



The Communists' Urban Archipelago

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While the Socialist Party was the big loser in France's municipal elections in March, the French Communist Party was also left weakened. While communist support has not completely disappeared in the urban municipalities that were historically its strongholds, it is now more thinly spread – especially in the working-class suburbs that were previously its heartlands.

The 2014 municipal elections in France, while disastrous for the ruling Socialist Party, were also painful for the PCF (Parti Communiste Français – French Communist Party). The erosion of its election scores in towns with more than 3,500 inhabitants is not a new phenomenon, but in 2001 and 2008 the rate of erosion had slowed down; in 2014, however, it accelerated. That said, support for the party has not disappeared from the urban landscape in France, but it has shrunk a little more and now resembles an archipelago of small islands of support more than ever (Martelli 2008), even in its historic heartlands in the Paris suburbs.

Diminishing urban support

In 2008, the PCF claimed to control between 724 and 751 of France's 36,681 municipalities (*communes*),¹ representing a total of 3.2 million inhabitants. In reality, 85% of the population administered by communist and "communist-affiliated" mayors is contained within just 194 municipalities of at least 3,500 inhabitants. Half of these towns are concentrated in just six *départements*, four of which account for half of the total population administered by communist councils.

¹ Translator's note: the whole of the French territory (with the sole exception of the two sparsely populated overseas territories of Wallis & Futuna and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands) is divided into *communes*, which each elect a mayor and a municipal council. *Communes* range in population from a handful of residents in some rural localities to 2.25 million in the city of Paris. As of 1 January 2014, 31,539 communes had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, while 2,987 had 3,500 inhabitants or more; of these, just 953 had populations in excess of 10,000.

Table 1. *Départements* with the highest levels of communist support at the 2008 municipal elections

2008 ranking (by number of municipalities)		2008 ranking (by population)	
Nord	26	Seine-Saint-Denis	487,943
Pas-de-Calais	16	Val-de-Marne	467,559
Bouches-du-Rhône	14	Bouches-du-Rhône	242,370
Val-de-Marne	12	Nord	217,801
Seine-Saint-Denis	11	Hauts-de-Seine	200,796
Seine-Maritime	8	Rhône	136,016
Isère	7	Pas-de-Calais	122,023
Meurthe-et-Moselle	7	Isère	117,186

Note: the populations cited represent the combined populations of all municipalities in the *département* controlled by a PCF or PCF-affiliated council (and not the number of electors who voted for the PCF or PCF-affiliated candidate).

Source: Martelli 2008.

In 2014, the PCF saw its urban support base decrease by almost a quarter in terms of the number of councils it controlled, representing a drop in the administered population of around 570,000 (a figure that would have been higher were it not for the fact that the PCF won back two large inner Paris suburbs – Montreuil and Aubervilliers – representing a total of 180,000 inhabitants). In previous elections, the PCF was capable of losing control of many towns while simultaneously winning back a significant number: indeed, in 2008, the gains and losses in terms of municipalities with 3,500 inhabitants or more almost balanced each other out (with a loss of just five councils). In 2014, in the same population range, the deficit totalled around 50 municipalities. The PCF now controls just 5.4% of the urban population in France, compared with 23% in 1977. The losses in 2014 are comparable, in recent history, to those of 1989, when the party experienced its greatest ever number of losses in urban municipalities.

Over the last 30 years, the erosion of support for the PCF has varied in intensity, but has nevertheless been constant, regardless of the political context.

Table 2. Number of PCF-controlled towns with 3,500 inhabitants or more since 1977

Year	Number of towns	Difference	Index	Administered population (millions)
1977	380			7.7
1983	350	-30	92	6.1
1989	254	-96	73	4.6
1995	227	-27	89	4.0
2001	198	-29	87	3.0
2008	194	-4	98	2.9
2014	145	-49	75	2.3

Source: Martelli 2008.

In 2014, there seems to be little correlation between the towns lost by the PCF and the political strategy implemented. Regardless of the type of candidate list headed by communists (joint lists with socialists and other mainstream left-wing parties; joint far-left Front de Gauche² lists; or PCF-only lists), the trends observed were broadly the same, with first-round election scores 5% to 7%

² Translator's note: the Front de Gauche is a union of several far-left parties: the PCF; Parti de Gauche; Fédération pour une Alternative Sociale et Écologique; République et Socialisme; Convergences et Alternative; Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de France; Gauche Anticapitaliste; and the political movement Les Alternatifs.

down on 2008 on average. Furthermore, in 29 communist-controlled towns, PCF scores in the first round were not high enough to ensure a two-way contest in the second round, necessitating three-way elections in 20 towns, and even four-way elections (a rare occurrence) in 9 towns. In 17 of these 29 cases, the second-round score for the communist list was between 40% and 50%, and even fell below 40% in four cases.

