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***NEO-LIBERISM IN THE GAULLIST PARTY BETWEEN 1981 AND 1986: A
TURNAROUND?***

In setting out his general programme on 9 April 1986, the newly-elected prime minister Jacques Chirac explained that the French people had understood the dangers of «statist dirigisme» and wanted to move towards new values of «liberty, creation, responsibility of the human person»¹. In other words, it was a matter of translating into concrete terms an *à la française* liberalism² involving not only the economy but also a more comprehensive vision of state-society relations. Although many observers noted that it took only the mass protests against university reforms in December 1986 to stymie the initiative, the project itself nevertheless had several years of development behind it. Indeed, between 1981 and 1986, the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR), of which Chirac was president, had developed not only a new programme (called “project” by the Gaullists), but also a cultural framework informed by the neo-liberism of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

The RPR had been formed in December 1976 by Jacques Chirac out of the ashes of the Gaullist UDR with the aim of embodying the perpetuation of Gaullism. However, with the neo-liberist programmatic and cultural project the RPR appeared to make a clear break with the legacy of Gaullist thought and the role that de Gaulle and his successor Pompidou (albeit with a greater degree of liberalism) had given the state in the economy and social relations, not only as regulator, but also as planner and key player in the modernisation of France.

This article aims to retrace the stages by which the RPR and its president moved towards the adoption of a neo-liberal programme and then to analyse the reasons behind its adoption, as it is felt that there is a need for such a reconstruction.

1. Factors leading to the adoption of a neo-liberist programme:

The European election results of June 1979 were a disaster for the RPR: with its 16.31%, the RPR was a long way behind the 27.61% achieved by the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF) under the President of the Republic Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (also known by his American-style nickname VGE). The leadership of Chirac, who had come to personify triumphant Gaullism with his victory in the Paris mayor elections in 1977, suffered a major setback. The RPR was wracked by internal

¹ In Olivier Wieviorka, Christophe Prochasson, *La France au XX siècle. Documents d'histoire*, Seuil Paris 1994, pp. 648-649.

² In the text the term liberalism (referring mainly to the economic sphere) has been preferred to liberalism (which has a broader meaning, especially political), even if the French language has only one word, *libéralisme*. Furthermore, we have chosen to use the term neo-liberism to indicate the thought that is called neo-conservatism in the Anglo-American public debate. The French public debate does not use this last word.

strife that was far more damaging for Chirac's position than the public attacks and defections that had plagued the party in the period leading up to the elections. With humiliation in the European elections came a number of changes. There was a reshuffle of advisors to the party president: Pierre Juillet and Marie-France Garaud, who had been close to him since the beginning of the 'Seventies, were moved away; Chirac selected the young Alain Juppé, whom he later replaced with Eduard Balladur³, and in 1981 he took on a communications advisor, Elie Crespi. The upper echelons of the party were also renewed and, in October 1979, the politician Bernard Pons took over from the “technician” Alain Devaquet as the party's secretary general⁴. Lastly, the RPR perceived the need to «translate» into terms suited to the climate of the 'Eighties «the unchangeable element in the Gaullist legacy: the responsibility of man and the pride of the nation»⁵. This led to a programme overhaul, especially with regard to the economy, that would come to fruition only two years later, in 1981.

During the time of Giscard d'Estaing's presidency, and especially after 1976, Chirac had often criticised the policies of the Raymond Barre government from a left-wing perspective: in September 1976, he announced the imminent creation of the RPR and spoke of a «great Rassemblement that aims to marry the defence of the core values of Gaullism with the aspirations of a true and genuine French labourism»⁶. For the presidential elections in 1981 Chirac chose to draw inspiration for his campaign from the speeches of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher: he accused the administration of invasiveness, attacking its infringement of individual liberties, and called for the abolition of particular regulations and taxes that paralysed companies and discouraged enterprise, especially that of small to medium-sized companies⁷. He presented himself as the only candidate capable of engendering a turnaround in the economy, while accusing both Giscardism and socialism of generating *étatisme*, and «rampant collectivism»⁸. At the same time, however, he counterweighted his programme with renewed emphasis on planning, a throwback to the “voluntarist” economy of Charles de Gaulle⁹. Furthermore, *La lettre de la Nation*,

³ Nicolas Domenach, Maurice Szafran, *De si bons amis*, Paris Plon, 1994.

⁴ The bad performance at the European elections showed how the de-politicization, carried out in the RPR's upper echelons through the recruitment of non –professional outsiders, was not suitable for managing the interior conflicts, cf. Annie Collovald, *Jacques Chirac et le gaullisme*, Belin, Paris 1999, p. 240 e 244.

⁵ *La lettre de la nation*, 24 September 1979.

⁶ Mentioned in Jacques Derville, *Le discours des partis gaullistes*, in «Regards sur l'actualité», November 1990, pp. 17-29, p. 24. In 1977 the RPR's proposals focused on the idea that «economy should become political in the highest meaning of the word. It must be subjected to the democratic sovereignty's stimulus and orientation»; the planning was the instrument of the political will applied to the economy, *Propositions pour la France*, Stock, Paris 1977, p. 175.

⁷ *La lettre de la Nation*, 3 February 1981.

⁸ *La lettre de la Nation*, 11 February 1981.

