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The Firebrands Echo: National Fantasy as an Obstacle to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Populist Spectacle

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1 | Introduction

During the 2016–2017 French presidential election season, the established playing field of political parties and voter affiliations was ruptured. The longstanding center-left and center-right parties collapsed, and Emanuel Macron rode this wave to an electoral victory. Candidates at opposite ends of the political spectrum—the far-right Marine Le Pen (FN) and the left-populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI)—jostled for favor with the French public. Reviewing the results of this competition, scholars agree that Le Pen consolidated a committed voting base drawn to chauvinistic French nationalism (Shields 2018).

Le Pen's success in preserving her coalition problematizes the strategy of combining left-wing populism with nationalism. Over the last decade, left-wing populism has intertwined with the political theory of discourse theory (DT), following the tradition of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau and the Essex School of Discourse Analysis (Glynos and Howarth 2007). DT accounts advocating left-populism as a political strategy have pointed to how practices of articulation can create viable left-populisms, galvanizing support for insurgent movements promoting novel identities (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). Preceding (and proceeding) 2017, a sample of important scholars and politicians of this conjuncture claim(ed) that left populists could find a strategic advantage by creating discourses of progressive nationalism. In addition to the normative claims that left-populism could embrace national identity while remaining "progressive," this camp argued that emotionally-charged patriotic and nationalist displays would win-back voters seduced by the chauvinistic political right—I call this specific proposition the "conversion strategy" (Custodi 2021; Mouffe 2018; Mouffe and Bherer 2016; Gerbaudo 2021, 131; Mouffe and Bechler 2018).

Competing with Le Pen in 2017, the left-populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon put the conversion strategy into practice. Mélenchon is an iconoclast politician. While consistently self-identifying as left-republican, his career spans decades and can heuristically be divided into different stages, depending on his primary discursive emphasis: (1) A"first" career with the French Socialist Party (PS) from the 1970s until the early 2000s featured a traditional Marxist discourse (Alexandre et al. 2021, 936) (2) A left-populist phase in the 2010s—while Mélenchon's embrace of left-populism occurred over a long-term engagement with Latin American left-populism and neo-Gramscian thinkers—Mélenchon's populism became explicit after he broke with the PS (Alexandre et al. 2021, 937–938). (3) A post-2020 turn to abandon the insistence on national identity and promote the unique concept of "créolisation," which emphasizes the hybridity of Frenchness and the importance of incorporating immigrants, Muslims, and minority participation in a plural French democracy (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025). The second stage of Mélenchon's career can be further heuristically bifurcated according to the differences between the 2012 and 2017 presidential election campaigns. Over time, 2012's pluralistic Front de gauche party, which focused on "left-wing cultural identity," was subsumed by Mélenchon's closely controlled 2017 party, La France Insoumise and its strong brand of republican nationalism. Demarcating the distinction between the 2012 and 2017 presidential campaigns underscores the particularity of Mélenchon's populist articulation of the conversion strategy. Indeed, analysts of French left-wing politics were struck by the shift between 2012 and 2017 from a discourse

promoting the historic symbols and notions of the French left to one embracing the conflation between the French people and the French nation (Chiocchetti 2019; Marlière 2019; Alexandre et al. 2021; Cervera-Marzal 2022).

In this paper, I am not necessarily interested in the qualitative continuity or rupture of the 2017 campaign discourse compared to Mélenchon's career (cf. Alexandre et al. 2021; Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi 2025) but in the specific strategic importance placed on nationalist republicanism for the 2017 election. While Mélenchon was clearly ideologically motivated in his articulation of republican nationalist discourse, there was also an explicit ambition and intention to utilize French republican national identity as a strategy to capture segments of the right-wing vote in the 2017 election (Cervera-Marzal 2022; Desmoulières 2017; Mélenchon and Endeweld 2016; Alexandre et al. 2021, 939). Mélenchon's coordinated with and took direct inspiration from key conversion thesis proponent Chantal Mouffe, who appeared alongside him at major campaign rallies and gave interviews and lectures to mainstream and left-wing media (Mélenchon and Mouffe 2016). Mélenchon employed a slogan labeling Le Pen voters as "angry, not fascists" as an olive branch and appeal for defectors to join his camp (Cervera-Marzal 2022; Mélenchon and Endeweld 2016). His textual campaign materials, including a series of "thematic books," explained how he hoped his defense of and pride in French national identity would provide an alternative for those drawn to the far-right rationale (Mélenchon 2016; Kleinberg 2023, 174–175).

While keeping in mind his overall success (a surprise election result of 19.6% in the first round), which gives credence to the general program of left-populism (Amable and Palombarini 2021), Mélenchon's specific failure to attract right-wing voters problematizes the conversion theory. Overall, Mélenchon did not spur FN voters to migrate to his camp, as advocates of the conversion strategy had promised. As we shall see, surveys indicated that support from young voters and absentee voters accounted for the surprising performance of the left-wing candidate. For both the conversion strategy (and DT generally), this outcome is puzzling and important to explain. Methodologically, Mélenchon's failure to attract right-wing voters to his campaign, despite the claims of the conversion theory, sets the scene for a "retoductive" analysis of the campaign (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 41–47). A retroductive analysis seeks to theorize and explain the potential reasons for a puzzling outcome; in this case, I investigate why and how Mélenchon's nationalist discourse failed to attract right-wing support according to the internal rationality of the conversion strategy?

My theory is that the misstep in the conversion strategy is fundamental: Ernesto Laclau's thorny incorporation of psychoanalytic theory in his formulation of populism. Laclau's account never adequately explains how populism works on a fantasmatic level when "established" and "novel" political discourses are matched in political competition, presaging the messy situation of the conversion strategy. More specifically, a Lacanian-derived account of nationalism as an "ideological fantasy" illuminates Laclau's error and helps theorize the poor showing of Mélenchon's application of the conversion strategy (Glynos 2001; Mandelbaum 2020; Žižek 1993). Ultimately, I propose that nationalist fantasies are more obstinate than Laclau's theory of populism accounts for.

