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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

UNGOVERNABLE FRANCE

A divided country lurches toward nationalism.



FORTY-NINE MINUTES INTO A CHAMPIONSHIP-round rugby game in the French city of Agen one night this spring, the lights went out. The stadium and surrounding neighborhoods were plunged into darkness. Players collided on the field. Patrons groped their way out of restrooms. For half an hour the stands glowed with cell-phone screens, as fans sought to figure out whether a generator had burst or a terrorist had struck. They discovered that this was not an ordinary blackout. The power had gone off because someone had shut it off—namely, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the most radical of France’s labor organizations.

The mayor of Agen professed himself shocked. But when the CGT announced that it had sabotaged the game out of rage at President Emmanuel Macron’s having raised France’s retirement age, Agen’s fans and the stadium’s neighbors were by and large mollified. Or so they told interviewers after the fact. The 45-year-old Macron, in office since 2017, has a 28% approval rating. Other presidents have fallen lower—notably Macron’s Socialist predecessor and mentor François Hollande. But of the eight men who have held the office

since the 1950s, Macron is the most passionately and widely despised. He was re-elected last year, having promised to bring France’s retirement age, which then stood at 62, into line with those of other Western countries. But voters didn’t want that. Seventy percent of them oppose his reform. In legislative elections a month after re-installing Macron in the Elysée Palace, they stripped him of his majority. In March the National Assembly voted down his bill to raise the retirement age to 64. So Macron resorted to a notorious piece of French political chicanery. His prime minister, Elisabeth Borne, invoked section 49.3 of the constitution. This section permits the passage of legislation by decree, as long as the assembly cannot produce a majority to bring down the government. Macron’s foes tried to rally such a majority, but their motion failed by nine votes. The very afternoon Macron resorted to 49.3, French citizens rushed into the streets in fury. They have barely gone home since.

Although Macron has never been especially popular, he has always been able to rally a lukewarm coalition. Moderate conservatives like him for the way he advocates (without

always practicing) fiscal prudence. American-style progressives back him for his campaigns around sexuality, multiculturalism, and euthanasia. But his support has collapsed. The problem is not the reform as such—though only 7% of people with jobs approve of it—but the constitutional outrage of passing it without a vote. Now Macron has fallen afoul of workers who think of themselves as the country’s backbone. Garbagemen and bus drivers have gone on strike. The normally business-friendly CFTD, another of those French trade-union confederations, has, for the first time in decades, made common cause with the electricity-cutting radicals at the CGT. Farmers have marched.

Of course, Macron’s predicament is not unique. In every European country there are people mad at the capture of institutions by elites, infuriated by the lockdown of public spaces and the run-up of debt under COVID, and uneasy about being dragged ever deeper into the Ukraine war. But France is the first country to reach the stage where its leaders can no longer scare up the resources they need in order to quiet the electorate down. And this threatens to make the country ungovernable.

Jupiter and “Manu”

THE FRENCH CONSTITUTION OF 1958 was written with General Charles de Gaulle in mind. It was meant to give the hero of World War II the scope he would need as president to fight the partisan corruption that had paralyzed France for more than a decade since the war. Macron has never hidden his fascination with what he calls the “Jupiterian” powers of the Gaullist presidency. Whether he is fit to exercise them is another question. At a 2018 ceremony commemorating de Gaulle’s declaration of resistance to the German invasion of 1940, a smiling teenager greeted him as “Manu,” an affectionate nickname for Emmanuel. Macron wheeled around to scold the boy for not calling him “Monsieur Le President.” Yet when he visited the Caribbean island of Saint Martin later that year, he actually *was* “Manu”—embracing sweat-soaked, bare-chested native men in a series of informal photos that led a certain kind of social media troll to guffaw at Macron’s eccentric relationship to womankind. (Raised in Amiens, north of Paris, he was a studious, literary teenager. He is married to his high school drama teacher, 25 years his senior and now in her 70s.)

