

Matthias Waechter*, April 18th, 2017*

Nothing new in French politics? Why Emmanuel Macron is the most Gaullist of all candidates for the French presidential elections of 2017

The French presidential campaign of 2017 turns very much around the buzzword of renewal: Renewal of the political elites, the morals and habits of political leaders, the party system. Some of the candidates, most prominently far-left politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon, even fight for a constitutional turnover and the creation of a "Sixth Republic". Among the five leading candidates, one presents himself not only as an innovator, but also as a revolutionary: It is Emmanuel Macron with his movement "En Marche!" The campaign book by the former minister of the economy appeared under the title "Revolution" and traces the way towards a profoundly changed France beyond the cleavage of Left and Right. A closer look at Emmanuel Macron and his movement will show, however, that he is less revolutionary than he would like to appear, but joins the political tradition of the founding father of the Fifth Republic, Charles de Gaulle. The "Gaullism" of Macron concerns foremost his positioning in the political landscape of France, the structure of his movement, and the style of leadership he embraces.¹

Neither left nor right

When Charles de Gaulle entered the political stage of France in June 1940, his upbringing, his professional background as a military and his sympathies for the "integral nationalism" of Charles Maurras identified him clearly a representative of the political right. But as soon as he took over the leadership of the resistance movement in London, he pointed out that he stood above all political quarrel and unified France in all its political tendencies. The fight against Nazism was, he argued, nothing less than a patriotic obligation, so that individuals from all political camps should rally him. De Gaulle was highly successful in his appeal above party-lines, so that former elites of Léon Blum's Popular Front as well as activists of the far right "Croix de feu" joined him. In the post-war period of his political career, the General ceaselessly insisted on his claim that he was neither right nor left: He was, according to his self-perception, the incarnation of France, and as such above all political cleavages. However, as

soon as he exercised power from 1958 onwards, his assertion lost its credibility and he was quickly perceived as the overarching figure of the French Right, triggering by the same token the consolidation of a leftist opposition.

The claim to pave a third way between left and right, to transcend the allegedly unproductive conflict between those political currents is at the core of Emmanuel Macron's political stance. He doesn't deny his origins from the political left, but asserts that this cleavage is nowadays obsolete and that good ideas should be taken from all camps. His movement "En Marche!" posts on its website a speech by de Gaulle in which the former president declares: "France, that's not the left. France, that's not the right. It is an inexcusable national error if one pretends to represent France in the name of a faction."² So far, Macron has been quite successful in garnering the support of personalities from both the moderate right and the left. His programme emphasizes at the same time the strengthening of public services as well as the liberation of individual initiatives from the intervention of the state, thus mixing themes of the left with those of the right. Ultimately, however, it is unlikely that he will succeed in escaping from the binary logic of Left and Right, deeply embedded into current French political culture and institutionalized in the electoral system, in which always two candidates oppose each other in the second round of the presidential elections.

The stance against political parties

One central leitmotif of Charles de Gaulle's ideology was his staunch opposition against political parties. Already in the resistance period, he had pointed out that parties had destroyed the unity of the French nation by pursuing egoistically their own power interests. His short career as the leader of the first provisional post-war government of France ended abruptly because he refused any power-sharing with the renascent parties. He then founded in the shape of the "Rassemblement du peuple français" (RPF) a movement directed

against the parliamentary system of the Fourth Republic, which wanted to blast away the parties with their "sterile" confrontations. The constitution of the Fifth Republic, strongly inspired by de Gaulle's ideas, reduced the parliament and with it the parties to a subordinate role by giving preeminence to the executive. The President refused to give his blessing to any political party, in order to preserve his role as a national, non-partisan figure.