To be clear, I am not claiming that the fantasmatic dynamics of Mélenchon's campaign had causal effects in "pushing" voters to Le Pen. Simply, I aim to introduce a reasonable and persuasive theoretical account of how Mélenchon's campaign did not address the ideological "grip" of Le Pen voters to underscore the deficiencies in the conversion strategy and ultimately the lack of vote transfer. Therefore, while the crux of the analysis is on a theoretical level, I draw from a sample of electoral surveys to build context and underscore the reasonableness of the theory.

The article proceeds through a case study of a significant moment in Mélenchon's construction of his fantasmatic narrative of progressive French nationalism: the February 5, 2017, Paris/Lyon hologram rally. At the February 5 campaign stop, a crowd of 12,000 people gathered to listen to Mélenchon preach how France's progressive and enlightened national identity would usher forth a future collective harmony and prosperity (France Culture 2017). I analyze the rally as a microcosm and a representation of the conversion strategy. The rally was heavily publicized in both the French and international media as a significant moment in the campaign, signifying Mélenchon's momentum. The hologram rally constitutes a Nationalist Media Spectacle (NMS), an "eye-catching," temporally limited event that is indicative of the consolidation or contestation of dominant national identities (Dayan and Katz 1994). However, the eventual outcome of the election and the remarkable consistency in Le Pen's voting bloc sets the scene for theorizing the ideological commitment and reaction of the right-wing French demographic to Mélenchon's campaign. The overall failure of the conversion strategy and Mélenchon's public displays of French nationalism point to another dynamic at play, the dynamic of fantasy, whose role in the theory of left populism needs to be reconsidered.

2 | Laclauian Populism and the Conversion Strategy

The rationale underpinning DT's strategic turn to a progressive national discourse is the notion of "conversion" that there is a particular force to left-populist nationalism that will attract right-wing voters. The conversion strategy is one possibility for how DT can produce effectively charged political movements. DT is distinguished by its ability to theorize the politics of novel identity narratives, welding together popular demands and collective emotional investment.

Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005) describes how populism unfolds as complex, intertwined processes of political organization and rhetorical representation, that is, both activism centered on interpersonal relationship building between oppressed groups to form horizontal alliances and strategic uses of semiotics and aesthetics to produce novel markers of these alliances (Laclau 2005). Populism mobilizes a "logic of equivalence" and a "logic of difference" to narratively organize society into two sides of an antagonistic relationship, what Laclau calls two "frontiers" (Laclau 2005, 78). For the populist, their camp is the true representative of society, a claim they make by describing themselves (often) as "the people," which symbolizes how this movement, which is only ever partial, tries to present itself as the representative of the whole society (Laclau 2005, 81). Alternatively, the opposite camp is an offending party, the

villains who must be vanquished from society for it to prosper. The constructed borders of the first group sequester the second group external to society (Laclau 2005, 81). To achieve this polar separation, populisms must articulate "empty signifiers," pivotal terms in the existing discursive order laden simultaneously with authority and ambiguous referential meaning (Laclau 2005, 98). Empty signifiers both symbolize the authority of the populist movement to assert power and functionally congeal the unity of the populist frontier (Laclau 2005, 111). Furthermore, Laclau utilizes the Lacanian concept of jouissance—a unique experience of pleasure intermixed with pain and frustration—to describe how individuals engaged in populist projects come to emotionally identify and gain satisfaction from identifying with the empty signifier (Laclau 2005, 110).

For Mélenchon's campaign and for the 2010's global left-populist "moment," Chantal Mouffe was the chief advocate of the conversion strategy. Mouffe argued that Laclauian left-populism should focus on the nation to mobilize the embedded emotional attachments right-wing voters have toward their country and sway them to the left (Mouffe 2018, 71; Mouffe 2022, 14; Mouffe and Bherer 2016). She describes how passionate displays of national pride might "sublimate" right-wingers to the left's progressive national movement (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 62; Mouffe 2018, 71; Mouffe and Bherer 2016). Sublimation is the psychoanalytic complex that Laclau exposits to theoretically anchor the above-described emotional mechanism found in the empty signifier. However, sublimation's role has also recently been critiqued as an inadequate psychoanalytic mechanism for *sustaining* the collective identity required for populism. Zicman de Barros explains how sublimation is in tension with the dynamics of fantasy, leading to the possibility that individuals attempting to sublimate into a group identity will fall back into the grip of their preexisting "fantasmatic" identities (Zicman de Barros 2022, 231; see also Rothenberg 2010, 151). My hypothesis is that in contexts where emotionally charged discourses of identity are in political competition, established fantasies of national identity can function as obstacles to the political efficacy of the *new* discourse of national identity. Mouffe's conversion strategy and Mélenchon's campaign are haunted by fantasy.

3 | The Incongruencies of Laclau's Psychoanalytic Theory

Consider that in Lacanian theory, there are two "realms" through which subjects enjoy: desire and drive. Desire and drive are distinct but intersecting; they engage similar psychic elements but tend to organize and process them in different ways. Both desire and drive emerge from the subject's "ontological lack," as immortalized in Lacan's allegory of the child's separation from the mother (Lacan 1997, 71; see also Glynos 2001, 195–196). Both desire and drive develop in conjunction with an individual's biographical life (Fink 1994, 55–56). However, fundamentally, desire and drive differ in how they direct the subject toward *object petit a*.[1] In desire, the individual's social identity is wrapped up with *object petit a* such that the goals one pursues are partial to an identity discourse

