

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How Economic Inequality Fuels the Rise and Persistence of the Yellow Vest Movement

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Our analysis explores the rise of the Yellow Vest movement as a collective response to perceptions of growing levels of economic inequality in France whereby collective action is triggered by the perceived illegitimacy of the growing gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. We highlight different psychological processes that might explain why concerns about economic inequality have become more salient. We focus on two dynamics in particular: (a) President Macron’s perceived alignment with the elites and disconnection from ordinary French people, and (b) historically dominant collective narratives that frame growing inequality as breaking with long-standing values and norms of equality. Both processes enhance ‘us’ (the victims) versus ‘them’ (the elite and those that are not true to national values of equality) categorizations along wealth lines whereby, ‘us’ becomes a broad category. To explain why the movement continues to go strong, we focus on ongoing intergroup processes (i.e., the police response, lack of support from intellectuals and the middle class) and intragroup processes (i.e., the movement brings together all those who self-categorise as *victims of inequality*, uniting those that may at other times be seen as ‘strange bedfellows’). We conclude that a proper understanding of the way in which economic inequality might divide society creating new intergroup dynamics is essential to understand the Yellow Vest movement.

**Keywords:** Economic Inequality; Yellow Vest Movement; Collective Action; Political Identity

At the time of writing, the French Yellow Vest (‘Gilet Jaunes’) movement continues to make headlines and the end of the movement is not yet in sight. Although the movement has received attention in the news and social media, a theoretical analysis of the factors explaining the emergence and continued persistence of the movement is only slowly emerging. Nevertheless, despite a scarcity of empirical research (for exceptions, see Bennani, Gandré & Monnery, 2019; Boyer et al., 2019), it is clear that the Yellow Vest movement deserves attention from social scientists. As an initially spontaneous and grassroots rural uprising without apparent organizational structures or leaders, the Yellow Vests has led to substantial policy change and concessions on the part of the French government, changing the political landscape in France. That is, the Yellow Vest movement has effectively ‘rattled the French establishment’ (Guilluy, 2019).

Even though there are many material and ideational factors that contribute to the rise of the Yellow Vest movement, here we focus on just one of those: growing levels of economic inequality. Importantly, regardless of whether economic inequality is actually on the rise, we argue that the mere perception that inequality is increasing is associated with collective discontent and subsequently, the

social mobilisation of the Yellow Vest movement. One of the first questions to ask, then, is which factors and events gave rise to the perception that economic inequality was growing in France? We focus on two such dynamics that have brought the issue of economic inequality into sharper focus in France—factors that may have enhanced the perceptions that there are two opposing groups of people in French society: the upper-class elite versus the lower-class victims of inequality.

First, narratives about victims of inequality, originally crafted by populist far-right leaders like *Front National* leader Marine LePen, have been fanned by President Macron’s austerity measures and policy decisions (such as the tax on petrol, repeal of the wealth tax) that disproportionately affect the poorer segments of society and favour the wealthy. This has given rise to suspicions that Macron aligns himself with the elites and is disconnected from ordinary French people. Second, even though growing perceptions of inequality are collectively perceived as a cause of concern in many Western countries, because historically France has defined itself as a country that embraces social equality and defines itself by egalitarianism, rising levels of income inequality are seen as a direct threat to the French national identity and the collective continuity of French values. As we will outline in greater detail below, the Yellow Vest protestors have positioned themselves as attempting to reclaim that legacy of collectively valuing equality and as restoring the continuity

to past values and norms (Jetten & Wohl, 2012; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Sani, Bowe & Herrera, 2008).

Before further developing our conceptual analysis, it is important to consider in greater detail the French context with respect to economic inequality. After this, we provide a social psychological explanation for the ways in which economic inequality can fuel social unrest and trigger collective action. In particular, we outline how the perception of growing levels of economic inequality may have increased the salience of the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', enhancing 'us' versus 'them' categorizations along wealth lines. In turn, we address the question of why the movement continues to go strong and focus in particular on the group dynamics (intergroup and intragroup) that are likely at play. We end this article with suggestions for how some of the processes described here might form the basis of future research.

### **Economic Inequality in France**

Objectively speaking, how unequal is France? The French economist Piketty (2014) has drawn attention to the growing gap between the wealthy and poor in France. As Piketty shows in his work, while the average income for the richest 1 percent of people in France doubled between 1983 and 2015, the bottom 99 percent saw income rise by only one-fourth. Other indicators also need to be considered when answering the inequality question. Reflecting on changes in the Gini coefficient in France since 1990, it is clear that income inequality did indeed surge between 2006 and 2011 (from 29.7 to 33.7). However, since then income inequality has slowed down and even fallen, albeit marginally (to 32.7 in 2015—the most recent measurement year). Perhaps more interestingly, levels of income inequality were as high in 1990 as they currently are, suggesting that inequality levels in France are currently not spiralling out of control as they are in other countries (e.g., the U.S.). Indeed, according to the World Bank, France has far less inequality than many other Western countries, and there are only a handful of countries that spend a greater proportion of their income on social welfare programs (Denmark, Sweden and Belgium; Goodman, 2019). Nevertheless, access to social security has become more difficult because more and more French employees are on short-term contracts and/or are employed in the so-called gig-economy. For example, the number of contracts that lasted less than one month exploded from 1.6 million to 4.5 million over the last 18 years and only half of those on these short-term contracts are eligible for unemployment benefits (Goodman, 2019).

