The Charismatic Style in French Political Leadership

This is not a study of ‘charisma’ in French political leadership in a straight forward sense. This is not a study of a personality type nor of the weberian legitimacy that it is derived from. Charisma’ is a much abused word. It originates in the arid works of the sociologist Max Weber but is now an all-purpose term that implies an attractive and well-liked personality. It is so widely used, and so detached from its roots, that the term is often highly misleading. It is much favoured by the press to describe film stars and, of course, political leaders but it is usually where the analysis ends. ‘Charisma’ now implies an ineffable character that is for some reason highly attractive and capable of gathering mass following. Needless to say it is applied indiscriminately to Kennedy, de Gaulle, Churchill, Thatcher, Blair, Reagan Mitterrand and, probably to most political leaders at one time or another. It has also been applied to dictators like Stalin, Castro and Mussolini and, of course, Hitler (in the discussion of the rise and career of Hitler it is a very popular notion). In Weber's view it was not necessarily strong leadership (in fact quite the reverse) and would very likely be febrile.

This is less a study of Weber and Weber’s ideas than a departure at a tangent with a series of insights provided by the notion of ‘Charisma’ as presented in the works of the sociologists. ‘Charisma’ is an unfortunate term and – possibly –should be avoided but as the concept is well-known and the ideas are Weberian, it is best to retain the original term rather than to vary it with neologisms. It is the argument here that the central core of the term ‘Charisma’ – as it is be derived from Weber’s work – is a helpful aid to the understanding of certain types of political leadership and will be applied to political leadership France as a brief case study.
The Weberian typology

‘Charisma’ is Weber’s term. It was taken from theology where it covered the 'charismatic' phenomenon of speaking in tongues as Weber found it in fringe Christian Churches. Weber transferred the term to the political arena where it became part of the study of political legitimacy. It is not *stricto sensu* a leadership category as such but is a form of leadership that belongs in the 'charismatic' category but the sense has slipped into the depiction of a leadership type as such. It has been widely used and was particularly favoured in the era of decolonization in the 1960s when a flamboyant and colourful series of leaderships emerged in the former European empires on the cusp of liberation. It is a concept that seems to cover, and offer and explanation for, a vivid leadership style that is both comparative, stretching across several systems, and time. ‘Charisma’ was also narrowly defined so that it could be operational as a concept and not too vague to be applied in all systems. Moreover, the concept was one that predicted or, more accurately, indicated pathways that would be favoured by leaders of this type.

Returning to the initial theory, the ‘Charismatic’ leadership type is one of a triptych of leadership forms based on the legitimacy that supports them. These are traditional leadership, legal-rational leadership and ‘charismatic leadership’. Weber is often criticized for ignoring force in political leadership. Weber’s argument appears to be that – in Hobbles terms - ‘when all else fails clubs are trumps’. These leadership types are all underlined by force or violence. No leadership cans subsist without that backing but the reliance on violence alone is a route to definite anarchy because whoever has the
force has the power and even a military regime must have some other form of support making the orders legitimate.

In different ways these leaderships answer the question ‘why should I obey you’? Traditional leadership depends on then assertion that the leader can make ‘because things have always been done this way’. Legal-rational leadership replies ‘because these are the rules’ and the ‘charismatic’ leadership’s response is ‘because I say so’. Weber seems to see the ‘legal-rational’ form of leadership as the most modern and is based on bureaucracy. This is a wide category and Weber is the sovereign theorist of bureaucracy which is a vast oeuvre and a very substantial sub-discipline in itself. Traditional leadership is comprised of most forms of leadership before the modern era and thus a vast span of forms and types that are not investigated by Weber. Perhaps, today, the only traditional leadership is found in the oil rich emirates and Saudi Arabia. ‘Charismatic leadership’ is, by contrast, neatly delineated and a discrete category. ‘Charisma’ is for Weber, the one truly original and innovating style of leadership. before “charismatic authority usually acts as a revolutionary force, inasmuch as it involves rejection of traditional values and a rebellion against the established order, often in reaction to a crisis” (Blau, 1963, p. 308).

