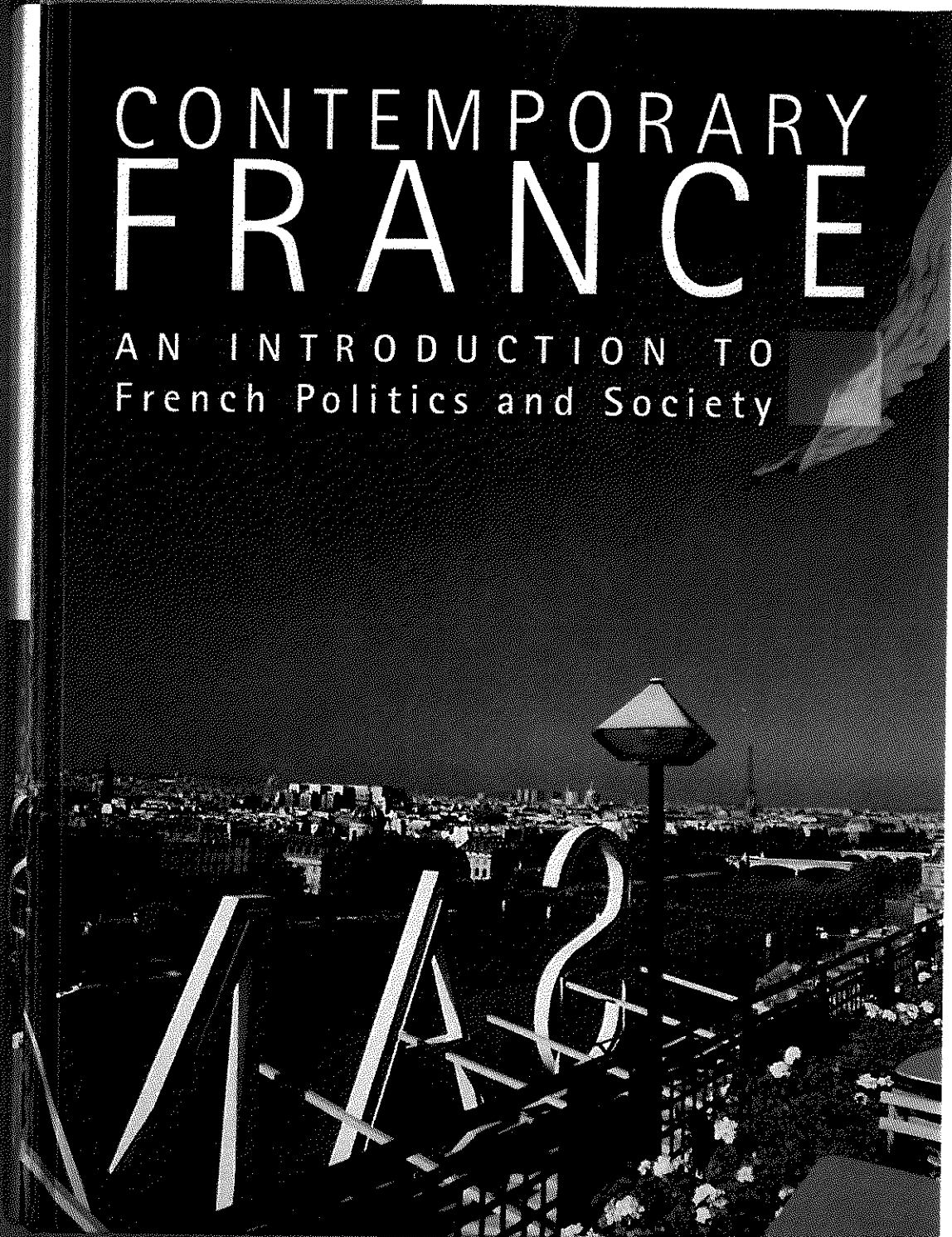


David Howarth

Georgios Varouxakis

# CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
French Politics and Society



First published in Great Britain in 2003 by  
Arnold, a member of the Hodder Headline Group,  
338 Euston Road, London NW1 3BH

<http://www.arnoldpublishers.com>

Distributed in the United States of America by  
Oxford University Press Inc.,  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY10016

© 2003 David Howarth and Georgios Varouxakis

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronically or mechanically, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without either prior permission in writing from the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the United Kingdom such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency: 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

The advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of going to press, but neither the authors nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0 340 74186 4 (hb)

ISBN 0 340 74187 2 (pb)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Typeset in 10/12 Palatino by Charon Tec Pvt. Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

What do you think about this book? Or any other Arnold title?  
Please send your comments to [feedback.arnold@hodder.co.uk](mailto:feedback.arnold@hodder.co.uk)