Importantly too, compared to other western European countries, France's taxes continue to increase—from 41 percent of the gross domestic product in 2009 to over 45 percent in 2017. On top of this, in the first year of Macron's presidency, eight additional taxes were introduced and the increase in taxation has been proportionally more than the wealth produced in France (Paye, 2019). The increase in taxes was not equally divided across poorer and wealthier segments of society: the new taxes disproportionately affected the 'have-nots' of society (such as the tax on petrol, which affects working-class communities in

rural areas, where people rely almost exclusively on cars to travel) while those in the highest income brackets saw a tax cut (the abolishment of the solidary tax on wealth or the 'flat tax', which reduced taxation on capital income from dividends and capital gains; Paye, 2019).

In addition to the objective growth in the gap between income of the poor and wealthy, partly as a result of such growing inequality, France has also seen an increase in unequal opportunities for those at different ends of the wealth spectrum (on the way social mobility affects acceptance of high levels of economic inequality; see Day & Fiske, 2017). Increasingly, there is talk of a 'broken social elevator' in France whereby redistribution through taxes has not been sufficient to allow for equal opportunities for all, for example, in the educational system. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2018) show that it takes more than six generations for a person at the bottom end of the income distribution to reach the mean income level in France. Out of all the OECD countries, only Hungary has a more broken social elevator with seven generations to reach a mean income level. Likewise, out of all OECD countries, France stands out as the country where academic achievement is most dependent on students' social class (see Croizet et al., 2019).

In sum then, answering the question whether income inequality has increased over the last decades in France is not that straightforward and the answer depends largely on which factors are being studied (e.g., labor versus capital income, tax policy, intergenerational wealth, social security access, see for instance Garbinti, Goupille-Lebret & Piketty, 2018; Goodman, 2019). What is clear though that the *perception* has emerged in France that its leaders have abandoned systems that promote greater economic equality and social security for all and have introduced systems that have pushed France on the path of greater economic inequality (Greeman, 2018). Importantly, the perception that inequality is growing creates fears for the future and it is perhaps the anxiety and pessimism around growing levels of inequality (and not so much present levels of inequality) that should be taken into account when studying people's assessment of economic inequality (see also Duvoux & Papuchon, 2019). Next, we turn to the importance of such perceptions.

### ***Objective versus Subjective Perceptions of Growing Inequality***

Despite the importance of objective indicators of economic inequality and the structural barriers for social mobility, there is an equally important reason why we need to examine the consequences of inequality through a social psychological lens: growing evidence suggests that objective inequality indicators and the collectively shared *perception* of inequality (i.e., subjective perceptions) are not necessarily aligned. For example, studies show that people can both dramatically underestimate (Norton & Ariely, 2011) and overestimate the actual level of inequality (Chambers, Swan & Heesacker, 2014). Further, it is the subjective perceptions of inequality rather than objective inequality which predict important outcomes such as

happiness (Buttrick & Oishi, 2016) and health (Adler et al., 2000).

Moreover, even when objective and subjective perceptions of economic inequality are aligned, for inequality to lead to dissatisfaction (and thereby affecting collective and individual behaviour), there needs to be collectively shared belief that inequality has reached a breaking point in the political community (i.e. 'polity'). That being said, there is evidence that higher levels of actual inequality are associated with greater perceptions that the system is unfair. In particular, Newman, Johnston, and Lown (2015) found that higher levels of income inequality were associated with heightened rejection of meritocracy ideals.

These dynamics may have been at play in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis when, on a large scale in the Western world, people started to question the legitimacy of the gap between the wealthy and the poor, and recognize that those at the poorer end of the spectrum suffered most from the financial crisis. In this instance, it was a steady stream of revelations about excessive banker bonuses and about malpractices in the financial services sector that rendered the issue 'inequality' salient, and triggered public outcry over what became widely viewed by citizens as a society divided into 'us', the downtrodden '99 percent', and 'them', the exploitative '1 percent'. Similar dynamics may be at play when explaining the social unrest in Chile, Bolivia, Iraq, Iran, and Jordan in 2019 (see Walker, 2019). For example, in Chile, while objective levels of economic inequality in Chile hardly changed over the last decade, a range of government initiatives that appeared to target citizens from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, combined with the perceived lack of empathy of political leaders for the hardship suffered by ordinary Chileans, were important triggers of large-scale political protests (Walker, 2019). In sum, once 'inequality' has become/ been rendered salient, the issue can become politicized at the collective level, and if those perceptions subsequently become coupled with the perception that such high levels of inequality are unfair, then it is more likely that those who perceive themselves as the victims of economic inequality will rise up to challenge the status quo (see Jetten & Peters, 2019; Østby, 2013; Walker & Smith, 2002).