In Weber’s view these forms of leadership are intertwined and there is no ‘pure’ form of leadership. In the sociology they are so-called ideal-types’ (a concept with its own difficulties) and abstractions or models that do not exist in pure form. This is the first difficulty. When, in weberian language, a leadership is ‘charismatic’ then that means that they are predominantly ‘charismatic’ but have other elements as well. But the problem for theorists is that the different forms have no operational indicators that
would enable the observer to say that the leadership in question is ‘10%, 40% 80% or 90% ‘charismatic. That part of the case is left unmade and hence there is a tendency to jump to the ‘charismatic’ type without disentangling the attributes. It is part of the three-fold way but the question remains of how much it is composed of one and how much of the others.

For example, taking some of the leaders mentioned above the question is open about de Gaulle. Was de Gaulle a ‘charismatic’ leader or one of the legal-rational leaders? In the western cases the constitutions and the bureaucracies form a legal-rational framework within which the leaders exercise authority. Outside of that they have no power and inside the framework of rules the powers are delineated and patrolled. Weber does say that the legal-rational framework is suffocating and leads to sclerosis – the ‘stalemate society – but the ‘charisma’ of a leaders will enable a way out. There is a relationship between the legal-rational and charismatic leadership in this view: legal-rational institutions can respond only by making increasingly prescriptive rules and these may impede the resolution of a crisis. Charisma is the way that these rules are broken and replaced by a new order. This might not matter in some cases but for empirical use this has not yet been clarified. ““charismatic leadership, says Weber, is typically manifested by expansive political movements in their early stages” (Runciman, 1970, p. 161). (In parenthesis it is sometimes said that ‘charismatic leadership’ is confined to developing countries but that is not the original weberian postulate.)

Weberian ‘charisma’.

In sum ‘charisma’ is not used by Weber in the way it is in the popular press or ordinary speech. It does not mean a striking or attractive personality; ‘charisma’ is
‘extraordinary’ qualities imputed to a leader - which they may not in fact possess. It is crisis leadership and appears to be a ‘miraculous’ way out of the difficulties a society finds itself in. This is a postulate as much about followers as leaders. The test is why people obey: do they do it from devotion to the person or to tradition or to law? In this form of leadership the agents of the leader are important and have power because of their closeness to the fount of charisma. ‘Charisma’ flows into people and the ‘rulers of a country are the most charismatic persons of that country because they are closest to the source from which charisma radiates” (Shils, 1958, p. 4), and thus, when an individual connects with this charisma, they are also seen to possess it.

‘Charisma’ in Weber’s argument is an unstable form of leadership because it depends on the ‘crisis’ and the ‘crisis’ is temporary. During the ‘crisis’ the normal political demands are set aside and an unusual set of priorities asserts itself into the political agenda. In this view the everyday demands about the standard of living and so on are replaced by the need to resolve the ‘crisis’ but the ‘crisis’ is what gives the ‘charismatic’ leadership its legitimacy. Instability is part of the DNA of the leadership type and is also its force. ‘Charismatic’ leadership also depends on ‘extraordinary’ accomplishments, the miraculous in politics. Miracles are not easy to produce on demand. One arena that might be stage for the ‘miraculous;’ is in foreign policy where the legitimacy of a leader can be reclaimed by a spectacular intervention in diplomacy or defence. This is still an unstable situation and the continuation of a dynamic or disruptive foreign policy does not help the quotidian concerns of ordinary people. What ‘miracles’ are done after the ‘crisis’ is a challenge for the ‘charismatic’ leader and most
of them are unable to solve this problem and in consequence disappear as leaders shortly after solving of the ‘crisis’ that brought them to the fore.

But there are additional problems to the continuation of success. There is the so-called ‘routinisation’ of ‘charisma’. For the leadership to endure it has to be ‘routinised’. What this implied is unclear: “routinized charisma…is a charisma which has become institutionalized in a church or other organization” (Freidrich, 1961, p. 22). It could be, as in the case of de Gaulle, the rebuilding of institutions and the creation of a political party to follow up the leaders’ message. Traditional leadership, like the Shah of Iran, finds no takers in today’s world but it might be argued that there have been successful implantations of legal-rational leadership by ‘charismatic’ leaders. There are possibilities to nominate a successor and that is a possibility in Weber’s schema.

Moving to the details of the category itself, Weber’s definition of ‘charisma’, this has several components. First, and most importantly, it is ‘crisis’ leadership. Weber’s notion of the crisis was quite limited and referred to a collapse of legitimacy. This could take several forms but the main one was the undermining of the mainstream institutions that have legal-rational or traditional bases. There is, according to Weber, a turning point at which the charismatic leadership can surge to the fore. This is not, as is sometimes assumed, determinism but the postulate that the crisis will provide opportunities for new leadership and that this will very likely take the centre stage. It may not happen and a society can descend into anarchy or perhaps military rule.

