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# After the Deluge: The French Communist Party after the End of Communism

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## Abstract

*Although economic problems and political developments in the late 1970s and early 1980s had already started to sap its political import and erode its electoral support, since the fall of state socialism in 1989 the French Communist Party (PCF) has found itself in an even more severe identity crisis. Much of its decline can be traced to its inability to effectively define itself ideologically and its corresponding inability to formulate an attractive and relevant set of policy positions. This article presents an overview of the historical evolution of the PCF from its zenith of political relevance to its recent decline, paying special attention to the PCF's attempt in the face of political oblivion to delineate distinctive and effective political strategies and political programs.*

Communist political parties have faced unusual difficulties in establishing identities and distinctive political programs and agendas in the aftermath of communism's collapse in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Even before this great revolution, economic problems and political developments had discredited the Marxist-Leninist ideology. It was that ideology that gave focus and distinction to Communist parties whether they exercised power in countries that they dominated or sought it in competitive western democracies and unstable developing countries (Wilson, 1993). Communism no longer appeared as a sustainable option to capitalism; Leninism and Stalinism could not compete as attractive or viable alternatives to western-style democracy (Rose et al, 1998). Faced with political oblivion, Communist parties have hunted for new ways to define themselves for voters and political leaders.

Nowhere has this quest for a new identity and program been as difficult and as fruitless as in France. The French Communist party (PCF) was

once among the top two or three competitors for power in that country and among the largest and most important Communist party outside the Soviet bloc. It now struggles to elect enough deputies to the National Assembly to qualify for its own parliamentary group. Once a major force in local politics, it tottered on the brink of irrelevance in the 2001 municipal elections. Much of this decline comes from the loss of its ideology and its inability to formulate an attractive alternative dogma and policies. This article will examine the PCF's efforts to delineate a distinctive and effective political program and strategy.

### **Programs and Parties in the New Century**

It is not just Communist parties that have struggled to retain distinctive identities in recent years. The decline of ideology that began soon after World War II as intellectuals and citizens reacted against the extremes that ideologies had produced in the 1930s and 1940s (Bell, 1960). Political ideologies that offered all-explaining, rational, and revolutionary solutions to society's problems lost favor to more pragmatic politics based on meliorating policies achieved through muddling through. This trend away from comprehensive and millenarian ideologies affected Communist parties in and out of power. The decline of ideological fervor and conviction contributed to the spread of corruption in Communist countries. In democratic countries, Communist parties found their ideologies to be obstacles to broadening their electoral appeal. There, competing parties carried little ideological baggage and relied less and less on clearly defined party programs.

The tendency to move away from ideologies or even clear party programs continued through the 1970s and 1980s as democratic parties sought to maximize their electoral appeal. In the past fifteen years, political parties in established democracies have undergone significant transformation in their basic organization, strategies, and tactics (Katz and Mair, 1995). These changes have reflected new cultural values and attitudes, political changes, socioeconomic alterations, and changes in the terms competition facing these parties and their societies. While some observers maintain that the process is one of political party decline, it is more accurately a process of adaptation through trial-and-error to respond to new features of contemporary society. Parties are becoming little more than labels that candidates for public office may use as they seek election to public offices.

The parties' democratic function of setting policy agendas is now little more than listening to the advice of pollsters and the "findings" of focus groups. Parties pay less attention to linking citizens with government now than to providing "service-oriented" organizations of professional vote-getting machines to aspiring candidates. Party bureaucracies remain important even as individual party membership has declined because they provide technical expertise, campaign management, survey research, and public relations skills to their parties' candidates. Party officials also play key roles in raising and allocating the vast public and private funds needed to run modern election campaigns. Modern parties are becoming more and more "client-serving" organizations than vehicles to present alternative ideas and policies to the public.

The flight from policy and program is stimulated in part by the recognition that voters make their choices less on the campaign issues than on established party loyalties and traditional cleavages, even when those cleavages have lost significance in the contemporary world. After World War II, political and socioeconomic leaders embraced a consensus on state planning and management of the economy, a mixed economy of public and private enterprises, and a generous social-welfare state (Zysman, 1977). It was a dominant but not unchallenged viewpoint, supported broadly by elites and masses for nearly 30 years. Which parties could best establish and implement these policies became the heart of public debate and electioneering in most western industrial democracies. The state's role in the economy and society came under attack in the mid- to late 1970s when Keynesian economics failed to control simultaneous recession and inflation. The costs of social welfare programs exploded as they became more generous and more widely used at the same time that the size of the working force that paid for them stabilized and then began to decrease.

By the 1980s, most industrialized democracies had begun to retreat from the postwar socioeconomic consensus. High costs of social services, large state deficits, stagnant economies, and growing economic competition from low-cost labor areas threatened long-term economic decline and unemployment. Above all, unification of European economies in the European Community (now the European Union) required the elimination of competitive advantages bestowed by differing patterns of state subsidies and government regulation among its member states (McGowan, 1996). In addition, the rise of a new generation of people who had not experienced war

and depression gave higher priority to esthetic and individual freedoms than had earlier generations (Inglehart, 1990). The new “postmaterialist values” wrought important social and political changes and reordered policy priorities in many advanced industrial democracies (Inglehart, 1997). These cultural changes prompted a reaction from the far Right. Extreme rightists in several European countries exploited racial antagonisms against immigrants, urban decay, fears of globalization, and eventually populist resistance to economic changes to carve out their own, sometimes large, electorates (Betz, 1998). None of these three challenges to the postwar social-welfare state consensus—the neo-liberal socio-economic agenda, new postmodern political and cultural values, and the counterrevolution from the far Right—has yet won the endorsement of a popular consensus in any major industrial social-welfare state. Nor have they entirely supplanted the older social and political cleavages. They compete with each other and the older cleavages in a political party setting where policy is declining as a mobilizing force for voters and members.

Neo-liberalism, postmodern values, and populist reaction have nevertheless introduced issues and policies that have come to dominate politics and policy-making in many industrialized societies. Positions on these issues often cut through the established parties that have dominated politics over the past fifty years or more. Hence, parties often play down such issues in their platforms since these new issues may divide their own ranks. In addition, the new themes have not yet proven to be successful in mobilizing voters. Political parties often invoke these new themes in their campaigns but their commitment to them is marginal, often contradictory, and expedient rather than principled. Parties of both the Right and Left (1) claim to have defined a “third way” but the policy content of the third way is unclear, changing, and by no means supported by a public consensus (Wilson, 1998; Giddens, 1998). It is in such an era of incoherent and unwanted policy programs among political parties in general that the French Communist party seeks to find a program that will give it specific meaning and prevent its disappearance from the French political scene.

