles. He did not choose a constituency where the FN is strong but one where he had fared very well in the first round of the presidential election, the constituency of Patrick Mennucci, a PS deputy and former comrade in PS's left-wing.

It is worth stressing that as early as 2010, Mélenchon's discursive practice uses a populist pattern: a) its discourse is articulated around the nodal point of 'the people'; b) his representation of society primarily divides the socio-political field in two antagonistic camps ('the people' and 'the oligarchy') (Katsambekis 2016).

What is most remarkable is Mélenchon's change of vocabulary and register since the 2012 campaign. The FI leader wants to stop using the traditional language and discursive imaginary of the left. This is of course much in line with Podemos's attempt to 'spread the ideas of the left in a language geared toward the common sense of the social majority' (Rendueles & Sola 2015). In a true populist fashion, the idea is to rally 'people' from different political and ideological backgrounds against the 'oligarchy.' Thus, Mélenchon banned red flags from his rallies, and he stopped singing the Internationale at the end of each public meeting. Those traditional left-wing symbols were replaced by tricolour flags and La Marseillaise. This raised a few eyebrows on the left as the French national flag and the national anthem have been the emblem of the right and far right for a long time. Left-wing symbols which are deeply ingrained in the culture of the French left were deemed too divisive or simply meaningless to the mass of the people FI wished to connect with.

Another important 'signifier,' in the sense given by Ernesto Laclau, is the promotion of a 6<sup>th</sup> Republic in the place of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic.<sup>iii</sup> Mélenchon and his followers have been promoting a new Republic which would break with the pomp of the current institutions. The 5<sup>th</sup> Republic does indeed confer on the president tremendous power. The aim is first and foremost to address the democratic deficit at the heart of current institutions.<sup>iv</sup> In 2014, Mélenchon conceived and launched the Mouvement pour la 6<sup>e</sup> République (Movement For a 6<sup>th</sup> Republic / M6R), a loose structure to promote a 6<sup>th</sup> Republic. This was the first political initiative outside of PG, his party.

At that time, Mélenchon published *L'Ère du Peuple* (The Time of the People), an early attempt to spell out, if not to theorise, the new major cleavage between 'the people' and the oligarchy (Mélenchon 2014a). This essay is an ideological turning point. Mélenchon bids farewell to an interpretation of society and conflicts based on class. He stops referring to the notion of class struggles altogether. This is obviously a major break with Marxist theory and with left-wing politics. Instead of addressing a politically and culturally fragmented proletariat, he argues that progressive politics should seek to gather together 'the people' beyond their class, race and gender differences.

Mélenchon points out that unifying ‘the people’ is a three-stage process. Firstly, the people, which he calls *homo urbanus* as they essentially live in urban areas, is the multitude of depoliticised individuals who go about their daily routine. Secondly, there are the politically conscious individuals who start taking action and make political claims. Thirdly, a network constitutes itself through collective action. In this scheme, political parties do not get a mention. The future belongs to movements with a horizontal type of organisation. Long before the 2017 presidential election, Mélenchon’s populist narrative had been formed. It is here interesting to distinguish between Mélenchon’s attempt to politically unify the people (in the sense of an active and conscious political community) and Marine Le Pen’s homogenising of the French community along ethno-cultural lines (Geisser 2015).

Mélenchon does not give a convincing explanation on how the people as multitude can overcome its divisions and conflicts (class, gender, ethnic). The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Mélenchon has adopted a resolutely ‘interclassist’ approach to building a majoritarian bloc. Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain have attempted to follow a similar path earlier on with mixed results, but with steady electoral progress.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon also believes that the era of ‘the party’, as coordinator and aggregator of popular demands and expectations and as vanguard, has passed. The ‘movement’ has replaced the party. The organisation should be horizontal and not vertical (as in traditional socialist/communist parties). The question of horizontality refers to democracy: who draws up the programme? Who decides the main policy proposals? There are, of course, open procedures (notably on the internet) for FI supporters to make such proposals. It remains to be seen whether they are genuinely democratic and transparent.

