

Politics and the People during the French Popular Front

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Key words

Action Française; Léon Blum; Croix de Feu; Edouard Daladier; Jacques Doriot Albert Lebrun; Charles Maurras; Parti Communiste Français; Parti Populaire Français; Parti Radical; Parti Social Français; Popular Front; Colonel de la Rocque; Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière; Maurice Thorez

Q. Why did the 1930s witness the descent of French politics into the street?

A. The mass demonstrations of the 1930s present a very powerful image of the involvement of ordinary people in politics. This was particularly true of 1934–38, the years of the Popular Front movement and government. From the riot of 6 February 1934 to the strikes of November 1938, the streets of Paris and of towns and cities across France formed the locus for celebration and commemoration, for the creation and dissolution of political alliances, and for violent confrontation between the Popular Front and the leagues and parties of the extreme right.

In order to understand why the politics of the street were so important in this period, we need to reflect both on the hopes and fears of the French people and also on the changing forms of political involvement and activity. The riot of 6 February 1934 is a valuable place to start. This violent demonstration took place in the Place de la Concorde in Paris, opposite the Chamber of Deputies, and was explicitly directed against the French parliament. Leaving 15 dead and hundreds injured, the riot was the most violent to take place in Paris since the French Commune of 1870–71, and even led to the collapse of the government of the Radical Edouard Daladier the following day. Initially described by the left as an attempted 'fascist coup', the riot actually involved members of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), as well as veteran soldiers' organizations and some of the leagues of the extreme right, such as Action Française.

Although the idea of the 'fascist coup' is now discredited (partly because of the evident lack of co-ordination between the right-wing leagues), the riot of 6 February does reveal the potential of anti-parliamentary sentiment to precipitate demonstrators into the streets. Demonstrators of the extreme left and right were extremely noisy in their condemnation of parliamentary scandal and corruption. One particular impetus for discontent was the alleged 'suicide' of Stavisky, a notorious swindler who had never been brought to trial because of his protection by those in high places, including the Minister for the French Colonies, Albert Dalimier. Many believed that the police had murdered Stavisky so as to forestall the disclosure of incriminating evidence about the corruption of his parliamentary protectors. Meanwhile, cartoons in right-wing newspapers portrayed the French Republic as an ailing patient in hospital, gradually sinking into decline while the parliamentary deputies, pictured as doctors, wasted their time in idle chatter. Even the word 'deputy' became a popular insult. The widespread nature of anti-parliamentary feeling is also reflected in the positive images of the riots that appeared in moderate and extreme right-wing newspapers, many of which described the injured as martyrs for the cause of honesty against corruption. Nor was such anti-parliamentary feeling limited to the right. The day after the riot, the PCF newspaper *L'Humanité* called for a 'worker and

peasant government' to replace that of the existing regime, and for the construction of a new Soviet Republic of France. Leaders of the main socialist party, the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), were frequently lampooned in *L'Humanité* for their treacherous support of existing parliamentary democracy.

Challenges to the legitimacy of liberal, parliamentary democracy were characteristic of political debate across Europe in this period. The re-establishment of democracy across Western Europe after the Second World War tends to obscure the depth of the anxieties of the 1930s, when many who had accepted liberal, bourgeois democracy as a development of the nineteenth century questioned whether it could be adapted to the mass societies of their own times. The deepening of the economic depression also played a vital role in precipitating people into the streets, people for whom hunger marches, and food or employment queues had become integral to daily life. Unemployed workers were often a significant presence among the militants of leagues and parties arrested by the police for their violent participation in street politics.

The perception of political and economic crisis in Europe certainly made the French people more willing to take to the streets, yet the causes for which they were prepared to make their voices heard were often diverse in nature. Common anxiety about the state of France coexisted with very different ideas about possible solutions. Many veteran soldiers and self-styled 'young patriots' called for more authoritarian leadership. Communists, socialists and trade unionists began to unite in demonstrations against fascism, while extolling the power of the masses as a force for political change. The Popular Front movement, which came to birth in the streets during the general strike of 12 February 1934, was cemented by a unity pact between the PCF and the SFIO in July, included the Parti Radical from 1935 onwards, and also broadened into a mass, anti-fascist movement. By 1936, the Front included the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, the Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Anti-Fascistes, as well as the main trade unions. Supporters of the Popular Front believed in the need to defend and renew the Republic by widening the participation of ordinary people in political association, and added to their political rhetoric an argument for the defence and popularization of culture, recognizing that the battle against fascism needed to be waged in images and cultural activities as much as in political action.

