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## French populism in times of COVID-19. Chapter 5, France

Laura Chazel

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# **Populism and the Pandemic**

## *A Collaborative Report*

Edited by Giorgos Katsambekis & Yannis Stavrakakis

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**POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY**  
**POPULISMUS**

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Giorgos Katsambekis  
Yannis Stavrakakis



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## 5. France

On 16 March 2020, Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic, declared that his country was 'at war' against the new COVID-19 virus, a declaration followed by the implementation of a lockdown policy that partly ended on 11 May. Since the beginning of the crisis, Macron had expressed his fears concerning the lack of coordination at the European level which could lead to the consolidation of populism around the world. Simultaneously, he recalled the irresponsibility and the lack of solidarity of populists that 'don't protect you [in times of] crisis [and] don't protect you the next day.'<sup>47</sup> Following a minimal definition of populism, based on people-centrism and anti-elitism,<sup>48</sup> two populist parties can be identified in France: Marine Le Pen's radical right *Rassemblement national* (National Rally, RN) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical left *France insoumise* (Unbowed France, FI). Both mobilize a people/elite dichotomy to address the crisis, and construct each of those categories in an *exclusionary* or *inclusionary* way depending on their respective ideologies. During the same period, the political *establishment* increased its anti-populist discourse in a bid to give more legitimacy to experts.

Both the RN and FI called for respect of the lockdown while still criticizing the government's reaction considered as disorganized by Mélenchon, and as too permissive by Le Pen. They both consider that the COVID-19 pandemic validates their respective ideologies, and they see the crisis as an opportunity to build a 'new world.' According to them, the crisis: (1) shows the failures of neo-liberalism; (2) validates the importance of regaining France's lost sovereignty; (3) reveals the authoritarian tendencies of liberalism; (4) highlights the failure of the European Union. Although they both develop a sovereignist, anti-establishment and critical discourse regarding globalization, the projects they defend differ.

The RN identifies globalization and open frontiers as the main culprits of the pandemic. Le Pen continues to draw a people/elite dichotomy associated with an *exclusionary* frontier between 'native-born French' and 'immigrants.' She argues that the government mismanaged the crisis by giving priority to 'migrants' over residential care homes for senior citizens (Ehpad), and by increasing violence after allowing some early-release of prisoners. According to Le Pen, this (dis)organization testifies the 'collapse of the sovereign and managing functions of the State.' Therefore, the government effectively 'contribute[d] to deepen[ing] the confidence divide between the French people and their ruling elites.'<sup>49</sup> She insists on the fact that the lockdown is not respected in sensitive urban zones and draws a new frontier between 'disciplined native French people' and 'unruly immigrants.'<sup>50</sup>

On the other side, Mélenchon considers that the pandemic is due to an 'ecological crisis.' He warns against the 'shock doctrine', which could lead to an authoritarian liberalism by imposing anti-social measures and by adopting measures that threaten freedom such as the state of health emergency and tracking. One can observe an important shift in his speech. Whereas in 2017 Mélenchon chose to leave aside the rhetoric of the left,<sup>51</sup> he now mobilizes signifiers

<sup>47</sup> Victor Mallet & Roula Khalaf, 'FT Interview: Emmanuel Macron says it is time to think the unthinkable,' *Financial Times*, 16 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/3ea8d790-7fd1-11ea-8fdb-7ec06edeef84> (accessed 13 May 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2017, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 2005, London: Verso.

