

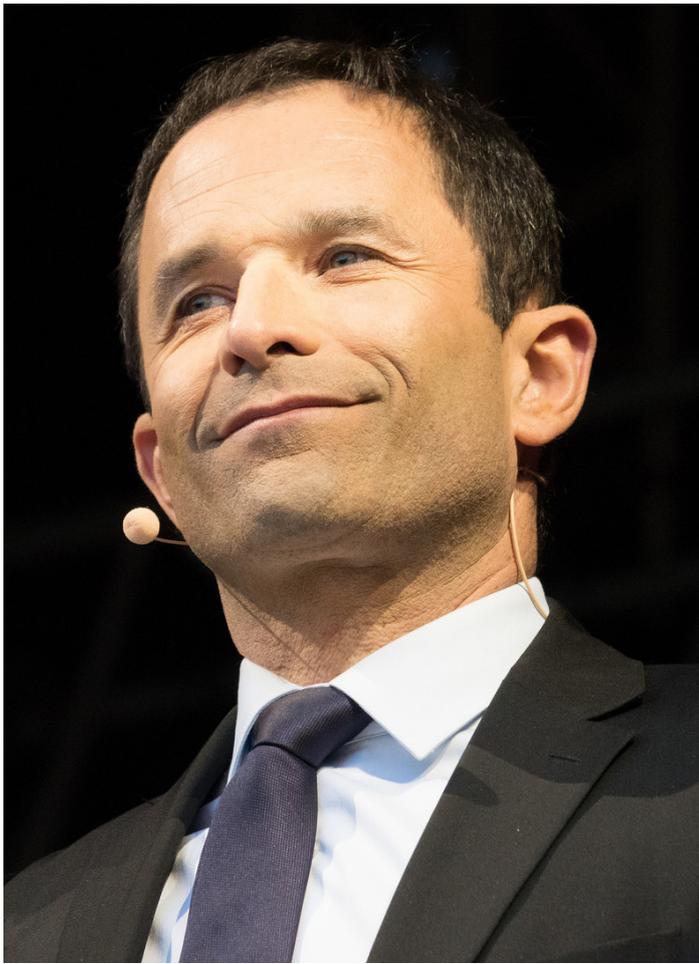
French Left-Libertarianism and Benoit Hamon's Socialist Vision

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(*Exeter*)

The *Parti Socialiste* (PS) lost the French presidential election of 2017 with the lowest score (6.36 per cent of votes) in the party's history under the fifth republic. Its candidate, Benoit Hamon, had made the decision to propose a campaign manifesto firmly anchored on the Left, putting an end to years (if not decades) of proposals that were socialist in name only, and prompting the departure of various prominent figures within the party, such as Manuel Valls (ex-prime minister) and Jean-Yves Le Drian (ex-foreign office minister). Despite winning the party members' vote at the primary, many party officials did indeed regard his turn to the Left as a problematic move, recalling elements of the rift between UK *Labour Party* members and that of the Parliamentary Labour Party regarding Jeremy Corbyn. But, although Hamon sought to reach an agreement with the charismatic left-wing leader of the increasingly popular movement *La France Insoumise* (FI), his programme, as

well as the movement (Generation.s) he launched following his electoral defeat, mark more than a mere (re-)turn to the Left. They are, too, elements of a revival of a left-libertarianism, whose expression within the French party-political apparatus had so far been confined to parties associated with political ecology (Kitschelt, 1990; Gombin, 2003).

In order to fully appreciate the nature of Hamon's strand of socialism, then, it is essential to situate it within a (libertarian) socialist mode of thought, wherein the ideal of individual emancipation holds a place as important as the values of equality and solidarity. For, left-libertarianism not only aims to liberate individuals from various conditions of domination engendered by capitalism, it is also distrustful of forms of central planning and sets out to strike a compromise between collectivism and individualism. While it would be unreasonable to suggest that Hamon's political vision



Benoît Hamon at a public open-air meeting at the Place de République

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constitutes a fully-fledged libertarian socialism, a discussion of his interest in worker cooperatives, his political ecology and a core measure he advocates, known in the English-speaking world as the universal basic income (UBI), reveal a fairly pronounced affinity with left-libertarian thinking. In this piece I aim to discuss this affinity, while situating Hamon's socialism within a particular tradition of French left-libertarianism. This is followed by reflections on the 2017 electoral defeat and some of the lessons to be learned from it.

