POLITICAL RADICALISM IN FRANCE

Perspectives on a Protean Concept

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“For me, revolution simply means radical change.” Thus the Burmese democracy campaigner and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, in a BBC interview following her release from prolonged detention by the ruling military junta in November 2010.¹ The remark is arresting, not least for the qualification “simply,” which both draws the notion of radicalism into closer alignment with that of revolution and at the same time marks a distance from what implied others might hold to be a more excessive meaning of “revolution.”

As the starting point for a special issue on political radicalism, this remark already suggests something of the challenges awaiting analysts of an apparently clear yet elusively protean concept. The “radical change” that seems desirable, or possible, to a campaigner for democracy in Burma may be very different indeed from the “radical change” that might be aspired to, or achieved, in other parts of the world today. In the case of France, the locus of this collection, political radicalism has to be understood within the framework of a longstanding and solidly consensual liberal democracy, with its settled institutional structures and its relatively narrow parameters for genuinely radical change. How do the prospects for “radical change” in contemporary France compare with those opened up before the Eastern Bloc countries in 1989, or in China over the past decade, or more recently in parts of North Africa and the Middle East? How do they compare even with the prospects opened up to France itself in 1945, or 1958? The degree of relativism required might counsel against venturing any such comparisons, not only across space but also across time.

Political Radicalism in France: A Changing Paradigm

France today appears to be the stable endpoint of more than two centuries of turbulent political history, with its successive bouts of both revolution and radical change. Yet it is at just this moment of institutional and political stability that the notion of political radicalism has taken on a new momentum in France as voices urging radical solutions have attained a higher pitch. When disaffection is the prevailing political mood, change is the most elemental desire. The promise of change has, in that sense, become the motor force not only of French democracy but of other advanced democracies, the mobilizing impetus that gets voters out to the polls; and the more electorates grow weary or disenchanted with incumbent governments, the more the temptation to promise radical alternatives grows too.

Even under the current Fifth Republic, the most secure and popularly endorsed regime that France has known, the horizons of political radicalism have been drawn, redrawn, and redrawn again over time. The years 1968 and 1981 stand as two highpoints of radical aspiration, but both provoked a backlash of conservatism: in 1968 with the election of a resounding Gaullist parliamentary majority; in the 1980s with the retreat of the governing Socialists from zealous reform and the subsequent loss of the presidency to a neo-Gaullist incumbency that has already lasted longer than the double presidential mandate of François Mitterrand. The radical populism of the Poujadists in the 1950s finds only faint echoes in the France of José Bové, and the radical nationalism that took final refuge in attempts to assassinate General de Gaulle had run its course by the early 1960s. Less violent but altogether more thoroughgoing was the political and social radicalism urged by students in the late 1960s—with its unrestrained calls to “demander l'impossible”—or by the Socialists in the early 1980s—with its similarly unrestrained promise to “changer la vie.”

None of these adventures in political radicalism delivered on their visions, but they exhausted neither the propensity of political leaders and parties to promise radical change, nor the appetite of voters to hear that promise. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing understood well the delicacy of the task in the mid-1970s when founding his “société libérale avancée” on a promise of change with inbuilt restraint, “le changement sans le risque.” This was the first election under the Fifth Republic where Gaullist continuity was no longer a viable option, but it was also an election played out at the close of *les trente glorieuses* and in the shadow of May '68. At a time when the mood music of disaffection was not yet so well rehearsed, Giscard sought above all to offer reassurance that change would be real but not brutal, “le changement dans la continuité,” a reformism insured against excess.²

Giscard's widely perceived failure to change France enough, or in the right ways, or to pass the first big post-war test of economic crisis management, raised the stakes for his successor, François Mitterrand. He, too, saw the need

to balance the benefits of change against its risks, learning campaigning lessons from his predecessor and marketing himself as “la force tranquille”; but impelled by a program obligated to the radical Left, Mitterrand and the Socialists mortgaged their first experience of national office in almost a quarter-century to an economic and social revolution, that of effecting a “rupture avec le capitalisme” and founding a “nouvelle citoyenneté.” The results would bring about a paradigm shift for political radicalism in France, with a stark awakening to its costs, its perils, and most importantly its limits.

