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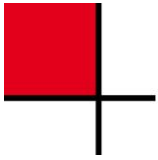
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# A Machiavellian prince at the Elysée: *Virtù* leadership and contingency in the populist moment

Charles Barthold and Martin Fougère

## abstract

In this paper we study the strategies through which Emmanuel Macron was able to emerge as a hegemonic leader in French politics in the context of the populist moment. In particular, we analyse (1) Macron's interventions that contributed to redraw the political map and renew the establishment, as well as (2) how some of those interventions focused on building his digital movement-party LaREM through personalisation. Drawing on Laclau, we emphasise how, for political leaders, politics is about boldly adapting to contingency – and we use Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* to illuminate how Macron adopted these strategies in his rise to power. We contribute to the power and leadership literature by showing how, through *virtù*, a leadership practice can emerge and become hegemonic. Relatedly, we contribute to the political organising literature by suggesting how the digital movement-party *En Marche!* (later *La République En Marche*) and its alternating opening and closing was used strategically in Macron's conquest of power. Thus, we illuminate how a movement-party was used instrumentally for a highly personalised conquest of power. Finally, we make a theoretical contribution by suggesting how Machiavelli and Laclau can be combined in order to understand the populist moment: as a political space full of contingency in which Machiavellian insights are relevant to understand how leaders seize opportunities; and from a Laclauian perspective, as a space of opportunity for some of the *virtù* interventions to make a hegemonic project successful.

## Introduction

In critical leadership literature, the concept of power tends to be used to describe either (1) the ways in which certain hegemonic discourses shape norms about leadership (Ford, 2006; Muhr, 2011; Cook and Glass, 2016; Collinson, 2020), or (2) how leadership is entangled with struggles (e.g. Gagnon and Collinson, 2014; Smolović Jones et al., 2016) or resistance (e.g. Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). Relating to the latter stream, Sinha et al. (2021) take an interest in the ‘transition’ of a leader from marginality to developing a hegemonic leadership practice, and urge for more studies to help us understand how this process might work. We aim, therefore, to explicate how in populist times a personalised leadership practice can enable a redrawing of the political map and thereby deliver a renewal of the establishment, adapting boldly to contingency through *virtù* (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]). In doing so, we focus on Emmanuel Macron as a political leader and his interaction with his political movement-party *En Marche!*, later LaREM (*La République En Marche*, ‘The Republic Onwards’).

Beyond our contribution to critical leadership studies and the study of how a marginal leader manages to conquer power, we contribute to the political organising literature (Husted and Plesner, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) by analysing how the opening and the closing down of the movement-party happened in a series of strategic interventions by the leader and his team, which was highly instrumental to the conquest of power. Additionally, unlike existing studies that link digital party organising with anti-establishment politics (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2019b), we show how forms of political organising that leverage the openness of digital processes (and the possibility to modulate that openness) can be employed by actors whose objective is to renew – and perhaps even become – the establishment. Finally, we make a theoretical contribution by suggesting how Laclau’s (2005) notions of political contingency and hegemonic interventions can be combined with Machiavelli’s (2017 [1532]) analysis of the prince as needing to deploy *virtù* by seizing opportunities when they are offered by *fortuna*.

Macron, who was not a public figure before 2015, was able to emerge very quickly as Minister of Economy, then a presidential candidate, and then

finally the winner of the 2017 presidential elections. This entailed the creation from scratch of a successful movement, first *En Marche!* then LaREM, which quickly became the biggest political party in France. What Macron accomplished is truly extraordinary (Anderson, 2017; Roussellier, 2017; Dolez et al., 2019) because he was able to redraw the French political landscape beyond the Left-Right divide, which had characterised French politics since the beginning of the Fifth Republic and possibly since the French Revolution (for a political history of the French Right, see Rémond, 1982). The leadership practice of Macron, we argue, can only be understood in relation to the high level of contingency in contemporary French politics, similar to several Western countries. First, this is connected to the crisis of legitimacy of the French political system due to the ongoing struggle between state-led neoliberal policies, such as the 2016 and 2018 labour deregulation reforms, and the contestation of numerous large-scale social movements.

Second, this is linked to the development of populist discourse in public debate (Mouffe, 2018). To understand the link between contingency and leadership practice, we draw on the works of Machiavelli (2017 [1532]) and Ernesto Laclau (2005). Laclau conceptualises the political field as discursively articulated through equivalential chains and antagonistic frontiers – all of which are characterised by contingency in that they are rooted in ‘the play of difference’ (Marchart, 2004: 69). In *The prince*, Machiavelli (2017 [1532]) reflects on examples of individual leaders dealing with contingency, and he develops the concept of *virtù* to characterise successful efforts in that respect. *Virtù* is about the boldness to take the right action at the right time and therefore involves a level of personal risk. By combining both understandings of contingency heuristically, we set out to analyse how mostly during the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections campaigns the *virtù* leadership practice of Macron helped him redraw the political map and renew the French establishment, thus taking advantage of the particular contingency of his time.