Since he first arrived on the political scene in 2008, Macron has presented himself as a free-marketer of almost caricatural zeal, and has shown himself willing to cut constitutional corners to make his wishes reality. He started his career at Rothschild, the investment bank, earning a glowing reputation (and more than \$3 million) for helping Nestlé acquire Pfizer. The extremely unpopular Socialist prime minister François Hollande brought Macron aboard as a dynamic young economics minister who might help Hollande improve his abysmal relations with businessmen. Macron dreamed up a set of deregulatory reforms (most notably, the imposition of Sunday shopping) that came to be called the “Macron law.” The public, and even most of his fellow Socialists, hated it. But the government enacted it by decree, resorting to 49.3. Blame stuck to Hollande. His political career did not survive his five years of misrule. Neither did the century-old Socialist Party.

Macron was the beneficiary. He has turned out to be a pivotal figure in the partisan history of his country: the first to see that the Socialist Party’s claim to be a body of the “center-left” was a self-flattering falsehood. The party’s core was neither the old working class nor the new social movements, but the rich of the information-age tech and finance economy, and the more modestly situated people who worked for them. Macron lured practically all

of them into a new party called En Marche. (It’s now called Renaissance.)

Even if most of the tech economy’s winners were loyal Socialists, there were also a lot of people like Macron at the top of the old Gaullist party, Les Républicains. Macron was not the first Socialist to promise a progressive social program, but he was the first to rule out any redistribution of income. He even abolished the Socialists’ beloved wealth tax. And so, at the national level, much of the leadership of Les Républicains has also been absorbed into Macron’s project. Les Républicains, the party of De Gaulle, Chirac, and Sarkozy, seemed to have run into nothing more than a spot of bad luck when a scandal wrecked their presidential chances in 2017. François Fillon, in many ways a dream candidate capable of rallying anti-gay marriage Catholics alongside modernizing entrepreneurs, was revealed to have paid his wife more than half a million for a no-show job in the national assembly. But in 2022 the Gaullists collapsed outright. Their nominee, the businesswoman Valérie Pécresse, finished fifth, with 4.8% of the vote. A party that dominated French politics for six decades has suddenly become a fringe force that can’t even reach the 5% threshold to get its campaign expenses reimbursed.

Though Macron had never run for any office before running for president, in both 2017 and 2022 he won roughly a quarter of the votes in the first round. Both times he triumphed handily in a runoff against the nationalist Marine Le Pen. But his margins have narrowed. Le Pen took 42% of the vote in the second round last year.

“Our elites no longer make policy,” the political essayist Christophe Guilluy complained in an interview this spring. “They adapt the French market to the global market.” Macron’s borrowings from American business culture have not gone down well. Shortly before his 2022 re-election campaign a Senate investigation revealed that Macron’s government had paid McKinsey and other mostly American consulting companies \$950 million over the preceding year—a doubling since Macron took office. The tens of millions paid to the consultants who devised France’s COVID policy were particularly galling. First, because France’s lockdowns were among the most draconian in the West. At times city residents were forbidden to leave their apartments except to buy food. Second, because France’s COVID policy was in some respects conspicuously unsuccessful: China, Russia, India, the United States, and (in partnership) Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom all managed to develop ef-

fective vaccines against the virus. Among major Western countries that launched vaccine projects, France, which entrusted research to its once-prestigious Pasteur Institute, was the only conspicuous failure.

A case can be made that Macron’s proposed pension reforms are indispensable. According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, pensions account for 14% of GDP in France, almost the highest in the world, and roughly double the figure in most rich countries. (The U.S. is at 7%.) France is the most politically active member of the European Union, yet its ability to remain in the E.U.’s common currency depends on its matching the fiscal discipline of its neighbors. Lately, the indicators have not been good. At the end of April the Fitch agency lowered France’s credit rating from AA to AA-, citing its unusually high deficits (5%), unusually high debt (112%), and the indexation to inflation of its generous pensions. (On these debt-and-deficit parameters, France’s balance sheet is almost identical to that of the United States, which suffers less for its profligacy only because it possesses—for now—the world’s reserve currency.)

