

BOOK REVIEW

Mélenchon's Optimistic Rambling Rallying Cry

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Now, the People! Revolution in the Twenty-First Century, by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Verso Books. 320 pp. £22

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold', wrote the Irish bard W. B. Yeats, himself not a very progressive chap, in 'The Second Coming'. It has become the go-to line encapsulating a decent deal of what went wrong with centre-left parties in European (neo)liberal democracies for the last quarter of a century at least. Their choice to deal with the economic malaise—declining profit rates, low investment, sluggish growth—without abstaining from slashing public services and furthering the enrichment of the ultra-rich has now turned into an existential threat. Some call it 'Pasokification': the withering away of the Greek social democrats (Pasok) during the debt crisis imposed on that country in the 2010s. Such erosion of the democratic compromise between the people and their representatives is what makes the overquoted verse a suitable herald of the Trumpian franchise of the 'Western far right'. Its British incarnation, hysterically wrapped in flags, is banging at the door of the country's seriously endangered two-party system. It has also given rise to what moderates of right, centre and left hues took to call 'populism', a term that, in Europe, has always had a patronising and derogatory stigma: pro-Palestine or woke also come to mind.

Not so in North and South America, as names such as Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump himself, Hugo Chavez and Juan Peron can attest. And in Europe itself, the Spanish Podemos and the Italian Five Star Movement have slowly but steadily begun to turn the tide. But if there is a country in Europe where the use of 'the people' and 'revolution' can appear in the same title, it is republican France. Now, a book that is openly advocating a democratic revolution has been smuggled into the kingdom that feared that revolution the most. 'No opportunity is missed to paint a repulsive caricature of the people', fumes

Jean-Luc Mélenchon in his *Now, the People! Revolution in the Twenty-First Century*. So far, he has proved to be the most successful leader of the really existing left. In France, the not entirely uncontroversial *gilets jaunes*, to whom he devotes a few pages of this hi-vis tract, were looked down upon by the often-affluent liberals. 'Jojo, le gilet jaune' became a sarcastic trope, even used by the obdurate Emmanuel Macron. The traumatic upset of Western social peace—or rather, truce—triggered by the subprime crisis of 2008 and unravelling ever since, resulted in similar sneers in Britain—see Chavs, *Little Britain*, Corbyn or Brexit—or in the demonisation of the Five Star Movement in Italy. But in France, the yellow vests were the new *sans-culottes*, equally feared and loathed by Hannah Arendt's civil society. Just ask the 'Pasokified' Parti Socialiste of François Hollande.

The (revolutionary) people is, of course, a conceptual fixture of French history. And since, in the last couple of decades, the term has become a Western political taboo before it became a totem, it is no surprise that the leader of the so-called far left, La France Insoumise (France unbowed, in revolt, Est. 2016), has built his movement—the party structure being dismissed as obsolete—around it. It is mostly urban-centred and comprised of the 'cognitariat'—young, overqualified, poorly paid 'intellectual' workers with no rights and no social security—and the grandchildren of 'immigrants' in the banlieues, who are still disenfranchised and proudly so. 'I'm not a "populist", but "with the people." I won't accept the vulgar connotation that the word "populist" takes on in the mouth of our opponents', assures Mélenchon. A full quote from Robespierre himself at the Club des Jacobins in 1792 serves to further buttress the statement. To top it off, the book is handsomely translated

by a contributing editor of the American journal *Jacobin*.

In the UK, politicians write self-apologetic, door-stopping memoirs after the event; in Italy—at least recently—they can barely read, while in France, they write too much. A formidable campaigner and organiser, lazily labelled ‘radical fire-brand’ or ‘antisemite’ by the *mainstream* media, Mr Mélenchon is a veteran, a former Trotskyist who finished third in France’s last three presidential elections and the undisputed leader of the left alliance labelled the New Popular Front. He grew up against and inside the system: once a senator and a socialist minister in one of François Mitterrand’s governments, he calls himself an intellectual—just to confirm the positive status the term still enjoys in the land that invented it—and has written over twenty books. This one is part rallying cry, part summa of the man’s political legacy, part extensive—if structurally and conceptually unsystematic—attempt to lay the foundation of a utopian socialism for the twenty-first century. More Saint-Simon and Jean Jaurès than Marx—the latter being, unsurprisingly, quoted only five times in almost 300 pages. Mélenchon proves that you can teach an old dog new tricks.

This is a heterodox, rambling text brimming with Gramscian optimism of the will. It dares to aim at ‘nationalising time’, at defending the right to non-metaphorical darkness (light pollution) and at preserving inalienable and endangered commons like air and water. Mélenchon tries, often successfully, to build ‘a new field of political semantics’, by jettisoning the productivist ethos of the old left and embracing humanism, environmentalism and direct democracy. He has the guts to call the king naked: polycritical capitalism is inherently suicidal, and the fetish of unattainable growth will make us extinct. French universalism and *laïcité* (too often an alibi for oppression of the Other) are done away with, making way for feminism, differences, anti-racism and

trans rights. He calls for a Sixth French Republic through a new constituent assembly, has a few—here intriguing, there naïve—musings on networks that studiously avoid Deleuze, Guattari or Foucault. Drawing some suggestions from chaos theory and science fiction—he is a lover of Asimov—Mélenchon’s is mostly indebted to Chantal Mouffe and the late Ernesto Laclau’s idea of a populist and sovereigntist left engaged in ‘agonistic’ democracy. This is sealed by the enthusiastic embrace of the *tricolore*, essential to the perennial quest for legitimacy of the left but anathema to internationalists—not that unreasonably, as the recent fascist undertones of the Union Jack show. But then again, in France, the flag is republican, in the UK, it is still essentially monarchist. Crucially, the emphasis on *la nation* does not rule out the realisation that the nation state won’t save us from the floods, droughts or forest fires engulfing the globe due to what is still being termed in self-exculpatory terms ‘climate change’—just like ‘globalisation’, something natural instead of man-made.

Maybe the strongest point of the book is the articulation of ‘creolisation’, a term coined by the Martinican poet Édouard Glissant about the cross-pollination of colonial languages and shaped by Mélenchon into the blending of different human groups who are deep down similar: a reality that the advocates of Fortress Europe should learn to embrace, and that the man himself, born and bred in French Algeria—a *pie noir* like Albert Camus, to use the derogatory French term—learned early enough to accept and appreciate. The French title is *Faites mieux!*, do better, a clarion call to his disciples. Now almost 75, he will have another last shot at the presidency—his fourth—to prevent the ascent of the Le Pen gang to the Elysée, which began in 2002 and could climax in 2027.

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