When it comes to understanding the effects of inequality, most research attention to date focuses on its harmful consequences for health (e.g., Oishi, Kesibir & Diener, 2011). Important as this work is, it is unable to speak to concerns that inequality also undermines the social fabric of society and negatively affects citizens' trust in government (Kettl, 2018). There is now growing evidence that inequality affects the relationship between those at the bottom and those at the top of the hierarchy (Jetten et al., 2017; Jetten & Peters, 2019). The Social Identity Approach—SIA, comprised of *social identity theory* (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and *self-categorization theory* (SCT; Turner et al., 1987) forms a particularly useful theoretical framework to understand the dynamics between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The SIA provides explicit theorizing on how individual level psychological processes are both affected and informed by the broader

socio-structural context (e.g., economic and political factors affecting status relations between groups).

There is evidence that the greater salience of economic inequality and the perception of being disadvantaged or victims of inequality are psychologically related. For example, Osborne, Sibley, and Sengupta (2015) analysed longitudinal panel data collected in New Zealand and found that inequality heightens people's perceptions that they are deprived (either as individuals or as a group). Interestingly too, they found that perceptions of relative deprivation were linked to neighbourhood-level inequality (as determined by data from the New Zealand census), and that higher perceived inequality was associated with higher ethnic identification. It is important to understand these processes, because heightened ethnic identification may motivate tensions between groups, heighten 'us' versus 'them' perceptions and, at times, this will lead to collective action and social unrest. In social identity terms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), when boundaries between different wealth groups are impermeable (because of higher levels of inequality), this limited social mobility is likely to motivate lower classes to perceive the status quo as illegitimate. Impermeability of boundaries and illegitimacy of inequality provide the combination of socio-structural factors that have the greatest likelihood of motivating lower status groups to challenge the status quo by engaging in collective action to improve their disadvantaged position.

#### ***Perceived Economic Inequality: Its Salience and Perceived Fairness***

While there appears growing consensus among scholars that inequality can erode social cohesion and perceptions of shared fate (Buttrick & Oishi, 2016; Uslaner & Brown, 2005), we suggest that, at a more basic level, inequality increases people's tendencies to see the world through a 'wealth lens' (Jetten et al., 2017). We therefore propose that we need to understand *when* wealth becomes a relevant categorization to make sense of the social world, and how this then triggers intra- and intergroup dynamics and determines the content of wealth group's identities. Unpacking this, we propose first that growing inequality enhances the likelihood that income and wealth differences become more easily noticed. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue: 'If inequalities are bigger, ... where each one of us is placed becomes more important. Greater inequality is likely to be accompanied by increased status competition and increased status anxiety. It is not simply that where the stakes are higher each of us worries more about where he or she comes. It is also that we are likely to pay more attention to social status in how we assess each other' (p. 44; see also Loughnan et al., 2011). When there are increasing levels of inequality, wealth becomes a fitting basis for categorizing oneself and others in society (to use self-categorization theory terminology, inequality enhances the comparative fit of 'wealth' as a basis for categorization, Turner et al., 1987). As a result, 'us' versus 'them' perceptions become more salient and, over time, this will lead to deteriorating relations between different socio-economic groups (as will be evident from

greater intergroup competition), so called ‘classism’ (i.e., enhanced stereotyping of other wealth groups, Horwitz & Dovidio, 2015) and ingroup bias. Ultimately, this can lead to a splintering of society into subgroups and the withdrawal of individuals from society at large, lower social cohesion and reduced identification with society (Jetten et al., 2017).

In line with this reasoning, in France there is a perception of a growing schism between different groups (Greeman, 2018). As Goodman (2019) observes in a recent article in *The New York Times*: ‘France is cleaved by profound forms of inequality: between urban and rural communities; full-time employees and temporary workers; graduates of prestigious universities and the plebeian masses. And not least, between retirees, who maintain the divine right of pensions, and younger people excluded from social welfare programs.’ Also evident from news reports is the notion that French people feel that their standard of living has declined over the years. In the words of anonymous Yellow Vest protestors: ‘We are a rich country and yet there are people who work hard and have to sleep on the streets,’ and ‘I want better spending power for everyone, particularly for the vulnerable – single women, the old, widows’ (Burrows-Taylor, 2019). Perceptions of subjective poverty, whereby people feel poor and identify as poor, is highly prevalent among the French working class even if they do not qualify as being below the poverty line according to existing indicators (Duvoux & Papuchon, 2019).

Despite the fact that objective inequality measures do not show that inequality has increased all that much over the last decades, it appears that the Yellow Vest movement has picked up on the collectively shared perception that France is increasingly divided into the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. Their grievances have revolved around two narratives in particular. First, the movement has focused on the unfairness of growing levels of inequality whereby those who are at the bottom of the hierarchy must regain control. For example, philosopher Alain de Benoist sees the movement as a clear example of ‘populism of the people’ motivated by people who no longer want to be ‘excluded, exploited, overtaxed, humiliated and ignored in every way imaginable, who want to make it clear that they exist’ (United World International, 2018). Second, the movement appeals to French national identity, including its historical ideals. By highlighting government policies that have led to growing levels of inequality, the current government is seen as breaking with France’s history of championing social and economic equality (Bristow, 2019). The current French government, led by President Emmanuel Macron, is represented as undermining historical continuity and as not acting in the interests of ordinary French people. We will unpack these two arguments in greater detail below.