Furthermore, we discuss the instrumental role of LaREM in navigating contingency at different points in time. This will enable us to underline three elements of current political organising. First, LaREM is, we will argue, a mix of party and social movement which can be characterised as a ‘movement-

party' (Della Porta et al., 2017). Several other parties, such as Podemos or the Five Star Movement, are also at the intersection of a social movement and a party. Second, we will highlight the strong digital element (Gerbaudo, 2017; 2019a) of LaREM – facilitating limited forms of political activism with no membership fees – in line with political organising elsewhere, for example with *The Alternative* in Denmark (Husted and Plesner, 2017). Finally, we will emphasise the strong personalisation of Macron's leadership of LaREM, which is in line with current digital organising in political contexts, for example with Pablo Iglesias and Podemos (Gerbaudo, 2019b; see also: Musella, 2020; Balmas et al., 2014). LaREM was created and used by Macron mainly as an instrument to help him win the presidential election and then sustain his position of power. However, it lacks meaningful internal democracy. In other words, through interventions, Macron was able to mobilise the political organising of LaREM to serve his personalised political objectives and then reduce any space for autonomy within it. This meant imposing a centralised hierarchy within LaREM with a resulting lack of meaningful participatory democracy (Gerbaudo, 2019b).

In this paper, we first review the literature on power in critical leadership studies and organisation studies. Then, we analyse the notion of contingency in the works of Laclau and Machiavelli, and *virtù* in the work of Machiavelli, which we draw upon to study Macron. Third, we analyse Macron's leadership practice mainly in terms of *virtù* interventions. We then zoom in on how LaREM's political organising was instrumental in these interventions. Finally, we discuss our contributions mostly to the literature on critical leadership studies and political organising.

### **Power in critical leadership studies and organisation studies**

There is an extensive literature that analyses power in organisational studies (for a review: Fleming and Spicer, 2014). For example, this includes the organisational control of the labour process by management (Beverungen et al., 2015; Gandini, 2019) as well as identity regulation of employees (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). Scholars in critical leadership studies have substantially engaged with organisation studies in

order to explore the connection between leadership and power in organisational processes (Collinson, 2005; 2020).

First, certain power relations in organisational life have been analysed as producing specific types of leaders or leadership. Hegemonic organisational discourses on gender favour the emergence and reproduction of male leaders, as opposed to female leaders thereby deploying an organisational identity regulation (Ford, 2006; Muhr, 2011; Cook and Glass, 2016). For example, leadership is performed in particularly masculinist ways in mainstream financial organisations (Liu, 2017) and related metaphors are used in discourses of leadership (Linstead and Maréchal, 2015). Strikingly, the concept of the ‘prince’ is one such highly gendered metaphor in that, for Machiavelli, only men – such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar or Cesare Borgia – could exercise authority (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]). Similarly, heteronormative discourses favour certain types of binary organisational authority and influence, either male or female (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018), thereby marginalising those forms of leadership identities which do not conform to these, such as those of transgender and nonbinary individuals. Other scholars discuss race as a category that causes discrimination in organisational processes against minority groups since organisational norms about leadership are associated with whiteness (Liu and Baker, 2016). Accordingly, either non-white potential leaders face discrimination or they are forced to fit within a white model of leadership, which exerts a form of control on their organisational identities and practices (Liu and Baker, 2016).

Second, there is literature studying the interplay between power, resistance, and leadership in organisational processes. This involves considering leadership as entangled in a dynamic organisational process with power and resistance (Collinson, 2005), as opposed to being shaped by certain forms of organisational power. For example, Carroll and Nicholson (2014: 1414) argue that leadership development in organisations is characterised by power *and* resistance – both of which would be in a ‘dialectical’ relation as ‘leadership development spaces are steeped in power, resistance and struggle and entangle facilitators and participants alike’. Similarly, based on the analysis of two multinational organisations, Gagnon and Collinson (2014: 645) highlight that in leadership development ‘power, context and identity can be

inextricably linked'. Interestingly, Gagnon and Collinson (2014) do not see the relationship between power and leadership as a fixed and one-sided relation with power shaping leadership; they highlight that, in fact, *resistance* also occurs. For example, participants both engage and resist the organisational identity regulation that is promoted by the leadership development programmes they engage with (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014). Furthermore, the idea that leadership development can emerge through agonistic processes involving discursive conflicts also recognises the interplay between power, resistance, and leadership in organisational dynamics (Smolović Jones et al., 2016). This foregrounds 'collective approaches to organising that embraces discord and contestation' (Smolović Jones et al., 2016: 425). In that case, agonistic processes would involve a struggle among certain individuals within the perimeter of preestablished organisational rules: leadership emerges in a process in which everyone is trying to exercise organisational power over others while at the same time resisting power from others.