Critics have argued that despite promoting the creation of a 6<sup>th</sup> Republic, Mélenchon has fully embraced the very personalised traditions of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic, notably by dispensing with political parties and by seeking to create a personal relationship with the French people. Emmanuel Macron and, to a lesser extent, Marine Le Pen have done the same. This bears all the characteristics of a populist stand.

In late February 2017, facing a threat on the left from the socialist candidate Benoît Hamon, Mélenchon's populist campaign intensified after the Bastille rally on 18<sup>th</sup> March (Lago 2017) onward. Jorge Lago, a Podemos cadre who has lived in France, approved of this tactical change. In his view, Mélenchon convinced many doubters by combining a statesman discourse, wise and strong, with a populist rhetoric that can appeal to the more disenfranchised (the young and the working class): 'In short, the idea of obliterating the language of the traditional left and radical left shibboleths, and of banishing red flags and certain references from campaign rallies, was executed really well in my view, albeit perhaps a little late in the day' (Lago 2017).

Coming eventually fourth in the presidential election with a significant 19.6% per cent score, Mélenchon called on voters to elect an FI majority in the legislative elections of June 2017. He has insisted that unlike the extreme/radical left, which allegedly has no intention of winning an election whatsoever, FI wants to accede to power as soon as possible. This is reminiscent of the claim made by Syriza in Greece (Katsanbekis 2016: 398) and Podemos leaders in Spain (Tremlett 2015).

In the end, FI fell largely short of an overall majority in the lower house with 17 deputies elected in total, but enough to form a parliamentary group (15 deputies are required). This was a better result than what the polls forecast after the first round. In the second round, all opposition parties (including Les Républicains) gained from a relative demobilisation of the Macron electorate. The PCF won in 11 constituencies and the FN in 8. The PCF also formed its own parliamentary group, separate from FI, thanks to the addition of five overseas deputies. Since the 2017 elections, the relationship between FI's and PCF's leaders has been very tense. The two parliamentary groups lead separate lives and activists on both sides rarely mingle. Further evidence of the tension between the two parties: for the first time over the past twelve years, Mélenchon did not attend the Fête de l'Humanité in September 2017. This is a political and festive gathering organised annually by *L'Humanité* newspaper which is close to the PCF.

As soon as the parliamentary session started, FI deputies positioned themselves on the left, claiming to be the main, if not the only, opposition to Macron and his government. For FI voters and for the public at large, there is no doubt that FI is a

left-wing movement. Like the PCF, FI concentrated on defending the Labour Code<sup>v</sup> under threat.

### **3. Which populism?**

Where does Mélenchon's populism come from? Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau have undoubtedly influenced him. Mélenchon met Laclau and Mouffe in Argentina in 2013. The three of them spoke at a conference on populism (Proust 2017). Since Laclau's death in October 2012 (Mélenchon 2015a), Mélenchon has maintained close ties with Mouffe, who can be spotted alongside him at most important rallies or demonstrations. Both have debated further since their first encounter in Argentina. The FI leader has also established contacts with Podemos's leaders Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón. He was also close to Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. In the years preceding his ascent to power, Alexis Tsipras was also one of Mélenchon's political friends. The FI leader welcomed him in Paris in June 2014, months before the Syriza leader became Prime Minister. Relations between the two men started to cool down in the Summer 2015 once Greece signed a third memorandum with the European Union. Mélenchon was publicly critical of Tsipras, who was presented as a man 'caving in' under pressure. This prompted Mélenchon to start reflecting on a 'Plan B'. Should he win power in France in the future, he has pledged to ask for a radical revision of the European treaties. If this is not conceded to France, Mélenchon said that France under his leadership would exit the Eurozone, if not the EU altogether (Besse Desmoulières 2017).

#### ***3.1 Personal and ideological changes***

Chantal Mouffe believes that Mélenchon is no 'communist revolutionary' and describes him as a 'radical reformist' against a 'mounting oligarchy.' She thinks that Mélenchon and FI embody the 'populist moment' that Spain experienced with Podemos a few years earlier: people reject 'post-democracy' and 'demand a real participation in political decisions.' FI aims to federate 'the people' (i.e. the working classes and the middle classes). The Belgian political theorist argues that Mélenchon has recognised the 'crucial role of emotions in constructing political identities.' The FI leader aims to 'bring together the people, to create a collective will around a project of citizen's revolution, in order to write a new constitution that opens up more debate and facilitates the expression of popular sovereignty' (Mouffe 2017).

