# Dossier: Les clivages politiques

# Progressivism and the challenge of conservatism

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**Résumé**

Les origines historiques du clivage progressistes/conservateurs sont appréhendées à travers l’opposition entre Nicolas de Condorcet, pour les Lumières, et les réactions conservatrices d’Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre et Louis de Bonald. Puis un saut est fait dans les enjeux du présent : la dynamique ultraconservatrice actuelle (le couple Alain Soral-Éric Zemmour) et les bricolages confusionnistes (la triade Jacques Julliard-Frédéric Lordon-Mathieu Bock-Côté et Emmanuel Macron) dont elle bénéficie dans le contexte d’un recul du clivage droite/gauche d’abord. Ensuite est explorée la possibilité d’un rebond du progressisme par l’intégration de certains questionnements conservateurs.

## Abstract : Progressivism and the challenge of conservatism

Insights into the origins of the progressive-conservative divide are provided by the contrast between Nicolas de Condorcet, on behalf of the Enlightenment, and the conservative responses of Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. The analysis then moves to the present day to examine, against the backdrop of the decline of the left-right divide, the current ultra-conservative dynamic (Alain Soral and Éric Zemmour) and the confusionist mishmash from which it benefits (Jacques Julliard, Frédéric Lordon and Mathieu Back-Côté on the one hand and Emmanuel Macron on the other). The article finishes by exploring the possibility of progressivism bouncing back by using some of the questions posed by conservatives.

A few days after setting up the political movement La République en marche (LaREM) (The Republic on the Move) while he was Minister of the Economy during François Hollande’s presidency, Emmanuel Macron revived the question of the progressive-conservative divide. The intention was for this divide, the “real divide in our country,” to replace the left-right divide.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, having helped disrupt and weaken the left-right divide, this statement of belief has since become less important to the President of France. With the blurring of previously stable political reference points, it would nevertheless seem interesting to deal with some of the main current issues related to it, beyond Macron’s ephemeral use, starting with noting some of its historical features. It might be of help to political theory and, outside academic discussions, may support disoriented citizens in finding a compass to navigate the ideological fog that is gradually thickening around us.

## The origins of the progressive-conservative divide

In *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, written at a time when the sound of jackboots could be heard throughout Germany, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in an openly declared break with the modes of thought that had previously been dominant among the elites, cast Reason and Progress as the central themes of the philosophical and literary world of the eighteenth century. The centrality of these notions justified the use of capital letters. The exercise of reason, in its questioning of prejudices and evidence embedded in tradition, opened the way to what Cassirer called “the conquest of the historical world,” and history became a march of reason.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nicolas de Condorcet was one of the philosophers who most clearly expressed the link between reason and progress during the exploratory years of the Enlightenment. This is particularly true of his *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, completed in October 1793 and published posthumously in 1795 by his widow; the National Convention decreed that three thousand copies of the book be purchased and distributed. It includes a conceptual link between reason and progress: the theme of human perfectibility borrowed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The progress made possible by the advance of reason has three key elements: “the destruction of inequality between different nations,” “the progress of equality in one and the same nation,” and “the real improvement of man.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Hence there is a direction and a specific necessity in what might almost be termed a theology of historical reason: “The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde.”[[4]](#footnote-4) If the improvements are infinite, a qualitative stage radically different from the current situation may be reached: “Then will arrive the moment in which the sun will observe in its course free nations only, acknowledging no other master than their reason.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, the adjective “progressif” (“progressive”) took on a social and political meaning in 1770, and was replaced by “progressiste” in 1830, while the noun “progressiste” (“progressive”) first appeared in 1841 and “progressivisme” (“progressivism”) in 1842.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The illustrious group of conservative thinkers emerged as critics of the French Revolution.[[7]](#footnote-7) In a range of different forms, they opposed reason in favor of tradition, future-oriented progress in favor of the long timescale of history where the past has primacy, universalism in favor of specific rootedness in time and place, equality in favor of inherited hierarchies and inequalities, movement in favor of a naturalized order, the emergence of the modern individual in favor of the primacy of society and its encompassing sovereign national embodiment, etc. Three figures distinguished this illustrious group initially: the British political thinker Edmund Burke, the Savoyard polemicist Joseph de Maistre and the French political philosopher Louis de Bonald.[[8]](#footnote-8) Their reflections took shape against the background of “a cosmo-theological order where every being had its place.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Some scholars see traditionalism mixed with features that closely resemble political liberalism in Burke’s work, while others detect economic liberalism, hybrid forms that are not found in the works of de Maistre and de Bonald. This opened the way to later hybridizations between conservatism and political liberalism (in the work of Max Weber and Raymond Aron) or, more recently, between conservatism and economic neoliberalism (in the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush – father and son).