## FRENCH SOCIETY TODAY

*For Jean-Marie Le Pen, the halt is evident and spectacular. Nevertheless, his ability to retain his votes [in the second round of the presidential elections] shows that the widespread discontent whose vehicle he has been for the last twenty years has resisted the splendid republican mobilisation between the two rounds [of the presidential elections]. It is a proof that the social malaise persists; that the cultural and social fracture has become, as they say in the vocabulary of surgery, an open fracture. ... Because France is not going very well: in terms of employment, of production ... The pockets of under-development will not be reduced but by a dynamic economy, a generator of wealth. ... No matter how necessary might have been the pursuit of the beautiful anti-racist burst between the two rounds, we need to persuade ourselves that we will not bring to an end the tumour unless we cure its causes: insecurity, certainly, the degradation of the urban fabric, but also, and moreover, unemployment, failure at school – which is a failure of the school system itself – the progressive paralysis of the public services and the state. ... All this is for tomorrow. We might as well, for one evening, let ourselves indulge in unadulterated joy. Decidedly, this sacred country, as Tocqueville and de Gaulle thought, is not equal to itself except in exceptional circumstances. (Jacques Julliard, *Affront lavé*. Le Nouvel Observateur, 9–15 May 2002: 49; emphasis added, authors' translation).*

### VERSIONS OF MALAISE: FROM LA FRACTURE SOCIALE TO L'INSÉCURITÉ

French society today seems almost distilled in the above selections from an article written by one of France's most distinguished commentators immediately after the second round of the presidential elections, when Jean-Marie Le Pen had just been defeated and, therefore, *'dile nouveau nous pourrions être fiers de notre pays'*, as Julliard put it. The French who agreed with Julliard's views could indeed be proud of having avoided what a British newspaper dubbed the 'A Front National' (alluding to the extreme right leader's success in qualifying for the second round after the result of the first on 21 April

2002), by giving a resounding and almost unprecedented 82 per cent of the vote to Le Pen's opponent, Jacques Chirac, in the second round. And France's friends and lovers abroad did shed a tear or two at the result of the second round and the jubilation that followed. Yet, Julliard is no less right in alerting his readers to the deeper causes of the protest vote for the candidate of the National Front: *le malaise social ... la France ne va pas très bien: ... mécontentement diffus ... la fracture culturelle et sociale ... l'insécurité ... la dégradation du tissu urbain ... le chômage ... échec de l'école ... paralysie progressive des services publics et de l'Etat ...* It reads like a compendium of the ills of French society today. Of all these causes of *malaise* usually invoked in contemporary France, none was more *à la mode* during the electoral period from April to June 2002 than *l'insécurité* – in the same way as *la fracture sociale* had captured the mood of the moment during the electoral campaign for the 1995 presidential elections (and, arguably, given victory to Jacques Chirac, who adopted the concept and promised to alleviate the condition described). Many tried to dismiss the fears of insecurity and play down the problem referred to by the term, accusing those who used it of being victims of an *obsession sécuritaire*. Yet, the term was here to stay, it turned out, and those who tried to pretend that the problem complained of did not exist proved to have done so at their peril. Those – primarily Socialist politicians – who tried to dismiss talk of *l'insécurité*, not least out of fear that it could play into the hands of xenophobic racists (who blamed the problem squarely on foreigners and immigrants) did not manage to wish it away. And those (many) who blamed the media for having created Le Pen's relative electoral success by overplaying the theme of insecurity and showing too many grim details of urban delinquency and crime may have to think again whether the problem is the presentation of these unpalatable traits of everyday life in French society on people's television screens and newspaper pages, or rather the fact that they are as prevalent as they appear to be. It is said by many in France that the fact that images of 'papy Voise', an elderly man brutally beaten by his attackers, were shown incessantly on television screens on 20 April 2002 (the day before the first round of the *présidentielles*) may have added to the anxiety felt by the public and increased to Le Pen's vote. But is that really the problem? Is the messenger to blame for the bad news? It seems not. Rather, it is more to the point to accuse politicians who have tried for a long time to suppress debate on issues like crime, juvenile delinquency, the – disproportionately great, according to all statistics – part played in crime and delinquency by immigrant youths and the causes thereof, and the ever-more talked of *incivilité* (another recently coined term) of having unwittingly made Le Pen's bed for him. Most of the politicians in question failed to address such issues directly and straightforwardly – for noble reasons, perhaps, fearing that by doing so they could raise a backlash against foreigners and immigrants, or simply because of considerations of 'political correctness'. However, events have shown that failure to discuss the issues does not lead to their elimination.