France, in 1958, was described as a Weberian ‘crisis’. This ‘crisis’ was the end of the unloved Fourth Republic which had an inauspicious beginning: attacked by de Gaulle its most important leader at the head of a mass movement and by the
Communist Party the best organized force in the Republic after the Second War. In that year the Fourth Republic, which had been entangled decolonization imbroglios, and in a humiliating military defeat in Indo-China, as well as being unable to prevent the rearment of Western Germany and the integration of Europe through the Common Market and ECSC, was faced with a military rebellion in Algeria. Legal-rational authority, the Republic, had been sapped and there could have been a civil war before the resolution of the crisis. Of course, de Gaulle had his own personal networks of supporters, some of whom actively worked against the Fourth Republic, and could call on supporters in the Army and the institutions (at the price of ambiguity) which the Republic could not do.

French public opinion was supportive of the attempt to end the insurrection in Algeria which was regarded by mainstream opinion as part of France and administered as internal departments by the Minister of the Interior. French politicians were seemingly unable to master the situation and the Armed forces ultimately refused to obey orders – a legitimacy crisis of the first order. In Algeria the power had been functionally transferred to the settlers in a quasi-apartheid and the Army was the effective authority. Fourth Republic political leaders recognized the dire straits in which the Republic found itself and called on de Gaulle to become Prime Minister. De Gaulle’s own personal authority enabled the Army to be brought under central control and the Algerian departments were decolonized under his impetus in 1962. France abandoned the province making no demands and the settlers and their supporters fled. It was a solution that would not have been recognized as such in 1958. In weberian terms the
traditional and legal-rational forms of authority had been undermined and de Gaulle’s leadership by ‘charisma’ took its place.

But, according to Weber, ‘charisma’ is a perception by the public. There is a lack of clarity about this in Weber’s writing because the description Weber gives is at times of a personality, a larger than life individual with the solutions to hand. However, personality is not the core of the ‘charismatic’ leader which in the main part of the description is beside the point. ‘Charisma’, superhuman or more than normal abilities, are imputed to an individual and not given to the leaders themselves. “Weber’s [...] type, define a leader and his mission as being inspired by divine or supernatural powers” (Blau, 1963, p. 308). ‘Charisma’ is in the eye of the beholder and is not a characteristic of the individual. This is completely at odds with the use of the term in everyday language and – in many cases – in leadership studies. In Weber’s view there is sometimes a ‘crisis’ in society that produces this form of leader. Society ‘cries out for charismatic leadership’: there is a ’charismatic hunger’ and the leaders satisfy that without necessarily understanding what they have tapped into. This ambiguity is a major problem with the theory as mapped out by Weber and needs to be tackled if the concept is to be moved ahead.

Some adjustments

This is a concept that has great explanatory potential. It could be amended to resolve some of the more problematic aspects and to place it in an empirically verifiable state. This latter is important in a political situation where the polling data and the vox pop. Material is difficult to get and where the markers are missing in the theory itself. There are difficulties with the idea of crisis, the perception of the leader and the nature
of the leadership type itself (it hangs uneasily between the legitimacy type and the leadership category assigned by Weber). Thus, at risk of disrupting one of the more enduring sociological generalizations, there could be some changes.

Starting with the ‘crisis’. Is this too narrow? It is a legitimacy crisis in Weber’s formulation but that might be too restrictive and in addition too ill-defined to provide guidance. If the crisis is taken to be a political manifestation of any disruption, be it decolonization, regime change or economic depression, the concept of ‘charismatic leadership’ might be given a more meaningful application. Where a regime’s legitimacy is uncertain any event could precipitate a political turmoil. Perhaps regime ‘legitimacy’ could be a background factor but the leadership type could be more used in more widespread situations.

Charismatic leaders could be found where the political class is unable to deal with the issue confronting it. In this context a set of indicators could be developed showing 1) that the political class is discredited 2) that the appeal is to the ‘real people’, those without the deforming characteristics of the elite and 3) the leader is thought to be possess extraordinary gifts and insights - qualities beyond the normal 4) and this support goes further and is more extensive than would be expected within the political system in question. On this point the leaders in question would be expected to recruit a range of personalities from different political traditions and to find support from voters not normally associated in the same movement. Thus the main cleavage between left and right is to some extent superseded and religious or clerical lay divisions obfuscated. It is not always possible to find evidence for these electoral movements in polls, which
were only introduced in the late 1930s in France, but the system of Third Republic by-elections is of some help in showing how the public reacted to the leader’s cause.

