Municipal socialism in France from the interwar period to the 1970s

An innovative local experiment

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"Municipal socialism" has marked the history of many cities in France (Lille, Toulouse and Bordeaux, to name but three). The period between the two world wars saw the rise of the great figures of the Socialist Party – following in the footsteps of Henri Sellier – on the political landscape of urban France. But how did they differ from other elected representatives? And is it true to say they espoused an innovative form of local government? Following the recent municipal elections in France, we look back over more than half a century of municipal history.

The story of the socialists and the city is now over 130 years old. It begins in the working-class suburbs of Paris and the industrial cities of northern France, and revolves around a handful of pioneering figures of socialism.[1] Twenty years before the Congress of Unity that in 1905 founded the French Section of the Workers' International (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière, or SFIO), these pioneers paved the way for the first experiments in municipal socialism in French (Dogliani 1991). This form of socialism in urban local government was very much a minority movement, and indeed remained so until relatively recently. And yet it deeply permeates the history of both 20th-century France and the French Socialist Party. Furthermore, this enduring and fruitful experiment contrasts singularly with a short and painful period of national power during the Third and Fourth Republics (Chamouard 2013).

The interwar period: innovative municipal policies, but with constraints

During the interwar period, the Radical Party, to the centre-left of the political spectrum, controlled the vast majority of municipalities, one of the most prominent being Lyon, headed by the renowned Édouard Herriot (1905–1940 and 1945–1957[2]). In 1935, the SFIO had overall control of just 1,300 of the 38,000 municipalities that existed in France at that time.[3] However, it would experience its first wave of municipal successes during this period, particularly in provincial cities: Marseille, Lille and Strasbourg were won by the socialists in 1919, followed by Bordeaux and Toulouse in 1925. In the face of a serious housing crisis, followed by the economic crisis of the 1930s, socialist mayors developed ambitious social policies. Like the first mayors of the 1880s, they perceived the city, in all its facets, as the perfect stage for the socialist Utopia. Urban areas therefore became test beds for innovative and original experiments such as municipal bakeries and pharmacies, transforming largely working-class cities into islands of socialism (Chamouard 2007).

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1 Among these pioneers, particular mention should be made of Henri Carrette in Roubaix (an important town in the Lille conurbation), Victor Menand in Saint-Denis (a large northern suburb of Paris) and, a little later, Jules Ledin in Saint-Étienne (an industrial city near Lyon).

2 Dates of his terms of office as mayor of Lyon.

3 Today, the figure stands at around 36,500 (excluding overseas *départements* and territories). The whole of France is divided into municipalities (*communes*) – the smallest unit of local government – which range in population from under 200 inhabitants in thousands of rural villages to 2.2 million for the city of Paris.

This meant that socialist mayors experienced power long before their party rose to prominence nationally in 1936.

The municipal socialism of the interwar period would remain limited by administrative and financial constraints. Mayors' powers were governed by the Municipal Act of 1884, which restricted their capacity for real intervention (Ulrich 1971). Despite reform in 1926, the town hall was still seen by the government purely as a vehicle for the implementation of national policies. Socialist mayors took full advantage of the discretionary powers available to them and sought to push their interpretation of the rules as far as possible, albeit without subverting central government like the Guesdists[4] did in the 1880s. Their interventionism was limited by the scarce budgetary resources available to municipalities at this time. To overcome this constraint, socialist mayors made extensive and innovative use of loans. Constructive loans, to be invested in building infrastructure (roads, schools, hospitals, etc.) that would then generate financial resources for the municipality, were widely employed by the socialists (as well as some radicals, such as Édouard Herriot), unlike most right-wing mayors, who continued to manage their municipalities with the utmost prudence and caution. These projects were inspired by two municipal programmes developed for the Socialist Party in 1925 and 1935 by Henri Sellier, president of the Federation of Socialist Elected Representatives (Coudroy de Lille 2013).

Despite these constraints, socialist mayors developed economic, social and urban planning policies that distinguished them from mayors of other political persuasions. From a social standpoint, they did not hesitate to pass motions for significant "optional" expenditure (optional as it was at the discretion of the council) in favour of the poorest in society (e.g. single women, the unemployed, "old people"). From an economic standpoint, they engaged in investment spending that inflated councils' supplementary budgets and led to soaring expenditure in general. These policies were intended to project a certain image within the national arena and constitute a showcase of the achievements of the Socialist Party. The city therefore truly took on the role of a laboratory for experimentation as mayors attempted to push back the limits imposed on them from above, in particular with regard to social laws (on helping the elderly, disabled and unemployed). The communists, who took things even further in implementing their own brand of (subversive) "municipal communism", denounced this "municipal socialism", which in their eyes was far too timid (Lefebvre 2013). Indeed, SFIO politicians did not hesitate to make use of networks and nationally renowned personalities – often non-socialists – in order to bring their municipal projects to fruition. In the Chambre des députés,[5] those SFIO *députés* (MPs) who were also mayors presented their municipal achievements and contributed, via amendments, to the drafting of the major social legislation of 1928–1930 that created the French welfare state.

Towards an all-conquering municipal socialism

Under the Vichy regime during World War II, socialist politicians were among the first victims of the Purges.[6] They were immediately considered suspect by what was an anti-republican and authoritarian regime, as they represented large working-class municipalities that were perceived to be dangerous. Many of these politicians were also Freemasons, leading to their removal from office. Under this regime, local democracy was in a sorry state. The French law of 16 November 1940 abolished the principle of the free election of mayors in all major towns and cities. A small minority of socialist mayors did, however, manage to remain in their town halls, in exchange for acts of allegiance to the Vichy authorities or the Germans. They were also kept at the head of their councils because they were perceived by residents as stabilising and legitimate elements able to manage the

[4] Guesdism" (named after Jules Guesde) was one of the pre-unity currents of socialism. Guesdists believed that municipal socialism had no specificities and that the role of the town hall was to form a revolutionary citadel on the margins of "bourgeois" society. Guesdist mayors therefore passed municipal by-laws that they knew would be revoked by the prefect of the *département*, and refused all contact with the republican state authorities.

