

LYRICAL ILLUSIONS OR A SOCIALISM OF GOVERNANCE: WHITHER FRENCH SOCIALISM?*

Mark Kesselman

The demise of French socialism in the current period occurred on June 13, 1982, barely a year after the Socialists' electoral triumph.¹ The government's *plan de rigueur* signalled the abandonment of its ambitious attempt to initiate a radical form of social democracy in France. Unlike Hegel's owl of Minerva, this time theory preceded practice. For years, French intellectuals had been proclaiming the end of socialism—when they were not equating socialism with the gulag. The extent to which rightist ideological hegemony and the near-absence of socialist theorising contributed to the government's conservative shift cannot be determined. But the febleness of leftist intellectual activity, as well as the lack of pressure from the left, including trade unions and social movements opposed to statism, militarism, chauvinism, and class inequality, was doubtless significant. More influential in the short run was the failure of the government's attempt to radicalise social democracy.

The government's initial approach was itself a compromise with the objective, announced in the *Projet Socialiste* adopted in 1980 by the Socialist Party (PS), of achieving a rupture with capitalism. France was unique among major capitalist democracies because its two major left parties, the French Communist Party (PCF) and PS, continued to proclaim that socialist transformation necessitated the abolition of capitalism. In 1981, however, the Socialist-Communist government (in which the PS was by far the dominant partner) judged that economic stagnation, unemployment, and the damage wrought by decades of conservative rule precluded seeking radical change at the outset. Instead, the governing coalition sought to liberalise French society as well as sponsor structural reforms and redistributive measures to foster the kind of social democratic class compromise prevalent in Northern Europe.² The most immediate goal was to revive the stagnant French economy. Borrowing Keynesian techniques from social democratic practice, the government sharply increased transfers on grounds of social equity, and in order to boost aggregate demand and stimulate investment, employment, and growth. However, rather than create a virtuous circle of growth, the first phase provoked a vicious circle familiar from similar socialist attempts in Chile

*I am deeply grateful for suggestions from Amrita Basu.

and Portugal in the 1970s: much of the increased purchasing power went for imported goods. The result was to increase France's international trade deficit, exacerbate inflation, weaken the franc, drain currency reserves—and bring France to the brink of economic chaos.

The *plan de rigueur* signified abandoning the attempt to achieve rapid growth through state intervention. But it also signified abandoning the goal of radical change. The new priorities were to control inflation, reduce budget and international trade deficits, and rationalise French capitalism. In the process, the government curtailed social welfare programmes, sanctioned massive layoffs, and curtailed proposed democratic reforms within industry, local government, and the state bureaucracy. The impact of Socialist rule was cruelly described by one faction of the PS: 'Far from demonstrating the left's capacity to direct social change in a desirable fashion, five years of left government. . . have obscured and devalued socialist prospects.'³ Public opinion polls that charted changing political attitudes between 1980–84 found that 'socialism' displayed the greatest decline in popularity.⁴

Socialist Party leaders describe the shift in 1982 very differently. They argue that harsh realities compelled the left to relinquish 'lyrical illusions' (in the words of PS First Secretary Lionel Jospin). Rather than pursue an impossible—and irresponsible—dream, the left should confront the most pressing problem: the need for economic modernisation in order to improve France's international economic competitiveness. The next section describes the bedrock change in French Socialist theory and practice from 'lyrical illusions' to a 'socialism of governance'. The new approach could be described as '(capitalist) economics in command': by some alchemy, socialist goals were transformed into the quest to perfect France's capitalist economy. The focus here is on the PS because of the party's central role in defining the ideological agenda of the left. The PS assumed this position during the 1970s, a product of its increasing political prominence, the decline of the PCF, and the rightward shift among intellectuals.

The Dialectics of Desocialisation

Especially when judged by the deflationary, neo-liberal policies pursued by other capitalist democracies in 1981, the French Socialist government's first-year balance sheet is extremely impressive. The government substantially increased social transfers, including family allowances, rent subsidies, and pensions; introduced a fifth week of paid vacations, a large increase in the minimum wage, retirement at age sixty, and a one hour reduction in the working week; and sponsored far-reaching reforms of the industrial relations system, local government, criminal justice, and electronic media. The most distinctive reform, going beyond social democracy as it had evolved since the 1950s, was a considerable enlargement of

the public industrial and banking sector: nine large industrial firms and most private banks were nationalised.

The first year's reforms changed many aspects of France's political economy. But rather than generating a demand by progressive social movements for further democratisation, the opposite result occurred; a variety of privileged social forces, supported by **rightist** political parties, mounted determined resistance (what the French term neo-corporatism). The reason was that the reforms marginally eroded the position of privileged groups, thus provoking their anger, yet failed to mobilise support among less advantaged groups—women, workers, immigrants—to offset rightist opposition.