⁹ In fact, Chirac's programme was quite undefined; according to Raymond Aron it relied on «an act of faith in individual enterprise and in the RPR leader's charisma», *Le débat du chômage*, in «L'Express», 11-17 April 1981.

the party daily, insisted on rejecting the term 'liberism' («liberty is not liberalism¹⁰»). There were frequent references to Gaullism in the party press, in which Gaullism was defined as the will to act, to not allow things to drift, to act in the name of France and overcome all difficulties: «the primary objective is to restore France's role and authority. To reclaim the position General de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou gave to our country and which is now weakened and contested»¹¹; significantly, to mark the continuity with the Gaullism of de Gaulle and Pompidou, Pierre Messmer, former prime minister of both of them, was selected to chair the committee supporting Jacques Chirac.

Chirac's programme in 1981 was somewhat undefined. The real step towards the adoption of a genuine political agenda and a project with wider neo-liberal scope came after the presidential elections in the Spring of 1981, in which Chirac won 18% of the votes, a better result than that of the Gaullist candidate Jacques Chaban-Delmas in 1974 (15.11%). In the legislative elections the following June, despite an overwhelming socialist majority, the RPR lost fewer deputies than the other centre-right party, the UDF. Encouraged by these results, which nevertheless marked a positive trend, also in an anti-socialist sense, the RPR devoted itself to drawing up a political programme, which was drafted on the RPR parliamentary days towards the end of September 1981¹², and which was to have been presented at the Toulouse nation-wide conference (Assises) on 23 and 24 January 1982, but was in fact presented at the extraordinary congress held on 23 January 1983.

Theoretically, its conception should have been the result of a general consultation of the base through the *Carrefour pour la Liberté et le Progrès*. But the base was more often than not called upon to approve proposals conceived within the immediate circle of Chirac's advisors; not even the parliamentary group took part in the drafting process. In fact, political experts have noted how both the RPR's sociological constitution (the lack of teachers, academics and artists in its ranks of activists) and its highly centralised structure meant that intellectual debate was extremely scarce and theoretical discussion was not valued within the party¹³. The true protagonists of the programme's drafting were Edouard Balladur, like Chirac a long-time collaborator of Pompidou, and the members of the Club 89, a think tank created by Chirac and peopled by his close collaborators: Alain Juppé, Michel Aurillac, Nicole Catala¹⁴.

The énarque Juppé, a technical advisor to Chirac when Chirac was mayor of Paris who followed Reagan's election campaign in the United States, published *La double*

¹⁰ *La lettre de la Nation*, 12 February 1981.

¹¹ «Jacques Chirac: pourquoi je suis candidat», *La lettre de la Nation*, 11 February 1981.

¹² «La Nation», 28 September 1981.

¹³ Jean Baudouin, *Le "moment" néo-libéral du RPR: essai d'interprétation*, in «Revue française de Science politique», December 1990, pp. 830-844, p. 838-9.

¹⁴ Regarding the clubs' important role for the RPR see François Denord, *Néo-libéralisme version française. Histoire d'une idéologie politique*, Paris: Demopolis, 2007, p. 296. Since the foundation of the Club 89 Juppé was pointed out by the press as the new "thinking head" for Chirac, see for instance «Figaro Magazine», 3 October 1981.

rupture in 1983, a book which sought to provide a conceptual framework for the new political project. Criticism for the programme and the action of socialist Pierre Mauroy's government informed a rereading of French history. By means of a sort of endogenous process in industrial societies, the state had expanded to become an oppressive and castrating influence which stifled production. Such a transformation led to the abandonment of the values of the French Revolution, in which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen guaranteed the freedom of every man. In concrete terms, liberty meant that citizens had to be free to act, own, produce, exchange goods, communicate, associate and circulate; they should not need to continually elicit authorisations, derogations, subsidies and advices from the administration; they could not be subjected to its will, but on the contrary had to «be free and responsible within the framework of general, impersonal and stable rules»¹⁵. In other words, the essence of liberty consisted in the absence of excessive regulation, especially in the sphere of economics, as the greater part of the acts of daily life was economic in nature.

We may see that the neo-liberist conceptual framework developed by the Club 89 and Chirac's advisers sought integration with French political tradition, but was also clearly indebted to American and British theory. It is no coincidence that in January 1983, a few days before the extraordinary congress, Chirac travelled to the United States and met the president, Ronald Reagan. Addressing the British and American press, the RPR president said that the policies he was proposing for France were those being pursued at that time in Great Britain, the USA and the German Federal Republic¹⁶.

The RPR's policies for economic and financial recovery and its political project were again taken up and given greater definition in *Libres et responsables*, a document published in 1984¹⁷. The RPR's economic recommendations went in four different directions:

a) deplanning and deregulation: removing of price control; allowing salaries to be fixed through a widely decentralised contract law; establishing the freedom to employ and sack; reducing taxation, especially income tax and corporate tax, which were a discouragement to work and initiative; abolishing the tax on large-scale inheritances.

b) downsizing the state: denationalising public companies by spreading the capital of nationalised companies among their employees – there was also the suggestion to denationalise not only the companies nationalised by the socialist government in 1981-1983, but also some of the companies that were nationalised by the de Gaulle government in 1944-45; reducing state spending by reducing the number of state employees. During a Club 89 meeting, Michel Aurillac expressed these concepts with

¹⁵ Alain Juppé, *La double rupture*, Economica, Paris 1983, p. 42.

¹⁶ «Le Figaro», 23 March 1983.

