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French elections: what does normal stand for?

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Nilufer Gole [1] , 11 May 2012

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The vote for Hollande is not so much a radical desire for change as a possibly illusory desire to go back to the pre-crisis period. The socialists have meanwhile opened up a new approach to the economy. But 'racism from above' has led the way in this historic fight over what is normal

François Hollande won the presidential elections with almost 52 percent of the votes. Since the François Mitterand years, he will be the first socialist president of the Republic. In his campaign he promised “change” to French voters. However I argue that rather than change, it is the tacit desire for going back to normal that determined the tone of the elections. The day after the elections, the French newspaper *Liberation* published on its cover page Hollande’s picture and the caption that reads “Normal!” with an exclamation mark. What does the normal stand for? Does it mean that it was expected that he won the elections as the polls had predicted? Or does it mean that Hollande represents ordinary people and French ways, against the ostentatious liberal figure of Sarkozy?

The vote for Hollande translated in the first place the desire to get rid of Sarkozy. His aggressive style as a president, personalization of power, volatility in his decisions made him unpopular. In contrast with the super presidency of Sarkozy that irritated many French citizens, Hollande presented himself as a “normal President” meaning serious, consensual (“rassembleur” was his trademark in French) and a reliable statesman in conformity with the Republican State traditions. Many explained his success in terms of his capacity to follow in the footsteps of the legendary heritage of François Mitterand who embodied state power almost like a monarch. In this respect, we can interpret the “normal” as going back to Republican State traditions represented by the left.

During the pre-election television debate, Sarkozy attacked Hollande and implied that the aspiration for “normalcy” stood for mediocrity. To belittle his rival he reminded us that Mitterand was not an ordinary politician and that given the present context of economic crisis France needed more than ever an exceptional president, like himself, to lead the country. The fact is he already had his chance in the 2007 elections, coming to power with the same promise of changing, modernizing and liberalizing the French economy and its institutions. But the expected economic reforms did not succeed in consolidating French leadership in Europe. France lagged behind Germany in terms of economic growth, productivity, competitiveness and unemployment rates. During the campaign debates, Germany was the regular reference point as the successful economic model. On the other

hand, the Socialist Party introduced the Keynesian model of economic growth as an alternative to the policies of austerity; proposing an economic programme that expands the state and public spending while creating employment and increasing the rate of income tax.

In denial?

In general, observers agree that little was said by anyone at all about the country's dire economic straits. French society does not seem to be prepared to acknowledge the gravity of the economic situation and wants to hold onto their rights and privileges as guaranteed by the social welfare state. Before the elections, the British weekly *The Economist*, spoke of France as "a country in denial" and sarcastically described the elections "as the most frivolous campaign" devoid of any serious engagement with the economic situation. So, we can interpret the vote for Hollande, not so much as a radical desire of change and implementation of reform, as a desire to go back to the pre-crisis period, hoping that this does not prove to be an illusion. The socialists, however, have opened up a new window for approaching the economy in an alternative way. They have weakened a dominant ideology that presented neo-liberal politics as an unquestionable article of faith, the only right way, as "normal".

The fact that the French are not fully facing up to the economic crisis does not mean that they are not anxious about their future. The rising popularity of the far right party illustrates very well the fertile ground for nationalist feelings and discourses of xenophobia. The economic crises facilitate the scapegoating politics targeting immigrants and Muslims, which singles them out as responsible for taking up jobs, abusing the welfare state, and invading French society with their religious visibility and backward cultural norms. With this anti-European, nationalist, and anti-immigrant Islamophobic politics, the female face of the far-right Party, Marine Le Pen achieved almost 20 percent of the votes and has become a key figure in the political arena. She has consolidated her leadership of her father's party, "Le Front National" but furthermore emerged as the potential leader of the right. Indeed, Marine Le Pen is the second winner of this campaign; she has succeeded in setting her political agenda and imposing it. Sarkozy, in order to attract the far right constituency, had no compunction in adopting her security discourse. But in doing so, he not only surrendered himself to the political agenda of the rival, but also gave legitimacy to radical right politics.

The normalization of far right politics and racisme d'en haut

The "normalization" of far right politics is the key to understanding the changes in the European political panorama and public life. For the last ten years, we have been witnessing a phenomenon not limited to France but shared throughout Europe, the proliferation of public figures and voices that signal the end of multiculturalism, criticize politically correct norms of public speech, and search incessantly for ways to rid themselves of taboos against racism.

A succession of public controversies around Islam - namely the headscarf of young students in the public schools, total veiling, the burkha in the streets, helal meat, street prayer - have preoccupied the public scene in most European countries. These debates end up by erasing the well established distinctions between right and left, and creating a consensus on the need to condemn and prohibit such religious and cultural practices. The values of secularism and feminism have been doggedly advanced as superior and distinctive values over and against those of Muslims living in Europe. The politics of tolerance and pluralism have been condemned not only by right wing politicians, but also by intellectuals from the left and secular backgrounds. Philosopher Jacques Ranciere has drawn attention to the changing forms of racism, not that racism supposed to be rooted among the underprivileged lower classes, but the one initiated and promoted from above, by state power boosted by the intellectuals. He named such racism "racisme d'en haut". More recently, the day before the Presidential elections, Alain Badiou published an article on "le racisme des intellectuels" in the newspaper *Le Monde* (5 may 2012), addressing his criticism to the intellectuals who reinvented the "Islamic threat" and defended the superiority of the western civilization - thereby contributing to the proliferation of anxious discourses on immigration, cultural racism and Islamophobia in France. He directly blames those intellectuals who facilitated this mental development aiding the ascension of fascism to power.

The rising popularity of these new faces of the right surfs over the dynamics of “normalizing” widely-shared anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic discourse. Secular-left and conservative-right join hands in making anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant politics appear quite “natural”. As many say, “we should not diabolize the Front National”, they are as legitimate as any political formation. One hears among the voters of Marine Le Pen that there is no shame in voting for a person who represents the feelings and anxieties of the people, and who is ‘one of us’. Besides the new faces of the populist right are not like the first generation of patriarchal anti-Semitic mouthpieces; they speak against homophobia, they declare themselves feminist and they defend secularism. And they are not marginal. The more they turn the political agenda against Islam, the more they become central players in the system.

A normal future

Economic recession, anti-Islamic discourses and nationalist feelings are reshaping the public sphere in Europe. In such a context, what does Hollande’s promise of being a normal president signify? There are several leitmotifs around ‘the normal’ that might be competing with each other. Going back to normal republican traditions of the left implies the defense of secularism, “la laicite”, the community of the nation and egalitarian values among its citizens. But there is another move to the “normal”; it is the normalization of far right ideas, the way anti-migrant, anti-islam discourses appear natural and consensual.

How will the socialist party defend Republicanism, the politics of “laicite”, and women’s rights without converging with the new popular right? Anti-Islamic politics of the far right and economic recession are the two most important threats to European democracies. Can socialism be an alternative to these destructive waves? A French socialist victory bears a historical importance way beyond its national borders, for Europe in general.

Will going back to normal imply developing alternatives to economic crises, acknowledging a multicultural France (defending “France metisse” as only the leftist communist candidate Jean-Luc Melanchon managed to do), expanding democratic pluralism and embracing the European ideal? This may be way too optimistic. But at least the victory of Hollande gives us hope that far right ideas and politics can be avoided as aberrations. And that requires a new awareness on the part of European intellectuals.

For our coverage of the French elections see....

Philippe Marlière blog **-** Marlière Across La Manche *[14]*

Patrice de Beer **-** France: towards a new right *[15] and François Hollande and France: the big deal* [16]

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