In desire, the subject's relation to object petit a is structured according to the coproduction of desire and fantasy. Fantasy designates the specific narrative pathways created by identity discourses, directing how subjects pursue the *object petit a* as fulfilling (Fink 1994, 74). Analytically, fantasy illuminates how the subject fixates on singular goals and objectives, such as a scaffolding that insulates and preserves the integrity of the subject's ability to enjoy their identity. Glynos writes that "fantasy stages the impossible relation between subject as lack, as desiring on the one hand, and fantasmatic object of desire on the other" (Glynos 2001, 201). The *impossibility* of the relation between the subject and the desired object is crucial, as it designates that the structure of fantasy corresponds to an ultimate fulfillment that is always deferred. The frustration—or impartiality—of the subject's pursuit of *objet petit a* constitutes the character of *jouissance* as a mixture of pleasure and frustration—it is a satisfaction that is never absolute but always teases a "beyond" (Fink 1994, 60–61). Fantasy offers a *promise* of fulfillment; it entices an imagined possibility of perfection (Mandelbaum 2020, 57). Lacan's "graph of desire," a topological model of his theory, further illustrates the importance of fantasy as structuring and maintaining the social-symbolic world occupied by the subject. On the graph, this is visually represented by the fantasy's location in the upper-left corner at the end of the vector of the split-subject's desire, anchoring the response to the demand of the Other (Lacan 2006, 300 (815)). The graph amplifies how, as the lacking subject enters the social-symbolic world, the subject is confronted with the existential question of desire—simultaneously the anxiety of the subject's lack in its own desire and a confrontation with a preexisting world that forces the subject to wonder "what does it want from me?" Fantasy, as a discursive structure—as a narrative if one prefers to think of it in these terms—provides the subject with a ready answer; it offers a way of being (Lacan 2006, 301 (815–816)).

Scholars have assessed nationalism to be an identity discourse whose fantasmatic structure has an especially formal character and intense grip on subjects (e.g., Žižek 1993; Stavrakakis 2007; Mandelbaum 2020). Subjects with nationalist fantasies identify with nationalist desire, and the master signifier of "the nation" occupies the role of *objet petit a*. Nationalists follow an economy of enjoyment where *jouissance* is achieved by pursuing the formation of an idealized nation through a myriad of objectives and ends (Žižek 1993, 202; Mandelbaum 2020, 43). As nationalist subjects learn to function according to the nationalist discourse, the fantasmatic function "fills in" *objet petit a* with various signifiers from the nationalist discourse; fantasy thickens the subject's conception of an ideal state and a perfect enjoyment to be obtained (Žižek 1993, 201; Fink 1994, 96; Mandelbaum 2020, 60).

Furthermore, fantasy displaces and inflects the impediment of the subject's fulfillment onto an external actor—a person or group, as Zizek describes—"who steals our enjoyment" (Žižek 1993, 201; Mandelbaum 2020, 56). By externalizing our lack of enjoyment into an exterior other, fantasy functions to keep us convinced that our idealized enjoyment is a possibility. Nationalists striving to find a pure society can always construct "corrupting outsiders." Furthermore, just objects of desire can be metonymically constructed, so too can constructions of the villain be metonymically constructed; the content of the villain figure is secondary to its function as the scapegoat/obstacle that blocks enjoyment (Glynos 2001, 202). A discursive community's

fixation on a specific enemy occurs, in Lacanian terms, on the level of the imaginary. For Lacan, "imaginary relationships" govern the genus of mutual recognition—classmates, neighbors, colleagues, siblings—according to binary designations of love or hate (Fink 1994, 84–85; Lacan 2006, 295 (809)). The symbolic law of the subject's identity discourse subsumes these imaginary relationships into symbolic terms, and subsequently symbolic markers of the villain are enough to trigger the imaginary relation of theft of enjoyment in the fantast, for example, for a nationalist, the flag of another country is enough to raise a sense of rivalry (Lacan 2006, 66 (277–278); Žižek 1993, 210).[2]

Finally, the fixation on the villain also opens an additional pathway of jouissance, a transgressive enjoyment, of pushing into taboo pursuits such as racism, xenophobia, sexism, or conspiracy. The extra component of vice and edge that comes from indulging these morally shunned practices and beliefs both provides an outlet of jouissance and sustains the coherence of the fantasy (Glynos 2021, 104). In societies governed by liberal norms of multiculturalism and "colorblind" ideas of meritocracy, tolerance, and distributions of rights and protections on alternate planes of the individual and the community, intense nationalist fantasies transgress these norms in their persecution of figures outside the national community. This fantasmatic enjoyment gained from persecuting the "villains" or "thieves" helpfully captures the fantasies of right-wing nationalists (Žižek 1993, 210; Mandelbaum 2020, 15).

Parallel to the subject's socialization into the symbolic and the onset of desire and fantasy, attachment to *object petit* introduces a pursuit of enjoyment in the realm of drive. Drive, like desire, utilizes *objet petit a* to symbolize an attainable fulfillment reproducing the original lost harmony (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004, 210). However, drive describes an economy of enjoyment structured on how the subject's fixation on *object petit a* is inherently doomed to fail; it twists the inevitable frustration of failing to reach the object into a source of enjoyment (Lacan 1997, 92). While desire provides partial enjoyment in the obtaining/disappointment related to "partial objects," drive provides enjoyment in the continuous actions related to the failed pursuit of *objet petit a* (Lacan 1998, 167). As Lacan writes, in the drive, the subject is "indifferent" to the object (Lacan 1998, 168) and describes the drive's circuity by utilizing Freud's original German description, "…the characteristic of the drive is to be a *konstante kraft*, a constant force" (Lacan 1998, 164; italics original). Thus, drive is always broken into the pursuit of partialities (Laclau 2005, 116). Lacan artfully describes it as the act of shooting the arrow at the target to achieve the goal (Lacan 1998, 179). More precisely, enjoyment in the drive comes from the repetitive firing of the arrow as if they were aiming *through* it, "It is a paradoxical fact that the drive is able to find its aim elsewhere than in that which is its aim…" (Lacan 1997, 110).

