Competition for the Nationalist Mantle:
The Case of *Action Française* and Contemporary Theories of Nationalism

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Abstract:
The essay presents a case-study of an extreme-Right nationalist organization in early twentieth-century France, *Action française* (AF). The analysis focuses on the ideology of the group and its political tactics. The interest of the case derives from it being an example of competition between self-described nationalists for the political content of nationalism. The main findings with regards to AF relate to the ambit of political discourse, mythmaking, and the theatricality of violence as elements destined to exert a profound influence on subsequent nationalist movements. The outcome of the competition for the redefinition of French nationalism was nuanced: AF failed to gain power through its political strategy, but durably changed the identity of French nationalism. The establishment Republicans, whose nation-building efforts resulted in the creation of contemporary France, lost their monopoly on the nationalist label.

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What happens when two political groups compete to don the mantle of nationalism? Or, more specifically, what happens when an avowedly nationalist regime is challenged by an anti-system movement that claims for its nationalism the same degree of intensity, but a completely different content? Contemporary political science theories of nationalism tell us rather little about this question. Beyond their disagreements on the nature of the phenomenon itself, its historical sequencing, its link with economic development and literary culture, they have seldom explored the issue of party competition within the nationalist camp. The present essay proposes to address the issue by means of a case study of an early twentieth-century fringe movement named *Action française* (AF). The essay is structured as follows: the first section introduces the theoretical stakes of the research question; the second describes the institutional and political settings of AF's activities; the third and fourth respectively analyze what AF stood for and how they fought for it; the fifth and final section, in assessing AF's legacy, sums up the analytical significance of the case study.

1. Introduction

We are used to thinking of nationalism as a compound notion, which may take the form of a series of ideological positions and specific policies, a series of social groups who are receptive to such ideas, a label used by and for actually-existing political actors, and, as a consequence, a series of effects that this type of politics has on institutions,

social, and economic life. At the center of this compound notion is the sense that nationalism is somehow a unitary phenomenon, that is to say that it is possible to know (within each given real-life setting) who is a nationalist, what the nationalist position is, what the nationalists would do about salient political issues, and so forth. Without such a position necessarily implying a reification of the concept, there often is a tacit assumption that a dominant version of nationalism will be present at any given time.

Most of the theoretical distinctions that have been debated in the literature, between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism, for example, or between periods of national quiescence and periods of national revival, are based on the implicit premise of the unitary nature of nationalism at any specific moment, in each specific political context. Variation, then, is typically diachronic, or at most between different national cases synchronically.

Most of the classics in the social-scientific literature on nationalism share this slant (Anderson 2006, Gellner 1983, 1994, Greenfeld 1992, Hobsbawm 1990, Hroch 1985, Kedourie 1993, Smith 1991, 2008). More recent studies in a variety of different research traditions, be they descriptive (Ichijo & Uzelac 2005, Jusdanis 2001) or theoretical (Malešević 2006, Hogan 2009) or normative (Benhabib et al. 2007, McKim & McMahan 1997, Miller 1995, Tamir 1995), historical (Cole 2007, Marx 2003, Hechter 2000) or contemporary (Ross 2007), focused on individual thinkers (Varouxakis 2002) or broader currents of thought (Chatterjee 1993), by and large follow the same pattern. Although much has been written on contestation of national identity, in studies of specific national cases (Hechter 1975, Brass 1991, Jaffrelot 2007) typically the locus of strife is on competing ethnic or communal loyalties. John Breuilly's (1993) avowedly realist theory,

while speaking of nationalism as a form of politics, still fails to prolong his analysis beyond the point in time when nationalism becomes a common idiom. Some exceptions may be found, though mostly as *obiter dicta* (McCrone 1998: 113, 122, 138, Roman Szporluk's and Mark Beissinger's contributions to Hall 1998: 34, 174; S.N. Eisenstadt's contribution to Malešević et al. 2002: esp. 43-5, Özkırımlı 2005: 173-84; Hearn 2006: 231). Craig Calhoun (1997: 76) and Michael Billig (1995: 64, 71) gesture toward the implications of taking the idea of nationalism as discourse seriously, and understanding its analogy with language as a contested territory. Perhaps most notably, Rogers Brubaker (1996: 60, 66, 68, 84, 106) applies the Bourdieuian concept of fields, with its inherent notion of contestation and competition, to nationalism.

