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Remembering France's glory, securing Europe in the age of Trump

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Abstract

These days, when we hear the slogan 'let's make our country great again' we almost automatically assume the state concerned is the US, and the leader uttering the slogan is President Trump. This article invites readers to explore the discourse and practices through which another national leader is seeking to restore his country's 'greatness' and promote national and international security. The leader concerned is France's Emmanuel Macron. Why focus on the French president? Because since his election he has become the most dynamic European leader, on a mission to enhance France's international stature, and to do so via a broader process of protecting and empowering the EU. More broadly, France stands out as a country whose political leadership has long been committed to the goal of playing a global role. As Pernille Rieker reminds us, 'Since 1945, French foreign policy has been dominated by the explicit ambition of restoring the country's greatness [*la grandeur de la France*], justified in terms of French exceptionalism'.[1]

Macron has cast his vision of national/European greatness, security, and international order in opposition to the isolationist, rigidly nationalist visions articulated by his domestic opponents and, internationally, by President Trump. In his view, France and Europe can only be secure if they defeat the illiberal ideas advocated by the increasingly vocal political forces, particularly far-right movements, seeking to undermine the core values and multilateral principles of the post-1945 international order. Under these circumstances, an analysis of Macron's policies and practices of *grandeur* can help us gain a better understanding of the competition between liberal and illiberal worldviews – a competition that is increasingly pronounced within the Western world.

Keywords: European Security; National Greatness; Liberal Order; Trump; Macron; France

Introduction

In May 2017, a dynamic leader who had only recently created a political movement ambitiously called La République En Marche! (LREM), became the youngest president in France's history. Building on that astonishing success, in the June 2017 parliamentary elections, President Emmanuel Macron's party won 350 out of 577 seats, or 61 per cent of the lower house. Both elections were unprecedented and a historic upset for France's traditional left and right parties, which for the last sixty years had enjoyed a duopoly over political power. From the very start, President Macron and his political allies defined their agenda around the theme of restoring French power both domestically and internationally, revitalising the European Union (EU) and boldly promoting a liberal international agenda at a time when liberalism is increasingly under attack - not only due to the growing assertiveness of authoritarian powers like Russia and China but also because of the rise of illiberal ideas and actors in Europe and the US.

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[1]Pernille Rieker, *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (London: Springer International Publishing, 2017), p. 3.

One of this piece's key aims is to highlight an important yet still under-analysed aspect of practices through which leaders seek to promote their visions of *grandeur*, security, and international order: their performative dimension. Drawing on diverse bodies of literature, the article explores the specific performances that have been at the heart of the French president's efforts to reconstruct the world around him, and shows how some of his symbols, language, and staging techniques have generated opposition both in France and internationally. Today, the French president's vision of national greatness and European security is subject to systematic contestation, and it is far from clear that Macron will be able to implement some of the boldest ideas articulated when he came to power. By analysing Macron's performances, this article builds on constructivist critiques of the mainstream IR literature, which fail to capture the importance of discourses and performances in shaping actors and their interactions. It also seeks to help transcend a persistent weakness of much of the critical IR literature on performativity – where 'performativities are discussed while performances are ignored', leading to a limited understanding of how agency works in international politics.[2]

In the following pages I examine the key assumptions underpinning Emmanuel Macron's image of France, European security, and international order; shed light on the contrast between his vision and the perspectives articulated by his key opponents; and analyse the ways in which the French president's discourse draws connections to his country's and, more broadly, Europe's glorious past to cultivate support for an ambitious vision for the future. In examining the policies and practices involved in President Macron's quest to make France 'great again' and to secure Europe in the twenty-first century, I draw on sociological and critical IR literature on identity formation, and build on more recent works on the role of performances in international politics. This enables me to shed light on the characteristics of the 'Jupiterian presidency' enacted in the name of national and European greatness.[3] As I argue below, what is fascinating and surprising about this 'Jupiterian presidency' is that it involves a tension between imperial-style symbols and staging techniques, and the substance of the (liberal-democratic) political project that Macron has advocated. It is also interesting to note that Macron's presidential performances involve an attempt to recapture certain virtues of the French republican past, for instance via the campaign to reintroduce a compulsory national service, as a way to stimulate the enactment of good citizenship and protect the values of liberalism in what he perceives as an increasingly illiberal present. The article further shows how the Jupiterian style has been systematically contested, and how both internal opponents (particularly the *Gilets jaunes*) and international critics have enacted counterperformances that revolve around alternative visions of national greatness and European security. In essence, this article advances our understanding of how performances matter in international relations. Specifically, particular kinds of performances have been central both to the president's effort to change the world around him, and to contestations of that effort. Under these circumstances, an analysis of presidential and counter-presidential performances also sheds new light on an important, yet still under-analysed, aspect of how power is exercised in a democratic society.

Performing international politics

To understand the performative dimension of current efforts to restore French *grandeur* and secure Europe, I draw on performance studies, including the IR constructivist works of scholars like Emmanuel Adler and Erik Ringmar, sociologists like Jeffrey Alexander, the literature on

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[2]Erik Ringmar, 'The problem with performativity: Comments on the contributions', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Online First (2018), p. 14, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-018-0159-8}.

[3]For influential works on identity formation, see especially David Campbell, 'Global inscriptions: How foreign policy constitutes the United States', *Alternatives*, 15:3 (1990), pp. 263–86; Iver Neumann and Jennifer Welsh, 'The Other in European self-definition: a critical addendum to the literature on international society', *Review of International Studies*, 17:4 (1991), pp. 327–48.

authority in the age of mediatisation by public policy scholars, and studies of staging techniques developed by students of dramaturgy.[4]

Within the field of International Relations, the analysis of performances can be seen as part of a larger constructivist effort to return to symbolic interactionism to understand the production of social order. While symbolic interactionist scholars have long been a source of inspiration for constructivists, their key insights into social interactions often appear to have been forgotten in conventional constructivist accounts. As George Lawson and Robbie Shilliam put it, '[i]n IR, many constructivists appear to have ignored – either by accident or design – what symbolic interactionists have been arguing for the past century or more'.[5] In particular, the problem is that conventional constructivists conceptualised the self as individualistic. However, for symbolic interactionism, the self is first and foremost a social phenomenon, not an individualist or psychological one. In fact, this may be one of the key assumptions that all symbolic interactionists share. For instance, Herbert Mead's and Charles Cooley's fundamental arguments about consciousness was that it arose out of constant shifts and role taking, of seeing things from the point of view of the other(s). For symbolic interactionism, the self is highly complex, fragile, and always in the making. This sophisticated conception of the social self was never fully imported into IR constructivism.[6]

It is by returning to the symbolic interactionist view of the self as a fragile phenomenon, always in the making through multiple social interactions – and by building on the recent constructivist literature that applies this view to the sphere of international politics – that we can better grasp the dynamics of practices enacted since President Macron's election in an effort to restore national greatness, secure Europe from a complex set of security risks and challenges, and redefine the EU's role in the world. Focusing on the performative aspect of social practices, I suggest that we can understand efforts to enact French greatness and protect Europe as forms of strategic performances.

As Ringmar has pointed out, in performances social actors use particular vocabularies to assemble scripts through which they seek to obtain recognition from their audiences. Scripts provide individuals and groups with roles and goals, 'with instructions for how to act and for how to go on'.[7] They tell us who we are and how we are related to various others in the international arena, and how people in 'our' society should interact with one another. In our case, it is particularly useful to examine various staging activities through which Emmanuel Macron has sought to secure domestic and international recognition as an effective, heroic leader who is fully committed to the values around which France and the EU define themselves, who can be trusted to provide a reliable 'script' for transcending recent French and global problems, securing Europe, and recapturing the glory that his country and the EU deserve.