The French word “conservateur” began to be associated with conserving, or maintaining, the existing social order in 1794, “conservatisme” appearing in 1851.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Over time, the space occupied by conservative ideas has shifted and hybridized in accordance with intellectual and political usage, each time in specific circumstances. We are not dealing with a homogeneous and stable “essence.” What then can be said about different types of conservatism today?

## Dynamic and attractive: Ultra-conservatism French style

A dynamic conservatism, made attractive by the far right, appeared in the ideological arena in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a French-style ultra-conservatism, typified by the rhetoric used by Alain Soral and Éric Zemmour.[[11]](#footnote-11) The far right’s attempt to make conservatism attractive is not an historical innovation. It was apparent in the “conservative revolution” at work in Weimar Germany, for example.[[12]](#footnote-12) One feature evident now is the correlation between the prevalence of conservative ideas in the public arena and the retreat of progressive ideas, impacted by the dual crisis of the notion of the left, with which progressive ideas were often associated in the twentieth century, and the concept of Progress.

French-style ultra-conservatism consists of an ideological mishmash linking a range of types of xenophobia (including anti-migrant xenophobia, Islamophobia and/or anti-Semitism), sexism and homophobia within a nationalist framework. It includes the following at the core of its ideology:

* gender (the separation between male and female) as “natural” and homosexuality as “unnatural”;
* the obsession with “identity,” as part of a mythology that sees threatening identities ( “Muslim,” “Jew,” “Black,” “gay,” “migrant”) clashing in general configurations stigmatized as “communitarianism” and/or “multiculturalism,” in the aim of restoring the fantasy of a “pure,” “original,” “rooted” national identity endowed with “masculine” characteristics and logically assumed to have existed first;
* the image of a culturally homogenous “real people”;
* the contrast between “social” concerns (more “masculine”), typical of the “real people,” and “societal” issues (more “feminine”), typical of the “metropolitan elites”;
* a “real people,” that necessarily belongs to the nation, a *people*-*nation*, opposed to Europe and “globalism,” both of which are demonized, for nationalist reasons.

The rhetorical underpinning of this ideological mishmash often consists of an essentialist vision of reality (reduced to essences, to compact and enduring entities), a conspiracy-based narrative thread (emphasizing hidden manipulation to explain events and history in general) and replacement of the structural social critique of injustice and domination that was historically the preserve of the left with a superficial critique of “political correctness.”

## Ongoing hybridization: The confusionist space

The rise of an ultra-conservative dynamic at the expense of progressive ideas, alongside the decline of the left-right divide, has allowed a space to open up containing ideological hybrids that can be labelled ‘confusionist’. ‘Confusionism’ refers to the growth of interference between stances (such as criticism of “political correctness” or conspiracies) and themes (promotion of all things national and disparagement of all that is global or European, criticism that combines individual rights originating in political liberalism with the supremacy of markets that is a feature of economic neoliberalism, the erosion of the symbolic border with the extreme right, etc.) taken from the far right, the right, the moderate republican left, and the radical left. In a context where the left-right divide is being eroded and the left is in crisis, confusionist mishmashes mainly enable advances by the ultra-conservative right.