Thus, street action of the 1930s was rooted not only in fear but also in hope. Fears of fascism and the hardships of the Depression were entwined with the increasingly urgent belief that radical political transformation could save France from succumbing to a more generalized, European crisis.

Q. What forms of street action were most common in the 1930s?

A. The street politics of the 1930s were very diverse, and could include official or partisan celebrations and commemorations, organized or spontaneous protests, and localized skirmishes between rival organizations.

Official republican occasions, such as the military parades along the Champs Elysées on 14 July and 11 November, drew large crowds and were echoed in regional and local street processions across France. Political groups and parties also occupied the streets in their own well-established rituals: members of right-wing leagues, veteran soldiers' organizations and Catholic groups organized processions to commemorate Joan of Arc, and the Communist and Socialist parties organized processions to the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris to commemorate those executed for their support of the Paris Commune (known as the Communards). Members of the

royalist Action Française assembled to attend Mass on 21 January, in remembrance of the execution of Louis XVI.

Street politics could also take the form of protest: violent riots such as that of 6 February 1934, demonstrations by workers on strike, and hunger marches organized by the Confédération Général du Travail or the Confédération Général du Travail Unitaire (the two large trade union associations that amalgamated into the single CGT in 1936.) Conflicts and provocations were also common between the small, militant groups attached to many of the newer political parties and organizations, often known as 'groupes de choc'. Closely monitored by the police, these groups put up posters around the streets of Paris and acted as protection for large-scale meetings. They were also notorious for their disruption of the meetings of rival political groups and for their provocation of violent skirmishes with other militants.

Q. Why did the people in the street matter politically?

A. In French politics, the people in the street had an irrepressible historical resonance. Political groups of both right and left were keenly conscious of the legacy of the French Revolution, during which the street had been a focus for violent protest and also, in a republican sense, for the expression of the legitimate voice of the sovereign people. In the 1930s, parliamentary parties and extra-parliamentary groups alike saw the people in the street as force to be mobilized and controlled, and as a potential source of legitimacy.

The riot of 6 February 1934 and the street violence and mass demonstrations that followed had revealed a crisis of political representation: a dissatisfaction with the corruption of the existing Republic and its parliamentary democracy that was driving protestors into the street. The same crisis required that political groups and parties should seek new methods of appealing to and controlling the people, both in the interests of public order and also as a means of securing legitimacy and political stability.

The importance of controlling the people in the street was reflected in official attitudes towards any form of procession or demonstration. In the Third Republic, the demonstration had always existed in an ambiguous relationship with legality. In theory, every citizen had the right to 'demonstrate his opinion', but it was never entirely clear whether or not this included the street demonstration, despite attempts by some deputies to clarify the position. Organizers of demonstrations were therefore obliged to request official authorization before the event could take place: an authorization might not be granted if the demonstration was deemed likely to provoke adverse reactions, such as a counter-demonstration of similar proportions.

The importance of the people as a source of legitimacy was reflected in both rhetoric and organization. The phrase 'the people' could denote the crowd; it could also denote the workers, the electorate, or the entire national community. New political leaders and parties in Germany and Italy were using their alleged status as the incarnation of the popular will to justify their actions against parliament and to establish their own authority. In France, politicians and extra-parliamentary leaders also claimed to represent the people as they sought either to defend existing parliamentary democracy or to justify their criticism of the parliamentary regime.

Q. How did the Popular Front represent the people?

A. The choice of the term 'Popular Front' to describe the anti-fascist movement that coalesced in 1934 was highly significant. It was intended to evoke a powerful sense of the unity and solidarity of the French people against dangers both external and internal. But the image of 'the people' that the Popular Front claimed to represent was one that evolved with the movement itself, 'the people' being progressively identified with the proletarian masses, the working people, the electorate and the nation.

When the Popular Front was formed in February 1934, the Socialist and Communist Parties often used the word 'people' interchangeably with the word 'proletariat'. Léon Blum's speech to the assembled crowd of striking workers on 12 February praised the 'working people of Paris' and called for 'proletarian unity' against royalism and fascism. But as the Popular Front movement became not only a mass movement but also a political alliance between the Communist, Socialist and Radical Parties, so too did the idea of the people become significantly broader in scope. Popular Front newspapers described how the sufferings of the Depression and the danger of fascism reinforced the solidarity of all working people, including not just the proletariat but also the petty bourgeoisie, and even the middle classes. Moreover, by 1936 the Popular Front had won the support of the electorate, and the PCF in particular was celebrating the success of the Popular Front as exemplifying the unity of the French nation.