#### Macron as fuelling the salience of economic inequality

The Yellow Vest Movement started in October 2018 in response to Macron’s fuel tax, but now its aims and motivations are much broader and target a number of initiatives that are seen to enhance economic inequality. One

of the most fiercely criticised initiatives is Macron’s repeal of the wealth tax. When it comes to the leadership style of Macron and what he stands for as an individual, he is increasingly seen as a ‘president of the rich’. This image is strengthened by the fact that Macron himself is a wealthy man, a graduate from France’s prestigious *École Nationale d’Administration* (ENA), which many former Presidents attended,<sup>1</sup> and, as a former investment banker, is seen as a member of the Parisian elite. His decision to increase fuel tax was motivated by an environmental agenda to reduce car use. However, this motivation was also seen as being insensitive and blind to the needs of in particular ordinary people in more rural regions in France where public transport is not a viable alternative to car use. As one Yellow Vest protestor put it: ‘Macron is concerned with the end of the world; we are concerned with the end of the month’ (Goodman, 2019).

President Macron’s initial response to the Yellow Vest movement may have been well-intended, but they seemed to backfire and only strengthen the perception of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. In particular, he organised a ‘great debate’ which lasted for two months. However, this debate was dismissed as tokenistic, and lacking genuine dialogue and engagement with representatives of the Yellow Vest movement (Royall, 2019). In fact, the debate was described by critics as ‘a long monologue’ whereby ‘the president chose the topics, posed the questions, and provided the answers himself’ (Paye, 2019: 48). Macron’s response therefore fed the resentment from the poorer parts of society who already felt exploited and believed the elites do not care about their suffering. Although Macron’s government has made concessions to some demands of the Yellow Vest Movement (e.g., dropping plans for a fuel tax, and an increase in the pension age), the movement has continued, and Macron’s attempts to appease the protestors’ demands only seemed to fuel the movement.

The narrative of Macron as the ‘president of the rich’ has underscored the salience of inequality, and, once it was noticed, it became persistent (Greeman, 2018). One Yellow Vest protestor, Ghislain Coutard (who came up with the idea to use the yellow warning vests as a uniform for the movement) stated: ‘We should have woken up years ago. We took too long to wake up and now we have to make up for the years that we have missed. There have really been too many abuses over the years’ (DW News, 2018). Thus, while working classes (i.e., low-status groups) are often remarkably accepting of inequality and do not seem to routinely challenge it, in France greater attention for economic inequality has clearly enhanced ‘class consciousness’. This reasoning is consistent with recent work which has shown that class consciousness was lower in countries that were rich and more equal, compared to countries that were either poor or rich but unequal (Carvacho & Álvarez, 2019). Supporting this view, the few studies that have examined the demographic profiles of Yellow Vest protestors show that the protestors tend to have high levels of concern over downward social mobility and low confidence in political elites (Royall, 2019).

### Growing inequality as violating national identity

A key cultural value in France is to look out for those who are less well-off and that is perhaps why the welfare system has traditionally been very generous. Having strong national welfare programs is a historical French aspiration and it lies at the heart of French national identity. Indeed, the slogan 'Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood', coined during the French Revolution in 1789, is prominently displayed in many public buildings and schools, forming a daily reminder for many French people that the national identity of France is intrinsically linked to social equality. In particular, the French Revolution is an important historical narrative that encapsulates the idea of 'the people versus the elites' (Bristow, 2019). As scholars have shown, historical memories help construct a group's identity, its norms, and therefore provides the group with a framework for how to respond to current challenges (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Research has provided some evidence for the idea that the longer specific social arrangements have been in place in a particular society (i.e. institutionalized), the more fairness and legitimacy these institutions are afforded (Blanchard & Eidelman, 2013). For example, in a study in India, participants were led to believe that the Indian caste system (an inherently unequal social system, at least from a contemporary Western perspective, in which people's social status is determined by birth ranging from Untouchables to Brahmin) was either a system with a long history tracing the origins of the system back thousands of years or a relatively short history—that it originated only a few hundred years ago. When the Indian caste system was described as having a long history, Indian participants judged it to be more legitimate and justifiable (Blanchard & Eidelman, 2013, Experiment 2).

In France, the situation seems reversed—it is social equality (rather than social inequality) that is seen as at the core of what it means to be French. Precisely because 'equality' embodies French national identity (Anderson, 2019; Bristow, 2019), growing inequality in French society is perceived as troubling because it instils in people the sense that the French revolutions may have been in vain, and, hence, economic inequality does not fit with their understanding of what it means to be French. This has led to a strong response for at least two reasons. First, the suspicion that the French government is not doing enough to promote equality evokes strong emotions and accusations that the French government and elites are threats to national identity and traitors who do not have French interests at heart. Second, the perception that France is abandoning its core values also triggers a fear for identity discontinuity and identity loss (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011; Sani et al., 2008).