Third, there is a less researched area, which is the focus on the leadership 'transition' from a marginal position to a central position in an organisational context that can be described as 'anti-establishment' leadership (Sinha et al., 2021: 355). Accordingly, Sinha and colleagues analyse how Jeremy Corbyn in connection with Momentum, a grassroots organisation, was able to move from a backbencher with a marginal discourse, perceived to be outdated, to a party leader able to remobilise and increase the number of members of the Labour party – thereby embodying 'leadership practices inherent in the transition from marginality to power' (Sinha et al., 2021: 355). These dynamics lead to a democratisation process along the lines of the facilitation by an individual leader of distributed leadership processes inside the Labour political organisation. Additionally, Corbyn's anti-establishment leadership was able to operate in a context of conflict characterised by 'circumstances of heightened uncertainty' (Sinha et al., 2021: 355), namely the Brexit context. It can be noted that there are organisational similarities between Corbyn's Momentum and Macron's LaREM in terms of struggles and dynamism about leadership in a populist context. But the main difference is that Corbyn's leadership practice opposed the establishment, whereas Macron, through a rhetorical critique of the old governing elites, ensured a renewal of the

establishment. Thus, through the case study of Macron and LaREM, our aim will be to analyse how a personalised *virtù* leadership practice through a number of interventions can engage in a leadership struggle that enables the redrawing of the political map and the renewal of the establishment in a highly uncertain situation. This will enable us to contribute to the discussion around transitions in critical leadership studies and political organisation started by Sinha et al. (2021), as Macron was able to move to a hegemonic leadership position in order to renew the neoliberal establishment in the context of the populist crisis. We will also highlight the interplay of Macron's leadership practice with the digital organising of LaREM in line with the political organisation literature (Husted and Plesner, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2017; 2019a; 2019b).

### **Context: Neoliberalisation struggles and the populist moment**

The context of Macron's *virtù* leadership is characterized by a high level of uncertainty and fluidity in the French political space. This was brought about by two main factors: neoliberalisation struggles and the rise of populism.

Neoliberal policies have been implemented in France since at least the austerity turn of François Mitterrand's government in 1983 (Dardot and Laval, 2019), although this was often in combination with more social-democratic measures, such as reduction of the working-week to 35 hours in 1998. However, from 2002, with a higher level of consistency, the neoliberalisation project of the establishment – both left and right – has employed a combination of 'roll-back neoliberalism' and 'roll-out neoliberalism' (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 384; see also Fougère et al., 2017). The former involves pushing back the role of the state within the economy in order to move away from a Fordist model – this is typically the case with privatisations and is associated historically with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Harvey, 2007). This was the case with public highways and airports among many others. The latter (roll-out) is linked to transforming social policies and a neoliberalisation of the state and institutions through, for instance, activation logic in relation to unemployment benefits or the favouring of entrepreneurship discourse, policies for continuous professional



development (Chanut, 2017), the favouring of micro-entrepreneurship Uber-like employment, or reforming the pension system. Contrary to other countries, such as the UK and Germany, where neoliberalisation was not resisted through mass social movement, neoliberal policies in France were met by a high level of contestation led by powerful trade unions, such as the communist-linked National Confederation of Labour with a culture of confrontation with the government and employers' unions (despite their decreasing membership). There were several country-wide social movements against neoliberal public policies, such as the flexibilisation of labour in 2005, the liberalisation of public universities in 2009, a pension reform in 2011, and again the flexibilisation of labour in 2016. Thus, the neoliberalisation of France creates a context of instability in that neoliberal policies are often met by a contestation that destabilises the establishment hegemony. This situation is a neoliberalisation struggle that produces tension for political leaders who, on one hand, had to move forward with their neoliberal agenda to keep their credibility and, on the other, faced decreasing popularity. The latter considerably weakened former Socialist President François Hollande, as he implemented a neoliberal labour reform in 2016 that was met by considerable contestation from the left – the reason that probably led to his lack of popularity before the 2017 presidential elections (Milner, 2017). Thus, it is the neoliberalisation agenda that favours contingency and thereby facilitated Macron's access to power through *virtù* leadership and at the same time creates risk for his hegemony. The biggest challenge to Macron's leadership was the Yellow Vests social movement, which arguably can be linked to a resistance to the project of neoliberalising France (Jonsson, 2019).

Neoliberalisation struggles have been linked to the rise of populism in France and elsewhere in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis. Mouffe (2018: 11) connects the 'populist moment' with 'a crisis of the neoliberal hegemonic formation'. This was brought about by a number of phenomena, such as the polarisation of the political field, widespread suspicion of the establishment, and development of both left-wing populism with Mélenchon's *La France Insoumise* and right-wing populism with Le Pen's National Front – both of which try to create their own versions of the people and of the establishment that they would oppose. In other words, the populist moment repoliticises the

social space and forces political discourses to deploy a ‘political frontier’ (Mouffe, 2018: 11). Therefore, it is no longer possible for the establishment to only present a naturalised and technocratic version of neoliberalism, and it becomes vital for a neoliberal strategy to articulate popular demands and deploy a political frontier in order to confront other political discourses. While neoliberalisation has faced a higher level of contestation in France than elsewhere since the 1980s, the 2017 presidential elections showcased an open crisis of neoliberalism with the left-wing populist Mélenchon and the right-wing populist Le Pen receiving 40 percent of the ballots in the first round.

### **Framing contingency and *virtù* leadership practice**

To inform our analysis of political leadership in uncertain political times, we will now discuss the question of contingency in politics, and how that relates to *virtù* leadership practice in the works of Laclau (2005) and Machiavelli (2017 [1532]).