<sup>49</sup> Interview of Marine Le Pen, CNEWS, 27 February 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=535930443772710> (accessed 12 May 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Max-Valentin Robert, 'Nationalism in times of pandemic: How the radical and extreme-right framed the COVID-19 crisis in France,' *BilGi Prime Youth blog*, <https://bpy.bilgi.edu.tr/en/blog/nationalism-times-pandemic-how-radical-and-extreme> (accessed 12 May 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Paolo Chiochetti, 'Make way for the people! Left-wing populism in the rhetoric of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's 2012 and 2017 presidential campaigns,' in Giorgos Charalambous & Gregoris Ioannou (Eds) *Left Radicalism and Populism*

from socialist ideology: collectivism, planning, requisitioning. He adds to this rhetoric a post-Marxist and Green dimension, for instance by explaining that the future world should be based on 'ecological collectivism.' He draws three oppositions. Firstly, he continues to rely on an opposition between a 'German Europe' and its 'rogue leaders' versus a 'Latin Europe' of 'sincere Europeans.'<sup>52</sup> He also attempts a *reversal of the stigma* by opposing 'ideologues' (the liberals blinded by their ideology) to 'organized pragmatists' (the opposition represented by FI). Thirdly, he opposes 'liberals' ('every man for himself'), represented by Emmanuel Macron, to 'collectivists' ('all together'), represented by his movement. He continues to construct 'the people' in an *inclusionary* way by deploying a strategy of 'common causes' which targets 'the weakest, the most isolated, the most destitute' citizens facing the neo-liberal offensive.

Since the beginning of the crisis, mass media have regularly pointed out the 'blindness', the 'denial', and the opportunism of populists who would have 'take[n] advantage of the anger.'<sup>53</sup> More generally, the French *establishment* has warned against the 'populist threat' in three ways. Firstly, by accusing populist actors of merely criticizing without putting forward any concrete solutions. Secondly, by further emphasizing the role of experts in the public space. Both the RN and FI responded to this 'technocratization' of the debate by condemning the 'lies' of the executive and asked, once the crisis is over, the government to be accountable to the citizens. This rhetoric is fuelled, and largely justified, by the controversies linked to the executive's lies revealed by *Mediapart* in April 2020<sup>54</sup> – negation of the shortage of masks and circulation of false information on the worthlessness of wearing masks to slow down the pandemic. Mélenchon has also, repeatedly, warned against the dangers of a 'lockdown of democracy' and the 'omniscience of experts.' Thirdly, populists have been accused of spreading conspiracy theories according to which the virus has directly originated from a Chinese laboratory. In fact, contrary to Mélenchon who rejects such 'theories,' Le Pen declared it was legitimate to 'doubt' and 40% of her voters think the virus was created 'intentionally' (this view is adopted by only 19% of Mélenchon's voters).<sup>55</sup>

The controversy around Didier Raoult, an international renowned infectious disease expert, Professor of microbiology in Marseille, illustrates the debates around populism and expertise well. His figure has been highly operationalised within conspiracy circles but also by populist actors. Raoult began to gain notoriety after claiming he had found a treatment for COVID-19 based on chloroquine. He quickly became one of the favorite public personas in France. Often accused of 'health populism,' he divides the medical and political *establishment*, mainly because of his scientific methods, and is sometimes described as a 'charlatan,' others as a 'genius.' Both

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in *Europe*, 2019, London: Routledge; Philippe Marlière, 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon and France Insoumise: The Manufacturing of Populism,' in Giorgos Katsambekis & Alexandros Kioupiolis (Eds) *The Populist Radical Left in Europe*, 2019, London: Routledge.

<sup>52</sup>Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 'L'Europe allemande frappe encore l'Europe latine', *Blog de Jean-Luc Mélenchon*, 5 May 2020, <https://melenchon.fr/2020/05/08/coronavirus-une-periode-deveil-des-consciences-politiques-entretien-avec-la-presse-europeenne> (accessed 11 May 2020).

<sup>53</sup> Alain Frachon, 'Le virus, les populistes et leurs modèles,' 7 May 2020, *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/05/06/le-virus-les-populistes-et-leurs-modeles\\_6038900\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/05/06/le-virus-les-populistes-et-leurs-modeles_6038900_3232.html); Philippe Boulet-Gercourt, 'Trump, Bolsonaro, Johnson: radiographie de l'aveuglement des populistes face au coronavirus', 17 April 2020; *Nouvel Obs*, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/coronavirus-de-wuhan/20200417.OBS27638/trump-bolsonaro-johnson-radiographie-de-l-aveuglement-des-populistes-face-au-coronavirus.html>; Lucie Soullier, Abel Mestre, 'Coronavirus: La France insoumise et le Rassemblement national veulent profiter de la colère,' 12 May 2020, *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/05/12/coronavirus-la-france-insoumise-et-le-rassemblement-national-veulent-profiler-de-la-colere\\_6039375\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/05/12/coronavirus-la-france-insoumise-et-le-rassemblement-national-veulent-profiler-de-la-colere_6039375_823448.html) (all accessed 12 May 2020).

