

# Bourgeois politics in France, 1945–1951

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# 1 Introduction

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History is often seen from the winners' point of view, but writing on France between the Liberation and the early 1950s provides a conspicuous exception to this rule. Historical accounts of the Fourth Republic concentrate on the early hopes that are seen to have been incarnated by the French Resistance. Subsequent developments are then presented as a depressing and tedious slide into *immobilisme*, and the most serious consideration is reserved for the political left, which was defeated during this period, or for those bourgeois politicians – like Mendès-France or de Gaulle – who rebelled against the Fourth Republic system. Those politicians who succeeded during the 1940s have attracted few historians: Paul Reynaud is better known for his unsuccessful attempts to save France from defeat by Nazi Germany during the 1930s than for his part in a successful effort to contain Communism during the 1940s.

In 1944 the property-owning classes of France seemed under threat from increasing Communist power (many feared an outright Communist take over), from a general belief that in future the state would play a greater role in the administration of the economy, and from the measures that had been taken to exclude from public life those who had supported Marshal Pétain's Vichy government of 1940–44. By the early 1950s all these threats seemed to have passed: the Communist party had been forced out of government in 1947 and Communist supporters had been forced out of administrative jobs; *dirigiste* economics had come to be seen less as a threat to the rights of property than as a means of managing capitalism, and measures taken against Pétainists were beginning to be formally rescinded or discreetly forgotten. The new political climate was marked by three events: the 1951 election, which saw a large number of conservatives returned to parliament; the amnesty laws of 1951 and 1953; and the election in 1952 of Antoine Pinay (a businessman, former Pétainist and conservative) as prime minister.

The revival of bourgeois fortunes in France between 1944 and 1951 is significant for three reasons. Firstly, it marked a dramatic change: men moved from prison cells to boardrooms and from ineligibility to ministerial

office in the space of a few years. Secondly, the means by which the French bourgeoisie preserved its interests were unusual. There have been many occasions in European history when property-owners have successfully reacted against threats to their interests. But most of these reactions involved violence and the suspension of democracy. Often the European bourgeoisie came to wonder whether the radical right cure to which it had turned might not be worse than the Bolshevik disease that it was designed to counter. By contrast the bourgeois leaders of Fourth Republic France achieved their aims without destroying democracy and without large-scale violence. There were no civil wars, no political murders, no private armies: the forces of order fired a total of eight live rounds during the strikes in 1948.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, the bourgeois reconstruction of 1944 to 1951 is important because it left a legacy. Economic planning, European integration and a managed version of capitalism that pervaded both the public and private sectors survived the fall of the Fourth Republic to influence the whole of post-war French history, and indeed to establish models that many outside France sought to emulate.

This book will seek to describe and explain the triumph of bourgeois France in the early part of the Fourth Republic. It will pay particular attention to six political parties, or alliances of parties: the Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP); the Rassemblement des Gauches Républicaines (RGR); the Centre National des Indépendants et Paysans (CNIP); the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF); the Parti Républicain de la Liberté (PRL); and the Groupement de Défense des Contribuables (GDC). It will also study business organizations, particularly the Conseil National du Patronat Français (CNPF), the civil service and the various agencies set up to defend the reputation of the Vichy government. The Fourth Republic will be examined from the perspective of those who operated it rather than those who rebelled against it. Three assumptions will be made. The first of these is that political parties cannot be studied in isolation from each other. Political commentators of this period often pointed out that the most important political divisions existed *within* rather than *between* political parties.<sup>2</sup> All but one of the Fourth Republic governments were coalitions, and bourgeois parties frequently merged or allied. Indeed, the capacity to form alliances was crucial to the survival of many loosely structured conservative parties after 1945. It was this capacity that helped them to survive the system of proportional representation, which would normally have benefited strong well-organized parties.<sup>3</sup> In 1951 the system of alliance

<sup>1</sup> Jules Moch, *Une si longue vie* (Paris, 1976), p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> This was a point made by the leading Fourth Republic politician Edgar Faure.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Williams, *Politics in post-war France: parties and the constitution in the Fourth Republic* (2nd edition, London, 1958), p. 316. See the appendix.

between parties was institutionalized by the *apparentement* law that allowed an alliance of national parties to pool their support in order to prevent 'wasted' votes. Furthermore, politicians and voters sometimes switched between one party and another, while the notables, businessmen and anti-Communist agencies that worked behind the scenes usually maintained relations with more than one political party simultaneously.