The present article, while eschewing that particular theoretical approach, explores such a logic of contestation: its premise is that ideas need to be embodied in order to act in politics, and these embodiments can be numerous, and not necessarily consistent. I argue that a further dimension of variation among nationalisms, beyond the traditional ones mentioned above, can be found in political environments in which nationalism is contested *between those by whom it is prized*. Radically different content is proposed for the same (positively valued) nationalist label. The ideological contestability of nationalism, that is to say, how it aligns with other traditionally influential cleavages, gives rise to competition to impose content (Freeden 1998). The case examined here sheds light on the possible outcomes of such a process.

The case study with which this article is concerned has not received much attention by nationalism scholars (but see Smith 1999: 75, Meadwell 1999). It involves an antagonistic political force, which struggled to establish itself as the 'true' embodiment of

the national spirit against an entrenched understanding that was one of the pillars of the political regime. Moreover, it did so within a political culture in which nationalism was accepted by a majority, but by no means the whole, of the polity as a pre-analytical, self-evident good. There were politically significant movements that advocated completely different, class-based regimes of solidarity. Hence, nationalism in this case was not 'activated' politically for the first time from a pre-political slumber: the struggle was over the re-definition of an already politicized cleavage, in the name of a value that commanded the allegiance of a majority, but not the totality of citizens. The politically divisive question was what it meant to be a good nationalist, in a context in which a normative split already existed on whether it was good to be a nationalist at all.

2. Republican nation-building and its discontents

AF was a political movement on the extreme Right of the French political spectrum under the Third Republic. It arose in opposition to the politics of the establishment republicans at the turn of the century (Maurras 1933, Nguyen 1991). Its political aim was to overthrow the regime ("by all means, even lawful ones"[1]) and restore the traditional French monarchy (Maurras 1924). It persisted in its anti-system opposition for several decades, becoming a stable presence in the political landscape; its story ultimately veered into infamy under the Vichy regime, when AF lent its support to the racial laws of the Pétain government (Maurras 1941), and actively collaborated with the Nazis in the capture and deportation to Germany of the French Jewish population. For the purposes of this case study, however, the focus of inquiry will be restricted mainly to AF's activities

in the years preceding World War I, the *belle époque*, in which most of its ideological and tactical characteristics were shaped (Joly 2006).

To understand AF's political project, it is necessary to replace it in the political context of the early twentieth century. The chief political problem facing the monarchists was the institutionalization and 'naturalization' of Republican rule. It is not indispensable in this setting to address the complex debate as to whether Republican ideology under the Third Republic in effect amounted to democratic liberalism with French characteristics (Hazareesingh 2001, Berenson et al. 2011). It will suffice to state that lines of filiation can be traced (as they were quite explicitly by contemporaries) both in the world of politics, from Gambetta to Clemenceau, and in the realm of academic scholarship, from Brunetière to Durkheim, in a tradition affirming the essential solidarity of progress, patriotism, and the republican form of government.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly for present purposes, the Republican project was not simply a disembodied ethos or a generically pious aspiration: it took the form of an unprecedented, ambitious, and invasive program of nation-building, and it took place in the context of the great social transformations that we are in the habit of naming the transition to socio-economic modernity (Weber 1976). An additional advantage for the forces of nationalization and modernization lay in the fact that they were operating in the only Great Power of pre-World War I Europe not to have politically significant national minorities, hence no natural adversaries to a discourse of French patriotism and national pride (Renouvin 1955).

Charles Maurras and most of the other key leaders of AF made their political debut as anti-Dreyfusards (Winock 1997, Ory & Sirinelli 2002), that is in the great Right-wing

mobilization in defense of the Army and against attempts to reopen the Captain's treason trial (Birnbaum & Berlière 1994). The movement, however, only came into its own organizationally around the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, and can be considered as an established force when its eponymous publication began to appear as a daily, in 1908. As an organizational form, AF bore some resemblance to other cases of 'negative integration' (Roth 1963) in the pre-war years, especially with regard to the attention paid to separate cultural institutions (such as the *Institut d'Action française* and its publishing house) as sources of counter-cultural prestige and legitimation. In the atmosphere of defeat surrounding the end of the Affaire Dreyfus and the subsequent Republican policy of separation between Church and State (Lalouette 2002, 2005), and in view of the eclipse of some of the leading lights of the previous generation of revolutionary-Right politicians, such as Déroulède and Drumont (Sternhell 1978), AF functioned as a rallying point for the reconstitution of a defeated political family.