French left-libertarianism in perspective

French left-libertarian thinking could be traced back to the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (2007), whose defence of workers' self-management significantly influenced later proponents of *autogestion* in the 1960s and 1970s. As the 'father of autogestion' (Guerin, 1978), he advocated a radical re-organisation of economic life capable of striking a balance between individual emancipation and collective responsibility expected to pave the way for the co-existence of freedom, equality and solidarity. Partly drawn up in opposition to Louis Blanc's 1848 call for a state responsible for financing and supervising the creation of cooperatives, Proudhon's de-centralised federalism effectively sought to safeguard workers' freedom against the encroachments of an omniscient and omnipresent form of centralised command. The central site of emancipation for this form of *autogestion*, then, is the democratically organised workplace.

But, left-libertarian thinking in France would, especially from the 1960s onwards, eventually become internally diversified. Two main strands could be observed: one, the economic strand, influenced by the work of Proudhon, and another, the culturalist strand, influenced by the work of Henri Lefèbvre (1988; 2002). The latter was an influential figure of the May 1968

protests in France, who anticipated a central role for the workplace in the operationalisation of *autogestion*, but understood the concept as one capturing a more general change. According to him, the concept ought to be regarded as a principle of life, guiding practices within and beyond the workplace (Lefèbvre, 1988). Under such a reading, then, *autogestion* is best understood as a principle according to which individuals choose to live, i.e. as a cultural principle. It follows that a socialist alternative based on this version of *autogestion*, entails the emergence of new economic, political and cultural modes of life articulated around self-management.

While André Gorz followed a similar line of reasoning, his diagnosis that ‘individuals no longer identify with their work’ (Gorz, 2012: 88) led him to propose a revision of left-libertarianism. Like Lefèbvre, he insisted on realising the ‘possibilities of self-determined activity’ (Gorz, 2012: 42) in all spheres of life, but for Gorz, this would be achieved through the implementation of concrete measures, such as the reduction of working time (Gorz, 2012) and, as advocated later in his life, the introduction of a UBI (2012b). His own strand of libertarianism also includes a pronounced concern for ecological matters. In fact, the above measures are thought to be central for re-organising society around the ‘less is better’ logic

of ‘ecological rationality,’ in virtue of their role in minimising the operations of an ‘economic rationality’ that imposes repressive imperatives of productivity on society at large. By increasing the scope of choices made independently of the ‘quest for maximum economic productivity’ (Gorz, 2012: 32), those measures are thought to be particularly appropriate for facilitating the emergence of a free and ecologically sustainable mode of life. In this sense, his eco-socialism, which could also be regarded as a post-work left-libertarianism, marks a decisive break away from the Proudhonian economic strand discussed above.

In fact, despite the existence of other economic left-libertarianisms such as Daniel Guerin’s ‘libertarian communism,’ it was Gorz’s own strand that eventually succeeded in making inroads into party politics. This could be explained by three key factors. Firstly, the presence of counter-cultural movements contesting the rather *dirigiste* character of the French political-economic order in the 1960s provided a fruitful basis for the revival of a left-libertarianism that located emancipation beyond the workplace. Secondly, the increasing preponderance of environmentalist concerns within public and political discourse gave actors of May 1968, disillusioned with party politics, such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Brice Lalonde, opportunities for cultivating their

political engagement outside traditional party structures. Finally, the advocacy of an economic understanding of *autogestion*, alongside socialist forms of planning by a French socialist party keen to unite forces with the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF), contributed to making political ecology the most auspicious political terrain for left-libertarian concerns à la Gorz. It was not until the 2017 presidential election campaign of Benoit Hamon that left-libertarianism began to enter party politics through the socialist door. But what kind of left-libertarianism can be observable here?

