

Power Outage

By Theodore Dalrymple

Last week, I saw a picture of President Macron in his shirtsleeves embracing Teddy Riner, the French heavyweight judo champion who has long reigned unbeaten in every championship he has entered, and who has just won yet another Olympic medal.



M. Macron is not a large man, which is not his fault, and M. Riner is a very large one, a man-mountain almost, which is neither to his credit nor his discredit. No one can help being the height he is. But M. Macron trying to embrace him, which was obviously quite a strain, looked ridiculous and undignified. I am afraid that I thought of the very large ant on my terrace capturing and eating a very tiny one, albeit that the latter put up a very good fight in the circumstances. The judo champion could easily have crushed the president to death.

I confess that I am in general against all this hugging in public, which is so often a means of displaying insincerity, but on this occasion especially a simple handshake would have been far better. This was so obvious that one asks how a man as intelligent as the president of France could not, or at

least did not, see it.

I think the answer is that the president cannot quite make up his mind whether he is the Sun King or the Tribune of the People. Sometimes he is the one and sometimes he is the other. Unfortunately, these two roles are irreconcilable. You cannot stand on your dignity at one moment and be one of the lads the next.

I think that this points to an essential dilemma of democratic politics, not in France alone. On the one hand such competitive politics draws to it highly ambitious types who are prepared to go to great lengths to reach the top of the greasy pole and must have the kind of self-belief or entitlement necessary to do so, and who want desperately to distinguish themselves from the great mass of mankind; on the other hand, for electoral reasons, they are obliged to pretend that, at heart, they are simply one of the people, at the most a mere first among equals. The dilemma creates a dialectic between distance from, and proximity to, the people.

Distance is necessary to create one kind of mystique; proximity, mystique of another kind. The successful democratic politician must be near to and far from the people at the same time. This is a contradictory demand that leads to generalized insincerity in both roles. The man who plays them is never himself, and since habit becomes character, soon his character is emptied of real content. He comes to be an empty vessel, and empty vessels are completely uninteresting.

Not long ago, for example, I saw the former president of France, M. Sarkozy, give a speech. Some people are prepared to pay a lot to hear such a formerly powerful man speak, but I would now be prepared to pay *not* to hear him speak.

I suppose that at my age I should not be easily shocked, but I admit that I was shocked by the emptiness of the performance that I witnessed. M. Sarkozy spoke with passion and

gesticulated like a ham actor or a puppet with an uncoordinated puppet master, but what he said was forgettable almost before he finished the sentence, and I could not but think of him as a dried pea in a tin box being shaken a child who loves noise. I do not know whether the whole of life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing, à la Macbeth, but certainly former prominent politicians seem to be full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

Having been in the public eye for so long, many of them try to remain in the public eye, as if for them to be is to be seen, and not to be seen is to cease to be. John Maynard Keynes was once asked what Lloyd George, the prime minister of Britain when it was still an important country, thought about when he was on his own, and he replied that when Lloyd George was on his own, there was nobody there; and this was before the great efflorescence of celebrity culture in which so many people derive their sense of real existence from being publicly noticed.

Many public figures are so addicted to the limelight that they cannot do without it; life loses its savor and meaning for them. Gone are the days when a Harry Truman could drive away from the White House in his own car at the end of his term of office. The fate of Mr. Biden is terrible warning to, and almost a nightmare for, public figures who derive their self-importance and meaning from public exposure. The poor man, whose name only a few weeks ago was on everyone's lips, though not necessarily in a flattering way, might now just as well be dead, for all the attention paid to him. (One should add that to be the object of reprehension is better for such types than to be totally ignored, just as it is said that there is no such thing for a writer as bad publicity.) Fame without real merit or achievement—the most common kind—is like a leaky party ballon that must be kept inflated by constant pumping, otherwise it deflates completely and reduces to an unimpressive soggy bit of rubber on the floor.

Perhaps 'twas ever thus—to an extent. People who fawned upon court favorites ceased to do so the moment they fell from grace; indeed, it might become dangerous even to acknowledge their continued existence. Those who once bestrode institutions such as hospitals or universities like colossi were forgotten the moment that they retired. But yet (or so it seems to me, I cannot prove it scientifically) there are more people now than ever who feel the need to be in the public eye in order not to feel crushed by their sense or awareness of their own insignificance, and therefore who rattle around like dried peas in tin boxes shaken by little boys who like noise.

First published in [Taki's Magazine](#)