In particular, it managed the improbable feat of employing the language of ultra-nationalism as the medium for expressing opposition to the Republican nation-building project: the Republican synthesis of progress, patriotism, and republic was denounced.[2] The monarchists saw what we could (anachronistically) call the Republicans' 'constitutional patriotism' (Müller 2007) as a completely unwarranted abstraction, and as a partisan political encroachment on a common pre-political heritage. In order to understand how the contestation of the idea of nationalism was carried out, however, it is first necessary to discuss the tenets of the monarchist worldview analytically, beginning with their conception of the ideal society.

3. Ideological contestation

When attempting to relate what kind of nationalism AF stood for, it is a convenient research heuristic to focus on the works of Charles Maurras.[3] Without wishing to claim that there was no ideological infighting within AF, or that it was a purely personalist party,[4] the very long association between the leader and the organization, along with the remarkable comprehensiveness and stability of Maurras' political ideas throughout his career, make him an ideal subject of study.

Maurras' political thought[5] is a closed and systematic doctrinal universe, expressed in a political rhetoric that eschews debate and innovation: authority, hierarchy, and subordination are key values, in what we have come to recognize as standard reactionary discourse (Shorten 2015). However, this hankering for the past is not exclusively repressive. The appeal to a prerevolutionary polity is also a means of escaping the gaze of the Jacobin State. The denial of the overarching normative power of the General Will also makes space for a defense of local particularities and rights against the encroachment of the centralizing Republic. If all guarantees of autonomy and non-interference are contextual and historically rooted, nationalism takes on a very special guise, because each nation is unique and specific, completely non-universalizable. To defend the integrity of the Motherland thus becomes to defend the bases themselves of all political life. In this sense also, AF could claim to be waging its battle on the side of the *pays réel* against the *pays légal* of the Republican regime.

At the vertex of Maurras' political thought is a comprehensive doctrine of conservatism. Its constituent elements are familiar. A passéist belief in the virtues of institutions evolved over the course of centuries mingles with the neo-Thomist belief in

an ordered cosmos of which the traditional institutions are the natural expression and embodiment. Hence, a static social order is seen as a guarantee for all social groups and classes, according to the traditional maxim of 'everyone in his place, and a place for everyone.'

The central role in the system, the monarch, is understood essentially as a subtraction: removing the problem of the legitimation of authority from the political calculus, from human volition generally, the monarchy guarantees the equilibrium of the system, and represents the public good. While the monarch cannot be limited by legal constructions such as constitutional charters, he is bound to guarantee the traditional and particularistic freedoms of the realm, and in fact Maurras conceives of his monarchism as a natural fit for his regionalism ('Authority from above, liberties from below'[6]), against the abstract centralizing tendencies of the Jacobin heritage (Maurras 1919). An endorsement of the Catholic religion, above and beyond personal questions of conscience (that is to say as an *instrumentum regni* and a moral sanction of the status quo) closes the circle (Buttry 1993: 54).

This neo-medievalist image of society, from which politics is all but expunged, is not particularly novel to Maurras, and his writings are themselves very forthcoming in acknowledging the intellectual heritage of his views. In essence, the tradition of French reactionary and counter-revolutionary thought in the nineteenth century, from the Legitimists to the *Ordre Moral*, is fully endorsed (Gwynn 1922, 1923). In fact, the role of modern social thought, from Auguste Comte and Frédéric Le Play to Ernest Renan and Hippolyte Taine, which is sometimes adduced as a sign of the modernity of Maurras'

thought, mostly plays the part of a confirmation, through new data and argument, of age-old political wisdom.

Maurras does not claim any particular innovation for his doctrine of monarchism. Indeed, it is interesting to note how, discursively, the tenets of Maurras' ideal theory vary only little over the course of his long political career, interacting not at all with the wide range of historical and political circumstances that confronted France in half a century of public life (and quite strikingly for someone whose motto was 'politics first!'[7]). For this reason, I would hazard the opinion that it is ungenerous to think of the chief ideologue of AF as an idealist or a utopian, a 'maker of systems' in the guise of a Saint-Simon: the chief purpose of the reference to a monarchic society is the creation of distance—monarchism is what political life and political thought would look like if it were not forcefully necessary to deal with the degeneracy of the present. But the indignities of the Third Republic, its corruption and faithlessness, hypocrisy and misrule are always menacing. Monarchism is the radical alternative, and as such it is uncontaminated by political struggle, but it is hardly the core of the ideology of AF, or the reason for such success as it garnered.