Hamon and left-libertarianism

Keen to re-align the *PS* with a genuine but modernised form of socialism, the socialist candidate drew the contours of his political programme on the basis of a clearly defined diagnosis of contemporary French society and its future developments. Central to it are the following observations, most relevant to the discussion of left-libertarianism offered in this article: increasing poverty and socio-economic inequalities, various forms of precarity and domination articulated around racial, gender and sexuality lines, the increasing automation of work and manifold socio-economic consequences of the digital revolution and, last but not least, the ecological consequences of pre-existing economic practices and lifestyles. In order to address those issues, Hamon

proposes a range of measures ranging from investment in public services and urban renewal, the expansion of the cooperative sector, the UBI, the reduction of working time, anti-discriminatory controls, forms of green taxation and the constitutional protection of public goods such as water and air (Hamon, 2017).

Given the presence of a range of measures relying on taxation, regulation and public expenditure, it is possible to observe an inclination towards collectivism, typical of social democratic models. However, Hamon made his preference for de-centralised and participatory forms of democratic governance plain to see. In fact, now freed from the constraints of the PS political machine, Hamon wrote in the charter of his movement entitled *Generation.s*:

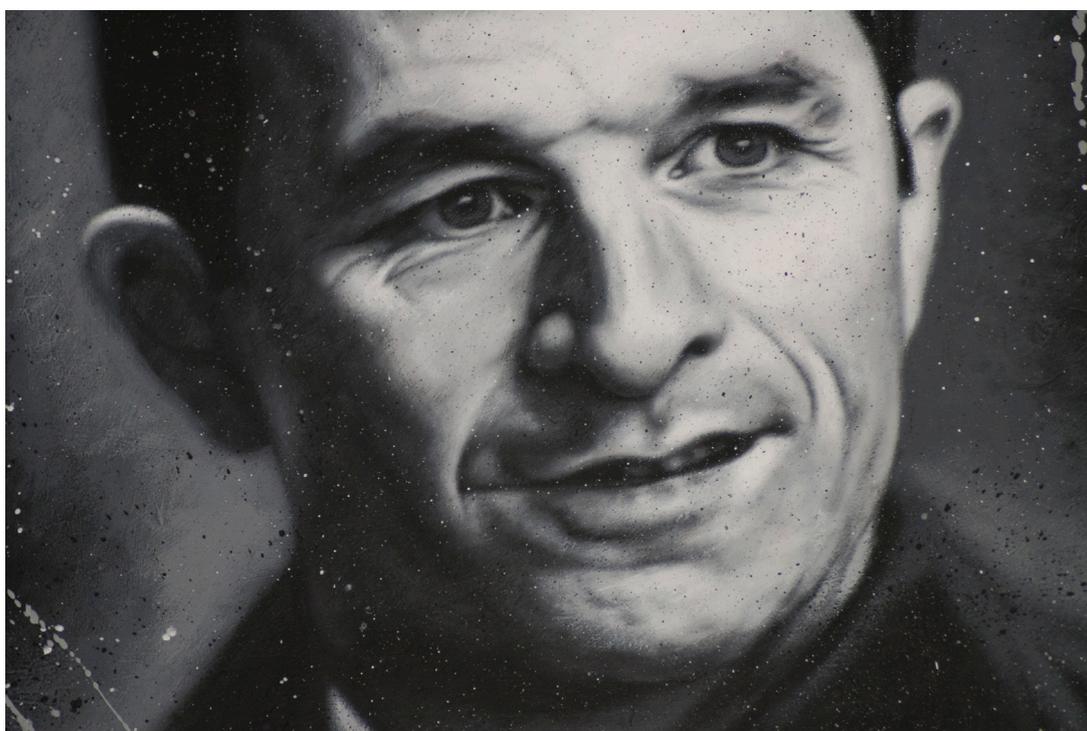
In the economic and social field, we align ourselves with the kind of socialist struggle and promise, according to which no emancipation can be possible without democracy in the workshop. Democracy is not an oasis limited to the intermittent right to vote for one's representatives.¹ (Generation.s, 2017)

With such an explicit support for industrial democracy and a clear ideological alignment with forms of socialism grounding emancipation in the democratic organisation of the workplace, Hamon makes his debt to left-libertarianism explicit. But, while this passage seems to suggest an alignment with economic left-libertarianism,

other measures he defended during the presidential campaign and continues to promote within his movement, indicate a closer alignment with the post-work and eco-socialist left-libertarianism of Gorz.