Yellow Vest protestors make frequent reference to the French Revolution and the idea that all those ideals that ordinary French people had fought for were now at risk (Anderson, 2019). As Bristow (2019: 70) observes: 'More or less the sole historical reference point for the Yellow Vests is the French Revolution of 1789. This common denominator has been a symbolic presence on demonstrations from the start: French flags worn as capes or waved on

sticks, rousing choruses of La Marseillaise sung by groups of protestors, red Phrygian caps, and even the odd mock guillotine'. The Yellow Vests have positioned themselves as holding the moral high ground by protecting the French people from the elites who are breaking with the past (Mols & Jetten, 2014). Combined with a strong national history of collective action and protest, it may therefore not be surprising that violations of national norms around equality form a strong motivation for mobilization against the current French government.

### Continued Success of the Yellow Vest Movement

The Yellow Vest movement continues to go strong. Depending on the week and depending on who does the counting, numbers of demonstrators are said to vary from 90,000 to 1.3 million (according to the police union) to 30,000 to 280,000 (estimates by the Ministry of Interior; Paye, 2019). Regardless of the actual number, it is clear that the Yellow Vest movement is not going away anytime soon. There are a number of intergroup and intragroup processes that help explain the continued appeal of the Yellow Vests: (a) police actions enhance the perceived legitimacy of the Yellow Vest protests (intergroup process), (b) sharply drawn boundaries between victims of inequality and elites (intergroup process), and, at the intragroup level, (b) greater solidarity forged among strange bedfellows. Together, these dynamics have further fuelled the cohesion within the group of Yellow Vest protestors, thereby consolidating a politicized identity as the 'Yellow Vests', directing mobilization against groups that are perceived as perpetuating social inequality.

### *Police Response Enhance the Perceived Legitimacy of Protests*

From a social identity perspective, in particular the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM; Stott et al., 2018; Stott & Drury, 2000), protestors' interaction with the police produces the social conditions that lead protestors to perceive violent protest tactics as legitimate. Excessive use of police force enhances the perception that police actions are illegitimate, leads to a conflict with the police, and further strengthens 'us' versus 'them' dynamics between protestors and the state. Supporting this 'action and reaction' analysis, it is clear that the response to the protests by the French police has been strong and at times brutal. Protestors have complained about the 'over-use of force' and that protestors had been denied basic rights after imprisonment. Journalist David Dufresne reported that police retaliation against demonstrators has been out of proportion with 483 cases of serious police violence over the period November 2018 to March 2019, with 202 head wounds, 21 eyes put out and 5 hands torn off (Paye, 2019).

Police brutality increases the sense that protestors' actions are legitimate, protestors' violent actions such as property damage, looting, and rioting (Royall, 2019). This is because repression can become an additional grievance that motivates further protests against authorities (Earl, 2011). Those who were initially unwilling or unlikely to use violence may engage in violence to defend themselves

against perceived injustice at the hands of the police force—who are viewed as an extension of the unjust Macron government (Stott et al., 2018). In line with crowd behaviour research (Reicher, 1984), violent Yellow Vest protestors are not vandalizing property at random but seem to choose their targets carefully. For example, many violent actions strategically targeted the type of property that lies at the heart of the class conflict in France: expensive and luxury brand shops that line the Champs Elysees in Paris.

Beyond the micro-level categorization processes that occur between protestors and the police, the broader political system may also serve to legitimize the actions of the protestors. France is one of the few European countries to continue using rubber bullet guns to control crowds and disperse riots with the goal of enforcing public order. Prominent French and international human rights non-government organizations have called for a ban on rubber bullet weapons, which have been fired over 9,000 times since the Yellow Vest protestors emerged (The Local, 2019). For example, the United Nations and the Council of Europe have condemned the use of excessive police force against the Yellow Vest protestors (News Wires, 2019; The Connexion, 2019). However, the French courts have upheld the use of rubber bullets and have shown no signs of curbing excessive police measures. Instead, there appears to be an escalation and a growing tendency to resort to more violent means to curtail the Yellow Vest protests. As an example, the Macron government has proposed a controversial 'anti-vandalism' law, which would bring in protest laws that sanction aggressive legal actions to be taken against violent protests. For example, this law would ban specific individuals (who are suspected to be violent) from protesting, give law enforcement agencies the power to search protestors for possessing weapons without a court order, and make it illegal for protestors to cover their face with masks (France 24, 2019). Macron signed the 'anti-riot' bill into law in April 2019, arguing it protects civil liberties (NDTV, 2019). However, it may inadvertently give the Yellow Vest protestors greater legitimacy for their cause. These dynamics are well captured in the following statement by a Yellow Vest protestor: 'We won't give up. If nothing else, we will fight for those who have been injured, for people who lost their eyes and others who have been beaten up and assaulted. Their injuries will not be in vain' (Voice of Europe, 2019).