While AF was, first and foremost, a monarchist party, hence a participant in the battle of opposed regime legitimisms that marked nineteenth-century French politics, its 'integral nationalism' was a main plank of its program, along with its anti-Semitism (Maurras 1972). 'Integral,' because nationalism, in Maurras' thought, is an ideology with many hybrids. Integral nationalism stands at the center of Maurras' actual political praxis. It serves as an ethical justification for political action (even within a political equilibrium in which the monarchists are a fringe anti-system opposition). It is also provides an

explanation for this marginalization. The idea, in extreme synthesis, is to contrast a healthy and sound 'French' core, traditional, sedulous, agrarian, and so forth, to several different (but inevitably colluding) pernicious 'foreign' influences, manifesting themselves within the country: Freemasons, free-thinkers, Protestants, atheists, dogmatic revolutionaries, Jews (Reynaud-Paligot 2008)… The power of the latter oppresses the former: when it will be broken, the Nation will be cured.

Several aspects of this construct of integral nationalism are worthy of note. First of all, as in any case of 'ideals with adjectives', we are alerted to the existence of a contested semantic field, or a struggle for the political appropriation of a vocabulary with general appeal and traction. Indeed, the entire experience of AF can be seen as a struggle for the separation of the revolutionary tradition from a sense of French patriotism (Weyembergh 1992), in a situation in which 'the good of the country' was a common idiom of politics (and thus an empty signifier).[8] There was, secondly, arguably a 'fit' to be exploited between the ideal of nationalism in general and the exclusionary implications Maurras drew from it. Nationalism as an ideal of the common good of the polity as a whole is always at best a synecdoche, a part for the whole. In a contested political sphere, it claims to reach beyond divisions, especially beyond Right and Left, but it can only aspire to the totality it claims to embody. These exclusions, which Maurras' formulation renders systemic and 'embodied' (at least until society can be rid of its 'parasites'…), are, thirdly, part of a broader tendency in late nineteenth-century political thought: as has been argued elsewhere (Giglioli 2013, chap. 2), they belong to a family of elite responses to the irruption of the popular masses into representative politics, and the attendant epistemic crisis in assessing seemingly irrational collective

behavior. Such responses relied on a variety of arguments, drawn from the biological sciences, criminology, social Darwinism, the study of crowds, and so forth, for limiting the political community to a subsection of the population within which interactions could be taken to proceed in a customary, rational fashion, excluding the 'barbarians'.[9] The particularity of Maurras' formulation, however, is that it shifts the onus of recognizability. For someone like Gustave Le Bon, sound politics could be conducted among clearly individualized and characterized statesmen, bourgeois citizens proud of their personal identity, as against the frightening anonymity of the crowd and its base impulses (Barrows 1981, Nye 1975). For Maurras, on the contrary, it is exclusion that identifies: the 'metic' ('*métèque*'), the member of a Masonic Lodge, the Jewish financier are the recognizable, stigmatized individuals, contrasted with the 'regular,' 'ordinary' Frenchman, who is simply, by default, an anonymous everyman. Thus, a national identity 'by subtraction' comes to be articulated as an anti-elitist populism.

Such populism, however, does not cross into AF's political economy. In the realm of economic ideas, Maurras' position can be summed up as a version of paternalistic conservatism. Shrill in its denunciation of Socialist 'expropriation' aims, it nonetheless stressed the importance of social cohesion (Renouvin 1982, Fessard de Foucault 1984). While the Republican regime's economic policy was unabashedly developmental, and thought of welfare as a separate, remedial activity, AF's economic proposals wished to *prevent* the adverse social effects of economic change, such as urbanization, the destruction of traditional local social ties, and especially the atomization of factory life. Therefore, following the path of certain conservative French social thinkers, such as Le Play and François-René de La Tour-du-Pin, as well as the Catholic Church's social

doctrine, they advocated for traditional, corporatist arrangements to reconcile the interests of capital and labor. But what was a general goal of wellbeing and pacification in an orderly society for the Church, was explicitly valued by AF on grounds of national strength and war-readiness (Maurras 1910). In practical terms, this led to a championing of the interests of certain 'traditional' economic strata, such as landowners and shopkeepers, which formed the backbone of monarchist electoral strength, and the progressive demonization of finance, which was equated with rootless, anti-national capital (an attitude that was further biologized as hatred for Jewish bankers).