In fact, Hamon's debt to Gorz has, too, been made rather explicit on several occasions. A few months before the presidential election, for example,

Generation.s promotes for addressing environmental problems. In fact, the call for large-scale social change through a re-organisation of social, economic, political and cultural life appears more pronounced in his movement manifesto than his campaign manifesto. Freed from the *PS* party machine's constraints, Hamon is now in a better position to express his political radicalism.



Benoît Hamon, painted portrait
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he published an article on the UBI in a special issue of *Politis* marking the tenth anniversary of Gorz's death (Hamon, 2017b). More recently, his movement's draft manifesto, to be debated on 30th June 2018, directly referenced Gorz's own call for 'communal means of production for communal needs' (Generation.s, 2018) under a section devoted to political ecology and the kind of economic changes

But, Hamon's debt to Gorz goes beyond the occasional references to his work. It is indeed possible to observe a more fundamental influence by Gorz on the kind of social change and the measures to attain it promoted by Hamon and his movement. In the draft manifesto, for example, the movement calls for a 'profound rethinking of work and its role in our lives,' while claiming

to 'engage in a cultural struggle against consumerism and individualism, responsible for the fragmentation of societies' (Generation.s, 2018). The overall aim of such orientations consists in paving the way for an ecologically sustainable society in which individuals can finally achieve a 'real and complete emancipation' (Generation.s, 2018) both within but, also and crucially, outside work. It is as facilitator of this change and as basis of a 'new social contract' that Hamon envisions the UBI to perform its key functions.

As indicated above, Hamon, like Gorz, proposed to introduce an unconditional basic income for all citizens. Construed as a 'pillar of social security of the 21st century,' the UBI has a socio-economic function, insofar as it is expected to alleviate precarity and poverty (Generation.s, 2018). As such, it is expected to facilitate the emergence of a more egalitarian society. But Hamon identified another function for this measure: as 'instrument of emancipation and progress' (Generation.s, 2018). While its existence is made possible through institutionalised collective responsibility, i.e. the state, it is also aimed at facilitating the emancipation of each individual. Alongside the 'reduction of working time,' the UBI will alleviate the pressures exerted by market imperatives and, in turn, empower individuals to choose how they want to live, that is,

to increase their freedom to choose the kind of job that will satisfy them, while also obtaining the means for seeking emancipation outside work. Given the two aforementioned core functions, then, the new social contract underpinned by the UBI is one founded on 'principles of autonomy, solidarity and redistribution' (Generation.s, 2018) and, as Gorz himself would put it, partly aims to liberate individuals from economic rationality.

Hamon's proposal to operationalise, at once, what Horvat (1980) regarded as the core values of self-government, namely freedom, equality and solidarity, anticipates an essential role for the state. Left-libertarian forms of thinking, however, warn us against the potential excesses of a state-centred socialist alternative. How could Hamon overcome the tension between such a strong emphasis on a 'providential state,' alongside overtly libertarian ideals? Unlike his left-wing rival Jean Luc Mélenchon, Hamon aims to strike a balance between individualism and collectivism. According to the latter, collectivism aims to facilitate rather than subjugate individual emancipation. One does indeed find in both his campaign and movement manifesto, a pronounced tendency to use such terms as 'facilitate,' 'encourage' and 'incentivise' while referring to functions of the state (Hamon, 2017; Generation.s, 2018). Combined with

his proposals to decentralise governance and enhance industrial democracy, those discursive components do point towards a concern for minimising potential state encroachments on freedom.

Contrasted with the proposals of *FI*, the singularity of Hamon's stance becomes even clearer. In its campaign manifesto, for example, one finds an eco-socialist vision formulated with a much more punitive tone than Hamon's. The state is expected to 'prohibit', 'tax' and 'punish' when deemed necessary (Mélenchon, 2017). The state, here, appears to constitute an end in itself. For, despite favouring a 'people's uprising,' calling for a 'constituent assembly' and insisting on the horizontalism of movement-led political action, the anticipated role for the state recalls the Jacobinist tendency to centralise power. The state, as institutionalised universalism, can and will act in the name of the 'people' (the 'people'). Rather than a state-as-facilitator, Mélenchon tends to promote forms of intervention tilting the balance of collectivism and individualism towards the former. For, no distinction appears to be made between individual emancipation and the actions of the state, undertaken in the name of the people.

