

France - The Benalla Affair: Will Scandal Sink Emmanuel Macron?

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The Benalla Affair is not about Alexandre Benalla. It is about the French President, and the brash, self-confident manner with which he has blasted through his first year in office.

To travel abroad as an American in 2018 is to serve as a baffled explicator of scandal. No outsider quite understands what we are living through; we don't even understand what we are living through, and trying to describe even the simplest of the ludicrously plausible conspiracy theories that dominate our current politics is not an easy business. At the moment, I am in France, a country that I have been visiting regularly since the George W. Bush era, when the dominant feeling, as a blue-aligned American, was shame at our President's stupidity and headlong imperialist ambitions. The Obama years brought a resurgence of pride, the balm of sanity. Now I find myself met with something like pity, tinged with curiosity and commiseration. The United States poses a threat to the rest of the world, as usual. The commiseration comes from the fact that we now also pose a threat to ourselves.

So it has been an unexpected point of solidarity to find that France is in the midst of an opaque political scandal of its own. L'Affaire Benalla began just after the World Cup ended, though its central event took place on May 1st, traditionally a day of labor protests around France. This year's demonstrations, fuelled by frustration with President Emmanuel Macron and his pro-business policies, were especially dramatic. More than a thousand members of the far-left Black Bloc movement came to the demonstrations in Paris dressed in dark hoodies and balaclavas. Windows were smashed; cars were torched. Footage circulated on social media showing riot police spraying tear gas and bashing protesters with truncheons. One video [[1](#)], taken in Paris's Fifth Arrondissement after protesters had already begun to disperse, shows a man in a what appears to be police riot gear grabbing a young woman by the back of her neck and rushing her across the street. The camera moves to show a group of policemen descending on a young man in jeans and sneakers, pummeling him to the ground. He has managed to sit up on his knees, surrounded and subdued, when the first officer suddenly returns, seizes him from behind by the throat, drags him to his feet, and begins to punch him in the head, before throwing him down and stomping on his stomach. Suddenly, the officer seems to catch himself, pulling away from his doubled-over victim, as if unsure of what to do next. "Get a good look at him!" the video-maker shouts, as the camera swivels to capture the officer's face before he walks away.

On July 18th, tipped off by an anonymous source, *Le Monde* revealed that the brutalizer in the video was not, in fact, a police officer at all but, rather, Alexandre Benalla, a twenty-six-year-old security aide to Macron. Benalla had asked to observe the police operations on May 1st, which does not explain how, or why, he had obtained a walkie-talkie, a police helmet, and an armband. (Impersonating a French officer is illegal.) Though the Elysée Palace had swiftly learned of the video, it emerged that Benalla had been suspended from work for only two weeks, and hadn't been

taken off Macron's security detail. The Elysée had also failed to warn the judiciary of Benalla's suspension in a timely manner, which led to rumblings about a coverup. Just what was the nature of Benalla's relationship to the President, anyway? Why did he have, as was discovered, a diplomatic passport and a gun permit? Photos began to surface showing the President and his aide sharing what seemed, to some, an unusual intimacy: Macron and Benalla grinning together at the Salon de l'Agriculture [2]; Macron and Benalla riding bikes in polo shirts the color of rosé and lemon sherbet, respectively.

What followed was a tangle of denials, accusations, recriminations, and non-apology apologies: in other words, politics. Benalla was fired. The Assemblée Nationale and the Senate both launched official hearings. Through it all, Macron kept curiously silent, refusing to speak to the press, tweeting only to express sympathy for Greece as it battled wildfires. Finally, after nearly a week of furious news coverage and speculation, the President got around to saying his piece. Standing in front of a phalanx of deputies from his political party, he delivered a typically Macronian speech, flecked with irony, rhetorical flourish, and a certain steely self-regard. Macron, who once recited Molière from memory on the campaign trail, is highly attuned to dramatic cadence, the theatrical power of rhythm and repetition. "Alexandre Benalla has never had the nuclear codes," he said, as he began to work his way through the catalogue of rumors that had been circulating. "Alexandre Benalla has never earned ten thousand euros a month. Alexandre Benalla has never been my lover." (Capped with a little smile: *I went there.*) What had happened was serious, a deception, a treason, but, Macron said, it was ultimately his own fault. He had trusted the wrong man. "If they want to find the person responsible, he's before you." Macron spread his arms. "Let them come and find him. I answer to the French people."

The President was right. The Benalla Affair is not about Alexandre Benalla. It is about Emmanuel Macron, and the brash, self-confident manner with which he has blasted through his first year in office. As a candidate, Macron promised the modernization, and the liberalization, of the French state. As President, he has cut taxes for corporations and raised them for pensioners; pushed through a controversial loosening of France's labor laws that had failed under his predecessor, François Hollande; waged war on the national train union, resulting in months of paralyzing strikes; and lowered the speed limit on France's secondary roads, which many people in the countryside have interpreted as Paris's backhanded way to impose yet another tax through radar-enforced speeding tickets. Macron was poised to launch the next stage of his reforms, including a reordering of the national education system, when the Benalla mess began; these are currently on hold while the inquiries run their course.

People can reasonably debate whether Macron's grand projects are destined to fortify or to further weaken France. What is uncontested is his salient political flaw: arrogance, girded with an attitude of "technocratic authoritarianism," as a French friend of mine aptly put it. Macron did pundits everywhere a favor, when, in an interview he gave just before his election, he used the term "jupitérien" to refer to his intended governing style. That's Jupiterian, as in Jupiter: the largest planet, the most powerful god. Macron was talking about his wish for the executive to reign supreme over all other branches of government; the explicit contrast was to the lower-key style of Hollande, who humbly fashioned himself a "normal" President, and was rewarded, by the end of his single term, with a single-digit approval rating.