### **The Rise of the French Communists**

The PCF is the oldest functioning party in France. It was formed in 1920 when the majority of the French Socialist party of the era, the French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO), accepted the Moscow-

dominated Third International and its Twenty-One Conditions. Now known as the French Communist party (PCF), it soon became one of the most loyal Communist parties in backing the Soviet model of political and socioeconomic development and in supporting Moscow's foreign policies. It was also among the largest Communist parties in Europe. As one analyst noted, the French Communist party "was, and is, a party of a wholly different type" committed to the interests of a revolutionary movement more than to its winning elections (Bell and Criddle, 1994: p. 2).

On several occasions during its history, the PCF has shifted from hardline to more conciliatory platforms (Tiersky, 1974). In the past, these strategic shifts were dictated by Moscow; more recently policy shifts have been the calculations of the party's own leaders. As the Cold War developed in the late 1940s, the PCF showed no hesitation in aligning with Moscow. The PCF's advocacy of Moscow and its call for revolution in France soon isolated it in a ghetto on the fringes of mainstream domestic politics. The Soviet Union remained always its model and master; East European Communist states were "the future that works." But these ideas and the party's isolation in French domestic politics did not prevent the PCF from having a major impact on France from the mid-1940s to the mid-1980s.

### **Influence without Power**

The Communist party's ghetto position in French politics kept the party out of government. But it did not prevent it from exercising influence over the content of politics and even national policy. With a quarter of the vote and seats in parliament until 1958, it was a political force that had to be included in the calculations of mainstream, pro-democratic parties. The PCF reached its peak of influence during the French Fourth Republic (1946-1958). It was the largest party in terms of membership and voters. The Party's appeal was anchored in the working class voters around major industrial centers, especially in the north. It also had important support among small farmers in central and southeastern France. Throughout the Fourth Republic, one in four French voters supported the Communist candidate. The Party hit its maximum support in 1946 when the PCF took 5.4 million votes or 28.2 percent of the overall vote in the National Assembly elections of that year. Its political isolation kept it out of power. From that position of permanent opposition, the Communists offered both the promise of revolu-

tion and support for “every demagogic cause with a robust contempt for cost, consistency, or practicality” (Williams, 1966: p. 88).

It had a vast, well-developed, and hierarchical nationwide organization that no other French party possessed. Its members and activists were disciplined and organized in structures that operated at the workplace as well as in public political debates and campaigns. Lenin’s concept of “democratic centralism” ensured full control from the top of the party hierarchy. A large body of full-time militants organized its actions at the grassroots level. It had a popular national newspaper, *L’Humanité*, and regional and local daily papers to spread its message. The PCF controlled the largest trade union in France, the French Confederation of Labor (CGT) (Ross, 1982). It ran a number of other auxiliary organizations for students, women, farmers, sporting and vacation activities, families, and other groups that further extended its influence in society. It thus provided a counter society and alternative way of life for those who felt alienated by or left out of the dominant capitalist society (Kriegel, 1972). Its promise of revolution attracted the support of the disgruntled and the despairing (Almond, 1954; Cantril, 1962). For those many French citizens who believed that loyalty to the Revolution of 1789 required them to vote for the party furthest to the Left, the PCF was the natural party of the Left. The party’s truly valiant sacrifices during the German occupation of France gave the PCF a nationalistic air in spite of its subservience to Moscow on foreign policy matters.

During the Fourth Republic, the PCF’s large delegation in the National Assembly was a major factor in the governmental instability of that era. Its deputies, usually a quarter of the total number, were always available to overthrow governments but never to install new ones. That meant government coalitions had to include most parties from the Left to the Right in vague and weak coalitions. The weakness of the executive left the government vulnerable to pressures from all parties, even those in permanent opposition. The Communist party’s deputies could stop proceedings in parliament by manipulation of the legislative rules or, when that approach failed, by disruptive tactics such as banging desk tops, blocking corridors, or other disorderly behavior. At its leadership’s call, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators would turn into the streets for demonstrations on behalf of one or another Communist cause. The PCF could attract thousands to public rallies and political meetings. The CGT could close down factories, pub-

lic transportation, and mines with calls for strikes. The party's activists covered walls with posters or graffiti.

The Communist party's anti-democratic stance in domestic politics and pro-Soviet attitudes in foreign policies removed it as a possible participant in coalition politics. This forced the Socialist party to align with parties to its right in so-called "third force" coalitions when it would have benefited from more progressive alliances. The PCF's strong ideological commitment to Marxism-Leninism kept the Socialists from moderating their stand as happened among the German Social Democrats and in many other European Socialist parties. The French Socialists felt compelled to retain a fundamentalist and dated attachment to Marxism and class warfare to avoid losing its Left wing to the PC. But that Marxist rhetoric limited the Socialists' appeal to moderate voters and to Center-Right parties as potential coalition partners.

Most important, while the party could not win control at the national level, it developed a solid base in local politics (Schain, 1985). Even when isolated during the Fourth Republic and early Fifth Republic, the Communists elected a large number of municipal governments. At its peak in 1977, the PCF led governments in 72 or a third of the 221 cities with populations over 30,000. These local offices gave the party additional revenue and patronage. They also allowed the party to show its competence in government. Communist local governments were usually free of the corruption that plagued other parties' municipal office holders. Even though Communist local governments faced hostile national authorities, they were successful in winning funds to meet the needs of their communities. Communist dominated cities had their full share of public facilities such as bus systems, parks, street lights, swimming pools, and youth centers (Tarrow, 1977). They were also great advocates for private businesses located in their city limits. Even in a party deeply committed to its ideology, pragmatism in governing at the local level always prevailed over doctrine.

