Social democracy has faced an onslaught from the free market right in the last two decades, and the French Socialist Party has been as vulnerable to this as the other Second International parties and as ineffective in finding a reply. But although there was a near collapse of the banking system in 2008, the left’s former commitment to the state-run economy had also been dismissed. Even while Socialists elsewhere in Europe have been relatively successful in national elections, the French Socialists also face competition on the anti-capitalist left and from the extreme nationalist right over mobilising issues, and in the French case this challenge is particularly acute and includes competition from the ecologist movement, which is hostile to globalisation and ‘capitalist’ growth. Their political problem, in trying to reconcile these articulate movements, is part of the Socialist Party’s theoretical impasse, which has not been resolved and which the financial crisis of the twenty-first century has (paradoxically) done nothing to dissipate (Callaghan 2000 and Bergounioux, 2012).

Although the moderates were a recognisable force, French socialist and left-wing politics remained dominated by theoretical Marxism much longer than other continental political systems (Canto-Sperber, 2003 and Judt 2001). Marxism was a way of interpreting the world and also a form of self-identity, the loss of which has not been repaired, to the extent that, faced with new challenges, the left have not found the register that enables a convincing response to today’s problems. Yet not only did Marxism, as an understanding of society and the economy, have a much wider resonance (in academic life and journalism) in France than it did elsewhere but it remained the point of reference in the mainstream social democratic left until the late 1980s. For the last century, the socialist left defined itself as the party of the working class, and the working class in
the Marxist world view had the vocation to liberate humanity, to lead it to a socialist utopia. Marxism remains a referent for many on the left, and is central to the far left, which, in France, is stronger and more articulate than in other European countries. Hence as a ‘party of the working class’, the socialists saw themselves as the wave of the future, but the working class itself was split between parties. To this had to be added the complication that the working class changed in composition in the late twentieth century with white-collarisation, the decline of old heavy industries and the increasing importance of service industries.

Marxism was a theory of ‘revolution’, and Marx had little to say about how a society, even a ‘socialist society’, could be run (although Lenin and the Communists filled this gap with the totalitarian regime), and Marxism evaded the consideration of what the social project might be. What were socialist reforms to do? One response, exaggerated but not by much, was that the left is revolutionary, whereas reform is a compromise with the establishment, and government is treason (Baumel and Bouvet, 2006 p. 55). This rhetorical answer, powerful on the far left, was that unless everything changed, reforms were mere froth on the surface, and a break (‘rupture’) was necessary. The ‘Fabian’ tradition of detailed and planned reforms expanding social solidarity were a weak part of the French system, and the highly articulate theoretical Marxist tradition of the left deflected consideration of other routes (Dupin, 2002 pp. 86–7). Whilst French Socialists repudiated their reference to Marxism at the 1991 Conference at l’Arche and frequent allusions are made to the principle ‘we are all reformists now’, this does not seal the matter because the perspective provided by an elaborate ideology (reforms for what purpose?) is missing.

Perhaps for this reason, the condemnations of ‘capitalism’, assimilated to the market economy (which has numerous variants), is more powerful on the French left than elsewhere in the developed world. The French Communist Party was a powerful ideological force, and currently, although on life support, continues to act as an influence on contemporary thinking (Lazar, 2002 p. 10). French socialists have not contributed greatly to the debate on how to control the market, how to protect the population from the irrationalities of the competitive system, and have not found an answer to the problem of how to discipline the globalised system. ‘European institutions’, invoked as an answer, lack the authority and centralised government needed for such a task, and have run into opposition.

In moving away from its Marxist past, the Parti socialiste, dropping the ‘revolutionary’ vocation, has struggled to find the appropriate