[5] The lower chamber of the French parliament, known today as the Assemblée nationale (National Assembly).

[6] Communist politicians were relieved of their functions following the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

difficulties of shortages and occupation. The mayor of Boulogne-Billancourt (immediately to the south-west of Paris), André Morizet, for example, chose to remain in his role, despite the inevitable compromises that this entailed in the occupied northern zone (Guillot 2004). Nevertheless, the majority of socialist politicians resigned from their positions, either because they were forced to do so or because they wished to "jump before they were pushed" by the ruling authorities. A minority actively participated in the Resistance (Sadoun 1982).

After the Second World War, compromised politicians were excluded, and new local elites were sought for a thoroughly restructured Socialist Party. In 1945, the SFIO swept away all those politicians who had remained in their roles and had not joined the Resistance. In reality, the party very quickly relaxed these measures, which deprived it of certain politicians who were important figures in the major provincial cities. From the 1945 elections onwards, the Socialist Party gradually began to become more prominent in French cities. The SFIO tripled the number of councils it held, with some 40,000 councillors elected in 4,115 municipalities. A new generation of activists rose to power in the big cities. They were typically drawn from the ranks of the Resistance, born in the early years of the 20th century, and had more academic qualifications than their predecessors. This new guard of elected officials would develop ambitious programmes aimed at municipalising public services.

Despite several changes in the voting system, the Socialist Party maintained and built upon its municipal success between the local elections of 1947 and 1977. In 1947, 30% of towns and cities with more than 9,000 inhabitants were socialist-controlled. Some of them were held continuously for over 30 years. A notable example is Marseille, stronghold of Gaston Defferre from 1953 until his death in 1986 (Ollivier 2011; Mattina 2010). This longevity was due to "Third Force"[7] alliance strategies developed by the socialists. Although the Third Force disappeared at national level in 1951, the SFIO's alliances with centre-left, and even centre-right, parties formed the foundations of municipal majorities in socialist cities up to the 1970s. This was the case in particular for Augustin Laurent, mayor of Lille (1955–1973), Gaston Defferre in Marseille (1953–1986), Guy Mollet in Arras (1945–1975), Victor Provo in Roubaix (1942–1977), Jean Minjoz in Besançon (1953–1977) and André Morice in Nantes (1965–1977).

Relative depoliticisation (1950s and 1960s)

These alliances led to a relative depoliticisation of socialist municipal management and, above all, as demonstrated by Rémi Lefebvre, the disappearance of municipal issues from the debates of the Socialist Congress. In official discourse, the role of mayor was no longer associated with socialist experimentation; and, significantly, the party did not develop any major programmes in the post-war period until 1977 (Lefebvre 2001). At the same time, however, the socialists' municipal presence was becoming increasingly important to the life of the party, as the activist base at national level was rapidly dwindling. In many municipalities, council employees formed a new group of supporters to replace these activists. In this way, the Socialist Party became – via its mayors – a party of patronage. In a sense, socialist town halls acted as a solid base for a party in crisis, which seemed perpetually confined to an opposition role in the political system of Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic.

During the Fourth Republic and part of the Fifth Republic, socialist municipalities became even more dependent than ever on the state and central government. As part of its planning and regionalisation movements, the French state introduced major urban policies to be implemented by town and city councils. The degree of flexibility that individual mayors enjoyed depended on their level of activism within the party and on their Parisian networks, these being the only means to bypass the dual control of the state: not just administrative control, but also – indeed, especially – the technical and financial control imposed by local branches of the state public works department

[7] After 1947, the term "Third Force" referred to the alliance between the SFIO, various centre-left parties and the centrist Christian democratic MRP (Mouvement républicain populaire – Popular Republican Movement).

and the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (a government-controlled public financial institution). Socialist mayors, opposed to this state tutelage, negotiated with the government in order to have their cities included in major projects such as ZUPs (*zones à urbaniser en priorité* – priority development areas) or the *métropoles d'équilibre* (literally "balancing metropolises", i.e. major regional cities intended to counterbalance Paris). In Marseille, Gaston Defferre built 40,000 homes between 1959 and 1965; in Lille, Augustin Laurent helped to eradicate unsanitary *courées* (cramped courtyard housing). They managed to achieve these goals essentially as a result of the widespread practice of holding several political mandates concurrently. In 1971, 80% of socialist *députés* were also mayors (compared with a figure of 50% for National Assembly members as a whole).[8]

At the dawn of the socialists' landslide victory in the 1977 municipal elections, the concept of "municipal socialism" retained its specific characteristics only as a result of the action of a few high-profile mayors who continued to implement ambitious policies. In most SFIO-controlled areas, though, the concept had largely lost its socialist identity, that is to say its identity as an innovative experiment in socialism in municipal contexts. Furthermore, it would not be until the refounding of the Socialist Party at the Congress of Épinay-sur-Seine in 1971, the creation of the "Union of the Left" in 1972 and the turning point of the 1977 elections that the socialists would see an upturn in their fortunes, achieving major electoral success that would in many ways presage that of François Mitterrand in 1981.

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[8] Rémi Lefebvre, *op. cit*., p. 102.

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