



The Poujadist Movement: A faux 'fascism'

James G. Shields

To cite this article: James G. Shields (2000) The Poujadist Movement: A faux 'fascism', Modern & Contemporary France, 8:1, 19-34, DOI: [10.1080/096394800113330](https://doi.org/10.1080/096394800113330)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/096394800113330>



Published online: 19 Aug 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 464



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)



The Poujadist Movement: a faux ‘fascism’

JAMES G. SHIELDS
University of Warwick

Abstract

Though short-lived as an electoral force, the Poujadist movement of the 1950s provides a lasting reference point within French political culture. As a term, ‘Poujadism’ is synonymous with opposition to economic and social change; as a political doctrine, it has proved more resistant to definition. Denounced by some as a resurgent fascism, Poujadism has been classed by most commentators as an extreme-right movement. This article re-examines that interpretation and argues that Poujadism presents a complex and ambiguous picture, embodying two distinct and opposing French political traditions: the revolutionary-republican and the conservative-nationalist. Far from providing a vehicle for fascism, Pierre Poujade resisted attempts to impose an extreme-right ideology on his movement or to harness it for neo-fascist ends, confirming both the highly specific nature of Poujadism and the continued marginality of the French extreme Right a decade on from Vichy.

In obscure retirement among the flora of the Aveyron, Pierre Poujade can be satisfied with one enduring legacy of the movement which he led to overnight success in the French legislative elections of January 1956. Unlike so many weightier political figures past and present, Poujade has given his name to a term enshrined in the modern French (and English) lexicon. The *Petit Robert* defines ‘poujadisme’ thus: ‘Mouvement et parti politique populaire de droite, à la fin de la IV^e République, soutenu surtout par les petits commerçants.—Attitude petite-bourgeoise de refus contre l’évolution socio-économique.’ Clear enough as an ‘attitude’ perhaps, Poujadism as a political movement has proved less amenable to definition. In popular usage, the term has become a byword for active resistance by threatened interest groups to economic and social change. In early 1999, when groups as diverse as crop farmers, blood sports enthusiasts and nuclear plant operators staged a series of violent protests against environmental reforms by the Jospin government, their action was greeted in the French press as a ‘nouveau poujadisme’.¹ When the government of Alain Juppé introduced a package of measures in response to pressure from small business in November 1995, it was reported in the *Financial Times* as ‘Poujade’s return’.²

The readiness of such associations confirms the place reserved for 'Poujadism' within modern socio-political parlance; yet it offers little to further our understanding of the political doctrine denoted by this term. Those who have sought to determine the place of Poujadism on a classic right-left scale have, in the main, described it as an ultra-reactionary, extreme-right or 'fascist' movement;³ others have inclined to a more benign interpretation, seeing in Poujadism a defence of the 'small man' in the French revolutionary-republican tradition;⁴ others still have dismissed Poujade outright as a 'bouffon politique', a fairground attraction of an 'almost burlesque' character.⁵ The purpose of this article is to look afresh at the Poujadist movement and return to the origins of this peculiar yet persistent 'ism'. While it has been branded by its sternest critics as a form of 'fascism', the article will argue that such an interpretation ignores the complexities of a movement that remains, half a century on, resistant to easy classification.

The birth of an 'ism'

The Poujadist movement was launched in July 1953 as a localised protest by small shopkeepers against the punitive effects of an anachronistic tax system and the high-handedness of government inspectors in clamping down on fiscal fraud.⁶ Pierre Poujade was no politician, but a stationer and local councillor from the small town of Saint-Céré in the Lot, where this anti-tax revolt began. Raised in a traditional Catholic, pro-royalist household, Poujade had flirted in his youth with Jacques Doriot's fascist Parti populaire français (PPF), then Marshal Pétain's *Compagnons de France*.⁷ When the southern zone was occupied by the Nazis in 1942, he had escaped via Spain and North Africa to join the RAF. Having returned to set up his small business in Saint-Céré after the war, he won a seat as a Gaullist (RPF) candidate in the 1952 municipal elections. From this narrow platform, the 33-year-old Poujade was pitched into a national leadership role as his movement became the conduit for an upswell of popular grievance against economic restructuring under the Fourth Republic.

Poujadist protest spread quickly from the Lot to neighbouring departments, then to other regions, reflecting the fears of 'static' France confronted with the onset of modernisation. The years since the Liberation had seen a concerted effort by government planners to promote industrial development, announcing the end of small-scale agriculture and commerce as the mainstay of the French economy. With the expansion of town-centred employment came rural depopulation and the decline of the peasantry. Provincial shopkeepers and artisans, many of whom lived off very slim profit margins, were hit not only by the dislocation of their traditional consumer-base; they were also adversely affected by the reining back of postwar inflation, which had allowed them to sell their goods at steadily increased prices and turn a depreciating currency to benefit in their back payments to the Revenue and their creditors. At the same time, the modernisation of the commercial sector, with its drive towards new modes of commercial production and distribution (retail chains, cooperatives and—on the

horizon—the dreaded supermarket), threatened the *raison d'être* of the small dealer.⁸

When all of this was compounded by a new government resolve to curb the widespread practice of tax evasion, the Poujadists' response was direct, brutal and effective. They obstructed treasury agents (*polyvalents*, or '*polyvoleurs*'), ransacked local tax offices, mobilised demonstrations, and called for a general tax strike and the withdrawal of savings from state banks. They articulated their demands (for a fairer tax system, an end to tax inspections, equal social security rights, and the convocation of an Estates-General to address popular grievances) in a language notable for its violence. Their enemies were clearly identified: politicians, tax officials, big business, high finance, technocrats, intellectuals, uncomprehending journalists—so many cosy, metropolitan elites conspiring against the honest toilers of France in the name of 'progress'.

