Beyond the mainstream:
la gauche de la gauche

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Introduction

In the summer of 1998 an article in *Le Monde* entitled ‘Quand la France s’amuse’ compared the apparently beatific state of mind of the French in the wake of the national team’s World Cup victory with that evoked by Pierre Viansson-Ponté in his celebrated essay ‘Quand la France s’ennuie . . . ’ written on the eve of the May ‘68 events. As with the original article, such complacency proved at odds with a powerful undercurrent in society which, from the mid-1990s, had seen a backlash against neo-liberalism gather pace against a backdrop of growing social inequality. The backlash took the form of a so-called ‘social movement’ encompassing the revival of working-class militancy signalled by a major public sector strike in November–December 1995, a wave of occupations and demonstrations by immigrants, the homeless and the unemployed, the rebirth of the engaged intellectual, and unprecedented electoral success for the revolutionary left, whose two presidential candidates, Lutte Ouvrière’s Arlette Laguiller, and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire’s Olivier Besancenot, achieved in 2002 a combined score approaching three million. The growing influence of *la gauche de la gauche* was accompanied by the mushrooming of various militant groups and associations campaigning against racism, unemployment, homelessness and homophobia, boosted from the turn of the century by an emerging anti-capitalist movement spearheaded by individuals like the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the anti-globalisation campaigner José Bové, and by groups like the Attac association against financial speculation.

The class conflict and political polarisation at the heart of the 1995 strikes appeared to confound orthodox analyses which saw late twentieth-century France as a society of consensus and institutional stability (Furet *et al.*, 1988). This polarisation, however, was expressed almost exclusively outside the major political parties. Yet the political system
itself, despite the turbulence of intra-party relations, underlined by a series of splits from the RPR and UDF in the wake of the left’s return to power in 1997, appeared relatively stable in the period following the strikes. In particular, Lionel Jospin appeared to have consolidated the revival signalled by his showing in the 1995 presidential poll through his management of the governmental plural-left coalition, not least in helping to nurture the PCF through its transformation into a mainstream social-democratic party, and in facilitating the integration of the notoriously indisciplined Greens into the party system. Indeed, the most dramatic split to occur, that of the FN, was interpreted by some, although not this author (Wolfreys, 1999), as a triumph for the absorptive capacity of the system, drawing former FN chairman Bruno Mégret into its orbit and leaving Le Pen severely weakened. Since April 2002, however, the credibility of all claims about the system’s capacity to neutralise anti-establishment forces must be questioned. When, as happened on the first round on the 2002 presidential election, fewer people choose to vote for all of France’s mainstream parties combined than opt for the extreme right, the Trotskyist left, abstention or spoiling their ballots, the term ‘crisis of representation’ no longer seems excessive.

This chapter will argue that the phenomenon of the ‘social movement’ is the product of a process of social and political polarisation to which France’s party system has been unable to respond, largely because of the broad consensus which now governs most areas of policy. We begin with an outline of the way in which fundamental ideological differences between the parties of the mainstream left and right are being eroded. The perception among grass-roots activists that the PS in particular is no longer either able or willing to provide solutions to long-term problems like unemployment, job insecurity and discrimination, is a major reason for the development of the social movement, or gauche de gauche, whose principal elements will be assessed below. The argument put forward in this chapter is that behind an atrophied party system, a culture of protest and dissent is developing which opposes neo-liberalism but has yet to put forward an alternative vision of society of its own. This lack of a clear ideological focus limits its ability to provide clear political solutions, contributing to a general political climate characterised by both stagnation and volatility.