The Socialist government was not only isolated from social movements but squarely opposed many of their goals and tactics. For example, it quickly antagonised the ecology movement by refusing to modify France's heavy emphasis on nuclear power. When immigrant workers launched strikes to **protest** against management's highly repressive tactics in the automobile **industry**, Prime Minister Mauroy direly warned of the damage to the French economy. In 1985, I asked one of Mitterrand's more leftist associates whether he thought that a cause of the government's difficulties was the low degree of left mobilisation. He replied, 'As Minister of the Interior, I could hardly approve of that kind of activity.' By its statist approach, the Socialist government reinforced a traditional socialist image that antagonised its own social base and led many intellectuals to reject socialism.

Linked to its statism, the Socialist government emphasised an economic approach to socialism which emphasised productivist values rather than fostering democratic and solidaristic goals. Yet the government's failure in the economic sphere was dramatic: it derived from the fact that France's state-stimulated expansion was not followed by a widely-predicted international economic **revival** in 1981–82. Rather than the French economy securing an early lead in supplying expanding international demand, French exports fell during the worst worldwide recession since the 1930s (at the same time that French imports were soaring). When currency reserves were nearly depleted in early 1982, the Socialist government was forced to choose between imposing severe protectionism and a steep devaluation—which would have necessitated withdrawing from the **European Monetary System** and would have provoked international capitalist opposition—or adopting a deflationary course.

The plan *de rigueur* adopted in 1982 departed from traditional austerity by including provisions for vocational training programmes for redundant workers, early retirement for workers in depressed industries, and social sector employment programmes (what the government termed the 'social treatment of unemployment'). The lowest paid workers were excluded from the wage-price freeze. Plans went forward to implement

reforms passed in the first year. But in other respects, the **1982** measures and others sponsored in later years were part of the stop-go deflationary arsenal familiar elsewhere: measures to lower business taxes, shift income from labour to capital, stabilise or reduce public sector employment, and lower income taxes for those in top brackets. The new turn spelled an end to grandiose visions of *socialisme à la française*. Henceforth, the government's first priority was to rationalise French capitalism. The Socialists' new discourse suggests the distance travelled since the *Projet Socialiste* advocated a rupture with capitalism.

The Socialist government has sought to sponsor a fundamental restructuring of the French left's ideology. Gone are attacks, characteristic of PS publications, congresses, and public statements through **1981**, on the exploitation, profiteering, and irrationality inherent in capitalism. Instead, the government argues that the major problem facing France is the need to modernise the productive apparatus—which is described as backward and inefficient, but never as capitalist. In the past, the government argues, the French relied unduly on the state, whereas they need to engage in greater competition, risk-taking, and private entrepreneurial activities.

As early as September **1982**, in a speech that the *Elysée* described in advance as having 'national significance', François Mitterrand stated that *socialisme à la française* was not his 'bible'. In a TV interview the following year, he defended the legitimacy of gaining a large personal fortune, if it was not based on inheritance or financial speculation, and he praised the profit principle. He called for national unity to replace class struggle: 'Conditions have emerged permitting a class armistice and class peace. . . Thus, class struggle is not my goal; I hope that it ends.'⁵ Jean Daniel, editor of the *Nouvel Observateur*, suggested that, as a result of Mitterrand's remarks, 'the entire [Socialist] philosophy of governance must be revised. . .'⁶

Mitterrand argued that the burden for modernising the French economy falls on the left because, when in power, the right failed 'to understand or persuade others that henceforth French grandeur must consist of our successfully competing on foreign economic and commercial battlefields. [The right] did not prepare France for this competition'.⁷

The Socialists always prided themselves on being in the vanguard of progress. But modernisation assumed even greater importance in **1984** when newly appointed Prime Minister Laurent Fabius made it one of two axes of the government's overall policy. '[We must] modernise to wage the battle for full employment. . . Any genuine improvement in employment depends on growth; durable growth requires a solid productive apparatus, able to export and hold its own in domestic markets; and any solid productive apparatus must be modern. . .'⁸

Fabius asserted that modernisation will fail if it is defined as exclusively technological and economic. 'Economic modernisation cannot succeed

without modernising social relations.' Yet he defined social modernisation in an economic and conservative fashion as the process by which all social forces reflect together 'on how social progress can contribute to competitiveness and **growth**'.⁹