The presidential elections of 1974 and 1981 offered voters nothing less than a *choix de société*, and both major blueprints for a new society were tried and found wanting (while other projects for social renewal, such as Jacques Chaban-Delmas’ “nouvelle société,” were simply left by the wayside). Following the Socialists’ accommodation in the 1980s to much that they had inveighed against in the 1970s, blending market economics with cautious reformism, promises of radical change in France came to ring more hollow (where they did not descend into parody, such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement’s call for “le changement dans le changement”). As a rhetorical barometer of the new wariness towards over-promising, presidential campaign slogans (at least by those who had some prospect of winning) largely shifted their emphasis away from societal transformation towards social inclusion—Mitterrand’s “La France unie” and “Génération Mitterrand” (1988), Chirac’s “La France pour tous” (1995) or “La France en grand, la France ensemble” (2002). Where change remained the key element in the promise held out, it was a change less expansively framed, as in Lionel Jospin’s pledge to be “Le président du vrai changement” (1995) or, more restrained again, to “Présider autrement une France plus juste” (2002).

As the space within which national political institutions can effect major change has been eroded (by the encroachments of the European Union, or the growth of the globalized economy), expressions of political radicalism in France have nonetheless grown once again in their intensity. The presidential election of 2007 saw a return to, and an especially vigorous competition in, promises of radical change. Ségolène Royal’s *Pacte présidentiel* rang with calls for “une République nouvelle” and “un État réformé”; François Bayrou stood on proposals “qui changeront profondément la vie de notre pays”; Nicolas Sarkozy pledged to “changer la vie des Français” and to transform the Fifth Republic “en changeant la pratique, les comportements, les mentalités.”³ These extravagant promises were encapsulated, moreover, in slogans that mimetically echoed the winning formulas of past incumbents—Sarkozy’s “rupture tranquille,” Royal’s “force sereine,” Bayrou’s “révolution sans risques,” “révolution tranquille et paisible.”⁴ The impulse to promise radical change in order to secure even the center ground in this election was clear; but what these promises mean in early twenty-first-century France is much less clear.

“Tous radicaux!”

After the failure of the “Socialist experiment” in the 1980s and the much heralded “end of ideology” in the 1990s, political radicalism in France seemed consigned to the margins. As center Right and center Left grew closer in their policies and even shared power for extended periods (with nine years of “cohabitation” between 1986 and 2002), and as the French Communist Party (PCF) sank further into terminal decline, the only voices trumpeting radicalism were to be found on the excluded fringes of Right and Left. Two major events combined recently to change this picture: the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as president and the global financial crisis.

Political radicalism is now conspicuously back on the agenda in France—and not just for the duration of an election campaign. More than any *présidentiable* since François Mitterrand in 1981, Sarkozy was elected as a candidate for change on a program designed to propel France to far-reaching economic and social reform. The polarizing effects of his presidency in a context of deepening economic crisis have been felt across the French Left. The new Socialist leader, Martine Aubry, has called for her party to reinvent itself as a true party of the Left. Still further left, Olivier Besancenot cultivates support for his anti-capitalist, anti-system, anti-Sarkozy Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA), while facing a challenge from the latest avatar of *la gauche radicale*, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Parti de gauche (PG), with its founding mission to reinstate the primacy of Left versus Right and oppose the Right “sans concession.”⁵ The far-right Front national (FN), too, has further radicalized its stance in opposition to Sarkozy, seeking to reaffirm its patent on right-wing populism, while François Bayrou strains to keep alive the “centrisme révolutionnaire” that saw him finish a strong third behind Sarkozy and Royal in 2007, converted now into a “critique radicale du sarkozysme” prosecuted from the Center.⁶ “Tous radicaux!” declared *Le Monde* in April 2009, summing up the “surenchère” at work across the entire political spectrum, “de Nicolas Sarkozy à Olivier Besancenot en passant par François Bayrou et Ségolène Royal,” in the face of an economic crisis that both invites and resists providential solutions.⁷