To gain a better understanding of these staging practices, it is useful to draw on studies of performativity produced by public policy and dramaturgy scholars. As one of the pioneers of the field of performance studies Richard Schechner has argued, performances only exist as actions,

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[4]Emanuel Adler, 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't: Performative power and the strategy of conventional and nuclear defusing', *Security Studies*, 19:2 (2010), pp. 199–229; Maarten A. Hajer, *Authoritative Governance: Policy Making in the Age of Mediatization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Erik Ringmar, 'Performing international systems: Two East-Asian alternatives to the Westphalian order', *International Organization*, 66:1 (2012), pp. 1–25; Ringmar, 'The problem with performativity'; Alexandra Gheciu, *Security Entrepreneurs: Performing Protection in Post-Cold War Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Also relevant are: Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); and Jeffrey Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011).

[5]George Lawson and Robbie Shilliam, 'Sociology and International Relations: Legacies and prospects', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1 (2010), pp. 69–86.

[6]See, in particular, Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[7]Ringmar, 'Performing international systems', p. 7.

interactions, and relationships.[8] Studying a form of behaviour as 'performance', from this perspective, means analysing it in terms of doing, behaving, and showing. Thus, to perform is first to execute, to carry out to completion, to discharge a duty – in our case, to discharge a duty of protecting and advancing France's prestige and simultaneously securing the EU. Second, to perform is to behave in everyday life in a manner that conforms with the habits, customs, laws, and etiquette that prevail in a given society at a particular moment in time. To perform in this sense is to promote French/European greatness and security in ways that are consistent with the liberal-democratic values of the EU and appropriate in a historical context marked by the rise of illiberal forces. Third, to perform is to show. Thus, when doing and behaving are displayed, when they are shown, when participants are invited to exercise discernment, evaluation, and appreciation, social practices move towards the theatrical or the spectacular – they become representations that mobilise particular discursive sources and stage 'props' aimed at generating the positive evaluation of specific audiences.

In our case, we shall see that Emmanuel Macron's use of the spectacular has involved the effective mobilisation of diverse resources in order to cast himself – and secure broad recognition – as a heroic president, on a quest to save both his country and the EU. A combination of techniques of discourse analysis[9] and visual analysis reveals how presidential practices enacted in this context have relied on specific speech acts as well as various 'stage props' or 'means of symbolic production'.[10] These include practical, visually potent displays of material capabilities and symbols of expertise and prestige in a variety of scenarios. As we shall see, the discourse articulated by the French president is inscribed in a series of texts disseminated to domestic as well as international audiences. The categories and divides that are at the heart of those texts are reinforced via staging practices that involve the display of potent symbols, which serve to invoke selective collective memories. What is involved here is a process of mobilising memories of the past to symbolically bring into existence 'imagined communities'[11] and use those to legitimise specific courses of action and secure support for particular forms of leadership. Staging practices seek to establish a connection between the audience and the actors, and thus to create conditions for projecting particular sets of meanings from the performers to the audience.[12] In other words, the objective is to get audiences to regard actors that enact security practices as genuine, honest, and trustworthy, and to interpret their performances as natural.

In an effort to convince audiences to accept the performed meanings, President Macron has employed a variety of widely recognised symbols of strength – including military power. Yet, as we shall see, those performances have generated a series of practices of contestation and counter-performances both in France and in other EU countries. To understand these performance/counterperformance dynamics, it is once again helpful to draw on the symbolic interactionist literature, particularly Charles Cooley's concept of the 'looking-glass self'. Cooley places his theory of the social world on the assumption of the self as a reflexive entity, which emerges out of interactions with others and impressions of those interactions.[13] In his view, self and society are

[8]Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 23.

[9]In analysing the French discourse on national/European greatness and security, I have selected central texts, as defined in Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 177. In particular, I have located texts issued by actors with authority to define a situation, and in politically significant contexts. On text selection criteria, I follow in particular Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[10]I draw here on Hajer's (*Authoritative Governance*) and Alexander's (*Performance and Power*) analyses of the ways in which actors mobilise 'dramaturgical tools' to get audiences to see things in a certain light. These include discursive tools (such as metaphors or storytelling) as well as 'stock practices' (or routinised ways of acting) to legitimise their proposed courses of action.

[11]This concept is borrowed from Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

[12]Alexander, *Performance and Power*, pp. 53–5.

[13]See, in particular, Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (rev. edn, New York: Scribner's, 1922). Reprinted in *The Two Major Works of Charles Cooley* (New York, Free Press, 1956).

twinborn, and any notion of an independent self, defined outside of social interactions, is an illusion. In Cooley's words,

> A self-idea … seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification …. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind.[14]

In other words, others are crucial to the emergence of the social self, but those others are mediated through the self's mind: they are above all the imaginative ideas that the self entertains of them. Starting from this assumption, we can begin to see that social selves will change their behaviour based on how they think they are being perceived and judged in a given group. In imagining how others will respond to our actions, we allow ourselves to manage the kind of self-image we seek to project in the social world.

However, there is no way of knowing with certainty what others think, and there are situations in which it is easy to misperceive how others see us. This is particularly the case with 'persons of great ambition', who are vulnerable to 'disorders of self-feeling because they necessarily build up in their minds a self-image which no ordinary environment can … corroborate'.[15] There is an interesting connection between Cooley's argument concerning the disorders of self-feeling and his analysis of conditions and challenges of leadership. In particular, persons of great ambition can forget that 'all leadership has an element of sympathy and conformity … so that every leader must be a follower in the sense that he shares the general current of life'.[16] If a leader fails to communicate ideas in ways that are congenial to others, his vision, and, more broadly, his claim to leadership will likely be rejected.

Building on Cooley's analysis of the social self, and linking this to theories of performances, we can begin to see that if a leader – possibly affected by a 'disorder of self-feeling' – is guided by a self-image that is not corroborated by his social environment, will fail to create the connection to the audience that is necessary for a successful performance. If there is a discrepancy between the image of leadership that a political actor seeks to project and the interpretation of that image by a targeted group, we can expect that group to challenge the authenticity of his/her performance, and on this basis to reject the 'script' proposed by that political actor. In such circumstances, the targeted audience will not only reject the leadership claim and proposed script, but will likely also enact or support counterperformances, which propose alternative scripts for governing or changing the world around them.

These concepts, I suggest, can help us understand the nature – and limits – of performances of leadership enacted by the French president. As he recently admitted, Macron misread his public in the first years of his presidency, failed to understand how his discourse, symbols, and staging techniques would be perceived and judged both in France and abroad, and on this basis largely failed to secure recognition for the authenticity of his performance and support for his proposed script. Thus, his attempt to stage a heroic presidency in the name of restoring national greatness and saving the EU were widely interpreted as arrogant, 'Jupiterian' practices, performed not in support of France and Europe but in the exclusive interest of French elites and global capital. This resulted in a series of public contestations and counterperformances that continue to pose a significant set of challenges to his presidency.

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[14]Cooley (*Human Nature and the Social Order*), also quoted in Glenn Jacobs, *Charles Horton Cooley: Imagining Social Reality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), p. 53.

[15]Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*, p. 258.

[16]Ibid., p. 354.