Integral nationalism is the central thrust of Maurras' conception of politics, but it does not exhaust it. Even the focusing of social resentment effected by the redefinition of social groups as essentially foreign (and harmful) to the body of the Nation is not sufficient to account for a certain asperity, a certain antagonistic edge, a certain style of politics that hinges on confrontation. In exploring the cultural components of Maurras' synthesis, above and beyond his solar image of a neo-Thomist society, and the political praxis of an exclusionary nationalism, there remains an idiosyncratic residue. For want of a better term, I will call it an intrinsic mythopoeic urge.[10]

It manifests itself, for instance, in the particular way in which Maurras conceives of the historical mission of AF, in the constant self-memorializing that presents its political action as radical novelty, unexpected and unpredictable. Naturally, French monarchism was not alien from myth, or unacquainted with a discourse of miracles, from the apocalyptic visions of a Joseph De Maistre to the *enfant du miracle*[11] to the wave of pilgrimages and otherworldly apparitions of the 1870s. But in Maurras there is a seemingly paradoxical, but constitutive, link between miracle and voluntarism. The

surprising, unforeseeable appearance of a mass monarchist movement that holds its own in the street as in political controversialism and polemics is a demonstration that there is no mechanistic law of progress overseeing political development, no immutable intrinsic logic of progress in political affairs, as the official Republican ideology claimed. Around this central notion of its own sheer improbability, the movement built its identity of defiance, grounding its calls to action. The central myth of AF is its own vitalism against all odds, the motor of a politics of enthusiasm.[12]

At the same time, myth-making is a basic characteristic of the group's ideological activity. It most often takes the form of a staking of claims to sites of (re-)sacralization, or in other words, the expulsion of 'partisan' influences from (and the imposition of interpretive conformity on) aspects of social life or parts of the common cultural heritage, as in the most famous case, the 'co-optation' of Joan of Arc (Wilson 1968).

4. Tactics

A discussion of attempts at sacralization leads quite naturally into a discussion of the tactics of AF, that is, of the interaction of the movement's ideas with the real-life political battles it engaged in. As a preliminary issue, however, it is instructive to consider the relative lack of importance of grand strategic considerations to the entire story.

From the end of the Affaire Dreyfus to the 'strange defeat' of 1940, AF occupied a very specific, and overall a static, role in French political life. It did not make much of an effort to break into electoral politics, and never was a force within governmental institutions, the only exception being its support of the *Union Sacrée* during the First World War (Maurras 1932). It did not hegemonize the French Right and was always seen

with suspicion by mainstream conservatives (Sutton 1979). Even its attempts at 'entrist' tactics (Maurras 1902) met with mixed success at best. It, however, had a daily newspaper that reached hundreds of thousands of families, and a network of cultural institutions to deepen its theoretical elaboration. Furthermore, it disposed of 'shock troops' to deploy on the Parisian street, the *Camelots du Roi*, ostensibly tasked with selling the *Action française* daily, but in fact a paramilitary outfit made up of shopkeepers, artisans, and mostly of university students (especially law and medical students), whose long-term political socialization AF pioneered (Tucker 1955, Huguenin 1998). Making the most of these limited means, AF for decades continued to embody anti-system protest, both in word and deed, but the closest it got to a putsch was in the murky circumstances of the riot of 6 February 1934, the quasi-coup of the far-right leagues against the *cartel des Gauches* government (Dobry 1989, Weber 1996: 133ff): for all its celebrated activism, and its cooptation of the catchphrases of insurrectionary Blanquism from the socialist tradition, this was the quintessential Gramscian 'war of position'.

Perhaps most interestingly, AF did not enjoy the firm and constant support of its natural, ideological allies, the Pretender to the throne (Osgood 1970) and the Vatican: both followed their own independent political agenda through the changing contingencies of their relations with the French Republic, and adopted a thoroughly instrumental approach to Maurras' group, as a pawn to be sacrificed in the interests of broader strategic aims. However, even so direct a repudiation as the Pope's solemn condemnation of the movement in 1926 did not prove fatal (Vanneufville 1927). AF's seeming immunity to these crises is a major historiographical puzzle. In order to account for the

movement's persistence as a political phenomenon, two structural elements shaping its tactics must be considered: the role of rhetoric, and the role of violence.