Simply, given that the problem is there for great numbers of members of French society to see (and suffer from), it is Le Pen and his party that benefit,

as they are seen as the only ones who really care for the victims of crime, the only ones who really 'listen' to the people and their problems. Of course Le Pen's solutions are oversimplistic and often foolish, but this is not immediately evident to people who despair of anyone doing anything for them. It is the lack of any debate among mainstream politicians on the causes of crime, delinquency and *incivilité* that left the field open for the extreme right to present itself as the only hope of many segments of French society. If there had been serious debate, perhaps most of its solutions would have been easily exposed as at best insufficient and superficial, at worst outright dangerous and unacceptable. It is this message that Jacques Chirac seems to have grasped when he declared that he had 'heard' France immediately after the 21 April first round, if one is to judge by the priorities of the caretaking government that he appointed after his victory in the second round 2 weeks later. Jean-Pierre Raffarin's government gave priority to security issues and lavished all sorts of promises for improvements in this domain if elected in the legislative elections. The experiment seems to have paid off, if one is to judge by the landslide victory of the pro-Chirac *Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle* (UMP) in the June 2002 legislative elections. As the editorial of *Le Monde* put it immediately after the second (final) round of that election: 'The French have indeed come out clearly in favour of change; just as they opted for the left in 1997 in the hope that unemployment would be brought down – which it was – they have voted for the right in 2002 in order to halt the breakdown in law and order' (Jean-Marie Colombani, *Le Monde*, 18 June 2002).

### FROM PLANNING AND THE TRENTE GLORIEUSES TO THE STATE'S IMPOTENCE

How did it come to this? France was a society that had achieved unprecedented rates of development, growth, modernisation, urbanisation and prosperity after the Second World War. What is now seen as a problem – immigrants of foreign descent – was then a necessity and a blessing imposed by the country's rapid industrialisation and the concomitant need for labouring hands. Most of the immigrants were actively sought out and invited to come to France and contribute to its development. France, a traditionally rural society of peasants in its majority, was transformed after the war into a highly urbanised society as a result of a real *exode rurale* by people who sought – and could find – better employment in the urban centres. This was the famous *trente glorieuses*, the glorious thirty years, almost three decades of impressive growth between the late 1940s and 1973. Significantly, this growth had been primarily state-planned and state-sponsored, to an extent unknown in countries like the UK. This is important in terms of understanding contemporary frustrations at the state's inability to promote similar processes and find solutions. The past has created high expectations about the role of the state in France, and today the state is seen as unable to deliver what in

French eyes are its essential obligations to society and its citizens. The idea that the state is not omnipotent and that there are things it cannot do and should not be expected to do, aired more and more – though half-heartedly and with characteristic reluctance – by French politicians these days, meets with a mixture of disbelief, frustration and sulkiness in a population that had been used to other ideas.

### A SOCIETY IN PROLONGED CRISIS?

When did things start to go wrong? Such developments and processes are by definition complex and no single factor can explain them. However, the beginning of problems came with the global oil crisis of 1973, which hit France hard. Since then, France has been in a spiral of constant decline and *malaise*. As far as relations between state and society and perceptions thereof are concerned, matters have been complicated by the processes of Europeanisation and globalisation. Although further and tighter European integration was actively promoted by France itself, particularly from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s, the constraints this process imposed and is imposing on the French state's scope for manoeuvre in all sorts of areas have attracted more and more critics, by whom the French state is seen as increasingly impotent. Even more dreaded in France is so-called 'globalisation', regarded by most French people as another name for 'Americanisation' – the imposition of American cultural, social and economic patterns all over the world, and the consequent disappearance of France's distinct identity. The astonishingly rapid consequences of globalising markets and economic and financial practices have dealt a very severe blow to French reliance on and confidence in the French state and its capacity to protect its citizens. Voter apathy, abstention from elections (almost 40 per cent in the June 2002 legislative elections), general indifference to politics and anything resembling a community are some of the consequences. Observers of French society in recent years are struck by the ever-increasing advances of individualism, of people's self-absorbed pursuit of personal pleasures, hedonism and consumerism. In this context it should be noted that *Loft Story*, the French version of the unashamedly voyeuristic television show *Big Brother*, became a great success when it was introduced to France in 2001. This phenomenon provoked endless debates regarding its social and sociological significance, with most participants in the debates criticising the programme, claiming never to have condescended to watch it, meanwhile sounding fairly familiar with what was going on. The most successful and most read novelist in France today is Michel Houellebecq, whose books exhibit a degree of cynicism about politics, a focusing on the pursuit of sexual gratification and personal passions and a self-destructive turn that have shocked many observers, both in France and abroad. Both his admirers and his critics find that his works reflect tendencies of contemporary French society (Marc Weitzmann, 'Houellebecq, aspects de la France', *Le Monde*, 7 September 2001). Such observations are anything

but new, of course. They are at least as old as de Tocqueville's and his contemporaries' worries in the early nineteenth century, but de Tocqueville's predictions about what the future held (if nothing were done to prevent the unpalatable aspects of modernisation) seem to have been borne out with frightening accuracy in some respects.