Changes in the party system

Belated industrialisation, the Socialist–Communist split and longstanding ideological divisions have all been cited as factors delaying the formation of modern, disciplined party machines in France. Long into the twentieth century, the political system incubated numerous parties, most of them
with weak structures and limited militant bases. Under the Fifth Republic, revision of the electoral system forced parties to combine in alliances. This, along with various other changes linked to economic modernisation, meant that the number of parties represented in the National Assembly was greatly reduced during the post-war period. The subsequent establishment of what is quaintly known as the *quadrille bipolaire*, a left–right polarisation dominated by the four main parties, was generally held to be a consequence of newfound constitutional stability which derived from a number of factors, notably the consensus over major policy issues after the Socialists’ emergence as a party of government; the experience of cohabitation between a president and prime minister of opposing tendencies; and the decline of ideological factors linked to class and religion which accompanied the emergence of a post-industrial or post-materialist society. ‘It took centuries to establish [the] ideological structures [of France],’ wrote Emmanuel Todd in 1988, ‘and only five years to liquidate them’ (cited in Safran, 1998: 89). But no sooner had this model been established than it began to disintegrate. New parties, in the shape of the FN and then, to a lesser extent, the Greens, emerged as major players. Three authoritarian nationalists, the Gaullist Charles Pasqua, who broke from the RPR, the aristocratic Philippe de Villiers, who broke from the UDF, and the republican Jean-Pierre Chevènement, who broke from the Socialists, emerged as significant minor players. This fragmentation of the party system, although partly based on personal ambition and petty rivalries, was also a product of the dilution of three major ideological currents in post-war French politics; socialism, communism and Gaullism.

In the late 1980s a debate took place within the Socialist Party about whether its commitment to managing capitalism, confirmed by the abandonment of its reform programme and the adoption of austerity measures in the early 1980s, was robbing the party of its specific identity. By 1991, former Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy was redefining the party’s role as that of a brake on the excesses of the market, while the Rocard government was responding to the crisis of Keynesianism in an era of globalisation by championing the ‘reform of the infinitely small’ (Moreau, 1998: 291–6). The dangers of this approach were signalled by Henri Emmanuelli in 1989, who warned that if the Socialist party were ‘to limit itself to managerialism’ by renouncing its vocation ‘as an instrument of social transformation’, it would lose its identity (cited in Moreau, 1998: 285–6).

Jacques Moreau has argued that the Socialists’ hesitancy and loss of direction during Mitterrand’s second *septennat* derived from an inability to come to terms with the retreat to austerity in the 1980s. Whereas in the past the left had concluded that failure to deliver on electoral promises required a redoubling of revolutionary ardour, allowing leadership and rank and file to be reconciled around an ostensibly class-based analysis

*Beyond the mainstream: la gauche de la gauche* 93
of society, no such reconciliation took place after 1983. This was partly because the party’s founding Epinay programme of 1971 was not rooted in any doctrine that would allow it to learn from failure and lay the basis for regeneration. But the ‘presidentialisation’ of the PS during the 1980s further prevented party activists from drawing lessons from the experience of office or even discussing party policy, a shift of authority underlined most dramatically by the imposition in 1988 of the *Letter to all the French*, written by Mitterrand and embodying a ‘reformism without principles’ (Moreau, 1998: 278). While in office the Socialists had in any case dismantled many of the tools that would have permitted state direction of the economy, through financial deregulation and integration into the European monetary system. Although most European social-democratic parties emerged from the 1980s with neither Marx nor Keynes as points of reference, the history and traditions of France’s political culture made the abandonment of the rhetoric of radical change particularly problematic (Hincker, 1997: 123). In particular, greater French integration into the world economy called into question the French left’s allegiance to republican nationalism. How could the defence of *service public* be reconciled with privatisation? How could the universalism of the social security and health system be defended in the face of moves to privatise pension schemes and health insurance? Such questions, as we shall see below, were to be taken up and thrown back at the Socialists by activists angry at their perceived abandonment of republican principles.

