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‘The yellow vests will triumph’: The middle and working class protests in France

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Background

In 2018, France experienced one of the most significant social mobilisation in its recent history, which laid bare the country’s social ills, anti-elite sentiment, growing inequalities and need for social reforms and justice. It all started on 17 November when thousands gathered on the streets across the country to protest against rising fuel prices. The fuel prices were raised as part of French President Emmanuel Macron’s environmental policy strategy of green tax on fuel. The move set off nearly a month of protests around France. The French Interior Ministry then estimated that 1,36,000 protesters had turned out across the country over the weekend, in addition to 2,80,000 in the consequent weeks. The protests had since continued and has gained recognition for its yellow high-visibility jackets which French motorists must carry in their vehicles. The protesters wearing these yellow jackets and in protesting against the high fuel prices have led the movement be reckoned as the ‘Yellow Vest’ protests. The protests started in the French rural provinces from where individuals commute to work in public or private transport and then spread to Paris, where demonstrations turned into riots over a few days and scenes of violent civil unrest played out along the city’s famous Avenue des Champs Élysées (the industrial hub). In 2018, the movement resulted in a 10 billion Euro aid package for the poor and led President Macron to back down in the face of protest, something he had said he would not do. The protest that started in 2018 still continues as Macron crystallizes the anger of all protestors and their language is getting more and more violent: “We’re going to hang the banker!” and “Macron, we’re coming to get you at your place!”

So how did day-to-day frustrations about fuel prices and ‘green taxes’ transform into a nation-wide protest movement attracting hundreds of thousands of people in a matter of weeks? It all comes down to Macron’s apparent failure to connect with the people, understand their concerns and steer France away from the neoliberal policies that have only led to a higher standard of living in an already inequal society where the income differences between rich and poor has only increased. With no social security and adequate welfare measures to facilitate the income distribution, the yellow vest protesters have taken to the streets asking for mundane issues from wages to fuel prices to be solved.

Protests and revolutions have forged the sociopolitical landscape in France but are the yellow vest protestors the modern Jacobins fighting contemporary tyranny or something different? Danielle Tartakowsky, a history professor at Paris University in his recently published book wrote "the current demonstrations are unlike any other, marking an important shift in France's political landscape."

Scholars since at least the 1980s have noted that structural economic changes in advanced industrial democracies have decreased voters' demand for traditional political parties of the center-left and center-right. Deindustrialization and its shift from manual labour to a more service-oriented economy has reduced the working class share of the population since as least the 1950s, decreasing the electoral viability of parties of the left. For example, the working class share of Germany's electorate was more than halved between 2000 and 2016, from 39 to 17 percent. In Britain, the working class share of the electorate declined roughly 20 percentage points from 1961 to 2006—from nearly 60 per cent to less than 40 per cent—as the growing white-collar middle class became a majority of the country's electorate by the middle of the 1980s. The economic development behind deindustrialization and the growth of the middle class in advanced democracies also led to an increasingly educated population. Russel Dalton and Michael Wattenberg suggest that increasingly informed electorates have become less dependent on information from traditional parties to make individual political judgements. Rather voters have become less deferential to party elites and less attached to party labels, and increasingly engaged in nonpartisan forms of political mobilization, such as through civil society organizations. For example, as the share of the Portugal's electorate belonging to a political party declined in the 1980s, the number of Portuguese voluntary organizations created each year reached triple digits.

In France, a traditionally centralised political system have always received its electorate and affiliations through centrist, right or left political ideologies driven unions. Thus the working class movements in France were traditionally affiliated with left-wing parties and workers' unions and its socially conservative movements have been linked to the right and religious groups. But the yellow vests are an amorphous group of people from all different political leanings including socialists, communists, conservatives, far-right extremists, anarchists, and even centrists who identify as former Macron supporters. The yellow vest protest should be understood in a social context when educated and apolitical consumers in the form of middle class has become the majority. The middle class in France appear to belong from no particular economic background whether rural or urban, engaged mostly in the service sector and have derived its awareness from the television and social media. Thus, this movement stands apart from the party ideology driven mobilization in the past and focuses more on all political elites' power arrangement and policy impacts on the mundane life of all people. In this context

Macron's as a populist leader has become the pivot around which the mobilization has expanded.