In response to these developments, this special issue brings together analysts of French politics from France, Britain, and Canada to discuss some of the meanings, expressions, and prospects of political radicalism in contemporary France. The questions they consider span the political spectrum and bear upon the major parties as France approaches a presidential election in 2012 that will surely be defined as much by the lessons of the past as by aspirations for the future. Adopting a cross-party perspective, Jocelyn Evans opens the collection by drawing some of those lessons from the past and considering the concept of “radicalism” in relation to inter-party competition. He reflects on both the temptations and the perils of policy radicalization, the impetus on parties to promise change, especially after extended periods of incumbency or of opposition, but also the dangers of using this to achieve electoral gain. Making use

of policy mood and spatial competition models, the article examines a number of cases of political radicalization under the Fifth Republic, reflecting on how French parties of both Left and Right have overreached in their proposals and thereby exacerbated political disenchantment among the French public. There is a slender dividing line between ideological renewal and policy innovation on the one hand, and mismanaging voter expectations on the other. By misreading electoral competitive cues, the article concludes, mainstream politicians court failure more than success in conspiring to radicalize the political agenda.

Nowhere has the temptation to stretch the space between radical promise and real delivery been greater than on the center Left. Campaigning “in poetry” and governing “in prose” has not only been the experience of the French Socialist Party under the Fifth Republic; it has become a defining dichotomy in its need to reinvent itself as a modern social democratic party. There has been no *Godesberger Programm* for French Socialists as for their German Social Democrat counterparts, no official renunciation of a Marxist heritage that continues to weigh upon the party; rather, a *de facto* process of distancing has opened an ever wider gap between the party’s discourse when in opposition and its practice when in government. The failed “Socialist experiment” of 1981–1983, the periods of enforced “cohabitation” with the Right (1986–1988, 1993–1995, 1997–2002), and the calamitous defeat of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin by FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002, were so many blows to the Socialists’ prospects for implementing a Socialist program. Yet these setbacks merely compounded a deeper existential dilemma that was already evident in the fractious alliance between the Socialists and their Communist partners in the 1970s. Since then, the shift from breaking with capitalism to managing it, from zealous social reformism to cautious realism, and the increasing exposure of national economics to supranational dynamics have confronted the PS with the challenge of developing a viable political alternative not only to a neo-liberal model called into question by the global financial crisis, but also to its own formerly radical left-wing agenda and its enduring inferiority complex vis-à-vis its Communist neighbor in terms of ideological self-assertion. Lionel Jospin’s declaration during the 2002 presidential campaign that the “projet proposé au pays n’est pas un projet socialiste,” but rather a pragmatic policy synthesis born of necessity, was an acknowledgement of the PS as a post-Socialist party—social-democrat in all but name, or “social-libéral” for its detractors on the Left.⁸ It pointed also to a programmatic deficit yet to be made up almost a decade later.

In assessing the PS at this critical juncture in its evolution, Alistair Cole and Gérard Grunberg look back and forward respectively. Alistair Cole examines the deeply ambivalent relationship with political radicalism that the PS has maintained throughout its history, in both internal party dynamics and external inter-party relations. He explores an ideological identity more at home in opposition than in office, and views the modern PS in the light of the

historic struggle within the party between Marxist orthodoxy and a Socialist gradualism less concerned with preserving programmatic purity than with exercising political power. Across its different modes of operation—organizational structures, policy fora, electoral alliances, etc.—the PS is at once a modern protagonist in the politics of government in twenty-first-century France and a former revolutionary Marxist party caught in tension between radical reformism and political pragmatism, and drawn still to its historic mission to unite the French Left. The residual power of the Communist legacy and continuing anxiety about a centrist “sell-out” explain why the prospect of an alliance between Royal and Bayrou in 2007 provoked more consternation in the PS than any number of appeals to the far Left; they also help to explain why the French Socialist Party can, in its identity construction, be considered a European exception.