Chantal Mouffe endorses Mélenchon's populism quite emphatically. She points to Mélenchon's efforts to make up 'chains of equivalence' between various groups of dominated or marginalised groups in society (whatever the social class they belong to). Mouffe makes a distinction between the Latin American context (societies with powerful, entrenched oligarchies) and Europe (where the left-right divide remains key). Given that our European societies are being 'Latin-Americanised,' she advocates an end to the domination of an oligarchic system, by way of a democratic reconstruction.

Mélenchon may have come across to some as 'too radical' or 'too subversive' in 2012. But in 2017, his objective was certainly to be perceived as 'wise' and 'statesmanlike.' The word 'humanist,' unqualified, was widely used. In a note published on his blog, Mélenchon claimed that 'Disobedience is a new humanism' (Mélenchon 2017). This new disobedience has its roots in the history of human emancipation from oppressive institutions (political powers and churches). Mélenchon insists on the question of freedom of thought. But true to his French republican credentials, this means for him emancipation from religions. At no point does he contemplate that individuals may emancipate themselves by worshiping a god or by following religious principles. This manifesto reads very much like traditional French republican ideology.

The Greek letter *Phi* ( $\phi$ ) has become the movement's logo, used everywhere including on ballot papers. The word Phi allows some wordplay: it sounds like FI, the France Insoumise acronym. Phi also evokes philosophy, harmony and love and is unburdened by a political past. It is a symbol of neither right nor left, a neutral marker.

Over the months, language, symbols and communication techniques did indeed change. For instance, as a familiar and 'inclusive' form of address, Mélenchon uses the expression *les gens* (people), which was popularised in Spain by Podemos leaders (*la gente*) (Grijelmo 2017). He has studied what worked in other countries, such as Barak Obama's and Bernie Sanders's use of social media in the United States, or the history of Podemos in Spain.

Mélenchon has taken stock of the traditional media's declining influence. He has worked on his image down to the smallest details (such as the clothes he wears on different occasions, less formal and closer to what ordinary citizens wear). He likes PR stunts, such as using holograms to address two rallies simultaneously. He works very closely with PR consultants. He is a professional politician, more than at any time in the past.

His economic program has not much changed qualitatively since 2012 (Mélenchon 2016c). It is not anti-capitalist or radically leftist. It essentially promotes a radical Keynesian approach (Dusseaulx 2016) with a far greater emphasis on ecological questions than in the past. He wants to abolish the reform of the Labour Code which was carried out by the socialist government, and he opposes the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the United States and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada.

Labour issues were indeed at the heart of the Mélenchon campaign, but not social classes as such. Mélenchon referred to the '99%', pitting an undefined and far too large population against the richest oligarchs. In truth, the '1%' receives support from lower segments who also benefit from the social and economic status quo. The problem is that the '99% vs 1%' opposition is not class-based. It is therefore simplistic and misleading. The more important, and widening, gap in Western societies is that between the upper middle class and everyone else. It would be more accurate, thus, to say that the real wealth distinction is between the '80%' and '20%'. Those '20%' have a clear incentive to keep the system as it is although they are not part of the infamous '1%'. The growing separation between the upper middle class and everyone else can be seen in access to education and lifestyle. The '20%' are more effective at passing on their status to their children, reducing overall social mobility and corroding prospects for more progressive approaches to policy (Reeves 2017).

### ***3.2 France insoumise and the 'old world'***

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's relationship with left-wing parties and the trade unions has been tense. The FI leader has no time for political parties which, as he puts it, belong

to the ‘old world’. Mélenchon sent an angry text message to Pierre Laurent, the PCF leader, after his party had called for a Macron vote in the second round of the presidential election: ‘it took you ten months to decide to support me, but only 10 minutes to decide to decide to vote for Macron. You, communists, are death and nothingness!’ (Dodet 2017).

