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French Leftists Should See Silver Lining

In a flood of carefully designed public opinion polls, editorials, and books bordering on idolatry, the French communications industry had already settled next year's presidential election. The loser would be Nicolas Sarkozy, sagging in the polls. The winner would be Dominique Strauss-Kahn, ever on the rise. True, the French Socialist Party had not yet chosen its candidate, and Strauss-Kahn had not yet announced his candidacy, but the party nomination and the election itself were little more than formalities. Known by his initials, like the International Monetary Fund he currently heads, DSK was the clear choice of the economic powers behind the throne, and was being vigorously sold to the public as "the most competent" candidate.

Since DSK has the luck to face a New York jury, and not the judges at the International Criminal Court, commentators are all stressing that he is, of course, innocent until proven guilty. Well, yes. But the scandal has already blown the upcoming presidential election campaign out of the water.

The French Socialist Party has been largely speechless at seeing its supposedly unbeatable candidate shoot himself in the foot before the race even starts. Conspiracy theories proliferate. Was this all a plot by Sarkozy?

But Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, a minor candidate who is trying to resuscitate the tradition of social Gaullism, says that, contrary to many observers, he thinks the elimination of DSK is a stroke of luck for the left: "Dominique Strauss-Kahn was a false good candidate for the left and I think that the right would be mistaken to rejoice. I've always thought that there was a sort of phony

Strauss-Kahn fad and that he was perhaps the best adversary Nicolas Sarkozy could have…”

Indeed, only a few days before the hotel room scandal broke, DSK was under fire for being photographed getting into a luxurious Porsche – not his own, as it happens, but ironically belonging to his public relations (“communication” these days) advisor. But this was only a reminder that the potential Socialist candidate is anything but a man of the people. Strauss-Kahn’s luxurious life style is no secret, his hunger for wealth and power every bit equal to that of Sarkozy, and his womanizing reputation has spiced up Paris dinner party conversation for years. Moreover, he has been credited with a style of womanizing that is not so much the Latin lover stereotype as “a chimpanzee in heat”, according to a young journalist who has publicly recounted how she had to fight him off tooth and nail.

But the real scandal for the Socialist Party is the one it does not even begin to recognize: that it was pinning its electoral hopes on a leading champion of global capitalism, the president of the IMF. Whatever the outcome of the New York proceedings, the bursting DSK bubble marks the total degeneration of the Socialist Party in France, for reasons that have nothing to do with his sex life.

Thirty years ago, the wily François Mitterrand led Socialist Party politicians to an election victory they are still celebrating. Initially allied with the French Communist Party, the better to subjugate and destroy it, Mitterrand’s Socialists started out in a blaze of reforms, ending the death penalty, nationalizing enterprises and lowering the retirement age, only to turn around a couple of years later and abandon socialist economic policies as impossible to pursue in the free market context of the European Community (now the European Union). The Mitterrand era in reality buried socialism, or even social democracy, but the Socialist Party went on calling itself “the left”. This no longer referred to economic policies favoring the working class but above all to moral issues such as anti-racism and all sorts of vague good intentions.

The Socialists were no longer socialist, without being anything else.

With Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the mere absence of socialism evolved into something much more vigorous: unabashed promotion of global capitalism. After becoming Minister of the Economy, Finances and Industry in 1997, he totally reversed the early Mitterrand direction, carrying out a wave of major privatizations, turning over French telecommunications, steel, aerospace and other key industries to the whims of international finance capital. This was to be expected from the vice president of the high level "Cercle de l'Industrie", which he joined in

1994 at the invitation of Raymond Lévy, then head of the Renault auto manufacturer. In this charmed circle, dedicated to promoting the interests of industry in the European institutions, DSK hung out with the same crowd of top French capitalists whose company so delights Nicolas Sarkozy. Indeed, it is only fair to suggest that Sarkozy chose DSK to head the IMF not only, as is constantly repeated, to keep his rival out of France, but also because the two see precisely eye to eye when it comes to international financial policy.

Consistently, DSK opposed the last Socialist Party reform intended to favor the workers, namely the reduction of the work week to 36 hours adopted in 2002. Having written his doctoral thesis in economics on “human resources”, he has argued in favor of both a longer work week and raising the age of retirement, “now that we live a hundred years”.

In the wake of the Porsche flap, it is a sign of the degeneration of political life that commentators were writing that DSK needed to change. The fact that he was clearly an eager champion of multinational financial capital posing as a socialist was not the problem; the problem was that it showed. He needed to do something to make himself seem more concerned with ordinary people. Well, nobody imagined how rapidly that could be done.

There is another way in which DSK would have been a vulnerable candidate for the Socialists. The PS has often been the party of choice for voters from immigrant communities, but this has been complicated by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All mainstream French politicians are pro-Israel, but DSK went farther than most, writing: “I consider that every Jew in the diaspora, wherever he is, and thus this holds true for France, should contribute to helping Israel. Moreover that is why it is important for Jews to assume political responsibilities. Not everyone in the Jewish community thinks so, but I believe it is necessary. […] To sum it up, in my functions and in my daily life, through all my actions, I do what I can to contribute my modest stone to the construction of the land of Israel” (from the review *Passages*, number 35, 2007.) This sort of stuff no doubt aroused the enthusiasm of the large Jewish community in the Paris suburb of Sarcelles that elected him mayor. But it is strange for a presidential candidate to declare that concern for a foreign country is the primary motivation of his political career.

In his comments, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan was the first public person in France to express concern for the victim. “If the facts are proven, it is very grave, all the more in that nobody speaks of the victim. If it had happened in France, I am not sure that the police would have dared to arrest DSK.” Dupont-Aignan deplored the fact that France “will go on having that image

of a culture of impunity for important personalities. … The United States", he concluded, "has a lot of faults but in such sex cases they have much less of the culture of impunity which prevails in our country."

Many French will see the prosecution of DSK as symptomatic of American puritanism. Certainly, this scandal will draw attention to the cultural differences between the two countries, including what it is that causes a major scandal. Back in the summer of 2004, a huge uproar occurred in France when a young woman claimed to be the victim of a group of young blacks who attacked her on a suburban commuter train because they thought she was Jewish. Even the President of the Republic joined the chorus of protests against the "anti-Semitic attack". It turned out that the young woman had invented the whole story to attract the sympathy of her family.

As the truth came out, Dominique Strauss-Kahn commented that if the incident "turns out later not to have happened as alleged, in any case there have been 20 others that did take place before."

This was symptomatic of a "left" that abandoned the working class, while marketing itself as uniquely concerned with moral issues such as promoting feminism and combating racism and anti-Semitism. It would be fittingly ironic for this pretense to be exploded by the revolt of an abused African housekeeper.

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