Bringing a forward-looking perspective to bear on this identity construction, Gérard Grunberg considers what is left of radicalism in the Socialist Party today and asks where the party goes from here. He examines a PS in which political radicalism is very much alive, both as a form of opposition to economic neo-liberalism and as the product of a longstanding opposition to the institutions of the Fifth Republic; but he also identifies powerful internal and external factors that militate against that radicalism. The PS finds itself caught in conflicting imperatives: it is a party in ideological mutation, where an evolutionary reformism conceding “la nécessité de l’adaptation” co-exists with a primal radicalism still bent on effecting a “transformation sociale radicale.” While radical discourse has long been a means to exert influence within the party and to facilitate alliances with other leftist parties, and while the international financial crisis today presents a providential *casus belli* for that radical discourse, the crucial importance of the presidential election within the French political system makes it impossible for French Socialists to stand on a genuinely radical platform if their main aim is to win this election. The PS has provided only one of six presidents of the Fifth Republic; but it has exercised power as a party of government over the course of three legislatures since 1981, and the attainment of power—first and foremost presidential—remains its paramount objective. The challenge is to steer a “voie moyenne” through its own party culture, tempering radical impulse with reformist realism in addressing voters who, in the current conjuncture, will pay close attention to the economic credibility of parties and candidates, and who will be more unsparing than ever towards peddlers of promises that go unfulfilled.

If the lodestar of French Socialists has always been on the Left, that of the mainstream conservative Right has been most typically in the Center. The power of France’s Republican value system and the opprobrium attaching to the right-wing authoritarian Vichy government’s attempts to overturn that system meant that, in the post-war years especially, political parties on the Right eschewed the label “droite,” preferring other, more seemingly benign formulations such as “indépendant,” “populaire,” etc. With the moral and

intellectual climate favoring the Left and with left-wing parties in the political ascendant under the early Fourth Republic, only the most radical elements of the Right identified themselves in the term "*droite*." This taxonomic aversion prevailed through the later Fourth and early Fifth Republics, weighting the ideological center of gravity in French politics to the left and allowing a far-right party in the Front national eventually, with its challenge to the founding Republican principles of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*," to occupy unclaimed terrain on the Right.

The unprecedented electoral successes of the FN in the 1980s and 1990s, the rise and fall of successive Socialist governments, and the continued weakening of the PCF as a pole of attraction shifted the balance rightward, with not only a new acceptability for values traditionally associated with the Right (competition, profit, etc.) but also a new legitimacy for the term "*droite*" itself.⁹ This gradual rebalancing of the political scales was a marked feature of Jacques Chirac's presidency, most notably in his second mandate following the shock election of Le Pen to the presidential run-off in 2002 and with the appointment of Nicolas Sarkozy as interior minister. From the outset, Sarkozy interpreted his brief as a means of restoring the political and electoral viability of a Right unashamed to label itself as such. Sarkozy's hardline, sometimes intemperate, pronouncements on law and order and his unabashed commitment to courting Le Pen supporters on that and other issues (immigration, national identity, traditional values, the pernicious legacy of May '68) were accompanied by a discourse insisting on the rightness of the Right and the wrongness of the Left. Declaring himself "*plus à droite que Chirac*," Sarkozy offered a simple analysis: "*Si le FN a progressé, c'est que nous n'avons pas fait à droite notre boulot*."¹⁰

Florence Haegel's article deploys two distinct research strategies to measure this radicalization of the French Right, and more widely of French politics, under the influence of Sarkozy—both as presidential candidate in 2007 and as president since. First, by subjecting to computer-aided analysis campaign speeches of Sarkozy and of his predecessor Chirac, the article marshals evidence of a clear radicalization of discourse and policy on the issues of immigration, national identity, and law and order. It sees in Sarkozy's rhetorical overtures to FN supporters and in some of the policies implemented by his governments a shifting of the borders separating Center, Right, and far Right, arousing concerns for some on Left and Right alike that there is underway in France a "*dérive droitière*" and even a "*dérive anti-républicaine*." Radicalism can be defined as much by the opposition it attracts as by its own utterances or the norms it transgresses. Measuring the extent and nature of the opposition to Sarkozy, specifically as mobilized on internet sites, provides the second method of analysis here. Again electronic tools are used in assessing the extent to which "*l'antisarkozysme*" in its variegated forms has reshaped political opposition under Sarkozy's presidency, polarizing public opinion and mapping new networks and alliances. As a space for rallying political support or

opposition, the internet offers an abundant resource for a type of data analysis that is surely set to grow as electronic fora assume an ever greater role in the national political discussion.