With this rendition of the core Lacanian "knot" of identity, desire, drive, fantasy, and *objet petit a* in mind, I find two divergences from Lacanian theory in Laclau's elevation of sublimation in populist logic. First, Laclau ignores the biographical process of subject formation as co-original between desire and fantasy, focusing solely on drive and sublimation (Laclau 2005, 101, 112). Second, Laclau is ambiguous in how he construes the empty signifier, leading him to overemphasize the capabilities of sublimation. At times, Laclau states that the empty signifier is analogous to *objet petit a* when it is sublimated. At other times, he sticks to the concept of partial objects, suggesting that sublimation of the drive has the capability to overwrite, or hegemonize, the subject's identification without addressing fantasy.

This incongruency occurs in a crucial section of *On Populist Reason*, where Laclau attempts to supplement the notion of the empty signifier by drawing from Lacan to explain how discursive practices of naming and rhetoric tap into emotional dynamics of identification. Here, Laclau favorably cites the work of Joan Copjec and her claim, "that there is no single complete drive, only partial drives…" (Laclau 2005, 112). Laclau expands Copjec's (accurate) statement into the claim that partial objects become available as remnant, scattered objects that contain traces of *jouissance* (Laclau 2005, 113). However, Laclau then makes an odd claim. He writes that at this moment, in the articulation of a populist movement, when the empty signifier is named, the empty signifier takes on the role of the *partial object* such that "the partial object becomes itself a totality; it becomes the structuring principle of the whole scene" (Laclau 2005, 113). Copjec, Laclau claims, demonstrates that although the empty signifier is simply at first a regular signifier, its elevation in populist discourses resembles the same process that occurs when *partial objects* are sublimated—they function as the totalizing signifier of identity, *objet petit a*.

In her text, Copjec is very careful to stress that this mutation breaks with the notion that the partial object of *jouissance* would act as a representative of the inaccessible Thing. Quoting Lacan's definition of sublimation as "the elevation of an ordinary object to the dignity of the Thing," she reads it in the sense that "elevation does not seem to entail [the] function of representation, but rather entails—in a reversal of the common understanding of sublimation—the substitution of an ordinary object for the Thing" (Laclau 2005, 113). Laclau's rendering of the empty signifier lends itself, I believe, to two readings depending on whether one takes literally or metaphorically the function of the empty signifier as totalizing (see also Zicman de Barros 2022, 13).

First, Laclau could be read literally as staying true to the Lacanian account of sublimation in the drive. In this reading, the empty signifier is the sublimated partial object in the drive that orients the repetitive practices and actions of the body. Second, Laclau could be read metaphorically; he would be suggesting that the elevation of the empty signifier happens *like* the elevation of an object in the drive and that the effect is formative for the creation of a collective populist identity. Both readings, however, ignore the role of pre-established fantasies in sustaining existing identifications; neither reading properly develops an account of how the elevation of the empty signifier (as sublimated partial object or fundamental emotional anchoring point) overcomes preexisting fantasies (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004, 207; Rothenberg 2010, 141). For Rothenberg, Laclau's account can never specify, even in cases when a successful hegemonic group identity forms, *how* the individual identifies with a group's collective fantasy. Laclau's formulation simply ignores the significance of fantasy in individuals' biographical development and in stabilizing their identifications (Rothenberg 2010, 151).

This leads to the second problem in Laclau's theory. If we accept Laclau's presentation of sublimation, he still never offers an account of why the sublimation of a partial object in the *drive* supersedes the knot of identification by fantasy in *desire*. Indeed, *desire* corresponds more intimately with the subject's fantasies and how it orients itself toward goals and ambitions. *Drive* corresponds to the enjoyment found in the repetitive *action* of a practice. Thus, it is not entirely clear how, even in basic premises, a sublimated drive would impact subjective identification in a social, political sense. It is possible and even predictable that parallel, competing political discourses feature the sublimated signifier leading to a conflict and competition between the populist discourse and this preexisting fantasy-laden discourse (Rothenberg 2010, 141).

4 | French Political Division, Mélenchon 2017, and the Hologram Case

The outcome of the 2017 election indicates something went terribly astray for the conversion strategy. Mélenchon's discourse of progressive nationalism did not capture a significant contingency of right-wing support, and some minimal evidence from French political history, voting attitude surveys, and electoral sways demonstrates this outcome.

First, we should consider that a parsimonious explanation for Mélenchon's relative success was his ability to attract a sizable block of voters with left-wing economic values who, in recent history, developed strong grievances against the PS and had become absentees. Amable and Palombarini's (2021) analysis of the neoliberal turn of the PS documents this trajectory. Left-wing voters traditionally were "…the majority of public-sector employees and the blue-collar working class…" who tended to vote in favor of the welfare state (Amable and Palombarini 2021, 30). However, led by Francois Mitterrand in the 1980s, the PS embraced neoliberalism and increasingly alienated this longstanding working class contingent (Amable and Palombarini 2021, 50). One election study from 2012 notes that "blue-collar workers" support for the PS compared to the national average withered from 68% in 1974 to just 4% in 2012 (Amable and Palombarini 2021, 17). These voters did not migrate to the FN or the center-right. Instead, the PS and French Communist Party (PCF) have mainly conceded voters to absenteeism. For example, Mayer found a link between economic destitution and absenteeism in the 2017 election: 35% of voters in the classification of most economically precarious reported either abstaining or not declaring a vote (Mayer 2018a, 656). Mayer demonstrates that when ideological attitude is controlled for, economic precarity does not increase the likelihood of voting for the FN but significantly increases the likelihood of abstaining. For Mayer, this points to the importance of ideological conviction in driving support for the FN and the emerging independence of ideological commitment as a social category linked to factors such as education rather than class and occupation (Mayer 2018a, 664; see also Rooduijn et al. 2017, 541; Gidron 2022, 151). In corroboration of the trend in voters' grievances against the mainstream left, Tiberj discovered that between 2012 and 2017, self-identification with the left fell from 43% in 2012 to 34% in 2017, right-wing identification remained consistent, and the share of "nonaligned" self-identifications rose dramatically to a 40-year high of 36% (Tiberj 2017, 1093).