¹⁷ Rassemblement pour la France, *Libres et responsables: un projet pour la France*, Paris: Flammarion 1984.

a phrase that became famous: «L'Etat est un garant et non un gérant» (The state is guarantor, not manager)¹⁸.

c) reviewing the welfare state: although the RPR said it wanted to safeguard social welfare, the welfare state was described as increasingly unsustainable from an economic standpoint and was accused of turning French citizens into minors dependent on a parent state. For this reason, alongside a review of the system which offered protection from all risks, there was also the need to introduce private insurance schemes.

d) promoting pluralism both within the audiovisual communications system, «freeing it» from state's monopoly and authorising the financing of private television and radio stations, and in the education system to ensure the free choice of parents in the education of their children. As Chirac explained, «in every sphere of social life, the aim was to give back to the individual the opportunity to choose freely what he wanted, to follow a personal path, to give the means to invent and do business to those who wanted them.»¹⁹

The RPR project also had a strong dose of social conservatism: the «advanced liberalism» of Giscard's seven-year mandate was harshly criticised, and the RPR, as explained by Jacques Toubon at the nation-wide assembly in 1982, aimed to promote «not feminism, but family; not ecology, but work and standards of living; not regionalism, but nation; not permissiveness, but morals».²⁰ At the same time, the RPR wanted at once «more state and less state», meaning that the state had to do a better job with regard to the security of persons and goods and national defence, but at the same time it was necessary to «give back to the French people the control of their daily lives»²¹. Most political experts, especially those close to the left, saw in this «project for France» not a straightforward economic choice aimed at restoring France's prosperity by leading it out of the crisis, but a social choice, one that had to do with the distribution of power within society²².

This new neo-liberist trend went hand-in-hand with a review of the RPR's European policy of the 'Seventies: on 2 July 1982, Chirac launched the idea of a European nuclear defence system to complement that of the Americans within NATO, thereby countermanding the views expressed in the «appel de Cochin» in December 1978. Following his trip to the United States in January 1983, Chirac called for closer military ties between France, the United States and Europe. In

¹⁸ «Le Monde», 11 October 1983.

¹⁹ «La Lettre de la Nation», 3 October 1983.

²⁰ Quoted in Colette Ysmal, *L'UDF et le RPR: la reconquête d'un espace politique*, in Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, Jean-Louis Bianco, *François Mitterrand. Les années du changement 1981-1984*, Perrin, Paris 2001; p. 741.

²¹ *Le RPR propose une « alternance constructive »*, in «Le Figaro», 14 gennaio 1983.

²² Colette Ysmal, *Les programmes économiques des partis de droites*, in «Critiques de l'économie politique», April-June 1985, pp. 63-76, p. 76. According to François Denord, with the RPR project, liberalism was transformed from the «managerial practice» it had been under the Barre government into a «social project», *Néo-libéralisme version française. Histoire d'une idéologie politique*, Paris: Demopolis, 2007 p. 241.

October of that same year, during a trip to federal Germany, he spoke of a European-American atomic force, in the running of which he envisioned a position of responsibility for Germany.

In truth, the RPR programme did not go that far. But it is the case that the report on the state of Europe and the measures to be taken for what was a necessary revival of the construction of Europe reflected this new trend: the consolidation and strengthening of the customs union, the common agricultural policy, the European monetary system; creating a new will to push ahead with closer coordination of foreign policies, shared security measures and enhanced joint economic action²³.

Neo-liberist proposals formed the basis of the programme presented by the RPR and the UDF at the elections in 1986 that was drawn up by a group including Edouard Balladur and Alain Juppé for the RPR, and Alain Madelin and Gérard Longuet for the UDF²⁴.

2. The reasons behind the neo-liberist programme

Some have explained the adoption of this neo-liberist programme as the political manifestation of wider cultural movements which took place in France in previous years. From the beginning of the 'Seventies onwards, an ideological right-wing revival took place, which affected not only the Aronian liberals, but also the radical right, who came to be known as «the New Right»²⁵, and whose key exponent, Alain de Benoist, proposed a Gramsci-inspired strategy, namely winning back the elite and public opinion from the cultural hegemony of Marxism²⁶. Operating within the ideological renewal of the right was the *Club de l'Horloge*, founded in 1974 by a number of énarques (including Yvan Blot and Jean-Yves Le Gallou). The Club soon diverged in its programme from the positions of the New Right due to its aim of reconciling nationalism and economic liberalism, a concept rejected by the latter. Concerned as they were with the preservation of national identity against cosmopolitanism, as well as being opposed to the welfare state and egalitarian ideology, the intellectuals of the Club developed conservative social and neo-liberist economic ideas. The Club de l'Horloge used its members' connections with the leading circles of the centre-right parties to ensure the penetration of its ideas into political spheres: the club's president, Yvan Blot, was not only head of cabinet under

²³ Mentioned in Jean Charlot, *Tactique et stratégie du RPR dans l'opposition*, in «Pouvoirs», n. 28, 1984, pp. 35-46; p. 44.

²⁴ Pierre Favier, Michel Martin-Rolland, *La décennie Mitterrand*, vol. II: *Les épreuves (1984-1988)*, Seuil, Paris 1991, p. 491. However, according to Howard Machin the liberist programme had a low impact on French public opinion and the electorate; cf. Peter A. Hall, Jack Hayward, Howard Machin, *Developments in French Politics*, revised edition 1994, p. 41.

²⁵ Anne-Marie Duranton-Crabol, *La "Nouvelle droite" entre printemps et automne, 1968-1986*, in «Vingtième siècle», n. 1, 1988, pp. 39-50. For a broader discussion on cultural changes in the 'Seventies and in the 'Eighties, see François Bourricaud, *Le retour de la droite*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1986.