Socialist Austerity

What is distinctively socialist about an approach that reduced health and unemployment insurance benefits, reduced purchasing power in **1983-84**, and failed to reduce France's substantial income inequalities? The simplest, if least satisfactory, answer was provided by Lionel Jospin when he was asked this question in a TV interview: 'Because it is sponsored by socialists.'¹⁰

Former Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy defended the government's new stance since **1982** as necessary to digest the substantial reforms of the first year: 'Governments which have sponsored as deep a transformation as we have cannot maintain a constant pace of **change**. Periods of social peace are indispensable. . . The revolution is never permanent. If social change is to be durable, it must be intermittent.'¹¹

For Mauroy, the approach adopted in **1982** represents a pause in a continuous process of social change. Others, however, assert that the shift is both permanent and salutary. Jean Daniel argues that the Socialists' ideology **became** ossified as a result of electoral **exigencies**. 'Ideological renewal within the left was suppressed by the necessity of allying [with the PCF]; otherwise, the left might not have reached power.' By having to govern for a long period, the Socialists 'will be forced to reach new conclusions; in fact, they already **have**'.¹²

Many Socialist leaders echo Daniel. They suggest that, in the past, after sponsoring a spate of reforms, the French left was quickly forced from power. Thanks to their **1981** electoral victory and the political institutions of the Fifth Republic, the Socialists gained control of the commanding heights of the state for at least five years. As a result, they had both the **opportunity** and necessity to adopt a longer term perspective and to assume responsibility for the conduct of the entire nation rather than merely defend the less advantaged. Mauroy suggests that the left must go beyond sponsoring reforms in order to 'demonstrate that it has the capacity to administer an industrial **society**'.¹³ Illustrative of the Socialists' 'new look' is that Mauroy uses the term '**industrial society**' and thereby wholly avoids the very real and difficult issue for socialists of how simultaneously to administer a capitalist society and transform it in a socialist direction.

To govern for a durable period (*gérer la durée* as Mitterrand often described it) has meant a sharp change in orientation. **Gérard** Delfau, a Socialist Party leader, suggests that the Socialists must choose whether 'to seek immediate gains for workers or to assure their longer-run interests by

representing the entire **nation**'.¹⁴ Mitterrand also illustrated the change when asked in an interview why he defended socialism so little: he replied that he was no longer the head of the Socialist party but of the entire French nation, with its diverse ideological currents.¹⁵

Lionel Jospin described the Socialists' transformation best when he suggested that the process consisted of a shift from a 'socialism of opposition' to a 'socialism of governance'. In Jean Daniel's words, '... The resistance of stubborn reality, the practice of power, and the confrontation with constraints have provoked a dramatic conversion from the fantasy of revolution to a responsible social democracy. . .'¹⁶

The economic crisis has played a primordial role in the transformation of French Socialism. Socialist leaders argue that they underestimated the gravity of the crisis and failed to grasp the fragility of France's economy. They now argue that economic stagnation in France, intense international economic competition, and rapid technological change have reduced the possibility of engaging in any reforms that are not designed to improve France's economic position. As Jospin describes it, the Socialists must relinquish their 'lyrical illusions' and 'intellectual arrogance', for 'Reality has brutally reminded us that the laws of economics exist. . . We must accept that modifying economic realities is a slow process, that political will [the French term is 'voluntarism'], while necessary, has its limits; and that our policy choices may produce negative **consequences**.'¹⁷ Jospin reaffirms the laws of capitalist economics, and apparently assumes that the only alternative to 'lyrical illusions' is the grim realities of the dismal science.

It should come as no surprise that, in the current Socialist **vision**, when capitalism is mentioned, it is praised. For two Socialist scholars, writing in a journal linked to the Rocard faction, '... The market is the most effective instrument yet devised for **producing** wealth, innovation, and the global improvement of living standards. . . A rupture with capitalism should no longer be the central **objective** of French **socialism**'.¹⁸

Prior to 1981, French **Socialists** asserted that they sought a third way between social democracy and Soviet socialism. Within several years, **François** Mitterrand was describing the model, which he termed the society of the mixed economy, as a third way between ultra-liberalism and collectivism. 'The society of the mixed economy is French society as it is presently emerging, through the coexistence of two powerful independent, yet complementary, **sectors**.'¹⁹ When he was asked whether the mixed economy was a strategy for achieving socialism, his answer was evasive and unsatisfying: 'The coexistence of the two types of society will be long. It corresponds to an evolutionary stage of Western economies when progressive forces are in power. When conservative parties gain office, they seek to remove the obstacles preventing concentrated capital from becoming dominant.'²⁰