An example of confusionist interference is provided by the unintended similarities found in the rhetoric of three intellectuals from very different generations and political positions: the historian and columnist Jacques Julliard, who has moved from the “Second Left” to the so-called “republican left” and from *Le Nouvel Observateur* to the sovereigntist *Marianne*; the economist and radical left philosopher Frédéric Lordon, a mainstay of the Monde diplomatique; and the ultra-conservative Quebec essayist Mathieu Bock-Côté, who writes regularly in *Le Figaro*. All three use language that fetishizes the national in opposition to the international, promoting a vision of the national as a form of rootedness that gestures at the nationalism of Maurice Barrès.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hence, in the position promoted by Jacques Julliard can be found “the one and indivisible nation,” “national identity,” “heritage,” “lineage,” and “the people” as a tight-knit people-nation. The opposite view, criticized by Juillard, includes “the removal of borders,” “immigration,” “communitarization,” “diversity,” and the mixing of races.[[14]](#footnote-14) The position implicitly promoted by Frédéric Lordon values “belonging,” “identity,” “homogeneity,” the “national,” and “territorial affiliation” in opposition to the perspective he disparages, which includes “disaffiliation,” “heterogeneity,” “abstract internationalism,” and “the widely scattered political community.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Finally, Mathieu Bock-Côté positively emphasizes “belonging,” “national identity,” and a homogeneous people-nation, while condemning “multiculturalism,” “immigration,” “the removal of borders,” “nomads,” and the mixing of races.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Another prominent confusionist speaker of the period is Emmanuel Macron, although his initial use of the progressive-conservative divide has tailed off. Confusionism first appeared in the French President’s rhetoric in December 2018, as one of his responses to the “yellow vests” movement. On December 10, 2018, while announcing the “great national debate,” and contradicting his multicultural campaign of 2017, Macron contrasted “national identity” and “secularism” with “immigration.” During a press conference on April 25, 2019, he continued this theme, conflating “communitarianism” and “political Islam.” He used the term “separatism” (borrowed with the cultural meaning used by the left-wing conservative essayist Christophe Guilluy) alongside “insecurity” when addressing the LaREM deputies on February 11, 2020.[[17]](#footnote-17) For Emmanuel Macron, as with a number of conspiracy-based faux pas by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, these are tactical political games used to get out of momentary difficulties that account for the involvement with confusionist rhetorical forms.

## From a crisis around Progress to a progressivist bounceback?

Alongside the weakening of the left-right divide, the crisis around the notion of Progress is an important factor in conservative ideological successes. When Progress seems increasingly uncertain, progressivism flounders. The long period of mass unemployment following the 1973 crisis, followed by a shift towards neoliberal policies in 1979 (Margaret Thatcher) and 1981 (Ronald Reagan), helped disrupt expectations of a better future. On another level, environmental issues stimulated doubts about the future. As early as 1979, the philosopher Hans Jonas drew attention to the way in which the scale of contemporary technical and scientific risks and environmental damage was forcing us to revise our ethical reference points.[[18]](#footnote-18) The scientific and technological bedrock of the belief in Progress was significantly negatively impacted. The “heuristics of fear” evoked by Jonas fostered pessimism about the future. Since then, public awareness of climate change has created greater anxiety and uncertainty. Hence, social and environmental concerns have both contributed to a blurring of the vision that previously guided progressives.

Furthermore, conservative critiques of progressivism have highlighted its mistreatment of the past and of tradition: the tendency since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment has been to classify both unilaterally as backward-looking “prejudices.” The historian of ideas, Pierre-André Taguieff, for example, has questioned the idea of “emancipation,” pointing out the dangers of an individual “relieved of all traditions,” and the risk of “an absolute rejection of the past.”[[19]](#footnote-19) “Of the past let us wipe the slate clean,” wrote Eugène Pottier in “The Internationale” in 1871.

This does not mean that progressivism cannot bounce back. Particularly if we take into account an astonishing remark made in 1951 by Theodor Adorno, one of the leading members of the Frankfurt School, in *Minima moralia*: “Not least among the tasks now confronting thought is that of placing all the reactionary arguments against Western culture in the service of progressive enlightenment.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This comment can be seen as an appeal to take seriously the conservative arguments against the mechanical and essentialist visions of Progress (in both their unilateral devaluation of past traditions and their weakly instrumental link to the natural world) in order to enrich a progressive, non-Manichean, reflective, open Enlightenment, a *softly lit Enlightenment*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This may mean that, from the perspective of a redefined progressivism, characterizing emancipation through the unilateral lens of *detachment* from the prejudices and servitude of the past, as in standard versions of the Enlightenment, appears too simplistic. Instead, a dialectic needs to be sketched out between *detachments* (oppressive relationships) and *attachments* (to social protections and natural spaces). Hence, Robert Castel’s sociology of the institutions of the social state has highlighted the historical importance of the democratic extension of social protections (social security, pension systems, etc.) to guaranteeing the growth of individual autonomy.[[22]](#footnote-22) In another, convergent direction, Bruno Latour’s political philosophy of nature has encouraged us to pay attention to natural beings that help us to live better lives.[[23]](#footnote-23) This does not imply that we should abandon the liberating detachment from oppression, as the conservatives suggest.

