WHAT HAPPENED IN THE FRENCH ELECTION

by Theodore Dalrymple

When a man who is widely disliked or even hated wins a political election by a crushing majority, there are two possibilities: Either the electorate is sufficiently mature to understand that an election is not a beauty contest, or the other candidate is even more widely disliked and hated. The latter was certainly the case in the second round of the French election, held on Sunday, in which Emmanuel Macron was re-elected president of France. At best, this brought relief rather than joy. Macron's somewhat subdued victory speech suggested that he was aware of this himself.

The hatred that is often expressed toward Macron (he is Napoleon IV according to our odd-job man), even by those who

would vote for him in the second round of the election, is a little mysterious to me. After all, he has done nothing that is truly hateful by the standards of world history or even of French politics, or that many others in his situation would not have done. It is his manner more than what he has done that angers so many. He seems haughty and disconnected from those who find difficulty in making ends meet. There is envy, too: good-looking, academically clever, he has gone from banker to government minister to president, seemingly like a hot knife through butter. I surmise that, actually, there is quite a lot in his life not to envy, but I do not know for certain.

As for his opponent, Marine Le Pen, her very name is poison to a large part of the population on account of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen—he who once called the Holocaust a detail. She has tried to detoxify herself by relative moderation and by adopting economic policies that appeal to the poor, or to the worse-off, but concessions to moderation make her seem like just another member of the despised political class.

Despite her defeat, she can take some comfort from the fact that in this election she gained a bigger proportion of the votes than ever before. If she increases her share by a little more than the same proportion next time, she will be the first female president of France. Surprisingly, she won overwhelmingly in the former slave islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, and also in French Guiana, where whites are about 15 percent of the population. It was almost certainly Macron's technocratic policies during the pandemic that produced this surprising result.

Had Le Pen won, the riots that would have broken out all over France might very well have sparked a crisis of confidence that would have spread faster than you can say Omicron. Hence the sigh of relief. A Le Pen victory never seemed likely, and at no point was she ahead in the polls. In fact, most polls suggested that she would do rather better than she did. But

when you look at the map of France, she gained a majority of the votes in far more regions of the country than in the last presidential election of 2017. If the five years of Macron's new presidency are as difficult as the five years of the last, giving rise to even greater dissatisfaction (for people always compare their present situation not with the possible, but with the ideal), Marine Le Pen could well be elected.

This would settle nothing. In the first round of the election, on April 10, sixty percent of the electorate that voted did so for candidates of the far left or the far right in about equal proportion. The leader of the far left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, gained nearly as many votes in this first round as Le Pen. He would have surpassed her if the leaders of the communists, the extreme communists, and the ecologists, as well as the much-despised mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, had not insisted on their own hopeless candidacies.

Mélenchon called on those who voted for him in the first round of the election not to vote for Le Pen, as the polls indicated about 30 percent of them intended to do. But he did not call on them to vote for Macron. In other words, he hoped they would abstain, thus helping to delegitimize the inevitable Macron victory. This would strengthen Mélenchon's campaign for constitutional reform, an effort to give the far left and far right better representation

Mélenchon succeeded partially in delegitimizing Macron. If abstentions and blank and spoilt ballots are taken into account, Macron won the votes of 38 percent of the electorate, and much of that 38 percent was accounted for by hatred and fear of his opponent, not by liking for him.

In other words, Macron was legitimately elected in the sense that there was no fraud to account for his victory, no constitutional rules broken. His opponent recognized his victory without demur. But as representative of the people's hopes or wishes, Macron has little legitimacy; and yet he has

immense power. It is in the nature of such power, alas, that he who exercises it believes that he has the right and even the duty to direct society and comes also to believe himself both popular and competent.

Narrow constitutional legitimacy without the wider kind is now a problem for many Western democracies. In France, however, there is a further problem, and successive presidents have wrestled with it in vain. People dislike their state but expect everything of it. They want its benefits and protections but hate taxes. They want reform but no change.

The failure to square these circles gives rise both to extravagant hatreds and impossible dreams. The longing for simple solutions to complex problems and insoluble dilemmas is one of mankind's most dangerous propensities.

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