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# The French Communist Party: from revolution to reform

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### Introduction

Under the Fourth and Fifth Republics the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) was one of the most important forces in the shaping of the party system. This status only began to diminish in the 1980s with the victory of François Mitterrand in the presidential and legislative elections of 1981. Although the Communist Party is a shadow of its former self, the shape of the party system and its behaviour over the post-war period is explicable only in terms of the PCF's historical comportment. No discussion of the French party system is possible without taking into account the size and nature of what was, for most of the cold war, the biggest Communist Party in the western world.

French Communism has had both negative and positive effects on the party system. It was, on the one hand, the great party of the left dominating the parts of society which in other western countries were social democratic. It was tightly organised and ran unions, societies and associations which it used for its own purposes and it had a press and publishing empire of some size. It is not surprising that this power in the service of a revolutionary cause provoked hostility and even fear in both its allies and opponents. In the Fourth Republic, this negative influence kept the centre parties together, in the Fifth Republic, it helped to consolidate the conservative right into alliance. It was very difficult to ignore the Communist presence in most social areas until the Party's influence began to decline in the 1980s. By the same token the waning of the Communist Party's influence in the 1980s had ramifications across the party system, reducing confrontation, enabling realignments but also abandoning part of the extreme-left spectrum. At the same time, there were social changes which undermined the sense of the working class on which the Party depended. This was the start of the transition from a society of 40 per cent 'workers' in 1950 (broadly defined) to one of

27 per cent 'workers' in 2001<sup>1</sup> and in addition to a working class which was fragmented, better educated and part of which took on middle-class aspirations. The Party did not comprehend these changes, and for a long time acted as if they had not happened.

The PCF continued its 'saw tooth' decline throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In the presidential elections of 1995 the Party's leader Robert Hue polled only 8.7 per cent to the Socialist candidate's 23.2 per cent. After the 1995 elections, a coalition of the left, led by the Socialists, was put together and the Communists participated along with the ecologists, the MdC, the left Radicals and some independents. In the 1997 snap general elections, the Communist Party's candidates polled just fewer than 10 per cent and won 34 seats, dwarfed by the Socialists' 242. In purely electoral terms, the Party's decline continued over the Parliament and by 2002 it was slipping into irrelevance. Its candidate Robert Hue polled a marginal 3.37 per cent in the presidential elections (its worst ever) not qualifying for reimbursement of his expenses and coming below two of the three Trotskyite candidates, Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot. French Communism only kept an edge through its force in local government although that had been further weakened the previous year. This local implantation explains its slight revival to 4.7 per cent of the vote in the ensuing general elections in June. However, it lost seats (including that of its president Robert Hue) and with 21 deputies crossed the threshold enabling it to form a parliamentary group by only one seat.

### The three aspects of Communism

There are three aspects of the Party relevant to what it currently is in the French party system and from which it has to break free. First, the PCF was devoted to the Soviet Union where the 'Revolution' had taken place and to the USSR which was building Socialism. Even if 'mistakes' had been made on the way, the belief was that the elimination of private property and the central planning of the economy was the route to Socialism ('Just because there were spots on the sun, it did not mean there was no sun'). Hence, in France, Communism was seen as the *parti de l'étranger* and as promoting Socialist society with its queues for essentials, Gulag and nomenklatura (Duhamel and Jaffré, 1997).

Second, the Party was a 'party of a different sort'. It was the framework for the new society and the advance guard of the Revolution. Unity was at a premium enforced through 'democratic centralism', which can be summed up as obedience in the ranks and militaristic top-down command. The structure of the Party, divided into cells at the base and supervised by superior organs, facilitated discipline. But the main force in the Party was Lenin's 'professional revolutionaries', the employees of

the Party dedicated full-time to its organisation. It was the 'bolshevik' core of the Party that enabled the Communists to magnify their influence in unions or in institutions which had been infiltrated.