What, then, is the meaning of socialism in the current period? According to Jacques Julliard, 'It is common knowledge that **Fabius** has buried socialism. . . The real question, the only interesting one, is what will replace it. And on this score nothing has yet emerged.'²¹ The recent crop of books by Socialist leaders do not fill the gap.²² Typically, they argue that socialists have learned about the necessity of achieving economic efficiency while retaining a commitment to equality, solidarity, and social justice. For example, 'Socialism is an attitude, an approach. Distributing power, broadening access to responsibilities. . . while seeking as much as possible to involve workers.' In a similar vein, socialism is 'the struggle so that people exercise mastery over their destiny, the ceaseless struggle against inequalities, and the defence of human rights'.²³ These accounts are vague about the specific content of equality, the appropriate strategy for achieving it, and its relationship to the traditional goal of socialism: democratising control of production and the state.

As is well known, the PS is highly divided by factional strife. The position described until here commands agreement from three of the party's four major factions: the Mitterrandistes', under Jospin, and the Mauroy faction sponsored the 1982 shift; Michel Rocard argues, quite reasonably, that the party's orientation is belated vindication of his own position in the party's internecine struggles. The major critique of the dominant orientation within the PS derives from Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Socialistes (Ceres), often described as the left wing of the party. In public pronouncements, Ceres leaders barely conceal their contempt for the party's position. In private conversations, they are even less restrained.

Contrary to what one might expect, Ceres does not criticise the fact that the Socialist party and government have embraced the logic of capital. According to Ceres, socialism is simply not on the agenda in the current period. The real problem is that the government has not grasped that the principal danger is multinational corporate (primarily United States) domination of France's economic and political destiny.²⁴

According to Ceres, the major political-economic cleavage in France pits the interests of most French people against 'the forces of **decline**—those who place their class interests ahead of France, those who accept submission to the capitalism of multinationals, the dissolution of France, the vassalisation of France. . .'²⁵ Yet in this situation, the Socialist government lacks a project to stem France's decline. The only possible approach is to couple protectionist measures with vigorous state actions to foster growth and develop France's industrial base. Ceres identifies three major priorities in the current period: national independence, economic growth, and a democratised society (with emphasis on the **first**).²⁶

Ceres proposes to substitute a vibrant conception of the 'modern republic' for the discredited socialist ideology. Ceres leaders believe that

the image of the modern republic evokes the kind of broad-based nationalism that was at the origin of the Third Republic. Education Minister Jean-Pierre **Chevènement**, Ceres leader, is fond of quoting Jules Ferry on the need for civic virtue (and he has ordered that civics instruction be made compulsory in primary schools). **Chevènement** has advocated the value of 'republican elitism' to instill the love of competition, initiative, and excellence as a way to **revitalise** France.

This brief review suggests the theoretical sterility of debate within the **PS**; there is precious little creative socialist analysis outside the **PS** either. The **PCF**, which has obtained less than fifteen percent of the popular vote in elections during the **1980s**, advocates a **majoritarian** mass movement to force a shift in economic decision-making. The **PCF** proposes replacing capitalist criteria of short-term profitability by socially-oriented criteria of decision-making at all levels of production.

According to the **PCF**, priority should be assigned to investments that maximise employment and economise on capital, as opposed to the present situation, in which wages are treated as a cost of **production**.²⁷ The **PCF** accords heavy emphasis to workers' direct intervention to re-shape decision-making criteria; and it emphasises the need to concentrate investments in France, rather than further weaken the French economy through investments abroad.

There has been relatively little interest in the **PCF's** new approach, probably because the party has lost credibility as a result of its electoral decline, erratic strategic shifts, sectarian attitude since 1984, and refusal to question democratic centralism. With a few noteworthy exceptions, there have been no independent left analyses of French **socialism**.²⁸ This situation merits separate analysis, for it points up the general conservative shift in France.

The Sound of Silence

On July 26, 1983, Max **Gallo**, novelist, essayist, and official spokesperson for the Socialist government, published an article in *Le Monde* lamenting the absence of leftist debate concerning the government's project to modernise **France**.²⁹ The following day, *Le Monde* journalist Philippe Boggio analysed the reasons for 'the silence of left intellectuals'.³⁰ Was the government's isolation a result of intellectuals' disappointment with the government's conservative policies? Quite the contrary. According to Boggio, intellectuals suspected the government of complacency toward the Soviet Union and toward communism. The Union of the Left alliance was seen as a pact with the devil; the **PS** was regarded as blind, cynical, or opportunist with respect to the greatest threat to liberty in the twentieth century.