Such pragmatism prevailed despite the PCF's adherence to an orthodox version of Marxism-Leninism. Its program embraced these doctrines as implemented in the Soviet Union by Joseph Stalin and his successors. The PCF looked forward to ending party pluralism in France and the permanent rule of the people's party. It called for expropriations, nationalizations, and collectivization but in ways that would not frighten modest prop-

erty owners in its ranks. The PCF repudiated western democracy as a fraud and called for the eventual installation of a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” It denounced what it saw as denials of fundamental liberty in France and other western democracies but accepted Soviet violations of human rights as necessary for the success of the revolution. Within its ranks, democratic centralism stifled dissent and opposition. In comparison with other European communist parties, the PCF was more revolutionary in promise, more loyal to the Soviet Union’s foreign policies, more tolerant of the Soviet Communist party’s totalitarian controls over its society. The PCF promoted class awareness and class warfare even though much of its own support came from small farmers, low-level bureaucrats, and even artisans, craftsmen, and people with small businesses. At times the party tempered its revolutionary voice for tactical purposes (Tiersky, 1974). But its overall loyalty to fundamentalist Marxism-Leninism gave the party a clear identity and program from its origins until the mid-1970s.

### **The Fifth Republic and French Communism: A Struggle for Identity and Political Space**

Charles de Gaulle’s ascension to power in 1958 and the subsequent establishment of the Fifth Republic began an era of decline for the French Communist party. The PCF was nearly alone in opposing de Gaulle’s return to power and the ratification of the Fifth Republic’s Constitution. It opposed the new mixed presidential-parliamentary system and became the chief advocate for the parliamentary system of the Fourth Republic that it had denounced and tried to sabotage until 1958. But the new constitution was endorsed in a referendum by over eighty percent of the voters. In the 1958 National Assembly elections for the new republic, the PCF vote fell by over 1.5 million voters from its results in 1956, dropping from 25.9 percent of the vote in 1956 to only 19.2 percent of the 1958 voters. In the 1962 elections, the PCF improved to 21.7 percent of the vote, a share of the electorate that it maintained for the next fifteen years.

The Fifth Republic brought two institutional changes that were very adverse to the interests of the Communist party. The first institutional change was the introduction of a powerful, popularly-elected president. Over the years, the presidency has grown in power although it is vulnerable to periods of weakness under “cohabitation” when the president is from a different party than the majority in the National Assembly. The major po-



litical prize is the presidency. Parties that cannot present serious presidential contenders have become second-class participants in French politics. The PCF recognized early on that it had little chance of winning the presidency in popular elections. Voters might be willing to elect Communist deputies and even accept Communist ministers but even Communist sympathizers would be leery of voting for a Communist president. Poor results in the presidential election would discourage its activists and reveal the party's fundamental weakness. As table 1 shows, the PCF preferred to avoid contesting presidential elections and endorsed the Socialist candidate before the election in two of the six presidential campaigns.

In three of the four cases where Communist candidates were present on the first ballot, they withdrew and called for their voters to support the Socialist candidate on the second ballot. (2) As a result, win or lose, the spokesman for the Left became the Socialist presidential candidate or victor. This acceptance of second rank on the Left even while the PCF was still outpolling the Socialists (until 1978) helped rebalance politics on the Left in favor of the Socialists.

The second institutional change was the two-ballot majority electoral system for the National Assembly. This system required a majority for a win on the second ballot, eliminated candidates gaining less than 12.5 percent of registered voters for the second ballot, and usually left only two candidates on the decisive second ballot. Isolated extremist parties, like the PCF in 1958 and the far Right National Front since 1986, are severely handicapped by this two-ballot electoral system. The electoral rules provided an incentive for the Communists and eventually the Socialists to agree among themselves to rally the voters of the Left to support whichever party's candidate had the most votes on the first ballot. An informal agreement to this effect was first reached in the preparations for the 1962 National Assembly elections.

**Table 1**  
**Voting Results in French Presidential Elections for the PCF and PS,**  
**1965-1995**

Year	Candidate	Percentage of First Ballot Vote
1965	PCF: no candidate, backed Mitterand PS: Francois Mitterand	32.2%
1969	PCF: Jacques Duclos PS: Gaston Defferre	21.5% 5.1%
1974	PCF: no candidate, backed Mitterand PS: Francois Mitterand	43.4%
1981	PCF: Georges Marchais PS: Francois Mitterand	15.4% 25.9%
1988	PCF: Georges Marchais PS: Francois Mitterand	6.8% 43.4%
1995	PCF: Robert Hue PS: Lionel Jospin	8.6% 23.3%

When that proved successful in increasing both parties' parliamentary delegations, the electoral system became a strong incentive for further efforts to unite the Left in a broader coalition. During the 1960s and 1970s French domestic politics centered on the effort to achieve a Union of the Left. The alliance was most successful at election times but it did bring the Communists and Socialists to agreement (albeit short-lived, 1972-1977) on a Common Program of the Left. Both the Communists and Socialists made policy concessions in establishing this unified platform. The Communists accepted a modified market economy, distanced themselves from Soviet foreign policy goals, and moderated some of their ideological commitments. The Socialists renewed their commitment to Marxism and class conflict rhetoric. They also accepted the nationalization of a lengthy list of enterprises and banks, new government regulation of the economy, a better voice for trade unions in managing private and public enterprises, and increased expenses on social welfare programs at the very moment when those programs were breaking their budgets.

The French Communists' flirtation with Eurocommunism was brief and hesitant in comparison to the experiences of other European Commu-

nist parties (Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1978). During the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s, the PCF began moderate criticism of human rights in the Soviet Union and some of Moscow's foreign policies. It moderated its program to reduce references to the "dictatorship of the proletariat," one-party rule by the workers' party, revolution, and other undemocratic verbiage of Marxism-Leninism. It accepted France's continued participation in the European Community and indicated that it would not insist on France's immediate withdrawal from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The French leadership did not embrace Eurocommunism with the enthusiasm of Communist leaders in Italy, Spain, and other European countries. The PCF's slow pace of reform and its limits on the content of its changes left many observers skeptical about its sincerity. Some believed French Eurocommunism was purely an electoral tactic that, like earlier periods of reduced militancy such as the Popular Front or postwar Tripartism, would be abandoned soon.