But Communist Party voluntary activists and fronts, organised professionally, disciplined and spread throughout 'capitalist society', have also been one of the Party's resources. It claimed to have 275,000 members at its 29th Congress though the number could be as low as 100,000.<sup>2</sup> Yet the proportion of members under 30 has also fallen from 25 per cent in 1978 to 10 per cent in 2001 and the percentage of workers dropped from 47 per cent to 31 per cent over the same time. The Party newspaper *L'Humanité*, once part of a large publishing group and essential to activists, has had to seek private capital to keep going.<sup>3</sup> Of the other satellite front organisations very little remains. Only the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs (CGT) is a force to be reckoned with but that trade union is also in a tense relationship with the Party hierarchy: if the CGT is to revive, it needs to free itself from the Party but the Party needs the CGT to prop up its own flagging influence.

Third, the Communist Party had commandeered the cultural high ground of revolutionary Marxism and had imposed its own brand, Marxism-Leninism, as the orthodox version. By the 1990s, Marxism itself had become a negative factor in the Party's repertoire and, of course, linked with the 'Stalinism' of its recent past, something which, in its constant use of 'Communist', it continues to remind people of (Duhamel and Jaffré, 1997). Robert Hue's (1995) exercise in homiletic excess, *Communisme, La Mutation*, does not distinguish the new Party from the old one in a convincing way. In his opening to the 29th Party congress in 1996, Hue asserted that the roots of the Party are in the French Revolution of 1789 and that the PCF represents a long and continuous French tradition dating back to that time. But, of course, the Party has in its ranks people who remain devoted to the 'Communist idea' and they would be demoralised by any change of name.<sup>4</sup> Hence, to some extent the Party has returned to the young Marx to open up themes of justice and rights and of the once rejected 'humanism'. But the Communist Party remains a critic of 'capitalism' (though now referred to as 'market totalitarianism' or some similar term) and the ills of society are attributed to rampant 'neo-liberalism'.

### *Un passé qui ne passe pas*

In Western Europe, the principal line of cleavage has been between left and right in the post-war period (Gallagher *et al.*, 2001: 95). Coalitions of parties have lined up facing each other across this divide. The norm has been a bipolar system with the main struggle for the centre ground – the middle or 'floating voter' – and a centripetal dynamic has been evident

over the long term. It was the intrusion of the big Communist Party into the French Party system that frustrated any such bipolar development in the Fourth Republic (though not to the same extent as in Italy).

The Communist Party emerged from the war benefiting from the legitimacy of its part in the Resistance. At the Liberation, the French Communist Party was one of the big three political parties along with the Christian democratic MRP and the Socialist SFIO. It came to be seen as a national party: as patriotic, reformist and 'modern' while its rivals – notably the Socialists – were afflicted with a 'cultural cringe' when faced by the PCF's penetration of working-class milieux. By the October 1946 general elections, the PCF was the biggest party in the system polling 26.2 per cent to the Christian democratic MRP's 25.9 per cent and the SFIO's 21.1 per cent. It had participated in governments under de Gaulle and its leader, Maurice Thorez, made a serious bid to become Premier, falling short by only 51 votes. But the onset of the cold war meant that by 1947 the principal cleavage in the party system divided the Communists from the Socialists. It pushed the Socialists into alignment with the MRP and with other moderate and centrist groups willing to participate in a centrist programme and the Communist Party's self-imposed isolation became a ghetto from which it could not escape.

This 'polarised pluralist' format came into being and prevailed through the Fourth Republic until 1958 (Sartori, 1976). Parties which supported the Fourth Republic in the centre were attacked by anti-system parties from the two sides of the ideological continuum but the anti-system parties were kept out of power and had no incentive to moderate their attacks or to accommodate the political mainstream. Parties in the centre found it increasingly difficult to provide solutions to contemporary problems and the *régime* fell when faced by the Algerian crisis of 1958.

### Alliance politics

For the French Communists, the main change in strategy was in 1956 with Khrushchev's 'parliamentary road to Socialism' in Western Europe: western parties were to use elections to gain power in the European situation that was then unpropitious for revolution. However, there was a tension at the heart of the strategy that the PCF never overcame. It was necessary to downplay the 'Revolutionary' aspirations (which were the Party's *raison d'être*) in order to find allies and get elected as part of a coalition.