Maurras' political rhetoric, in general terms, can be said to present a curious inner tension. On the one hand, it appeals to the cultural legitimacy of the 'grand style', of the century of Bossuet and Corneille, hence to the tradition of high classicism in contrast with the prosaic, fallen nature of the present (Barko 1961, DeLeonibus 2000). Here, literary form is seen as symptomatic of an inherent ethical condition, so a struggle for a traditional aesthetics always already implies a *rappel à l'ordre* in the political realm, too (Maurras 1937a). In this context, Maurras could mobilize his erudition and cultural capital in the literary sphere, dating to his early years as a Provençal poet and *félibre* (Maurras 1922, Roudiez 1951, 1957), as the guarantor of an authority that was intended to count for politics, as well. More broadly, the literary excellence of criticism appearing in the columns of the *Action française* daily, and its ability to dialogue with and value even certain strands of literary modernism, as in the case of Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot, or Ezra Pound, attests to the emphasis placed on high culture in the monarchists' long-term ideological project (Einfalt 1996, Compagnon 2005). In the *belle époque*, the prestige of the tradition of national literature could still count on at least the passive recognition of a mass audience (derived in part, ironically for the monarchists, from the disciplining and standardizing cultural impulses of the Republic's mass educational system).[13]

This form of rhetorical engagement, however, is paired in Maurras' works with a very different tone. Together with the rhetoric of art, classicism, and tradition, *kalokagathia* (the Greek ideal of the unity of the good and the beautiful) as a transcendent political model, it is characteristic of Maurras' style to present a pervasive polemical note, a

ruthless pugnacity, a verbal extremism completely at odds with such an aesthetic ideal of equilibrium and equanimity. While the world of organic monarchism could take the discursive form of a reference to the 'grand style', the mobilizing potential of AF's ideology was typically expressed in the form of concentrated invective (e.g. Maurras 1918). Stylistically, the high-brow classicism of Maurras' literary strategy found its correlative in the re-invention or re-mobilization of popular folklore in politically antagonistic forms (such as the adoption by the *Camelots* of the *chansons chouannes*, the folksongs of the Vendée uprising against the Revolution).[14]

The most distinctive ambit for the deployment of this mode of discourse is as a rhetoric of disgust, which is invariably associated with the movement's campaigns of re-sacralization. The archetype of this move is the series of arguments employed by the anti-Dreyfusards to exclude the Army from the realm of the politically debatable, through an *ad hominem* stigmatization of those trying to prevent the sacralization of the institution. Here we touch the very center of the AF 'method', its distinctive style of politics: an ideology of exclusionary nationalism focused on the visibility and recognizability of the excluded, expressed as a rhetoric of disgust (Hanna 1994), and impelling to a politics of indignation, as a reaction to desecration. The dualism of this style of political speech is emphasized: rational argumentation in favor of or against a given policy assumes a didactic, non-dialogical tone, in essence preaching to the converted; meanwhile, the onus of mobilization is borne exclusively by references to highly-charged, emotive topics, provoking immediate, visceral reactions. Violence is the natural corollary of this strategy, condoned by the syllogisms, excited by the aesthetic-political use of images of purity defaced.

There is still, despite the historical distance and the many intervening experiences that dwarf the scale of any of AF's deeds, something intimately and inherently shocking about the insouciance with which appeals to violence appear in the prose of Maurras. There is, indeed, almost a complacency in his idea of a 'violence in the service of reason,'[15] a completely instrumental, Realpolitik conception of the role of street clashes and paramilitary action within the framework of a broad political strategy (Maurras 1943). Maurras contrasts his approach with the nihilism he sees in theorists of violence such as Georges Sorel (whose unbridled rhetoric he nonetheless sometimes mimics): he accuses them of letting political calculation be overwhelmed by the totalizing tendencies of the evocation of the Furies. Hence, Maurras relativizes the importance of violence, while normalizing its presence in politics. In other words, for Sorel, for example, violence served a central political purpose: it was the manifestation of the failure of the integration of bourgeois society, and the creation, through direct action, of a revolutionary alternative; therefore, it signaled a key moment of revolutionary effervescence (Vernon 1978). For Maurras, violence was not productive of new political subjects, but precisely for that reason it could be considered, and endorsed, as endemic, not growing in a crescendo towards any revolutionary palingenesis.