Significantly, the voting behavior literature points to a consistent bifurcation between far-right and far-left constituencies; voters with strong ideological identifications rarely vote for the other side (Gidron 2022, 156). Longstanding research shows that ideological commitment to exclusionary nationalism and distaste for immigration motivates support for the far-right in Europe (Lubbers and Coenders 2017; Rooduijn et al. 2017, 550; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020; Stockemer et al. 2021). The empirical literature consistently also shows opposition to immigration as the driving factor behind support for Le Pen (Gougou and Persico 2017, 314; Mayer 2018b, 445). For the 2012 presidential election, Alexandre documented that 88% of FN voters recorded a xenophobic value profile (Alexandre 2015, 7). Mayer writes,

> What drove support for Le Pen in this election was fear of immigrants and of a European Union seen as opening the door to them. If one looks at the marginal effects, one standard-deviation increase on the ethnocentrism scale raises the probability of voting for Le Pen by 8 percentage points in both rounds (Mayer 2018a, 664).

In another analysis, Haegel and Mayer find that the FN received 95% of the vote from respondents who rated themselves a "10" on an ideological scale of 0–10 (0 *the most left-wing*, 10 *the most right-wing*), while Mélenchon attracted 0% of 10's and only between 3% and 5% from 9's, 8's, and 7's (Haegel and Mayer 2018, 237). In Dabi's assessment of the 2017 election, 92% of FN voters thought there were too many immigrants in France, while only 28% responded that they thought that the children of immigrants were as French as their home-born peers. An IFOP poll[3] found that 93% and 92% of Le Pen's first-round voters were motivated by concerns over fighting terrorism and illegal immigration, respectively, compared to 43% and 25% for Mélenchon voters (Dabi 2017). Finally, Tiberj argues that cultural values around tolerance and social progressivism have become particularly important in demarcating the distinction between far-left and far-right constituencies; in his analysis of the 2017 election, voters with an attitude profile reflecting cultural and social tolerance had an 84% chance of identifying with the left, while voters with a cultural authoritarian profile had an 82% chance of identifying with the right (Tiberj 2017, 1104).

These results are striking when one also considers that FN voters remain strongly anti-immigrant even while voters for the mainstream right party become more tolerant. Tiberj's long-term mapping of French social and cultural attitudes shows a consistent increase in tolerance since the 1990s and a relative peak in 2017. For Tiberj, the increase in tolerance is correlated with two variables, the long-term increase in formal education achievement in French society and the strong concentration of tolerant values by younger French voters (Tiberj 2019, 9–10; see also Mayer 2018b, 444). Consistently, Mélenchon supporters tended to be younger and had above average accepting positions toward immigrants (Rouban 2017). Mayer's analysis supports this assessment:

> [Mélenchon] voters are the polar opposites of those who voted for Le Pen. They are driven by a rejection of ethnocentrism, a rejection of economic liberalism, and above all ideological self-identification with the far left. The increase of one standard deviation to the left on the left-right scale increases the probability of voting this way by 12 percentage points. Education makes the difference: while the chances of voting for the radical right increase among the least educated, there is a significant positive relation between education and support for Mélenchon (Mayer 2018a, 664).

Finally, the empirical measure of the sway of voters between Mélenchon and Le Pen between the 2012 and 2017 elections confirms the clear bifurcation between the coalitions and underscores the empirical ineffectiveness of the conversion strategy. In the 2012 election, the vote sway of 2007 leftwing voters to the FN was virtually nonexistent (Alexandre 2015, 9). In the 2017 election, both Mélenchon and Le Pen captured 4% of the other's 2012 voters for the 2017 election. While this is a numerical victory for Mélenchon, it is mitigated when added that Le Pen captured 6% of Hollande's 2012 vote compared to Mélenchon, which captured just 3% of Sakrozy's 2012 vote—an overall numerical victory for Le Pen in terms of rough right-to-left vote pull in a head-to-head between Mélenchon and Le Pen (Dabi 2017). Tiberj's study found that 6% of voters whose value measurements identified with the left-wing voted for the FN, compared with 5% of right-wing voters selecting LFI (Tiberj 2017, 1105; see also Haegel and Mayer 2018). Dabi's study found that only 1.3% of Mélenchon's total electorate from 2017 described themselves as having political ideals that matched the FN, and only an additional 3.5% from those ideals matching the remaining three right-wing parties combined (Dabi 2017).

While the long- and short-term surveys of voter attitudes and behaviors leading up to and during the 2017 election underscore the relatively stable bifurcation between the Le Pen and Mélenchon camps, this situation needs to be understood as context and not a determining "iron law" governing the outcome of the election. The conversion strategy might seem more contextually rational when one considers the recent success of the FN in winning over "nonaligned" voters during the 2010s. These are voters who identified their politics neither with left nor right parties. According to Tiberj, the nonalligneds' choice to vote for the FN is usually predicated on their commitment to social and cultural insularism (Tiberj 2017, 1104; see also Gidron 2022, 156). Indeed, the relative electoral success of the FN in 2012, and the blueprint for its strategy in 2017, was to consistently mobilize and expand its "ownership" of nationality by co-opting the discourse of French republicanism (Alexandre 2015, 9).

Scholars of the French far-right agree that the FN's marked success in establishing a connection between its reactionary politics and republican discourse in the 2010s. Mayer describes this a successful "demonforming" strategy that purged antisemitism from the party, shielded xenophobia in republican language, and attempted to professionally organize the party. The results were a resounding success as the party increased its public acceptance and electoral shares in the early 2010s (Mayer 2018b, 441–443). Shields notes a pivotal Le Pen speech in 2011 where she proclaimed the party was suited to defend the traditional values of the French Republic, marking a shift, "…from an ethnic to a cultural discourse of identity" (Shields 2013, 191–192). Mondon, chronicling the battle over rhetoric and legitimacy between Sarkozy and Le Pen in the 2012 election, confirms the crystalizing of Le Pen as the representative of exclusionary nationalism and her conflation of FN ideology with traditional French republican language (Mondon 2014, 313). Debras highlights how the FN offers a narrative of the French nation as a cohesive cultural unit secured by its republican history and the hard work of the French people. Any conflict that strikes France is portrayed as artificial, produced antagonistically by politicians and the hostile elements of immigration and multiculturalism (Debras 2018, 78).