However, communist parties sought allies and for the PCF this meant the SFIO had to be wooed. French Communists, still the principal party in France, and attracting one voter in four after the 1956 general elections, made overtures to the Socialists (Rioux, 1987: 260). However, the Communists remained excluded from the majority and their position

in the ghetto was confirmed after the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising in November 1956. Communists persisted in seeking an alliance with the Socialists, but their reintegration into the party system was postponed (Schlesinger and Schlesinger, 2000: 136–7).

It was the return of de Gaulle to power in 1958 that transformed the party system. De Gaulle's politics also gave the Communist Party the real opportunity to promote the coalition of the left it had demanded after 1956. What the Communists wanted was an alliance of the left, of the Communists, Socialists and Radicals along with whatever other small parties could be persuaded to join. Communist leaders no doubt assumed that they would dominate it. This domination might not be obvious, and non-communist politicians would be the facade, but the Party's size in vote and membership, its resources and its command of the unions and its political resources would guarantee its authority over the left.

Potential allies feared the same thing and there began a long 'hesitation waltz' as non-communist parties sought a way of managing the PCF within an alliance. Matters were, however, hastened by de Gaulle's creation of a modern conservative party federating the parties on the right and forcing the small centre parties to choose between the right and the left. De Gaulle's politics started to move the party system to a bipolar one of confrontation between government and opposition with the centre divided between them. By the end of the 1960s the centre was already part of one or other of the coalitions.

As the 1960s and 1970s progressed, the choice between de Gaulle's conservative coalition and the left along with the Communists became sharper and was seen by many as one of choice of society and *régime*. But a new factor in allocating dominance on the left came from outside the Communist Party (and the Socialist Party) and that was presidential politics. In the competition for the presidency, the Communist Party could not hope to win although a candidate from the left might win with their support. Party leaders decided to avert a humiliation at the polls by not putting up their own candidate and chose instead to participate in (and legitimise) the presidency by supporting the independent Mitterrand. As the big organised party of the left it experienced an influx of members from the 1965 presidentials and it had taken an important step towards its objective of creating a coalition of the left. Under the leadership of Thorez, then Waldeck Rochet and then Marchais, the PCF's revolutionary ardour was muted and they bargained with the main representative of the non-communist left whom they helped to build up as a viable interlocutor.

However, despite the onset of bipolarisation between 1965 and 1973, there was the possibility that it could be rejected by the left and the centre as much as by the conservatives. On the Communist side, the changes made little difference and the search for an alliance around a

joint platform continued. For the Communist Party, the apotheosis of the 'Union of the Left' around a 'Common Programme' came in June 1972. This platform was extensive and unique in French party politics, which was more used to coalition bargaining between leaders in the National Assembly than to manifesto politics. French politics polarised, and the fight, or so it seemed, for the future of the Republic became more divisive and also more mobilising.

What happened after 1972 and the conclusion of the 'Common Programme' was unanticipated: it was the Socialist Party which became the beneficiary of the coalition's advances. Within the left, the Communist Party lost its preponderance as the Socialists gained members and voters. The presidential elections of 1974 after President Pompidou's death were revelatory. In these, the Communist Party played an exemplary role supporting the Socialist candidate Mitterrand but making few demands. After that election, almost all the benefits went to the Socialist Party which began its rise in the polls and Socialists took the major winnings of the left at by-elections. This was a situation to which the Communist Party did not find a response. It started an open quarrel with the Socialists, which ended only in 1994 with a new leader.

The year 1977, it transpired, was a crucial year for the development of the party system and the Communist Party's place in it. Local elections held in March that year saw a further bipolarisation of the party system into left and right coalitions. Old 'Third Force' alliances that had subsisted between Socialists and centrists (against both the Gaullists and Communists) were finally ended and replaced in most cases by Communist/Socialist/Radical 'Union of the Left' alliances. There were 204 of these 'Union of the Left' lists in the 221 large cities and they won 156 of these contests. In the big cities (over 30,000) the Communists gained 22 and held in total 72 to the Socialists' 81. From the Communist perspective, the local elections provided tangible gains for the first time in the alliance and the number of Communist councillors in large cities almost doubled from 1,560 to 2,306.