Competing views of French *grandeur,* European security, and international order

To understand President Macron's vision of French identity, European security and international order it is useful to start with the debate that took place in the context of the presidential campaign of 2017. Particularly revealing in that context were his clashes with his opponent, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the right-wing *Front National.* In sharp contrast to Le Pen, Macron boldly embraced a liberal internationalist vision, and sought to cast that as the only vision that was consistent with French values and history, and that would help his country transcend recent economic and political difficulties and (re-)emerge as a powerful European and global player. Indeed, at the heart of Macron's discourse lies the assumption that Le Pen's political movement represent the internal *other:* a political force that rejects and seeks to undermine the foundational values and principles of modern France. As such, it is only by firmly rejecting that movement and its definition of French identity that voters can protect France and build a future that is worthy of their country's true values and glorious past. Macron's vision has at its heart a business-friendly, competitive France playing a leading role – together with Germany – in a deeply integrated, liberal Europe, and helping the EU to become an important player in the field of security in a globalised, multipolar world.[17]

Drawing on liberal themes of democracy, market economy, the rule of law, and an Enlightenment-inherited sense of technological optimism, Macron has articulated a vision that depicts the EU – with a strong France at its heart – as an indispensible union in the contemporary world. Key to his vision is the idea that today, in many issue areas – such as energy, migration, technology, and certain military concerns – sovereignty exists in part at the national level but in part also at the European level. In his words, 'France cannot win against Google and Facebook, but Europe can … at least regulate them.'[18] Macron's approach can thus be read as an effort to not simply pursue liberalism, but also to adapt the Gaullist theme of restoring French greatness to the age marked by globalisation and the resurgence of great power competition. Thus, his perspective echoes in interesting ways de Gaulle's view that the added value of French culture and history is at the heart of the European continent that legitimised the desire to restore the country's greatness in the post-Second World War era – for, after all, 'France cannot be France without grandeur.'[19]

In clear contrast to the liberal vision espoused by Macron, Marine Le Pen and the *Front* (subsequently rebranded and now named the *National Rally*) embraced an illiberal, nationalist vision of French greatness, national security, and European order. Le Pen's vision is similar in interesting ways to the views put forward by many far-right movements in different European countries, and to the 'alt-right' movement in the US. [20] As such, it can be seen as part of a wave of radical conservative protests against the liberal-democratic values and institutions that came to be at the heart of the postwar international order. What is involved here is a growing clash between competing views of identity, national greatness, security, and international order occurring *within* the Western world, not between the West and 'the rest'.

Revealingly, Le Pen explicitly compared herself to President Trump as she asked voters to support her political vision. This vision revolves around the idea of reviving France's strength and reaffirming its true identity via a fight against globalisation.[21] In her view, only her party understands – just as President Trump does – that the defence of national identity, prosperity, and

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[17]Ronald Tiersky, 'Macron's world: How the new president is remaking France', *Foreign Affairs*, 97:1 (2018), pp. 87–96.
[18]Ibid., p. 93.
[19]De Gaulle, cited in Rieker, *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World*, p. 17.
[20]George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
[21]Interestingly, the Front has also cultivated links with the alt-right movement and with right-wing parties from across Europe. See, for instance, 'Aux Etats-Unis, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen veut "make France great again" [In the US, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen wants to "Make France great again"]', *Le Monde* (22 February 2018), available at: {http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/02/22/aux-etats-unis-marion-marechal-le-pen-veut-make-france-great-again_5261135_823448.html#3ixfIiCsMtKjtJbu.99} accessed 24 September 2018.

national security require a strong state, not a naive faith in multilateral institutions. Hence, only she can make France 'great again'.[22]

In the course of the presidential campaign rallies as well as during the debate held just before the second round of presidential elections in May 2017, Le Pen systematically attacked Macron's vision of global exchanges and pursuit of liberal values as central to the restoration of France's domestic and international strength. An analysis of the predicates and presuppositions at the heart of Le Pen's discourse shows that she reversed Macron's dichotomy, casting liberal openness as the source of political danger and a recipe for the loss of national identity. At a rally in Nantes, for example, she told voters: 'You see America with Trump … In this new world that is emerging, I am the best placed to speak in the name of France.' By contrast, Emmanuel Macron, Le Pen argued, was no more than a 'smirking banker', and the agent of the globalised order who 'no longer believe[s] in France'.[23]

In a similar vein, in the course of the presidential debate Le Pen accused Macron of being soft on terrorism, and she insisted that the only reasonable course of action in a world dominated by global capital was to leave NATO, and to bring in economic protectionism. Casting herself as the only politician who could protect France's traditions, language, and culture, she argued that 'I want to defend France as it is, ancient, with its borders and with its people who deserve better.'[24]

In sharp contrast to Le Pen, Macron depicted himself as the political leader who understood that, in a globalising world, it was only through an acceleration of EU integration and an active defence of liberal-democratic values and principles, both at home and abroad, that France could protect its core values, principles, and interests. From his perspective, the answer to France's problems can only be more rather than less Europe, more liberal openness rather than any closure, and a thoughtful rather than knee-jerk reaction to the terrorist threat. Macron's vision of independence and security rests heavily on further European integration – including in controversial areas, such as defence – seeing that as key if Europe is 'to hold its destiny in its own hands'.[25]

The politics of (re)building French *grandeur*, securing Europe, and protecting the liberal order

As noted above, following the second round of presidential elections – and subsequently parliamentary elections – Emmanuel Macron and his *En Marche* movement acquired impressive political power, and embarked on an extensive campaign to (re)build French strength and reaffirm the role of France as a key player both in Europe and on the global stage. There is a powerful performative, theatrical aspect to Macron's policies and practices, as the French president has consistently mobilised various staging tools in an effort to gain recognition as a heroic leader and secure the support of domestic as well as international audiences for his political scripts. In the following pages, I focus on a few key initiatives aimed at enabling France and, more broadly, the EU to play more prominent international roles. I pay particular attention to initiatives in the field of security, as these are among the most controversial in the context of French and European politics.[26] Specifically, I examine the nature of those initiatives and the ways in which the president has sought to legitimise and promote them. Given this article's space

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[22]Charles Bremner, 'Only I can make France great again, says Le Pen', *The Times* (17 February 2017), available at: {https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/only-i-can-make-france-great-again-says-le-pen-0grpnbhh9} accessed 23 August 2018.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Manuel Lafont Rapnouil and Jeremy Shapiro, 'Macron's foreign policy: Claiming the tradition', *States News Service* (8 May 2017), p. 2.

[26]Those initiatives are linked to domestic reforms such as those concerning the liberalisation of labour legislation, seen as essential if France is to be able to pursue Macron's foreign policy agenda. Due to space constraints, however, I have to bracket those reforms in this article.

constraints, I do not seek to address the question of whether Macron's approach can actually solve France's problems and enhance the role of Europe on the global stage.

Launching the 'Jupiterian' presidency

From his first days in office, Macron deliberately embraced a presidential style and image designed to convey the message that deserved the trust and support of the public as he was bent on enacting a strong leadership aimed at saving both France and Europe from a series of deep, self-inflicted crises. In defending what were presented as almost heroic efforts to enact reforms, including some that amounted to a 'Copernican Revolution', Macron sought to cast himself as a leader determined to transcend the weakness of his predecessor, Francois Hollande. While he claimed that he did not see himself as Jupiter (king of the Gods in Roman mythology), Macron was critical of Hollande, who 'did not believe in the idea of a Jupiter-like president for France',[27] and who had failed to understand that the French 'don't want a buddy in the Élysée Palace. They want someone distant, and even mysterious.'[28]

The image of a distant, strong and mysterious leader was explicitly adopted by Macron right from the start of his presidency. What is surprising here is that, in seeking to promote a liberal project – that is, a type of project that stresses, by definition, norms of transparency and democratic accountability – Macron chose to adopt a presidential style which, with its imperial-style symbols and staging techniques, appeared to contradict those norms. His presidential style thus appears very different from the styles adopted by other leaders – Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, or Barack Obama, for instance – who advocated liberal projects in the name of promoting both domestic strength and international security. It is also interesting to note the contrast between the style of Macron the presidential candidate and Macron the president. Gone was the presidential candidate who went out of his way to appear friendly and connected to the public. Instead, the French 'discovered an imperial, icy leader', who did appear to cast himself in a Jupiterian role as 'he retreated into the Élysée, ordered media silence on key topics', and made it clear he would only communicate on the topics of his choice and at the time that was convenient for him.[29] To further reinforce the message that he would be a solemn, distant leader determined to restore dignity to the Office of the President and to act in a heroic manner to protect France as well as Europe, Macron resorted to various 'stage props', for instance by insisting on being driven in a military vehicle on the day of his inauguration.