French republicanism is a historically contested tradition with factions having attempted to dominate interpretation for political gain since the onset of the French Revolution in 1789 (Chabal 2015). Mélenchon specifically belongs to an ideologically committed tradition of articulating French neo-republicanism for the left (Kleinberg 2023). Because the FN's success in winning the "nonaligneds" and anti-system voters through its republican turn was relatively recent, Mélenchon's conversion strategy of winning back this voting block through a discursive battle over republican nationalism seems more logical on the surface. As Tiberj notes, political and social attitudes are malleable and, importantly, susceptible to political events and speech (Tiberj 2019, 11). However, in the final instance, for the 2017 election, Mélenchon faltered in outcompeting Le Pen in capturing nonaligned right-wing voters for his camp. In fact, the FN peaked in its ability to capture nonaligned voters in the 2012 presidential election, winning 31% (Alexandre 2015, 9). Haegel and Mayer show that the "demonstration" strategy started to backfire after 2013, when the FN had achieved the most public acceptance—when 53% of the population rejected the idea that the party was dangerous—and belief in the FN's danger hit it is highest point in the decade by the 2017 election (Haegel and Mayer 2018, 230). Tiberj's analysis shows that of the total nonaligned voting bloc, 19% went for Mélenchon and 23% for Le Pen (Tiberj 2017, 1105). The decrease from Le Pen's high watermark of 31% in the 2012 election can be explained by identifying the success Macron had in winning nonaligned voters (Tiberj 2017, 1105). We can infer from these findings that the FN's ability to pull anti-system and nonaligned voters through appeal to republican-laced nationalism had already rescinded and that public opinion had already soured on the FN by the 2017 election. Nonaligned and anti-system voters were signaling a withdrawal from an interest in strong republican and nationalist discourse—progressive, conservative, or otherwise. For Mélenchon and the conversion strategy, this context would seem to have introduced a serious impediment from the outstart. Mélenchon had chosen a discourse that was already out-of-sync with the voting block "most up for grabs" and instead were left trying to win "on the enemy's turf," engaging the FN on a rhetorical battle over the nation and republicanism in a gambit to win over FN voters who had firm ideological commitments. While Mélenchon's nationalist discourse formed through the conversion strategy wishes to point out the falsity of Le Pen's claim to national signifiers, Le Pen supporters seemingly were gripped by the chauvinistic, "inappropriate" fantasy of the nation, which they have come to identify as related to republican signifiers. This context must be kept in mind as we begin to

assess how Mélenchon articulates a progressive version of the nation.

4.1 | Case Study: The Paris/Lyon February 5, 2017 Hologram Rally

The Mélenchon campaign held a live event on February 5, 2017 in the city of Lyon with an audience of 12,000 people in attendance (Mélenchon 2017). This was an important moment during the campaign season, as voting in the first round occurred on April 23. The Lyon rally was part of a series of late-stage campaign events in the lead up to election day. Following Lyon, Mélenchon would hold the momentous March 17 march for the Republic, participate in the two televised presidential debates—one on March 20 and one on April 4—and stage an additional hologram rally in Dijon on April 18.

Mélenchon's polling support among voters surged in correspondence with these late-stage events. The high-watermark of 15% support, recorded in the early autumn of 2016 (Elabe 2016), petered out to between 11% and 13% for much of November–January 2016 into 2017 (Ifop-fiducial 2016). By the end of January 2017, Mélenchon was polling at a campaign low-point of 9%–10% (Elabe 2017a). It should be noted that polling results do pinpoint a jump in support for Mélenchon in proximity with the Lyon/Paris hologram rally. An Elabe study using data collected between January 30 and 31, 2017 showed Mélenchon's support at 10% (Elabe 2017b). A subsequent OpinionWay study found that in the few days after the rally, support increased to 13% (Micheau 2017). However, it would not be until early April 2017, after the second presidential debate, that polls found support for Mélenchon had jumped to approximately 17%, a number that would continue to rise to 19% in the days before the election (Elabe 2017b; IPSOS 2017).

There are good reasons to analyze the February 5, Lyon rally as representative of Mélenchon's nationalist discourse and the ambitions of the conversion strategy. First, I choose not to focus on the presidential debates to magnify attention on the performance of the discourse of nationality. While the presidential debates were more high-profile events, they were governed by an interpersonal clash between candidates and their dueling personalities. It also entered the French public consciousness that Marine Le Pen had a "disastrous" outing in the debate, as Monde dubbed it a bad performance that scholars have cited as a detriment to the effectiveness of her messaging and possibly her electoral performance (Gougou and Persico 2017, 307). Moreover, audience members found Mélenchon to have been the most impressive debate performer (25%) (Fondation Jean-Jaurès 2017). In contrast, the February 5 Lyon/Paris rally stands out as unique because of its novel use of hologram technology,[4] which allowed Mélenchon to "project" himself onto the stage in Paris. In both international and French media, the hologram rallies were portrayed as potential tipping points in the campaign with journalists and pundits conveying the idea that Mélenchon's intimate, charismatic, and tech-savvy mode of performance contributed to his strength as a candidate, especially among younger voters (Wilsher 2017; Theviot 2019, 87–88). In this sense, the Lyon/Paris hologram rally certainly worked to grab attention: beyond wide media coverage, the event hashtag "#hologram" trended on twitter afterwards (France Culture 2017).