The movement's founding charter was the eight-point 'Gramat Programme', drawn up in October 1953 and focusing exclusively on tax and social security issues. Its Constituent Assembly, held in Cahors in November 1953, launched the Union de défense des commerçants et artisans (UDCA), which held its first national congress in Algiers the following year. By late summer 1955, the UDCA registered a paid-up membership of 356,160; it ran a press producing information sheets, propagandist tracts and two newspapers, the monthly *L'Union* then the weekly *Fraternité française*, with their reported subscription figures of 460,000 and 400,000 respectively.⁹ In January 1955, a mass rally at the Porte de Versailles in Paris attracted over 100,000 supporters from all over France, followed by other rallies throughout the year (Poujade was said to have held over 800 public meetings in two years). In March 1955, a Poujadist delegation presented itself at the National Assembly to press Edgar Faure's centre-right government into a number of concessions, including the abrogation of the so-called 'Dorey Amendment', a piece of legislation from August 1954 that had made the obstruction of tax auditors an imprisonable offence.

From protest to politics

Facing deep political divisions at home and a worsening situation in Algeria, the Faure government brought forward to January the legislative elections set for June 1956. This offered the Poujadists the opportunity to stage their most spectacular protest. On 2 January 1956, the hastily constituted Poujadist 'party', Union et fraternité française (UFF), sent a shockwave through the political establishment: with no formal electoral programme and a slate of unknown candidates, they won 11.6 per cent of votes cast (some 2.5 million) and 52 seats in the new National Assembly.

The Poujadist vote represented predominantly the poorer, underdeveloped and economically static departments of central, southern and south-western France. Shopkeepers, small farmers, artisans, café proprietors, peasants, wine growers

and *bouilleurs de cru* (home distillers) provided the bulk of the Poujadist electorate, which was in the main male, middle-aged, modestly educated, and markedly lower middle-class in its profile.¹⁰ Support was drawn mostly from the established right-wing parties; it came also from the Left, including the French Communist Party (PCF), which found itself challenged in its tribune function by this new protest force. The Poujadist deputies were an unlikely assemblage of butchers, bakers and the like, with around half their number having no previous political affiliation or experience. By what would later be judged a miscalculation, Poujade himself did not contest a seat, preferring to manage his party from outside parliament and preclude accusations of self-advancement or compromise with the regime. He had with difficulty persuaded his movement to field candidates at all, such was their hostility to the party system and concern to preserve their apolitical stance.¹¹

Not all of the recruits to Poujadism fought so shy of political engagement. As a law student in Paris (1947–1953) and president of the Corporation de droit (Law Students' Union), Jean-Marie Le Pen had earned a reputation as a strident nationalist and anti-communist. Having completed his studies and a tour of duty as a volunteer paratrooper in Indo-China, Le Pen was casting around for his entry to politics at the moment when Poujade was looking to inject new blood into his militant core. Though a stranger to Poujade's professional concerns, Le Pen subscribed to much that Poujadism represented, with its imprecations against a 'corrupt' system, its emphasis on traditional French values and, above all, its robust espousal of *Algérie française*. By the time Le Pen was introduced to Poujade in November 1955, the UDCA had thrown its weight behind the defence of the French Union, with a marked shift towards a more nationalistic discourse. It had, in René Rémond's assessment, crossed the border from being a socio-economic interest group to becoming 'une force de droite et même d'extrême droite'.¹²

In signing up to the Poujadist cause and showing his mettle as a public speaker, Le Pen was made an 'orateur national' and entrusted with one of the movement's parallel associations, the Union de défense de la jeunesse française (UDJF). Le Pen used the UDJF as a security service and a battering ram for the Poujadists, disrupting opponents' electoral meetings with demonstrations that sometimes took a violent turn.¹³ Philip Williams recounts how, in many constituencies, Poujadist rowdies would simply drown speakers 'by shouts—or by cowbells, drums, loudspeakers, hunting horns, and alarm clocks', while others 'were bombarded with eggs, fruit and vegetables'.¹⁴ With their slogan '*Sortez les sortants*', the Poujadists ran a spoiling campaign. Their declared objective was not to win power and become just another institutional party, but to clear the way for an Estates-General, a representative body last convened on the eve of the Revolution. An electoral tract addressed to the 'Paysans de France' stressed the anti-political nature of their mission: 'Notre seul but est de nettoyer la maison et de donner la parole au peuple pour la convocation des États Généraux. [...] Ce but atteint après y avoir consacré tous nos efforts, nous démissionnerons.'¹⁵

The Poujadists in parliament

Elected on a wholly negative platform, the Poujadists were ill-adapted to their new institutional role. With no parliamentary experience and few ready allies, they fell easy prey to the procedural pitfalls of the National Assembly and the manoeuvrings of the established parties. On the testimony of one (albeit sympathetic) witness, Jacques Isorni, the Poujadists were 'incapables de rédiger une proposition de loi ou de prononcer un discours'.¹⁶ Even on their central issue of tax reform, they proved unable to formulate a positive proposal or contribute constructively to the parliamentary process.¹⁷

Conspicuous as an exception to this ineptitude, Le Pen proved a fiery orator and emerged as the *porte-parole* of the UFF parliamentary group. With his Paris seat secured after only six weeks on the political circuit, Le Pen became the youngest deputy in the legislature. Elected, too, were another ex-paratrooper, Jean-Maurice Demarquet, and an ex-Police Commissioner, Jean Dides, forming with Le Pen the hard core of militant nationalism within the Poujadist group. The most heated exchanges (including a punch-up on the floor of the National Assembly)¹⁸ took place in February 1956, when 11 of the group were disqualified for irregularities in the election campaign, then in March with the debates on Algeria. These occasions saw the Poujadists lambasted from the left-wing benches as 'fascists' and 'nazis', an image reflected in the seating plan of the Assembly, where the Poujadist deputies were consigned—despite their protests—to the far-right benches. 'On nous fait hériter du passif de l'extrême droite,' Poujade would later write, 'avec laquelle nous n'avons en réalité rien à voir.'¹⁹