Just as the PCF historically exerted a radicalizing pull for French Socialists, the FN has increasingly exerted a similar effect on the parties of the center Right. The neo-Gaullist Rassemblement pour la république (RPR) and centrist Union pour la démocratie française (UDF) tried various strategies in response to the FN, from selective local alliances to a *cordon sanitaire* and finally a number of electoral reforms designed to diminish the FN's capacity to convert support into seats. The formation in 2002 of the Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP) brought a new strength through unity, a renewed resolve to reject all cooperation with the FN, and (as outlined above) a radicalizing of the center Right on the FN's favored themes. This major development begs the question in reverse of whether the FN too has varied in its radicalism and shifted in any way under the pull of the center Right. The question is one that is generally not posed since the FN is commonly viewed as a radical right-wing party located essentially on the same ideological and policy axis over its near forty-year lifespan; but examination of its evolution over that period reveals a more complex picture, while also showing a reciprocal dynamic of influence between the FN and the parties of the center Right.

The fifth article in this collection, by James Shields, undertakes that examination of the FN by focusing on the single core issue of immigration. To what extent has the party in its immigration policy been defined from the outset by its radicalism? Has that radicalism been a constant or has it varied with changing circumstance? What has been the relationship between the FN and the center-right parties in terms of influencing or moderating the FN's stance on immigration? The article shows that, far from espousing a static policy, the FN has given evidence of a sometimes surprising readiness to review and even revoke important aspects of its approach to the issue of immigration. By focusing on a number of election campaigns, manifestos, and key moments in the FN's development, the article assesses how the party has tailored its radicalism to contextual factors and tactical considerations. It reveals an FN less bound to a fixed policy and more ready to seek accommodation (with circumstance, public opinion, or the center-right parties) than might be suspected. The article concludes by considering whether the first change of leadership in the party's history is likely to confine it to the radical fringes of the Right or see it adopt a more center-oriented course.

Consideration of the FN's prospects raises a further question: who are these voters who proved so loyal to Le Pen and his party over some two decades, then so critical to Sarkozy's victory in 2007, and on whom may depend the future electoral fortunes of the FN? The question can be extended to embrace not only voters of the "radical Right" but those of the "radical Left" too. In the presidential election of 2002, fully one third (33 percent) of those who turned out to vote in the first round voted for a far-right (Le Pen,

Mégret) or far-left (Laguiller, Besancenot, Hue, Gluckstein) candidate; this represented some 9.4 million of the 28.5 million valid votes cast—almost as many as the 10.3 million who voted for the outgoing President Chirac or Prime Minister Jospin. In the 2007 presidential election, the combined far-right and far-left vote, though markedly down, still accounted for some 20 percent in the first round, with Le Pen and Besancenot between them garnering close to 15 percent, over 5 million votes.

Who, then, are these “radical” voters of far Right and far Left in France? What differentiates them, what do they have in common, and can their political space overlap? Even on a weakened showing in 2007, the strength of its political extremes makes France an exception in Western Europe and raises questions about the precise nature of the far-right and far-left electorates. These are questions addressed by Nonna Mayer, who revisits the debate about the convergence of the extremes and asks whether Besancenot might be perceived in any way as a “Le Pen of the Left,” or whether he exerts a categorically different populist appeal to an altogether different constituency. Drawing on data from the first two waves of the CEVIPOF French Electoral Panel 2007, the article shows that divergent social and political logics are at work in the electoral support for these two candidates: their voters do not occupy an overlapping political space; they do not have the same social background; and they do not hold the same values, but rather remain socially, politically, and ideologically contrasted.

The final article in this issue, by Marcos Ancelovici, moves beyond party politics to ask what is left of radicalism where it once held arguably its most powerful sway: within the French labor movement. The article asks whether the wave of protests in the fall of 2010, preceded by other high-profile conflicts, can be interpreted as evidence of persisting radicalism or whether, despite appearances, labor radicalism is actually in decline in France. The analysis advanced here points rather to the latter than to the former interpretation. Industrial conflict is still alive and kicking, of course, sustained by enduring historical traditions and by institutional processes that continue to push workers to adopt extra-institutional methods; but industrial conflict in France is no longer what it was. That conflict has been transformed, with labor contention now motivated less by an offensive agenda than by an essentially defensive one. Concluding that French labor radicalism might be best understood as a “radicalism of tradition,” the article raises questions about the very pertinence of “radicalism” as an analytical category to make sense of labor contention in France today.