Adorno helps us better understand how progressives can use the questions posed by conservatives. If current confusionist hybridizations benefit conservatism, Adorno’s method seeks to make other hybridizations an instrument for the renewal of progressivism. However, when, in outlining an alternative policy, Bruno Latour focuses too exclusively on deconstructing the imagery of the Enlightenment rather than on a critical reproblematization of it, as well as on attachments (or on “a logic of dependence,” or “the aim of forging links with the land”), all the while forgetting the detachments that produce individual and collective autonomy, he risks contributing to confusionist interference with ultra-conservatism in environmental thinking. He then forgets one of the two core messages of Adorno’s injunction above: “in the service of progressive enlightenment.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

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The modern divide between progressives and conservatives emerged during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It has moved through the flows and circumstances of history. Today, the prevailing ideological current in the public arena appears to be more conservative. The intensification of the ultra-conservative dynamic and its confusionist facilitators may permanently challenge the reference points we have inherited from the Enlightenment. However, other hybridizations, this time in the service of a reproblematized progressivism, should not be counted out. It’s not all over yet.

1. “Macron: ‘La gauche aujourd’hui ne me satisfait pas’”, Le Monde.fr, April 23, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. M. de Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (London: Johnson, 1795), 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. De Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. De Condorcet, *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind*, 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alain Rey, ed., Dictionnaire historique de la langue française (Paris : Le Robert, 1992), vol. 2, 1644. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Julien Weisbein and Samuel Hayat, Introduction à la socio-histoire des idées politiques (Louvain-la-Neuve: De Boeck Supérieur, 2020), 64–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On Burke, see Justine Lacroix and Jean-Yves Pranchère, Le Procès des droits de l’homme: Généalogie du scepticisme démocratique (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 85–126; on de Maistre et de Bonald, see Lacroix and Pranchère, Le Procès des droits de l’homme, 175–214. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lacroix and Pranchère, Le Procès des droits de l’homme, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rey, ed., Dictionnaire historique de la langue française, vol. 1, 479. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Philippe Corcuff, La Grande Confusion: Comment l’extrême droite gagne la bataille des idées (Paris : Textuel, 2021), 236–48. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Pierre Bourdieu, L’Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger (Paris: Minuit, 1988), 15–50 (translated as *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Corcuff, La Grande Confusion, 16–28 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jacques Julliard, L’Esprit du peuple (Paris: Laffont, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Frédéric Lordon. Imperium: Structures et affects des corps politiques (Paris: La Fabrique, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mathieu Bock-Côté, L’Empire du politiquement correct: Essai sur la respectabilité (Paris: Cerf, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For a detailed overview of Emmanuel Macron’s confusionist change of position, see Corcuff, La Grande Confusion, 117–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hans Jonas, Le Principe responsabilité: Une éthique pour la civilisation technologique (Paris: Cerf, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pierre-André Taguieff, L’Émancipation promise: Exigence forte ou illusion durable? (Paris: Cerf, 2019), 317 and 335 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Philippe Corcuff, La Société de verre: Pour une éthique de la fragilité (Paris: Colin, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Robert Castel and Claudine Haroche, Propriété privée, propriété sociale, propriété de soi: Entretiens sur la construction de l’individu moderne (Paris: Fayard, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bruno Latour, Politiques de la nature: Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie (Paris: La Découverte, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Thibaut Sardier, “Face à la crise écologique, nous avons fait exactement ce qu’il ne faut pas faire,” interview in Libération, May 14, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)