²⁶ Pierre-André Taguieff, *Origines et métamorphose de la nouvelle droite*, in «Vingtième siècle», n. 1, 1993, pp. 3-22 ; p. 8.

Pons, but also a member of the central RPR committee and the group in charge of Chirac's campaign in the presidential elections in 1981; the secretary general, Yves Le Gallou, was a member of the Republican Party, a component of the UDF.

Over and above the theories of the New Right, some experts have focused on the manifestation in the political sphere of a wider cultural movement: the renewal of liberism, as proved by the proliferation of discussion groups and publications²⁷. The renewal of liberism was carried forward by a new generation of academics with links to the world of business or financial journalists, the so-called "new economists" (Florin Aftalion, Jacques Gareilo, Henri Lepage, Jean-Jacques Rosa e Pascal Salin). They did not have the same reference points as the previous generation and they advocated the approach of the Chicago School and its French disciples, namely monetarism, supply theory and the critique of Keynesianism²⁸. Thanks to a book by Henri Lepage, *Demain le capitalisme*, published in 1978, the ideas of this minority of economists reached a much wider French public. Their ideas were transmitted to right-wing parties by means of think tanks such as the Institut Economique de Paris, the Groupe de recherche d'action et de liaison des libéraux (GRALL) connected primarily with some UDF parliamentarians, the Club 89 and the Club de l'Horloge. They were then broadcast in numerous publications extolling the virtues of the «American conservative revolution»²⁹.

These changes in the cultural sphere and in the manner of cultural diffusion coincided with social phenomena that had themselves been the subject of wide-ranging debate in the 'Eighties: on the one hand, the cultural training and recruitment of party leaders nationwide; on the other, the renewal of RPR members and electorate.

Regarding the former, Bruno Jobert and Bruno Théret³⁰ believe that at the beginning of the 'Eighties the entire political class was overrun «by the governing elite from the upper echelons of the public administration of key centres of political and economic power» seeking legitimation in a reinterpretation of the notion of republican solidarity. The penetration of neo-liberism into political thought and above all the new turn in the 1983 socialist government's economic policy are the result of a radical review of the intellectual devices of the political-administrative elite: the diffusion of new economic approaches in state centres of economic and statistical learning preceded their rhetorical use in the 'Eighties by about a decade. The context is that of a body of social and economic knowledge that has always been

²⁷ Suzann Berger, *Liberalism reborn: the new liberal synthesis in France*, in J. Howorth, G. Ross (eds), «Contemporary France: a review of interdisciplinary studies», 1987, pp. 84-108.

²⁸ François Denord, *Néo-libéralisme version française. Histoire d'une idéologie politique*, Paris: Demopolis, 2007, p. 286 e ss.

²⁹ Guy Sorman, *La révolution conservatrice américaine*, Fayard, Paris 1983. To have a broad view of the main popular works of the neo-liberist thought see Bruno Théret, «*Vices publiques, bénéfices privés*» *Les propositions économiques électorales des néo-libéraux français*, in «Critiques de l'économie politique», April-June 1985, pp. 77-134.

³⁰ Bruno Jobert, Bruno Théret, *France: la consécration républicaine du néo-libéralisme*, in Bruno Jobert (eds), *Le tournant néo-libéral en Europe*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994.

a state monopoly in France: the traditional weakness of trade unions and business organisations in France has ensured their inability to contribute decisively to the very establishment of the terms of social debate.

Other writers have focused on the distinctive features of the RPR's cultural development – a factor which is lost in the explanation offered by Jobert and Thérét – highlighting the origins of RPR leaders in the Ecole nationale d'administration (ENA) and the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris (IEP), both institutions that were permeable to liberist arguments in the 'Seventies. The four central committee commissions tasked with drawing up the new political project were led by four IEP graduates, two of whom were also énarques. Of the team put together by Jacques Toubon (himself an énarque), the secretary who replaced Pons in 1984, one third came from the IEP and one fourth from the ENA. According to these authors, the increasingly liberal training of the énarques in the 'Seventies and the osmosis between the members of the upper echelons of the administration and the RPR leadership gave rise to an elite that was already attuned to neo-liberism³¹. Yet, this explanation lays itself open to the same criticism as the previous one: it fails to explain the specific character of the RPR project, since, although the “functionarisation” of political, and even more so governmental, personnel reached its peak under Chirac between 1986 and 1988, it was a common feature of almost all parties, UDF, RPR and PS, and one that persisted into the 'Nineties.

Another sociological explanation has viewed neo-liberal questions in the light of an intellectual rationalisation of the mentality and aspirations of the party militants, in which the self-made man tended to replace the high-ranking modernising official of the 'Sixties³². Indeed, the RPR's social composition changed from that of previous Gaullist movements (especially with regard to its direct predecessor, the UDR), even at the local level. Politological inquiry has pointed to the breadth of this renewal among both the troops and the active members of the Gaullist movement, from the time when Chirac took control and reorganised it – 30% of card-carrying members and 32% of militants joined between 1976 and 1980 and, in response to the shock of the left's rise to power in 1981, almost 50% of card-carrying members and 34% of militants joined the RPR between 1981 and 1985³³. There was evolution also from the standpoint of the political principles. There is in fact a clear distinction between the generation of Gaullists from the time of the RPR and the “Chiracian” generations, especially the party members of the post-1981 wave: the latter proved to be far more open than the former to the privatisation of social welfare and the concept of the market as the primary regulator³⁴.