<sup>54</sup> Yann Philippin, Antton Rouget & Marine Turchi, 'Masques: les preuves d'un mensonge d'État,' *Mediapart*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/020420/masques-les-preuves-d-un-mensonge-d-etat?onglet=full> (accessed 20 May 2020).

<sup>55</sup> 'L'origine perçue du Covid-19. Ifop pour Fondation Jean Jaurès et L'Observatoire du conspirationnisme,' *Fondation Jean Jaurès*, March 2020, [https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2020/2803/117275\\_rapport\\_covid\\_19.pdf](https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2020/2803/117275_rapport_covid_19.pdf) (accessed 14 May 2020).

RN (in favor of a generalized prescription of chloroquine) and FI (Mélenchon considers Raoult 'too hated by "important" people to not arouse interest')<sup>56</sup> took him seriously. Given his growing notoriety, the government also showed interest in his research despite the controversies surrounding him. On 11 March, Raoult was chosen as a member to sit on the COVID-19 scientific council (although he eventually refused), and Macron visited him on 9 April, qualifying him as a 'great scientist.' However, the presidency then insisted that this visit did not mean 'legitimizing [Raoult's] scientific protocol.'<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to other European countries, in France the confidence in the executive has fallen during the COVID-19 crisis. At the end of April, 80% of French people considered that the government had made 'mistakes' during the crisis, and only 39% of the population considered that it 'managed the crisis well.' In the absence of any serious and recent study on voting intentions, it is difficult to estimate if populist actors will benefit from this crisis or not. However, recent polls showed that the COVID-19 crisis increased distrust towards globalization and 'exacerbated the social and political divide.'<sup>58</sup> If this tendency is confirmed in the near future, it could indeed boost the popularity of populist actors in the long run.

\* \* \*

Laura Chazel is a Ph.D student at Sciences Po Grenoble and the University Complutense of Madrid. Her research focuses on the (re)construction of the notion of populism in/by left-wing political parties with a focus on two movements: Podemos and La France insoumise. She recently published two articles on the populist strategy adopted by Podemos in *European Politics and Society* and *Pôle Sud*.

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<sup>56</sup> Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 'Billet d'enquête – Échange avec le professeur Didier Raoult,' *Le Blog de Jean-Luc Mélenchon*, 26 March 2020, <https://melenchon.fr/2020/03/26/billet-denquete-echange-avec-le-professeur-didier-raoult> (accessed 11 May 2020).

<sup>57</sup> Alain Auffray, Stéphanie Aubert & Stéphanie Harounyan, 'Macron en consultation surprise à Marseille chez Raoult,' *Libération*, 9 April 2020, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/04/09/macron-en-consultation-surprise-a-marseille\\_1784783](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/04/09/macron-en-consultation-surprise-a-marseille_1784783) (accessed 14 May 2020).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



#### **POPULISM RESEARCH GROUP LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY**

The Populism Research Group (PRG) at Loughborough University was established in 2018 and is hosted at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities. The Group has contributed since to the development of a dynamic intellectual community for postgraduate researchers and members of staff working on different aspects of the populist phenomenon, organizing several events and activities, while coordinating with other groups and external networks with the aim to promote international collaborative research. For more information, please visit the Group's webpage: <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/politics-international-studies/research/prg>

#### **POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI**

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismissed the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the current administration of the global financial crisis, the Tea Party movement and the Trump presidency in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis. POPULISMUS website: <http://www.populismus.gr>

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