#### *Contingency in the works of Laclau (and Mouffe)*

Laclau developed a post-Marxist philosophy characterised by post-foundationalism, meaning that it relies on an ontology that does not have any ultimate foundation (Marchart, 2007). Laclau’s project is about redefining Gramsci’s notion of hegemony beyond a Marxist essentialism, which would argue that political and ideological phenomena are determined by the economic infrastructure in the last instance (Laclau, 2005: 127; De Cleen et al., 2018). By challenging the centrality of the (essentialist) Marxist concept of ‘class’, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) propose that the political is open-ended and not strictly determined by the socio-economic infrastructure. The political becomes a discursive practice articulating demands emerging in the social field through empty signifiers within the framework of a ‘meaning [which] is always fluid and contingent’ (Smolović Jones et al., 2020: 4). Strikingly, the fact that ‘the need to name an object [...] is both impossible and necessary’ makes discursive practices and thereby hegemonic interventions something contingent whose success is not ontologically guaranteed (Laclau, 2005: 72).

Furthermore, hegemony and hegemonic interventions are linked to two constitutive elements of politics: (1) the unification of demands through equivalential chains (Nyberg et al., 2013), and (2) antagonism through the discursive struggle against a political adversary (Laclau, 2005). The former and the latter are entangled and depend on the constitutive role of ‘the *contingent* moment of naming’ (Laclau, 2005: 227, emphasis added). Thus, the struggle for hegemony and thereby the political are linked to discursive interventions that are characterised by contingency in that they are not attached to any fundamental necessity – and rather correspond to a singularity that can always emerge. An example of the latter is the success of the empty signifier ‘shirtless’ to symbolise the struggle for social justice of the Peronist masses against the Argentinean oligarchy.

In sum, for Laclau, contingency unfolds on a variety of levels. First, it is a linguistic phenomenon in the sense that it is the outcome of an arbitrary and thereby contingent act of naming. Second, it is a political phenomenon as the political has no ultimate necessity, which could be, for instance, natural rights (for a liberal philosophy example, see Locke, 1894) or the economic infrastructure. However, contingency is not absolute in that it is restricted by the sedimentation of hegemony and the status quo it creates. Leaders are essential in terms of producing contingent acts of naming and subsequently in terms of embodying them. This means that leaders are central in articulating empty signifiers and creating equivalential chains. The objective of the interventions of the leader is to create hegemony. To illuminate this phenomenon, we now turn to a complementary analysis of leaders – through the figure of ‘the Prince’ – in the oeuvre of Machiavelli (2017 [1532]) whereby we develop the notion of *virtù*. We will integrate Machiavelli’s *virtù* into Laclau’s discursive and anti-essentialist understanding of the political space.

### *Machiavelli’s virtù*

In the oeuvre of Machiavelli (2017 [1532]: 52), contingency is associated with *fortuna*, which can be roughly translated as ‘chance’. For Machiavelli (2017 [1532]: 52), *fortuna* determines ‘half of our actions, leaving the other half – or perhaps a bit less – to our decisions’. To articulate his understanding of contingency and make it less abstract, Machiavelli (2017 [1532]: 52) associates

*fortuna* with several metaphors; for example, he ‘compare[s] *fortuna* to one of those raging rivers which when in flood overflow the plains’.

*Fortuna* and contingency in the context of politics are thus linked to external factors that cannot be controlled. *Fortuna* is ontological in that *being* itself is characterised by chance, since according to Machiavelli, there is no divine causality that would be the ultimate cause of phenomena (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]). Contingency is therefore political and ontological. *Fortuna* is linked to the ‘evental time’ of politics (Dillon, 2008: 1), that is, events or ruptures in particular contexts that are impossible to predict and that redraw the map of power relations. This is linked to the fact that, for Machiavelli, politics has “‘no rule” [...] [as] all political authority [...] [is characterised by] continuous polemical tension’ (Dillon, 2008: 4-5). We understand this to be compatible with Laclau’s (2005) (and Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985)) conceptualisation of contingency.

However, *fortuna* can be counterbalanced by *virtù*, a term that Machiavelli uses to describe a series of individual techniques practised by the leader. *Virtù* is indispensable for the prince’s success as luck ‘doesn’t work well in the long run’ (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 11). But *virtù* without some degree of ‘good fortune’ is not enough. The example of Cesare Borgia – Machiavelli’s major inspiration for many of the insights found in *The prince* (see, Skinner, 1981) – illustrates this point: ‘his arrangements failed; but that wasn’t because of any fault in him but because of the extraordinary and extreme hostility of *fortuna*’ (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 13), in the sense that he became sick at a strategic moment. *Virtù* is not about ethics but practical efficiency as ‘a prince, especially a new one, can’t always act in ways that are regarded as good; in order to reserve his state he will often have to act in ways that are flatly contrary to mercifulness, trustworthiness, friendliness, straightforwardness, and piety’ (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 38). This practical efficiency is nonetheless not always linked to prudence; in another striking and misogynist metaphor – linking in essentialist fashion the decisiveness and the force of the prince with masculinity – Machiavelli (2017 [1532]: 53) argues that in some cases, rapid action and aggressiveness are needed as ‘it is better to be adventurous than to be cautious, because *fortuna* is a woman’. Thus, *virtù* is about ‘continuously changing political artifice to figure out how to act [...] in

circumstances which are challenging in continuously novel ways, because [...] the times themselves, are radically contingent' (Dillon, 2008: 5).