The second assumption on which this book is based is that political developments cannot be explained with reference to party politics alone. When the PRL proved an ineffective lobbying mechanism, businessmen worked through the CNPF. Local notables might seek to advance their standing through either the Radical party (Parti Républicain Radical et Radical-Socialiste) or the chamber of commerce or, more probably, they might use both bodies simultaneously. Many key political battles were fought in the supposedly 'apolitical' administration. The exclusion of the Communist sympathizers from the civil service, the dissolution of the *forces françaises de l'intérieur* and the purging of the *compagnies républicaines de sécurité* probably did more to alleviate the Communist threat than the exclusion of Parti Communiste Français (PCF) ministers from government in 1947. Similarly, the debate over economic policy was conducted as much within the ministry of finance or the *commissariat général du plan* (or between the two bodies) as it was in parliament. This book attempts to describe the institutions of the bourgeoisie both by devoting particular chapters to some of those institutions and by dealing with the links that individual political parties had to business associations, civil servants, church organizations and the press.

The third assumption on which this book is based is that attention should be devoted not just to the causes of the bourgeois triumph, but also to the reasons why that triumph took a particular form. It is necessary to explain why the large-scale disciplined parties, such as the MRP and the PRL, that emerged on the right of the political spectrum between 1944 and 1947 ultimately failed and why loose coalitions of small poorly organized parties, similar to those which had dominated the Third Republic, returned to prominence in the 1950s. It is also necessary to explain why Christian Democracy in France did not become the main representative of bourgeois interests as it did in Italy, Germany and, to a lesser extent, Belgium.

A number of objections could be advanced to the scheme outlined above. Firstly, it could be suggested that the very idea of 'bourgeois France' is flawed. It could be pointed out that the French bourgeoisie was never particularly united. Pierre Birnbaum has stressed that the 'bourgeoisie' represented by conservatives in parliament (a class with links to small-scale local business) differed sharply from the 'bourgeoisie' represented by upper level civil servants (a class linked to large-scale national and multinational

industries).<sup>4</sup> Even within sub-sections of the French bourgeoisie it is possible to identify important conflicts and differences. Large-scale capitalism in France was riven by disputes between traditional and modernized industries or simply between firms that were competing with each other in the same sector. Similarly, the upper levels of French administration were the scene of intense rivalries over prestige. However, the conflicts and differences within sections of the bourgeoisie can be overstated. Internal squabbles within the bourgeois groups may have been frequent, and they seemed intense to those involved in them, but they concerned relatively minor issues and they rarely caused collaboration between the bourgeois agencies to break down.<sup>5</sup>

Many historians would argue that it is wrong to interpret French politics in primarily class terms at all. They would contend that divisions over the role of the catholic church and the constitution were as important, if not more important, than social struggles.<sup>6</sup> Such arguments clearly have some plausibility when applied to the Fourth Republic. Fourth Republic political parties that agreed on issues connected with the distribution of wealth might have violent disagreements about clericalism or the need to strengthen the executive. However, close examination makes it seem unlikely that either religious or constitutional differences cut as deeply as those of class. It is true that the clerical/anti-clerical division still mattered to large sections of the electorate in Fourth Republic France, but it mattered less to leaders of most political parties who laboured, with some success, to prevent the clerical issue from disrupting their projects.<sup>7</sup> Political alliances were often maintained across the clerical/anti-clerical divide. Furthermore, the clerical/anti-clerical division was less clear in the Fourth Republic than it had been before 1940. Broadly speaking, it is true to say that the MRP was perceived as being most closely linked to church interests and that the Radical party was perceived (among the parties representing property owners) as being the most anti-clerical. But distinctions were not absolute. Even the Radical party contained some defenders of the *école libre* and was sometimes viewed with favour by the religious authorities, and the Radicals were part of a larger alliance that associated them with pro-church parties (the Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance (UDSR) and Réconciliation Française (RF)). On the other side of the spectrum almost all the pro-clerical parties, including the MRP, periodically alleged that the church was acting against them.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Birnbaum, *Les sommets de l'état. Essai sur l'élite du pouvoir en France* (Paris, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Birnbaum stresses the gulf between the backgrounds of businessmen and parliamentarians, but he fails to describe the mechanisms (such as business funding of political parties) that linked the two groups. <sup>6</sup> Williams, *Politics in post-war France*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Politicians were less successful in preventing clericalism from creating divisions among them after 1951 than they had been before this date.