But the worm had entered the bud. Communists were forced to share power even in their strongholds and the local victories pushed power down from the central Party apparatus to mayors. At its origins, Communist politics had gone counter to the trend of localised politics typical of France and instituted a central control of party politics. In 1988, panic measures taken in response to the collapse of its vote in the presidentials promoted local figures but made it more vulnerable to dissidents. In addition, its need to keep local power in order to survive as a national party bound them securely to the Socialist Party. These factors were to become crucial in the comportment of the PCF in the 1990s as the demands of the alliance pulled it in one (governmental) direction away from its revolutionary roots and militant supporters.

## Anti-system to system politics

In September 1977 the negotiations to update the 'Common Programme' failed and the alliance was formally ended. As in the past, the PCF coupled a domestic hard-line with international solidarity with the USSR. In the development of the party system, 1978 was the year in which the role of dominant party on the left passed from the Communist Party to the Socialist Party. Thus in 1968 the Gaullist Party had been the dominant party in the system and had outdistanced the Communists by 46 per cent to the PCF's 20 per cent. In 1978, during the bipolar quadrille party system, there was a left-right division with each camp split in half. In the 1981 election, the Socialists polled 37.8 per cent, the neo-Gaullists 20.9 per cent and the Communists took 16 per cent. A Socialist and Left Radical total of 285 seats gave them an absolute majority, but the PCF's 44 seats did not give it leverage. Whether 1978 was the start of the decline or not, the process of sliding to the margins was inherent in the party strategy of 1978.

Over the rest of the 1980s and until the collapse of the USSR the Party's position steadily worsened. When Mitterrand won the presidency, the Party acceded to the demand to support the Socialist Party and, constrained by its own supporters, it took the four minor ministerial posts offered. However, it determined to make use of its position in government to associate itself with successes and criticise failures. This ambiguous tactic proved no more attractive than outright criticism and its slide continued. In 1983-84 it was even rivalled as a protest party by the FN. By 1984, the Party had decided that criticism of the Socialists from outside the coalition was the best strategy and it left government.

Communist hostility to the Socialists was unremitting from then until 1994. However, in terms of relevance, the PCF was close to slipping out of the party system (Sartori, 1976: 122-3). Yet, because the Party was hostile to the 'reformist' Socialist Party, and clung to the old certainties of state socialism, it was unable to capitalise on a probably unrepeatable opportunity. In 1993 the French Socialist Party collapsed. There were indications that the former Socialist space was open to conquest. One of these was the rise of the ecologists who were credited with 20 per cent in the opinion polls at one point (though their disorganisation prevented them from capitalising on this) and Le Pen also picked up left-wing support (Perrineau, 1997). A 'Downsian' reaction by the Party moving to the centre would, at this point, have led to a change in ideology to compete for the available votes.

As it was the PCF decided to stand pat. All the same between 1992 and 1994 the Communist Party survived. It reoriented its message using the Maastricht referendum of 1992 to a nationalist and patriotic one

defending the working people of France from the perceived European threat. Communism in France had always emphasised its patriotism, affiliating itself with the national spirit and with the nation (Lavabre, 1994). In the past the Communist Party actively worked to bring together a mixture of working-class, peasant and intellectual communities to give them a common identity. What this means is that the PCF has taken up the defence of social and welfare rights against the inroads of an 'aggressive neo-liberalism'. This is the point at which Communist Euroscepticism comes to the fore and joins the Party's long-standing anti-capitalism. Europe is, in this view, the vehicle for a market-oriented liberalisation of France and for the dismantling of the welfare state. Yet they are limited by the alliance with the Socialist Party and by competition from the extreme left (and from the FN) for its voters.