Again, the issue at hand is retroductive analysis of why far-right voters were not convinced to vote for Mélenchon. It remains beyond the scope of my argument and analysis to claim that this rally had any causal effect in "pushing" voters to Le Pen. However, what is clear is that in contradiction to the ambitions of the conversion strategy, the sedimented constituency of Le Pen voters did not jump ship to Mélenchon. Some final bits of empirical polling evidence help illustrate this point. Le Pen's constituency remained remarkably stable over the course of the 2017 election. An IPSOS survey noted that 73% of Le Pen's voters had decided on their choice "several months in advance" (Teinturier 2017). Perrineau found that "From January to February 2017, the FN leader held 91% of her intended vote compared to Fillon's 75% and Macron's 77%. Going back to the previous presidential election of 2012, Le Pen retained 84% of support base…" (quote in Shields 2018, 540). In other words, the spectacle of the rally and the conversion strategy as whole did not have its intended effect.

4.2 | Critical Fantasy Studies and Media Spectacles

Critical fantasy studies (CFS) is a subdivision of the overall DT research program, applying insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis to trace out the fantasmatic narratives produced by social and political actors (Glynos 2021; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Ronderos and Glynos 2023). CFS, in focusing on the fantasmatic narratives of a discourse, builds on earlier research in DT that developed the logics of the critical explanation approach (Glynos and Howarth 2007). The logics approach asks, for any practice, what governing idea or notion motivates and dictates the arrangement, form, and usage of a set of elements? What fixed terms *must* constitute the practice, and what sense of purpose governs this arrangement? The approach enables the analyst to capture what is significant or meaningful about a particular operation through close historical analysis of the ontological conditions that foregrounds it and subsequently through categorization and interpretation of the material practices and semiotic elements that constitute its aim (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 139–140). In this schema, fantasmatic narratives denote the intensity and aim of affect mobilized by a discourse (Glynos and Howarth 2007). The fantasmatic logic describes how discourse presents enjoyment to be gained by actors if they "buy in" to the presented program. CFS intensifies the logics approach's focus on the fantasmatic logic and calls attention to the presentation and discursive construction of such imagined scenarios and the qualities and practices necessary to fulfill them (Glynos 2021; Ronderos and Glynos 2023). However, CFS has only yet been applied to cases occurring over the long run, such as the circulation of a specific newspaper (Ronderos and Glynos 2023) or the corpus produced over years by a social movement.

Recent literature in DT on populism has highlighted performance as an effective practice for articulating populist discourse but focuses mainly on bodily performances and aesthetic styles correlating to a microanalysis (Aiolfi 2022). An account of the

role that theatric, singular events can play in the distribution of fantasmatic narratives in populist discourse would expand the scope and viability of the CFS approach. To this end, I borrow the concept of NMS from nationalism studies. Scholars look to mass media to understand the formation and emotional components of nationalist identity (Dayan and Katz 1994). Dayan and Katz brough attention to the power of "eye-catching" media events and broadcasts that function as sites of national socialization as media have become increasingly digital, unevenly produced and distributed, and transversal of borders. The main thesis of Dayan and Katz remains credulous: visible public displays cause audiences to experience national identity, sometimes creating limited "flashes" of support for latent feelings of national community. I treat Mélenchon's hologram rally as an NMS and, following CFS, scrutinize how key signifiers, syntax, and historical references were mobilized during the event to produce a fantasmatic narrative.

I transcribe and assess a set of deictic statements made by Mélenchon during the event. Deixis refers to a type of syntax, identified by Michael Billig (1995, 106–107), marked by pronouns such as "we," "our," and "your" in conjunction with signifiers of the nation to reflexively position an audience into discourses of national identity. Turning to the deictic statements as empirical data to reconstruct the fantasmatic narratives therefore has two benefits. First, it underscores that the positioning of collective political identity created by the narrative statements reveals the extent to which he was trying to incorporate his constituents into a French national republican discourse. Second, the statements demonstrate the construction of the combinatory chain: the national community, political action, and achieving a goal. This compounding quality of the statements makes them ideal for assessing the fantasmatic logics of the hologram rally. I have transcribed 10 deictic statements from the rally below separated into two groups to correspond with two sets of fantasmatic logics: a logic of national grandeur (where membership in the nation leads to enjoyment by imagining a sense of "greatness") and a logic of reasserting national popular sovereignty (where achieving power leads to enjoyment).

5 | Results: Fantasmatic Logics of the Hologram Spectacle

5.1 | Fantasmatic Narrative of National Grandeur (Beatific Fantasy)

1. "This rally should therefore be a hymn of love to the history of France, to who we are."
2. "We are this great country, with so many poets, writers, scientists, and so forth."
3. "We are a great power. An intellectual power but also a material power."
4. "We are here to think about ourselves with our level of culture, education, and preparation, with the tremendous wealth that was accumulated by our elders."
5. "You the French! France ranked second with respect to per capita contributions to the space industry."

First, notice the repetitive use of the pronoun "we," which appears in all four statements and typically at the beginning of the statement. The use of "we," as Billig suggests, has the function of signaling to the audience that they are part of, and internal to, this collective identity. Second, notice the reference to history and tradition in the statements to anchor the collective "we." Statements 1 and 4 both make temporal references to events/actors from the past that become inscribed in the history of the French "we." Statement 1 explicitly does this with the phrase "history of France." Statement 2 is more ambiguous, as it is not clear if the "poets, writers, scientists" are contemporary or include a temporal dimension. Statement 4 more explicitly includes a temporal frame as the reference to elders and accumulation signals the theme of continuity and inheritance.