On top of making controversial policy decisions that favoured powerful corporations and rich individuals, Macron also repeatedly demonstrated his unfamiliarity with ordinary people's struggle to survive in the country's competitive economic environment. In 2016 while he was the minister of economy Macron was confronted by angry trade unionists and was recorded telling one young man: "You don't scare me with your T-shirt. The best way of paying for a suit is to work." In a 2017, Macron said train stations were wonderful places, for there you can cross paths with both "people who succeed" and "people who are nothing" (presumably the ordinary French citizens who are the majority in the country). The yellow vest protests led by the working class aims to transcend Macron's personality as the embodiment of "metropolitan France" and a target for the anger of rural and also the less advantaged (who has recieved nothing the imbalanced economic structure) in France who feels left behind. The problem goes deeper, as political scientist Pisani-Ferry argued, in 20th century ideologies—communist and socialist have collapsed and "now what's dangerous for democracy is the feeling that half of the population has been shunted aside." All this gradually accentuated the economic concerns of the French middle and working classes and led them to be more and more suspicious of all mainstream politicians with Right and the Left affiliations. They came to believe that the political elite protects the interests of the wealthy and does not care about the wellbeing of ordinary citizens. Macron was elected as he chose to differentiate himself from the establishment in Paris and sort to act as the representative of a "new world order" throughout his election campaign. But his still represented the same system and institutions which the people have faulted of apathy.

With the rise of the middle class and working class as the main electorates, the traditional political parties in France had moved to appeal them abandoning their traditional base using television/technology for broader appeal. This has led to a homogenous strategy by all political parties. Increasingly the policies of all political parties started converging leaving little space for the people to seek a political union, organization or group to communicate with the political elite when a policy hurts them the most. For example, as the policy positions of the major British parties converged in the 1990s, the share of working-class respondents who told pollsters that they supported no party roughly doubled between 1980 and 2010, from just under 20 per cent to nearly 40 per cent. As social democratic parties in Germany and Sweden similarly moved to the center, supporters' attachments to these parties and enthusiasm to vote declined; in Sweden alone, the share of Swedish Social Democrat (SAP) supporters who considered themselves "strong" supporters declined from roughly 40 to 25 per cent in the 1990s, and by 2006, 14 per cent of SAP supporters abstained from voting. Gino Raymond has observed that France's mainstream center-left and center-right parties have loosened if

not abandoned their traditional ideological positions. In particular, the Socialist Party's (PS) political and ideological compromises after obtaining the presidency in the 1980s—including implementing austerity policies after 1982—probably turned off much of its core working-class constituency, even as it attracted new middle class voters. In presidential elections between 1981 and 2012, the share of the working class votes for any party on the left fell from 68 to 40 percent, according to Nonna Mayer. By 2002, only 11 per cent of Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin's voters were workers, while nearly one-quarter of his electorate was white collar managerial class.

Party system volatility had subsequently wracked France's party system since the 1990s as voters have disengaged from politics; turnout in France's legislative elections dropped nearly 20 percentage points between 1993 and 2017, from 65 to 47 percent of registered voters. In the 2017 National Assembly election, 41 per cent of the electorate switched party votes from the 2012 election, and Macron's newly formed La Republique En Marche! (LREM) gained voters at the expense of traditional center-left and center-right parties. The PS in particular lost 22 percentage points off its 2012 vote, and was reduced to just five percent of the seats in the National Assembly.

But Macron after his election has pursued the exact same neoliberal agenda like his predecessors in the 1980's that has been hurting the poorest and helping the rich. The French president has been trying to claw back the support of local officials and citizens who felt ignored by a leader they saw as arrogant and out of touch.

The yellow vest protest has begun in this political and socio-economic context where the people wanted a different kind of leader, someone who can understand their long-rooted social and economic concerns and deliver real, practical solutions. For the past four decades, French people have been worried about the erosion of social protections in their country. Since Francois Mitterrand's socialist government controversially decided to impose austerity policies in 1983, successive governments have taken slow but consistent steps to dismantle the French welfare state. In addition, France lacks the political culture of clear interlocutors today whether through student leaders or labour unions who would have addressed the grievances of the people. Philippe Laurent, the mayor of the city of Sceaux, just outside Paris, and the secretary-general of the association of French mayors, once said he wasn't convinced that Macron had actually won over mayors during his grand débat road show. But Macron, a technocrat, lacks the political culture of his predecessors, who had more on-the-ground experience. The process was the epitome of "disintermediation" in politics—the reduced clout of political parties and other mass organizations to serve as intermediaries between the government and citizens. Historically, labor unions in France have been key to organizing large scale protests, but today the yellow vest protests have gradually shifted this traditional political cultures and participation and mobilization in France. And in turn the yellow

vest protests have been an attempt by the middle class in France to form groups that can take issues like fuel prices or pension directly and seek social justice.