Although the plural left was essentially an electoral alliance, it grew out of an initiative to re-establish links with ordinary activists and revive, ‘more modestly than before’, as Jospin once put it, the notion that the Socialists could act as a brake on the market. Efforts at a recomposition of the left had begun with Michel Rocard’s *Assises de la transformation sociale*, which brought together Socialists and various ‘progressive’ forces. Jospin and his allies continued to pursue the initiative long after others had forgotten it (Mercier and Jérôme, 1997: 144–7). Jospin’s strategy of seeking alliances with the left, rather than the centre, along with his 1997 election platform, promising to fight unemployment and reduce the working week, sent out a message that the left would attempt to offer regulation and state intervention to ensure job creation and the preservation of public services. In 1981 it was Jospin who had wondered aloud whether there would be ‘a clash or a compromise’ between the government and French capital (Moreau 1998: 272–3). After his election in 1997, he famously attempted to provide his own answer to the question, claiming to want ‘a market economy but not a market society’. But having held out the prospect of a break with the neo-liberal orthodoxy, his government chose not to act when workers at Renault-Vilvorde, Michelin and Danone called on Jospin to make good his campaign promises to make it harder for companies to make mass redundancies.
By 1999, he appeared resigned to the impotence of government before the market, announcing on national television that 'I do not think our role is to administer the economy'. His attempts to emphasise that there remained a left–right divide were increasingly reduced to symbolic acts, provoking angry clashes with the opposition by calling for the rehabilitation of First World War mutineers and accusing the right of being on the wrong side in the Dreyfus affair. But the most symbolic of all the government’s acts, Martine Aubry’s long-awaited thirty-five-hour week, with all the evocations of the Popular Front government this brought to bear, failed to live up to expectations. Michel Rocard’s references to Paul Lafargue’s Le Droit à la Paresse during Jospin’s 1995 presidential campaign seemed a far cry from the flexible working practices, proliferation of short-term contracts and increased job insecurity which the measure was to produce (Fondation Copernic, 2001).

When the 2002 campaign came around, Jospin appeared to have returned to the hesitancy of the early 1990s, initially denying that his programme was Socialist before re-emphasising his identification with the left as election day neared. Voters, three-quarters of whom claimed to be unable to tell the manifestos of Chirac and Jospin apart, were unforgiving, and Jospin’s result was the worst of any Socialist presidential candidate since the party’s formation. The PCF was hit even harder. Its leader, Robert Hue, in a typically gauche turn of phrase, had warned in 1998 that the left would fail if it did not ‘have a symbiotic relationship with the social movement’. But participation in government, not least that of PCF transport minister Jean-Claude Gayssot, who oversaw the ‘partial’ privatisation of Air France, undermined whatever relationship the party might have had with the movement in the first place. In 2002, Hue’s electorate fell to a level which more or less approached parity with what the party had claimed in membership only twenty years previously.

Although economic growth and the introduction of the thirty-five-hour week had led to a fall in unemployment, Jospin’s coalition left office with the problem of job insecurity unresolved. Despite the introduction of various youth employment schemes since the 1980s, in the 1990s only 20 per cent of the 17–24 age group entered the job market on indefinite full-time contracts (Mouriaux, 1998: 146). The practice of issuing part-time contracts for all workers continued until by 1998 they made up one fifth of all contracts issued. By the end of the decade almost one third of all workers felt that their jobs were in danger (Filoché, 1999: 127). The role of the Socialist party, then, in the absence of either a doctrine or a radical reform agenda, appears once more reduced to a predominantly systemic function, devoted to ‘the organisation and legitimisation of the electoral process’ (Yanai, 1999: 6–7). This view would seem to be supported by the changing social composition of the mainstream left’s electorate. In the 2002 parliamentary election, as in 1997, the PS won
the support of a greater proportion of senior managers (35 per cent) than either white-collar (30 per cent) or manual workers (33 per cent). Studies have shown that the activist base of both the Socialist and Communist parties is now older and less working class than ever before. Only 5 per cent of Socialist Party members are under 30. The average age of Socialist party members (55), Communists (49) and even Greens (47) tells its own story. All these factors, in a context of rising inequalities and scepticism about the Socialists’ commitment to reform, help to explain what has given rise to the emergence of the autonomous groups and associations which make up the ‘social movement’, to which we now turn.