### CHANGING PATTERNS OF EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT, AND THE NEW KINDS OF POVERTY

To turn now to some more concrete data about French society today, let us start with changes in employment and employment patterns. France had in 2000 a population of more than 60 million, a population that seems to be increasing, but also getting older. France has a working population of 24 million people, 88 per cent among whom are wage-earners. Among that working population, 13 million are men and 11 million women. Just over one-fifth of this active population are employed by the public service (*fonction publique*), in other words 5.4 million French people are *fonctionnaires*. It is the wage-earners who seem to be most exposed to unemployment and job precariousness. This question of precarious employment is becoming one of the most serious social problems in France today. According to the statistics of INSEE (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques*), in March 2001, 2.2 million among the wage-earners (9 per cent of the active population) were employed in a particular form of work, consisting of fixed-term contracts, interim missions or aided contracts. Interim missions counted for 2.5 per cent of the active population, fixed-term contracts for 3.91 per cent, apprentices for 1.1 per cent, and aided contracts for 1.71 per cent. Now, these forms of employment taken together accounted for only 3 per cent of wage-earners in 1983. Such forms of employment are instruments of flexibility which reduce costs more and more for enterprises. People practising these various temporary forms of work particularly tend to be women, young people and people less qualified than the average wage-earners who find themselves in permanent employment. In March 2001, 16.4 per cent of the active population were working part-time. This category breaks down to 30 per cent for women and 5 per cent for men. Unemployment was, on 31 January 2001, at 9 per cent (2 209 000 people were seeking work). Unemployment is very unequally spread depending on sex, age, studies and qualifications. In March 2001, the unemployment rate for active men was 7.1 per cent, while for active women it was 10.7 per cent. For people between the ages of 15 and 24 years, the unemployment rate was 18.7 per cent; for those between 25 and 49 it was 8.4 per cent; and for those older than 50 years unemployment was 6.1 per cent. It needs to be noted, however, that the relatively low rate for those above 50 can be explained to an extent by the fact that the rate of activity for over-50s is relatively feeble. Moreover, it is they who stay the longest in unemployment: in March 2001 the average

length of time in unemployment for those over 50 was 24.5 months, against 14 months for people between 25 and 49, and 7 months for the younger group. Even more than age, it is qualifications that seem to be a determining factor. Those without a diploma in unemployment in March 2001 were 14.1 per cent; those with a 'bac +2' (two years of post-secondary education) were 5.2 per cent; while those with higher-education qualifications were 4.9 per cent. Finally, there is serious disequilibrium depending on socio-professional category: in March 2001, the unemployment rate of workers and employees was 11 per cent, against 3.1 per cent for higher staff (*cadres*) and the *professions intellectuelles supérieures* ('Les France de 2002', *Le Monde*, 10–11 March 2002: 16). It is obvious that some categories of the population are more vulnerable than others.

Up to the 1970s, poverty and social exclusion touched mostly older people and particularly the rural world. Today, the face of poverty and exclusion has radically changed. It affects new population groups, often installed in major urban centres (*grandes agglomérations*): the young, single-parent families, salaried wage-earners in part-time work and asylum seekers. Another novelty of recent years is the emergence of a new social category, the 'working poor', people who work in low-paid activities, mainly in fixed-term contracts. There are increasing numbers of homeless people who also work: around 30 per cent of those deprived of abode at the beginning of 2001. According to INSEE, 86 000 persons were *sans domicile fixe* (without fixed address, SDF) in 2001. They either slept in the streets or were offered accommodation by some organisation. The SDF are a group composed mainly of young people and males: two-thirds are men and 36 per cent are between 18 and 29 years old (while this slice of the population represents 23 per cent of the French population) ('Les France de 2002', *Le Monde*, 10–11 March 2002: 16).

### FOREIGNERS, IMMIGRANTS AND SCAPEGOATS

Under such conditions of generalised insecurity, accentuated by an overall anxiety about the future of France and its way of life (almost invariably seen as unique and more or less superior to any other), foreigners easily become scapegoats. Among a sizeable part of the population – one in four of the French said in opinion polls after the elections of 2002 that they agree with most of Le Pen's views in general – this takes the form of anti-immigrant feeling, xenophobia and racism directed against foreign immigrants living in France or against French citizens of foreign descent, no matter how remote (see more in Chapters 4 and 5). Another form in which 'the other' and everything that is seen as coming from abroad is rejected is anti-globalisation agitation, which, in France, is at its most organised and vociferous. It remains to be seen how the relationship of France with the European Union will develop in the new environment of EU enlargement eastwards (see more in Chapter 9) but opinion polls already show that the French population is among the most reluctant in the EU.