While Poujade pretended to an increasingly untenable posture of apoliticism for his movement, Le Pen sought from the outset to politicise his role. His declarations in the National Assembly articulated a visceral anti-communism and authoritarian nationalism.²⁰ This would become a source of concern for Poujade, who came to see Le Pen's hardline political orientation as more of a liability than an asset. For it was Le Pen's clear ambition to transform the UDCA into a full-blown political party and a pole of attraction for the ultra-nationalist Right—those precisely whom Poujade dismissed as 'les professionnels du nationalisme', 'une extrême droite bornée et coupée des réalités politiques et populaires'.²¹ At an extraordinary congress, Poujade warned his deputies against contagion from radical right-wing elements in parliament. This was a clear response to the overtures of ultra-nationalists such as Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, with whom Le Pen had struck up a cordial relationship. In a further move to cut ground from under Le Pen, Poujade now declared the role of deputy to be incompatible with that of directing a parallel association. In effect, this applied only to Demarquet, head of the Union de défense des combattants, and Le Pen, with his UDJF youth wing, which he had built up as a forum for far-right nationalist students and a personal power base.²²

The Poujadist congress of April–May 1956 was symptomatic of a movement that was slipping from the control of its leader and losing its direction. Though

it retained strong professional support (claiming a membership of 435,000 at its peak),²³ its political edge had been blunted by its ineffectual absorption into parliament. The oath which the Poujadist deputies had sworn (to remain loyal on penalty of death!) now rang hollow as internal dissensions multiplied. These came to a head over the Suez crisis (when Dides led a breakaway faction against Poujade's opposition to armed intervention) and the worsening situation in Algeria, which brought Le Pen and Demarquet into conflict with Poujade.²⁴ In January 1957, the latter attempted to regain control of his parliamentary group by contesting, and losing, a Paris by-election. Le Pen and Demarquet, who had taken parliamentary leave in September 1956 to enlist as volunteers in Algeria, now came out against Poujade and were formally excluded from the UDCA at its congress in May 1957.

The final break-up of the Poujadist movement occurred over de Gaulle's return to power the following year. In addition to its strength in mainland France, Poujadism had many adherents in Algeria, some of whom held open the possibility that Poujade might lead a revolutionary government there. Poujade, for his part, reacted with caution to the evolving events in Algeria. His Cornelian dilemma (as he put it) remained one of reconciling the original socio-economic objectives of the UDCA with the national political issues in which it had become increasingly entangled. Wooed by the prospect of a ministry, Poujade opted to support de Gaulle's investiture, only to withdraw his support on sensing that he had been outmanœuvred and that Poujadist concerns were being by-passed. His support for the 'No' campaign in the referendum of 28 September 1958 set him at odds with the leadership and rank and file of his movement, who voted massively in favour of the new Fifth Republic.²⁵ The Poujadist group disintegrated as its members deserted to other right-wing parties, while in the November 1958 parliamentary elections, Poujadist candidates recorded 1.5 per cent, just over 300,000 votes. By the end of 1958, membership of the UDCA had dropped to around 200,000; by the end of 1959, it had fallen to under 100,000.²⁶ Poujadism as a political force was spent.

'Poujadolf'

Much has been said about the fascistic nature of Poujadism. François Mitterrand, one of the movement's *bêtes noires*, described it pithily as 'un fascisme d'arrière-boutique', while the PCF, after a period of support, denounced it as 'une entreprise aventuriste de caractère fasciste'.²⁷ Following the elections of January 1956, the Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme (LICRA) launched a public appeal against 'le danger fasciste et raciste représenté par le mouvement Poujade'.²⁸ A number of less engaged commentators concurred with this judgement. Maurice Duverger described Poujadism as a 'fascisme élémentaire, grossier, primitif', while others detected echoes of Nazism.²⁹ One of the most striking images of the 1956 elections was the cartoon (by the *Daily Mirror*'s Vicky) which appeared in *L'Express*, depicting 'Pou-

jadolf' holding forth from a podium with the ghost of Hitler whispering in his ear: 'Vas-y, mon gars! Pour moi aussi ils ont rigolé, au début ...'.³⁰

There was much in Poujadism to provoke concern: its authoritarian structure and leadership cult, its anti-parliamentarism and direct activism, its increasing nationalism and xenophobia. There was much, too, that bore the stamp of a specifically French tradition of right-extremism, from the *instinct des humbles* lauded by Maurice Barrès to the distinction between the *pays légal* and the *pays réel* as argued by Charles Maurras.³¹ The lamentations over Indo-China and vigorous defence of French Algeria were redolent of the nationalism that had characterised the extreme Right in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War. General Boulanger's 'union of malcontents', in its linking of military defeat with the weakness of a decadent regime, contained adumbrations of Poujadism.³²

A further factor giving rise to the charge of 'fascism', and placing Poujadism again in the lineage of the French ultra-Right, was the anti-Semitism on which it played. The growth of the movement in 1954 coincided with the premiership of Pierre Mendès-France. Excoriated for 'selling out' in Indo-China (and again in North Africa) and for persecuting Poujadist protestors through the hated 'Dorey Amendment', Mendès became the focus of the movement's animosity throughout his term of office (June 1954–February 1955). While Poujadist propaganda peddled a coded anti-Semitism in its denunciation of 'sociétés anonymes', 'trusts internationaux' and 'puissances financières apatrides et inhumaines',³³ Mendès provided a figure on whom the animus could be personalised—as a left-leaning politician, a supporter of modernisation and decolonisation, and a Jew. When his government launched a campaign against alcoholism (with Mendès setting the tone by drinking milk at high-profile receptions), he was savaged by Poujade for not having 'une goutte de sang gaulois dans les veines', and for conspiring to force the wine growers and café owners of France out of existence.³⁴