A municipal archipelago

From the 1930s onwards, support for the communist party in France increased in the wake of the Front Populaire³ and the Liberation, transforming the communist electoral landscape from islands of support in the 1920s to a far more extensive territory: the “archipelago” was now a “continent”. However, a return to an archipelago-like situation became evident in the 1980s. In terms of municipal communism, the decline in support in urban areas began in 1983 (when the PCF lost 33 towns with 3,500 inhabitants or more), accelerated in 1989 (93 towns lost) and has continued ever since. After a slight upsurge in 2008, the decline continued in 2014. The PCF experienced losses both in terms of the number of municipalities and in terms of the population administered in the vast majority of *départements*. Only in Puy-de-Dôme (a *département* in central Auvergne, containing the regional capital Clermont-Ferrand) did the party’s score increase; it is also the only *département* where the PCF controls more municipalities now than it did 30 years ago. In 1977, there were 26 *départements* where the communist party controlled no municipalities with 3,500 inhabitants or more. By 1989, this figure had risen to 42, and in 2008 stood at 52. Following the 2014 elections, this is now the case in 59 *départements* (out of a total of 101). Today, urban support for the PCF is concentrated in four regions: Nord–Pas-de-Calais, Upper Normandy, the Paris region (Île-de-France), and Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur. More generally, communist support extends across a swathe of the country stretching from Orléans to Grenoble. Everywhere else – in the west of France, in the east, in the southern regions of Midi-Pyrénées and Languedoc-Roussillon – support either fits the archipelago model or is non-existent.

Table 3. *Départements* with the highest levels of communist support in towns with 3,500 inhabitants or more at the 2008 municipal elections

2014 ranking (number of municipalities)		2014 ranking (administered population)		<i>Départements</i> with the most losses in 2014 (number of municipalities)	
Nord	20	Val-de-Marne	410,806	Var	33
Pas-de-Calais	12	Seine-Saint-Denis	407,141	Sarthe	33
Bouches-du-Rhône	11	Hauts-de-Seine	200,176	Allier	33
Val-de-Marne	10	Bouches-du-Rhône	184,706	Rhône	40
Seine-Maritime	8	Nord	167,895	Pyrénées-Orientales	50
Seine-Saint-Denis	7	Isère	111,291	Seine-Saint-Denis	64
Meurthe-et-Moselle	7	Seine-Maritime	107,084	Eure	67
Isère	6	Pas-de-Calais	98,187	Cher	67

Source: Martelli 2008.

Today, while the PCF’s level of influence has diminished, the geographical distribution and hierarchy of its influence has changed very little: half of the towns it controls are located in just

³ Translator’s note: the Front Populaire (Popular Front) was an alliance of left-wing movements that governed France between 1936 and 1938, during which time it introduced a number of major social reforms.

seven *départements*, first and foremost in the former industrial heartlands of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, in the far north of France. Half of its losses were concentrated in five *départements* where the PCF have historically enjoyed strong support (Seine-Saint-Denis and Val-de-Marne, which respectively cover the north-eastern and south-eastern inner suburbs of Paris; Bouches-du-Rhône, around Marseille; Rhône, around Lyon; and Nord, around Lille), as well as the Morbihan *département* in southern Brittany. In the Paris region, Seine-Saint-Denis, whose departmental council was controlled by the PCF until 2008, has now been supplanted by its southern neighbour, Val-de-Marne. In several *départements*, including Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Morbihan, a significant number of municipal councils were lost to the socialists or “other left-wing” candidates. In these solidly left-wing areas, long-standing rivalries between socialist breakaway parties continued in 2014, although on this occasion the Socialist Party managed to make gains at the communists’ expense and thus partially compensate for its catastrophic results elsewhere.

The end of the “Parisian exception”

The geographical distribution of French communism, which became a truly national phenomenon throughout the 1930s and the post-war years, has always been associated in the public imagination with the “red suburbs” of Paris. And yet, since the 1980s, it is in these emblematic areas – where abstention has skyrocketed over the last three decades – that the decline in the communist vote has been particularly marked.

At the height of its influence, in 1977, the PCF controlled 147 municipalities in the Paris urban area; in all, it administered a third of the population of the Île-de-France region. Today, only a tenth of this population, spread across 38 municipalities, has a communist or communist-affiliated mayor. In 2014, the PCF lost just under a quarter of the town halls it possessed in 2008, which is similar to the losses experienced in 1983 and 2001.

The *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis is the strongest symbol of this decline. When the *départements* in the Paris region were reorganised in the 1960s,⁴ the promoters of this reorganisation sought to create a *département* that would group together the “reddest” of the “red suburbs” in the industrial north-east of the urban area. This *département* was named Seine-Saint-Denis and, being relatively homogeneous, 27 of its 40 municipalities elected communist mayors in the 1977 municipal elections, representing 80% of the *département*’s population. In the following year’s parliamentary elections, all nine members of parliament for Seine-Saint-Denis were PCF members.

⁴ Translator’s note: in 1968, the boundaries of two of the three existing *départements* in the Île-de-France region were completely redrawn. While Seine-et-Marne (covering the eastern outer suburbs) remained unchanged, Seine (covering Paris and the inner suburbs) and Seine-et-Oise (covering the remaining outer suburbs) were abolished and split into seven new *départements*, namely: Paris (city of Paris only), Hauts-de-Seine (western inner suburbs), Seine-Saint-Denis (north-eastern inner suburbs), Val-de-Marne (south-eastern inner suburbs), Essonne (southern outer suburbs), Yvelines (western outer suburbs) and Val-d’Oise (northern outer suburbs).