³¹ François Denord, *La conversion au marché, droites et libéralisme économique dans la France des années 1980*, Mémoire DEA, IEP Paris, 1999, p. 79 e ss.

³² Jean Baudouin, *Le “moment” néo-libéral du RPR: essai d'interprétation*, in «Revue française de Science politique», December 1990, pp. 830-844.

³³ Pierre Bréchon, Jacques Derville, Patrick Lecomte, *Les cadres du RPR*, Economica, Paris 1987, p. 102.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 155 e ss.

Even more important was the reshuffling at the highest levels: Bernard Pons kept his position as secretary general until 1984, but otherwise leaderships were changed both locally and nationally. According to Andrew Knapp, at the Toulouse *Assises* in 1982 53% of those elected to the central committee had not been there before; likewise, 60% of the members of the national council were new. Such changes continued until 1984. Lastly, even those who determined the party's strategy (national secretaries and delegates) were replaced: following the *Assises* in 1982, Jacques Baumel alone among the national delegates remained to represent the traditional Gaullists³⁵.

Owing to this renewal, traditionally dominant sociological features within the structure of the RPR began to assert themselves during the 'Eighties: the popular component (workers and clerks) became increasingly scarce, not only among the delegates, but also among the adherents; growing importance was acquired by autonomous workers, namely those in liberal professions and managerial positions within companies, a category that was even more substantially represented among the militants who had joined after 1981 (they represented 44% of the new intake)³⁶. These new members were undoubtedly far more open to liberist ideas and were the most ardent supporters of privatisation. However, the predominance of high-ranking civil servants and liberal professionals at the level of nationwide decision-makers, who were, as we have said, the only ones to be involved in drafting the programme, remained overwhelming.

Therefore, although the emergence of a neo-liberist discourse in the RPR occurred at the confluence of medium-term cultural and social phenomena, it is necessary to look into the political reasons underlying its adoption by the RPR elite. Neo-liberist renewal was functional to the strategy of Chirac and his collaborators on three levels: the political system; the political domain of the centre-right; the Gaullist party.

To start with, 1981 was the year of Mitterrand's victory in the presidential elections and the socialist surge in the National Assembly. For the first time in 23 years, the heirs of de Gaulle found themselves on the side of the opposition. Given the unprecedented nature of the situation, and the fact that Gaullists could in no way question de Gaulle's institutions, the RPR's strategy was to accept their role in opposition and to regain power in compliance with republican legality. While inciting social protest against the government – especially the mass protest in June 1984 by the parents of private-school children – both Chirac and Giscard blocked those who

³⁵ Colette Ysmal, *L'UDF et le RPR: la reconquête d'un espace politique*, in Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, Jean-Louis Bianco, *François Mitterrand. Les années du changement 1981-1984*, Perrin, Paris 2001; p. 732.

³⁶ Pierre Bréchon, Jacques Derville, Patrick Lecomte, *Les cadres du RPR*, Economica, Paris 1987, p. 31 e ss. See also Patrick Lecomte, *Comment viennent-ils à la politique? L'engagement des nouvelles recrues du RPR*, in «Revue française de Science politique», n. 5, 1989, pp. 683-699. According to Ysmal, on the contrary, the change of values and programme was slightly linked to the modifications in party's organisation, which actually were not so broad, Colette Ysmal, *L'UDF et le RPR: la reconquête d'un espace politique*, cit.; p. 741.

sought to use the protests against the government. In Parliament, on the other hand, no quarter was given in the fight conducted by UDF and RPR “musketeers” against the nationalisation programme: between 1981 and 1984, 33,857 amendments were deposited in the National Assembly, a far greater number than between 1968 and 1981³⁷. Chirac and his party wished to fight an uncompromising opposition campaign inspired by «values that were radically different from those of the ruling party» and based on an analysis of economic and social realities in terms that were opposed to those of the socialists³⁸. Prudent and moderate to start with, this critique rapidly became ferocious and merciless. On 28 October 1981 Chirac denounced the 1982 budget bill as a «complete departure from the economic and financial policies of the 5th Republic», and repropounded the core values of his election campaign: «socialism won't save you. Only you can save yourselves, your work and your creative genius»³⁹. The battle against the left took on ideological tones – «today the failure of Marxism and Marxist-inspired socialism stands out like a revelation and asserts itself as evidence [...] our humanism must be a new humanism»⁴⁰ – and, as from the Spring of 1982, became programmatic.

The new «project for France» was connected with Chirac's strategy for opposing the socialist government. The strategy followed different lines of development: focusing on local elections to win back constituencies that had moved to the left; establishing a presence in the newspapers with a view to occupying centre stage for the opposition; establishing connections with certain trade unions (unlike Thatcher and Reagan), especially Force Ouvrière and even the Confédération française démocratique du Travail (CFDT); mobilising adherents and involving the citizens, without registering directly, through clubs and *Carrefours pour la liberté et le progrès*, which had been set up in every department with the purpose of generating discussion with the people and to “keep a finger on their pulse”⁴¹.

Secondly, the adoption of the neo-liberist programme was part of the struggle between the RPR and its ally-cum-rival, the UDF, for control of the centre-right ground. In a system in which political competition was becoming increasingly centred on presidential candidates and in which the political sphere was structured around what already then political experts were calling the “bipolar quadrille”⁴² – namely four major parties allied in pairs – Chirac's strategy for becoming one of the two leading candidates in the presidential elections and then winning the second round had to be based on taking control of the centre-right. His entire strategy in 1981 can be interpreted as an attempt to recover the control of the Gaullists within

³⁷ Andrew Knapp, *Le gaullisme après de Gaulle*, Seuil, 1996, p...