The torrent of articles replying to **Gallo** and Boggio in the next weeks suggested that there was no single cause of intellectuals' discontent with

the government. The debate helps illuminate the crisis of socialist theory and practice in France.³¹ First, it is noteworthy that there were few critiques of the government from the left, an illustration of how far the balance has shifted to the right within French political culture. Second, many intellectuals echoed Boggio in their opposition to the USSR, communism, totalitarianism, and the PCF. Why is anti-communism stronger in France than in comparable nations?³² The major reason is probably that it represents a backlash, amplified by the print and electronic media, that follows a period in which (in Régis Debray's cruel phrase) it was chic to be on the left. The memoirs of intellectuals like Edgar Morin and Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie reveal the depth of bitterness that developed among intellectuals who resigned or were expelled from the PCF.³³ It is ironic that the very factor that impressed leftists outside France as increasing the possibility of radical change—the Union of the Left alliance—was viewed with dismay by many French intellectuals. (In this connection, one needs to appreciate the widespread bitterness that developed on the left following the breakup of the alliance in 1977, and the disgust with the behaviour of both the PCF and PS in the late 1970s.)

Third, intellectuals' reservations regarding the Socialist government involved a complex of factors going beyond opposition to communism. In a prescient article written years before Gallo's appeal to intellectuals, Diana Pinto analysed the 'hidden conflict' between French intellectuals and socialism.³⁴ She identified three shifts in intellectuals' attitudes during the 1970s which produced a sceptical stance toward socialism. First, intellectuals repudiated the Marxist paradigm in theory and 'actually existing socialist' practice. André Glucksmann illustrates the most extreme (and sectarian) rejection of Marxism and the discovery of totalitarianism; Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriades, more temperate (albeit one-sided) variants.

Second, the decline of anti-Americanism. The initial impetus derived from French intellectuals' fascination with the peace movement, new left, and other social movements. Gradually, they shifted from viewing the United States as intellectually vacuous and reactionary to dynamic, pragmatic, and pluralist. The third change involved a rethinking of France's own history. Intellectuals began to challenge the stereotype of France as representing a revolutionary vanguard in world history. Revisionist attitudes developed toward France's revolutionary past.

Intellectuals' reservations about socialism were reinforced by the French Socialist experience after 1981. They were disturbed by the Union of the Left alliance and believed that the Socialist government adhered to an archaic conception of socialism, as symbolised, for example, by the government's emphasis on the need for nationalisation. Most left intellectuals were sympathetic to Michel Rocard and the 'deuxième gauche', which were in a marginal position within the PS and government. Intellectuals

often considered the Socialist government's slogans and rituals somewhat ridiculous, for example, Mitterrand's post-inauguration visit to the Pantheon, or Minister of Culture Jack Lang's ostentatious refusal to visit the annual festival of American films at Deauville. Rather than suggesting a more appropriate socialist project, however, intellectuals theorised about the impossibility or undesirability of global social projects, or remained silent. The climate of intellectual opinion in France helps explain the Socialist government's turn to 'realism' in 1982.

What Was To Be Done?

One cannot condemn the Socialist government for its preoccupation with economic efficiency, competitiveness, and growth. However, it can be faulted for its naivete, inconsistency, and lack of preparation in confronting the economic crisis. The Socialists reached office, in considerable measure, because of their telling critiques of the right's failure to appreciate the gravity of the crisis, the dilapidated state of French industry, and France's growing dependence on international capitalism. Yet it appeared that the Socialists did not believe their own campaign rhetoric.

The Socialist Party proved incapable of translating its ambitious promises into concrete policies. It was an electoralist party as well as an agency adept at passing legislation and directing day-to-day administration. (The PS was the most entrenched party at the level of urban government.) But there was a link missing between the torrent of laws passed in the first years and the specific administrative application: the capacity to stimulate a broad movement to achieve the party's overall goals. The problem may be rather that the PS lacked a global socialist strategy and programme. President Mitterrand was fond of recalling that most of his 110 point electoral platform had been voted into law. Yet, judging from public opinion polls, a majority of the French believed that one of the principal reasons for his unpopularity (he received the lowest rating of any Fifth Republic president) was that he failed to keep his promises.