The projected opening of an experimental supermarket in Corsica in November 1954 was denounced in similar terms, as a means of forcing French commerce to 'plier le genou devant le veau d'or'.³⁵ This theme of the Jew as a malevolent, profit-driven, un-French presence—part of a network of 'complicités nationales et internationales'—had a long history.³⁶ In response to charges of anti-Semitism, Poujade argued that he had shaken up 'quelques ministres israélites parce qu'ils étaient ministres et non parce qu'ils étaient israélites'; he had, he objected, attacked non-Jewish ministers just as violently.³⁷ The defence was a flimsy one, taking no account of those within and around his movement who showed less inhibition, or of the increasingly anti-Semitic line adopted by the official Poujadist press.³⁸ The 'sentiment du terroir' which Poujade invoked as a prerequisite of Frenchness played well in a provincial France where local interests predominated,³⁹ but it could lend itself to distortive simplifications, resonating with the 'Blood and Soil' cult beloved of fascist movements. It underlay the scornful dismissal of those 'Français de fraîche date' who concealed 'leur nom véritable sous celui de l'un des nôtres qu'ils nous ont volé'; it

explained, too, the requirement of three generations of French ancestry in order to serve on the UDCA's administrative council.⁴⁰

Poujade and the Republic

When such evidence is reviewed, it is difficult not to concede something to those who decried Poujade's movement as a renascent fascism. Viewed in its totality, however, Poujadism presents a much more complex and equivocal picture: firstly, because so much of its discourse paid homage to the French Republican heritage; secondly, because its supporters were drawn from right across the political spectrum, with significant backing from the PCF; and thirdly, because the nature of the movement, and its political centre of gravity, shifted markedly over a short time.

Poujade insisted that the UDCA was 'ni à droite, ni à gauche, ni au centre', appealing to all regardless of political affiliation.⁴¹ Though this is a familiar posture for extreme-right movements (anticipating the 'Ni droite, ni gauche—Français!' slogan of the FN in the 1990s), it is undeniable that Poujadism played into a French political culture that transcended easy right-left divisions. In its calls for an Estates-General, it embraced a primitive ideal of direct democracy and associated itself with a popular mythology rooted in the Revolution of 1789: the defence of *les honnêtes gens* against an oppressive regime.⁴² Where Maurras had inveighed against the Revolution and Pétain sought to bury it without trace, Poujade's language abounds with Revolutionary imagery, rallying his supporters as descendants of those *sans-culottes* 'qui n'hésitèrent pas à guillotiner un roi'.⁴³

Though there were antecedents in France for a fascism in 'republican' guise (notably Marcel Déat's Rassemblement national populaire under Vichy), the conception of a 'fascist republic' found no echo in Poujade's invocations of the 'grands principes' of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. 'Si les auteurs de la Déclaration des droits de l'homme sont des fascistes,' he declared to an international press gathering in January 1956, 'alors Pierre Poujade accepte d'être pris pour un fasciste'.⁴⁴ By other indicators too, as Lipset notes, Poujadism leant towards the 'revolutionary republican tradition'. Whereas the anti-Republican Right exalted the Catholic Church as a bastion of moral leadership, Poujadists were 'more likely to resemble anticlerical leftists in their opinions than right-wing conservatives'.⁴⁵

The Resistance also provided a ready store of myths and symbols. Poujade's writings contain frequent reflections on the Resistance as a heroic enterprise and the Liberation as a horizon of (missed) opportunity, revealing nothing in common with those self-proclaimed fascists who greeted 1940 as a cause for 'jubilation' and 1944 as a 'defeat'.⁴⁶ Poujade stressed his 'attachement fondamental aux principes démocratiques' and declared the Republic to be the 'seul régime démocratique valable', denouncing incumbent elites as 'nouveaux collaborateurs [qui] ont vendu notre pays aussi honteusement et encore plus sûrement que les autres'.⁴⁷

Though there was much in Poujadist discourse that called forth the providential leader, Poujade's express objective was to shake the system up, not to 'take' power himself.⁴⁸ His 'Republic' was not a set of institutions but an abstract ideal, with overtones of Rousseau. Hence his care to attack the Fourth Republic, rather than the republican model of government *per se*, calling not for a new form of government but for 'le retour aux principes de base de la République: au peuple'.⁴⁹ While the distinction might have seemed spurious to some of his fellow travellers and elusive to part of his audience, it was one on which Poujade insisted: 'Peu importe si la IV^e République disparaît, pourvu que nous sauvions la République'.⁵⁰

In this crucial sense as in others, Poujade is much less akin to right-wing thinkers such as Barrès and Maurras than to the radical philosopher Alain, with his ideal of direct democracy and deep distrust of political elites.⁵¹ Peter Campbell passes close to this point when he describes Poujadism as a provincial republicanism in the democratic tradition: 'The language of Poujadism has a Jacobin violence, but the movement is essentially Girondin; like the Girondins, the Poujadists are in revolt against the capital'.⁵² This, Campbell acknowledges, is but one side of a Poujadism that has another, more anti-democratic aspect; but it is an important side that has too often been neglected. Reaching back through history for legitimation, as he frequently did, Poujade located his own political ancestry in the same provincial republican tradition of resistance to the strong centralised state. 'D'une certaine mesure, ne suis-je pas, avec mon mouvement, l'héritier de tous ceux qui ont, à travers notre histoire, dressé leurs pics et leurs fourches pour résister aux abus du pouvoir central et de sa fiscalité?'⁵³

The electoral strength of such an impulse would ultimately prove its political weakness. The success of Poujadism merely exposed its in-built obsolescence: having triumphed against 'the system', it could not but compromise its rationale by entering the National Assembly and forfeiting its anti-political role. While it forged for a time a novel solidarity among those traditionally isolated in their trades, its adherents remained too rural, sectionalist and politically disparate to sustain the parliamentary party they had launched.