Research has shown that repression of free speech and protests can mobilize people (Aytac, Schiumerini & Stokes, 2018; Chen, Zachary & Farris, 2017; Lawrence, 2016). In the context of the Arab Spring in Morocco, Lawrence (2016) found that people who had family members who faced violent victimization by the regime (e.g., imprisonment, beatings) were more likely to participate in anti-regime protests. In an experimental study, Lawrence (2016) further found that reminders of the Moroccan government repression against protestors (compared to tolerance or receiving concession from the government) led to greater support for future pro-reform protests. Using geolocation and Twitter data, Chen et al. (2017) found that instances of policing increased the likelihood of Black Lives Matter

protests in Baltimore, USA. Through survey-based experiments, Aytac et al., (2017) found that reminders of police violence during the Gezi Park protests in Turkey promoted more anger, which subsequently led to greater intentions to protest in Turkey. Taken together, findings across different social and political contexts suggest that political repression of protests can mobilize even further support for such protests, calling into question the effectiveness of government actions that aim to curb civil disobedience and activism (such as Macron's 'anti-riot' law).

### ***Boundaries between 'Victims of Inequality' and 'Elites' are Drawn More Sharply***

Police actions are not the only group dynamic that fuels intergroup 'us' versus 'them' dynamics. Rather, distinctions along wealth lines have been further enhanced by the alleged lack of support from more mainstream French intellectuals and the middle class.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in an interview with geographer Christopher Guilluy (2019), who studies the experiences of working-class people in France, Guilluy explains how the Yellow Vests have received little cultural validation from elites: 'One illustration of this cultural divide is that most modern, progressive social movements and protests are quickly endorsed by celebrities, actors, the media and the intellectuals. But none of them approve of the gilets jaunes.'

To explain this apparent lack of backing, we consider the possibility that the lack of support from elites and intellectuals may result from enhanced income inequality in France. In particular, there is evidence that enhanced wealth categorization are likely to give rise to the development of richer and more elaborate narratives and self-stereotypes of one's own wealth group (Stephens, Markus & Phillips, 2014) and the wealth groups that others belong to (in self-categorization terms, a stronger comparative fit triggers a search for normative fit, Turner et al., 1987). Moreover, the Yellow Vests were denounced by many as xenophobes as anti-environmentalists (because of their demand for a lower fuel tax), anti-Semites and homophobes, thereby strengthening class lines. Indeed, this perception was/is reinforced by the protestors themselves, many of whom are open about their support for Marine Le Pen's populist radical right party, National Rally. This perhaps explains why, despite considerable support for the Yellow Vest movement from within some left-wing circles,<sup>3</sup> intellectuals more generally have not supported and endorsed the movement to the same extent as support that was given to some other protest groups (e.g. the Occupy Wall Street movement in the USA; the Chilean Protests in 2019).

Regardless of whether intellectuals are reaching out to the Yellow Vest protestors or not (and when they do, what motivates them), it is clear that the Yellow Vest protestors are distrusting of intellectuals and refuse to include them as part of the struggle. It has been noted that the Yellow Vests movement avoids alliances that could split them. As a Le Monde journalist noted, [the Yellow Vests demonstrate an] 'absolute defiance towards – almost disgust at – the usual channels of representation: the movement has no leaders or spokespeople, rejects political parties,

keeps its distance from unions, ignores intellectuals and hates the media' (Halimi, 2019). In that way, strong 'us' versus 'them' distinctions are reinforced and boundaries between 'victims of inequality' and elites are drawn more sharply. Moreover, cross-categorisations that may lead to schisms within the movement are less likely to occur and the unifying bond (i.e., fighting economic and social inequality) remains strong, enhancing identification with others who define themselves as 'victims of inequality' (Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Jetten et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2015) further fuelling protestors' motivation to continue the fight, challenging all those who are not 'victims of inequality'. We will explore the latter dynamic in greater detail in the next section.

### ***Fighting Inequality Enhances Solidarity among Strange Bedfellows***

These two intergroup dynamics (i.e., police actions and sharper boundaries between 'victims of inequality' and elites) not only enhanced 'us' versus 'them' dynamics, but (and in line with class self-categorization theorising, Turner et al., 1987), it also led to greater solidarity among all those who identify as 'victims of inequality' (see so-called Social Cure research; Haslam et al., 2018). Relevant for our current purposes, research on the outcomes of economic inequality has shown evidence of two dynamics that are of particular importance to understanding the solidarity among protestors in the Yellow Vest movement.

First, in more unequal societies, there is less physical contact between people who belong to different classes (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). This is particularly the case in France where there is considerable physical exclusion of the 'have-nots' from the big cities and therefore the perception of 'us at the periphery' versus 'the elite in the cities'. That is, the working class tends to be largely concentrated in the countryside or smaller cities whereas the elite and intellectuals tend to live in the city or metropolis areas, creating a strong centre-periphery (capital city versus the rest) dynamic. The reasons for such physical separation are largely historic: France engaged in excessive centralization of administrative power in the capital in the 19th and 20th century. Even though, in the 1980s, reforms were introduced to create new administrative 'Régions' and to decentralize administrative functions to regional centres (e.g. Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille, Lille) this development has not ended the widespread belief that Paris remains by far the most dominant administrative centre. Such physical segregation is likely to be consequential for how people perceive economic inequality (see Dawtry, Sutton & Sibley, 2015). In this case, it is likely that it further fed the 'us' versus 'them' narrative, leading to greater solidarity among those who feel at the periphery to collectively mobilize against the elites.