Defining right and left in constitutional terms also raises serious problems. The most important group in the Fourth Republic urging a more authoritarian constitution was the RPF, but the elements of the RPF that are normally regarded as right-wing were those elements that abandoned the party either before the 1951 election or in order to support the government of Antoine Pinay in 1952 – in other words those who were willing to sacrifice constitutional reform for more immediate goals. Furthermore, defining right and left in terms of constitutional position in the Fourth Republic would have the odd effect of placing the Vichy apologists in the Association des Représentants du Peuple de la Troisième République on the extreme left of the political spectrum.

This work will not seek to argue that disputes within the bourgeoisie were unimportant; such disputes are central to answering the question posed above about the particular form that bourgeois reconstruction took in France. However, it will be suggested that intra-class disputes were less important for the bourgeoisie than inter-class ones: neither the disputes inherited from the nineteenth century over clericalism and the constitution nor the social contradictions within the bourgeoisie ever prevented parties that represented property-owners from uniting against real threats to the interests of their class. A characteristic of the French bourgeoisie throughout the twentieth century has been its capacity to bury its differences at moments – 1920, 1936, 1944, 1968 – when left-wing governments or labour agitation seemed likely to undermine the rights of property. The sense that political disputes could be divided into ‘primary’ ones (concerning class interest) and ‘secondary’ ones (which took place within the bourgeoisie) was particularly strong during the late 1940s. One of the functions of the *apparentement* law of 1951 (the most important constitutional innovation of the Fourth Republic) was to ensure that division over ‘secondary’ issues did not threaten ‘primary’ interests by benefiting the Communists.

Other objections might be raised to the study of ‘bourgeois France’. Bourgeois is a vague and subjective term: definitions of who was and was not bourgeois depended on lifestyle and self-image as much as objective economic status. The frontiers of ‘bourgeois France’ might even be said to run within households: workers sometimes referred to their wives as *la bourgeoise*<sup>8</sup> and public opinion surveys showed that the proportion of women who regarded themselves as bourgeois was higher than that of men who put themselves in this category. Furthermore, not all of the parties described in this book were exclusively bourgeois. The MRP had, or at least claimed to have, a substantial proletarian membership; the RPF attracted

<sup>8</sup> R. Magraw, *A history of the French working class. I: The age of artisan revolution 1815–1871* (London, 1992), p. 6.

votes from working class areas and the Peasant party appealed to voters who could hardly be described as bourgeois.

To some extent the use of the word bourgeois is justified by the absence of any other satisfactory term. In Fourth Republic France, ‘right-wing’ or ‘conservative’ were labels that almost all politicians would have rejected, while the description bourgeois would have been accepted by most of those whose career is described in this book. The term bourgeois was very widely used in the Fourth Republic. Charles Morazé wrote a book in 1946 entitled *La France bourgeoise*, while André Germain, grandson of the founder of the Crédit Lyonnais and cousin of the Pétainist Alfred Fabre-Luce, published his memoirs in 1951 under the title *La bourgeoisie qui brûle*.<sup>9</sup> Sociologists in the 1940s might debate the precise meaning of the word bourgeois but they had no doubt that it meant something.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, to some extent the debate over the limits of the bourgeoisie was a sign that the social group under discussion was a dynamic one that was constantly adjusting to circumstances – electrical devices were replacing domestic servants, and the ‘cultural’ capital provided by *lycées* and *grandes écoles* was becoming more important than the inheritance of property.<sup>11</sup>