Representing the people meant defining the boundaries of this 'people'; it also meant defining the role of the people as political actors. The movement that became the Popular Front began in the street, as the striking workers converged on the Cours de Vincennes in Paris on 12 February 1934 with cries of 'unity', as if prefiguring the unity pact between the PCF and SFIO the following July. Communists and Socialists within the Popular Front movement were active in promoting the idea of the people in the street as powerful and legitimate political actors in their own right, looking back to a long tradition of revolutionary street action. Demonstrations on 14 July were seen as an opportunity to commemorate the popular insurrection that had brought down the Bastille, and to wage a rhetorical war on contemporary 'Bastilles' such as war, unemployment and fascism. Socialists and Communists also looked to their revolutionary predecessors when commemorating the Communards at the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, particularly in speeches made at the Mur des Fédérés (the wall marking the place where the Communards had been executed). Anti-fascist demonstrations in reaction to the leagues of the extreme right were described by Communists and Socialists as evidence that the people in the street retained their spontaneity and combativeness as political actors, even if this spontaneity was possible only through the detailed preparation of the demonstrations themselves.

It was also important for the Popular Front to court respectability, especially when the political parties in the movement agreed to form an electoral coalition. The participation of the Parti Radical, renowned for its solid support of the parliamentary Republic, began to attract many middle-class supporters to the movement. Partisan descriptions of Popular Front demonstrations thus sought to emphasize the peaceful, mature and rational character of the people in the street, and the reassuring presence of women and children. Popular Front newspapers represented their movement as one of republican defence, while condemning the right-wing leagues for their military style and anti-republican rhetoric. The attack on Léon Blum by right-wing dissidents in February 1936 thus placed the Popular Front in an advantageous position, and seemed to vindicate its continuing condemnation of the leagues.

Q. How were the people represented by the leagues and parties of the extreme right?

A. It is important to remember that the Popular Front was far from being the only movement that aimed to mobilize the 'discontented masses' of the 1930s. The leagues to which the Popular Front was so vigorously opposed were also explicitly seeking popular support, and were developing their own images of the people in the street. The direct opponents of the Popular Front were the extra-parliamentary leagues and the new right-wing parties of the 1930s, the 'fascist' character of which has been so much debated by historians, and which were explicitly appealing to the 'working people' in the widest sense of the term. While the Popular Front was also opposed by the parliamentary right, such as the Alliance Démocratique and the Fédération Républicaine, these groups were less directly concerned with the mobilization of the people at grass-roots level.

The enemies of the Popular Front included such leagues as Action Française, the Jeunesses Patriotes, the Solidarité Française, the Francistes and the Croix de Feu. The Croix de Feu, originally established as an association for decorated veteran soldiers of the First World War, was to become by far the largest of the leagues, and continued, in the form of a political party known as the Parti Social Français, to increase its level of support throughout the 1930s. Indeed, its leader, Colonel de la Rocque, estimated that the party would have won substantial support in the elections originally planned for 1940. Certainly, by 1938 the estimated membership of the party was already greater than the combined total membership of the PCF and SFIO, seeming to justify its claims to be a genuinely popular party. The other significant (but far smaller) party of the extreme right was the Parti Populaire Français. This was founded in 1936 by the ex-Communist Jacques Doriot, who was to die fighting for Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

The right-wing leagues also envisaged a role for the people as political actors. In February 1934, the action of those who demonstrated against parliament was described with approval in partisan newspapers as the voice of the angry people against the decadence of the parliamentary regime. As in the case of the PCF, violent and 'energetic' street action was seen in a positive light when it was directed against the perceived corruption of the Chamber of Deputies. Action Française had been organizing violent demonstrations throughout January, and its leader Charles Maurras was to become notorious for his provocative suggestion that the enemies of France should be assassinated by 'a knife in the back' (a provocation that was later seen as the incitement for the attack on Blum in February 1936). The Francistes, too, believed in the revolutionary nature of popular protest, and claimed that they aimed to transform society 'with the people and for the people'.

Some of the right-wing leagues sought to tone down this revolutionary rhetoric and to present a more disciplined image of the people in the street, with the people as guardians of order and as protection against Communist insurgency. The leagues in general also retained a heavy emphasis on the importance of strong leadership. They did not share the Popular Front's overt (although not always deep-rooted) conviction that the people were capable of rational, self-disciplined, and autonomous action. Essentially, the leagues' idea of the people was of a powerful but corruptible force for political change, a force that needed to be harnessed by responsible and inspirational leadership.