Poujade and the extreme Right

To what extent, then, is Poujadism to be seen as the resurgence of the French extreme Right a decade on from Vichy? In order to answer this question, two important distinctions must be drawn: the first between 'orthodox' Poujadism and the later development of the movement, that is between the 'poujadisme' of the UDCA's founder and the 'ultrapoujadisme' of some of its adherents; the second between a leadership that mobilised some of the classic themes of the extreme Right and a grassroots support who remained defined above all by their sectional interests.

Launched against the conservative government of Joseph Laniel, the movement at the outset, as Philip Williams observed, 'was not obviously right-wing'.⁵⁴ Another contemporary observer, Jean Touchard, went further, defining

Poujadism in its early phase as ‘incontestablement de gauche’, with a strong Communist strain.⁵⁵ The shift in the UDCA’s political centre of gravity became evident under the premiership of Laniel’s successor, Mendès-France, with the development of a more sharply politicised discourse. Pierre Milza describes the transformation over this period as a gradual slippage from anti-fiscalism to anti-parliamentarism, from a patriotism with strong Republican resonance to a narrow nationalism with xenophobic tones, from anti-capitalism to anti-Semitism.⁵⁶ The first national congress in Algiers in November 1954, the launch of *Fraternité française* under the wealthy Algiers ultra, Paul Chevallet, and the ‘purge’ of Communist influence within the leadership structures all confirmed the rightward shift of the movement.

Whereas the strong Communist presence in the early days had precluded recruitment among extreme-right circles, Poujadism now began to serve as a magnet for ex-Vichyites, neo-fascists and ultra-nationalists wishing to destabilise the regime and keen to exploit the fascist potentialities of Poujade’s movement.⁵⁷ As *Algérie française* became the mobilising theme, Poujade was drawn into collusion with hard-liners at home and with French army and *pied-noir* ultras in Algeria; at the same time, the influence was felt in the Poujadist press of a number of former collaborationist journalists.⁵⁸ As the defining ethos of Poujadism became blurred, it was no longer clear, in the words of Stanley Hoffmann, ‘si l’on est dans le jacobinisme, l’antiparlementarisme xénophobe classique (de gauche ou de droite), ou aux limites du fascisme’.⁵⁹ The opponents of Poujadism showed no such hesitation, as the UFF was consigned to the fascist fringe and its leader denounced as ‘hitlérien’. The Communists in particular effected an about-turn from active support to vilification. In an editorial in *L’Humanité* of 1 October 1955, Waldeck Rochet deplored the fascist character of the Poujadist movement and placed its leader in the lineage of La Rocque, Doriot and Dorgères.⁶⁰ In the March 1956 issue of the *Cahiers du communisme*, the future PCF leader published a more developed philippic, branding Poujade and his inner circle ‘un ramassis de traîtres, de pétainistes, de renégats, de colonialistes, d’hitlériens et d’hommes de main’, and calling for a ‘Front populaire’ to resist once again the rise of fascism.⁶¹

The fact is, however, that those extreme-right elements drawn to Poujadism imprinted their stamp on the movement but failed—as the Communists before them had failed—to take control and re-route it towards their own purposes. Tixier-Vignancour was premature in declaring that Poujadism had opened the ‘way back to the masses’ for the extreme Right in France.⁶² Poujade’s resistance to the latter’s advances in parliament, his circumspect association with the former Green Shirts leader, Henri Dorgères, and the progressive elimination of the most extremist elements within the movement (Le Pen, Demarquet, Dides, Dupont, Chevallet) showed in fact how ill-adapted Poujadism was for a take-over by the extreme Right.⁶³

Following the elections of January 1956, the extreme-right press vied for a share, by association, in the Poujadists’ success. While *La Nation française* deemed it a healthy popular reflex and *Rivarol* sensed the dawn of a nationalist

revival, *Aspects de la France* divined in Poujadism a cry for strong leadership through the restoration of the monarchy.⁶⁴ Others went further in their attempt to court Poujade. The Phalange française of the neo-fascist Charles 'Luca' Gastaut expressed its 'chaude sympathie' for the Poujadists and called for a revolutionary alliance to launch 'l'assaut qui emportera le Régime'.⁶⁵ The appeal fell on deaf ears, confirming Poujade's refusal to allow his forces to be mobilised for any political cause but his own. And his was clearly not a revolutionary cause. No sooner was the UFF group elected than Poujade showed again his capacity to wrong-foot critics and would-be allies alike by denying any intention to be a 'saboteur' and stating his readiness to support the government in most areas, in return for tax reforms.⁶⁶

A more thoughtful contribution to understanding Poujadism rather than merely trying to hijack its success came from another extreme-right journal, Maurice Bardèche's *Défense de l'Occident*, which devoted its May 1956 issue to the Poujadist phenomenon. For Bardèche, Poujadism represented a quintessentially French form of communitarian activism. The charge of fascism levelled at Poujade, Bardèche argued, was 'faux et absurde'. Poujadism was not a political project but 'un mouvement civique', an attempt to address social and economic injustice at source; far from being anti-democratic, it was a call for 'la vraie démocratie contre l'altération de la démocratie'. Despite a strong personal sympathy for Poujade, Bardèche's refusal to classify Poujadism within a fascist framework is significant. In support of his argument, Bardèche notes the lengths to which Poujade went to effect change through the existing democratic institutions before declaring war on a regime '[qui] n'écouterait pas la nation'. Poujade's approach to leadership, too, was quite at odds with any fascist model. Where an authentic dictator would seek to impose his ideas on the masses, Poujade had no ideas to offer: he was simply a 'caisse de résonance' for the grievances of those he represented, a political leader 'malgré lui'. In giving a voice to the people, concluded Bardèche, Poujade 'ne combat pas la République, il la ramène à ses origines'. If he was to be accused of anything, it was of clinging to an ideal of republicanism that had no place within the existing Republic.⁶⁷

A faux 'fascism'