In some respects the very subjectivity of the term is appropriate. Subjective notions sometimes played a key role in influencing electoral behaviour – women were not just more prone to describe themselves as bourgeois than their menfolk, they were also more prone to vote for parties such as the CNIP, the RPF and the MRP. Furthermore, political parties had a self-image just as individuals did: the *vins d’honneur*, the banquets and the soporific speeches identified the Radicals or the Independents as ‘bourgeois parties’ just as white table cloths and leather-bound editions of Montesquieu might identify an individual as bourgeois.

It is also possible to justify the use of the word bourgeois in more precise terms. The key groups who controlled most political parties and institutions described in this work were bourgeois by any definition. Most

<sup>9</sup> The works by Morazé and Germain, and a number of other books published in the 1940s and 1950s dealing with the French bourgeois, are cited in the opening pages of T. Zeldin, *France 1848–1945: ambition and love* (Oxford, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> M. Perrot’s study of bourgeois living standards between 1873 and 1953 discussed three possible characteristics that might be used to identify the bourgeoisie: the possession of the *baccalauréat*, the employment of servants and the use of a room specifically to receive visitors. Perrot herself argued that all families who kept accounts were bourgeois (which was convenient since family accounts provided the source for her study). M. Perrot, *Le mode de vie des familles bourgeoises 1873–1953* (Paris, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Some idea of changing bourgeois lifestyles is given in Perrot, *La mode de vie des familles bourgeoises* and in J. Morice, *La demande d’automobiles en France. Théorie, histoire, répartition géographique* (Paris, 1957). The memoirs of Philippe Ariès give a marvellous impression of how a family could retain its sense of being bourgeois even when its material circumstances changed. Philippe Ariès, *Un historien de dimanche* (Paris, 1980).

politicians were drawn from the liberal professions – the law, medicine, journalism – and much of the funding of political parties came from large-scale industry. Civil servants and the *éminences grises* who worked behind the political scenes were also bourgeois by education and background. A large proportion of industrialists and civil servants, and a smaller proportion of politicians, came from a very precisely defined section of the *haute bourgeoisie* that was united by education at the smart *lycées* and *grandes écoles*, service in the *corps d'état* and residence in the *beaux quartiers* of western Paris.<sup>12</sup>

It is not suggested that the bourgeois leadership exercised exclusive control of French politics during the period 1944 to 1951 or that class interest was the sole element in political struggles; indeed, it will be argued that the confusion of French politics in the period owes much to the complexity of forces and interests at work. However, it will be argued that the French bourgeoisie was the group that benefited most from developments in France between 1944 and 1951: they had most to lose from the nationalization, *dirigisme*, *épuration* and disorder of 1944, and they had most to win from the period of rapid growth in a neo-capitalist economy that began at the end of the 1940s. Furthermore, it will be argued that, to some extent at least, the conscious defence of class interests by bourgeois leaders laid the foundations for the benefits that their class was to enjoy.

A second objection that might be raised to the structure of this book concerns the choice of political parties studied. It might be argued that the decision to include the UDSR and to exclude the main socialist party (the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière or SFIO) is arbitrary. It is true that there was frequent discussion of alliances between the SFIO and the MRP or the UDSR immediately after the war, and that some in all three parties aspired to form a broader *travailliste* grouping, which would provide a French equivalent of the British Labour party. However, this book will argue that *travaillisme* was always something of a mirage and that those in the MRP and UDSR who espoused it were either hopelessly isolated from their own colleagues or had failed to realize how radical the social policies necessary to sustain such a union would be.