Emmanuel Macron's strategy is quite similar: When he founded "En Marche!" in April 2016, it was launched not as a new political party, but as a "movement". Allegedly, it is a grass-roots undertaking carried forward by the enthusiasm and commitment of its more than 200 000 supporters rather than a traditional party with an internal hierarchy, professional staff and committees. Much of the aura and momentum of the Macron campaign is due to the fact that he has never held elected office and is thus not perceived as a career politician coming from the ranks and files of an established political party. The future will show how "En Marche!" will cope with the challenge of organization for the upcoming elections to the National Assembly. Will the Macron movement be able to escape from the "iron law of oligarchy", which according to the German sociologist Robert Michels ultimately affects all political movements?³ How will "En Marche!" go about to nominate its candidates for the 577 constituencies of the National Assembly? Will it succeed in maintaining its grassroots image or will it turn into a "normal" political party? The experience of Gaullism, which after the disappearance of the General ended up in a highly centralized structure in the shape of the "Rassemblement pour la République" (RPR), supports the argument that no modern political movement striving for parliamentary representation can ultimately escape from the logic of party formation with all that this entails.

Charismatic leadership

The rationale, the essence of Gaullism was its charismatic leader, the heroic chief of the resistance, the undaunted prophet of the defeat of Nazism, liberator of the country, first ruler of post-war France, who used his immense prestige in order to build the Fifth Republic and to finish the war in Algeria. An ongoing communicative process between de Gaulle and the French accounted for the success of this charismatic movement: The

constantly transmitted self-perception of de Gaulle as an exceptional figure, endowed with the mission to lead France, corresponded with the belief of a large part of French citizens in the uncommon qualities of de Gaulle and their trust that he would lead them to salvation.

The formal structure of the Macron movement is quite similar: Its "raison d'être" is a charismatic leader, who sees himself entrusted with the mission to steer France's renewal. The dynamics of "En Marche!" originated exclusively from the belief of its activists in the exceptional qualities of Macron and his unique capacity to find a solution to France's current problems. Even before its key ideas were defined and a detailed election platform was published, the movement had already garnered the support of thousands of campaigners. The initials of "En Marche!" are the same as those of Emmanuel Macron, thus demonstrating the inseparable link between the movement and its founder. The personality cult around the presidential candidate clearly highlights the contradictions of "En Marche!", which presents itself on the one hand as a citizen's movement, but is at the same time totally devoted to its leader Macron, to whom it owes its very existence. In the case of his victory on May 7th, it remains to be seen how he will reconcile the wide-ranging competences of the French presidency and its tradition of governance from above with his promise to introduce a new, inclusive style into politics.

In conclusion, there is nothing revolutionary about Macron's approach to policy-making in France. On the contrary, the impressive dynamics of his movement proves the sway of the Fifth Republic's institutions over the political culture of the country. The direct election of the President of the Republic and his overarching role in the political system favor a charismatic style in politics, of which Macron is a perfect example. Also is he by far not the only candidate for presidency in 2017, who is surfing on the cult of his followers around his own personality. Marine Le Pen as well as Jean-Luc Mélenchon both exemplify the populist variation of the charismatic style in politics, by claiming that they voice the true interests of the "real" people. The Fifth Republic remains a fertile ground for charismatic authority in politics, and not for grass-root movements.

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References:

¹ For a closer development of the key features of Gaullism see my book: *Der Mythos des Gaullismus. Heldenkult, Geschichtspolitik und Ideologie*, Göttingen 2006. Cf. also: Matthias Waechter, *Der De-Gaulle-Mythos. Erinnerung und Politik in der modernen Demokratie*, in: *Historisches Jahrbuch* 129 (2009), S. 131-144. http://www.academia.edu/1303411/Der_De_Gaulle-Mythos_Erinnerung_und_Politik_in_der_modernen_Demokratie

² "Il est trop de gauche, il est trop de droite". Desintox - En Marche!, <https://en-marche.fr/emmanuel-macron/desintox/desintox-en-marche>

³ Robert Michels, *Political Parties. A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracies*, Translated from German by Eden Paul and Cedar Paul, New York 1915.