The ‘social movement’

The literature on social movements generally stresses their emergence in two waves, the post-1968 liberation movements (gays, women, immigrant workers, ecologists) and the post-1981 movements typified by SOS Racisme. New social movements in general, the argument runs, are linked to the decline in traditional areas of conflict such as class or religion (Kriesi et al., 1995). They espouse ‘post-materialist’ themes and use unconventional forms of participation (Dalton and Kuechler, 1990). While the orientation of the first, post-1968 wave centred on policy, with movements cultivating close links with political parties, the second wave has been characterised by a desire for autonomy from traditional institutions and shaped by motives which are held to be expressive and affective rather than instrumental.

Conflicting interpretations of this shift in emphasis have been offered. The most orthodox contends that political opportunity structures hold the key to understanding the interaction between state institutions and social actors. The Mitterrand election victory of 1981 recast relations between the state and civil society, giving rise to a new kind of social movement which, disaffected with the refusal of the Socialists to provide such groups with the political opportunities they sought, radicalised and followed a more autonomous path after 1988 (Fillieule, 1997). Others have argued that new social movement theory offers an inadequate framework for explaining the emergence of these grass-roots currents, which instead embody a new form of active citizenship (Waters, 1998). Where once new social movements operated within the political system, the second wave forms a ‘civic front’ in defence of specific groups all united by a desire to defend basic rights and freedoms. Their altruistic outlook, ad hoc structures and identification with ‘civic humanism’ represent a democratic revival (Duyvendak, 1994, Waters, 1998). Their new model of flexible regroupements based on medium-term engagements has also been cited as evidence of a new type of activism stripped of both
the republican notion of individuals as citizens and the communitarian sociabilities which, despite everything, managed to insert themselves between the citizen and the nation to structure the work of voluntary groups (Ion, 1994: 36–7).

Clearly, during the 1980s the relationship between the mainstream left and social movements, once fairly close, changed significantly. Symptomatic of this change is the experience of SOS Racisme. By the end of Mitterrand’s first term of office, it was suffering from widespread disillusionment with its image as a satellite of the Socialist Party. Cynicism about the Socialists’ commitment to confronting racism in general and the FN in particular led to the adoption of a different strategy by rival anti-racist groups in the early 1990s. Where SOS had attempted, with some success, to mobilise a new generation of activists around the republican ideal of equality, new groups, such as Ras l’Front and the Manifeste contre le Front National were more focused on specific, immediate objectives, than the pursuit of equal rights for all (Fysh and Wulfreys, 1998).

At the same time, the apparent ‘exclusion’ of those at the bottom of society, brought home to many by the parliamentary debate on the Revenu Minimum d’Insertion and the growing proportion of long-term unemployed among the rising numbers of those without work, led to the development of a crise de l’avenir as the realisation spread that the continuous post-war rise in living standards was now being reversed. A number of protests took place in the early 1990s which appeared to contradict some of the assumptions made by social scientists during the 1980s about greater affluence leading to ‘post-material’ forms of protest. Those taking strike action and marching through the streets were now the professional classes, not usually associated with labour militancy: Air France pilots and bank workers, or those anxious about entering professional life like the school students who demonstrated in 1994 against the Balladur government’s youth employment scheme (Castel, 1993: 717–18).

The tendency to seek autonomy from established institutions began to generalise. In the trade unions a movement had surfaced with the student protests and railway workers dispute of 1986, which were led not by the official bureaucracies, but by strike committees or coordinations (Futur antérieur, 1996). Rejecting negotiation and compromise by delegated officials in favour of a more militant approach, the coordinations set great store by the participation of rank-and-file activists in decision-making. Some of these structures became unions in their own right, activists expelled from the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) setting up Coordonner, Rassembler, Construire (CRC) in the health service and the Fédération Solidaire, Unitaire, Démocratique des PTT (SUD–PTT) in the post office, both of which now form part of the Groupe des dix federation of independent trade unions. SUD, which
recruits a high proportion of previously non-unionised workers and has won significant support in elections to post and telecommunications workplace committees, was to play a prominent role in the social movement which emerged in the mid-1990s (Coupé and Marchand, 1999: 244–5).