Macron’s case for reforming the retirement age has been made in a slapdash way. He has cited the figure of \$10 billion in savings, but without giving much detail—and these savings seem paltry in contrast to the sums the government has been flinging around to pursue a war in Ukraine, to overcome the COVID crisis, and to manage an unprecedented flow of illegal immigration from Africa. So Macron’s pension reform has become wrapped up in other grievances. It is the expression of a deeper French mood.

Beyond Their Means

YOU CAN SEE EVIDENCE OF THIS MOOD shift in day-to-day life. In the 10th arrondissement of Paris, up the hill from the church of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, there is a tiny American-style coffee shop with a few tables. If you’d been sitting at one of them one busy morning in early April you’d have seen eight or so people lined up to get coffee and pastries to go. An African entered in a ratty track suit, leaned over the counter next to the woman at the front of the line, and asked the barista, “*Tu me donnes un verre d’eau?* Can you give me a glass of water?”

It was rude, and the fellow was loud, but at least he was cheery. There was nothing threatening about the situation. The barista spun around as his customer was in mid-order, poured the fellow a glass from the tap, and handed it across the counter.



The African, standing, gulped the drink down loudly. He placed the glass on the counter with a clunk. Then he turned to a woman who just ordered a couple minutes before, and was standing there nibbling her croissant while she waited for her latte to brew. “*Tu me donnes un p’tit bout?*” he asked. “Can you give me a little bite?” Everyone in the coffee shop was glancing over in disbelief. She looked back at him and literally pointed at herself as if to say: *me?* He nodded yes.

In the United States, this is the moment when the coffee-shop owner, if he is a confrontational person, bellows at the intruder and tells him to stop harassing the customers. If he is a non-confrontational person, he calls the police. But France doesn’t work that way. The lady is on her own. She tears her croissant in two and gives him half, just as her coffee arrives. If the proprietor is not going to throw the guy out, then what else can she do? As she moves to the door he walks ahead of her and politely holds it open, not in any subservient way but as if they now have a bond, as a kind of couple.

A number of things are converging to make French people decidedly uneasy about immigration. Africa is going to double in population in the next generation, to 2.5 billion. That’s about a billion more people than the conti-

nent has hitherto shown itself able to support. Much of Africa is French-speaking. French people assume that a Malian coming ashore on a trafficker’s speedboat in southern Italy will be less inclined to throw himself on the tender mercies of Calabrian tomato farmers than to seek fraternal help from a Malian diaspora that now numbers in the hundreds of thousands in the rich cities of France. All told, there are hundreds of thousands of immigrants arriving every year in this growing country of 68 million with a shrinking native population, and 41% are African. How this traffic is handled, who answers maritime rescue calls, where asylum seekers are allowed to disembark—these questions have become a significant source of diplomatic friction between Italy and France.

After years of hearing immigration downplayed by official apologists, the French now realize just how much mass migration has changed the country. A report released by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies in late March revealed that a third of the people in France now have a “tie” to immigration—meaning they are either immigrants or immigrants’ children or immigrants’ grandchildren. *Le Figaro* runs stories about the “ultra-violence” of immigrant gangs in Marseille. This seems unrelated to Macron’s pension reform,

but a lot of protestors bring it up. They sense that they are losing two years of retirement not because the system itself is unworkable, but because the nation has squandered the resources on the wrong things—offering to immigrants a welcome beyond its means, for example.

France has tried to make savings elsewhere. During the Cold War the country was wholly sovereign and militarily formidable, its power backed up by universal male conscription, its own independent nuclear deterrent, and a wariness of both great powers. As late as the turn of the century, at the start of the George W. Bush Administration, foreign minister Hubert Védrine used to speak of the “levers of France.” Times have changed. President Jacques Chirac ended conscription in 2001. President Macron has invested the bulk of his energy in building foreign policy ties with the European Union, a geostrategic nonentity. And, above all, France’s actions in the Iraq war two decades ago have brought unintended consequences.