In January 1994 at the Party's 28th Congress, Georges Marchais, who had effectively led since 1969, gave way to the unknown apparatchik Robert Hue. Hue changed the terminology of the Party, notably renaming the Central Committee the 'National Committee' and the General Secretary the 'National Secretary' but also replacing the old Marxist vocabulary and distancing the PCF's discourse bit by bit from the old-fashioned 'bolshevism' that was its heritage.<sup>5</sup> Robert Hue decided to promote a friendly rather than combative image and by 1995 the leader was held in record-high regard (35 per cent good opinions) and Hue raised the Party up with him. After the presidential election campaign the Party had ratings of 32 per cent good opinion (54 per cent bad) although the opinion polls did not translate directly into real votes (Duhamel and Jaffré, 1997). Hue ended up with 8.7 per cent of the vote and took only 1.7 per cent more than Lajoinie in 1988. Hue's vote was concentrated in 28 departments – in the Paris region, the north-west, the centre and the Mediterranean littoral. Even so, Le Pen outpolled him in some places. Local elections followed and proved worse for the Party, which lost its last big town (Le Havre), and seven towns of over 30,000. Robert Hue's strategy was to seek alliance with the Socialists while renewing the Party's doctrine as much as possible (given the old guard's reluctance to move). This was welcome to a Socialist Party which, under Lionel Jospin, had revived and sought allies on the left and the reward later was to be ministerial posts.

### Party system possibilities

French Communists have rejected any amalgamation with the Socialist Party to join what was split in 1920. But, given that the Party had neglected the opportunity to transform itself in the early 1990s, its main problem has been to remain as an active participant in the French party

system. Its strategic dilemmas turned on this problem of exerting some power in the constellation of small parties around the PS and it is one of influence. In other words, the Communist Party has lost its place in the Soviet empire and it has not found a replacement strategy. With the arrival of Robert Hue at the head of the Party, questions about what the Party's role might be and whether the Party is in any position to play it have become insistent. However, finding a new role for a party, which has historically had the strongest sense of direction of all parties, has run up against its own nature and that of the Party's partners.

There are broadly three views about what the Party's strategy within the party system should be and these all have ardent supporters. Communism in France has called on a sufficiently wide range of strands in the past for each position to claim some legitimacy and to be able to portray itself as the authentic continuation of French Communism. In itself this public quarrel about the Party's role is a novelty and one which the old generation of Communists are not used to. The leadership's idea prevails, but because of the tripartite division in the Party's hierarchy. These three strategies are: (1) the so-called 'alternative' strategy; (2) the 'hard-line'; and (3) the leadership's middle way as developed by Hue and supported by the National Secretary Marie-George Buffet.

### The 'alternative' strategy

Inside the Party the biggest minority is probably the 'alternative' strategy promoted by, among others, the late Marseilles deputy Guy Hermier, Party ideologue Lucien Sève, the historian Roger Martelli and the journal *Futurs*. They want to see the Party developed as the conscience of the left taking up the rights of minorities, extending the welfare state and leading the attack on the Front National. A 'radical pole', it is argued, could be developed by bringing together the small groups of the extreme left along with ecologists and that would regenerate the Party. A revival would enable the Party to deal with the Socialists as an equal but the strategy is not, in the short term, friendly to the PS. This route seemed to be opened by the strikes of December 1995 that paralysed the country for some days and in appearance mimicked the old 'militant working class'. Much was made of the Gardanne by-election of October 1996 at which a Communist supported by a 'rainbow coalition' was elected against a strong challenge from the FN. There is intellectual support for an 'alternative left' and the opposition to the all-pervasive free market liberalism is popular at the grass roots.