The leagues also aimed to undermine the Popular Front's image of the people as instinctively calm and rational. They described Popular Front demonstrations as

chaotic, anarchic, and unenthusiastic. Action Française in particular provided caustic analyses of Popular Front supporters in its descriptions of such demonstrations. Participants were categorized as a majority of disreputable Jews, freemasons, socialists, communists and foreigners and a minority of well-meaning but misguided Frenchmen.

Q. Why was the Popular Front successful in the elections of 1936?

A. The success of the Popular Front coalition in the elections of 1936 led to the formation of a Popular Front government and to France's first Socialist Prime Minister: Léon Blum. Yet although this electoral result was widely acclaimed as a vote of overwhelming confidence, it is important to bear in mind that this was by no means a landslide victory: while the Popular Front gained 5,420,000 votes, the right gained a total of 4,230,000, a loss of only 70,000 votes since the previous elections of 1932.

In order to explain the success of the Popular Front in 1936, we need to consider both the positive attributes of the political coalition, and also the weaknesses of the alternatives. On a purely practical level, the decision by those standing in the name of the Popular Front to present common candidates for the second round of the elections was certainly an astute tactic for maximizing the support received. The Popular Front also promoted a message of reassurance that appealed to both middle-class and working-class voters. Indeed, in the years 1934–36 the movement had evolved from a largely working-class movement of defiance to a largely peaceful, anti-fascist movement of republican defence. As the Action Française leader Charles Maurras noted at the time of the elections, even the Communists were trying to be anti-Communist in their emphasis on order, the nation and the family. The Popular Front slogan of 'Bread, Peace and Liberty' expressed concerns latent in the minds of many voters: the need to respond to the sufferings of the Depression, to promote the then compatible goals of anti-fascism and pacifism, and to disarm the 'fascist' leagues whose military trappings seemed to point to an affinity with nationalistic movements in Germany and Italy. Middle-class voters were reassured by the toning down of revolutionary, proletarian rhetoric, and the participation of the Parti Radical in the Popular Front coalition also identified the Popular Front with the parliamentary democracy of the existing Republic. Anti-fascism was certainly a trump card, and one that the Popular Front was well placed to play in 1936, especially after the violent attack on Léon Blum in February underlined the continuing danger of the right-wing leagues. Third, it is worth remembering the growing breadth of the Popular Front as a mass movement, encompassing not only political groups but also a multitude of sporting and cultural associations. This undoubtedly increased the number of potential voters, as well as its wider network of support (bearing in mind that at this point women did not have the vote in France).

We also need to consider the relative weaknesses of the Popular Front's adversaries in 1936. The conservative, parliamentary right, such as the Alliance Démocratique and the Fédération Républicaine, was not increasing in strength on the scale of the new movements. Yet the extreme right was largely extra-parliamentary, and few members of the leagues were deputies. Moreover, it was strongly divided. There had been an attempt to form a 'Front National' in May 1934, but this did not include the largest of the leagues, the Croix de Feu, and little came of it. The Croix de Feu produced a manifesto at the time of the elections but was not yet a political party and had few deputies as members, and so could not compete directly with the Popular

Front. Meanwhile, Action Française continued to criticize the very foundations of parliamentary democracy, and to denounce the electoral process as unrepresentative of the true needs and aspirations of the French. There is also evidence that a significant number of Catholic voters were won over to the Popular Front in 1936, deserting their traditional allegiance to the right. Indeed, police reports of April–May 1936 reveal considerable anxiety among Catholics about how best to vote, especially after the appeal by the PCF leader, Maurice Thorez, for common action in the name of the workers. Despite ongoing opposition to Communism, many Catholics writing about the ‘outstretched hand’ proffered by Maurice Thorez stressed their common concern for a social programme to alleviate the hardships of the working people. Although the Popular Front programme explicitly defended republican principles of religious neutrality, it also called for concrete measures against unemployment, such as a national unemployment fund and a programme of public works, which offered a direct response to such concerns.

Q. Why was the Popular Front unable to sustain its claims to represent the people?

A. The Popular Front had created an idea of the people as political actors that dovetailed nicely with that of popular sovereignty: the people were portrayed as calm, rational, mature, self-disciplined and reliable. Yet at the very moment that the Popular Front came to power, this image was challenged by a wave of strikes greater than France had ever previously witnessed, sweeping across the country and almost paralysing the capital. Although Popular Front newspapers made a concerted effort to emphasize the peaceful aspect of the strikes, and the respect for decency and property (if not necessarily for legality), nonetheless the strikes whipped up fears among the middle classes and confirmed the suspicions of right-wing opponents that the Popular Front as government and mass movement was not in full control of its supporters. Continuing outbreaks of strikes, together with disputes over the application of the Matignon Agreement, also strengthened the opposition of industrialists towards the new government.