Discredit, which might not go as far as delegitimizing the regime, is possible in a number of ways. Currently the inability to tackle the European economic crisis, the corruption scandals and the immigration problem form a series of issues that combine to make a political crisis. Contemporary political elites find it difficult to deal with these and are in consequence permanently on the defensive before the voters. With the collapse of confidence in the political elite the newcomers are seen as outsiders and as free from the mire of the daily grind that politics entails (the slow boring of hard boards). Clear, straightforward and obvious solutions to bedeviling problems are advanced – details to be arranged later.

There are three case studies that illustrate the nature of the ‘charismatic’ leadership failure in Republican France and its ramifications. Two of these, Boulanger and Poujade, are ‘failures’ in their own terms and one, Col. de Ls Rocque was partially ‘successful’ in limited terms.

There were three brief years of the Boulanger affair in Third Republic France from 1887-1890. In 1870 the Third Republic was established after the Franco-Prussian war and the defeat of Napoleon IIIrd, initially as a set of institutions to received the revived monarchy. Many of the voters who returned monarchists to the Assembly were against a continuation of the war rather than convinced monarchists. Under Thiers the Republic alienated the communards and those who wanted to continue the Franco-Prussian war in some way and then it was turned from a monarchical institution into the Republic leaving the presidency intact as a ‘constitutional monarchy’ but with a large anti-
Republican opposition. This was a weberian legitimacy crisis in the sense that the parliamentary Republic as a form of government was challenged by a large section of the public and the ‘natural’ elites of the country were in opposition to the establishment of rulers and the industrial class and financiers.

France had lost the region of Alsace-Lorraine to Bismarck’s Germany in the war and was encumbered with substantial reparations for Napoleon’s war. Not the least of the ironies here is that the opponents of the Republic became war-mongers demanding action – ‘revanchistes’, in the lexicon of the time. Monarchist and other opponents of the Republic had not disappeared and found that the demand of the return of the lost provinces could be used as a battering ram against the Republic. Of course, the Republic, faced by German military might, could not regain the provinces and need the alliances of the UK, Russia and the USSA to do so in the First War. It was politically impossible to deny the demand and equally impossible to fulfill it. As the Republicans put it about Alsace-Lorraine: think of it always, never speak of it.

But the immediate backdrop to the crisis was the revelation of corruption in the political class and the instability of governments. One scandal concerned the rather grey figure of President Grévy who seemed to have established a restrained but respectable office although his use of placements was notorious even at the time. Grévy had been elected in 1886 in succession to the intransigent monarchist Marshall MacMahon. Even so Grévy’s Presidency could not compete with the glamour of the court established around the Comte de Paris and in 1886 the Royal family were dispatched into exile. President Grévy, who looked like a minor prophet rebuking sin, was far from unpopular and added an element of stability to Republican France. However, was outrage was
generated by the President’s private sale of honours from the Elysée Palace organized by his son–in-law. This led to Grévy’s resignation and to the election of the respectable Sadi Carnot as President.

There was also the financial scandal of Panama. This came at a time of serious economic recession and that added to the public’s sense of grievance at the fat cats in the Republican establishment. In November 1988 the news that the company set up to build the Panama canal was about to fail. This project, presented as a patriotic enterprise like the Suez canal and a feat of French engineering and enterprise had attracted a large number of small investors. In effect the Panama company was trading while insolvent but kept going by political interference and fraud. It was turned against the Republic itself by the implication that it was the honest Mme and M. Dupont who had been swindled by the politically connected (Clemenceau included here) and the Republican elite including Protestants Free Masons and Jewish financiers.

Also added to this confusion was the split in the Republican ranks between the ‘Opportunists’ and the Radicals. Clemenceau led the ‘radicals’ (not a party at that time) and the Opportunists were a diverse collection of colonialists and conservatives who would bring in reforms when the time was ‘opportune’ (ie never). This split did not put the Republicans into a minority but it caused turmoil and meant that governments were short lived and lacked authority. Splits developed on issues such as colonization and the nature of the reforms. Neither of these two groups had real leaders and they were not organized along party political lines.