A Term Eluding Definition

Historically, the term “radicalism” was, first exclusively, then most often, associated with the Left, and in the specific context of France with the descendents

of the earliest French political party, formed in 1901, the Parti républicain radical et radical-socialiste, or "Parti radical." As will be clear from the foregoing, however, there is no such restrictive sense in which political radicalism is to be understood here; instead, it is apprehended across a wide range of applications and connotations.

In its purest sense, of course, "radicalism," from the Latin *radix* (root), means a return to source, the attempt to recover an essence or bring to bear an effect at the very root. This is what Martine Aubry urges for the PS: "un retour," "une refondation," "une profonde rénovation," "une offensive radicale"—all terms used in an opinion piece published in *Le Monde* soon after her election as party leader.¹¹ Or it can mean quite the opposite: not a return but a breaking away, a severing, "une rupture" in Nicolas Sarkozy's term. Radicalism can also be understood as a high-impact program for change reaching beyond the mainstream consensus, such as that advocated by Le Pen on the Right or Besancenot on the Left. It can also be held to mean the opposite of that too, a rejection of Right and Left both for a "centrisme révolutionnaire" such as that propounded by Bayrou. Finally, of course, political radicalism can assume many guises beyond the bounds of institutional politics, with methods often beyond the law, as forms of direct action or popular protest. We propose in this collection to venture no definition that might seek to harness these many diverse and conflicting conceptions of radicalism in France, but rather perhaps to suggest some ways of better understanding the very diversity that sustains this most mercurial of political references.

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Notes

1. Televised interview with John Simpson, broadcast 15 November 2010 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11761133>).
2. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, *Démocratie française* (Paris: Fayard, 1976).

3. <http://www.encyclopedie-gratuite.fr/Definition/politique/documents/programme-segolene-royal.pdf>; http://programme.bayrou.fr/programme_fbayrou_election_presidentielle.pdf; <http://royal.sarkozy.free.fr/projet-politique-nicolas-sarkozy.php>; *Le Monde.fr*, 10 November 2006.
4. *Le Figaro.fr*, 30 November 2006; <http://desirsdavenir16.zeblog.com/180827-je-suis-la-force-sereine/>; <http://www.bayrou.fr/discours/bayrou-agen-050407.html>; <http://www.bayrou.fr/opencms/opencms/discours/bayrou-pau-190407.html>.
5. *Le Monde.fr*, 7 November 2008.
6. *Le Monde.fr*, 16 April and 28 August 2009; *Le Figaro.fr*, 15 October 2007.
7. *Le Monde.fr*, 16 April 2009.
8. *Le Monde.fr*, 23 February and 30 May 2002; *Libération.fr*, 26 February 2002. Conversely, the new British Labour Party leader Ed Miliband's bald espousal of socialism in a BBC radio interview in November 2010—"Yes, I am a socialist"—shows, after more than a decade of the New Labour "third way" project in Britain, and after setting his party's course for the "radical centre," that the need to find new, or old, ideological bearings is not confined to the center Left in France (*guardian.co.uk*, 28 September 2010; *spectator.co.uk*, 26 November 2010; *independent.co.uk*, 8 January 2011).
9. The beginnings of this rightward swing can be traced in opinion polls from the mid-1980s. See, for example, SOFRES, *Opinion publique 1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 85–87; SOFRES, *Opinion publique 1985* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 93; also Pascal Perrineau, "Glissements progressifs de l'idéologie," in *Mars 1986: La drôle de défaite de la gauche*, ed. Élisabeth Dupoirier and Gérard Grunberg (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), 42–43; René Rémond, "The Right as Opposition and Future Majority," in *The Mitterrand Experiment: Continuity and Change in Modern France*, ed. George Ross, Stanley Hoffmann, and Sylvia Malzacher (Oxford: Polity, 1987), 131–32.
10. Interviews in *Libération*, 12 April 2007, and *Le Parisien*, 29 March 2006.
11. *Le Monde.fr*, 28 August 2009 (emphases added).