The image of a heroic, distant leader was also carefully cultivated and widely disseminated via Macron's official portrait. Taken in his office at the Élysée Palace 46 days after being sworn into office, the symbol-laden portrait can be seen as a masterpiece of political staging.[30] In the tradition of power portraiture in art history, Macron carefully chose stage props to hint at his personality and underscore his politics. Every detail matters in this portrait, which decorates the walls of some 50,000 French government outposts around the world. Consider, for instance, the careful placing of the president between two flags: the French Tricolor and the European Union flag. Macron was thus depicting himself as the defender of both France and the EU's supranational agenda. Giving the EU banner equal prominence with the French flag might well upset country's eurosceptics, but Macron is firm in his focus on the Union and the project of European integration. After all, at his victory celebration, Macron walked to the podium with the EU's anthem Ludwig van Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* playing in the background. Finally, it is interesting to note the power pose captured in the portrait. One cannot fail to notice the mark of power on his

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[27]Nicholas Vinocur and Cynthia Kroet, 'Emmanuel Macron: "I don't see myself as Jupiter"', *Politico* (31 August 2017), available at: {https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-i-dont-see-myself-as-jupiter/} accessed 7 March 2019.

[28]Pierre Briançon, 'Macron's Jupiter model unlikely to stand test of time', *Politico* (16 June 2017), accessed 7 March 2019.

[29]Ibid.

[30]The portrait can be viewed at: {https://sv.ambafrance.org/Portrait-officiel-du-President-de-la-Republique-M-Emmanuel-MACRON}.

otherwise modern, youthful attire: on his lapel is a military decoration, indicating the fact that, by virtue of this office, Macron is the Grand Maître of the Légion d'Honneur and entitled to wear the Grand Croix, the highest level of that order. In short, the portrait depicts a president that embodies, at once, the energy and enthusiasm of youth, as well as respect for France's values and glorious traditions. The merging of new and classical in the official portrait seems designed to convey the message that the president is determined to renew France's identity as a powerful player on the European and global stages. It is this image of strength and determination that has been at the heart of a series of policies and practices through which Macron has sought to renew and reaffirm France's domestic strength and greatness both domestically and internationally.

The quest to restore France's military might

One of the most significant sets of reforms pursued by Macron since his election concerns an effort to restore and reaffirm France's military force – seen as a key ingredient of domestic strength and ability to play the role of a great power on the international stage. Indeed, it could be argued that President Macron's vision of the France of the future is nowhere articulated more clearly than in his decision to push forward a new military planning law. Between now and 2025, total spending on the military is set to reach 198 billion euros, bringing it in line with the 2 per cent of GDP threshold agreed upon among NATO allies and endorsed by the EU. There will be year on year increases of 1.7 billion euros up to 2022 and of 3 billion euros thereafter. This will take the armed forces budget from an average of 32.2 billion euros per annum (for the period 2014–18) to a figure of 39.6 billion euros per annum by 2023.[31]

In an attempt to secure public support for this greatly enhanced level of military spending, Macron stated that what he pursues – and what the French public should support is:

> a strong France able to control its destiny, protect its citizens and its interests, guarantee its defence and security and, at the same time, propose global responses to the crises we face. I want a France that helps and protects the victims of obscurantism or terrorism, that makes its voice heard beyond our borders. I want a France that is faithful to its commitments in the Atlantic Alliance, but which is also the engine of European strategic autonomy. To achieve this, we must have a full-spectrum, strong, modern and powerful defence apparatus.[32]

In the meantime, as part of its historical mission, France needs to be readied to assume additional global 'responsibilities' in defence of the international order. Already deeply implicated in Middle East battle zones, France under Macron has set about raising its military profile in Africa. Since late 2017 it has been providing air support to the G5 Sahel Force, a multinational military grouping comprising units from Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania; despite its portrayal as an African solution to African problems, the force is heavily dependent on its French backer.

As a corollary to his determination to enhance France's military might, in February 2018 President Macron announced his intention to expand on this campaign pledge to reintroduce a compulsory national service, which would include an obligatory period of between three and six months for all young people, who would take part either in the military or in a form of

[31]Ministère des Armées, 'Synopsis of Draft Military Planning Law 2019/2025', Paris (2018), available at: {https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/defence-policy/military-planning-2014-19-act-and-update-2015-2019/mp-2014-2019-act-and-update} accessed 22 December 2018.

[32]Susan Ram, 'Making France Great Again, Counterfire' (19 February 2018), available at: {http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/19469-making-france-great-again-macron-to-bring-back-compulsory-military-service} accessed 22 December 2018.

civic service.[33] It is worth recalling that France phased out compulsory military service between 1996 and 2001. When he first announced the idea of bringing back compulsory military service, Macron framed it as part of France's efforts to prepare for an era of global 'turbulence' comparable to the Cold War.[34] But the campaign promise was also seen as a way of playing up a certain patriotic nostalgia for military service at a time of increasing social divides in France. Thus, the reintroduction of national service could be read as the president's response to multiple forms of dislocation experienced by French society in the era of globalisation and neoliberal reforms. In this respect, Macron's vision of society and citizenship appears to be the mark of his quest to connect his reforms to a theme with deep historical roots: that of citizens in uniform. After all, France was the first modern nation state to introduce universal military conscription as a condition of citizenship; the practice dates back to the Revolution and the compelling need to defend it via mass military mobilisation. In subtle ways, and over an extended period, the obligation to serve and the readiness to forego personal objectives in favour of national need have been melded into the fabric of the Republic, the core signifier and symbol of French identity. As a corollary to this, it has been central to the process of providing citizens with 'scripts' for appropriate behaviour, and including them in public staging of the collective 'imagining' of a horizontal community of citizens. [35]

There is a direct link between Macron's focus on the importance of a universal national service and his view, that: 'Post-modernism was the worst thing that could have happened to our democracy', because it undermined the idea of a convincing national myth, and with it the possibility of a feeling of national unity and purpose. In his words, 'Modern political life must rediscover a sense for symbolism … We need to develop a kind of political heroism … We need to be amenable once again to creating grand narratives.'[36] Against the background of those beliefs, his campaign to reintroduce a form of compulsory national service reflects Macron's attempt, yet again, to mobilise historical themes and symbols in order to legitimise his reforms and, simultaneously, cast himself as the heroic president, able to recover France's lost glory.

Further evidence of the president's systematic campaign to mobilise historical symbols to secure support for his projects can also be found in his use of military spectacles – particularly military parades. Macron has repeatedly demonstrated his deft mobilisation of parades to forge a link between his presidency and his voters' sentimental connection to key symbols of the Republic. Simultaneously, he has used displays of military might so typical of parades to improve relations with – and secure recognition as a powerful international player by – France's allies, particularly the US. Nowhere has this theatrical politics been more obvious than in the Bastille Day celebrations on 14 July 2017, when the guest of honour was none other than Donald Trump.[37]

The context in which the celebrations took place did not seem to be particularly promising. After all, President Trump had publicly supported Macron's far-right opponent, Marine Le Pen, in France's presidential elections. Trump and Macron have sharply differing views on a range of issues, most notably the Paris Accord, the climate change pact sponsored by President Macron but publicly rejected by Trump. Yet, in sharp contrast to the public disagreements over the Paris Accord, when the French president became famous for his thinly veiled criticism of Trump via the slogan 'Make the Planet Great Again', on Bastille Day President Macron included Trump and his wife in a public staging of the historical alliance between the US and France. Tanks rolled down the Champs-Élysées, the Arc de Triomphe framed behind them,

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[33]Samuel Osborne, 'France's Emmanuel Macron to bring back compulsory national service for young people', *The Independent* (28 June 2018), available at: {https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/france-national-service-emmanuel-macron-young-people-military-charity-police-a8420616.html} accessed 7 January 2019.