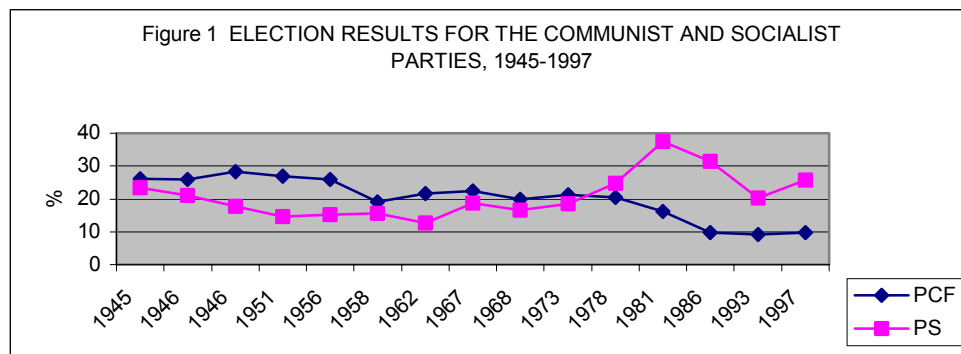
Indeed, the skeptics appear to have been right. As preparations began for the 1978 National Assembly elections, polls showed the strong prospect of a victory by the Left. PCF strategists noted, however, that the electoral benefits of their party's moderation were going primarily to the Socialist party. Polls indicated that the PS would outvote the Communists for the first time since World War II. The PCF's more democratic style and pragmatic program were not attracting more voters for the PCF but rather encouraging moderate voters to vote Socialist. These were voters who were generally unhappy with twenty years of Gaullism and who had feared a Left dominated by the Communists now could vote for the Socialist party because of the moderation of the PCF. Communist leaders also feared that some of their traditional supporters might not see the differences between the PS and PCF and vote Socialist from the first ballot. Fearing victory by the Left with the PS enjoying all the growth, the PCF leader, Georges Marchais, repudiated his party's acceptance of Common Program of the Left in the fall of 1977. He claimed, without much evidence to support him, that the PS had abandoned the principles of the Common Program and had returned to its bourgeois ways. In short order, the party also abandoned the Eurocommunist reforms it had adopted over the previous decade. It ended criticism of Soviet foreign policy and civil rights abuses. The PCF, alone among West European Communist parties, endorsed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and backed the suppression of Solidarity in Poland. It renewed its commitment to the Marxist-Leninist model of governing by the dictator-

ship of the proletariat and talked anew of the pending revolution of the proletariat.

The PCF then conducted a campaign for the 1978 elections that was directed more against the Socialists than against the Gaullist majority. The PS avoided responding in kind in order to consolidate its image as the embodiment of the Union of the Left despite its ally's misbehavior. The divisions of the Left and their vituperative exchanges, though, raised questions about the Left's ability to govern. In actual balloting, the parties of the Left outvoted the Gaullists and Giscardians but their divisions allowed the Right to keep its National Assembly majority.

The abrupt reversals in both doctrine and electoral strategy confused many PCF followers. For Frenchmen and women of all political stripes, the PCF's return to orthodoxy seemed to confirm the historical wisdom that one could not trust the Communists. A lively debate began in many PCF cells over the party's responsibility for the election defeat, the wisdom of the shifts in doctrine and strategy, and, above all, the party's insistent and verbally violent attacks on their erstwhile Socialist allies. Despite unprecedented internal opposition, the PCF persisted in a violent polemic against the PS for the next three years (Jensen and Ross, 1984).

The Communist fears of losing electoral preeminence to the Socialists were not misplaced but their attempted solution proved unsuccessful. In the 1978 elections, the Socialists received more votes than the PCF for the first time since 1936.



With the Socialist party and its leader, François Mitterrand, still advocating the Common Program, the PS became more than ever the heart of the Union of the Left. The Union of the Left had become a powerful symbol and slogan for all left-wing voters; the PS alone became its champion and benefitted from its acceptance even among voters who once supported the PCF. Communist concerns that such a reversal in the relative electoral strength of the two left-wing parties would be long-lasting have also been confirmed. Since the shift back to a hard-line, revolutionary policy in 1977, the PCF has steadily lost electoral support. It also lost many of its activists and those who remained lacked the militancy and conviction of the past. There was lively internal debate among party members, much of it critical of the party's leadership and choices (Jensen and Ross, 1984). The party leaders tried to impose democratic centralism to end or control the debate. They failed to end the debate but they did protect the party's central leadership and organization from their worst internal critics. Intellectuals, whose support of the PCF was long a point of pride for the party, pulled away from the PCF and communism. The PCF entered a long period of serious decline.

### **French Communism in Decline**

After an initial loss in 1958, the PCF generally held its own during the first two decades of the Fifth Republic. However, the next twenty-five years were ones of serious, unabated losses in voters, members, activists, morale, and influence in national politics. Some of this deterioration can be traced to socioeconomic and cultural changes in industrial societies in general. Others—and in the PCF's case the most important—were political changes that deprived the party of its distinctiveness and purpose and the failure of the leadership to carry out effective reform early enough to reverse the decline.

France, like most other European industrial democracies, experienced major shifts in the nature of its economy between the mid-1960s and early 1980s. The core of heavy industry where Communist political strength was greatest suffered major decreases in employment and in economic importance. The party and its union were unable to stop the restructuring that affected their members and this reduced their support not only numerically but also morally among workers who no longer could trust the Communists to defend their jobs. Economic development around the world created new competitors with lower labor costs and more modern plants. In the past, key

industries were supported by government subsidies in order to avoid the loss of jobs and to protect industrial sectors, such as steel, regarded as crucial to modern economies. This was no longer possible because the European Union imposed strict limits on subsidies and other government protection to enterprises in the interest of “leveling the playing field” and facilitating competition among all of its members. Much of this industrial downsizing occurred during the 1980s under Mitterrand’s government of the Left with PCF participation or tacit support (Smith, 1998).

Shifts in the nature of work and the spread of prosperity also contributed to changes in the meaning of social class. Classic Marxist views of class and class warfare no longer applied to modern societies. France has never been a country where social class had major significance in guiding voter choice and has even less importance now (Nieuwbeerta, 2001: pp. 121-135). Awareness of social class and the sense of belonging to a class were poorly developed there. Other social cleavages such as religion, region, and a general alignment with the Right or Left are much stronger predictors of how French voters will choose than is social class (Boy and Mayer, 1993; Pierce, 1995).

Another social change that has affected the PCF’s support is the general affluence of the postwar era. The French speak of the “forty glorious years” (1946-1986) of uninterrupted economic growth and prosperity. At first, affluence had limited effects on Communist support. Indeed, by drawing rural young people to the factories and plants of the urban areas where they could be influenced by Communist party activists and union organizers, affluence initially seemed to buttress rather than weaken electoral support for the PCF (Hamilton, 1967). Over time, however, widespread, long-term prosperity reduced the economic anxieties that fostered communism (Inglehart, 1990: pp. 248-288). Younger generations who had not experienced want or war began to give higher priority to other values than economic and physical security. Postmaterialist values include a greater value for aesthetic concerns, decentralization and reduced bureaucracy, social solidarity, and equality. As a result, political debate shifted away from the traditional economic and materialist concerns of the various forms of Marxism to new values and issues that do not fit into Marxist analysis. As Inglehart notes, by the 1980s communism was “a spent electoral force” with no hidden reservoir of support to permit its revival (Inglehart, 1990: p. 266).