In 2003 France and Germany created a rupture in the Western alliance by opting out of the American war on Iraq. On the simplest level, they were right. Iraq was not a war the West should have fought. But that was not all there was to it. Iraq would be the West’s *school* for war in the next generation. The United States emerged from it more technically advanced. France emerged complacent, with a sense that its war-fighting resources could be better allocated elsewhere—in its pension system, for instance. The country became a free rider. It was always intending to get its military act together, but the time was never quite right and the money was never quite available, and non-belligerence had brought the country such prestige. The ironic result is that when Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022, France and Germany discovered that their dependence on American defense was abject, and that the Biden Administration was not at all shy about bossing them around. Today, though Macron speaks frequently of “strategic autonomy,” France is more a vassal of the United States than it has been at any time since World War II. Nor was France’s sense of its radiance on the world stage enhanced when the office of King Charles III, uneasy about the public unrest surrounding Macron’s pension reform, canceled the king’s first trip abroad, scheduled for France, and sent him to Germany instead.

Manu Militari

THE PROTESTS OVER RETIREMENTS, then, are not just a selfish call for more and more benefits. The marchers are venting their rage at governments that have

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lured voters into accepting permanent degradations of their country's culture, their nation's standing, and their own self-respect. The public is the more infuriated for having itself to blame. If a long and well-paid retirement is all the French have to show for surrendering so much of what their great nation stood for, then a long and well-paid retirement must be a pearl beyond price.

A certain kind of gullible American progressive helped spread the legend of France's compassionate, high-quality welfare state around the world. Recall Michael Moore's much-praised documentary film *Sicko*, which arrived in U.S. theaters in 2007 and pushed for national health insurance three years before the passage of Obamacare. A stirring call to managerial ethics and common decency, *Sicko* (executive producer: Harvey Weinstein) portrayed the French social system as the end to which American society ought to aspire. At one point, Moore sat around in a romantic restaurant with a group of American expatriates and started asking them questions:

"So how many weeks of paid vacation are—"

"Minimum five weeks."

"Five weeks?"

"*Minimum* of five weeks."

"...Unless you work for a large company and you get sometimes eight, ten weeks..."

"...remembering that there is a 35-hour week."

"The productivity rate is so high here."

"Yeah, I read that it was higher than in the United States."

"People are happy!"

"Yeah, they're relaxed!"

This fabled French social system was being dismantled even as Moore's friends were singing its praises. Benefits have been taken away, one by one, as budgets have been cut. There are mid-sized cities from one end of France to the other that lack hospitals, or even clinics.

Christophe Guilluy has pointed out, in a half-dozen insightful books, how France's 21st-century social problems arose. The story is similar to that of the United States. The high-tech service economy that has arisen in the last quarter-century has produced extraordinary opportunities, particularly in about two dozen cosmopolitan cities, for the "symbolic analysts," as University of California, Berkeley's Robert Reich calls those who manage it: hedge-fund investors, television producers, patent lawyers. It also works well for the mostly immigrant laborers who do

its menial work—landscape gardeners, busboys, nannies—and this creates the optical illusion that the system is more egalitarian than it is.

The one thing the system has no use for is a well-paid lower middle class. This Guilluy illustrates with reference to urban housing markets. "Quaint" working-class neighborhoods in Paris have been taken over by executives—so the natives are excluded by price. France's extensive public housing has been taken over by migrants from North Africa—so the natives are excluded by culture. The people who 50 years ago were considered "ordinary" Frenchmen can no longer afford to live in France's cities. They have been exiled to what Guilluy calls "la France périphérique," where people live a life that a lot of Americans would recognize from their own exurbs. Usually not in the sticks, exactly, but beyond comfortable commuting distance to any of those two dozen chic cities, peripheral France is a place where people shop in big-box stores, eat in chain restaurants, and are totally dependent on automobiles for their

All of French politics now turns on keeping the lower middle class from rising in rebellion.

livelihoods and their independence. Largely *français de souche* ("old-stock French")—a euphemism for "white"—they are the country's largest coherent voting bloc. Guilluy thinks they are a majority. All of French politics today revolves around how to keep them from rising up in rebellion and turning the country upside down.