Against this background, the essay aims to analyse two issues: first, yellow vests protest as a symptom of a largely globalised economic system in a post-industrial liberal democracy that have failed to trickle down the economic and social benefits to a young middle class bulge. Second, the outcome of the protest will shift the political landscape of France from centrist parties to more issue based, independent and rigid ideological based groups.

Causes, Concerns and Fallouts

The immediate trigger for the protests has been economic, that is, the proposed fuel hike in 2018. In the past two years the protesters have embraced other issues such as minimum wage, living cost and economic inequality as the causes behind the protest. In 2018, the price of petrol was the spark that lit "*gilets jaunes*" or yellow vests in France. In 2019, people again took to the streets against pension reform. The primary focus of the protestors to demand for changes has been Macron who is seen as the source of their problems. Along with his early reforms to loosen labor laws and slash France's famous wealth tax, the fuel tax reinforces protesters had rallied their voice around Macron as the President 'of the rich, for the rich and by the rich.' Now there have also been calls to dissolve the National Assembly and hold new elections. Thus, the protest began as a protest of a fuel-tax hike and have now evolved into a wave of economic anxiety and anti-establishment sentiment—with bursts of violence, such as the torching of banks and businesses in Paris.

In the process, the 'yellow vests' has emerged as the symbol of the class struggle where the underdog needs to be noticed and the bright yellow colour served the purpose. The attack on the political elite class and the hierarchical nature of the French society also shows the demand for more presence of the democratic institutions. The incremental retreat of the state from rural France: maternity clinics, district courts, army barracks, post offices and shops disappearing from the centres of small towns and the people affected by this retreat realized, thanks to the internet, that they were on the margins. What the yellow vests gave them was visibility, solidarity and a common cause to mobilise.

The national response to the protest has been promises by Macron to raise worker's pay and cut taxes. In 2018 when the protest first began, Macron was in Buenos Aires for the G-20 summit over the weekend and he denounced the violence from Argentina and said those responsible for the chaos would be found and punished. After he returned to Paris, he went straight to the Arc de Triomphe and held a crisis meeting with top ministers. The Prime Minister Edouard Philippe sort to speak the protestors which was later cancelled

citing personal security concerns after receiving anonymous death threats. The government had already invited yellow vest protesters to talks but the delegation abandoned the meeting when they learned the discussions wouldn't be filmed or broadcast. Hence a dialogue between the representatives and the demonstrators have not yet materialized with the protesters becoming more violent in their approach. They have vandalised banks and sett rubbish bins on fire. At the end of 2019, the national intelligence coordinator Pierre Bousquet de Florian warned: "We are facing an unprecedented '*ensauvagement*' of our society with a degree of violence and a rapid rise to hatred."

The protest deescalated after the primary issue of fuel hike was retracted by Macron. But that didn't address the structural unhappiness and distrust on the system hence the protest has continued today. Most yellow vests at blockades around France are mostly peaceful protesters but violence have also erupted when police have sort to control the demonstrations. Paris police held 380 people in custody in 2018 and the city administrations have estimated a total damage at 3.4 million dollars. Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire in a press meet in 2019 had told that a month of protests have hit the French economy hard, with trade in shops, hotels and restaurants businesses falling significantly. Some sectors saw their revenues hit by between 15 and 50 percent. In the region, the yellow vest as a symbol of the class conflict has inspired similar anti-government protests seeking economic changes from Iraq, Bulgaria, Israel, Taiwan to the UK.

Major Trends

Firstly, the yellow vest protest has increasingly put focus on the pattern in which the (white collar) middle class demands have joined the agrarian and industrial labour class demands. Working middle class from different race, religion has been on the rise in France and this group is well assimilated. Broadly speaking this protest has been successful in putting together the demands of the both the working and the middleclass agendas such as economic inequality, rural-urban divide and the anti-globalisation backlash. Originally, the yellow vest protesters were people from rural areas who have to drive long distances as part of their daily life. They said they couldn't afford the hike in fuel prices. And the protests, reflecting their demands, appeared in pockets around France to denounce Macron's green tax and then quickly grew into a larger movement that includes members across groups who started expressing their frustration about slipping standards of living. They say their incomes are too high to qualify for social welfare benefits but too low to make ends meet. Thereby making the movement organic, largely representative and has no official leadership. The lack of institutional framework is one of the things that sets the yellow vests apart from previous political movements and give them independence from any particular party, politician, or political leaning.