³⁸ «Le Monde», 5 October 1981.

³⁹ «Le Monde», 28 -29 October 1981.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Jean Charlot, *Tactique et stratégie du RPR dans l'opposition*, in «Pouvoirs», n. 28, 1984, pp. 35-46; p. 43.

⁴¹ *Objectif RPR : un « vivier d'hommes » pour les prochaines municipales*, «Le Figaro», 20 July 1981.

⁴² Jean-Luc Parodi, *Le nouvel espace politique français*, in *Ideologies, partis politiques et groupes sociaux*, Paris, PFNSP, 1991, p. 53.

the right, first by undermining Giscard's election in the second round (or at least distancing himself, given the cool manner of his announced vote between the two turns⁴³), and then presenting himself as the right-wing candidate in the best position for defeating the left-wing candidate. Furthermore, with legislative elections looming in 1986 and defeat predicted for the socialist majority, Chirac had to avoid sections of the UDF being tempted into cooperation with the socialist party⁴⁴.

On the other hand, the UDF's situation favoured Chirac's strategy. The defeat of President Giscard d'Estaing in 1981 had triggered a centrifugal movement within his party, the UDF. In fact, more than a party, the UDF was an election banner for allied but distinct political forces⁴⁵; furthermore, the greater part of its components were personalities without a genuine militant base. Thus, not only was the UDF at the beginning of the 'Eighties a party without a national leader - in the run-up to the legislative elections it split into supporters of the former president, VGE, and those of his prime minister Barre – but its dependence on prominent personalities made it particularly power-dependent, and therefore unsuited to organising an effective opposition.

On the other hand, between 1981 and 1986, the RPR always strove to convey an impression of compactness and unanimity around the figure of its president, an impression which owed much to the fact that its members were not torn between different currents, and doctrinal debate, which did indeed arise at the base, never affected the leadership. Chirac's strategy was to draw together all the more or less scattered components of the right around a single major liberist and conservative project. For this reason, since the legislative elections of 1981, Chirac, often against the opinion of certain members of the UDF, proposed and insisted upon electoral union right from the first UDF-RPR round, thereby reinstating the procedure that was in use at the time of the Gaullist hegemony in the majorities of de Gaulle and, later, Pompidou. The reproposal and re-establishment of the union also coincided with supplementary elections in 1982, cantonal elections in the same year and municipal elections in 1983. The RPR was even able to present a unified list at the European elections of 1984⁴⁶, in which the proportional system would have favoured separate lists. In this context, and with a view to avoiding open internal resistance from the UDF, Chirac contradicted anybody making him out to be the leader of the opposition; on the other hand, however, he presented himself as the unifier, the

⁴³ In his statement, Chirac announced that personally what he could do was to vote for the incumbent President.

⁴⁴ *L'UDF ne veut pas se laisser ligoter par le RPR*, «Le Matin», 8 luglio 1983. On the other hand, there were a few projects from some UDF members, like Jean-Pierre Raffarin, who intended to cover the political space between the UDF and the PS, «*Génération 86*», *pépinière pour les législatives*, «Le Figaro» 15 August 1984.

⁴⁵ The members were: Parti Républicain (PR); Centre des Démocrates Sociaux (CDS); Parti Radical radicale; Parti social-démocrate (PSD); Clubs Perspectives et Réalités; the direct members of the UDF.

⁴⁶ For the details of Chirac's tactics, see

motivator of the opposition and the primary enactor of the neo-liberist programme, with a view to channelling UDF votes his way in the presidential elections.

The neo-liberist programme served the purpose of closing the gap with the UDF. According to René Rémond, the RPR's alignment with the liberal positions of the UDF was the result of the battle fought in parliament by RPR and UDF "musketeers" against the nationalisations brought in by the socialist government⁴⁷. But such an argument can only be accepted in part. The opposition to the Mauroy government's *étatisme* no doubt served to seal the alliance between the two parties in the name of liberist opposition policies; however, it must also be considered that, as mentioned above, the RPR began to move in a neo-liberist direction during the presidential campaign of 1981, but above all that Chirac and those who were inspiring RPR policies repeatedly highlighted their originality with respect to the VGE years: the «double rupture» had to be implemented not only with regard to the «contradictory policies of the social-communist government», but also the «ill-concealed socialisation of French economy and society», which was seen as the core of Giscardism⁴⁸. This is why the RPR tried to appear more radical in its programme than its rival, the UDF⁴⁹, and was frequently confronted with the hostility of certain UDF components – for instance, the CDS was opposed to the privatisation of social security, or at any rate to competition between the various welfare systems – as well as, at times, the resistance of certain elements within the RPR itself.

Lastly, liberist themes were used within the party to forge (at least in part) a new identity and to mobilise, first locally and then nationally, a new generation of militants and leaders known as «cadets», and to allow Chirac to escape the influence of the «barons» of Gaullism, namely the *compagnon* who had followed and supported the General since WWII or the times of the 4th Republic and saw themselves as the depositories of the RPR's Gaullist identity. The latter, Jacques Chaban-Delmas and Olivier Guichard in particular, had regained a position of importance in the legislative elections of 1978, thereby showing how their own regional domains constituted a significant proportion of the RPR's electorate. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in order to highlight the centrality of the Gaullist movement between 1979 and 1981, the Gaullists multiplied and sought to monopolise memorial celebrations. In the mid-'Seventies, despite acquiring considerable symbolic standing as party leader, the RPR president Chirac did not always have the actual power he needed to impose his will on the various groups that embodied the political representation of Gaullism⁵⁰.

