

THE LONG MARCH OF THE FRENCH LEFT

RW Johnson

Macmillan 1981 pbk £8.95

ISBN 0333274180

To predict the results of future elections is always very hazardous. R W Johnson is certainly too cautious to take such a risk. Nevertheless his analysis of the rise of the French Left from 1968 till its defeat in the parliamentary elections of 1978 clearly leaves us with the impression that a Left victory in the 1981 presidential elections would be very

unlikely.

The victory of Francois Mitterrand in May 1981 came of course as a surprise to almost everybody and it would not be fair to criticise Johnson — whose book was finished in 1979 — for not having foreseen it. Indeed it was only in December 1980 after some unexpected results in by-elections that the fragility of Giscard's electorate was revealed and began to cast doubt on his re-election. But even in those conditions very few people believed that Mitterrand would be able to succeed. Only at the very last moment did such a possibility become plausible.

The Long March of the French Left should not therefore be judged on its failure to announce the 1981 victory. The real question is the extent to which the book helps us to understand how such a victory has been possible. And that is exactly where we must admit that it is of very little use.

To be sure it provides a very readable — if superficial — account of political life in France since the Second World War. People concerned with the transformation of the old SFIO into the new Socialist Party (PS) or with the history of the 'Union of the Left' will no doubt find much useful information. Where the main weakness of the book lies is in its attempt to put the changes in electoral politics into a wider analytical framework. Johnson declares in the preface his intention to link them with the changing social structure of contemporary France. But for him the two most important phenomena in that area are the erosion of religious cleavage and the postwar baby-boom: both have provided new recruits for the Left. But concerning the characteristics of capitalist development in postwar France nothing is said at all, a fateful omission, since it is there that we find the key to the rise of the Left and its 1981 victory.

Gaullism was much more than an inter-class coalition behind the figure of a charismatic leader, as Johnson would have it. The decade following the accession to power of General de Gaulle in 1958 saw a radical modernisation of French society under the hegemony of monopoly capital. The traditional sectors remained in the alliance — and were neutralised — thanks to the nationalist and populist character of Gaullist ideology. But there is no doubt that the economic and social policies of the regime favoured the interests of big capital.

That modernisation profoundly transformed the social structure — in 1954, 26.7% of the population was still engaged in agriculture while in 1976 it had fallen to 10.8% — and led to a strong expansion of the 'new middle classes'. Those social and economic changes are absolutely crucial in



order to understand the political developments since the 60s. Johnson's failure to account for that new phase of capitalist development incapacitates him in providing a rationale for such events as 1968, the growth of the PS, the crisis of the Right and finally the Left victory. Take 1968, for instance. It was first a revolt of those new middle classes, a product of Gaullist economic policies, but antagonised by the authoritarian and conservative character of the regime. At the same time it was a revolt of the working class, an expression of a revitalisation of the trade union movement linked to the transformations in the labour process brought about by Gaullist modernisation. The decline of Gaullism which followed those events — despite the electoral triumph of the General in 1968 — was therefore not, as Johnson argues, a consequence of the great man. Paradoxically it was a consequence of its very success: Gaullism had so deeply transformed French society that the very conditions for its maintenance had disappeared. The rise of the PS since the Epinay Congress in 1971 — where Mitterrand was elected first secretary — cannot be understood outside the context of the new social structure and the new contradictions that emerged in France in the 60s. The PS was able to articulate many of the demands of those sectors — contrary to the Communist Party which made the same attempt but without success during its brief 'eurocommunist' phase — and that explains its rapid growth, not the crisis of the Gaullist alliance.

From the point of view of the Right, it soon became evident that the old coalition

could not be maintained. The economic crisis rendered a continuation of the protective measures, favouring the petty bourgeoisie and small capital and which had allowed its survival, impossible. Chirac's resignation as Prime Minister in 1976, indicated the open split between the two factions of the 'Majority'. From then on, Giscard and his new Prime Minister, Raymond Barre, would force through an economic 'recovery' programme clearly favouring the most advanced sectors of capital. Trying to use the crisis to impose a restructuring of the economy, the government liberated prices and imposed deflationary measures with a view to restoring monetary stability and international competitiveness. The opposition of the 'national' sector of capital — represented by Chirac's *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR) — to those policies was such that it eventually led to the Right's eviction from power in 1981.

On all those deeply conflicting interests, Johnson is absolutely silent. He is therefore unable to present an adequate panorama of the different forces in French politics. Blind to the profound contradictions among the Right — going much further than simple conflicts of ambitions and personalities — he, on the other hand, overestimates the divisions among the Left. Principally, he cannot recognise the profound impact that almost two decades of Left unity has had and the profound need for change manifested by the French people. Because if Mitterrand won, it is not only thanks to a third of Chirac's supporters who decided to vote for him or to abstain. It is also because 25% of the communist voters — who could not accept the sectarian attitude of the PCF — opted for Mitterrand instead of Marchais in the primary. Faced with such a disavowal of its anti-socialist campaign, there was no other solution for the party than rallying behind Mitterrand in the run-off.

The unity of the Left was finally restored *in extremis* and gave it the victory. However it was only an 'electoral' unity and it is far from providing the best conditions for a socialist transformation. The alliance between the new middle classes and the working class needs now to be constructed through concrete policies and common objectives. The demands of youth and of women — the support of both groups has been vital to the victory — must also be articulated to form a national-popular collective will. To transform an electoral coalition into a new hegemonic bloc will not be an easy task. But the success or failure of the socialist experiment in France depends on its realisation.

Chantal Mouffe