There are, however, serious reasons to doubt whether this Machiavellian 'economy of violence' in Maurras is sincere, or indeed tenable for the style of politics AF sets out to perform. Inasmuch as the practice of politics in general is conceived as agonic, and violence is interpreted as congruent with the 'altruistic' and 'generous' nature of the monarchist militants' political commitment (evidently contrasted with the utilitarian—and thus ultimately weak—motivations of their foes), the means tend inevitably to

intertwine with the definition of collective identity. Violence is no longer a means among many for the attainment of perennial political goals with the sanction of natural law behind them: it becomes a way of life, a form of collective identification. Furthermore, AF's mythmaking comes to rely on violence. The strength and persuasiveness of the mythopoeic construction centered on the radical unlikelihood of organized mass monarchism can only be sustained if it is seen to produce continuous effects. Violence then, for a movement premised on the refusal of electoral politics, becomes the proof of existence par excellence, giving credence to the continued viability and relevance of AF's worldview. In turn, if the movement is seen to act concretely for campaigns of political indignation, its violent methods become the practically meaningful part of its public persona and legacy.

Paradigmatically symbolic violence, no doubt: the horizon of all-out war is far removed from the world of monarchist street agitation in the *belle époque*, as from other coeval forms of activist politics on the Left. War, for this generation, is still the province of States, and even civil wars are envisaged by AF as belonging to an essentially different paradigm from the form of violence it itself employs. Nonetheless, this chaining to symbolic violence was the price AF had to pay in order to sustain its political mobilization in conditions of mass society. While the monarchism of the 1870s had been able to rely on the social basis of (the remnants of) a traditional legitimation, the new style of charismatic monarchism required perpetual stimulation.

In a final paradox, this constant evocation and symbolic re-enactment of insurrection and civil strife is contrasted with an unfailing support for the country's military institutions and discipline. Perhaps due to the fact that the participation in the *Union*

Sacrée during World War I resulted in the (albeit partial and temporary) legitimation of AF, in the group's imaginary war remained the master analogy for that ever-elusive state, national cohesion.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the political theory and practice of AF amounted to an opposite form of nationalism to that enshrined by the Third Republic. The picture is markedly different from what we are accustomed to associate with French political development—a nationalism, indeed, much more useful in understanding the filiation of the contemporary radical Right. What were its tenets? AF had scant regard for abstract liberal freedoms; it conducted an implacable war against parliamentary sovereignty and democratic self-government. It demonized the revolutionary heritage. It railed against Jacobin centralization and decried the universalization of citizenship. In fact, it sought to denationalize the French Jews. It had significant qualms about capitalist development, and especially about financialization. Progress played little or no part in its system of values. Ultimately, AF devised a form of nationalism in which the People had no real agency as a political subject. Yet, it succeeded in mobilizing previously quiescent strata of the population over the long run for a panoply of anti-system activities, from character assassination to paramilitary action in the Paris streets. An ideology of hierarchy and traditional order coexisted with a political praxis focused on the incitement of chaos. AF's alloy, composed of equal parts of respectability in intellectual circles and polite society, *ad hominem* attacks, *a priori* opposition to the regime, and theatralization of violence proved remarkably durable.

AF's posterity beyond Vichy can be perceived (and was directly acknowledged as such) in the Iberian authoritarianisms of the mid-twentieth century, as well as in Cold War reactionary politics of South America (Schwartz 2009: 95), for instance. In both these cases, however, the original civilian, or at most paramilitary, nature of Maurras' ideology was grafted onto an essentially military political tradition. In this transition, the difference, which also distinguishes Maurras' worldview from fascism tout court, can be seen to reside in the epigones' whole-hearted embrace of what Furio Jesi (1979) has called an 'esoteric thanatophilia' (as in the falangist slogan of *¡Viva la muerte!*). Maurras' classicism was flexible, but could not ultimately be reconciled with explicit nihilism.

Less dramatic and celebrated, but potentially more productive of far-ranging consequences, was the impact of Maurras' style of rhetoric on the handling of wartime propaganda on the part of the French State in World War I. To be sure, not in the lofty ideals of the defense of international law and the rights of small States, which formed the center of the discourse shared with the British, and later with Wilson. Rather, in the much more 'molecular' and ground-level depiction of the basic ingredients of enmity towards the Germans, the graphic descriptions of atrocities, the biologization of the enemy's wickedness, the essentializing of cultural traits, even the predominance of olfactory tropes—in short, the panoply of forms taken by the 'rhetoric of disgust' that Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker (2002) have shown to have been nationalized, mobilized, and incorporated in State propaganda. This incorporation, while furnishing the indispensable building blocks for many of the horrors and disasters of the early twentieth century (Traverso 2003), also had a profound but often neglected impact on the forms of political contestation in democratic settings in the medium- and long-run, recognizable for

instance in certain dynamics of personalization and spectacularization, on whose contemporary salience it would perhaps be superfluous to dwell (Wodak 2015).