After attempts to form a *travailliste* union were abandoned, the SFIO retained close links with the bourgeois parties with which it frequently entered into electoral alliances or coalition governments. However, the long-term aims of the SFIO remained radically different from those of its

<sup>12</sup> A large number of works deal with the social origins of the ruling class during the Fourth Republic. See particularly Alain Girard, Henri Laugier, D. Weinburg, Charretier (sic) and Claude Lévy-Leboyer, *La réussite sociale en France. Ses caractères, ses lois, ses effets* (Paris, 1961); E.N. Suleiman, *Elites in French society: the politics of survival* (Princeton, 1978); Pierre Birnbaum, *La classe dirigeante française* (Paris, 1978).

allies: no Socialist leader would have said that he wished to defend capitalism, though the practical impact of the party's action was often precisely that. Perhaps more importantly, the SFIO's internal structure differed from that of the bourgeois parties: it was made up of well-disciplined militants, not powerful notables, and, although its electorate sometimes overlapped with that of bourgeois parties (particularly the Radicals), the SFIO retained a larger number of proletarian voters, members and, most importantly, leaders than any other party except the Communists. Business relations with the SFIO reveal its curious position poised between the Communist ghetto and the anti-Communist alliance. Though businessmen funded the SFIO, their relations with the party were conducted at arm's length. SFIO leaders were much more discreet about their links with capitalism than the leaders of any other party were, and no prominent business leader ever joined the SFIO (though businessmen joined all the parties of the bourgeois grouping). For these reasons the SFIO will not be the subject of a detailed investigation in itself, but it will be mentioned when it formed part of larger strategies conceived by bourgeois leaders.

Another objection that might be raised to the party content of this book concerns the degree of attention given to various groupings. It might be argued that it is perverse to devote as much space to the UDSR, which gained only 9 seats in the 1951 election, as to the RPF, which gained 120 seats in 1951 making it the largest group in the National Assembly. To some extent the degree of attention given to various parties is justified by previous work done on the subject. Considerable space has been devoted to explaining parties that have been neglected by previous historians (especially where there are substantial archive sources available relating to those parties). The RPF has already been the subject of several excellent studies on which this book draws.

The weight of attention given to 'minor' parties in this book can also be justified with a more radical critique of traditional ways in which the Fourth Republic has been understood. Previous historians have been attracted to the RPF by its spectacular electoral success and by the exciting novelty of its programme. Philip Williams justified the space that he devoted to the RPF in his *Politics in post-war France* on the grounds that 'A volcano remains interesting even when the eruption is over'.<sup>13</sup> Previous accounts of the Fourth Republic have been based on the, at least implicit, assumption that the Fourth Republic was a 'failure'. In this context those parties that came nearest to overthrowing the whole regime are most worthy of interest. However, such an emphasis on the parties that attacked the Fourth

<sup>13</sup> Williams, *Politics in post-war France*, p. v.

Republic neglects those forces that entered governments and ran France between 1947 and 1951.

An alternative point of view, and one adopted in this book, is that there was no single criterion of success in Fourth Republic politics. The point can be underlined through a comparison with English politics. In England, politics could be likened to a game of draughts: there were only two players each of whom had a simple aim which could only be achieved in one way. Success in terms of the number of votes obtained translated, more or less, into success in terms of the number of seats in parliament gained, which translated into the right to form a government, implement policy and distribute portfolios. Politics in Fourth Republic France was more like some fiendishly complicated variation on the game of poker involving a number of skilled, and not always honest, players. Definitions of success varied according to whether votes, seats in parliament, ministerial offices or policies implemented were counted, and the leaders of political parties did not always subscribe to the same kind of goal.

The MRP was mainly concerned to affect policy, and particularly policy relating to the integration of Europe – hence the tenacious grip that the party kept on the ministry of foreign affairs. For this reason the MRP leaders were willing to remain in government even at times when it seemed likely that their presence would damage their own electoral fortunes.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, MRP leaders might well have argued that their losses in the election of 1951 were justified in view of the role that MRP foreign ministers had played in the early stages of European integration.

