

Daniel Bensaïd

## **The April 22nd French presidential election First impressions off-the-cuff**

*This text is an introduction to an interview published in Viento Sur. It presents elements from an off-the-cuff synthesis of the French presidential election. This synthesis will require editing later, after taking a step back. A detailed analysis of the presidential results confirms the "social" character of the Besancenot vote. One should keep in mind that this campaign's success was not caused by large spendings: it was a thrifty campaign, three times less costly than Lutte Ouvrière's [French Worker's Struggle party] campaign and six times less costly than that of the Parti Communiste [French Communist Party].*

The day after the first round of the presidential election, the morning press saluted the return to a classical polarisation between right and left, after the traumatising episode of the Chirac/Le Pen duel in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round in 2002. However this judgment needs to be nuanced. Certainly Le Pen lost about a million electors (more than 6 per cent of the vote) and Sarkozy, with 30 per cent, attained a historic first round result for the government Right. But this success is to a large degree a result of his campaign of seduction aimed at the electorate of the National Front, of his use of the theme of immigration and French identity, in short of a 'Le Penisation' of his discourse.

On her side, Segolene Royal did not conduct a classical left campaign, but a catch-all campaign, flirting on one side with nationalism and moral and family order, with a few sym-

bolic gestures of social compassion on her left. So Segolene's Left is a Left that has been largely "Blairised", with few electoral reserves on her left (the main one being the million and a half electors of Olivier Besancenot).

On the other hand, with more than 18 per cent, Bayrou's centre has established itself in a position of arbiter. Even in the case of a victory of Segolene Royal, it would be difficult for her to envisage forming a parliamentary and governmental majority without some kind of agreement with Bayrou. In a certain sense it is the cycle of the Union of the Left and of the 'Plural Left' (1972-2002) which is coming to an end, the perspective now being that of a centre-left coalition between social democrats and democrats who are social, in other words, a sort of French-style Prodisism. Having said that, looking at the result of the first round, the election of Sarkozy on May 6 remains the most likely hypothesis, even if the game is not yet over.

The radical Left, or left of the left, had won in 2002 around 13.5 per cent of the vote (Arlette Laguiller 5.7 per cent, Olivier Besancenot 4.3 per cent, the Communist Party 3.5 per cent), and the Greens 5.5 per cent. This left of the left experienced an important drop in its support, since it totaled this time a little less than 9 per cent (4.1 per cent for Besancenot, 1.9 per cent for Marie-Georges Buffet, 1.4 per cent for Arlette Laguiller, and 1.3 per cent for Jose Bove). The Greens only got 1.5 per cent. So the drop is due to a collapse of the electorates of the CP, LO, and the Greens.

Everyone recognizes that only Olivier Besancenot maintained his result in percentage terms and improved it in terms of the number of votes (with more than a million and a half) compared to 2002. He certainly lost a good third of his electors of five years ago, who had voted for him

for the novelty of it, and bitterly regretted it when they saw Le Pen in the second round. On the other hand he solidly established his vote in the working-class regions and milieux, and according to the first indications, he got results among new young electors which were markedly higher than his national average.

Why was there this drop in the vote for the left of the left? The first reason is certainly the traumatism of 2002. The fear, built up by the media and by the leadership of the Socialist Party, of seeing a second round between Sarkozy and Le Pen weighed heavily in the last two weeks of the campaign. This appeal to vote out of fear from the first round led to confiscating a vote based on choice and conviction, which is supposed to be expressed in the first round, to the advantage of a vote of elimination, a vote against, independently of the programme and the project of the Socialist candidate or of Francois Bayrou. This mechanism functioned all the more in that the electoral mobilisation was exceptional, around 85 per cent, and we can assume that a good number of these intermittent electors voted for the lesser evil.