Macron has not had to worry much because their party of preference has tended to be Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN). Founded as the National Front by Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie, the party used to stand for French rule in Algeria and a hardline anti-immigrant stance at home. The RN is often portentously described as a voice from France's dark past of rightism and World War II collaboration. It may well have been in 1995, but now that the youngest participants in World War II are approaching the age of 100, this is unfair. Macron nonetheless continues to benefit from an entire vocabulary of "defending democracy" and "standing up for republican values." The RN, the party of a

third of the country, has been weakened by a *cordon sanitaire*, a campaign to pressure and shame the country's center-right parties into excluding Le Pen from their coalitions. But Le Pen may now be the beneficiary. At a time of mounting impatience with elite government, exclusion from the circles of power can be a credential. And in a way, Macron suffers from the advantages that the *cordon sanitaire* has brought him. The loyalty of his voters is extremely soft. He got 58% of the vote in the second round of the 2022 election, but only a minority of his voters actually feel like they voted *for* him and not just against Le Pen.

Excluded though they are from national politics, France's peripheral voters nearly brought the system to its knees in 2018. Professing his concern with nitrogen pollution, Macron had called for a 34-cents-per-gallon tax hike on diesel (which many French cars burn) and a 50-mile-an-hour speed limit. It should be noted that there is very little skepticism about global warming in France—but there is a great deal of skepticism that plans devised in the 7th arrondissement for "saving the planet" should be paid for by the car-dependent rural working class. These workers, wearing the *gilets jaunes* (or "yellow vests") that come as standard emergency equipment in every automobile, began stopping traffic at rotaries and explaining their grievances to motorists. They soon had rallied most of the country behind them. They descended on the cities in their hundreds of thousands. Rather like the marchers at the dissolution of East Germany who chanted "We are the people," they had no revolutionary demands beyond that the government notice their existence. They sang:

Here we are! here we are!

Like it or not, Macron,

Here we are!

For the workers' self-respect

And the whole world to protect

Like it or not, Macron,

Here we are!

Macron barely survived the *gilets jaunes*. He withdrew the diesel tax. He persuaded the French public to participate in a so-called "great debate" about the "energy transition" and other pressing concerns—pressing for him, not for them. That diverted public rage for a few crucial weeks. It's not a trick you can play twice. The protestors were just beginning to realize they had been bamboozled when COVID struck.

And Macron showed himself capable of brutal rigor. When urban youths joined the massive demonstrations and began vandal-



izing French downtowns, Macron placed the blame on the gilets jaunes movement as a whole. A new paramilitary anti-riot unit called Brav-M was set up to crack down on the protestors. Today, black-clad and heavily armed, they are a constant presence at the rallies against Macron's retirement reform. The demonstrations of the gilets jaunes were policed aggressively enough to provoke a United Nations investigation, particularly over the use of LBD40 "Flash-Balls"—illegal in most European countries—which reportedly led to the blinding of dozens of protestors. At an environmental demonstration near La Rochelle this March, police fired 4,000 stun grenades at the green radicals, two of whom were gravely wounded. For the eleventh day of anti-Macron protests, 13,000 police were mobilized. The humorous newspaper *Le Canard enchaîné* refers to Macron as "Manu Militari."

Today's protests are a continuation of that earlier gilets jaunes uprising, except that the problems of peripheral France have in some ways grown more dire. The cost of food is up 16% in the past year. The price of diesel, \$6.00 a gallon at the time of the gilet jaunes protests, has been as high as \$8.75 lately and now stands at \$7.30. That is, French workers are now paying much more to run their cars than they would have even if the diesel tax that sparked the 2018 uprising had gone into effect. A number of central cities have become "low-emission zones" (ZFEs), banning older cars that burn diesel. If you are rich enough to buy a new Tesla, you can travel anywhere in France. If you drive a 12-year-old clunker, large parts of the country—the parts where the money is—are off-limits to you.