[34]Ibid.

[35]See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[36]Macron cited in Ronald Tiersky, 'Macron's world: How the new president is remaking France', *Foreign Affairs*, 97:1 (2018), pp. 87–96.

[37]The parade can be viewed at: {https://www.c-span.org/video/?431334-1/president-trump-attends-bastille-day-parade}.

memorialising the storming of the Bastille that helped set off the French Revolution. The parade also celebrated the 100th anniversary of America's entry into the First World War. In staging public recollections of those historical events, President Macron was reminding both the US president and his own population – deeply sceptical of the Trump administration – of the shared values, common revolutionary past, and profound historical roots of the friendship between the two countries.

By evoking key, carefully selected moments of the past, Macron was symbolically casting France and the US as leaders of the community of shared values that had triumphed over a multitude of threats and enemies. Tensions between Paris and Washington were thus skilfully framed as disagreements among friends who have long relied on each other to overcome many episodes of adversity – rather than the expression of a definitive rupture between them. Through the carefully choreographed military spectacle on that summer's day in Paris, Macron adroitly performed security and transatlantic friendship in a multifaceted way. Thus, the display of military might, meant to show both French citizens and his American guests that France was serious about its commitment to be a serious military power – and powerful NATO ally – in the twenty-first century, was also designed to reassure the domestic and international audience that the 'script' proposed by the French president ensured that the pursuit of military might would be conducted in a manner that respected French traditions, history, and values as well as its transatlantic commitments. The past and the present of US-French friendship and joint commitment to the defence of each other's citizens and territories – and, more broadly, their shared values – were symbolically brought together as nearly two hundred American service members took part in the celebration. They included Air Force Thunderbirds and soldiers dressed in First World War uniforms. Dozens of soldiers on horseback galloped along in the parade route, passing by the two presidents in formation.

While it is more difficult to gauge the extent to which the public display of friendship on Bastille Day influenced the French public's perceptions of the US, the performance was a success – at least a temporary one – from the point of view of relations between Paris and Washington. Resorting to his favourite mode of communication, Trump tweeted: 'It was a great honor to represent the United States at the magnificent #BastilleDay parade. Congratulations President @EmmanuelMacron!' In a statement released by the White House, Trump said, 'Melania and I were proud to stand with the President of France and Madame Macron and to celebrate with the French people' on the 228th anniversary of the French Revolution. 'France is America's first and oldest ally', Trump said. 'America and France will never be defeated or divided.' For his part, Macron insisted that 'The United States is our friend – nothing will ever separate us … The presence at my side of Donald Trump and his wife is a sign of that friendship that goes the length of time.'[38]

The Bastille Day celebrations seemed to signal that President Macron has successfully positioned himself as western Europe's key interlocutor *vis-à-vis* the US. In a situation in which German Chancellor Angela Merkel does not enjoy a good relationship with Trump and British politicians have been caught up in the complexity of Brexit negotiations, Macron sought to cast himself in the role of spokesperson for Europe. It is important to note, however, that this self-assigned role has not translated into unconditional support for US policies. On the contrary, particularly in a situation in which Trump has replaced the moderate members of his team with more radical supporters and has adopted an increasingly isolationist stance, Macron has cast himself – and his vision of national greatness, security, and international order – in direct opposition to the vision pursued in Washington. Thus, Macron has consistently sought to position himself as Europe's chief defender of liberal multilateralism. Despite this, Macron continues to be one of the few Europeans who are (reasonably) popular with the current White House, and in some specific

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[38]For these and more reactions to the Bastille Day parade, see Jabeen Bhatti and Jane Onyanga-Omara, 'Paris puts on a dazzling Bastille Day display for President Trump', *USA Today* (14 July 2017), available at: {https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/07/14/president-trump-bastille-day/478421001/} accessed 22 December 2018.

areas – such as counterterrorism – cooperation between Paris and Washington remains strong. But this occurs against the background of an increasingly acute opposition between the two presidents' visions of national greatness, security, and of international order. This opposition was reflected in the sharp contrast between Macron's and Trump's speeches at the UN General Assembly in autumn 2018. In a fiery rebuke of US isolationist policies under President Trump, Macron cast himself as the leader heroically standing up to the enemies and doubters of multilateralism and urging others to do the same. He thus called on the countries gathered for the General Assembly to repudiate narrow visions of sovereignty and to protect the post-1945 international order. 'Do not accept the erosion of multilateralism', Macron stated. 'Don't accept our history unraveling, I'm not getting used to it and I'm not turning my head.'[39]

Remembering the glorious past, securing Europe in the twenty-first century

As noted above, one of the fundamental pillars of Macron's political vision and platform concerns a commitment to place a reinvigorated France at the heart of a revived, more closely integrated, secure, and stronger EU. For him, France can only (re)capture its greatness by acting as a leader – in conjunction with Germany – of a dynamic European Union. In other words, reforming France and transforming the EU represent, in the eyes of the French president, two sides of the same coin. Consequently, following his ascension to power Macron has articulated a bold discourse stressing wide-ranging reforms needed to restore the EU to a position of strength both domestically and internationally. He has also mobilised potent staging techniques in order to secure the support of multiple audiences for that vision.

At the heart of Macron's plan for the EU, as revealed from the start of his presidency, lies the idea of a two-speed Europe, with a more closely integrated Eurozone and all the other EU member states on a separate track.[40] In the field of domestic security, Macron argued that the EU border must become more similar to a national one, so that travel and immigration could be brought under central control – particularly in order to prevent or at least minimise the movement of Islamist terrorists. As a corollary to this, he proposed the establishment of a European asylum office to speed up the process of accepting or rejecting refugees. Furthermore, Macron advocated a tighter European integration in the field of defence, arguing: 'We need strategic autonomy and defence to respond to new threats … Europe can no longer place its security in the United States' hands alone.'[41] This, in a situation in which 'the partner with whom Europe built the post-war multilateral order seems to be turning its back on this shared history'. Hence, in order to protect itself and others, Europe needs 'to play a greater role in conflicts in the Middle East, north Africa, and further afield in Africa'.[42] One of Macron's priorities in this area has been to build a common EU strategic culture, as part of a broader effort to ensure Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO. It is this vision that underpins some concrete measures, such as the launch of a European intervention initiative (EI2). Nine European countries signed a Letter of Intent launching the initiative on 25 June 2018, at a meeting of defence ministers in Luxembourg. The idea behind EI2 is both to prepare a coalition of willing countries for joint European action in crises, and to tie post-Brexit Britain into the continent's future military cooperation. EI2 is meant to be a flexible and non-binding forum of European states that are able and willing to engage their military forces when and where necessary in order to protect European security interests across the spectrum of crises, and without prejudice to the framework through which action is taken (that is, the UN, NATO, the EU, or as an ad hoc coalition).

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[39]Nicole Gaouette, 'Macron rebukes Trump's isolationist message', *CNN* (26 September 2018), available at: {https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/25/politics/macron-unga-speech-trump/index.html} accessed 7 January 2019.

[40]Tiersky, 'Macron's world', p. 93.

[41]Cited in Andrew Rettman, 'The EU needs to stand apart from the US', *EU Observer*, Brussels (28 August 2018), available at: {https://euobserver.com/foreign/142668} accessed 7 January 2019.

[42]Ibid.

When taken together, all these measures amount to a substantial reform programme for the EU – and it is far from clear at the moment that there is sufficient support within the Union for such a transformation. In this context, the French president has embarked on a systematic campaign aimed at convincing the citizens of the EU that his vision of Europe's future is not only realistic and constructive, but also that implementing it is a course of action that is perfectly consistent with – indeed, required by – the history and values embodied in the European Union. As in the case of the Bastille Day celebrations, Macron has mobilised staging techniques in order to reinforce his pro-reform discourse *vis-à-vis* multiple European audiences.