At the heart of this movement were the sans groups of ‘those without’. The association of the homeless, Droit au Logement (DAL), formed in 1990, and the civil rights group, Droits devant!! (DD!!), formed in 1995, pushed the issue of homelessness up the political agenda with an occupation in the rue du Dragon in the Saint-Germain area of Paris during the 1995 presidential campaign. The most prominent of all these groups, the sans papiers, immigrants made ‘illegal’ by government legislation introduced in 1994, won broad public support when their occupation of the Saint Bernard church in Paris was broken up by riot police. In the winter of 1997–98, associations such as Agir ensemble contre le Chômage (AC!), formed by the left opposition within the CFDT, and the Communist-led Association pour l’Emploi, l’Information et la Solidarité (APEIS) organised a wave of protests demanding increased state aid for those out of work. Act Up, a dynamic and highly visible Aids-awareness group, was founded in 1989 as a the result of similar frustrations with the institutionalisation of associations and the shortcomings of the left. It used shock tactics (during one protest a giant condom was fitted over the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde) to advance its argument that the inadequacies of state action leave the most marginal and vulnerable disproportionately affected by Aids, making it a ‘political disease’.

In Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) offer an explanation for the emergence of these movements. The decline in influence of Marxism, they argue, both as a political force and an analytical tool, means that the concept of exploitation has given way to the notion of exclusion. When society is viewed in these terms, attention tends to focus not on the system of relations which produces economic inequalities but on those who suffer. But without a sense of where exclusion fits into the broader picture, it becomes harder to develop a vision of an alternative society. The consequences of this were twofold: on a practical level, political engagement shifted during the 1980s to humanitarian work and the defensive reflex to relieve suffering, while in theoretical terms macrosocio-historical critiques have given way to the micro-analysis of specific situations. In other words, with social criticism no longer able or willing propose alternative solutions, those who oppose social injustice are left with little recourse other than to express indignation in the face of suffering. The humanitarianism of the 1980s, represented by initiatives such as Coluche’s Restaurants du cœur or Bernard Kouchner’s Médecins sans frontières, operated outside the frame of reference of the labour movement, and tended to represent the dispossessed as victims. Hence
the identification of the excluded as those without: the *sans parole/domicile/papiers/travail/droits*, and so on (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 416, 429). These groups combined aspects of 1980s humanitarianism, through their appeals to the rights of man and their high-profile direct action, and elements of 1970s activism, both via individual veterans of Maoist and Trotskyist groups and in their use of the *geste transgressif* designed to expose institutional bad faith (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 434).

They have also demonstrated a capacity to unite over specific concerns for a limited period around a loose, ‘fluid’ concept of citizenship based on a minimal definition of rights rather than any ideologically charged notion of republicanism. For Boltanski and Chiapello, the historical significance of the new forms of protest resides in their ‘morphological homology’ with remodelled capitalism (1999: 434). Where the bureaucratic organisations of the traditional labour movement find their ability to effect change stalled, flexible groups uniting around precise issues are able to ask participants for specific commitments over a limited period. Delegation and action by proxy are replaced by the authenticity of direct engagement in protest activities.