In summary, Laclau sees contingency as constitutive of any hegemony since the latter only accounts for the temporary sedimentation of political common sense at a particular time. Hegemony is always contingent, but it has the potential to be naturalised or considered as necessary. Leadership is then important in creating, sustaining, or contesting a hegemony, depending on contingent opportunities in the circumstances. Moreover, Machiavelli enables us to emphasise the role of *virtù* for leadership practice as he analyses specifically what the best strategies are for the prince to be prepared to face contingency. Accordingly, Machiavelli foregrounds the role of the individual in the face of contingency to deliver effective leadership practices. By combining Laclau and Machiavelli, we will connect individual leadership and the political as discursive articulation in a fundamentally contingent context linked to the populist moment. Accordingly, we analyse below the individual strategies that Macron deployed to produce several hegemonic interventions in connection with a political organisation – the EM movement, which later became the party, LaREM.

### **Macron's leadership enhanced by a series of *virtù* interventions**

We now turn to discussing *virtù* leadership practice in populist times through the case of Macron's rise to power. The latter is not a fixed trait that Macron would have irrespective of context, but rather a leadership practice deployed through several interventions. These interventions enabled Macron to embed his leadership practice in a power 'transition' (Sinha et al., 2021: 355) resulting in the redrawing of the French political map. We will focus mainly on *virtù* interventions during the 2017 presidential campaign, which was when Macron was able to establish his hegemony in the context marked by the populist moment.

#### *(a) November 24, 2016: Establishing the need for a revolution*

We must bear in mind that nothing is more difficult to set up [...] than a new system of government; because the bringer of the new system will make

enemies of everyone who did well under the old system. (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 12)

During the presidential campaign, in his book *Révolution* published in November 2016 and in other discursive interventions, Macron (2016) established the link between the leader and the dynamic people of France who wanted to be freed from their failed ruling establishment, thereby seizing contingency as a populist moment and providing an opportunity to redraw the political frontier. For example, in the very beginning of the book, this is explicitly formulated as Macron writes:

After the left, the right, the same faces and the same persons, since so many years [...] It is their models and their methods that simply failed. The country overall has not failed [...] *Thus there is a “divorce” between the people and its ruling elite.* I am convinced that our country has the strength, the ability, and the desire to move forward. Our country has history and the *people* to do it. (Macron, 2016: 7, emphasis added)

He made a similar point on 30 August 2016 in a TV interview with the biggest French channel TF1 by saying that ‘the left and the right and the way they structure French political life are obsolete’ (cited in Ventura, 2017: 96). Thus, in a populist moment of suspicion towards the establishment, Macron seeks to draw a political frontier between the people and the political establishment who had ruled the country in the past decades – mainly the French Socialist Party and the Republicans, thereby aiming to create a link with a dissatisfied population mostly disappointed by mainstream French politics (see, Fougère and Barthold, 2020).

*(b) February 2017: Seizing opportunities for aggregating demands*

a new ruler [...] has [...] to make himself loved [...] by the people. (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 7)

Through several discursive interventions, Macron was able to aggregate heterogeneous demands and associate ‘a people’ (Laclau, 2005; Fougère and Barthold, 2020). This was done in addition to the supporters of free markets who he had already mobilised since 2015 by promoting as Minister of Economy a liberalising law which was named after him (Macron Law) and by celebrating the skills he had acquired as investment banker working for

Rothschild (Macron, 2016). However, the month of February 2017 was a *turning point* in which Macron was able to gather a decisive advantage by seizing the opportunity of the weakening of the then favourite to win the election – the centre-right candidate Fillon, who was being investigated in connection to allegations of corruption. First, he was able to aggregate environmental demands to his equivalential chain – François de Rugy and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, two prominent Green politicians who joined the Macron platform in February. Second, he was able to attract socially minded liberals such as economist Philippe Aghion, Elie Cohen, Jean-Hervé Lorenzi, and Jean Pisani-Ferry, who joined Macron’s campaign staff in January 2017. Third, he was able to aggregate demands from postcolonial minorities by recognising that colonialism was a ‘crime against humanity’ (Roger, 2017) during a highly symbolic trip to Algiers. Furthermore, he also praised entrepreneurship and Uber in terms of job opportunities for low-skilled *banlieue* youths, often from postcolonial ethnic minorities (Van de Castele, 2017).

*(c) March-May 2017: Preparing a new government designed to divide the main rival parties*

A Captain ought, among all the other actions of his, endeavor with every art to divide the forces of the enemy [...] (Machiavelli, 2011 [1521]: 100)

Machiavelli (2017 [1532]) argued in *The prince* against systematising the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy because, as seen from the perspective of the established prince, this doctrine implies dividing the people, which is not desirable. But when understanding the situation as one of conquest of power, undermining rival groups through dividing them can be a sound strategy, akin to the strategic prescription above from *The art of war* (Machiavelli, 2011 [1521]). The Macron campaign started early on, mostly with a few experienced politicians linked to the French Socialist Party, such as the Lyon mayor Gérard Collomb (nominated Minister of the Interior in May) and mostly with young and inexperienced private and public sector professionals. However, Macron was able to perform a divide and conquer strategy during the last months of the presidential campaign by co-opting major figures of the centre-left and the centre-right. The former Socialist Party Prime Minister Manuel Valls and the former Socialist Party Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian mentioned that they would support Macron in March 2017. In parallel,

Macron was able to first attract minor figures from the Republicans, such as Marie-Anne Montchamp and Aurore Bergé in March 2017. This later facilitated the joining of senior figures such as Edouard Philippe, Bruno Lemaire, and Gérald Darmanin, who were all offered major posts in Macron's first cabinet in May.