Macron has made good on his grandiose self-image. Alongside the usual élitist stumbling blocks that trip up politicians everywhere—fancy suits, outrageous makeup bills [3]—he has claimed more trenchant symbols of power. He has taken to giving an annual address before the French Parliament at Versailles, something that previous leaders reserved for exceptional occasions. It is interesting, to say the least, for a French President to adopt, as a symbolic home, the palace whose last resident was beheaded by the people whose needs he failed to understand. The caricatures practically draw

themselves. Paris is plastered with posters, made by the Communist Party, that show Macron dressed in full monarchical regalia, scowling above the slogan *Méprisant de la République: Despiser-in-Chief*.

A small dig, perhaps, but Macron has been riled by less. In 2016, at a campaign stop in the southern French town of Lunel, he got into an altercation with a group of workers [4] who had come to protest the labor reforms that he had already begun to champion as the Minister of Economy and Finance under Hollande. Macron was dressed in his usual businessman's uniform; his interlocutors wore T-shirts. "I'm twenty-one, I'm finished with my studies, I don't have a cent to pay for a suit and tie like yours," one man told him, to which Macron replied, "You're not going to scare me with your T-shirt. The best way to buy a suit is to work." "I've worked since I was sixteen!" the man replied. Just last week, the *Times* reported [5] that Macron, on a visit to southwestern France, was confronted by a woman who told him that though she had a college education and a full-time job, she could no longer make ends meet. Macron responded by quibbling over the details. It wasn't the government that set her phone- or gas-bill rates, he said: "It's not all the state's fault."

It is this tendency toward rationalist, dismissive paternalism, coupled with an apparent incomprehension of the plight of the working poor, that Macron seems unable to shake. His is the logic of the spreadsheet: it all makes sense if you just do the math. This is not to say that he is without abundant political charisma. The World Cup was Macron's finest hour. There was the young French President, leaping athletically, adorably, to his feet, to rejoice at the young French team's first goal in the final. There he was after the match, standing in the pouring rain to congratulate the players with an affectionate series of hugs and head rubs: Macron, who has no children of his own, playing proud soccer dad to the nation at large.

The *Affaire Benalla* arrived just on time to neatly puncture the euphoria of that victory. Macron, naturally, has dismissed the scandal as a distraction, a tempest in a teapot, and accused journalists of willful hysteria and distortion. "We have a press that no longer seeks the truth," he said. Certain members of the press agree. In the magazine *Le Point*, Bernard Henri-Lévy used his latest column, titled "Macron and the Piranhas," [6] to criticize news stations for relying on the Benalla video as a "gimmick," and referred darkly to "the soulless sans-culottes, self-drunk and cruel, that we are all in the process of becoming." In *Le Monde*, the comparatively sober political philosopher Philippe Raynaud argued that [7], for all Macron's "soft Bonapartism," the *Affaire Benalla* is hardly a French Watergate, as the far left had been insisting. But he also suggests that Macron is perhaps missing the point. If a non-affaire affaire can elicit this degree of discontent, people are already deeply unhappy, looking for a reason to vent. Macron's approval rating has plummeted; more disturbingly, the Benalla business has succeeded in uniting Marine Le Pen, of the ultra-right National Front party, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, of the far-left La France Insoumise, against the President and his centrist *En Marche* coalition. Raynaud, who laces his column with references to Kant, de Tocqueville, and Nietzsche—France will be France—writes that Macron's criticisms of the press remind him of Napoleon III, "who believed that journalists were less legitimate than elected politicians." Napoleon III, of course, began as an elected President and ended up a self-appointed emperor, having decided that he might better serve the general interest by retaining power for life.

Another comparison comes to mind. I have been thinking quite a bit about Macron's state visit to Washington, D.C., this past spring, in which he and President Trump engaged in a bizarre demonstration of political-dominance play that was widely billed as a bromance but looked like something more sinister to me. The hand shaking, the shoulder squeezing, the cheek kissing, the dandruff brushing [8]: were we watching a bear tamer ingeniously ensnaring a bear, or just a wrestling match between two types of bears? It is obvious how significantly the elegant, intelligent, verbally gifted Macron differs from his American counterpart. (That clip of Macron reciting Molière is enough to make an American weep.) What can be harder to discern is how attractive this refined,

self-described centrist may find certain Trumpist mechanisms. The discrediting of the press, the “I alone can fix it” glorification of the self: these are tools that Macron seems more than willing to use for his own purposes, which at the moment include providing a counterweight to Trump and his fellow nationalist bullies on the global stage. But how much will it ultimately matter that Macron differs so significantly from Trump, in manner as in politics, if his methods cost him the support of his people?

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P.S.

- The New Yorker, August 2, 201:
https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/will-scandal-sink-emmanuel-macron?mbid=social_twitter
 - Alexandra Schwartz is a staff writer at The New Yorker.
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfCa41dMxb8>
- [2] <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/04/inside-the-salon-international-de-lagricult>
[e](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/04/inside-the-salon-international-de-lagricult)
- [3] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-politics-macron-makeup/makeupgate-stalks-frances-macron-a-year-after-fuss-over-hollandes-haircut-idUSKCN1B52E1>
- [4] https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/macron-tee-shirt-et-costard-ce-qu-il-s-est-vraiment-passe_1796599.html
- [5] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/23/world/europe/france-macron-aide-.html>
- [6] http://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/bernard-henri-levy/bernard-henri-levy-macron-et-les-pirahas-24-07-2018-2238709_69.php
- [7] https://abonnes.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/07/28/philippe-raynaud-l-affaire-benalla-n-est-pas-une-affaire-d-etat_5336958_3232.html
- [8] <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-macron-trump-summit-and-the-dandruff-factor>