Leaving aside the more contentious aspects of the ‘network society’ paradigm deployed in a series of recent influential studies (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999, Hardt and Negri, 2000, Castells, 1998), specifically the notion that a fundamentally new social structure has taken shape, it is clear that some of the transformations they describe, in particular the simultaneous crises of global capitalism and the nation-state and the reconfiguring of their relations, have had a profound effect on parties and protest groups alike. For Hardt and Negri, social movements today represent a fundamental break with the past. Traditional distinctions between economics and politics are dissolving as conflicts take on a wider ‘biopolitical’ dimension and each struggle ‘leaps to a global level’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 56). Certainly, as we shall see below, it is true that groups setting out to address specific concerns are increasingly being drawn into wider struggles, while the decline of social democracy gives an intensely political dimension to the movement.

**Anti-capitalism and the far left**

We have seen how in the early 1990s a limited and sporadic revival of labour militancy took place alongside the mushrooming of autonomous associations. In the presidential election of 1995, a third important development occurred when the Trotskyist candidate Arlette Laguiller passed the 5 per cent barrier for the first time, indicating that a sizeable electoral constituency was emerging to the left of the established left.
The effect of the November–December 1995 strikes and their aftermath was to bring all these tendencies to the fore. The main trade union federations were forced to come to terms with the threat posed by the rank-and-file coordinations, which led to far greater democratic participation than in previous strike waves. There was also much greater unity between different unions and between different branches of industry. In some areas, such as the twentieth arrondissement of Paris, mass meetings were open to all and attended by teachers, postal workers, railway and metro workers, along with members of various associations. On demonstrations led by public sector workers, anti-nuclear protesters joined contingents from anti-racist groups, unemployed and homeless associations and Act-Up, indicating that the frequently made distinction between the ‘old’ labour movement and the ‘new’ social movements is in fact far less clear-cut.

After December a process of generalisation took place. This was partly due to the context of the demonstrations themselves, which reacted vociferously to the contrast between the Juppé plan and Chirac’s 1995 populist campaign theme of the fracture sociale. Subsequent protests by the sans associations and by teachers, truckers, students and school students all made reference to this general context. The intervention of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu also played an important part in ensuring that the strikes developed into a wider reaction against the neo-liberal consensus forged in the late 1980s by the mainstream parties and subsequently propagated via a range of publications and think tanks. Bourdieu consciously attempted to polarise the situation, linking the neo-liberal content of Juppé reforms to the broader question of corporate-led globalisation. In doing so, a shift in the intellectual climate took place. A famous quarrel flared up over a petition in the journal *Esprit*, when various leading academics backed the emollient stance towards the reforms taken by the CFDT leader Nicole Notat. Bourdieu condemned those behind the initiative, like the sociologist Alain Touraine, not just for signing it, but for putting their expertise at the service of the state which such movements were directed against, making them, as Bourdieu declared with some relish, ‘lackeys of the establishment’ (Wolfreys, 2000).

Bourdieu engaged in a series of initiatives which aimed both to broaden the scope of the movement and to politicise it, principally through the use of his publishing house, Liber/Raisons d’Agir, which produced accessible and polemical publications bringing some of his theoretical preoccupations to a wider audience. A Raisons d’Agir association was formed and provided the launch pad for Bourdieu’s November 1996 call for an Estates General of the Social Movement, followed, in April 1998, by an article entitled ‘For a left left’ in which he called on the various components of the social movement to oppose the neo-liberal policies of Europe’s newly elected social-democratic governments in an
‘international of resistance’, a call which later formed the basis of an appeal issued at a European level.

The proposal for an Estates General of the European Social Movement argued that the inability of social democratic parties to offer an effective alternative to ‘growing inequality, unemployment and casualisation’ necessitated the development of an ‘authentically critical counter-force’ capable of bringing these issues ‘constantly back onto the agenda’. The search for such a counter-force explains the phenomenal development of Attac, perhaps the most striking indication to date of the size of the audience for groups operating beyond the mainstream. Set up in 1998 by various trade unions, associations and radical journals following an influential article by the editor of the *Le Monde Diplomatique* entitled ‘Disarm the markets’, Attac’s goal was the imposition of a so-called Tobin tax, or ‘global solidarity tax’, on financial transactions. The money raised would then be used to fight global inequality and fund sustainable development. According to Bernard Cassen, the association’s first president, the call for a Tobin tax is symbolic of the desire to defend democracy against the threat posed by the freedom of capital to circulate. Attac’s success – by the turn of the century it had formed well over 100 local committees in France with over 40,000 members, along with an international network covering around twenty countries – underlines the growing impact of the anti-capitalist current which first came to light internationally with the November 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