PCF and PCF-affiliated mayors in Seine-Saint-Denis



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Since then, the relative homogeneity of this territory has decreased following successive industrial downturns in the area, the “deproletarianisation” of the population, and various forms of spatial segregation (Martelli 2004). The PCF’s hegemony suffered as a result in 1983, when the party lost seven towns to the right. In the 1990s, when support for the right began to falter, it was the Socialist Party that benefited, spurring them to make concerted efforts to reduce PCF support in Seine-Saint-Denis and bring the *département* into line with areas elsewhere in France, thus ending its status as an “exception”. The spring of 2008 saw the electorate in Seine-Saint-Denis vote for a majority of socialist councillors in the departmental elections. The arrival of socialist Claude Bartolone at the head of the departmental council crowned the Socialist Party’s victory and brought four decades of communist rule in the *département* to an end. In the space of 30 years, the PCF lost 20 of its 27 municipalities in Seine-Saint-Denis, the seven remaining towns representing little more than a quarter of the *département*’s total population. Solid communist municipalities such as Bobigny (the administrative centre of Seine-Saint-Denis), Bagnolet and Saint-Ouen – which had been voting PCF since 1920, 1928 and 1945 respectively – were all lost in 2014, to the Socialist Party in the case of Bagnolet and to the centre-right UDI (Union des Démocrates et Indépendants) in the case of Bobigny and Saint-Ouen.

Table 4. Communist-controlled councils in the Paris region since 1965

	1965	1971	1977	1983	1989	1995	2001	2008	2014
Number of municipalities	79	94	147	106	84	69	53	49	38
Population administered by the PCF (in millions)	1.9	2.4	3.3	2.7	2.1	1.9	1.5	1.4	1.2
Number of PCF-controlled municipalities in France	1,134	1,150	1,464	1,460	1,124	873	786	725	N/K
% of municipalities in the Paris region controlled by the PCF	6.2	7.3	11.5	8.3	6.6	5.4	4.1	3.8	3.0
% of the population of the Paris region administered by the PCF	22.3	25.8	33.1	26.6	21.2	17.7	13.4	12.3	10.3

Source : Martelli 2008.

Does municipal communism still exist?

A few years ago, French publisher Autrement gave one of its works on the subject of the “red suburbs” a particularly interesting subtitle: *Années Thorez, années Gabin* (“The Thorez years, the Gabin years”, referencing long-time communist party leader Maurice Thorez and prolific French actor Jean Gabin, who were indeed contemporaries) (Fourcaut 1992). This subtitle is an apt description of the golden age of municipal communism, from the 1930s to the 1950s; furthermore, it conveys the numerical strength and symbolic recognition of the working classes, the expansion of the suburban phenomenon, and the relative hegemony of communism in the working-class spaces of the urban fringes. In more scholarly terms, historian Annie Fourcaut wrote that the “red suburbs” were the result of a combination of avant-garde municipal policies, a social class organised around a specific project, and communities on the edge of the city – adding, with regard to Bobigny, “a class-based parochialism” (Fourcaut 1986).

Today, none of these three terms can be applied to the suburban space around Paris. In this respect, the history of Seine-Saint-Denis is representative of the disintegration of municipal communism. The area was, for several decades, a relatively homogeneous space (inner suburbs), with a dominant sociological make-up (the working classes of the Second Industrial Revolution) and a political context marked by communist hegemony. For five decades, deindustrialisation and economic and sociological changes have unravelled the underlying fabric of the “red suburbs”, against the backdrop of the crisis of the welfare state and the erosion of former working-class sociabilities. The gaps between Seine-Saint-Denis’s different communities – gentrified towns (Collet 2008) on the border with Paris (e.g. Montreuil, Saint-Ouen and Bagnolet, which nevertheless still have significant vulnerable populations), poor towns that have become poorer still (La Courneuve, Bobigny, Villetaneuse, Aubervilliers and Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, among others), towns that have benefited from economic growth poles (e.g. Tremblay-en-France, near Charles de Gaulle airport, or Saint-Denis, home to numerous film and TV studios) – have gradually become wider, making it increasingly complicated to develop coherent strategies for redistributive territorial management.

The balance of conditions evoked by Annie Fourcaut therefore no longer exists, or at least not in the form that developed in the 20th century. Of course, there are still PCF activists, both individually and collectively, there are still councils with PCF mayors, and there are still remnants of communist culture of greater or lesser influence, but we can no longer talk about “municipal communism” *per se*. Those councils that remain under PCF control, in various forms of coalition, are now

seeking alternative models of governance that exhibit the attractiveness and originality for which communist municipalities were previously renowned (Gouard 2013). For the time being, this goal has not yet been achieved, and the resulting uncertainty is a source of vulnerability for the party. All it would take is a fragile political context – such as that created by the extensive mobilisation of the right in 2014 – for the erosion of PCF support to turn into wholesale decline.

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