The Radicals and the Socialist SFIO presented a sharp contrast to the MRP. Both parties were more concerned with the fortunes of their party than with the implementation of any particular policy. This accounted for the store that the SFIO and the Radicals set by control of the ministry of the interior, which exercised considerable power at election times. However, the means by which the SFIO and the Radicals tried to advance their party interests were very different. The SFIO tried to keep its austere militants happy by frequently leaving governments to take the proverbial *cure d'opposition*, while the Radicals tried to keep their worldly notables happy by remaining in government at almost any cost in order to distribute favours. Some political parties changed their aims over the course of the Fourth Republic. Thus the PRL and the UDSR began life with grand ideas about forming large-scale new parties *à l'anglaise* that might even be able to form single party governments. However, both parties renounced these early ambitions and emulated the Radicals – participating in government

<sup>14</sup> Archives Nationales (AN), 350 AP 76, Francisque Gay to Félix Gouin, 28 February 1946. Gay pointed out to Gouin (a member of the SFIO) that the MRP had probably damaged its electoral chances by remaining in the government after the resignation of de Gaulle.

whenever possible in order to secure whatever advantages might be derived from the distribution of patronage.

Most other bourgeois groupings never had any illusions about the possibility of forming single party governments. Some party leaders claimed that they did not wish to have more than a handful of parliamentarians in their groupings;<sup>15</sup> others, such as the leaders of the CNIP or the RGR, explicitly announced that they did not wish to exercise discipline over the parties or individuals who joined their groups. Sometimes candidates in elections did not even wish to win. Many of the candidates in the 1951 election who obtained half a dozen votes, or sometimes no votes at all, had been put up merely in order to allow the parties that they represented to claim the thirty candidatures necessary to benefit from the *apparemment* laws.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes presenting candidates was a form of blackmail: parties or candidates would be forced to buy off potential rivals.<sup>17</sup> In 1951, the Groupement de Défense des Contribuables institutionalized this system by seeking to exercise influence over the electoral lists presented all over France, and by threatening to put up its own candidates in areas where the existing parties refused to allow it to exercise such influence.

Parties that were seeking to secure influence rather than the prestige of electoral success often thought of their results in terms quite different from those that spring to the mind of Anglo-Saxon historians. The Groupement de Défense des Contribuables was a ‘success’ in the 1951 election because it had exercised influence over the selection of over three hundred successful candidates, even though it gained only one seat itself. The Radicals were a ‘success’ because they managed to gain seats and ministries consistently in spite of a continuously declining vote. The UDSR was a ‘success’ because it managed to hold ministerial office in spite of losing both votes and seats in parliament. Seen in the same light, the RPF was a failure because, in spite of

<sup>15</sup> Antier, leader of the Peasant party, told a representative of the Fédération Républicaine that he wished his grouping in parliament to remain small; undated report in AN, 317 AP 84.

<sup>16</sup> The two most commonly used sources used to study electoral politics in France, i.e. the electoral results printed in *le Monde* and the electoral declarations of successful candidates printed in the *Recueil des textes authentiques des programmes et engagements électoraux des députés proclamés élus à la suite des élections générales du 17 juin 1951* (commonly known as *Barodet*), both ignore those candidatures that attracted very few votes. The nearest thing to a comprehensive set of electoral results was produced by the ministry of the interior and published by Documentation Française. This list showed that the Groupement de Défense des Contribuables obtained no votes at all in the second constituency of the Bouches du Rhône.

<sup>17</sup> J.-L. Antier reported that his fellow Radical, Bastid, had faced the threat of electoral competition in his constituency from a shadowy organization called the URIAS (which was headed by a professional stamp-dealer). Bastid had been obliged to buy off his potential rival for 200,000 francs. AN, 373 AP 73, Antier to Bollaert, 19 May 1947.

the huge number of votes that it obtained, its inspiring mass rallies and the grandeur of its rhetoric, it did not obtain a single ministerial position or exercise any direct power over the action of government.

This book aims to understand the political parties and bourgeois institutions of Fourth Republic France in their own terms. It will argue that there were broad class interests at work behind the complicated factions, alliances and coalitions of Fourth Republic politics and attempt to show that the period from the Liberation to the early 1950s can be understood as much in terms of successful conservatism as of failed reform.