# Popular Front

An alliance of left-wing movements in France, the Popular Front (Front Populaire) won the May 1936 elections, leading to the first French government headed by a socialist Prime Minister, Léon Blum (1872-1950), from 5 June 1936 to 21 June 1937. After the anti-parliamentarian riots of 6 February 1934, which violently opposed fascist leagues to leftist organisations, the three main left-wing parties, Radical-Socialists, the *Section française de l’internationale ouvrière* (SFIO, the French Section of the Workers’ International) and the *Parti communiste français* (PCF, French Communist Party) joined forces, giving way in 1935 to one unified group to counter the rise of fascism in France. The PCF offered ‘support without participation’ to the government. In the summer of 1936, the Popular Front enacted important as well as symbolic measures, bringing about an atmosphere of euphoria in the working classes, immortalised in popular culture as the legendary ‘lendemains qui chantent’ or ‘singing tomorrows’ (see Tartakowsky and Willard). The Matignon Accords aimed at improving the workers’ conditions (enforcing twelve days of paid annual leave or ‘congés payés’ and the forty-hour working week) and at giving greater access to public education (school was made compulsory until age fourteen and secondary education free for all pupils).

Further to these, the Popular Front is also a crucial landmark in twentieth-century French history for an unprecedented attention to popular culture as well as for its forward-looking sports and health policy. Léon Blum created a Sports and Leisure secretariat under the authority of the Ministry of Public Health with Léo Lagrange (1900-1940) at its head. Lagrange arranged discounted rail trips and hotel accommodations (including youth hostels) on a massive scale for the summer, opening beach resorts to the great majority of the French population until then unable to enjoy leisure and tourism facilities, which had been reserved for the privileged elite for decades. The government generously funded Firmin Gémier (1865-1933), champion of the ‘popular theatre’, whilst the film group Ciné-Liberté was set up to promote the reformist politics of the Popular Front, enlisting film director Jean Renoir (1894-1979) as a key player. Well-known for his progressive and innovative films – *Le* *Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936; *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*) and *Une Partie de campagne* (1936; *A Day in the Country*), which encapsulated the reformist spirit while reaching out to popular audiences – Renoir was chosen by the collaborative venue Ciné-Liberté to direct *La vie est à nous* (1936; *Life Belongs to Us*). This more directly ideologically committed cinematic venture was funded by the PCF and conceived of as a political instrument to support the Popular Front’s election campaign. Such use of cinema in the political arena was unprecedented; after the film’s success, Ciné-Liberté commissioned Renoir for a second project, *La Marseillaise,* to be released on May 1, 1937, for the Paris Exposition opening but actually released in 1938 after the fall of the government, recapturing the French Revolution heritage as a rally symbol for the Popular Front electorate. The Popular Front left a reform of copyright legislation unfinished, with pioneering notions of public domain, considering authors as ‘intellectual workers’ and no longer ‘owners’.

By allowing workers to participate in leisure and cultural activities, the Popular Front upheld ideals of personal fulfilment and social progress through health, education and culture. Léon Blum’s first government was overthrown after a year by more mildly liberal and compromising forces, the Radical-Socialists – yet, however short-lived, the Popular Front offered in legacy a social and cultural model to aspire to, realised only partially after World War II.

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**Paratextual material**

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