Any attempt to understand Poujadism as a political movement and fix it in relation to the French extreme Right, or 'fascism' more generally, must take account of such objections. Though much of its rhetoric and many of its designated enemies were similar, Poujadism bore no relation in its essential goals to those earlier movements—Georges Valois' Faisceau in the 1920s or Jacques Doriot's PPF in the 1930s—which had called for the overthrow of the Republic by a fascist dictatorship. While Poujade recalled Doriot in his talent for haranguing crowds in rolled-up shirt-sleeves, his movement never adopted the trappings (uniforms, salutes, parades etc.) of movements with a fascist bent; nor could the violence of the Poujadists be compared in any way to organised fascist

brutality.⁶⁸ Poujade's avowed republicanism, his caution at every critical juncture (a 'distinctly unfascist' quality, as has been observed),⁶⁹ and his reluctance to lend his movement a more sharply focused political vocation militate against comparison along such lines. Even in his anti-communism—that first imperative of fascism⁷⁰—Poujade was belated and tactical rather than driven by ideological principle: the real anti-communist phase of the movement dates from 1955, and its loudest exponents would be Le Pen and Demarquet. Meanwhile, Poujade's fundamental pragmatism remained undiminished. 'Nous partageons certaines positions de la droite', he would declare of his parliamentary group, 'mais dans la lutte contre les trusts, par exemple, nous partageons celle des communistes. Nous sommes inclassables.'⁷¹

'Fascism' is a term much devalued by use and abuse. If we understand one of its classic signifiers to be, as Stanley Hoffmann suggests, 'un culte de l'Etat, et une philosophie de l'absorption de la société tout entière par l'Etat', then Poujadism was no fascism. The base of the movement, Hoffmann rightly notes, remained too Girondist to accommodate any sympathy for a totalitarian state. Behind the Poujadists' denunciation of Parisian elites lay 'une nostalgie d'un âge d'or où les petits Poujade cultivaient leurs jardins dans leur petit village, sans aucun contact avec l'Etat'.⁷²

Neither was Poujadism 'fascist' in the sense of combining nationalism (which it evinced strongly) with socialist economic principles (which it strenuously rejected, aside from its calls for social justice in tax and welfare provision). As anti-collectivist as they were anti-capitalist, the Poujadists remained wedded to the defence of small-scale economic liberalism, the micro-capitalism that was their *raison d'être*, along ill-defined corporatist lines. Even their nationalism had a primitive economic core: the preservation of the 'comptoirs de l'Inde', the protection not only of France's greatness 'mais aussi de sa prospérité, car les territoires d'Outre-Mer sont un élément essentiel de notre richesse'.⁷³ Whereas fascism embraced the economic necessity of industrialisation, Poujadism retained to the end its archaic mentality and outright opposition to industrial modernisation. It remained, as Plumyène and Lasierra note, a movement 'en-deçà de la modernité'—and, in that sense, radically different from fascism.⁷⁴

Though survey data for the 1956 elections are localised and fragmentary, they confirm that the vote for the UFF was emphatically a socio-economic vote with limited capacity for wider politicisation. The issues of national grandeur, decolonisation, French Algeria and anti-communism which gave Poujadism its 'high politics' content—and much of its extreme-right tenor—found not the merest echo among a sample of Poujadist voters interviewed by the Institut français d'Opinion publique, who explained their vote solely in terms of their professional grievances and general disgruntlement. Interpreting this survey, Jean Stoetzel and Pierre Hassner discovered among Poujadist voters 'aucun thème proprement politique, pas plus de droite que de gauche'.⁷⁵ From a series of post-election interviews published in *Le Monde*, the same impression emerges of a Poujadist voter exercised, to the exclusion of 'higher' matters, by tax, social security and the development of Prisunic stores.⁷⁶

The lower middle classes gave Poujadism a structured social base that Gaullism notably lacked, but it was a base of discontent which could not easily sustain a national political party. Apoliticism, moreover, remained a prudent posture for many in the commercial sector anxious to avoid antagonising their clientele. It required only a number of government measures favourable to small business and a marked return to inflation in 1956–1957, recreating economic conditions that the small retailer could exploit, for much of the wind to be taken out of the movement's sails.⁷⁷ The ineffectiveness of the UFF in parliament, the Mollet government's firm stance on Algeria and the pull of de Gaulle as a new rallying-point (for moderates and extremists) would in turn render irremediable the disintegration of Poujadism as a political force.

Disparaged for leading a movement with 'as much intellectual content as scream',⁷⁸ Poujade—if his own assertions are to be believed—never in fact sought to do anything more. For this reason, the historian Jean-Pierre Rioux sees in Poujadism not an avatar of fascism but a protection against authentic fascism, a 'populisme d'alarme' allowing for the expression of grievance within the democratic framework. '*Sortez les sortants*', as Rioux recognises, was a call not to public disorder, as in the 1930s, but to the ballot box.⁷⁹ The historian of French fascism, Pierre Milza, concurs. In the end, argues Milza, Poujadism had more in common with postwar Italy's L'Uomo Qualunque ('The Common Man') movement, which saw 30 'popular' deputies elected briefly to the Italian parliament in 1946, than with the rise of Fascism or Nazism.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Though commonly ranged among movements of the extreme Right, it is no easy matter to define the essential political significance of Poujadism. For it embodies two distinct and opposing French political traditions, the revolutionary-republican and the conservative-nationalist. It presents itself as a populist movement in defence of lower middle-class interests, mobilising the heritage of the Left (Revolution, Republic, Resistance) and of the reactionary Right (authoritarianism, nationalism, colonialism) against both Left and Right alike. Herein lies the ultimate singularity of Poujadism, for it assailed the parties of the Left, the trade unions, the welfare state and collectivism as readily as big business, banks, high finance and the established conservative parties, remaining to the end an inchoate mix of the democratic and the authoritarian, the revolutionary and the ultra-conservative. While the absence of a coherent doctrine made Poujadism seem ripe for exploitation by the extreme Right, the political pragmatism of its leader and the professional concerns of its supporters proved in the end the most effective barriers against such an enterprise. Dictated more by expediency than ideological kinship, the UDCA's relations with the extreme Right replayed its earlier—opportunistic—relations with the PCF, which had exerted a strong formative influence in many areas. The charge of fascism levelled against Poujade and his movement simply cannot be substantiated. Poujade remained throughout not only impervious but deeply hostile to the

imposition of an extreme-right ideology on his movement and resisted attempts to divert it to neo-fascist ends. In its failure to fill the doctrinal void of Poujadism and capitalise on a mass movement of popular protest, the French extreme Right discovered not a new horizon of opportunity but the confirmation of its continued marginality a decade on from Vichy.