1981 marked a shift in the party's internal balance. The «baron» Michel Debré ran in the presidential elections in an attempt to oppose Chirac's watered-down version

⁴⁷ René Rémond, *Les droites aujourd'hui*, Paris: Louis Audibert, 2005, pp. 192-194

⁴⁸ Jacques Chirac, *Présentation*, in Alain Juppé, *La double rupture*, Economica, Paris 1983, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Raymond Barre for instance remained very cautious about the plans of denationalisation and about any possible revision of the Left's social laws, *Offensive anti-Barre au sein de l'opposition*, «Libération», 19 October 1983.

⁵⁰ Annie Collovald, *Jacques Chirac et le gaullisme*, Belin, Paris 1999, p. 227.

of Gaullism with the traditional brand championed by himself. Debré's disappointing result, only 1.66% of the votes cast, not only represented a slap in the face for the barons who had supported his candidature, but also entailed a greater degree of freedom for Chirac with respect to the Gaullist image and legacy. It is no coincidence that in 1983 Chirac defined himself as «republican, democrat and in the tradition of Corrèze [corrézienne]»⁵¹: the adjective “Gaullist” had been dropped from his self-portrayal. In the legislative elections of 1981, the parliamentary group had shrunk by half and numerous exponents of the pre-Chirac generations of Gaullists (Robert Poujade, Yves Guéna, Alain Peyrefitte) had lost their seats. Many barons retained their standing only by accepting positions offered by Chirac within the RPR; in parliament, those who led the RPR against the nationalisations (Michel Noir, Philippe Séguin, Jacques Toubon) belonged to the new generation (although in 1981 only 12 out of 88 RPR deputies, or 13.6%, were actually new entries). The intellectuals and economists who drew up the new programme were mostly either external to the Gaullist party or had only recently joined⁵². In 1981, Chirac embarked on changes to the leadership of the party aimed at strengthening his own control of it⁵³.

In other words, between 1981 and 1986 there was a double process of rejuvenation and renewal at the highest levels both nationally and locally, as well as the assertion of a liberist programme supported by the new Chirac generation in opposition to the old-school Gaullists. Most of those who wrested municipalities from the left in 1983 were new-generation Gaullists who had risen through the party⁵⁴; Chirac himself won all the *arrondissement* in Paris, which came to resemble his own personal dominion, the “Chiraquie”, as described by the press⁵⁵. The new generation of Chiracian Gaullists which joined the RPR after 1981 entered parliament in 1986, at a time of genuine renewal within the parliamentary group: 54 out of 151 deputies were elected for the first time.

3. A turnaround for Gaullist culture?

Did the adoption of a neo-liberist project and the Atlantic focus of the party which was defined as the main political expression of Gaullism mark a departure from certain mainstays of de Gaulle's legacy and Gaullist culture, or can there be said to have been continuity between the programme and the pragmatism which de Gaulle and his successor Pompidou had always displayed?

⁵¹ Andrew Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle, ...*

⁵² Annie Collovald, *Jacques Chirac et le gaullisme*, Belin, Paris 1999, p. 255.

⁵³ «La lettre de la Nation», 5 October 1981.

⁵⁴ Jacques Frémontier, *Les cadets de la droite*, Seuil, Paris, 1984.

⁵⁵ Regarding the material and symbolic resources, which the role of Mayor of Paris conferred to Chirac, and regarding his ability to extend these resources, see Florence Haegel, *Un maire à Paris*, PFNSP, Paris 1994.

Most political experts see the adoption of the neo-liberist programme as a departure from Gaullist culture. For instance, according to Jean Baudouin, the RPR's acceptance of neo-liberism entailed three ruptures with respect to the legacy of Gaullism and de Gaulle. Firstly, a change in the cornerstones of the RPR's social and cultural project, which was now based on the celebration of the freedom of enterprise, the search for a new humanism and the promotion of the republican ideal, instead of the old Gaullist themes of *grandeur*, national independence and participation. Secondly, the disrepute into which the state had fallen conflicted with the economic voluntarism which inspired de Gaulle. Lastly, the RPR overturned de Gaulle's foreign policy objectives⁵⁶. Baudouin is referring to the loss of identity of the Gaullists in relation to the other right-wing parties in the West: during the 'Eighties, the RPR displayed no originality in its participation in the movement towards ideological renewal of right-wing parties in the West, which, following F. Hayek and M. Friedman, sought to recover liberism. In other words, a process of "normalisation" of the RPR took place.

Colette Ysmal has emphasised the concept of society: in opting for a minimal state which was external to the negotiations between social partners, a guardian state, the right was moving towards a deregulation of social relations and thus a break with the Gaullism of de Gaulle and Pompidou, who saw the state as having responsibility for negotiating and arbitrating between the various social groups⁵⁷.