This strategy runs up against several problems. The small parties of the left and the *gauche plurielle* are not harmonious and are competing – as the European campaign and the 1998 regional elections showed.<sup>6</sup> The Communists and the Trotskyite parties are competitors and the extreme left has historically made its way in opposition to the PCF. There

were a few Communist/Trotskyist lists in the local elections of 2001 (one in Bègles against ecologist leader and 2002 presidential candidate Noël Mamère) in towns where local disputes led to defensive alliances but there were many more confrontations. On the ecologist side, the compatibility with the Communist Party is by no means evident and they have their own agenda some of which (opposition to nuclear power, for instance) is antipathetic to the PCF. On the post-Communist issues, like the promotion of women, the Pacte Civil de Solidarité (PACS) and soft drugs the party has not led the way and the other parties are more liberal. There is the additional risk that the radicalisation of the left will alienate it from the Socialists and that would pose problems for the continuance of the Party at local level.

### The hard-line strategy

Some of the ideas of the strategists of an 'alternative' are echoed by the hard-liners unreconciled to the evolution of the Party away from its long-held positions. They are the Leninists who believe in the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-American 'party of the working class' hostile to 'bourgeois' institutions, including the PS. A number of Georges Marchais' former associates, like Maxime Gremetz and the doyen of the Assembly elected in 2002, Georges Hage, are resistant to the 'social democratisation' as they see it of the PCF and there are others nostalgic (like Jacques Karman) for the days of the USSR. Most of the hard-liners can be found in the Honecker Committees and around the journal *Co-ordination Communiste*. These people adopt a hostile stance to the coalition of the left and the deal with the PS, which they see as a repeat of the mistake made in the 1960s. This is not a small group and it is important in federations like the Pas-de-Calais. As far as can be discovered, it has support in the apparatus of the Party although that remains loyal to the leadership and it also has its divisions (Duhamel and Jaffré, 1997). It is, however, looking backwards and not to a strategy for the future.

### The leadership's middle way

More important is Robert Hue's 'middle way' between the two competing groups avoiding a schism but rejecting both a new 'Common Programme' and a competitive radicalism on the left and looking for allies to bring the Party into the mainstream.<sup>7</sup> These allies for practical purposes are the PS. Under Hue, the Party has tried to set itself up as the left of the Socialist-Communist alliance: in government but at the same time a popular tribune. Without being as aggressive as in previous years, this continues the 'Ministry of the Masses' to harass the government but combines it with governmental prestige and keeps close to the PS. Hue's balance is possible as long as it does not make moves that endanger the special relationship with the Socialists, but that means that the Party has

limited freedom. When the Party was active in demonstrations for full employment (with the extreme left in October 1999) or when the Association pour l'Emploi dans l'Industrie et le Commerce (ASSEDIC) was occupied in December 1997, its position in government is liable to be questioned.

There are many drawbacks to Hue's strategy. It is difficult to avoid either toppling into opposition on the one hand or mutely following the PS on the other. It has to maintain its distinctiveness but at the same time deploy its resources in support of the government of which it is part. Participation in government requires a degree of solidarity and prevents it, for example, from using anti-Europeanism to rally its supporters, officials and activists. Thus, opposition to the Maastricht Treaty used as a campaign theme before the 1997 elections was dropped in the interests of electioneering with the Socialists. By the same token, the criticism of privatisation which surfaced in *L'Humanité* was also muted and the swallowing of some hard choices – like the privatisation of Air France – has had no pay-off in votes

Even where the Party makes a distinctive radical mark it is always liable to be outbid by the extreme left or even the ecologists. There is a space open to exploitation on the protest left as the Trotskyist LO has demonstrated by polling 5.3 per cent in the 1995 presidential elections and the 10 per cent taken by the three Trotskyists in 2002. In 2001 the Trotskyist parties have made advances in local elections (where they are usually weak) and there were some serious challenges to the Party's hegemony in its strongholds. With competition on the extreme left it is more difficult than it was in the 1980s for the Party to retain a position in government and keep its radical electorate. Its compromises in government (despite the occasional concession made by the Socialists) made it difficult for the PCF to claim to speak on behalf of the working class or the disadvantaged.