This was the political confusion into which General Boulanger stumbled in 1888. Boulanger was of modest origins and went into the Army though the Saint-Cyr Military
Academy and then on to a distinguished career. After the Franco-Prussian war he
continued in a series of postings and came to the notice of Republicans. One of the
problems the Republicans thought that they faced was the loyalty of the Army which
was officered mainly by aristocrats loyal to the monarchy. Boulanger had displayed a
talent for office politics and playing off expectations to advance his career but he was
not a particularly political soldier. But General Georges Boulanger was one of the few
Republicans in the Army hierarchy and as such was on a fast track. Boulanger may well
have been backed by the radical's principal figure Clemenceau at this time, but if so e
soon recanted that support.

In January 1886 he was made Minister of War and at that post made a number of
popular measures which, with impeccable self-publicizing, made him very popular. It
was as the Minister of War that Boulanger deployed a skill for popular reforms and self-
promotion. A series of reforms tightening up the three years national service, improving
provision of materiel, improving conditions but at the same time making use of the
ceremonies for retiring officers and so on. Boulanger strengthened his credentials with
ordinary people though judicious deployment of the Army (backing off from strikes) and
making promotions and redeployments that appeared to be popular.

In May 1887 the Schnaëblé affair promoted Boulanger to the front rank of political
figures. Guillaume Schnaëblé was a Police Inspector who ended up in custody in
Germany accused of spying after events that are still uncertain. None of the mainstream
political figures and of the far right in France, or in Germany, wanted a showdown.
Bismarck repatriated Schnaëblé and a suitable fudge was served up. Public opinion,
however, attributed Bismarck repatriated Schnaëblé’s return to Boulanger. This affair
transformed Boulanger from the Republican General into *Géreral Revanche* - the hyper patriotic figure of popular imagination. Political figures of the Republican side then perceived Boulanger as a threat and a febrile politician with poor judgment.

Ousting Boulanger only served to confirm the public’s view that the patriot was being victimized and that the pusillanimous centrists were only concerned for their own positions. Boulanger had, by then, lost the support of almost all of the Republicans and – if it is correct – not yet his original sponsor Clemenceau. As a *revanchard*, a patriot, an efficient minister and a popular hero he became more of a problem outside government, gathered a shambolic rag-bag of supporters and became the focus for a new movement. When, in an attempt to defang the threat, Boulanger was transferred to the Army depot in Clermont Ferrand, thousands of supporters went with him to the Gare de Lyon and some lay on the track to prevent the train from leaving. A write-in campaign was organized for a by-election in the Seine department and Boulanger, as an Army officer and ineligible to stand, won 38,457 votes a vivid demonstration of the name.

By the summer of 1887 the General was a major figure and the political class were worried, particularly as mass demonstrations were held in support of Boulanger. Boulanger was retired from the Army but stood in by-elections across France that amply demonstrated his popular appeal. A party of sorts – the *Comité national* – was formed demanding the revision of the constitution and the election of a constituent assembly. In January 1889 a huge victory in Paris was seen by some as the prelude to a military coup. Crowds gathered at to greet Boulanger and he could have marched on the Elysée with little – if any – opposition from the police or the guards. Boulanger chose not to move and that was the pricking of the bubble.
President Carnot and the Prime Minister Floquet were not impressed by Boulanger. Radicals also turned away from the General and Clemenceau finally dropped any ambiguity of attitude and formed the Société of the Rights of Man to counter anti-Republican Boulangist propaganda. Boulanger was continually provoked by the government’s supporters and challenged Floquet to a duel after one insult. Floquet, was challenged to a duel which he won and the sabre-rattling Boulanger was ridiculed. Politicians were not without weapons and three of Boulanger’s supporters – his main paymasters - were brought to the courts. On 1\textsuperscript{st} April Boulanger fled to Brussels, on 4\textsuperscript{th} his immunity was lifted and in August Boulanger was condemned by the Senate for plotting against the state. Boulanger polled strongly in two more by-elections in absentia but the movement was fast losing momentum. It was clear from the general elections of 1889 and the municipal election of the following year that the Boulangist movement was not going to win poser legally. Boulanger shot himself on the grave of his mistress in September 1891.