From the time of the Popular Front victory onwards, strikes, public meetings and demonstrations thus tended to undermine, rather than reinforce, the image of the triumphant people. Motivation to demonstrate in unity had been much stronger in 1934–36, when these demonstrations were directed against the existing government, and there was hope that united action could strengthen or transform the Republic. But as the rifts in the new government became evident (the Communists did not participate in government, and many Radicals were increasingly uneasy about their own participation from the end of summer 1936 onwards), and as the Matignon Agreement did not seem to be easing industrial relations, demonstrations became increasingly bitter. More divisive still was the outbreak of civil war in Spain, since after some initial arms shipments, Blum announced that the Popular Front government would remain neutral. The right, which had called for neutrality, and which supported Franco as the guardian of civilization against anarchy, did not give Blum much credit for this decision. Meanwhile, many on the left saw the government’s actions as a betrayal of a sister Republic in need. In particular, the PCF argued vociferously against the government’s decision and organized collections for volunteers in Spain, as well as frequent, noisy demonstrations that tended to reinforce the divisions within the Popular Front rather than to offer a show of continuing unity.

Class tensions also contributed to undermining the transient unity of the 'people'. Many middle-class people were hard hit by the Popular Front's introduction of the 40-hour week (especially shopkeepers, who were no longer able to open at weekends and so lost valuable custom). Blum's decision to devalue the franc in October 1936 also meant that prices soared, and workers lost much of what they had gained from salary increases.

Thus, the supporters of the Popular Front became divided along class and party lines, and visual representations of the people tended to show division and dissatisfaction rather than unity. Such divisions were especially evident during the tragic events in the Parisian suburb of Clichy on 16 March 1937, when a demonstration against the supposed presence of Colonel de la Rocque at a meeting of his new Parti Social Français exploded into violence, resulting in five deaths and hundreds of injured. Although this was to lead to the trial of the Parti Social Français as an illegally reconstituted league, it left the Popular Front in an extremely difficult position, and showed that the government and mass movement were no longer able to control their supporters.

We should also ask to what extent it was actually possible for the government to sustain both its popular support and its image of the triumphant, sovereign people of 1936 at this time of international crisis. Increasingly urgent demands for higher production for national defence, the increasing incompatibility of anti-fascism and pacifism, together with the persisting economic crisis, rendered the social vision of June 1936 unsustainable in the years that followed.

Q. How had the significance of street politics changed by 1939?

A. By 1939, the political role of the people in the street was very different from that of the demonstrators of February 1934. For the Socialist and Communist Parties of the Popular Front, the street was no longer the locus for the creation of grass-roots unity against fascism, and indeed the Munich agreement had deepened divisions over exactly how fascism should best be opposed. Demonstrations organized in protest after the collapse of the two Blum governments in June 1937 and April 1938 were poorly attended, and reflected nostalgia for the former impetus of the Popular Front rather than confidence in the potential of the people in the street to effect political change. Moreover, fears of disorder meant that it was increasingly difficult to secure official authorization for street processions and demonstrations; indeed, after the tragic events at Clichy, the Prefect of Paris placed a temporary ban on all demonstrations in the region of the capital, seeking to bring an end to the counter-demonstrations that were becoming the habitual reaction to the meetings of the Parti Social Français and the Parti Populaire Français.

The coming to power of the Daladier government in April 1938 signalled a significant transformation in the political importance of the street, which was now dominated by official celebrations and commemorations, with the people present as spectators rather than as actors. Lavish displays were organized for the visit of the British sovereigns to Paris in July 1938. To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Armistice in November, ceremonies of remembrance were organized throughout the country, with the French President Albert Lebrun and the Prime Minister Edouard Daladier speaking at mass meetings in Paris. Spectacular celebrations were also organized for the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the French Revolution in July 1939. A festival of the tricolour was held outside the Town Hall in Paris, and a display of the French army (including regiments from the Empire)

took place on the Champ de Mars on 14 July to commemorate the Fête de la Fédération of 14 July 1790. Vast areas equipped with loudspeakers were set aside for the general public, although the crowds attending were less numerous than had been expected. To conclude the ceremony, the President Albert Lebrun gave a speech that was broadcast to all points of the Empire, and which was followed by the broadcasting of replies from workers and officials, first, in the provinces, then throughout the Empire. This was a symbolic celebration of the unity of the French people and nation, but it was a unity no longer realizable in the street. The collapse of the Popular Front thus marked an important shift in political culture, with the people in the street no longer at centre stage.

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