The FI leader’s objective is to replace those ‘old’ parties: all stand accused of ganging up to block FI’s progress (Le Monde 2017). Hence his sticking to a strict policy of non-alliance with other forces on the left locally. For Mélenchon does not simply take note of their decline; he actively wants to marginalise them. In this respect, FI’s and Macron’s La République En Marche (LREM) anti-party stances are the two sides of the same coin.

This uncompromising stand is the source of extreme tensions on the left. It raises the issue of a coalition formation to oppose Emmanuel Macron’s policies in the National Assembly and outside of it. With about 12-14% of the share of the national vote, FI is far from being in a position to challenge on its own LREM. Yet Mélenchon refuses to consider any type of alliance with other political forces of the left. He pejoratively describes those negotiations between parties as *tambouille* (grub) (Tronche 2017).

Mélenchon is often accused of portraying himself and his parliamentary caucus as the natural parliamentary expression of the struggles that the trade-union movement will undertake.<sup>vi</sup> Critics argue that such strategy is the antithesis of unity, and they stress the need to unite all resistance forces at the risk of being defeated by Macron’s offensive against workers’ social protection.

FI comes across as the archetypal post-modern organisation: there is no fee-paying membership, so it is not possible to formally join in. Mélenchon claims that FI is now the biggest organisation in French politics on the grounds that over 500,000 internet users have registered on his campaign website by simply clicking on the page as a sign of support for his presidential candidacy.<sup>vii</sup>

Since the announcement of Mélenchon’s candidacy in the presidential election back in February 2016, there has been no leadership contest to elect the FI leader or to elect

the party representatives. One cannot join in FI as a party of organisation but as an individual. This is a major difference with FDG which regrouped several parties. In other words, other parties of the left cannot join in FI. Their members have to integrate individually. The party therefore loses its name, identity and political orientation. Thus, there would be no room within FI for a French equivalent of Anticapitalistas, a far-left faction in Podemos and one of the founding factions of the new Spanish party.

The organisation has also highly unusual rules: support groups cannot have more than 15 members, and should not coordinate their work between each other within larger geographic zones. There should be no local FI conventions or general assemblies. These rules, which have not always been discussed nor abided by locally, strengthen obviously the authority of the national leadership. FI has a horizontal and informal type of organisation on the local level and a tight vertical control by the leadership on the national level. The core leadership group is drawn from PG, which is composed of Mélenchon's first circle of allies in FI. Most were previously, like Mélenchon, members of the PS.

### ***3.3 A staunch patriotism***

Patriotism is, for left-wing populists, a very positive notion. Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón have embraced it. They have sought to reclaim patriotism for 'progressive ends'. This is a novelty in a country where Franco implemented a fascist regime in the name of the 'patria', its defence and values. Patriotism works here as an empty signifier in order to stir up a 'new national spirit.' For Iglesias, the notion of patriotism is a question that goes beyond left and right. This is about behaving in a 'decent' manner (Bassets 2015).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon's traditional brand of republicanism has for long been patriotic. Most of his speeches are peppered with vibrant references to *la patrie*. The FI leader likes to quote in particular this famous Jean Jaurès sentence: 'It may almost be said that, while a little dose of internationalism separates a man from his country, a large dose brings him back. A little patriotism separates from the Internationale; the higher patriotism brings back to it.' Based on strong revolutionary and republican principles,

patriotism is largely perceived on the French left as an acceptable point of reference, although not everyone would agree with it (Philippe 2012).

Mélenchon sees the unity of the Republic (France's 'one and indivisible' according to the first article of the Constitution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic) as untouchable, if not sacrosanct. For instance, he inveighs against the European Regional Languages Charter on the grounds that it grants 'specific rights' to people according to their linguistic practice. The then European Member of Parliament argued that this would be contrary to the principle of equality of all citizens before the French law (Mélenchon 2014b).

The FI leader is also a patriot of a more conservative type. The FI leader sings the praises of France as global power, spanning all the world's seas and oceans. He wants France to quit NATO, for instance, but, like Charles de Gaulle, in order to better defend its interests and prestige around the world. Mélenchon regards all French overseas territories not as colonised countries, but as fully part of France (Branchi & Philippe 2012).