## **The PCF: Lost in the Victory of the Left**

The 1981 presidential election presented a new opportunity for the Left to win power in France (Penniman, 1988). President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's hopes for reelection were encumbered by a generally lackluster first term. More important, Giscard had offended his major and much larger ally by a seven year unsuccessful effort to shift the Gaullists to his own political movement. Tensions between the two parties were so intense that there was no agreement on a single candidate. Jacques Chirac became the Gaullist challenger to Giscard and on the first ballot the two ran campaigns directed more against each other than against the left-wing rival. As a result, the Center-Right went into the presidential contest highly divided with a number of top Gaullists publicly stating their preference for a government of the Left rather than another seven years of raids on their supporters by the Giscardians.

The Left, however, was in no position to take advantage of the Right's divisions. It too was deeply split. Mitterrand presented himself as the candidate of all the Left with a program drawn largely on the Common Program of the Left. The PCF still maintained that the Common Program was a fraud and presented Georges Marchais as its presidential candidate. As in the 1978 National Assembly elections, the first ballot campaign featured vituperative attacks against their "natural allies" rather than a concerted attack on the Gaullist-Giscardian majority. Mitterrand easily outpolled Marchais on the first ballot, 25.9 versus 15.4 percent of the vote. The PCF had lost a million voters compared to its results in the 1978 National Assembly election. Stunned by the loss of so many of its voters and no longer willing to accept blame for another defeat of the Left, the PCF called on its supporters to back Mitterrand on the second ballot. On the other side, Chirac stepped aside and made a "personal" endorsement of Giscard. But several prominent Gaullist leaders, especially older ones, declined to endorse Giscard and a few even indicated their intent to vote for Mitterrand. In the event, Mitterrand won handily with 51.8 percent of the vote. Mitterrand immediately dissolved the National Assembly and called for new elections to that body. The Socialists confirmed their preeminence with 37.8 percent of the vote; the PCF failed to improve much on its results in the presidential elections with only 16.7 percent of the vote.

The Socialists won a majority of the seats all to themselves in 1981. This was only the second time in the history of French republican government that a single party had a majority in the National Assembly. In the spirit of the "Union of the Left," Mitterrand nevertheless invited four Communists to become ministers in the Socialist government headed by Pierre Mauroy. With only four ministers in a government of forty ministers, the voice of the Communists was difficult to hear. In addition, the portfolios allotted the Communist ministers were relatively minor. In part, this gesture of forgiveness allowed Mitterrand to renew the notion of a Union of the Left. It was also a way of coopting the PCF to minimize its opposition in parliament and the public to the Socialist-dominated government.

The PCF remained in the government until 1984. Its ministers were unable to give a Communist imprint to any major governmental policy. The PCF felt free to be critical of some actions of the "government of the Left." But its views were ignored by the Socialists. Its complaints about the government's economic policies of rigor and industrial restructuring were generic and had little impact on the public and no effect on the government. It had no say in implementing the nationalizations that dominated the first three years of the Mitterrand presidency. How ironic that the PCF was not able to have a role in these policies since the nationalization platform had been included in the Common Program of the Left on the insistence of the Communists. In addition, the PCF was unable to formulate credible alternative policies to those of the government in other areas of great concern to the Communist party and its membership. This was notably the case with restructuring the steel industry.

During the rest of Mitterrand's presidency, 1984-1995, the PCF remained out of government even when the Socialists controlled it. The PS never again had a single party majority in parliament. When it governed, it did so with the support of the PCF in parliament but without the participation of PCF ministers in the governments. Out of government but backing the Socialist governments, the PCF's positions were obscure and difficult to present. The party's continued electoral decline further weakened public interest in its program and policies. During periods of cohabitation when President Mitterrand had to share power with a Center-Right prime minister and parliamentary majority (1986-1988 and 1993-1995), the PS faced the challenge of supporting Mitterrand and opposing the Center-Right governments. In such a setting, the PCF could claim to be more clearly the party of



opposition. But even under cohabitation, the PCF proved incapable of defining itself from the PS and its allies. The PCF had difficulties in formulating clear alternatives to those offered by the Socialists. Its freedom of action was hindered by internal divisions, the crisis of worldwide communism, and its recognition that it needed PS support on the second ballot if it were to remain in the National Assembly. The once mighty PCF was now a second-rate party dependent on its larger, Socialist ally.

That point was driven home clearly after the 1988 elections when the PCF fell below the minimum number of seats required to have its own parliamentary group. The PCF faced the loss of important prerogatives that come with a parliamentary group: membership on committees, a voice in setting the chamber's agenda, office space, and other administrative advantages. The PS, however, rescued the PCF from this political disaster by voting to lower the minimum number of deputies from thirty to twenty. The PS acted less in the fraternal spirit of the united Left than on the basis of hard-ball politics. The rule change that allowed them to have their own parliamentary group came as a reward to the Communists for their deputies' support of the Socialist candidate for president of the National Assembly.

By the end of the 1980s, the PS economic policies had shifted from trying to build a socialist economy based on nationalized enterprises to a market economy competitive on international markets. The PCF stood on its fundamental Leninist position of nationalization of the means of production and creating a "socialist" economy. In its weakened position, however, the PCF was not able to stop or influence the Socialist government as it privatized the firms nationalized in the early 1980s as well as firms nationalized decades earlier. Nor could the Communists prevent the Socialists from accepting neo-liberalism and the market economy. The Socialist governments between 1988 and 1993 effectively dismantled the public sector of the economy, eliminated thousands of blue collar jobs in restructuring key industrial sectors, reduced government economic regulation, and watered down labor protection laws. The PCF occasionally protested these actions but their votes were there when needed to maintain the Left's parliamentary majority.

The PCF had no option but to support the PS government. It did speak out against some of these changes but its opposition was weak and ignored both by the government and by the public. It was clear that the a-

agenda of the government of the Left was set by the Socialists. Communist alternatives were slow in coming, contradictory, and unpersuasive in content. The party was trapped between its ideological commitment to fundamentalist Marxism-Leninism and its need to compete in a democratic electoral system that tied it to an increasingly dominant and moderate Socialist party. Hence, the PCF often repeated its dogma but few believed it since the party continued to vote in support of the PS governments. By the time the Left had lost its parliamentary majority in 1993, the PCF had virtually no identity of its own.