One of the most prominent symbols of this emerging movement is the unlikely figure of a middle-aged sheep farmer from Larzac, José Bové. In 2002, Bové was sent to prison for his part in the dismantling of a McDonalds in Millau in the Tarn by members of his Confédération Paysanne in protest against *la malbouffe*, mass-produced processed food and the economic and environmental threat which it poses. As with other initiatives of recent years, from the anti-FN protests at Strasbourg in March 1997 (organised by a Comité de Vigilance uniting dozens of organisations) to the wave of mobilisations that followed Le Pen’s first round presidential success in 2002, Bové’s trial in Millau brought together a range of groups from across the social movement, both in France and elsewhere, in a 50,000 strong demonstration in June 2000. His trial was an illustration of both the breadth of the movement and of the way in which it was generalising. Around the figurehead of Bové, then, groups which had started out occupying derelict buildings in Latin Quarter back-streets now found themselves making common cause with international protests against global capitalism sparked off by demonstrations against the WTO on the north-west coast of the United States.

Clearly this is a period of transition when old relationships are breaking down and the ideas and aspirations which shaped and coloured them
are being recast. This raises an important point about autonomy. In 1998 a number of groups, including DD!!, SUD and the AC! unemployed association signed a declaration asserting the autonomy of the ‘social movement’ (Brochier and Delouche, 2000: 163–71). While the intention may have been to avoid recuperation by the mainstream left, the way in which the movement was developing showed that ‘autonomy’ did not really exist, neither in the sense of discrete groups working towards their own particular ends, nor in the sense that the movement could lay claim to a distinct and independent political standpoint of its own. But just as the shrinking ambitions of social democracy were creating an expanding space for these groups to occupy, so political questions previously debated within its institutions were being transposed onto the social movement. Groups like Attac therefore found themselves called upon to adopt positions on issues that went far beyond anything contained in the proposal for a Tobin tax, from the war on terror to the question of whether to vote for Chirac in the second round of the presidential poll. Such questions formed part of much bigger debates on broader points of strategy and principle, the most important being that of Attac’s role. Was it essentially a radical anti-capitalist association based on grass-roots campaigns and direct action, or a lobbying group whose aim was win the support of political parties for a Tobin tax? Perhaps it was both?

Since such groups achieve unity on the basis of identification with a relatively narrow set of aims rather than a general political outlook, these debates tend to be dealt with either in a piecemeal fashion, responding to events as they occur, or by organisational manoeuvres, highlighted by Bernard Cassen’s attempt to place his supporters in positions of responsibility when he stepped down from the presidency. The absence of a general political platform is both the strength and the weakness of the social movement, providing on the one hand the basis for unity and the capacity to mobilise widely, but carrying with it the risk either of cooptation by political parties or of paralysis, as the ability to act decisively is sacrificed for the sake of unity (Sommier, 2001: 97–110).

The search for political alternatives beyond the mainstream is an important element in the electoral success of the far left. Since Arlette Laguiller won 1.6 million votes in the 1995 presidential poll, LO and the LCR have gone on to perform impressively in elections at local, national and European level, sending five deputies to the European Parliament in 1999 and winning more votes between them than the combined scores of Hue and the Green candidate Noël Mamère in 2002. The respective campaigns of Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot highlighted some of the differences between the two organisations. Laguiller drew large gatherings to her campaign meetings in towns affected by job cuts, such as Nancy, Caen and Reims. Her calls to prevent companies in the black from making redundancies, and to make public the details of
the bank accounts of major firms and their directors, won her the support
of 10 per cent of manual workers, compared to 3 per cent for Hue
(www.ipsos.fr/CanalIpsos/poll/7549.asp).