Notes and references

1. *L'Événement* (18–24 février 1999).
2. *Financial Times* (30 November 1995).
3. François Mitterrand was one of the first to denounce Poujadism as a form of 'fascism' (*Le Monde*, 13, 25–26 décembre 1955).
4. CAMPBELL, P., 'Le Mouvement Poujade', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 10, 3 (Summer 1957), pp. 362–5.
5. PLUMYÈNE, J. and LASIERRA, R., *Les Fascismes français 1923–1963* (Seuil, 1963), p. 240; ARON, R., *France Steadfast and Changing* (Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 36.
6. The complexity of the tax system and potential for fraud were illustrated by the 'twenty-four different taxes for the café proprietor, and twenty-five for the owner of a small garage' (LIPSEGE, M. S., 'The Poujade Movement', *Contemporary Review* (February 1956), p. 85).
7. For Poujade's own account of his youth and early political engagements, see POUJADE, P., *A l'heure de la colère* (Albin Michel, 1977), pp. 13–82.
8. In the mid-1950s, an inordinately high proportion of the French earned their living as small retailers, with one shop per 62 inhabitants, compared with a ratio of 1:89 in the UK and 1:91 in the USA (LIPSEGE, 'The Poujade Movement', p. 85).
9. HOFFMANN, S., *Le Mouvement Poujade* (Armand Colin, 1956), p. 191; MILZA, P., *Fascisme français* (Flammarion, 1987), pp. 301–2. For an overview of the movement's development, see EATWELL, R., 'Poujadism and Neo-Poujadism: From Revolt to Reconciliation', in P. G. CERNY (ed.), *Social Movements and Protest in France* (Pinter, 1982), pp. 70–81.
10. For an analysis of the Poujadist vote, see HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 189–208; DUVERGER, M., GOGUEL, F. and TOUCHARD, J. (eds), *Les élections du 2 janvier 1956* (Armand Colin, 1957).
11. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, p. 163; HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 115–31. See also ISORNI, J., *Ainsi passent les républiques* (Flammarion, 1959), pp. 75–7.
12. REMOND, R., *Les Droites en France* (Aubier Montaigne, 1982), p. 252. On this transition, see HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 71–4.
13. BRESSON, G. and LIONET, C., *Le Pen* (Seuil, 1994), p. 124. Pierre Mendès-France, Edgar Faure and François Mitterrand were among the favoured targets for such disruption.
14. WILLIAMS, P.M., *French Politicians and Elections 1951–1969* (CUP, 1970), pp. 45–7.
15. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 153–4. The Poujadist slogan caught the public mood, as a poll published in *L'Express* recorded a 66 per cent rate of dissatisfaction with the outgoing Assembly (RIOUX, J.-P., *La France de la Quatrième République*, vol. 2 (Seuil, 1983), p. 84).
16. ISORNI, *Ainsi passent les républiques*, p. 75.
17. *Le Monde* (10 mars 1956). The political declaration of the UFF group, lodged with the Bureau of the National Assembly, was a brief statement of 'principle' without a single concrete proposal (BORNE, D., *Petits bourgeois en révolte? Le Mouvement Poujade* (Flammarion, 1977), pp. 152–3).
18. For vivid accounts of this incident, which witnessed the firing of blanks from a gun in the public gallery, see *Le Figaro* and *New York Herald* of 16 February 1956.
19. *Le Monde* (29 janvier 1956); POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, p. 161. Poujade's objection in a post-election press conference was trenchant: 'On voudrait nous faire siéger à l'extrême droite, tandis qu'en réalité, c'est à l'extrême gauche que nous devrions être' (*L'Express*, 4 janvier 1956).
20. BRESSON and LIONET, *Le Pen*, pp. 135, 140–1.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 136–45; POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 202, 228. Le Pen's ambition to transform the UFF into a 'parti national' is confirmed by his biographer: MAUGE, R., *La Vérité sur Jean-Marie Le Pen* (France-Empire, 1988), p. 118.
22. BRESSON and LIONET, *Le Pen*, pp. 145–6; DUPRAT, F., *Les Mouvements d'extrême droite en France depuis 1944* (Albatros, 1972), pp. 76–7.
23. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 150, 223.
24. BRESSON and LIONET, *Le Pen*, pp. 147–9.

25. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 184–233; DUPRAT, *Les Mouvements d'extrême droite*, pp. 78–9.
26. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 223–4.
27. *Le Monde* (13 décembre 1955); HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, p. 354.
28. *Le Monde* (15–16 janvier 1956).
29. Cited in MILZA, *Fascisme français*, p. 307; LIPSET, S. M., *Political Man* (Heinemann, 1983), p. 157.
30. *L'Express* (9 janvier 1956).
31. See, for example, POUJADE, P., *J'ai choisi le combat* (Société générale des éditions et des publications, 1955) pp. 66, 147–53. Poujade proclaimed that his deputies were 'des représentants légaux aussi bien que réels du peuple de France' (*Le Monde*, 10 janvier 1956).
32. MILZA, *Fascisme français*, pp. 63–6.
33. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 45, 153, 221.
34. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, p. 114. Poujade took to using the sobriquet 'Mendès-Lolo', echoing the treatment handed out in the 1930s to a previous Jewish Prime Minister, Léon Blum, over his habit of drinking water. See BIRNBAUM, P., *Un mythe politique: la 'République juive'* (Fayard, 1988), pp. 179–83.
35. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, pp. 115–16.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 112–14. See, more generally, WINOCK, M., *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France* (Seuil, 1990), pp. 117–44; WEBER, E., *Varieties of Fascism* (Kreiger, 1982), pp. 66–9.
37. *Le Monde* (20 janvier 1956); also POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, pp. 229–30.
38. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 226–7; DUPEUX, G., 'Les plates-formes des partis', in DUVERGER et al., *Les élections*, p. 62; *Le Monde* (15–16 janvier 1956).
39. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, pp. 116, 119.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 231–2; HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 225–7.
41. *Le Monde* (29 décembre 1955); POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, p. 248.
42. Poujade located his movement in what he termed 'la pure tradition française' of protecting the weak against oppression by the strong (*J'ai choisi le combat*, p. 26).
43. TOUCHARD, J., 'Bibliographie et chronologie du poujadisme', *Revue française de science politique* (janvier–mars 1956), p. 28.
44. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, pp. 43, 111, 250; *Le Monde* (20 janvier 1956).
45. LIPSET, *Political Man*, pp. 158–62.
46. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, pp. 123–4, 141–2, 240; *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 86–7. Cf. REBATET, L., *Les Mémoires d'un fasciste*, vol. I (Pauvert, 1976), p. 523; BARDÈCHE, M., *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme?* (Les Sept Couleurs, 1961), p. 98.
47. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, pp. 142, 202; HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, p. 229.
48. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 153, 188, 214. This is a point which Poujade stressed to the author in an interview on 18 April 1995.
49. POUJADE, *J'ai choisi le combat*, p. 124.
50. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, p. 242.
51. On the echoes of Alain to be found in Poujade, see HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 211–13, 228, 388.
52. CAMPBELL, 'Le Mouvement Poujade', p. 364.
53. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, p. 171. See on this point PLUMYÈNE and LASIERRA, *Les Fascismes français*, pp. 229–31.
54. WILLIAMS, P.M., *Crisis and Compromise* (Longmans, 1964), p. 163.
55. TOUCHARD, 'Bibliographie et chronologie', p. 32. On the early Communist influence and subsequent 'purge', see HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 38–40, 58–61, 349–56.
56. MILZA, *Fascisme français*, p. 301.
57. Pierre Milza (*Fascisme français*, pp. 307–8) judges Poujadism to have been 'fascist' only in its potentialities. Touchard ('Bibliographie et chronologie', p. 43) likewise described the movement as 'moins un fascisme qu'une réserve pour le fascisme au cas où ...'.
58. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 151, 196–206, 222–33; MILZA, *Fascisme français*, pp. 302, 308–9; PLUMYÈNE and LASIERRA, *Les Fascismes français*, pp. 239, 244–5.
59. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, p. 225; also ALGAZY, who locates Poujadism 'dans ce *no man's land*, souvent difficile à cerner et à définir, qui sépare le fascisme avéré du non-fascisme' (*La Tentation néo-fasciste en France de 1944 à 1965* (Fayard, 1984), p. 130).
60. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, p. 354.
61. WALDECK ROCHET, 'Le caractère fasciste du "mouvement" poujade', *Les Cahiers du communisme* (mars 1956), pp. 194–211.
62. WILLIAMS, *Crisis and Compromise*, p. 162.

63. DUPRAT, *Les Mouvements d'extrême droite*, pp. 76–9. On Poujade's relations with Dorgères, see HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 337–41. Williams notes how Poujade 'turned on his extreme fascist associates as he had previously ousted the Communists' (*Crisis and Compromise*, p. 164).
64. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 363–5.
65. ALGAZY, *La Tentation néo-fasciste*, pp. 111–12.
66. *Le Monde* (5 janvier 1956).
67. BARDECHE, M., 'Histoire du Mouvement Poujade', *Défense de l'Occident*, 33 (mai 1956), pp. 3–27. Bardèche's assessment chimes with Poujade's view of himself as nothing more than 'un reflet de l'opinion, un porte-voix. Un porte-drapeau' (*A l'heure de la colère*, p. 20).
68. Williams likened Poujadist disruption in the election campaign more to student 'rags' than to fascist violence (*French Politicians and Elections*, p. 47).
69. WARNER, G., 'France', in S. J. WOOLF (ed.), *Fascism in Europe* (Methuen, 1981), p. 314.
70. BARDECHE, *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme?*, p. 108.
71. POUJADE, *A l'heure de la colère*, p. 161. On Poujade's cultivation of pragmatism to the neglect of ideology, see HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 391–5.
72. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 387–90; also 251–4. In its revolt against state 'tyranny', Poujade would come to describe his movement as the precursor of May '68 (*A l'heure de la colère*, pp. 14–15).
73. HOFFMANN, *Le Mouvement Poujade*, pp. 154, 235–40.
74. PLUMYÈNE and LASIERRA, *Les Fascismes français*, pp. 228, 241–2, 248.
75. STOETZEL, J. and HASSNER, P., 'Résultats d'un sondage dans le premier secteur de la Seine', in DUVERGER et al., *Les élections*, pp. 226–7.
76. *Le Monde* (12 janvier 1956).
77. RIOUX, *La France de la Quatrième République*, vol. 2, pp. 79–80.
78. WRIGHT, G., *France in Modern Times* (Norton, 1995), p. 405; also SIMON, P.-H., 'L'Appel du vide', *Le Monde* (25 janvier 1956).
79. RIOUX, J.-P., 'Des clandestins aux activistes (1945–1965)', in M. WINOCK (ed.), *Histoire de l'extrême droite en France* (Seuil, 1993), pp. 226–9.
80. MILZA, *Fascisme français*, p. 308.