(d) *May 8, 2017: The new party name as a hegemonic intervention*

[...] a shrewd prince ought to handle things in such a way that his citizens will always, in all circumstances, need the government and need him. (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 22)

On May 8 the movement *En Marche!* officially became the political party *La République En Marche* (LaREM). By appropriating the signifier 'Republic', Macron was able to appear as a credible alternative to replace mainstream political parties in terms of upholding republicanism. The second round of the presidential elections involved for Macron opening discursively to the maximum, thereby creating a broad Republican front against the National Front of Marine Le Pen. Finally, the creation of the party LaREM just before the parliamentary elections in June 2017 acted as a bold and particularly timely hegemonic intervention, where Macron and his *virtù* tested *fortuna* while rhetorically hegemonising the French Republic away from *Les Républicains* by calling his own party *La République En Marche* (i.e. EM's – standing for Emmanuel Macron's – Republic). This vigorous intervention full of the youthful flair of a Machiavellian prince was needed to ensure a majority in parliament for Macron's followers without the need to have an alliance with the Socialists or the right-wing. This was a decisive move towards the establishment of Macron's hegemony within the French political system. Importantly, the alternating openness and closure of Macron's electoral populism was connected to the emergence of LaREM from a movement to a 'bureaucratized organization' (Fougère and Barthold, 2020: 426) in line with Husted and Plesner's (2017: 648) findings about *The Alternative* in Denmark which shifted from a movement based on 'open-source politics' to a political party with MPs.



*(e) May 17, 2017: Co-optation of key figures embodying core demands*

[...] men should be [...] either well-treated so that they won't want revenge or utterly crushed so that they won't be capable of it. (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 5)

Machiavelli's recommendations to the prince on how to treat potential rivals and powerful figures should be seen as a strategic question, warranting the adoption of a clear strategy: either co-opting these powerful people if possible and desirable, or crushing them, as suggested in the quote above. However, it is important to note that most often Machiavelli did not write about co-optation in a very positive manner because of the assumption that it is people from societal elites who are co-opted, which is not perceived well by the common people. In contemporary politics, however, there tend to be, in different societies, figures who have come to incarnate important symbolic demands of the people. Thus, beyond the specific issue of dividing rival political parties, being able to co-opt figures incarnating those demands that have a very broad support in society can be seen as a decisive move. This was another strategic objective of Macron's and Edouard Philippe's selection of the government in May 2017. The very popular Nicolas Hulot, who had rejected offers to become a minister on several occasions in the past, was an effective co-optation in order to aggregate environmental demands – he was offered what was presented as a high-priority Ministry of Environment post (higher in the hierarchy than the Economy post, symbolically). Similarly, the support of Bayrou, a French version of a Christian Democratic politician, for Macron's campaign from February 2017 (Willsher, 2017) was clearly linked to the foregrounding of ethics in French politics in the context of corruption scandals, a popular demand for significant sections of the electorate, including centrist voters. In May, Bayrou was offered the post of Minister of Justice, thus cementing Macron's commitment to renewal and 'cleaning up' of the political class in France.

*(f) January-June 2017: Opening to the maximum for the parliamentary elections*

[...] this way of becoming a prince is obtained with the support of the common people. (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 22)

In January 2017, an internet call for parliamentary candidacies under the banner of '*En Marche!*' was launched, with the promise of deciding which

candidates were to represent the movement by 11 May, that is a few days after the results of the presidential elections. A total of 14000 people applied and on 11 May 428 were selected to represent *La République en Marche*. In this process and its outcome, emphasis was placed on recruiting potential MPs from ‘civil society’, such as mathematician Cédric Villani or entrepreneur Bruno Bonnell (De Guigné, 2017). This was framed as a real opening towards common people, as opposed to professional politicians – although it should be noted that, in fact, many of these ‘civil society’ people can be seen as belonging to the socio-economic and/or socio-cultural elites of the country. This gesture was successful in obtaining an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections: many of these inexperienced politicians were elected. In fact, this was a bold *virtù* move testing *fortuna* and adapting to a contingent situation, in that LaREM simply could not otherwise have had enough experienced candidates to stand for every seat in parliament. This seemingly unfavourable contingent situation was thus turned into an opportunity for maximising the chain of equivalence.

*(g) June 2017: Immediate strategic closure after the parliamentary elections*

I conclude that a principality that doesn’t have its own army isn’t safe: it is entirely dependent on *fortuna*, having left itself with no *virtù* to defend it in times of trouble. (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]: 31)

Although Machiavelli (2017 [1532]) does not deploy a theory of party organising beyond the idea that common people and nobles often confront each other, he mentions how effective *virtù* interventions of the prince involve organising collectives, among which the army was essential in his time. However, Macron was able to perform two hegemonic interventions through the political organisation of LaREM – first through effectively creating a digital movement-party (Husted and Plesner, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2019a) during the campaign and then through the strategic closing of LaREM immediately after parliamentary elections in order to maintain full control of it. These were both bold moves, full of *virtù*.

