

THE CONVERSATION

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Emmanuel Macron is already showing he is no progressive

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The new French president's commitment to social justice has come in for questioning. Kamil Zihnioglu/EPA

At the Vel d'Hiv commemoration ceremony on July 16, France's new president Emmanuel Macron insisted that France must acknowledge its responsibility for deporting thousands of Jews to concentration camps during World War II. Over 13,000 were rounded up at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in 1942 by French police in a raid directed by the Nazis.

Although he has been criticised for conflating anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, the overall international reaction to Macron's intervention – in which he also called for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – was positive.

Barely a week before, however, comments Macron made about Africa saw him accused of racism by many of the same international media outlets.

Africa's 'civilisational' problems

Questioned on whether he would support a "Marshall Plan" for the continent, he suggested that foreign aid can do little to alleviate poverty there. Rather, he said that "civilisational" problems including high birth rates must be addressed. This statement inverted cause and effect – high birth rates are caused by underdevelopment, not the other way around. It also drew on racist stereotypes dating back to colonial times.



This seemed at odds with the “progressive” reputation of a president who has described French colonialism in Algeria as a “crime against humanity”. His naming of a gender-balanced cabinet also saw him praised as a defender of social justice.

Macron’s comments regarding Africa, however, cannot be dismissed as a mere misunderstanding of the issue. His stance on Algeria demonstrated his awareness of the ongoing legacy of colonialism in the continent. He further underlined his understanding of the subtleties of international politics when he correctly noted the link between climate change and global terrorism. Whatever else Macron may be, he is not poorly informed.

This is not the first time that Macron has been accused of racism. On a recent visit to a coastguard base, he joked about the fragile “kwassa kwassa” boats used by Comoran immigrants to reach the French department of Mayotte – dubbed the “boats of death” due to the thousands of Comorans who have drowned making the journey. Discussing the different kinds of fishing vessel used in Mayotte, Macron laughed that “kwassa kwassas do little fishing. They bring Comorans.” As well as making light of the hazardous journey that these immigrants face, Macron’s choice of words was profoundly dehumanising.

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Macron's interior minister Gérard Collomb has also raised doubts about how progressive the new government actually is by comparing refugees near Calais to an "abscess". Collomb refused to condemn a decision by local authorities to restrict food and water distributions to refugees to one daily two-hour window – during a heatwave.

France's human rights ombudsman has denounced the "inhumane" treatment of refugees at Calais. But Collomb has summarily dismissed accusations of police brutality against them. This came at a time when human rights organisations, which are pressing charges against local authorities over human rights violations, have alleged that police officers are going so far as to "poison" refugees' drinking water with tear gas.

Time for the state to move over

On closer inspection, Macron and Collomb's comments are not as inconsistent with Macron's overall programme as meets the eye.

His economic liberalism is no secret. Since being elected in May, he has launched wide-ranging employment law reforms in favour of employers. There are also €10 billion of privatisations planned, alongside tax cuts which will disproportionately benefit the richest 0.1% of society. He has never hidden his preference for free enterprise over state investment – and was backed during the election campaign by France's foremost managerial lobbying group.

In this context, the less widely publicised comments that Macron made in his three-minute long response to the question on the "Marshall Plan" for Africa take on their full significance. As well as high birth rates, other "civilisational" problems that he identified included security, illicit trade, and failed states. He accepted that public funding should play "a role" in areas such as education and health. However, he argued that the private sector should be encouraged to provide the lion's share of

investment in Africa and reasoned that the high growth rates in certain African states make the continent into “a land of opportunity”.

The ideological stance lying behind this argument is rooted more in neoliberalism than postcolonial racism. Macron has no problem with foreign aid – but he implies that Africa’s economic problems should be solved primarily by the investment of private companies, motivated by the profits to be made in doing so.

Social justice ... when it’s useful

Macron may or may not personally be racist, but his use of a racist stereotype to support this argument is unlikely to have been an accident. It distracted attention from the ideological stance underpinning his reply as a whole: one in which economic outcomes trump all human considerations.

Political theorist Sheldon Wolin labelled this ideology “inverted totalitarianism”. Philosopher Raffaele Simone describes a modern society founded upon it as a “gentle monster”. Its “monstrous” aspect hides behind an ostentatious liberalism – at least towards those affluent enough to drive the economy by purchasing consumer goods. Those unable to do so are subject to harsh repression, which explains the treatment of the Calais refugees.

Support for progressive causes is not prohibited by inverted totalitarianism, but only ever extends as far as is demonstrably beneficial to the economy and the private sector. Hence, Macron’s promise to act against discrimination in the workplace, and particularly against women, may be genuine. Recent research found that reducing such discrimination could be worth €150 billion to France. Beyond this, however, he has already started to renege on campaign promises relating to gender inequality – suggesting that he does not value it as an end in itself.

Macron may at times use the language of social justice, but he is no “progressive”. That he was a preferable option to the far-right Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential election cannot exempt him from criticism forever. He does not appear to value social justice for its own sake. For politicians to be truly worthy of the name “progressive” they must give people precedence over profit.

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