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Is Paris burning?

by Paul du Quenoy

Emmanuel Macron. Photo: David Ramos / Getty Images

"It would be very boring to admit that we all voted for Le Pen," an aged viscount replied over lunch at Paris's still predominantly aristocratic Jockey Club when I asked why no one was talking about the most divisive election in France's living memory. Yet for all his claims of unanimous support among France's nobility for the extreme right-wing Front National and its leader Marine Le Pen, on May 7 two-thirds of French voters swept into office Emmanuel Macron, a thirty-nine-year-old technocrat who had never before held elected office and of whom hardly anyone had heard until about a year ago.

The viscount's *de haut en bas* riposte belied a ferocious national debate about this year's *Présidentielle*, the ever more media-driven contest that now selects France's chief executive every five years (the Gaullist seven-year mandate was pruned down by referendum in 2000). Arriving in the wake of Brexit, Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency, the referendum to strengthen executive powers in Turkey, and similar national contests in Hungary, Poland, Austria, and the Netherlands, this year's election looked a lot like the latest battle between right-wing populism and cosmopolitan globalism. And *sacré bleu*! In so many ways it seemed downright *American*. The country was sharply divided, the rhetoric hysterical, the media circus inescapable. The body politic convulsed with seemingly unsolvable debates about national identity, immigration, and the nation's future place in the world. A troubled economy showed only weak chances of recovery and left the youth more alienated from the system than any other age group. A worried public suffered

paralytic and not wholly unjustified fears of terrorism. A deepening and ever more unbridgeable chasm widened between ordinary people and the elite. The long-dominant centrist political culture had all but disintegrated; its pathetic remaining leaders turned out to be feckless, discredited, and uncompetitive. Accusations of racism, anti-Semitism, and unacceptably illiberal thought dogged the Right's preferred candidate, who committed a number of embarrassing gaffes up until the last days of the campaign. The Left rallied behind a candidate who was the unabashed darling of the political, media, and even much of the business establishment—so much so that more doctrinaire Leftists favored an outspoken populist challenger who "told it like it is" and threatened to tear down the system. In yet other eerie parallels, the election even offered the spectacle of murky Russian interference, a late-hour internet hacking operation, and, earlier on, a sex scandal. Despite this radical Americanization of French politics, the *Présidentielle* still came off with distinctly Gallic pathologies in a land where defensively declaring "*Je ne suis pas un psychopathe!*" has become a common dating practice. Macron's detractors almost voyeuristically bathed in the circumstances of his odd marriage to a much older woman who had been his high-school teacher and had thought it a good idea to abandon her first husband and three children for him. His opponent Marine Le Pen is the sole heiress of a quasi-fascist political dynasty who came into her own by administratively expelling her father from its ranks when he became elderly and unruly.

Utterly unlike America last November, however, it was the candidate of what is at least nominally still "the Left" who won. Much of the world celebrated Macron's victory as a turning of an ugly international tide, a decisive defeat of what Tony Blair once called the "Forces of Conservatism and Darkness" (FOCD, the acronym presumably pronounced as one might expect). Surely the Republic—now number five in France's less than stable history of democratic government—had proved that it could endure even the strongest of challenges. Happy crowds celebrated at the Louvre, drunkenly singing *La Marseillaise*. The global mainstream media hailed the "wisdom" of the French people, often in juxtaposition to those "foolish" Americans and their obnoxiously contrarian election of Trump. France's reigning public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy sententiously wrote in the aftermath that "the democratic world needs Macron to succeed," as though a saintly Obama-esque deliverer had arrived fresh from the Goddess of Reason's bosom. Indeed, on the day after the election the popular centrist weekly *L'Express* published an illustration of the victorious president-elect—*Le Kid*—in a vaguely Napoleonic pose filtered through a patina that resembled an oil portrait of the last national ruler to assume power at such a young age (Napoleon became First Consul at thirty, and Emperor at thirty-five). Had the election happened later in the year, Macron might have reasonably expected a premature and undeserved Nobel Peace Prize of his very own.

Yet for all the triumphalism, a stark and undeniable fact remains—more one than one-third of French voters (and probably a larger percentage of Jockey Club members, at least of those who deigned to participate in vulgar democracy) *did* in fact cast their final ballots for Le Pen, a candidate who opposes the European Union, NATO, the euro, immigration, and pretty much everything else that defines the postwar Euro-Atlantic consensus. Moreover, in the first round of the presidential elections, which took place on April 23, Le Pen placed only slightly ahead of the

charismatic Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a man of the extreme Left who shared her opposition to liberal globalism, its institutions, and France's involvement in them. Adding the ballots carried by a handful of less popular extremist also-rans, the proportion of first-round French voters who rejected the prevailing "world order" accounted for solidly half of the electorate, roughly the same percentage that says it would favor a restoration of France's monarchy.

Simply put, these wrathful enemies of the present state of affairs will not just go away. Neither will their problems or concerns. If anything, the 2017 election indicates a *rising* tide of nativist populism in France rather than the comforting checkmate that so many would prefer to see as they adorn their Facebook feeds with self-congratulatory *Casablanca* memes. Le Pen lost, but the Front National has never been stronger. When Le Pen's father Jean-Marie ran for president in 2002, he edged out the uninspiring Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin in the first round only to lose to the incumbent president Jacques Chirac by a humiliating 82 to 18 percent. Just fifteen years later, his daughter has now managed nearly to *double* her party's percentage of the final vote (Macron won by 66 to 34 percent). Polls for the legislative elections forthcoming in June suggest that the Front National could for the first time in recent history win a substantial block of seats—possibly dozens—in France's National Assembly, up from the mere two that have heretofore made the party look like an asylum for marginal crazies. Indeed, Front National strategists did not even identify winning the presidency as an all-or-nothing game. For many, the greatest hope was to *lose* by no less than 40 percent of the final vote. In other words, they expected to fail—and even to fail decisively—but with enough support at the ballot box that their party could endure as a major force in national politics. Although they did not quite reach the 40-percent bar, it seems highly unlikely that they will shuffle off and sulk in their neglected farmlands, depressing post-industrial towns, and dark wood–paneled private clubs with no further voice and no hope for the future.

For all the enthusiasm vested in Macron, his most difficult challenges lie ahead. His political party, En Marche! (changed to La République En Marche! the day after the election) is just over a year old and is defined by little more than the force of the new president's glib personality and untested political skills. On election day it was an open question if he could even find enough warm bodies among his acolytes to campaign for all 577 National Assembly seats in the legislative elections. He has managed to place a candidate in every contest, but his party's electoral list, which respects the European Left's principle of gender parity, is largely drawn from outside the traditional political system, with more than half of candidates coming from careers in what is described as "civil society" (a handful are uninspiringly identified as "unemployed" or "looking for a job"). Macron's program and policy statements are a morass of platitudes and contradictions. He has declared himself pro-Europe, yet staunchly defends the idea of French national sovereignty. He favors open immigration but also wants to toughen border security. He is committed to the Left's traditional idealism but has publicly renounced both socialism as a concept and France's Socialist Party as an institution. He wants a "Europe that protects" without saying whom it is protecting or from what. He wishes to defend and expand France's generous welfare state, but has proposed large tax cuts for property owners. His boldest budget plan is an almost comically underwhelming pledge to reduce France's public spending from 56 percent of GDP to 52 percent. Even with a strong

parliamentary mandate, it seems hard to believe that Macron's youthful vigor and rhetorical flourishes will solve any of France's problems. If he fails—and there are many reasons to believe he will—his country may very well elect its first woman president in 2022.

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