The Socialists have proved unable to develop an adequate social vision. They shifted from an abstract call for a rupture with capitalism, to Keynesianism plus nationalisations, before adopting the right's deflationary and rationalising policies. It is hardly surprising that their turn to *rigueur* proved unpopular, for it 'neglected the preoccupations of solidarity, social transformation, and democratisation which are the core—and the honour—of the left'.³⁵

The Socialist movement failed to resolve the complex dilemma of how to achieve substantial reforms of capitalism while avoiding economic disruption from capitalist resistance. Initially, Socialist rhetoric oscillated between attacking the 'privileged caste' and cajoling capitalists to invest. Soon, however, there was a shift toward seeking to bolster capitalist confidence and profitability. In his declaration of general policy, Laurent

Fabius argued that 'the essential responsibility for modernisation falls on private firms. They deserve the support of the entire country. I have always believed that the left was best qualified to reconcile private enterprise and the nation'.³⁶

In 1981, the French left confronted a situation quite familiar to other left movements in Western Europe: social democracy was forged from the attempt to sponsor step-by-step transformation within the structure of opportunities and constraints offered by liberal democratic institutions. Under these conditions, pressures to deradicalise are legion.³⁷ Given decades of social democratic experience elsewhere, it is surprising that the French Socialists were so ill-equipped, both theoretically and in their governing practice. Although French Socialists had long been disdainful of Northern European social democracy, they quickly succumbed to conservative constraints on reaching office. By glossing over their capitulation through references to a 'socialism of governance', the PS ignores the need to develop a synthesis involving both opposition and governance. At the same time, French Socialists justify their retreat in a way that is uncannily reminiscent of social democracies elsewhere: the need for the socialist movement to be concerned with immediate problems of living standards and employment, the need to be responsible and mature, the need to represent broad national interests rather than merely workers' interests, and the imperatives posed by the international economy.

The real question is not whether enormous obstacles constrain the possibility of achieving radically democratic change: it would be utopian to deny the difficulties involved in following a socialist path. But what counts is to exploit whatever latitude for manoeuvre exists despite harsh realities. Concretely, did the situation confronting the Socialists in France dictate as conservative a response as they developed?

Take the relationship between rationalising the productive apparatus and democratising relations of production. The Socialist government assumed that the two goals were basically incompatible and chose to subordinate democratising productive relations to the need for industrial modernisation and technological innovation. However, this definition of the situation is rooted in an earlier era of Taylorised production. In the current period, the character of technological change points to a more complex relationship: at the shopfloor level, the new technology requires high levels of skill, polyvalence, initiative, and judgment, in brief, the transcendence of Taylorism. At the community and global level, overall economic efficiency may be enhanced by democratic planning, collaboration among social forces, and the ability to adapt rapidly and exchange information. The micro-electronic revolution creates possibilities for radical changes in social relations, which, thus far, are barely developed in theory or tested in practice.

The silence (or opposition) of intellectuals and the weakness of social

movements inhibited socialist change in this domain. For the absence of vibrant debate on the left deprived the Socialist movement of inspiration, concrete proposals, critical support, and visions of radical alternatives, leaving it vulnerable to rightist ideological, political, and economic onslaught. The right incorporated newly emerging social demands for flexibility, individualism, and autonomy into a neo-liberal project dismantling the welfare state and reconstructing capitalism. Yet the new themes are not inherently incompatible with socialism—they first erupted, after all, in the social movements of the late 1960s—and in fact could be the basis for a modern, decentralised, participatory socialism. However, this left approach required an ideological vision that **intellectuals** failed to provide, and a vigorous social movement that was lacking.

The timing and sequence of reforms is relevant to understanding the dialectic of desocialisation. The boldest reforms could probably only be launched in the grace period following the Socialists' election, when there were high popular expectations and extensive support for the left. Yet the government chose to make its first priorities an increase in social transfers (which soon proved economically destabilising) and a sweeping **decentralisation** of French administration. Neither reform involved democratising the centrally important arena of productive relations. And neither, however desirable it might be, was framed in a way to stimulate a spiral of mobilisation for additional change. By their content, as well as the statist manner by which they were proposed and implemented, they served to **demobilise**.³⁸ Very quickly, the government's grace period ended and conservative opposition burgeoned.

In private conversations, two Socialist cabinet ministers offered opposite assessments of the first months. When, in the fall of 1981, I questioned the strategy chosen and suggested the need for more radical, democratising reforms at the outset of Socialist rule, I was admonished by one leading Socialist to be patient. Each phase of reform would come in its own time: first, social transfers and decentralisation to consolidate support; next, nationalisation to create the instruments for socialist economic planning; and, eventually, more radical change. However, events proved that the cycle of change was diametrically opposite. According to the second minister with whom I spoke, the first months of Socialist rule were critical. And, rather than the state of grace being a cause for rejoicing, it was a disaster, since it signified a passive condition of watchful waiting and scepticism rather than active support forged through struggle. He cited a series of by-election results in January 1982, at which the left suffered a decline of support, as a turning point. At a cabinet meeting days after the elections, the cabinet was polled on its reactions to the elections. Pierre Mauroy, the confident, reassuring Prime Minister, and most of his colleagues, minimised the importance of the results. However, the minister confided, Mitterrand agreed with his own pessimistic assessment that the

results signified that the Socialists had lost popular confidence and were on a downward slide of support, which spelled the end to the phase of audacious reforms.