Mélenchon and his movement did nevertheless end the 2017 presidential campaign with a score (19.58 per cent of the votes) more than twice higher than Hamon's. In

the final section of this piece, I reflect on some possible reasons for such an outcome, as well as on the prospects for a left-libertarian future in France.

Lessons from the 2017 election and the future of left-libertarianism in France

Although Mélenchon and Hamon discussed possible avenues for uniting their campaign efforts during the presidential election, no agreement could be reached. Had they been able to agree on a collective way forward, however, the outcome of the election could have been significantly different, with a score likely to supersede Marcon's 24.01 per cent of votes and Marine Le Pen's 21.30 per cent. The Left in France, then, continues to be a political force to be reckoned with. However, given Hamon's election score and the predominantly Jacobinist outlook of most of left-wing parties in France, including the *Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste*, *Force Ouvriere* and the *PCF*, one is justified in doubting that the future of the French Left is libertarian. Below I explain why such doubts are not entirely justified.

The claim that Hamon's low score is attributable to a far too pronounced move to the left could be heard among deserting *PS* officials prior to, and following, the party's historical defeat. However, despite a manifesto firmly anchored on the Left, *FI* obtained

almost as high a score as Francois Fillon (20.01 per cent of votes), the candidate for the mainstream right-wing party *Les Republicains*. Because a very large section of the French electorate continues to value genuinely left-wing politics, the claim that Hamon's turn to the left is responsible for such a remarkable defeat appears unreasonable.

I would instead argue that, in order to understand the historically low score of a Hamon-led *PS*, one ought to take into account the constraints emanating from the party's own ideological trajectory and political history, on which Mélenchon himself based his ideological positioning and political strategy. Since the 1983 monetarist turn of the *PS* under the leadership of Francois Mitterand, the party has struggled to reconnect with its core electoral base, paving the way for the electoral successes of not only Mélenchon, but also of a *Front National* which seized the opportunity to revise its rhetoric in order to attract left-wing voters (Amable, 2017). Although Hamon sought to re-unite the *PS* with the electorate in question, his affiliation to a party responsible for implementing some of the most neoliberal measures in France (Baccaro and Howell, 2011; Amable, 2017) prevented him from gaining sufficient credibility among disaffected voters. If Mélenchon's electoral success can be explained by successfully positioning his party and

movement ideologically against the *PS* – as the 'real' or 'genuine' Left – Hamon's defeat partly stems from an attempt to achieve the same goal from within a party, whose genuinely left-wing credentials have become questionable.

In the footsteps of Mélenchon and Emmanuel Macron, Hamon eventually chose to create a movement in which he can freely express, cultivate and communicate his radicalism with like-minded political activists. With a green party – *Europe Ecologie les Verts* – often found vascillating between the centre and the Left of the political spectrum, and *more recently choosing to unite forces with Hamon during the presidential election*, the leader of *Generation.s* has, today, become the main bearer of libertarian ideals firmly anchored on the Left. Despite a clear and consistent advocacy of a 'providential state' watching over society, Hamon insists that its interventions ought to limit themselves to guiding the cultural and economic transformations appropriate for an egalitarian ecological transition and individual emancipation. He is today confronted with a choice: either to seek a closer ideological alignment with Mélenchon's statist strand of socialism or assert the distinctively left-libertarian elements of his own movement. Should he choose the latter, political success will partly rest on his capacity to offer a self-confident and credible left-libertarian

alternative to the dominant Jacobinism of the French Left, along with a left-libertarian critique of Macronist politics capable of opposing the distinctively (neo)liberal individualisation of risk, responsibility and freedom with the message that individual emancipation can co-exist with collective responsibility.

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Endnotes

1 All passages extracted from the Generation.s website are my own English translation of the original French.