Communist fears that the preeminence of the Socialists would lead to erosion of their electoral support came true. While there have been a few minor “recoveries” from earlier losses, the overall trend in Communist vote totals is down. Once the single largest vote getter in national elections, the PCF now struggles for third or fourth place. The party that once won 5.5 million votes now polls 2.5 million in a much larger population. Any electoral advantages gained by the Left’s unity and government actions have accrued to the Socialists and not the Communists.

The victory of the Left in 1981 did not bring many benefits to the French Communists. Their ferocious attacks on the Socialists, on Mitterrand personally, and on the Common Program did not end until the announcing of the results of the first ballot of the 1981 presidential elections. Their about face for the second ballot fooled few voters and disillusioned many of its hardline activists. Mitterrand needed the PCF votes for the second ballot in 1981 but the PCF leaders realized that their voters would support him no matter what the party declared. The Communists could hardly claim much credit for the Left’s successes. Their influence over the policies and actions of the governments of the Left was negligible. Even its dissents from those policies received little press coverage and even less public attention. The victory of the Left confirmed the Communist party’s second-class status on the Left after the PCF had had clear dominance and enjoyed the advantages of the powerful symbol of the first party of the Left for over thirty-five years.

### **The Challenge from the National Front**

One of the great accomplishments of the Fifth Republic was the taming of the far Right. A powerful political force in the 1930s, the far

Right had paid the cost for its collaboration with the Nazis in the years immediately after the end of World War II. However, the political potential of the far Right was demonstrated in the mid-1950s by the electoral success and political impact of the Poujadists. Under the Fifth Republic, the extreme Right was once again confined, never able to muster more than five percent of the vote in national elections until the mid-1990s. Then, Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front (FN) emerged in the mid-1980s as a powerful political force on the far Right. The National Front took strong, demagogic stands on popular issues that mainstream parties had tried to deal with in moderate, legal ways: immigration, asylum and naturalization issues, law and order, and urban decay. The FN's major electoral threat is to mainstream right-wing parties. But it also appealed to some left-wing voters, especially former PCF voters who were often concentrated in areas of heavy immigrant populations and declining cities and suburbs. Out of government, uncommitted to democratic liberties and procedures, the FN could and did out-demagogue the PCF on these issues. In addition, the FN soon assumed the anti-system, anti-democratic electoral option once represented by the PCF. The PCF's commitment to share power with the Socialists, even when that alliance was forced by electoral considerations, prevented the PCF from following its traditional anti-system role. As a result, the FN collected protest voters that once cast their ballots for the PCF. By the 1993 legislative elections, the FN was outvoting the PCF in national elections. In the 1997 National Assembly elections, the FN took a larger share of the blue collar and lower middle class vote than did the PCF (Perrineau, 1997a and 1997b). The FN took over half as many additional voters (15.2 percent) than did the PCF (9.8 percent). Once France's largest party, the PCF was now in fourth place and falling.

The National Front's threat to the PCF went beyond competition for votes. The FN picked up populist causes that the PCF might have exploited. These include immigration and naturalization; the decline of public services such as transportation, education, health, and housing; government globalization; government fiscal and budget austerity; urban and suburban decay. But the FN's racist, anti-democratic, and fascist twists to these issues and offered extremist solutions that the PCF could not match. For the PCF to take positions on these issues raised the risk of being labeled collaborators with the far Right. In sum, the FN's threat to the mainstream parties included the Communist party as well as those on the Center-Right and contributed to the electoral decline and marginalization of the PCF.

## The PCF and the Collapse of Worldwide Communism

The French Communist party faced its greatest crisis with the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s and 1990s. For nearly all of its seventy years, the PCF was dedicated to further the interests of the Soviet Communist party and the USSR's foreign policies. Unlike many other Communist parties in non-Communist states, the PCF had either not seen or ignored the signs of decay in the Communist world during the 1970s and 1980s. As Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to reform Soviet communism, Communist parties elsewhere in the world experimented also with *perestroika* and *glasnost*. But not the French party. As Eastern Europe repudiated Marxism-Leninism, PCF leader Georges Marchais blamed socialism's failure there on the underdevelopment of that region (*L'Humanite* 12 September 1989). Party members who saw the changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as causes for their own party's transformation, were isolated or expelled while the leadership hailed the need to find examples for its future in "real existing socialism" of these failing states (Bell and Criddle, 1994: pp. 39-43).

No longer guided by Moscow, the PCF's foreign policy followed those principles that were in place before the fall of the USSR or that the USSR would have taken had it still existed. It supported the Soviet regime in Afghanistan for the few years that it lasted. It spoke out against the West's involvement in the Gulf War and UN sanctions against Iraq. It opposed the European Union and played a major role in the "no" campaign for the French referendum on the Maastricht Treaty. It opposed NATO and its expansion to include former East European Communist states. The PCF competed with the FN to be the loudest voice of anti-Americanism in France.

The PCF was determined to remain "Leninist after the Leninist system had collapsed in its homeland," . . . feigning "to ignore the collapse of the Soviet Union, waiting for a revolutionary call which may never come . . ." (Bell and Criddle, 1994: p. 5). The expected future was still represented by the Stalinist economic models of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: a state-owned, centrally planned, socialist economy. The economic systems in the USSR and Eastern Europe had not "failed;" they did not succeed because of an unfavorable milieu. Note the explanation by one French Com-

munist leader of the fall of Eastern Germany, “this paradise of athletic youth.”

If only there had not been that West Germany so obscenely present thanks to television and its eternal visitors laden with presents like so many Santa Clauses.  
(Lauren, 1990: p. 41).

The PCF continued to evaluate these regimes and their economic systems in particular as achieving “a globally positive balance sheet.”

Some of the PCF’s embarrassment about the collapse of communism and its continued advocacy of that failed vision was the result of its growing political redundancy. Still present in a Socialist-dominated government, its voice was muted and its actions in government and parliament were contradictory to its official doctrine. The PCF was passed over by the press and public because the PCF was no longer seen as a key player. Much more attention was devoted to the rise of Le Pen’s National Front than the discomfiture of PCF leaders in explaining their orthodoxy to a Leninist doctrine that had failed and had been repudiated by its founders.