From the point of view of the theory of nationalism, the main interest of the AF case is the split it engendered between national organization and nationalist ideology. As a vehicle for seizing State power, the doctrine and political practice of AF were largely unsuccessful. The French State as we know it today, in its centralization, liberal-democratic socio-economic structure, republican institutions, and so forth is the direct descendant of the nation-building of the Third Republic, not of the monarchist revival. At the same time, nationalism as an ideology in France was durably imprinted by Maurras' movement, especially with regards to its long-term effect on the perception and articulation of foreignness. The Jacobin component of French nationalism, so prominent in the nineteenth century, was successfully challenged by the revolutionary Right in the decades preceding the First World War. Indeed, it may be ventured that AF's most successful strike against the ideology of the Left was precisely its attack on Leftwing nationalism (Maurras 1916). In the long run, especially with the receding of Charles De Gaulle's influence on French political culture, the exclusionary, racist tendencies of French nationalism have resurfaced (Chebel d'Appollonia 1988).

Hence, it can be argued that the political legacy of AF was to separate 'advocacy on the nation's behalf' from the actual nation builders. The heirs of AF have claimed the mantle of nationalism even while being barred from participation in power. In so doing, and as politically passéist as they undoubtedly were, the monarchists of AF ushered in a recognizably contemporary form of nationalist ideology, centered not so much on the transition to modernity as on the eternal recurrence of the themes of cultural identity.

[1] *Par tous les moyens, même légaux* (the slogan first appeared in an article by Maurras entitled "Politique" in the *Action française* daily on 27 March 1908) [All translations are my own].

[2] Indeed, AF represents an inflection point in the history of the anti-system Right in France, by reasserting the constitutional question and the form of State as the central foci of opposition to the regime, contrary to the preceding generation of activists of the late 19th century. On this, see the Maurras' correspondence with Maurice Barrès, published by Plon in 1970.

[3] For general biographical information on Maurras, see Bordeaux et al. (1953), Boutang (1984), Chiron (1991), and the *Cahier de l'Herne* curated by Giocanti and Tisserand (2011).

[4] It would, after all, be hard for a monarchist party to be the personalist party of anyone, except the king…

[5] For general studies on Maurras' ideas, see e.g. Paugam (1971), Capitan-Peter (1972), Giocanti (2006), Goyet (2000), and Kunter (2009). Maurras himself never produced a systematic, comprehensive treatment of his political theory, preferring instead to let it emerge through the large number of controversialist texts on current affairs by means of which he fought his political battles. The closest approximations we have (Maurras 1937b, 1954) are either late compositions, essentially didactic in character, or posthumous collections assembled by his followers.

[6] '*L'autorité en haut, les libertés en bas*'.

[7] '*Politique d'abord*'.

[8] In this, AF was following in the footsteps of the previous generation of Boulangist agitators (cf. Sternhell, *cit*.).

[9] On this topic, also see Michel Foucault's analysis (Foucault 1997), which traces the historical tradition of the warring-races concept in French political thought.

[10] It can be remarked in passing that most of the great names of French twentieth-century thought on the topic of myth, from Lacan to Dumézil to Girardet, were to some extent or other related to AF.

[11] The Count of Chambord (1820–1883), pretender to the throne from 1844 to his death, was the posthumous son of Charles Ferdinand, Duke of Berry, himself the younger son of Charles X of France.

[12] 'Exciting while it lasted', Eugen Weber rightly sums it up, with regard to the historical memory of the militants (1962: xi).

[13] This, after all, was the world that, in 1914, took part in that most singular of endeavours, a war in which the great majority of combatants (at least on the Western Front) were literate and shared a vocabulary of (national) literary heritage that cut across classes: soldiers and officers in the trenches could often be found to read the same texts (Fussel 2009).

[14] Similar re-enactments of an idealized past as political symbolism were performed by several groups in other European countries at the turn of the twentieth century, such as for instance the German academic fraternities and the pan-German League.

[15] '*Violence au service de la raison*' This was a motto of the *Camelots du Roi* (Maurras 1924). Its formulation is strikingly similar to an earlier version, by Ernest Renan, in a pamphlet entitled *Islam and science*: 'force in the service of reason' (Renan 2018: 276).

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