Second, there is evidence that greater economic inequality is associated with stronger class identification whereby the poor are more likely to self-identify as lower class (Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Newman et al., 2015). For instance, Andersen and Curtis (2012) analysed data from the World Value Survey and found in their analysis of 44 countries that greater economic inequality (as

assessed by the Gini coefficient) was associated with an identification polarization effect whereby people with lower incomes were more likely to identify with the lowest social class category in more unequal compared to more equal countries. Consistent with our reasoning, in the words of Andersen and Curtis (2012: 139): 'Our explanation for this finding is simple: If inequality between classes is high, people are more likely to see class differences and thus more likely to distinguish themselves along class lines' (see also Jetten et al., 2017; Kraus, Tan & Tannenbaum, 2013). In sum, both processes lead to greater intergroup dynamics with enhanced salience of the own class (and its disadvantaged status) as well as polarization away from the elite who are increasingly seen as the enemy ('them'), who are not acting in the interest of the victims of inequality.

The Yellow Vest movement has been successful in drawing attention to its cause because it was able to harness and articulate collective grievances of multiple groups in French society that perceive a growing gap between the elite and ordinary people. 'Us' is defined inclusively around shared victimhood—as anyone that is 'not them'. This sentiment is also captured in one of the slogans of the Yellow Vest movement: 'we are the people' (Paye, 2019) and the humble yellow vests that protestors wear, which have become a symbol of a shared identity around common grievances. In social identity terms, the shared outcry over rising inequality created a stronger superordinate identity, whereby differences between subgroups become (temporarily at least) unimportant and the focus is on the shared collective cause. As a Yellow Vest protestor interviewed in a EuroNews (2018) documentary on the movement explained, 'our strength lies precisely in our diversity'. Interestingly, as Laclau (2005) has noted, populism lends itself well to unite strange bedfellows because it is based on a 'thin' ideology that may appeal to many different groups in society from different backgrounds and with diverse grievances.

The notion that the Yellow Vest movement effectively represents a strong superordinate umbrella identity that embraces and includes many subgroups may explain why the movement includes a wide variety of political and social groups.<sup>4</sup> The category becomes inclusive because it is defined in opposition to the wealthy and elite segments of society and united by a common goal—in this case, frustration with economic inequality. Similar dynamics were at work for protestors coming together in Turkey to prevent an urban development project of the popular Gezi Park (Acar & Uluğ, 2016). In Turkey, what started out as a protest against the destruction of a park quickly escalated into protests against police violence, repression, and government corruption, which mobilized over three million people in cities across Turkey. Groups that typically find themselves on the opposite end of the political spectrum rapidly came together united in their opposition to the government (Acar & Uluğ, 2016).

In sum, by developing a narrative of bringing together all those who see themselves as victims of inequality, the Yellow Vest movement was able to unite groups that may at other times be seen as 'strange bedfellows'. Both the

political left and the political right were attracted to the movement and it was not only working class but also middle-class workers who joined the demonstrations (Anderson, 2019; Royall, 2019). Furthermore, it is historically disadvantaged groups who are joined by the ‘newly disadvantaged’; those who, before the austerity measures, led more comfortable lives (e.g., nurses, teachers, truck drivers) but who feel that their living conditions have declined over the last couple of years. The Yellow Vest protestors have attracted people who have traditional markers of wealth such as houses, jobs, and cars—but these are not considered luxuries because they are not sufficient to live comfortably anymore. As noted by the *Plateforme d'Enquêtes Militantes*, a militant anti-racist research group in Paris: “Certainly, the familiar strata of public and civil servants, service workers, wage earners from the industrial basins and students are present. But a whole host of other social segments struggling to make ends meet seems to be at the forefront of the dynamic: employees of small and medium enterprises, shopkeepers, artisans and the growing plethora of new forms of independent and precarious labour” (as cited in Anderson, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

All three processes enhance ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dynamics whereby boundaries between ‘victims of inequality’ and ‘elites’ are drawn more sharply strengthening the shared identity among the protestors. First, in intergroup terms, police action and state legislation to curb protest enhances the perceived legitimacy of the movement and the perceived illegitimacy of anyone who aims to stop them (e.g., the police, the government, intellectuals, the middle class). Second, the perception that ‘the elite’ are not on their side strengthens the ‘elite’ versus ‘common people’ distinction, making the movement a people-powered response to a class conflict. Third, and in terms of intragroup processes, the sense of shared identification that developed as a result of interacting with other subgroups in society that identify as ‘victims of inequality’ strengthens the solidarity with the movement and the strength in numbers enhances perceptions of collective efficacy and the motivation to fight for the cause. By banding together as those who share disadvantage, exclusion and marginalisation, a strong shared identity emerges and this is associated with a strong sense of anger and belief that by working together and continuing the protests, social change can be achieved (Dixon et al., 2012).