However, the payout from following the line Hue has chosen was clear. Most important is the continuation of local government strongholds and these include (even after March 2001) an important network. It still holds 90 town halls in towns over 9,000, it took 11.2 per cent of the vote in the cantonal elections in the 1,639 cantons where it was well represented and has 131 councillors. This is a network of some substance and it will be years before it is entirely lost. By the same token, it will be many years before the Greens (or the Trotskyists) can rival it. It also keeps the Party in the mainstream, at the centre of affairs and involved in bargaining. It can negotiate concessions in government and in committee and its supporters in the unions and state industries can be helped. Short of accepting a position on the outside looking in on the left and perhaps losing its role in the party system altogether, it has to stay in alliance.

What is lacking in Hue's line is a view of where the Party is going and

how it differs from its partners. This proved fatal to Hue's campaign in the 2002 presidential elections. Hue was unable to give a convincing account of in what way the PCF had changed or even inflected the course of the Socialist government of 1995–2002. Hue's stance as the 'left of the left' did not look credible and it was tested by more extreme and outspoken candidates during the campaign with the result that the Party looked opportunist and jaded. Although the humiliation of Robert Hue in the presidential election caused a leadership crisis there was still no response to the key question of what new line the Party should take and its dilemma of how a 'revolutionary' party should behave was unresolved.

## Conclusion

Little attention has been devoted to the resilience of the French party system and the way that it could accommodate a radically anti-system party which did not accept the rules of the game and wanted to change the nature of society. By incorporating the PCF into the party system, the mainstream left marginalised it and reduced its potential for destabilisation. However, its predominance on the left enabled other parties to play on fears of 'Reds' and its role helped an extreme right-wing opposition to emerge.

Despite the absence of an international Communist threat, it is not clear that this Communist effect, which promotes centrifugal competition, is played out. With the end of the cold war, however, the Communist–democratic cleavage became less salient and it became possible for other parties to define alternative lines of political division. In addition, Communist penetration of society has diminished on a number of dimensions. Party identification has dropped in France (as elsewhere in Western Europe) and the PCF has been dependent on this sense of party as no other. It could also be noted that class voting has also declined (although in France it has always been below the mean) to the lowest in Europe (Gallagher *et al.*, 2001: 250–61). This, for what was the self-defined 'workers' party', is a factor in its diminishing cohesiveness. New parties, or previously marginal ones, have entered the arena and rival the Communist Party for its own traditional electorate.

For the Communist Party, which knew where it stood and which had a vicarious participation in a greater project, adaptation to the new circumstances has proved unusually difficult. Yet French Communism, having been the dominant force on the left for the formative years of the Fifth Republic, remains a distinctive force on the left. It is rooted in French life and in its political culture, it is still highly structured and an effective organisation at local level as well as a potential government partner. But the Communist presence does not drive the party system

and its position in the 'plural left' is more like that of a small 'hinge' party than an anti-system force. It has also proved unable to keep the extreme-left supporters inside the coalition of the left and its hegemony over the forces to the left of the Socialist Party was negligible in 2002.

On this last point, the weakness of the Socialist Party means that, as things stand, Socialist leaders will have to rely on Communist support to compose governing coalitions. Thus the PS also has an interest in the continuing existence of the PCF, even in a weakened condition, but only as one of the components of the 'plural left' and as one of a number of partners. For the Communist Party it means living with the tension between participation in government or in alliance with the PS (with the solidarity that implies) and retreating to the margins as a critical protest party (invoking the anti-system politics at which it is an adept). Both these positions have their partisans in the Party (and both positions have their dangers) but the leadership has so far opted for an alliance or government role. With the continuing vertiginous decline of the Party, the temptation to outbid the extreme left (perhaps using the CGT) and regain its radical electorate must be strong. However, the Party is too weak to be other than a minor part of any new coalition of the left led by the PS.

## Notes

- 1 INSEE statistics.
- 2 *Le Figaro*, 15 April 1997.
- 3 *L'Humanité*, 22 May 2001.
- 4 *L'Humanité*, 28 January 1997.
- 5 *L'Humanité*, 7 May 1996.
- 6 *Le Monde*, 27 April 1999.
- 7 *Le Monde*, 14 July 1996.