Boulanger had substantial financial backing and the help of American-style campaigning management complete with posters, buttons and fliers. Boulanger’s support in by-elections came from the all sections of society, the conservative areas and the working class industrial areas. Boulanger was aided by the law allowing a candidate to present themselves in many constituencies and chose which to represent. In the Nord by-election of April 1888 Boulanger polled strongly in Flanders and in the mining area. Then in August of the same year Boulanger entered three by-elections and won in the bonapartist Charente Inférieur, in the conservative farming district of the Somme and in the industrial Nord. In the triumphal by-election of January 1889 Boulanger won
almost 240,000 votes against the republican Edouard Jacque’s 162,520 despite the determination of his opponents to bury their differences and to unite around one candidate. Boulanger’s votes coming from the eastern poorer arrondissements as well as the working class suburbs such as Saint Denis and the affluent. [Garrigues] Only the Third district refused Boulanger a majority. This was Boulanger’s high point.

Before the scheduled elections of 1889 the Republican government changed the electoral laws. Firstly the practice of multiple candidacies was banned and the electoral system was changed away from the departmental districting back to the constituency based ‘scrutin uninominal d’arrondissement’. It is difficult to say what difference these changes made to a tide that was already ebbing fast, but the new system threw the election back on the local elites (conservative, monarchic and republican) that were already well-implanted. In 1989 the general election saw the Republicans solidly returned to the Assembly (about 366 seats) as against 165 monarchists and 45 Boulangists, a number that was too small to impact on the Chamber and a devastating disappointment to a movement that had expected to sweep all before it. Boulangists were successful in Nancy and in the Seine (19 deputies) but the trouncing of their supporters who had only two elected councilors at the municipal elections in Paris in April 1990 confirmed the decline into irrelevance.

Col. de la Rocque

De La Rocque’s political movement is another that has escaped down the memory hole and if it has been remembered it is largely as a fascistic movement that is best left in the archives. It can be seen as a further example of the Boulanger type although the history is less clear-cut and its short life provided few clues to its electoral capacity. Col
de la Rocque was a very eminent and frequently decorated career officer from an aristocratic background who had retired from the army in 1929. La Rocque’s first party was the militaristic *Croix de feu* that had a very large membership (possibly over 400,000 at one stage). It was very well organised and had para-military units which were involved, on de la Rocque’s orders, in the 6th February 1934 riots in Paris. De la Rocque did not cut ties – to say the least – with the centre and conservative right at this time. *Croix de feu* was one of the extreme right leagues and involved with financiers and strong-arm squads but was outlawed in June 1936 by the Popular Front government.

It was rebuilt as the *Parti social français* (PSF), a party that could, had elections been called, have been a very big winner in the 1940 elections. La Rocque’s PSF was a conservative, Catholic party largely inspired by Catholic social teaching (*Rerum novarum*) and drawing on Church and veterans’ associations for support. This party animated by the economic, social and political problems of the late 1930s and the uncertainty and anxiety deriving threats from the far left and the rise of Hitler Germany. La Rocque’s PSF departed substantially from the tradition represented by the far right Monarchist and fascist or Nazi *groupuscules* and several *Croix de feu* far rightists quit the new party. In the 1930s La Rocque was neither anti-semitic nor pro-Hitler. PSF in late 1930s France and claimed to be conservative Republican and aimed at a wide audience although its supporters and financiers were less savoury. A by-election in Paris (IXth) provided it with a deputy in 1938, a deputy was elected for Nice in March 1939 and another was elected for Remiremont in May 1939 – in all they had a group of eleven at the end of the Republic.
On the eve of the Second War the PSF was a very important force in the political spectrum and – claiming two million members - had a very large popular membership (an innovation in the Republican conservatives France of those days). It was able to thrive because the social upheaval was threatening conservative France and the public’s disgruntlement with corruption (Stavisky) and with political incompetence in high office was ripe for exploitation. There was a strong undertow of support for the Colonel and the polls showed potential support but de La Rocque was unable to capitalise on it.

Republican politics was brought to an end by the Occupation. Under the Occupation the PSF continued (with a new name) in the southern zone and de la Rocque made anti-Allied and anti-Communist declarations even going as far as to condemn the allied landings in Algeria. La Rocque was personally outside of the Vichy regime but, in unclear circumstances, was deported in 1943 and arrested after the Liberation only to die in prison in 1946. La Rocque’s importance in this comes from the evidence of polls that show that the PSF could have become a dominant presence in the 1940 National Assembly and that the party took support across the political spectrum in the social classes least amenable to conservative appeals. La Rocque, in the 1930s, was a much more astute politician than the reactionaries that animated the anti-Republican movements and he was an adept at playing both sides (perhaps why he never became part of the Vichy establishment).