Conclusion

Rarely have conditions seemed as propitious for moving in a democratic socialist direction as they were in France in 1981. The French Socialist experience suggests the disturbing possibility that democratic socialism, broadly defined as collective appropriation and direction of the means of production, political decision-making, administration, and community, is indeed a 'lyrical illusion'. How else can one explain the failure of widespread social mobilisation in support of democratic socialism in 1981, the indifference or opposition of so many intellectuals, and the government's retreat beginning in 1982? What lessons for socialist theory and practice emerge from the failure of French socialism?

Three dilemmas appear critical in explaining the conservative outcome beginning in 1982; all three need to be overcome if democratic socialism is to have a future. First, the balance of political, economic, social, and ideological forces within France hindered radical change. Right wing political parties recovered quickly from their electoral defeat to mount effective opposition to Socialist policies. Despite the Socialists' political victory and passage of the nationalisation reform, the bulk of the French economy remained in private hands. Despite governmental blandishments, private investment stagnated. Further, while progressive social movements were weak, privileged social forces were well-organised and soon took to the streets (and highways) to defend their interests. In the ideological sphere, best-selling books extolled the virtues of the conservative revolution (in the United States) while there were no analyses of how to achieve the socialist vision. Given these constraints, it is unthinkable that the Socialist government would have ventured further into the uncharted terrain of democratic socialist change.

Second, the international capitalist system rapidly punishes national policies that do not respect the rules of the (capitalist) game. The French economy is so tightly integrated into the world capitalist system that, unless the left demonstrated its ability to out-perform the right, according to criteria of capitalist rationality, living standards would decline, unemployment rise, and opposition snowball. The Ceres faction of the PS urged protectionist measures, to provide a respite from foreign competition for French industry. This might have been a possibility—but only if adequately prepared and backed by strong popular support, conditions which were absent.

Third, the French left did not take the full measure of the first two constraints. It was initially utopian, by underestimating the gravity of the situation, and then defeatist, in that it allowed constraints to dictate

policy. Thus, although France's margin for quantitative redistributive measures was narrow, given the stagnation of the world economy, other kinds of reforms might have been initiated. At the extreme, what are usually described as obstacles and constraints might be converted into opportunities for a revitalised socialist project. For example, in recent years the link appears to have been severed between investment, technological change, growth, and full employment. Investment has begun to displace both labour and capital, an unprecedented situation which can impose heavy costs and yet make possible extraordinary progress. Without a drastic change in patterns of employment and wage relations, the third technological revolution can increase unemployment and strengthen tendencies toward a dual economy and society. However, a creative socialist project would incorporate the vast possibilities provided by this development of productive forces in order to reorganise production, reduce work-time, and develop new extra-work community-based activities.

The Socialist government demonstrated that it could overcome constraints and promote progressive change. While the industrial relations and decentralisation reforms are far from radical—they help to modernise French society and bring France closer to other advanced capitalist nations—they illustrate well how to translate stirring slogans into concrete practice. However, the Socialist government failed to demonstrate this capacity where it counted: in democratising relations of production. Thus, if the government cannot be held responsible for failing to achieve socialist transformation, by abandoning lyrical illusions and developing a socialism of governance it helped discredit the attempt to forge a democratic socialist path.

NOTES

1. When 'socialist' is capitalised, it refers to the French Socialist Party or government; when it is used in lower case, it refers to those (whether within or outside the party) committed to socialism.
2. For a description, see my 'Socialism Without the Workers: The Case of France', *Kapitalistate*, no. 10111 (1983), pp. 1141. The Socialists did not openly admit that they aimed to develop a form of social democracy in France until the following year; until then, social democracy was an epithet for the French left.
3. Ceres, Rapport Introductif, *14^{ème} Colloque* (Paris, 1985), p. 10.
4. SOFRES, *Opinion Publique 1985* (Paris, Gallimard, 1985), p. 100.
5. *Le Monde*, **Septembre 17, 1983**.
6. Jean Daniel, 'L'heure des intellectuels', *Le Dkbat*, no. 27 (December 1983), p. 169.
7. Interview in *L'Expansion*, no. 249 (November 16, 1984), p. 63. However, one should avoid a Manichean vision on this score. See Alain Vernholes, 'La Rigueur dans la demonstration', *Le Monde*, April 2, 1983.
8. *Le Monde*, July 26, 1984.
9. *Ibid.*

WHITHER FRENCH SOCIALISM?