FI does not fight against French imperialism because such a fight is unwarranted. Its approach to foreign policy is not based on an internationalist outlook but on a geostrategic one. Its view of the situation in the Middle East is based on an assessment of the relationship between global powers – hence the calls to cooperate with Russia even if this means negotiating terms with Bashar al-Assad. The same approach of rival global powers can be applied to Europe – so the target becomes Angela Merkel's Germany (Mélenchon 2015b), if not the 'German people' with borderline Germanophobic rhetoric.<sup>viii</sup>

Running for the presidency, Mélenchon enjoyed speaking as the country's (future) commander in chief of the French military, whose capacities he wants to strengthen. Although his 'ecosocialism' strongly opposes the use of civil nuclear power, Mélenchon supports keeping and even enhancing nuclear weapons (Rousset 2012). As a result, Mélenchon has widely been criticised on the left for his 'patriotic' and 'jacobin'<sup>ix</sup> stand. Although the FI leader does not embrace Marine Le Pen's ethnocentric conception of nationality, he is keen to stress that French nationality has

nothing to do with questions of culture, race or gender, but is related to the individuals' emancipation from those 'particularisms'. A French person, according to Mélenchon, is someone who adheres to the 'national narrative', made up of French history and its 'great' republican values, those which stem from the 1789 Revolution. He is, in this respect, a true believer in the republicanist ideology of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republic (Renan 1997). Critics argue that this approach ignores the multicultural and multi-ethnic fabric of the French nation today, and may even have chauvinistic if not neo-imperialistic overtones when Mélenchon claims that those republican values are not French but 'universal' (Martelli 2017).

#### **4. Was France Insoumise's populist strategy successful?**

##### ***4.1 Interpreting the electoral sequence***

On the night of the first round of the presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon lamented that he narrowly missed the qualification for the second round: about 600,000 separated him from Marine Le Pen who came second. In the subsequent legislative election, 17 deputies were elected (compared to LREM 309 deputies and 112 Républicains deputies). But how good are these electoral results overall?

It is undeniable that Mélenchon's performance in the first round of the presidential election is good compared to the results of the radical Left of the past 30 years. This being said, the top three candidates (Macron, centre, Le Pen, extreme right, and Fillon, right) received a total of over 60% of the share of the vote. The left was therefore largely defeated in this election.

One could also argue that Mélenchon's combative campaign (which attracted a significant number of young and working-class voters who normally abstain) managed to regroup traditional left-wing voters and socialist voters who had deserted the PS. Yet Mélenchon overtook in the polls Benoît Hamon (the socialist candidate) only in mid-March, after lagging behind for several weeks. This happened when it became clear that part of the PS leadership was defecting to support Macron. When the betrayal materialised, the more centrist sections of PS voters also switched to Macron. Their change of allegiance was dictated by two factors: firstly, they did not relate to Hamon, whom some found 'too left-wing.' Secondly, their vote for Macron

was tactical in the sense that they wanted to prevent the qualification of Fillon and Le Pen for the second round. When it was clear to everyone that Hamon would not recover from this act of betrayal from members of his own party, he started collapsing in the polls. PS voters with firmer left-wing sympathies turned to Mélenchon whose economic programme and ideas were largely compatible with Hamon's (Marlière 2017b). This was tactical voting rather than support for Mélenchon's persona. Benefiting from the support of disgruntled voters in the PS and good performances during the two television debates, Mélenchon came close to qualifying for the second round.

In short, Macron and Mélenchon were adept at seizing the opportunity that the crisis of the two main parties opened up for them: for the PS, Hollande's late decision not to run, and for the *Républicains*, the corruption allegations against Fillon. The collapse of the two government parties had been long coming: the working-classes have long deserted the left, and independent workers and artisans have turned their back on the right. Macron's victory could be interpreted as the emergence of a new dominant bloc, a 'bourgeois bloc' which gathers together the middle classes of the centre left and of the centre right (Amable & Palombarini 2017). It is too early to say whether this new bloc could indeed become the hegemonic bloc, but Macron's deep slump in the opinion polls, as well as the rising opposition to his labour law reforms, augur rather badly in this respect.