## Opening and closing LaREM

When looking into the instrumental role of organising LaREM strictly for the conquest and exercise of power, we observe a double movement, first opening the movement and later closing the party.

### *Scaling up LaREM: From a website to digital party*

Macron's digital movement-party was progressively structured from 2015 to 2017. First, in June 2015 Macron strategically had the *Jeunes avec Macron* (Youth with Macron) created, with a website and a presence on Facebook and Twitter (France Inter, 2018). This made sense at that point as he was still Minister of Economy in Hollande's administration, but was only starting to move away from the French Socialist Party and just considering an autonomous political career. Second, when it was clear that the current president had very low popularity, in April 2016 Macron decided to become a candidate for the presidential election and on the same day created *En Marche!*. This allowed Macron to start an official campaign, thereby facilitating membership and access to funding for *En Marche!*. Membership and most of the structure remained digital with local groups mostly operating online. This enabled Macron to quickly mobilise a very significant number of followers during the presidential campaign, allowing for example a significant number of people to come to his rallies. Third, after Macron won the presidential elections, the movement *En Marche!* was transformed into a 'bureaucratized organization' (see Fougère and Barthold, 2020: 426) but retained a digital aspect (Gerbaudo, 2019a; 2019b) in that LaREM still does not require members to pay a membership fee, and one can become a member through a few clicks on the internet and accepting LaREM's 'value charter' (LaREM, 2019).

From the perspective of Macron's leadership practice, each step can be seen as a *virtù* intervention responding to a contingent moment and the changing *fortuna* surrounding President Hollande. In Autumn 2015, Hollande was still likely to become the Socialist Party's presidential candidate; therefore, the *Jeunes avec Macron* was a way for Macron to position himself as a player still cooperating with Hollande. However, as Hollande weakened and it became

clear that Macron could become a candidate in the presidential elections, it made sense to formalise the creation of a movement and start a campaign in April 2016. This flexibility was provided by the fact that *En Marche!* was to a large extent a digital platform that could be easily modulated and scaled up (or even shut down) if necessary. Thus, one of the dimensions of Macron's *virtù* consisted in manipulating the flexibility offered by digital technologies – a flexibility, which was an asset in uncertain populist times, when moving quickly becomes a priority.

A striking aspect of a digital strategy is that it is a flexible instrument for reaching out to and recruiting individuals whose levels of politicisation are potentially not as high as those members from traditional political parties or mass parties (see Duverger, 1954), as the case of the Italian Five Star Movement illustrates (Gerbaudo, 2019a). From this perspective, it is striking that *En Marche!* was able to attract individuals of the former type. This latter point is illustrated by the role of the MPs, most of whom came from civil society (Michon, 2019). Additionally, as a digital movement requires fewer structures than a formal political party, it also requires fewer financial resources, which was decisive for a leader in a marginal position, such as Macron, who could not count on the resources of an established political party. For example, it was challenging for Macron's organisation to be given a bank loan to finance his campaign, and Macron had to take out a personal loan (Goubert et al., 2017).

#### *Taking back control over LaREM by neutralising internal democracy*

In connection with the use of digital organising, including local groups of members, *En Marche!* was able to create an image of participatory and democratic organisational culture during the presidential election campaign. This image was instrumental in helping mobilise members during the campaign. However, Macron and his entourage kept direct oversight of LaREM. Before it was made a political party in 2017, *En Marche!* was also directly controlled by Macron and a few close aides without any internal democracy.

After the victory at the parliamentary elections, an important hegemonic intervention was to bureaucratise LaREM in order to maintain control of the party and prevent either grassroots members or MPs from deploying autonomy. Strikingly, in 2017, at the first LaREM conference Jean-Claude Castaner, who was backed by Macron, was *de facto* the *only* candidate (Galtier and Martichoux, 2017) to stand for the party head post, thereby illustrating a blatant lack of democracy (or illusion thereof). Then, in September 2018, when Macron decided that Castaner was more useful in his administration, he appointed him as Home Office Minister. In turn, Nathalie Loiseau, who was the Minister of European Affairs, was nominated by Macron to lead LaREM in the European elections, although she had not been selected by party members. Another striking example of a lack of democracy is that LaREM candidates for parliamentary elections were selected by a national committee chaired by experienced politician Jean-Paul Delevoye, who had been suggested by Macron, as opposed to elected by party members.

In summary, Macron's *virtù* leadership practice entails boldly adapting to contingency through a variety of interventions – most of which were linked to a *personalisation* of political organising centred on the strategy of a single individual seeking to win a presidential election (Balmas et al., 2014; Gerbaudo, 2019b). This form of leadership practice combined with the flexibility of a digital movement was adapted to a dynamic power relation connected to the populist moment (Mouffe, 2018). Even though Macron was able to take advantage of a contingent situation through *virtù* leadership, doing so could also bring about his downfall. For example, the rise of populism linked to neoliberalisation struggles created a high level of uncertainty, which brought about the unprecedented decision of Hollande to withdraw from the presidential race. The same phenomenon led to the Yellow Vests social movement in November 2018, whose different types of actions, including the blocking of roundabouts, roads, petroleum refineries, demonstrations, and riots (BBC, 2018), arguably were relatively close to resulting in the end of Macron's leadership. Thus, a situation that allows political leadership to quickly attain a central position of power could also take it away because of its immersion in contingency.