That is one of their strengths, says Tartakowsky in his book, since it gives the movement broader appeal. But at the same time, this very nature of being all pervasive has caused the movement to suffer from a lack of coherent messages. Even its elected representatives disagree with one another about the future of the movement. Thus, while the yellow vest movement began as a protest against the French government's planned increase in fuel taxes, other demands from gender inequality to the funding of public services and immigration policies have joined the cause. This made the movement sway from its purely economic demands and made it difficult for the government to engage in dialogue with the yellow vests.

Second, unlike previous large-scale protest movements in France, the yellow vests was born out of the frustration of a small group of individuals who organized the protests entirely on Facebook. Tartakowsky says that's one way in which these protests are unique. Typically, French protests on the left have been organized or supported by major labour unions, and protests on the right (such as the marches against the legalization of gay marriage in 2012) were typically organized by Catholic groups. This protest is assimilated through Facebook posts but that doesn't mean the protest was apolitical. This made the protest a direct confrontation between the people and the government removing the intermediate groups. The demands translated into attacking political leaders: demands of Macron's ouster and abolition of the Senate. New antagonism openness of systems (stepped in equality values), all round wellbeing of the people which has been underestimated by the people has been gradually advocated through the social media posts. The yellow vests as a tool for mobilization have come and gone from the streets of Paris, but the same people are meeting, planning future actions, and learning how to use the encrypted messaging app Telegram.

Third, another trend of the yellow vest protest has been the slogans and the references to French Revolution made by the protestors. The protestors have invoked the revolutionary spirit from the establishment of the France Republic. France is a country that's no stranger to protest movements—from the massive student demonstrations of 1968 to contemporary union-led strikes. But during the "yellow vest" the protesters chanted slogans like "We are running the revolution" and "Macron to the Bastille." The Arc de Triomphe bore a message in spray paint: "We have chopped off heads for less than this," a reference to the death by guillotine of King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie-Antoinette.

Fourth, by borrowing from history, the protestors have particularly not aligned with any contemporary political parties. The political leaders such as Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Rally (formerly the National Front), and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the far-left France Unbowed have tried without success to latch on to the yellow vests. The inability of these two parties, who have traditionally fared well to represent the groups

who feel marginalized, signals that the yellow vest protesters are tired with all figures of the political establishment. In French, the political parties often depend on the practice called the 'ground-up' movement, which means taking support from the base. "And this base is all-powerful." But for Macron this base is not supportive, he is a strong leader with weak support from his base and few political allies and interlocutors. On the other hand, yellow vest protest is the base who have rejected all leadership.

Lastly, what has spread beyond France aren't its working-class protests, exactly, but the props of those marches such as the iconic traffic vests have become a symbol of discontent. For example, in Bulgaria the gas protests started a week before the protest in France using the yellow vests. Successive protest inspired and inspiring yellow vest protest have broken out in clusters because countries are similarly affected by common world events, such as increases in fuel prices, the collapse of international banks that doesn't indicate the protesters are emulating each other rather they are reacting to similar societal problems.

Forecast in 2020

The yellow vest protest is likely to continue so far, the social problems, economic inequality and a strong leader with a disdain for the labour force continues. Two years later in 2020, the yellow vest protests are still out on the streets protesting indicating that even if one issue is solved and the momentum erodes, the protests wouldn't die. The protests will evolve and adapt to the changing economic structure and policies. The global pandemic (COVID-19) had been an interrupter to the protests but as the country slowly lifts its lockdown measures, laying bare the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, the yellow vests have returned to the streets since 12 September, 2020. The French police fired tear gas and arrested more than 250 people in Paris as they tussled with "yellow vest" protesters seeking to revive an anti-government movement curbed by a coronavirus lockdown this year.

The protests are born as a response to the larger socio-economic problem. It seeks an answer: How can a government help people left behind in the rapidly changing globalised economic system? Similarly, when the class, voting patterns, economic needs of the base are changing, Tartakowsky argues, this leaderless, grassroots yellow vest are a logical continuation of this reorganization of political and institutional life. A new social compromise remains to be born. Away from the traditional ideologically driven political parties, the protest will propel a fast orientation towards issue based political groups. A trend in countries like the UK, Ireland has been evident with the social green parties rallying around environmental issues. But at the same time, the biparty politics in France will also embrace the issues of the base and seek to reorient its political arrangement in which the yellow vests will mark a catalyst for the change.

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