#### ***4.2 Populism and the left***

Commentators concur that Mélenchon's dynamic campaign galvanised large constituencies of the electorate which had stopped supporting the left (the young and the popular classes). Well-organised and active on the social media, FI was built around Mélenchon's charismatic presence and oratory skills, and it really made a difference. As the FI leader put it in the conclusion of one of the televised debates: 'I want people to find the taste for happiness again.' This may sound to some a grandiloquent statement and an unrealistic target. However, this positive discourse mobilised the left altogether. It gave people a new hope after so many defeats over the past decades (Benbara 2017).

The ‘hidden transcript’ in this case (Stavrakakis et al. 2016: 58) was the popular anger at what was largely regarded as the ‘betrayal’ of socialist principles by François Hollande as well as his broken promises. FI carried out a clever ‘war of movement’ in the Gramscian sense of the term.<sup>x</sup>

As a result, FI made important electoral gains in all social categories and in all age groups with the exception of the retired and elderly people. Mélenchon received 30% of the 18-24 years old, but only 15% of the 60-69 years old and 9% of the 70+ years old (Teinturier 2017).

FI supporters acknowledge that the difficulty of the task ahead was to federate voters across social groups and generations. Each of them has demands and expectations of a particular type. Some have suggested that the ‘national community’ or *la patrie* (motherland) could prove handy ‘empty signifiers’ which name collectively, unify and represent the chain of equivalence among popular demands that are left unsatisfied by the government (Kioupkiolis 2016: 102). Mélenchon toyed with those notions during his presidential campaign. The narrative could be as follows: France is a national community based on the principle of solidarity; motherland protects the poor through the actions of the State. The aim is to produce an alternative type of patriotism, one that is progressive and opposes the xenophobic narrative of the far right (Benbara 2017). FI, like Podemos in Spain, exemplifies a creative version of the ‘politics of the common,’ that opens up to ‘ordinary people,’ resonates with ‘the common sense of social majorities beyond the left-right divide’ (Kioupkiolis 2016: 100).

## **5. Conclusion**

Mélenchon’s populist strategy in launching France Insoumise is blatant. This is an attempt to organise the masses along the lines of an agonistic cleavage between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite.’ What is quite remarkable in this unique left-wing type of populism in France is that that it was not motivated by external factors, such as social movements, but was manufactured by one person in order to run a presidential campaign. This is somewhat different from the situations in Spain. Podemos was formed in the aftermath of decisive social movements. In France, the correlation with

social movements cannot be made easily except for the strong discredit of Hollande's presidency amongst left-wing voters. This certainly made Mélenchon an attractive electoral proposition for both radical and moderate left-wing voters.

Can left-wing populism work in France? Can a movement launched by one man to support an electoral campaign become a major progressive force? Contrary to Podemos which originated from various social movements, France Insoumise was engineered by one man for a specific political purpose.

The FI leader wants to federate the people, beyond the constituencies of the traditional left. He has ceased to refer to and to use the notion of the left altogether. One may ask what 'people' is there to federate in the end. Electoral polls show that FI's electorate match the traditional pattern of left-wing voters: urban, youngish, public sector workers, educated, lower-middle class. Mélenchon did not attract a significant number of voters from the right or the far right. He appealed to the young and the working-class voters who normally do not vote (Dubre 2017). The irony is that, despite dismissing the notions of left and class, the sociology of Mélenchon's electorate is clearly left-wing and their vote is a class vote against the right and extreme right. In other words, the FI's electorate was attracted in the first place by Mélenchon's left-wing social democratic programme.

One may wonder whether populism is the best strategy to broaden the left's electorate. Sociologist Éric Fassin thinks that left-wing and right-wing populisms do not tap into the same culture and do not express the same feelings. On the left, the anger is directed at free market economics. On the far right, the hatred of foreigners and immigrants is the main motivation. The sociologist argues that both feelings and mindsets are incompatible: the former has a positive mindset whereas the latter is based on resentment. Therefore, setting aside the left-right cleavage is dangerous as it may have a confusing and depoliticising effect on voters who are less politicised. Fassin also points to the nature of Donald Trump's electorate in 2016: the majority came from the middle/upper classes.