Poujadism

Pierre Poujade, now largely forgotten, was a star of the mid-1950s political scene. Poujade was a small stationery merchant in the small rural town of Saint-Céré who had a past involvement with many anti-Republican groups and the Vichy regime.
‘Poujadism’ became, for many years, a shorthand for radical, ignorant and hard-line protest. Hence it is easy to see why it is often portrayed as proto-fascist (in Duverger’s terms ‘bon enfant’) and it included a number of unsavoury characters belonging to shadowy organisations in its membership (Le Pen was elected as a poujadist in 1956).

Poujade launched a tax revolt largely on behalf of small businesses who felt threatened and, more importantly, by the changes in the French business climate. Poujade founded the unprepossessingly named pressure group of Union de défense des commerçants et artisans (UDCA) in 1954 and it surged out of nothing to become a real threat to the Republic. It was initially supported by the Communist Party but Poujade created his own political party of the Union et fraternité française. However, its appeal came from its protests principally against the well-off, the Parisian domination, the bureaucracy and the overweening state and its programme was very limited. In the contest of the time, the loss of the French Empire and the conflict then developing in Algeria, it was given to chauvinism (old sense) and immoderate language packaged around an anti-parliamentary aspect. It used the negative but effective slogan ‘sortez les sortants’ in the snap election called by Prime Minister Faure for January 1956 at which it polled 2.5 million votes and had 52 deputies elected (although eleven were later invalidated).

Poujade was seen as the ordinary ‘little man’ and proved an effective and startling speaker at many mass rallies. Poujade’s protest on behalf of the ‘menu peuple’ was fuelled by the rapid changes France was undergoing at the time. This was the beginning of the ‘trente glorieuses’ years of exponential economic expansion. In retrospect these do look ‘glorious’ but at the time old communities and understandings were being rapidly dissolved as the economy modernised. Threatened by the changes were, of
course, the small businesses, farmers (peasantry, in fact) and the marginal and the better future was a potential and not a fact. Poujade touched off a set of grievances without understanding exactly what they were or how to deal with them.

These demands snowballed into an incoherent jumble of rejected changes that were simply grouped around an implied older and better ‘france profonde’. Faure’s dissolution caught the party ill-prepared, without the structure or personnel to carry the movement on an evidently rising tide. Poujade had no talent for organisation and the bandwagon proved to be too small for the squabbling late-comers who were never federated into a viable party. Poujade’s movement did not last long and the hastily assembled party subsided in faction fighting, not helped by Poujade’s own failure to get elected and his humiliation in a by-election in Paris in 1956. In 1958, when de Gaulle came to power, there was nothing left of it and no poujadists were re-elected. Poujade did not find it possible to continue a political career in the Fifth Republic. He was a marginal figure involved in some rearguard actions against decolonisation and in defence of small business but in impact more as an intermittent irritant to the centre right leaders than serious figure. Poujadism never revived and he was a determined adversary of decolonisation but a vacillating opponent of the de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic.

Catalysing leadership

It may be that this ‘charismatic’ leadership is the catalyst in the system. That is ‘Catalyst’ in the sense that the conditions have to be ripe for action but need an outside factor to facilitate the reaction: some leaders can do this and some cannot. There is a persistent recrudescence of the ‘charismatic’ in French political life and this is a small
sample. Others who might be added to the list include Mendès France and JJSS in the Fifth Republic but the only example that could be regarded as a success is de Gaulle. This is not a moral judgement, but the difference appears to be similar to Skowronek’s idea of the political cycle in the political history of the United States and the place of the reconstruction politician within it. Skowronek, however, describes the building of political support when a politician catches the tide turning and uses it to their advantage.

This series of politicians is the antithesis of the political figures that Skowronek describes in that they prove unable to master the forces that they have unleashed. This is evident in the case of General Boulanger who was not a politician and did not think in political terms. A movement of that amplitude and with that spread of support might have been expected to produce something but – apart from a change in the electoral laws – the Boulangism of the late 1880s evaporated leaving nothing of note – hardly even a memory and no devotees. De Gaulle is the exception because he was a politician of considerable talent and, having misjudged the situation in 1946-7, did not make the same mistake again. De Gaulle, in these terms, was able to unite the skills of the leader and the charismatic force of society to accomplish a make-over of the political system in France.

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20.2.2015