10. *Le Monde*, October 23, 1984.
11. Pierre Mauroy, *A Gauche* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1985), p. 45.
12. *Le Matin*, December 31, 1984.
13. Mauroy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
14. Gérard Delfau, *Gagner à gauche* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1984), p. 79.
15. *Libération*, May 10, 1984.
16. *Nouvel Observateur*, May 31, 1985.
17. *Le Monde*, August 27, 1983.
18. Alain Bergounioux and Gérard Grunberg, 'Perspectives pour une gauche libérale', *Intervention*, no. 11 (Jan.-March 1985), p. 90.
19. *Libération*, May 10, 1984.
20. Interview in *L'Expansion*, no. 249 (November 16, 1984), p. 65.
21. *Nouvel Observateur*, June 14, 1985.
22. See, among others, Delfau, *op. cit.*, Max Gallo, *La Troisième alliance: Pour un nouvel individualisme* (Paris, Fayard, 1984), Jacques Mandrin, *Le Socialisme et la France* (Paris, Le Sycomore, 1983), Mauroy, *op. cit.*, Louis Mermaz, *L'Autre volonté* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1984), and Jean Poperen, *Le Nouveau contrat socialiste* (Paris, Ramsey, 1984).
23. The first quotation is from Gilbert Orsoni, 'Le socialisme, moyen de diffusion des pouvoirs', *Le Monde*, July 5, 1985; the second, from Bergounioux and Grunberg, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
24. See Mandrin, *op. cit.*, the *Ceres* journal *En jeu*, and the contribution to the preparations for the PS 1985 Congress at Toulouse by Christian Bataille and others, 'Un projet contre le déclin', *le poing et la rose*, no. 112 (May 1985).
25. Didier Motchane, 'Un Projet contre le déclin', *En jeu*, no. 23 (1985), p. 9.
26. Bataille, *op. cit.*
27. Philippe Herzog, *L'Economie nouvelle 6 bras-le-corps: Economiser le capital pour libérer les hommes* (Paris, Messidor-Éditions Sociales, 1984).
28. See the special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* on 'La Politique économique de la gauche en question', no. 441 (April 1983), Michel Beaud, *Le Mirage de la croissance*, 2 vols. (Paris, Syros, 1983/95), and Alain Lipietz, *L'Audace ou l'enlèvement, Sur les politiques économiques de la gauche* (Paris, La Découverte, 1984).
29. Max Gallo, 'Les intellectuels, la politique et la modernité', *Le Monde*, July 26, 1983.
30. Philippe Boggio, 'Le Silence des intellectuels de gauche', *Le Monde*, July 27-28, 1983.
31. Also see Emile Malet, ed., *Socrate et la Rose: les intellectuels face au pouvoir socialiste* (Paris, Éditions du Quotidien, 1983), Jean-Marie Domenach, *Lettre 6 mes ennemis de classe* (Paris, Seuil, 1984), and Edgar Morin, *Le Rose et le noir* (Paris, Galilee, 1984).
32. See Pascal Delwit and Jean-Michel Dewaele, 'The Stalinists of Anti-Communism', in Ralph Miliband, John Saville, and Marcel Liebman, eds., *Socialist Register 1984* (London, The Merlin Press, 1984), pp. 324-48.
33. See, for example, Edgar Morin, *Autocritique*, 2nd ed. (Paris, Seuil, 1975) and Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Paris-Montpellier, PC-PSU 1945-1963* (Paris, Gallimard, 1982).
34. Diana Pinto, 'Le socialisme et les intellectuels: le conflit caché', *Le Dkbat*, no. 18, (January 1982), pp. 4-10.
35. Beaud, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 93.
36. *Le Monde*, July 26, 1983.
37. See, for example, Adam Przeworski, 'Social Democracy as a Historical Phenomenon', *New Left Review*, no. 122 (July-August 1980), pp. 27-58, Przeworski, 'Material Interests, Class Compromise, and the Transition to Social-

- ism', *Politics & Society*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1980), pp. 125-53; and Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesensthal, 'Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organizational Form', in Maurice Zeitlin, ed., *Political Power and Social Theory* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 67-115.
38. See my 'The General's Revenge: French Socialism and the Fifth Republic', *Telos*, no. 55 (Spring 1984), pp. 125-37; and 'The Tranquil Revolution at Clochemerle: Socialist Decentralization in France', in Philip G. Cerny and Martin A. Schain, eds., *Socialism, the State and Public Policy in France* (London, Frances Pinter, 1985).