A second reason for this drop is the change that has taken place since the victory of the No in the referendum of May 29, 2005 on the European Constitutional Treaty. This No won by 55 per cent. But this majority was split between a right No and a left No. Even if it is probable that left No was dominant, the respective shares of the two electorates remain uncertain. The illusion of some people, in the left of the left (in particular in the entourage of Jose Bove) consisted of conceiving of the presidential and legislative elections as simply a prolongation of the referendum, and of overestimating as a result the potential of the radical Left.

Electing a president of the Republic and creating a government majority around a project

for five years is something else entirely than replying by Yes or No in a referendum. Moreover the “No-ists” of the Socialist Party (Fabius, Montebourg, Melenchon) did not waste much time in letting themselves be synthesized, under the leadership of Segolene Royal and behind the majority of the party that had been favorable to the treaty.

As a result, the question of Europe (which will come back onto the agenda from the end of this year) was largely absent from the campaign, as if what had happened was just a squabble which could quickly be forgotten. The Right, which had suffered a resounding defeat in the referendum, had no interest in talking about it. The Socialist Party, which had patched up its divisions, and which probably does not know how it is going to handle the issue of Europe in the coming period, had no interest in talking about it either. So the question was sidelined. Lastly, the division of the candidacies on the left of the left certainly had an influence on part of the electorate which was disconcerted by such a multiplication of candidates.

But from a strictly electoral point of view, this is certainly not, contrary to what Bove is beginning to say, the main reason. A unitary candidacy on a clear political basis would certainly have had a dynamic that would have been attractive for those who were hesitating, but experience proves that unity is not a simple question of addition, and that a part of the respective electorates of the CP, LO, and the Ligue would not have identified with a unitary

candidacy. So we can seriously doubt that in the difficult conditions of this campaign such a candidacy would have had the cumulative result of 8.5 per cent.

Why is Olivier the candidate who best resisted the siren calls of “vote usefully”? Over and above the dynamism of his campaign, his personal talent, his very positive image in working class milieux and among youth, the answer is to be sought in the fundamental orientation of his campaign. He was the one who most clearly kept his eye on the issues, who developed a serious and well argued programme, who most clearly asserted his independence in relation to the Socialist Party, including in the hypothesis of the victory of Segolene Royal and of a left government. He thus gained sympathy which goes well beyond his million and a half electors, as was witnessed, on his blog and in direct conversations, by the number of messages from people excusing themselves in a rather shamefaced way for renouncing voting out of conviction in order to “vote usefully”, out of fear of a new April 21<sup>st</sup> (2002).

This result of the campaign, which cannot be counted in terms of votes, is obviously very important, because it sows the seeds of resistance and struggles in the future, whatever the result on May 6<sup>th</sup>. Thus, we should take note that Olivier’s result is very homogenous in the different departments, generally between 4 per cent and 5.5 per cent, with peaks in the departments that have a strong working-class and communist tradition (the North, the Pas-de-

Calais, Limousin, Meurthe-and-Moselle), including in Seine-Saint-Denis, where Marie Georges Buffet is an MP. So it is the much lower vote in the bourgeoisified centres of the big cities (and in particular Paris) and in the overseas departments and territories (although Olivier came in fourth in Martinique), which explains that his average came down to a little over 4%.

What now? What follows will obviously be different depending on whether Sarkozy or Segolene Royal wins on May 6<sup>th</sup>. But in both cases we will continue, as Olivier did in his meetings and then in his intervention on the evening of April 22<sup>nd</sup>, to call for an anti-capitalist alliance of the left of the left. If Sarkozy is elected, we will have need of a radical Left of resistance and struggle to the left of the Socialist Party. If it is Segolene Royal, we will also have need of a left opposition that is independent of her governmental coalition. The form and content of such an alliance remain to be discussed with our potential partners. Furthermore, it is obvious that these partners are likely to be different in the two hypotheses. For our part, we will be meeting them as soon as possible. We will draw, in the course of a meeting of our national leadership meeting on April 28<sup>th</sup>, a balance sheet of the election and of these meetings, in order to define our orientation in the coming weeks and to make proposals.

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