### **A New Leader: Trying to Put New Wine in an Old Bottle**

From 1969 until 1994, Georges Marchais led the French Communist party. His leadership style was firm and centralized according to the Leninist principles democratic centralism. His twenty-five years of leadership accompanied near steady decline in the PCF’s electoral strength, organizational morale, and effectiveness as a political force in national politics. His persistence in holding onto leadership despite unrelenting decline attests to the PCF’s commitment to other values than the electoral success that most democratic parties seek and use to judge the achievements of their leaders. For the PCF’s hardcore militants, what counted was the party’s commitment to a revolution that they still believed possible if not imminent. Marchais did face several challenges to his leadership, especially in the late 1970s. But the party’s norms of democratic centralism and the penetration of the party’s apparatus by loyalists allowed Marchais to prevent revolt and force dissidents out of the party. As long as he remained General Secretary, there was little chance of fundamental changes in the PCF’s dogma and policies. His commitment to revolution and to the reality of nineteenth century class

warfare was unswerved by socioeconomic and cultural changes, electoral defeats, or the failure of what had long been his ideal for the future—the socialist society and economy of the USSR. Even after the disclosures by the Russians themselves of the Stalin’s atrocities and the policy failures of Stalin’s successor, Marchais and his PCF continued to judge the achievements of the Soviet regime as “globally positive.”

In 1994, Marchais turned leadership over to Robert Hue, a political unknown even in the party. Lacking blue-collar origins, Hue is inevitably introduced in the press as a former male nurse and judo champion. His first task after becoming General Secretary was to win over the party apparatus put in place by Marchais and totally loyal to Marchais and his fundamentalist views. Hue represented the PCF on the first ballot of the 1995 presidential election in a campaign more directed at winning the support of the party’s rank-and-file than at maximizing the PCF vote. He increased the PCF vote slightly from the 1988 presidential election but in that earlier campaign some PCF voters had been siphoned off by a dissident, ex-Communist candidate, Pierre Juquin. Hue’s vote in 1995 (8.6) fell slightly below the combined vote (8.9 percent) gained in 1988 by the official PCF candidate (Lajoinie-- 6.8 percent) and that of the PCF dissident (Juquin—2.1 percent).

Under Hue, the PCF finally began the adjustment to the post-Communist era. It has been a slow process since Marchais left behind a party apparatus committed to his fundamentalist Leninist-Stalinist vision. Under Hue, there has been more debate, less hierarchical subservience, and hence greater weakness within the party apparatus. Several factions supporting or opposing various versions of modernization have developed and flourished under Hue with the General Secretary showing little interest and even less power to curtail them. This unusual pluralism has weakened what had been one of the party’s chief assets, its internal discipline and unity.

Hue’s policy goals are extensive but by no means revolutionary. He rarely invokes traditional Marxist-Leninist ideology or class warfare rhetoric. In the 1997 National Assembly elections, he stressed addressing France’s problem of chronic high unemployment through government programs to create new jobs. The PCF gave unconditional support to imposing the thirty-five hour workweek and strict limits on the ability of enterprises to cut their employees. Hue pushed for better treatment of the least well off:

a dramatic increase in the minimum wage, lower health costs, and maintenance or extension of public services such as transportation. The PCF continued its opposition to the European Union's movement toward a single currency and advocated radical changes in the EU to promote its modest social agenda to benefit the average worker. More recently, the PCF has also grasped the torch of anti-globalization, sending four bus-loads of demonstrators to protest at the July 2001 G-8 meeting in Genoa.

The PCF managed a modest increase in its first ballot vote in 1997 (9.8 percent) compared to 1993 (9.2 percent) but not the kind of increase that would be expected in a year when the Left "won" the election. Furthermore, its 1997 second ballot vote at 3.6 percent was its lowest ever. After the 1997 elections, the Socialists lacked a parliamentary majority of its own but had enough support from minor leftwing parties, the ecologists, and especially the PCF to form a government. Prime Minister and PS leader Lionel Jospin recognized that this government did not represent the traditional *union de la gauche* but rather a looser combination of *la gauche pluriel*. In addition to ecologists and independent leftists, the new Socialist government of Lionel Jospin formed in 1997 included three PCF ministers. One of the ministries accorded the PCF, transportation, was in an area of traditional Communist interest.

Once again drawn into a Socialist-dominated government, the PCF faces again the challenge of projecting a separate image to voters. But the Communist voice in the policy processes of the Jospin government has been limited. The transportation portfolio even became a liability since the PCF minister had to reduce large deficits in railways and urban transportation while his party called for maintenance of public transport at its current level and consumer costs.

During the first three years of the Jospin government, it appeared that other branches of the alliance were more effective in getting their policy agendas addressed than were the Communists. The Greens were listened to more often than were the Communists. This has changed in the last two years as the PCF has adopted a more aggressive style. This role as hesitant partner allows the PCF to distinguish itself from the other members of the government coalition. While it remains in the government and backs it in nearly all parliamentary votes, the PCF has forced the government to delay and in some cases to modify legislation. As Hue explained in May 2001,

“We are not engaged in a bidding war [with our partners]. I am not the ‘Mr. More’ of the ‘majority’” (*Le Monde*, 22 May 2001). Instead, the PCF will engage in “constructive protest” against government policies it feels are inadequate. The PCF is now more aggressive in pointing out its disagreements with government proposed policies and uses street protest politics as ways to distinguish itself from the PS. But these distinctions are not very credible when the PCF in practical politics allows the PS versions to make their way into laws with the support of PCF deputies.

An example was legislation in spring 2001 restricting employment practices and restructuring by private enterprises. The PCF had played a leading role in the public outcry against the downsizing plans of the yogurt manufacturer Danone. Demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins were led by the PCF and CGT to protest the resulting loss of jobs during the fall of 2000. In the winter of 2001, the PCF and CGT again took the lead in attacks against the closing of all French branches of the British retailer, Marks and Spencer. The government had introduced legislation to tighten restrictions on employment reductions and provided new benefits for redundant workers to be paid for by the former employers. The PCF initially went along with the legislation but late in the process announced that it would not vote for it unless it was significantly toughened to better protect the workers. After a delay and further Communist grandstanding on the issue, the legislation was modified slightly to give the PCF a moral victory and then duly passed by the leftwing coalition.