In short, the common hatred of an elusive '1%' and even the profound dislike of neoliberal policies does suffice to fill the gap between left-wing and right-wing

populism. There is indeed evidence that an insignificant fraction of Mélenchon's electorate (less than 4%) voted for le Pen in the second round of the presidential election. Fassin concludes by saying that it would be more beneficial from an electoral and political point of view to appeal to left-wing voters who abstain rather than try to lure right-wing voters who do not share the social justice agenda of the left (Fassin 2017).

What defines FI's populism is the role and the centrality of the leader. At the end of FI's summer conference in August 2017, Mélenchon declared that the 'question of the leadership, programme and strategy was settled' (Mestre 2017). In other words, following his self-appointment as leader of FI, there will not be any debate or vote on the leadership. Laclau argues that the 'symbolic unification of the group around an individuality – be it symbolic or even notional - is [...] inherent to the formation of a "people"' (Laclau 2005: 100). Mélenchon identifies with the people, has a fiery character and is seen as a charismatic orator and performer. Those qualities are those normally associated with a populist leader. Mélenchon's model of leadership is closer to Chávez's than Iglesias's. In Spain, Iglesias has never been a lonely leader. Podemos's remains fairly collegial: Íñigo Errejón, Carlos Monedero, Carolina Bescansa, Luis Alegre or Pablo Echenique somewhat play a rather prominent role in Podemos's leadership (Kioupkiolis 2016: 113). In Greece and Germany, Alexis Tsipras and Oscar Lafontaine never played the role of the 'strong' and 'charismatic' leader to such extent. In France, no major figure has to date appeared on the front stage. Mélenchon incarnates FI for the public and he is, for the time being, its undisputed leader.

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<sup>i</sup> *Il n'est pas de sauveurs suprêmes  
Ni Dieu, ni César, ni Tribun,  
Producteurs, sauvons-nous nous-mêmes  
Décrétons le salut commun.*

<sup>ii</sup> Ironically, the PG – Mélenchon's party – made similar alliances with the socialists in the 2015 regional elections. Such tactical agreements enabled the PG to win several seats.

<sup>iii</sup> The constitution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic were adopted by referendum in 1958. The new text was voted shortly after Charles de Gaulle's return to power. It strengthens the power of the executive, notably the president. <http://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/conseil-constitutionnel/francais/la-constitution/la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958/texte-integral-de-la-constitution-du-4-octobre-1958-en-vigueur.5074.html>

<sup>iv</sup> The current institutions are often labelled 'republican monarchy' by its critics on the left.

<sup>v</sup> The Labour Code incorporates all legislation regarding work relations between employers and employees. Following a controversial law passed by the last socialist government, Emmanuel Macron's new comprehensive reforms of the legislation makes it easier to hire and fire, and reduce the power of the trade unions while negotiating with employers.

<sup>vi</sup> FI organised a demonstration against the Labour Code reform on 23 September 2017, just a week after a similar event had been organised by the trade unions. Mélenchon was singled out and criticised for mingling with unions' traditional business and trying to highjack for his own political gains a collective struggle and endeavour.

<sup>vii</sup> When in February 2016 Mélenchon declared his candidacy at the presidential election on television, he invited the people who wished to support his campaign to click on a page on his campaign site.

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Since then, Mélenchon argues that those online supporters are de facto fully-fledged members. <https://lafranceinsoumise.fr/>

<sup>viii</sup> In his *Hareng de Bismarck* essay (whose subtitle is ‘le poison allemand’ – German poison), Mélenchon writes: ‘Arrogant as never before, Germany uses brutality, blackmail and punishment for those who do not obey immediately the new order which it has managed to impose.’ (p. 7)

<sup>ix</sup> In France, the Jacobin Society was the most influential political club during the French revolution. Jacobinism, today, in the French context, generally indicates a supporter of a centralised republican state and strong central government powers-and/or supporters of extensive government intervention to transform society.

<sup>x</sup> A war of movement is, for Gramsci, the phase of open conflict between classes, where the outcome is decided by direct clashes between revolutionaries and the State. A war of position, on the other hand, is the slow, hidden conflict, where forces seek to gain influence and power.