The statements achieve the task of linking the audience to the collective and temporal dimensions of an entity that can be described as the historical and traditional French nation. These statements at least lack specificity in pinning down the particularities of this collectivity. While this may seem to conform to the Laclauian premise of using the nation in a vague and all-encompassing sense to reinscribe it in an inclusive manner, I will demonstrate in the next section that this is counterproductive in the Mélenchon case. The statements communicate that the audience should think of themselves as partial to this entity, the French nation, which has existed throughout history but also that they should get some sense of pride, fulfillment, and pleasure in recognizing its "greatness" (and therefore their own individual greatness). Statements 2 and 3 explicitly use the term "great," while Statement 1 uses "love" and Statement 4 uses "our level," implying an advanced or high level. However, the lack of specificity makes it such that the audience is left to fill in the details of what exactly is "great," "lovely," or "worthy" about France; they are told simply it is a thing they should love and celebrate.

5.2 | Fantasmatic Narrative of Protest (Confronting the Theft of Enjoyment)

1. "If the protests of the French people are not heard… then we have to either change the EU or leave it."
2. "You had power and you must take it back."
3. "We want a real assembly that regenerates the French people!"
4. "We need to make plans… and regain control over the long term, which is a public property."
5. "We need to chart our future according to conditions that correspond to our *patrie* (patriotic homeland)."

Here again, we can see the use of pronouns: "we" and "you" being used to signal to the audience to think of themselves as partial to the French people. This time, emphasis is placed on the action the audience, as members of this national people need to do: "either changing or leaving the EU," "taking power back," "regenerating the French people," "regaining control," "charting our future." Each of these actions corresponds to an aspirational idea of the future. Indeed, the "future" is a reoccurring theme in Mélenchon's political program and discourse (i.e., the name of his manifesto "a common future") and other statements made during

the rally that I have omitted here. Statements 2–4 are significant because they utilize tense to signal a loss of a certain advantage position and action that needs/should be taken to reinstitute this lost passed state: "regain," "regenerate," and "had power." In this way, the statements connect the actions—protest—to materializing a desirable state in the future when "power," "control," "a real assembly," or "conditions that correspond to our *patrie'* are achieved. If the logic of grandiosity positioned enjoyment *ipso facto* in being a member of the French national community, the logic of protest and achievement positioned enjoyment in acting in aspiration of a future where that community asserted its (lost) power.

Mélenchon presents a narrative centered on the grandiose idea of a national "reclaiming" and "reassertion" but in the scope of a supposedly progressive iteration of the French republican nation. In the next section, I argue that despite the "partial objects" of enjoyment articulated by Mélenchon through his use of nationality, this only metonymically activated an intense fantasy of national purity and supremacy, a fundamental conception of nationality, that was more entrenched in right-leaning and far-right constituents.

6 | Discussion: National Fantasy as an Obstacle to the Discursive Theory of Populism

We are now positioned to move from documenting the fantasmatic narratives of French national collectivity and political action proposed by Mélenchon through the Paris/Lyon spectacle to theorizing about their limited failure to coalesce far-right support. First, consider that inroads have already been made in understanding the role fantasy can play in causing political actors to retain, become stuck in, or become "gripped" by established fantasmatic discourses (Glynos 2001). Calling back to the first section of this paper, such critical mobilization of fantasy as an obstacle to creating identity change builds on the Lacanian idea of identity as a developmental process of psychosocial intertwining with a discourse (Mandelbaum 2020, 57).

The notion of metonymy in psychoanalytic theory offers the final piece of the puzzle for illuminating a process where the production of a novel fantasmatic discourse "activates" the grip of an established fantasmatic discourse. In everyday experiences of literature, metonymy refers to substitutions between words or terms to convey a link to another related term in a chain of concepts. Metonymy can be theorized not only from the "constructive" side but also from the "receptive" or interpretive side (Lacan 2006, 431). The articulation of terms in a proposed fantasmatic discourse can metonymically intersect with existing fantasmatic discourses, leading to overshadowing or overdetermination of one of the discourses by the other. It seems that when multiple fantasies utilizing elements and signifiers of nationality are competing, this tends to favor the maintenance of fantasies that posit the continuity, purity, and assertion of the traditionally understood nation. Indeed, this metonymic activation is implied in the structure of nationality as an affective community intelligible only through the metonymic "filling-in" of the symbolic criteria of the national discourse by the master signifier. My hypothesis is thus that when right-leaning voters encountered Mélenchon's discourse, they metonymically interpreted it according to their own ingrained fantasies of chauvinistic national purity and regulation.

Mélenchon's proposed "progressive" nation identity existed on a concentric, but novel, vector with the incumbent chauvinistic national fantasy. When Mélenchon articulates the nation in general but familiar terms, such as "we are the French," and so forththe audience starts to reflect and position themselves in their understanding of their Frenchness. Even though the direction and coherency of the signifying chain Mélenchon is articulating is anchored by the object of the progressive nation, the audience stuck on the "call" of the nation has metonymically jumped discourses into that of the chauvinistic nation and the fantasy structure it brings with. For the far-right voters caught up in a fantasy of punishing the immigrant threat as the "thieves of enjoyment," Marine Le Pen and her promise to manage the moral, cultural, and ethnic composition of the populace appears to have been persuasive.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] The *objet petit a* is a concept that denotes the primary moment when the euphoric harmony experienced in the mother-child dyad becomes transferred into the social-symbolic realm through attachment to a specific object/signifier presenting "perfect fullness." O*bjet petit a* has dual uses. First, it marks how all subjects come to desire by denoting a positivization of the "lost memory" of our harmonious state. Second, it denotes the goals that one ascribes and are directed to as they are socialized in a fantasmatic ideology (see Stavrakakis 2007, 173–74).

[2] See Fink (1994), 189 note 5 on role of the symbolic in the construction in imaginary figures.

[3] While an IPSOS poll found that 70% of Le Pen voters were swayed by convictions on immigration, 46% related to terrorism, and 42% on insecurity in contrast to 7%, 10%, and 6% on those issues, respectively, for Mélenchon (Teinturier 2017).

[4] The hologram rally received coverage from international technology and science media indicating that the hologram apparatus itself played a part in bringing attention to the campaign. For international technology media see Lecher (2017); for French language science and technology media see France Culture (2017).

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