A powerful illustration of such staging techniques can be found in one of the key foreign policy speeches given by the French president in Greece on 7 September 2017.[43] Macron's penchant for symbols and symbolic politics was revealed in the choice of the site where he delivered that speech. Thus, he was the first Western leader in modern times to speak from Pnyx hill in Athens, the birthplace of democracy beneath the Acropolis. The choreographed setting was laden with symbolism for Greece, which has struggled to remain in the eurozone and has recently suffered its worst economic crisis in modern times. It was also laden with symbolism for French voters and, more broadly, EU citizens, as Macron used the occasion of his speech to highlight the urgency of the need to reform the Union.

Right from the beginning of the speech President Macron sought to establish an emotional connection with his audience by starting his address in Greek, and depicting himself as someone who understood the pain of ordinary citizens and was determined to help them. This concerned both the Greek people emerging from a profound economic crisis, and the French citizens who were recovering from the hurricane that had just hit Saint Barthelemy and Saint Martin. For him, it was important to preface his speech with statements such as: 'I would like to more than spare a thought for my fellow citizens, I wish to stand with those who, since yesterday, are living in worry and destitution, several thousand kilometers from here.' As for his host nation, 'it was the Greek people who paid … when the crisis broke out – the financial crisis that became a sovereign debt crisis … This crisis was not entirely restricted to Greece. It was a European crisis, and in a sense, I would dare to say, a European failure.'

Having sought to establish an emotional connection with Greek and European citizens by displaying his compassion *vis-à-vis* their recent difficulties, the French president continued his quest to secure broad recognition as a trustworthy leader by once again casting himself into the role of heroic problem-solver. More specifically, Macron sought to depict himself as the leader who could present European voters with a reliable 'script' for moving forward and securing the EU from multiple risks. This in a situation in which people 'did not understand the EU' and felt they were being constantly asked 'to make more efforts' while fearing their daily lives were deteriorating. In this context, what is needed, Macron insisted, is a return to – and reaffirmation of – Europe's traditions, and also to the courage needed to defend those traditions. The stage of Macron's discourse played a crucial role in his effort to invoke an uninterrupted European community with its historical roots in ancient Greece and its contemporary institutional expression in the EU. However, this was also a discourse that cast that imagined community as being at an important crossroads: in light of recent crises, EU citizens – the heirs of ancient Athenians – had to either find the strength to renew their commitment to the defence of their shared identity and core values, or face the real threat of collapse of everything that their ancestors had built. It is revealing, in fact, that Macron delivered his speech at dusk: symbols of time and space were combined in that context to convey the message that Europeans found themselves at a point in time when it was unclear what the next dawn would bring.

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[43]The speech is available at: {https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/european-union/events/article/european-union-speech-by-the-president-of-the-french-republic-athens-07-09-17} accessed on 7 January 2019. All subsequent Macron quotations in this section of the article are also from the Athens speech.

Similar to the staging of the Bastille Day celebrations, Macron sought to persuade his audience that his proposed reforms represented not only an efficient solution to Europe's existential crisis, but also the only course of action that was consistent with the European identity. Here, too, different aspects of performance came together. In particular, that was a spectacle that appeared designed to show Europe the extent of its crisis but also the potential for revival, and to get the audience to identify with – and place their trust in Macron. Thus, the French president effectively used staging techniques designed to reinforce the discourse that depicted him as a European leader who had the knowledge, expertise, and determination to deliver the right solution to Europe's crisis. The symbolic Athenian stage was thus key in a theatrical act designed to reinforce a discourse in which Macron set up a dichotomy between ethically and politically superior, 'true' European attributes, and the allegedly inferior characteristics of the external and internal 'others' seeking to undermine Europe.

In particular, his discourse used carefully selected verbs, adverbs, and adjectives to endow his chosen subjects, France, Greece, and Europe, with qualities such as steadfast commitment to the values of Enlightenment and, on this basis, an ability to protect their citizens and act as a 'haven' of humanity and freedom in a world marked by dangers due to renewed geo-strategic rivalry among great powers, and attacks on the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Macron also relied on discursive techniques such as presuppositions to establish background knowledge about the world in which those subjects are seen as operating, and resorted to the repetition of specific lexical terms (for example, 'friendship', 'identity', 'presence') to create an effect of 'naturalisation'. That is, he sought to present as natural the boundaries of a specific imagined community, and to portray particular courses of action as commonsensical.

Similar to the staging of Bastille Day, in Athens Macron sought to symbolically bring into existence an imagined community of Europeans by invoking key, carefully selected moments of the past, while conveniently forgetting more conflictual ones among them (for example, the World Wars). In a move designed to encourage his audience to identify with his script, Macron depicted France and Greece as naturally occupying special positions of leadership within the European community of shared values and traditions. In his words, 'Our presence, your presence, here this evening is the recognition of a profound and secular friendship which links Greece and France. Because there are few nations who have transmitted and inherited in some way the values which have made and make our Europe in the way our countries do. Indeed, these ties which unite us, are the ties of freedom, Human Rights, values which have made our Europe and which no vicissitude of history has been able to sway.' The historical connection between contemporary Europe and ancient Greece was cast as a duty to 'listen' to the message inscribed in sites inherited from Athenian democracy: 'Because these places demand that we listen to them, because it was here that the modern State was created … we must ask ourselves without complacency 'what have we Europeans done with our sovereignty?'

The situation in Europe, as depicted by Macron, is critical, for the Union has been deeply weakened by a period of 'internal civil war where we have sought out our differences, our little betrayals, and where we have somehow forgotten the world in which we live. A civil war where we have preferred to correct these little differences and betrayals, forgetting that, opposite, there are radically different powers and that the only relevant question was how to make the eurozone an economic power that could stand up to China and the United States. How to make our Europe a diplomatic and military power capable of defending our values and interests in the face of authoritarian regimes that emerge from deep crises that can shake our societies?' The heirs of Athenian democracy, Macron insisted, had the duty to acknowledge their crisis, and also the responsibility to forge a way out of this crisis based on their shared values. As he put it, 'in Europe today, sovereignty, democracy and trust are in danger'. This, in a situation in which: 'Europe is one of the last havens where we collectively continue to harbour a certain idea of humanity, law, freedom and justice. We need Europe now more than ever. The world needs Europe.' But, Macron insisted, Europe will not be able to survive as a bastion of liberal-democratic

freedoms unless its citizens renew their commitment to defend its core principles and values. Just as France needs to defeat its internal enemies far-right, EU citizens must secure Europe by confronting and delegitimising its internal *others* – 'demagogues' and 'populists', particularly the far-right forces with worldviews similar to that of Le Pen. This confrontation is vital, on this logic, if the Europeans are to protect their true identity and successfully engage with the EU's external others, primarily the superpowers.

It is particularly interesting to note that, in the Athens speech, the US was no longer depicted as the close friend and fellow member of the liberal-democratic community of values, as it had been portrayed in the Bastille Day celebrations. Rather, the picture here is that of a world marked by the logic of geo-strategic rivalry, in which the US is a potentially dangerous other. The relevant community discursively invoked and depicted as in need of defence is, in this context, the European Union, not the transatlantic partnership. This is clearly illustrated in Macron's statement: 'our European sovereignty is what will enable us to – not be subjected to the law of the fittest, the Americans and, soon, the Chinese, but our own law.' With this statement, Macron was drawing – and building – on the Gaullist idea of a strong, independent France that would not be subjected to the will of superpowers. In the twenty-first century, however, the route to meaningful French independence and security can only run through deeper EU integration. Thus, 'True sovereignty is constructed, it must be constructed in and by Europe! The sovereignty that we want, is sovereignty which is there precisely to bring our forces together to build a European power to decide not to be subjected to what the superpowers will do better than we will. I believe in sovereignty, our national sovereignties, but I believe in this European sovereignty. Why? Because our challenges are no longer on a nation-scale.'