## Concluding discussion

We have shown how Macron was able to ‘transition’ (Sinha et al., 2021: 355) from a position of marginality to a position of power in the French political system through his capacity to redraw the French political map and thereby deliver a renewal of the French establishment. This leadership practice was unfolded through *virtù* interventions (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]), allowing a particular individual to become a political leader by deploying different strategies to deal with contingency (Laclau, 2005) in the context of the populist moment (Mouffe, 2018). This enables us to make a contribution to the power literature in critical leadership studies (Ford, 2006; Muhr, 2011; Cook and Glass, 2016; Collinson, 2020).

As Sinha and colleagues (2021: 362) demonstrate with Corbyn’s ‘anti-establishment’ leadership, moving from marginality to power involves the ability to redraw ‘organisational boundaries’ and the emphasis of conflict in a highly uncertain context, which they refer to as a ‘crisis’. Similarly, Macron was able to redraw the organisation of the French political map by creating a new successful organisation (LaREM) and relatedly by modifying the political space. Macron also emphasised conflict in his leadership practice. Finally, the highly uncertain context that allowed Macron’s leadership to emerge was the populist crisis created by the interaction between neoliberalisation and the resistance to it, which destabilises the French political system and since 2007 has prevented any leader from winning two general elections in a row. Unlike Corbyn, Macron deployed a *personalised leadership* (Gerbaudo, 2019b) by employing LaREM as an instrument with virtually no internal democracy, and which he leverages depending on the evolution of the contingent context. Our argument is that *virtù* (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]) as leadership practice is adapted to such a highly contingent environment by finding strategies to take advantage of opportunities and adapt boldly to contingency (Laclau, 2005). A situation of permanent destabilisation weakens hegemonies, thereby creating opportunities for the emergence of individual leaders coming from the margins of the political space to renew the establishment, such as Trump or Bolsonaro (Martigny, 2019).

This study of Macron's use of his movement-party through his *virtù* leadership practice strongly resonates with all three 'newest trends in party organization research' (Gauja and Kosiara-Pedersen, 2021: np): the personalisation of politics, implying that people identify more with personalities than with parties (Balmas et al., 2014); the proliferation of movement-based parties (Gerbaudo, 2019a, 2019b); and the new (notably digital) forms that party affiliation takes (Gibson et al., 2017). The Macron campaign relied extensively on the new possibilities of internet-based free membership, which developed the *En Marche!* movement from scratch as well as on an open online call for candidacies that succeeded in mobilising thousands of people to run for parliamentary elections and possibly other elections. While this was undoubtedly the fruit of collective organisational work, the role of personalised leadership practice by Macron was crucial every step of the way, as shown in the key *virtù* interventions we described here. Thus, it is Macron's personalised leadership that diverted digital organising towards control, as opposed to any technological determinism – for example, after the presidential campaign Macron decided to bureaucratise LaREM and thereby neutralise internal democracy, when he could have instead pushed for democratisation. This is in line with Husted (2019), who underlines the indeterminacy of the political space that cannot be closed by digital technologies since political organisation always involves some form of 'human interpretation and interaction' (Husted, 2019: 656). Therefore, in another context, digital organising combined with distributed leadership could lead to more democratic outcomes, as other examples, such as *The Alternative* (Husted and Plesner, 2017) or the Occupy movement (Barthold et al., 2018) suggest. If LaREM is characterised by a lack of internal democracy similar to other digital parties, such as Podemos or the Five Star Movement (Gerbaudo, 2019b), it is not because of inherent traits of technology but because of Macron's *virtù* leadership practice and his intention to use it strategically as an instrument to win elections despite having limited resources when compared with his competitors.

Furthermore, by studying the Macron example of *virtù* leadership practice, we suggested how Laclau's (2005) understanding of contingency and hegemonic interventions can be combined with Machiavelli's idea of the prince. In

particular, both theorists conceptualise politics as a contingent space in which particular interventions – if done with *virtù* – might lead to hegemony and the establishment of the prince's power. However, for both theorists the space of politics can never be fully controlled – a prince can always be contested or lose power to a marginal player or an unpredictable event, such as the death of his father Pope Alexander VI for his son Cesare Borgia (Machiavelli, 2017 [1532]) or a mass social movement such the Yellow Vests for Macron.

Finally, we should beware of not seeing the *virtù* leadership practice of Macron as a heroic accomplishment, or as a fully controlled endeavour where contingency was fully tamed. This would be very misleading. There was a great deal of luck involved in Macron's success, the planets aligned favourably with the established parties being taken away from the centre because of their primaries, as well as with the conservative candidate Fillon being submerged in legal trouble exactly at the right time for Macron. This is precisely the point with Machiavelli's emphasis on *fortuna* and contingency, a great deal of what becomes possible is about luck... and rarely is luck always on one person's side, it tends to switch allegiances. Be that as it may, the point with *virtù* leadership practice is that luck is not enough to redraw the political map and renew the establishment when coming from a position of marginality, you need to treat luck (*fortuna*) vigorously with well-timed decisive interventions. And Macron and his team certainly did this.

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