### A Research Agenda

The challenges facing ordinary French people (e.g., growing job precariousness, rising cost of living due to austerity) are real, not imagined. Furthermore, there are many specific idiosyncrasies such as the unique local and historical context that need to be taken into account when explaining the rise and persistence of the Yellow Vest movement. However, we can nonetheless recognize that a proper understanding of the way in which economic inequality might psychologically divide society and create new intergroup dynamics is essential to understand the Yellow Vest movement. While we focused here on mapping out the way the Yellow Vest Movement may be understood

through the lens of economic inequality, our reasoning is in urgent need of empirical support.

In particular, we suggest that future research may focus on examining the following processes. First, it would be important to test our hypothesis that the movement has profoundly shaped group dynamics around social class. The experience of participating in protests should help empower people facing economic hardships and politicize their identities around a clear power struggle – in this case, a class struggle among the ‘have nots’ and the ‘haves’. A second research agenda may focus on exploring the intragroup dynamics within the movement. Specifically, we proposed here that even if the movement’s specific political demands are yet to be realized, the success of the movement lies in the act of protesting together (see Drury & Reicher, 2005). Third, future research should explore Social Cure predictions (Haslam et al., 2018) related to the relationship between engagement in the Yellow Vest movement and well-being. The Yellow Vest movement has provided people from radically different backgrounds—many of whom may not only feel economically but also culturally ‘left behind’—with a platform to come together and help one another. People who previously struggled in separation from one another now have new (and some unexpected) social networks from which they can draw resilience and strength. Future research on Yellow Vest supporters may reveal a sense of solidarity within the group, as they are no longer suffering in silence (France 24, 2018).

Finally, another important aspect to explore is the way that the Yellow Vest movement has inspired the formation of other movements. It is clear that the Yellow Vest movement has opened up opportunities for mobilizing around related grievances around inequality. For example, inspired by the Yellow Vests, a new protest group branded as the Black Vests (‘Gilets Noirs’) has emerged in France and is focused on advocating for the rights of undocumented migrants. A Black Vest protestor, Kanoute, who is credited for naming the movement said: ‘we took the same name – the gilets – but we are blackened by anger – and that’s where the name gilets noirs came about’ (Butterly, 2019). Further, the Yellow Vests in neighbouring countries have also organised themselves by setting up schemes to support those who are unemployed and poor. For example, Yellow Vests in the Netherlands have started a support program called ‘Yellow and nothing to spend’ (‘geel en niets te maken’; Heijmans, 2019). These off-shoots of the Yellow Vest movement are worthy of study in their own right.

In sum, the Yellow Vest movement has made evident that there is a growing group of (lower) middle class, working class, and poor who are experiencing economic deprivation and resentment of the ruling class (i.e., politicians and elites), with this political class being perceived as ‘out of touch’ with the realities of everyday folk. Whether the spirit of the movement will go on to enact revolutionary change to the present class system remains to be seen. In the words of one anonymous Yellow Vest supporter: “If the politicians don’t work for us, we should be able to get rid of them. The battle will be hard, it’s we the people against



the elites, and they hold on to what they have, they don't want to let go of their power. But we will fight until they fall" (Voice of Europe, 2019).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Macron announced plans to shut down the ENA, in an attempt to make France a fairer society <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-macron-ena/frances-macron-to-shut-elite-ena-school-in-drive-for-fairness-idUSKCN1S12GZ>.
- <sup>2</sup> What makes the Yellow Vest movement a particularly fascinating case study is the fact that it emerged in French-speaking European countries, where Discourse Theorists have gone to great lengths to defend 'progressive populism' (Mouffe, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2017; Thomassen, 2016). However, apart from this relatively small circle of scholars, few intellectuals appear to have taken up the plight of the Yellow Vest movement.
- <sup>3</sup> Even though the Yellow Vest Movement has been supported by some left-wing intellectuals, those who have supported the Yellow Vest movement have been criticised for doing so purely for their own personal gain without caring much about the lot of ordinary citizens. This is elaborated by Guilluy (2019) when he notes: 'It is really difficult to oppose the hipsters when they say they care about the poor and about minorities. But actually, they are very much complicit in relegating the working classes to the sidelines. Not only do they benefit enormously from the globalised economy, but they have also produced a dominant cultural discourse which ostracises working-class people. Think of the "deplorables" evoked by Hillary Clinton.'
- <sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the Yellow Vest protest attracts both far-right Front National supporters and far-left Trade Union supporters (CGT and others). In interviews with CGT representatives, it becomes clear that some of them are uneasy about the presence of Front National supporters in the Yellow Vest movement, but accepting that the importance of the cause require them to temporarily set aside differences and fight a common enemy (see <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190205-france-cgt-gilets-jaunes-greve-manifestation-unisson-paris>).
- <sup>5</sup> There may be important boundary conditions to the 'heterogeneity as a strength' rationale. As shown by Wouters (2019) in the context of an asylum seeker demonstration in Belgium and the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, diversity of protestors only become persuasive and attractive in the eyes of the public when diverse groups act in unison and are consistent in their messaging and actions.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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