The PCF decline is unabated at the start of the new century. The share of vote going to the Communists dropped in most national, regional, and local elections. Membership dropped from 790,000 claimed in the early 1980s to an estimated but probably exaggerated 150,000 members in the late-1990s. Members who remain tend to be less active, less militant, and less disciplined than the hardcore supporters that once made the PCF’s ranks a powerful political body in the streets as well as in the poll booths. Financial problems forced the PCF to eliminate some forty full-time positions at its party headquarters in Paris. The party seemed oblivious to the irony of conducting its own reduction in forces at the same time that it was attacking Danone, Marks and Spenser, and other enterprises for their restructuring.



Readership of *L'Humanité*, the PCF's historic daily newspaper, fell and a variety of efforts to revive it have failed. In 1999, *L'Humanité* announced that it would drop the hammer and sickle from its masthead along with its slogan "Newspaper of the French Communist Party." But by the spring of 2001, the paper faced a new financial crisis and continued losses of subscribers. Most European trade unions have been losing members over the past twenty-five years. But the French Communist trade union, the CGT, has lost members at a faster rate than unions in other countries and than other French trade unions. More important, the CGT's influence in French labor relations has declined as other unions have become more effective. Once the unquestioned leader of the French labor movement, the CGT now contends with unions that appear more radical, more modern, and more dynamic.

Among the most serious aspects of the PCF's decline has been its losses in local politics. The PCF's strong presence and success in local politics was once a key source of political power and financial support for the Communists. The PCF lost the mayorships in 23 cities in 1989 and lost an additional 200 cities in 1995. The 2001 local elections confirmed this trend: 26 city halls were lost by the Communists including those in ten cities with populations over 30,000. The 2001 defeats were also significant because several of the larger cities that they lost were seemingly solid redoubts that the PCF had controlled for decades. With these losses, the party's influence in local politics fell further and its financial resources, already suffering, were strained by the loss of patronage, contracts, and other financial advantages afforded by control of local governments.

A central question that the Communists must now address is whether there is still political space for their party, however they define it. In the past, it was the party of opposition, an anti-system, a prorevolutionary party *par excellence*. Everyone knew what it stood for and where it was on the political spectrum. It served the interests of the discontented in French society and those who mistrusted liberal democracy. In recent regional, municipal, and national elections, the PCF has found other parties who are better able to capture the votes of the alienated. These parties have taken advantage of the weakness and confusion of the Communists to occupy political space once held by the PCF. As one PCF deputy complained recently:

We are too accommodating when our very survival is at stake. Our potential voters abstain or vote for the Greens, [the Trotskyist Arlette] Laguiller, or the FN.

(Patrice Carvalho in *Le Monde*, 22 May 2001).

The PCF has a longstanding fear of being outflanked on the Left. Regional elections in 1998 and municipal elections in 2001 showed some growth for the extreme Left. Communists fear that too much moderation on their part will drive more of their voters to the far Left parties. The far Right FN poses an electoral threat as well with its ability to out-demagogue the now establishmentarian PCF on populist issues. In addition, there is a small PS schismatic party headed by Jean-Pierre Chevènement on the left of the PS that actively seeks disaffected Communist voters. Compared to these rivals, the PCF seems stodgy and old, something out of the past with little to contribute in solving France's contemporary society. Voters find little attraction in the old communism that the PCF embodied for so long; nor do they see the PCF's current attempts to champion new issues as credible or attractive. By waiting too long to reform and modernize, the PCF may now find that its potential political space is filled by others.

Hue's attempts at reforming the PCF have met with real obstacles from outside the party. But they have also brought turmoil inside the party. Hue lacks the centralized discipline that once held the party together in times of crisis; he does not have a coterie of loyal mid- and upper level leaders that he has selected and can trust to impose his will on the party apparatus and membership. The party heads toward the crucial elections in 2002 with several aspirants for the PCF's presidential nomination. It has not yet set a policy for cooperation with the PS in the legislative elections. PCF factions struggle with each other within and between party units at all levels over policy issues and political strategies. Few of these issues will be resolved at the Party's special congress in October 2001.

## CONCLUSION

For seventy-five years, the French Communist party was guided by a fundamental commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology as interpreted by Moscow. There were eras when the party muted this attachment for temporary, tactical, political purposes (Tiersky, 1974) The Popular Front (1934-1937), Resistance and Tripartism (1941-1946), and the Union of the Left

(1972-1977) were three major examples of such eras of accommodation. But the party never renounced its belief that Marxism-Leninism would arrive by revolution and bring a socialist state ruled by the proletariat. Even during its moderate eras, it continued to talk of the revolution and to conduct actions designed to promote their ultimate ideological goals.

In democratic societies, parties lack credibility if they do not attract many voters. The PCF recognized this fact and established more modest policy-oriented goals for its electoral programs. In some instances, these policies were clearly linked to their ultimate revolutionary goals. The PCF's support of nationalization of private enterprises, for example, represented small steps toward the ultimate ideological goal of state ownership of the means of production. In other cases, especially in programs for local elections where the party would have to carry through, the policy programs promised additional public services and greater attention to the neediest. In general, the tensions between the party's ideological commitments and its practical policy proposals were minimal and party members knew (and many voters from other parties suspected) that the party "had not changed" and remained a party of revolution rather than one of electoral politics. Even after communism had failed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Georges Marchais held to the belief that his party's historical ideology was still valid.

As the new century begins, there still are many PCF members and parts of the party's apparatus who cling to the old values and goals. Robert Hue appears to be trying gently to pull the party away from its old ideology without abandoning its revolutionary traditions. Indeed, protest, he argues, is "constructive" in pressuring the Jospin government, employers, and other rightwing forces to pay more attention to the problems of the neediest. Beyond these protests and demonstrations, Hue has not produced many new policy proposals. He opposes much but the PCF does not offer many clear policy alternatives. As the 2002 presidential and National Assembly elections approach, it is likely that "constructive protest" may emerge as not only the PCF's tactics but also its chief policy contribution.

## Notes

1. The Center-Right parties that have often governed in Western Europe complain that their neo-liberal agenda has been stolen by

their left-wing rivals and they recognize the limited public tolerance of key elements of that agenda, notably any dismantling of the social-welfare state (see Wilson, 1998; Boeri et al, 2001: pp. 8-50; Giddens, 1998).

2. The one exception was in 1969 when the Socialist candidate, Gaston Defferre, was eliminated on the first round. The 1969 run-off occurred between a Gaullist (Georges Pompidou) and a Center-Rightist (Alain Poher) with the PCF calling for abstention

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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