Besancenot, meanwhile, a previously unknown postal worker, won over
one million votes, his sensitivity to the social movement reflected in his
post-election call for the unity of anti-capitalist forces. LO’s rejection
both of this proposal and the LCR’s offer to stand joint lists in the June
2002 parliamentary election stemmed partly from the organisation’s
preoccupation with building its own organisation rather than engaging
with other parties or movements. This has led it, outside of election
campaigns, to focus its activities on the workplace, dismissing develop-
ments like the anti-WTO protests and the Attac associations as distractions
which would serve no useful purpose.12 Neither of the most explicitly
political organisations associated with the new mood in French politics
have as yet found a way of addressing the question of the political
direction of the social movement. If the LCR’s enthusiastic involvement
in a range of groups linked to the social movement, notably Attac and
SUD, leaves it vulnerable to the same weaknesses as the movement itself,
then LO’s defence of its independent political stance is at times so fierce
as to risk alienating it from those outside its ranks. Despite the echo
which Besancenot’s proposal met, the thorny question of the relation-
ship between the broad movement and whatever specific, organisational
political form it might take will not be resolved overnight.

Conclusion

The progressive estrangement of French voters from the political process
can be gauged from their response to recent elections. The 1999 European
elections produced the lowest turnout for an election under the Fifth
Republic, with 53 per cent of voters abstaining. Pollsters concluded that
as much as 71 per cent of the population used the election to express
dissatisfaction with political elites (Méchet, 2000: 21). In the September
2000 referendum on the reduction of the presidential term of office,
even this figure was exceeded when nearly 70 per cent of voters abstained,
while almost two million of those who actually went to the polls only did
so to spoil their ballot papers. In the two elections held in 2002 the
number of abstentions on each of the first round votes meant that France
was to find itself with a president backed by under 15 per cent of the
registered electorate and a parliamentary majority with the support of
less than one quarter of those eligible to vote. Surveys have shown that
the majority of the population neither believe that politicians are working
for their benefit or feel represented by a political party.

Consensus, then, instead of bringing a more stable and ordered party
system, has accentuated a crisis of representation, while post-materialist society, as we have seen, has proven a surprisingly fertile ground for protests over material issues. In the late 1980s Herbert Kitschelt argued that although France had a societal potential to generate left-libertarian parties, its concrete political opportunity structure remained unfavourable to the emergence of such organisations. The effect of neo-liberalism and attacks on the welfare state in most western democracies, moreover, meant that left-libertarian concerns such as feminism, ecology, energy and anti-nuclear issues would fade and give way to ‘economic distributive’ issues (Kitschelt, 1988). By the late 1990s, however, it was clear that such distinctions between ‘new’ and ‘old’ struggles were beginning to break down.

France has witnessed both the growth of parties and associations generally associated with left–libertarianism and the emergence of organisations and networks whose primary focus is on class issues. The slow dissipation of the ideological and organisational reserves of parties of both left and right is symptomatic of the growing divide between political parties and society. This in turn explains the attraction of the diverse components of the social movement. These currents are neither ‘post-material’ nor can they be described as simply a ‘new citizenship movement’. What we are witnessing is a revival of collective protest at social inequality which is reconfiguring the relationship between a burgeoning associative network, the labour movement and the political left. But it remains a movement whose own lack of political and organisational focus has so far hampered its ability to mount a meaningful challenge from beyond the mainstream. That distinction belongs to Le Pen.

Notes

1 Le Monde, 8 August 1998.
3 Le Point, 30 May 1987.
5 Le Monde, 26 June 1996.
6 Le Monde, 15 September 1999.
8 Libération, 11 June 2002.
10 Le Monde, 8 April 1998.