Contesting Macron's vision of national greatness and European security

Macron's discourse and practices aimed at gaining the trust of the French and European publics, and thus securing support for his scripts for pursuing national greatness and protecting Europe from its internal and external enemies soon generated a significant degree of opposition and contestation, both domestically and internationally. To understand this opposition, it is useful to draw on Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self. In particular, as Macron himself later admitted, he misunderstood how the French and European publics would perceive his image and judge his presidential performance. The symbols, discourse, and practices that Macron enacted as part of what he understood as a heroic presidency, aimed at saving both France and Europe from their internal and external enemies, were generally interpreted by his domestic and international audiences as the reflection of an arrogant, detached elitism – and, as such, they were widely criticised and opposed.

A particularly strong, systematic campaign of opposition to Macron was conducted in France by the *Gilets jaunes* movement. This movement constitutes a fascinating reminder of the importance of performances in a democratic society – and of the power of those who engage in effective performances. As Ringmar reminds us, 'Someone who engages in a successful theatrical performance can claim rights which others are denied. The politically powerless have always known this and often used performances in order to enhance their power. [D]emocracy does not only presuppose an equal right to vote but also a public space which we can all enter … and some will necessarily be better performers than others.'[44] In this case, the *Gilets jaunes*, a movement that is not tied to any political party and has had very little material power or political experience, was still able to oppose the French president's programme, to contest the authenticity of his acts, criticise his anti-democratic tendencies and to engage in a counterperformance that has had a substantial impact on the French political and socioeconomic life.

The *Gilets jaunes* movement, which has claimed since its inception to represent the authentic voice of 'the people', was born initially out of opposition to a tax on fuel; it later morphed into a

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[44]Ringmar, 'The problem with performativity', p. 13.

wider protest movement comprising different strands of French society on the left and right who are angered by low wages or pensions, declining public services and rising socioeconomic inequalities. In a direct attack on their president, the *Gilets* claimed that they, rather than the Parisian elites, could best articulate a vision of political order and of security consistent with the true desires and concerns of the French people. Making France 'great again', from this perspective, requires the rejection of some of the key measures advocated by Macron, just as it requires a rejection of the president's leadership style. Contrary to Macron's insistence that 'I obviously never said that I see myself as Jupiter', in the eyes of the *Gilets* and other opponents, Macron did embody the arrogant, aloof characteristics of a Jupiterian president.[45]

The *Gilets* have organised themselves around several key themes. First, there has been a conviction that they represent 'the people' forgotten by Parisian elites. Linked to that, there is the belief that most of the taxes they pay are being used, not for education or health or defence, but to fund a gilded lifestyle for Parisian politicians. Finally, there has also been the view that career politicians and political institutions should be swept aside and replaced by direct democracy.[46] The *Gilets* skilfully combined the modern symbolism of yellow vests (widely understood as a distress signal) with the traditional French symbolism of street theatre – reminiscent of the French Revolution and, more recently, movements such as the 1968 protests by students and workers. On this basis, they have mounted a counterperformance aimed at delegitimising the leadership of President Macron. Building on a long history in which the street was an important theatre in French politics – both as forum for popular expression and as theatre of war – the *Gilets* and their supporters have staged weekly protests aimed at expressing their anger and contesting the government's reform programme as well as the leadership style of President Macron. This has involved occupying famous public spaces and visibly challenging symbols of state power, including via open clashes with the police. Against the background of public protests, the *Gilets* articulated a script for reforming France that contested key elements of the government programme. For instance, in an article published in the newspaper *Le Journal du Dimanche*, a collective of *Gilets jaunes* stated that, in addition to specific economic demands: 'We ask to know what the taxes are being used for, a social national conference, regional debates on "territory and mobility", regular referendums on social and societal questions in the country, the adoption of proportional representation for legislative elections so that the population be better represented in parliament.'[47]

After weeks of protest that took a heavy toll on the French economy, the president, who, based on the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, occupies a very powerful position in the state, and who had initially declared that he did not care about approval rates, felt compelled to declare a state of 'economic and social emergency', announced several immediate financial relief measures for low earners and pensioners and subsequently launched a national debate ostensibly aimed at listening to the French citizens' grievances. Then, in April 2019, following the conclusion of the national debate, Macron announced further tax cuts and other government reforms aimed at appeasing public protests.

In a carefully choreographed performance that can be read as attempts by the 'looking-glass self' to correct his behaviour based on his audience's reaction, Macron expressed regret for some of his past actions, and admitted that the style adopted in the early months of his presidency could have appeared as 'hard' and 'unfair'.[48] He further insisted he had learned a great deal about the grievances of ordinary French citizens through public consultations. In light of

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[45]Vinocur and Kroet, 'Emmanuel Macron: "I don't see myself as Jupiter"'.

[46]See, for instance, Cristina Abellan Matamoros, '"Gilets jaunes": Who are they and what do they want?', *Euronews* (3 December 2018), available at: {https://www.euronews.com/2018/12/03/gilets-jaunes-who-are-they-and-what-do-they-want-euronews-answers} accessed 14 April 2019.

[47]Ibid.

[48]'Macron responds to *Gilets jaunes* protests with €5bn tax cuts', *The Guardian* (25 April 2019), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/25/emmanuel-macron-significant-tax-cut-gilets-jaunes-speech} accessed 14 April 2019.

these lessons, Macron announced – with another highly theatrical gesture – that he was launching 'the second act' of his mandate, one that would be more humane and closer to the ordinary people of his country. To demonstrate that his departure from the initial style of leadership was genuine, the president also visibly participated in public debates, seeking to signal that he was listening to the people, and carried out a number of highly symbolic gestures, such as proposing the abolition of his *alma mater*, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), an elite university founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1945. The school is seen in France as a factory for creating the kind of elites that the Yellow Vests are in a metaphorical war against. He further announced a proposal to reduce the number of parliamentarians by up to 30 per cent, while introducing a measure of proportional representation in elections to the National Assembly to give French provinces more of a say in the national government, which is currently dominated by Paris.

Yet, Macron's carefully staged attempt to reconnect with the public, secure recognition as a leader that was genuinely concerned about the public good, and thus recapture support for his political script did not appear to impress the *Gilets*.[49] In fact, influential participants in the *Gilets* movement, disappointed by the fact that Macron stood by his commitment to liberalise the French economy, declared that the president's act of contrition and promise to change was no more than 'a charade', or 'window dressing for the media'.[50] Instead of demonstrating his ability to learn from his mistakes and willingness to genuinely listen to the people, in the eyes of many participants in the *Gilets jaunes* movement the president's reaction to months of protests demonstrated that he remained an aloof 'Jupiterian president' working to advance the interests of national and global capitalist elites. In rejecting the president's performance of contrition and transformation, *Gilets jaunes*' voices thus put forward a reading of Macron that comes close to the critical characterisation provided, as we have seen, by Marine Le Pen and her allies. It is interesting to note that even the meaning of the stage chosen by Macron to announce the launch of the second act of his mandate was contested. Macron, apparently in an attempt to symbolise the authority of the presidency, stood behind a sleek desk under hundreds of lights twinkling from chandeliers, in the Élysée Palace's *Salle des fêtes* – a room that was recently completely refurbished. Instead of being seen as the dignified president, however, he was accused of spending tens of thousands of euros on new carpet while others could not make ends meet.[51] In other words, a stage chosen as a symbol of presidential authority was interpreted by his opponents as the signifier of exactly the type of detached elitism that had triggered the *Gilets* movement in the first place.