After Retirement, the Deluge

JUST LIKE THE UNITED STATES, FRANCE is witnessing the consequences of an upheaval in its party system that took place in the middle of the last decade. A couple of French peculiarities must be kept in mind, though. Whereas the United States saw the transformation of its Republican Party into a more populist and nationalist formation, France already had such a party—the National Front, now known as the National Rally. So Les Républicains, which was to French politics in the age of Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy what the Republicans

were in the age of George H.W. and George W. Bush, has not been transformed—it has been replaced.

The part of the Socialist Party that became the backbone of Macron's Renaissance party, meanwhile, is like the part of the Democratic Party that backed Joe Biden. It is a vaguely progressive force, and answerable to a progressive establishment. But it is not progressive enough for the party's radicals, the equivalent of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who is revered by the French Left) and her "Squad." So the most progressive two thirds of what used to be the Socialist Party has now fallen out of the party altogether. It was totally disorganized and ignorable in 2017 but rallied together in 2022 behind the New Ecological and Social People's Union (NUPES), led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Now it is a real force.

Like the American system, the French rewards party consolidation. It tends naturally toward a two-party system but for now it has three, with each party commanding almost exactly a third of the electorate:

- There is a progressive capitalist bloc (33%), led by Macron, which includes both his own Renaissance party (27.9% of the vote in the first round of the last presidential election), plus Valérie Pécresse-era Républicains (4.8%).
- There is a nationalist bloc (30%), led by Marine Le Pen, embracing both the National Rally (23.2%) and potentially Reconquest, the party of conservative pundit Eric Zemmour (7.1%)—but only potentially, because Zemmour carries a grudge against Le Pen that has not waned, on the evidence of his newly published campaign memoir, *Je n'ai pas dit mon dernier mot* (*I'm not done*).
- And finally there is a radical progressive bloc (27%), focused on the environment and identity politics, led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (22%) and joined by the Greens who supported Yannick Jadot (4.6%).

France's politics look like this because of the way its population has evolved in recent years. In an interview this spring, anthropologist Emmanuel Todd gave the most concise

account: with the battles over retirements, Macron's support has been whittled down to those who have no stake in the reforms—notably the rich and the already retired. Mélenchon is the candidate of young people and well-educated workers—in other words, the upper middle class. Le Pen is the candidate of rural and less well-educated workers—in other words, the lower middle class. Immigration, as Todd sees it, is the issue that separates Le Pen's people from Mélenchon's, and the failure of the two sides to reach a rough consensus on the question is why Macron has, for now, managed to prevail.

Olivier Besancenot—ardent man of the Left, former presidential candidate, founder of the New Anticapitalist Party, supporter of Mélenchon's NUPES in the last election—was standing in a doorway at a rally against Macron's reform on March 28. Asked if he was satisfied with the showing of the protest, Besancenot replied that he wouldn't be satisfied with anything until Macron's reform was withdrawn. Well, then, did that mean he would make common cause with Marine Le Pen in order to overturn it?

"Never," Besancenot replied. "I'd rather die." "That's the limit for people like him," said one anti-Macron demonstrator, continuing on her way after chatting with Besancenot. "For me it's their limitation."

Le Pen is taking the opposite tack. "If a law is good for the French people," she said in an interview the following week, "we'll vote for it, no matter where it comes from." And the French public seems to like that. In late March, in the wake of the first wave of protests, French voters told the Ifop polling agency that, given the chance, they would vote to make Marine Le Pen their president. It is one of the great surprises of this tumultuous political season. But the present situation can only be temporary. France has three ideological tendencies in a constitutional order that can only accommodate two. A fusion of some kind seems destined to take place. Then an explosion. And then the political order that has prevailed since the end of the Second World War may turn into something else altogether.

Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties (Simon & Schuster).

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