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# The Best Hope for France's Young? Get Out

By FELIX MARQUARDT

THE French aren't used to the idea that their country, like so many others in Europe, might be one of emigration — that people might actually want to leave. To many French people, it's a completely foreign notion that, around the world and throughout history, voting with one's feet has been the most widely available means to vote at all.

Leave that kind of voting to others, they think, to the Portuguese, the Italians, the Spaniards and the Africans — to all those waves of immigrants who came to [France](#) over the course of the last century. France has always been a land to which people dream of coming. Not leaving.

When the journalist [Mouloud Achour](#), the rapper [Mokless](#) and I published [a column in the French daily Libération](#) last September, arguing that France was a decrepit, overcentralized gerontocracy and that French youths should pack their bags and go find better opportunities elsewhere in the world, it caused an uproar.

Jean-Marie Le Pen, the patriarch of the French far right, reacted as one would expect: “Mouloud is encouraging French youths to leave so his cousins can come in their place.” (Mr. Achour is of North African origin.)

But beyond Mr. Le Pen, whose extremist National Front party is now run by his daughter, Marine, the split didn't break down along ideological lines. The former Trotskyite leader Olivier Besancenot and the current head of the right-wing party Union for a Popular Movement, Jean-François Copé, publicly voiced support for our argument. Nor was the division generational.

It was a divide between those who have found their place in the system and believe fervently in defending the status quo, and those who are aware that a country that has tolerated a youth unemployment rate of 25 percent for nearly 30 years isn't a place where the rising generations can expect to rise to much of anything. The only glaring silence on the issue came from the highest institution of all — until recently.

On June 16, President [François Hollande](#) was interviewed on [M6](#), a network that aimed at 20-somethings. He listened to a story about Catherine, a recent graduate of the Institut d'Études Politiques (known as Sciences Po), who is moving to Australia because she can't find a job despite having attended one of France's top universities. Mr. Hollande then faced a blunt question. “What would you say,” the interviewer asked him, “if you had a youth in front of you who isn't able to find a job and who's losing hope?”

Mr. Hollande's answer was flaccid at best, a denial of reality at worst. "I'd tell this young person that France is your country. This country loves you," he replied, as if reiterating the dated conviction that France has more to offer would be enough to make it come true.

He repeated a refrain from his campaign over a year ago, claiming that he would make youth and employment priorities. "My duty is to tell this young woman, it's here in France that you must succeed." But duty has nothing to do with creating opportunity and innovation.

Just a few days earlier, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, in a BBC interview, proposed a different solution to the same problem: she explicitly told the 3.6 million young unemployed people in the euro zone to be ready to move around to find work as the European Union allowed them to and the whole European project encouraged them to.

Ms. Merkel seems to realize that presidential indignation at the idea of young citizens' leaving behind a country that can't offer them the opportunities they deserve won't address the real problem of disenfranchised youth.

The dramatic cultural and economic changes currently shaking the globe are still often met in France with parochial, irrelevant conversations, a symptom of the insular intellectual bubble in which the country has been trapped for far too long.

Meanwhile, a major paradigm shift is occurring, whereby white men from Western Europe and North America are no longer calling all the shots. In many ways, what used to be seen as the periphery is swiftly becoming the center, as the countries we still clumsily call "emerging" — China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia and others — are doing much more than that.

Young French people need to go abroad, to work, to travel, to see how things can work differently in cultures and countries that don't play by the same old rules — and then come back to France, and reinject some of the energy and enthusiasm they've absorbed to help reconcile the broader population with the global reality that France has shunned for far too long.

Though it may be anathema to French pride that anyone would want to leave (and that evidently Ms. Merkel, France's No. 1 partner and rival, agrees), young people voting with their feet and coming back with a new worldview could be the best thing to happen to France in 30 years.

It might also prove to be a salutary jolt for the country's leaders. Whether progressive or conservative, French politicians can't go on taking their youth for granted. If they do, the ranks of the Le Pens' extremist party will continue to swell, as will the number of talented young people who decide to leave — this time for good.

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