At present, the *Gilets* movement's claim to represent 'the people' appears less credible, in a situation in which public support for it has declined significantly due to systematic acts of violence perpetrated by radical members of the movement. According to public opinion tolls taken in the late winter to early spring of 2019, while a majority of French people still expressed sympathy for the *Gilets*' grievances, 56 per cent of those questioned thought the movement should stop mobilising people to take to the streets. This is in clear contrast with the strong public support the movement had enjoyed in late 2018 to early 2019, when as much as 70 per cent of the French population sympathised with the movement.[52] Yet, the declining sympathy for the *Gilets*' public protests has not translated into a substantial, stable increase in support of the president. In a situation in which less than 50 per cent of citizens express trust in the president, and in which in France Le Pen's rebranded party, the National Rally, emerged ahead of Macron's in the recent

[49]Ibid.

[50]See, for example, '"Yellow vests" unimpressed with President Macron's offer of financial relief, with some calling it a charade', *Agence France-Presse* (11 December 2018), available at: {https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/2177498/yellow-vests-unimpressed-president-macrons-offer-financial-relief}.

[51]'Macron responds to *Gilets jaunes* protests with €5bn tax cuts', *The Guardian*.

[52]See, for instance, Pascale Davies, '"Yellow vests": a majority of French people want *Gilets jaunes*' protests to end', *Euronews* (16 February 2019), available at: {https://www.euronews.com/2019/02/14/majority-of-french-people-want-gilets-jaunes-protests-to-end-poll}.

European elections,[53] it is far from certain that this president will succeed in securing the support it needs to implement his particular script for national greatness and European order.

It is worth pointing out that at the international level, too, Macron's efforts to enact European leadership and to prescribe a particular 'script' for securing Europe in the twenty-first century has encountered significant contestation. It is impossible to engage in a full analysis of that contestation given this article's space constraints, but even a cursory examination of recent developments suggests that Europe is not as ready to recognise Macron's leadership and vision as the French president might have hoped. Consider, for instance, the recent moves by a series of far-right populist parties to build transnational alliances, stage international counterperformances, and articulate a vision of European security and order that directly challenges President Macron's programme. These parties have depicted Macron's policy style and agenda as a reflection of anti-democratic tendencies, have accused French and German political elites of trying to impose their own agenda on less powerful EU states and vulnerable European citizens, and have sought to turn European public opinion in favour of a reaffirmation of strong nation states protected by fortress-like borders. By systematically disseminating images stressing the limits and challenges of liberal Europe – such as pictures of illegal migrants arriving on the EU shores – and by staging events that put the spotlight on the crises of liberalism, and where their leaders appear in the middle of small towns and villages depicted as the victims of globalisation, far-right parties have sought to portray the script prescribed by Macron not as the recipe for securing Europe, but, on the contrary, as the path to growing poverty, and subordination to the interests of unaccountable European and global elites. Casting themselves as the true representatives of ordinary European citizens – the people allegedly forgotten by elites – these far-right forces have argued that true security for those citizens can only come with a return to distinct national identities, protectionism, and strong state borders. This, while at the same time recognising Europe's nations as members of the same Christian family and acting in concert to protect that family against dangerous 'others', such as Muslim refugees. These, the argument goes, represent different values and threaten to undermine 'our' identity.

For instance, in leading a campaign to build a transnational alliance of right-wing forces ahead of European elections, Italy's then Interior Minister Matteo Salvini insisted: 'It is time to oppose the Franco-German axis with an Italian-Polish axis.'[54] He was speaking on a visit to Poland, aiming to challenge France and Germany's dominance in the EU. Not surprisingly, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán pledged his full support for the Italian-Polish initiative, explaining that Hungary's goal was to gain an anti-immigrant majority in Europe. He expressed hope that, with the support of his Italian and Polish allies as well as anti-liberal forces in other European countries, Hungary would be able, in time, to transform EU institutions, and use the material as well as symbolic resources of those institutions in order to reshape Europe around independent nation states and strong borders. Salvini also held news conferences with Marine Le Pen as well as senior Austrian officials. At each one, those leaders promised big changes, including a pushback against immigration and against 'the Brussels bunker'. 'Europe's enemies are those cut off in the bunker of Brussels … The Junckers, the Moscovicis, who brought insecurity and fear to Europe and refuse to leave their armchairs', said Salvini. His words were echoed by Le Pen, who argued: 'We're not fighting against Europe but against the European Union that has become a totalitarian system … We are today at an historic moment … It will be the emergence of a Europe of nations.'[55] From this perspective, Macron's idea that European citizens are best protected via transferring more powers to Brussels, pursuing European sovereignty, building a common

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[53]Adam Nossiter, 'European vote reveals an ever more divided France', *The New York Times* (27 May 2019), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/world/europe/european-vote-france.html} accessed 29 May 2019.

[54]'France and Germany seal new deal as Brexit looms', *BBC News* (22 January 2019), available at: {https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46908205}.

[55]'Le Pen and Salvini vow to storm Brussels "bunker" in EU elections', *France 24* (8 October 2018), available at: {https://www.france24.com/en/20181008-le-pen-salvini-brussels-bunker-european-elections}.

strategic culture and accelerating integration in the field of defence is intellectually misguided and politically dangerous.

While the European Parliamentary elections did not translate into the kind of large-scale success for the far-right populists that many analysts had predicted, they have nevertheless demonstrated the strength of that vision in contemporary Europe. Thus, these parties have increased their share of seats in the European Parliament, emerging as the winners in a series of EU member states, including France, Italy, Poland, and Hungary (not to mention the UK).[56] This suggests that Europe is deeply divided, and efforts by Macron and his allies to secure European support for his vision of security and international order will continue to be, at best, complicated in the foreseeable future.[57]

Conclusion

Building on the symbolic interactionist literature and on diverse works on the roles of performances, this article has examined the ways in which France's dynamic leader, Emmanuel Macron, has sought to 'make France great again' and to secure the EU in the age of growing illiberal challenges. As we have seen, since his election the French president has embarked on an ambitious mission to transform both his country and the European Union. As part of this mission, he has adopted discursive acts, symbols, and staging techniques that have generated significant forms of opposition, both in France and at the international level. At present, in a situation in which a majority of French citizens do not trust their president and in which Europe continues to face dramatic internal debates and disagreements over highly sensitive issues, one can expect continued resistance against attempts by Macron and his allies to pursue their transformational projects and especially to further integrate the Union. In the long run, it is difficult to predict the outcome of the competition between liberal, pro-integration forces and their opponents within the EU. Yet, for all these challenges and uncertainties, what remains indisputable is the fact that, under President Macron, France has witnessed a spectacular enactment of policies and practices aimed at reviving, reforming, and projecting French and European power on the global stage. Whatever happens in the long run, Emmanuel Macron will be remembered as the president who arrived at the Élysée Palace with a plan – and strong determination – to make France and Europe 'great again'.

In a broader perspective, whatever one might think about Macron's political choices, his discourse and practices – as well as the opposition to those practices – constitute a potent reminder that performances matter in international politics. Performativity, as we have seen, shapes the ways in which actors seek to reshape the world around them, places limits on what they are able to do, and affects the dynamics of the competition between them and their political rivals. In addition to shedding new light on recent developments in France and in Europe, this opens up interesting avenues for further research on issues such as: the roles and implications of performances enacted by other political leaders around the world, the role of staging techniques in the context of contestations and competition such as those between EU representatives and British negotiators over Brexit, or the various acts of opposition between President Trump and European politicians over the Iran Deal – to take just a few examples. In other words, the 'theatre' of international politics should continue to be a topic of interest to IR scholars and students for a long time to come.

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[56]Jason Horowitz, 'Election puts Europe on the front line of the battle with populism', *The New York Times* (27 May 2019), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/world/europe/europe-election-results-populism.html} accessed 28 May 2019.

[57]Interestingly, the elections also reflect growing support for the Greens in some, though not all EU states (and particularly in urban areas), and overall decline in support for traditional parties.

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