

# The Mitterrand revolution?

by Harvey G. Simmons

Perhaps revolution is too strong a word. Since the French Socialist victory of 1981 no one has seen tumbrils clattering through Paris streets, nor has anyone yet accused Mitterrand and the Socialists of establishing a new Terror. But serious changes there have been, and more are on the way. Some of these changes are dramatic and well-publicized, such as the wide-ranging nationalization program, others are less apparent, but no less important. Take for example, the changed vocabulary. When is the last time anyone can recall the president of a major western country attacking "capitalism?" Yet, in September 1981, in his first press conference after taking office, President François Mitterrand said: "In this year, 1981, after more than a century and a half of the development of capitalism in France, the accumulation and concentration of capital, and the multinationalization of capital in the world have led me to consider it as just and necessary that a certain number of enterprises which have become monopolies or tend toward monopoly and which make products necessary to the nation, be nationalized, and become an integral part of the nation."

Thus for Mitterrand, as for the Socialist Party, the term capitalism is not an abstraction to be used merely in the theoretical discussions or in internal party debates, but rather a concrete term which refers to a specific socio-economic system that is "French capitalism." Since Mitterrand and the Socialist Party committed themselves in 1969 to transforming France from a capitalist into a socialist state one must be prepared to see the Socialists press forward over the next five years or so (or until the next legislative elections) in an attempt to bring about what recent party documents have referred to as a "quiet revolution."

What is revolutionary, therefore, is not so much what the Socialists have done over the past sixteen months but rather what their intentions are and what they are capable of doing. One must remember that this is the first time since the French Revolution that a left wing government has won an absolute majority of seats in the legislature. It is the first time that a Socialist President has held office under the Fifth Republic. And it is also the first time since 1945 that a committed left wing Socialist Party has won power in a major European country, for the 1982 version of the French

Socialist Party bears only a faint resemblance to the older party that preceded it.

## The new Socialists

The earlier version of the Socialist Party — the SFIO — was a weak, reformist party which was ideologically stale, politically ineffective and tainted with opportunism. However, at an SFIO conference in 1969 a variety of left wing organizations and individuals joined with the SFIO to create a new party out of the ashes of the old one. Some of the new members came from the Communist Party, others came from the left wing study groups or political clubs which had proliferated under the Fifth Republic (Mitterrand was the head of a federation of political clubs before he joined the Socialist Party), and others still from left wing Catholic groups or from among the mendésistes, supporters of Mendés-France. This political ratatouille simmered and boiled for a number of years, but surprisingly, out of it emerged a Socialist Party which rejected the tepid reformism of the previous years, and was committed to a wide-ranging program of nationalization, decentralization, and radical social and economic reform. It was this new political grouping which took power in 1981.

What, then, does the Mitterrand revolution consist of? Clearly the most important and well-publicized measures concerned the nationalization of seven major industrial groups and of thirty-six banks. Even *Le Monde* referred to the nationalization program as a "revolution." Yet, as President Mitterrand pointed out in his first press conference, the nationalized sector represents only ten percent of salaried workers, eighteen percent of investment and fifteen percent of value added from industry. Moreover, the weight of the French state varies from one sector of the economy to another. In some industries — steel, for example — the state's share of the market has leaped from one percent to eighty percent. In others, machine tools, for example, although the percentage increase in state ownership is radical (from six to twelve percent) the total weight of the state in the sector is small.

The Socialists have argued that nationalized industries can be just as efficient and profitable as private enterprise. Inevitably, the Renault automobile company is cited as an example. But the Socialists have defended nationalization for three additional reasons. First, they claim that in difficult economic times the national interest demands that key industries be run in accordance with the national economic

*Harvey Simmons is in the Department of Political Science at York University in Toronto.*