Historians are divided. Serge Berstein interprets the change in the long-term perspective of the history of Gaullism as political culture and organised political movement. In his view, the RPR is simply a fragment of the right which lost the specific characteristics of Gaullism when it distanced itself from the Gaullist legacy, not only as regards those elements which de Gaulle's pragmatism considered contingent, but also the very objectives de Gaulle had set himself⁵⁸. Within the context of these developments, whereas 1976 marked a fundamental caesura in organisational terms, the agenda-setting congress of 1983 marked a «drastic turnaround»⁵⁹ which led the RPR to distance itself definitively from the Gaullist tradition and its past. Andrew Knapp agrees in seeing the 'Eighties as a watershed for party doctrine, but says also that when one considers the lastingness of the party structure and the symbolism of the militants, the case is not quite so clear-cut⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ Jean Baudouin, "Gaullisme" et "chiraquisme": réflexions autour d'un adulateur, in «Pouvoirs», n. 28, 1984, pp. 53-66.

⁵⁷ Colette Ysmal, *Les programmes économiques des partis de droites*, in «Critiques de l'économie politique», aprile-giugno 1985, pp. 63-76. According to Ysmal, because of its choice for a minimal State and a guardian State the Right was orientated towards a deregulation of social relations: this was brought particularly by the charges against the nanny-State- and the State's intervention in negotiations amongst social partners. These were changes compared to the Gaullism of de Gaulle and even of Pompidou.

⁵⁸ Serge Berstein, *Histoire du gaullisme*, Paris: Perrin, 2001, p. 519.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 441.

⁶⁰ Andrew Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, 1994.

On the opposite front, Bernard Lachaise and Jean Charlot view the neo-liberal developments as a minor episode which came to an end at the start of the 'Nineties (the celebrations for the 100th anniversary of de Gaulle's birth and the 20th anniversary of his death were used as an opportunity for numerous references to his memory and the principles underlying his political action). Charlot has insisted upon continuity in the principles inspiring RPR policies, Lachaise on the permanence of the symbols, Gaullist memory and “sociability” within the party⁶¹.

It is undeniable that there was a degree of continuity in the 'Eighties with the evocation of the key elements of Gaullism: the RPR was attempting to reinterpret economic liberism in a Gaullist sense with its emphasis on the will and efforts of the individual at the service of a militant nationalism, meaning a strong and respected France. However, as mentioned earlier, the RPR and Chirac adopted positions that were undoubtedly in conflict with “French-style labourism” and the “appel de Cochin” of the second half of the 'Seventies. Furthermore, the extension, sociology and geography of the RPR electorate changed radically⁶²; a new generation of Gaullist militants began to replace the older generations in positions of leadership within the party locally and nationally; the very image of itself which the party aimed to convey changed, as proved by its acceptance of the right-wing label, against the traditions of de Gaulle's Gaullism, which presumed to be capable of transcending the right-left divide.

The transformation must be understood within the context of two more general phenomena. On the one hand, the radical changes that overtook the political agenda in the second half of the 'Seventies and on into in the 'Eighties. Economic crisis, which became a slow rate of growth, replaced the steep growth curve that had constituted the foundation stone of Gaullism in French society: unemployment became the main problem on the political agenda which forced not only the Gaullists but also all other political forces to face up to the economic problems which western societies had not known during the “The Glorious Thirties”⁶³.

Secondly, Gaullism underwent a process of popularisation in which the state and its institutions as conceived by the founder of the 5th Republic and its followers gradually became common currency in French political culture (and shared by almost all parties). The distinctness of the RPR's institutional positions was minimal during the 'Eighties⁶⁴, and this in turn affected the overall distinctness of the RPR's image

⁶¹ René Rémond thinks that as an organisation and as an active part of the political game, Gaullism is outdated: it is fading not necessarily from memory, but from politics. (*Les droites aujourd'hui*, Paris: Louis Audibert, 2005, p. 207). However, Rémond states that the actual turnaround was brought not by the neo-liberism of the 'Eighties, but by the foundation of the UMP; he seems to interpret Chirac's pragmatism and his charismatic leadership as a continuation of the Gaullist orientation, pp. 190-191.

⁶² Andrew Knapp, *Gaullism since de Gaulle*, p. 298 e ss.

⁶³ Serge Berstein, *De la démocratie plébiscitaire au gaullisme: naissance d'une nouvelle culture politique républicaine?*, in Idem (eds), *Les cultures politiques en France*, Seuil, Paris 2003, p. 182.

⁶⁴ Andrew Knapp, *Le gaullisme après de Gaulle*, Seuil, 1996, pp. 749-750.

and programme. Indeed, from the second half of the 'Seventies onwards, the RPR appeared in the public sphere as just another organisation.

A third change in French political culture generally might be mentioned, which was noted by François Furet, but which a modern reader would perhaps have to temper considerably: in the 'Eighties the image of the nation and the French Revolution declined; whereas de Gaulle had allowed the French people to continue in the belief that world history could be read through the history of the nation, French politics in the 'Eighties had lost a reference point which had been shared by the left and the right, and, what with the lack of a strong collective identity which Europe as yet did not offer, the identity question was reduced to the daily life of the French people⁶⁵.

Although Chirac's conception of the neo-liberist turnaround was ultimately geared to his election strategy (to the point that for the presidential elections in 1988 he made substantial changes to his economic and social agenda), nevertheless the change itself on the one hand was indicative of a need to rethink Gaullism in the light of changes on the economic front and in terms of the political scenario and France's political culture, on the other it favoured the rise within the RPR of a new generation of Gaullists who were more open to liberal positions (to mention a few: Nicolas Sarkozy, Patrick Devedjan, Patrick Balkany), and who would unsurprisingly support the candidature of the liberal Balladur against Chirac in 1995.

⁶⁵ François Furet, *La France unie...*, in Idem, Jacques Julliard, Pierre Rosanvallon, *La république du centre*, Calmann-Lévy, 1988.