

The New York Times

April 20, 2012

Voting for Yesterday in France

By OLIVIER GUEZ

Paris

FROM the subject of halal meat to the matter of driver's licenses, the French presidential campaign that culminates in voting on Sunday has been marked by peripheral squabbles and endless invective among the 10 candidates. But few things have been said about the gravity of the French economic crisis: the deficits in France's public accounts and balance of payments; its drop in competitiveness; its decline in international commerce; its apathetic growth.

Nor have we heard much about the threat of increased unemployment and reduced purchasing power from the austerity measures that the markets expect any president to take — right after the election, of course. As for civil war in Syria, the perilous transitions in Arab countries, Al Qaeda's progress in the Sahel, or Iran's nuclear program, the candidates have behaved as if nothing were the matter — as if France were tacitly abandoning all influence abroad.

These omissions say a great deal about the state of a country that has rarely seemed so avid in its navel-gazing, so inward-looking. In short, France in 2012 is an old nation that increasingly cultivates the temptation to be an island unto itself.

So many examples from these last few years come to mind: magazine covers devoted to President Nicolas Sarkozy almost every week; the Jan. 7 issue of *Le Figaro*, naming Joan of Arc Woman of the Year. An issue of *Le Figaro Magazine* devoted to a portrait of the French people declared: "France is noble in essence, the mother of liberty, the rights of man, letters, arts, and sciences."

Transfuge, a Parisian literary magazine, offered a harsh assessment this month: French literature, obsessed with the past, is entering the 21st century walking backward. Indeed, the French don't like the 21st century, and would gladly give it back. Their desire has its roots in a confluence of failures (the defeat in 1940 and the loss of their colonial empire) and the rejection, by other European nations, of building a Europe à *la française* — France on a bigger scale. France has become a middling power, with a mass culture and a society of consumption like everyone else. Gaullism and Communism kept up the illusion that a great history, a great destiny were still France's to be had. It didn't pan out that way. So as the world heeds France less, the French long to shut themselves off from it, to turn toward olden days and protect themselves.

The electoral campaign flattered their aspirations. The populist candidates outdid themselves with magic formulas to get France out of history as fast as possible. Marine Le Pen, the favorite of young voters, promised the moon and the stars if France left the euro zone, limited

employment and social benefits to French citizens and finally drove all foreigners out.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, that great orator, rekindled the spirit of revolutionary mythology by summoning Robespierre, Fidel Castro, Jean Jaurès, Hugo Chávez and Victor Hugo, while throwing to the wolves the bosses, the bourgeois, the journalists, Wall Street and the CAC 40 index on the Paris bourse.

The major contending parties — President Sarkozy's center-right Union for a Popular Movement and François Hollande's Socialists — did not rush the French people. The “tears and blood” Mr. Sarkozy promised them (a very Churchillian position that was coupled with German-style reforms and sacrifices) soon gave way to generous promises and the appointment of other scapegoats — poorly patrolled frontiers, fiscal exiles, free trade, the European Central Bank, clandestine immigrants.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hollande, the Zen master from the department of Corrèze, made do with waiting for a change in power, avoiding faux pas, reassuring his fellow countrymen by aping, as best he could, the virtuoso he claimed to follow: François Mitterrand.

But all 10 candidates had one enemy in common: globalization, that perpetual movement of capital, people and merchandise that endangers the French social model cherished by 90 percent of French people even as it threatens to definitively bring them to ruin. Among all inhabitants of developed nations, it seems, none hate globalization more than the French. All their political leaders have promised to “fight against” it. But no one fights globalization alone. No one can lie down alone in the path of history with impunity, not even the nation of the artiste Jean Dujardin.

While candidates promise brighter tomorrows, convinced “that the worst of the crisis has passed,” markets watch their every move; their European partners (and toughest competitors) pursue reforms even as emerging nations continue to grow at dizzying rates.

In 1981, France rejected the path being set by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Mr. Mitterrand and his Socialists, with their Communist allies, embarked on a grand program of nationalization. Two years later, isolated, Mr. Mitterrand and his France had to turn abruptly toward austerity.

It will be much the same in 2012: whatever the new president will have promised before the election, reality will intrude. France will wake up to austerity again: After all, it needs to borrow \$233 billion by the end of the year.

Olivier Guez is a French journalist who writes for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. This essay was translated by Edward Gauvin from the French.

