

# Who are the Gilets jaunes?

A study on the prerequisites that led to the creation of the French protest movement and how it separates itself from tradition

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# Abstract

This study has two purposes. The first one is to explain in what consists the originality of the Gilets jaunes movement. This is done by comparing it to four earlier French protest movements. It is found that the original feature of the movement is its lack of organization and refusal to take political sides. The second purpose of the study is to explain which societal factors acted as prerequisites for the creation of the movement. This is done by a comparison between letters sent to the President's office and statements made by the Gilets jaunes in order to show that the anger that the movement incarnates have been present in France for several years. This supposition is later enhanced by a looking at earlier research on French social discontentment. In the end of the study it is shown that reforms made since Emmanuel Macrons arrival to power in May 2017 acted as triggers for the already discontent French population to mobilize within the framework of what came to be the Gilets jaunes movement.

*Key words:* Gilets jaunes, protest movements, contention, justice, France  
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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

With no organizational structure, no leaders and without any official support by unions and political parties the Gilets jaunes movement struck France and its political system by surprise on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018 when 300.000 protesters gathered on the streets of Paris, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lyon and many other cities and in the roundabouts in many parts of rural France to protest mainly against the increase of the “Taxe intérieure de consommation sur les produits énergétiques”, a tax on car fuel, planned to be enforced in January 2019 (Noiriel 2019, p. 15). But how did we come here?

The Gilets jaunes mobilization started online and on social media, primarily on Facebook. In October 2018, increasing criticism towards the aforementioned fuel tax appeared online and in the public sphere. In connection with this, a truck driver called Éric Drouet launched a call for mobilization planned to take place November 17<sup>th</sup>. Some months before this, in May 2018, an online petition was published by an entrepreneur in the cosmetics business called Precillia Ludoski calling for a cut to fuel prices. During the first couple of months this petition does not get much attention and is only signed by a couple of thousand people. As these both social media phenomena get more and more notoriety, the instigators get in touch and decide to join forces. In connection with this, Jacline Mouraud, a self-employed entrepreneur, posts a five-minute-long video on Facebook, hardly criticizing France’s heavy tax burden and especially the increased fuel tax. This video reaches in a couple of weeks six million views (Institut Montaigne 2019). These social media posts are generally seen as the three most important acts for the creation of the movement (Noiriel 2019, p. 18). But as this thesis will show, these acts are only to be seen as mere triggers that ignited an outbreak of anger that had been long brewing in French society.

## 1.2 Purpose and research questions

This thesis has two main purposes that play an equally large role. The first aim of the thesis is to explain in what ways the Gilets jaunes constitutes a new kind of movement in the continuum of French history. The second aim of the thesis is to explain what made the Gilets jaunes movement come to existence.

These purposes will be answered through the following research questions:

- What is the originality of the Gilets jaunes movement when placing it in the long duration of French contentious history?
- Which societal factors made the Gilets jaunes movement appear in France in November 2018?

## 1.3 Method

This thesis is a case study with a mixed descriptive and explanatory design. This mixed research design is the one that best suits the purpose of the study as its aim is to respond to the basic questions; “which” societal factors caused the appearance of the Gilets jaunes movement in November 2018 and in “what” consists its originality (Teorell - Svensson 2007, p. 27). In order to answer the principal purpose of the study, I will use two main perspectives, one historical and one contemporary. These perspectives will be studied with inductive reasoning. This means that I will start with some empirical premises and from them reach general conclusions (Teorell - Svensson 2007, p. 27). In order to find the relevant empirical premises, I will debar from the concepts elaborated by Tilly and Tarrow on contentious politics. These are to serve as a theoretical base when choosing which parts of the movement are most important and relevant to study.

On the basis of the guide Tilly and Tarrow supplies me with, I will study historical examples of French societal and political contention and compare it with the Gilets jaunes. I do this in order to give the reader a historical walkthrough of French protest movements with the objective to show in what ways the Gilets jaunes reassembles earlier French protest

movements but especially in order to show in what ways they constitute a new kind of movement.

Further, I will look at the current conditions in French society and describe what social, political and economic reasons and prerequisites made it possible for the movement to evolve and come into being. I will do this by studying letters sent to the French president complaining about, social injustice, economic hardships and taxes and compare them with slogans and statements that Gilets jaunes protesters have presented since the start of the movement; studying earlier sociological research on the topic of citizen-discontentment and connect this to the appearance of the Gilets jaunes; looking at reforms made since Emmanuel Macron came to power in 2017 and study the results these reforms have brought with them.

## 2 Theoretical framework and methodological concepts

The coming chapter is based on the concepts presented in Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's work *Contentious Politics* and is to be seen as a continuation of the methodological part of this thesis. This book draws on a number of specialized studies by authors in the broadening field of contentious politics. By doing so they are able to identify a number of concepts crucial to the study of contentious politics. These concepts are primordial for this study as they give it a theoretical and methodological starting point. These concepts will tell me where to start looking in the quest to understand in what the originality of the movement consists and which societal factors caused the Gilets jaunes to appear as a major player in French politics in November 2018.

These concepts are not theories in the sense that they try to give a general explanation to a certain complex process but rather in the sense that they give me a framework on how to approach the research questions and a clear justification as to why it is relevant to study this topic with the approach that I do. Or in the words of Tilly and Tarrow who writes that the concepts are to be seen as “a reliable guide to identify features to look for, features that clearly belong to what we must explain” (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 28).

But first, before explaining the concepts being used in this thesis. It is necessary to define the term contention.

On its base, contention means that one party makes claims on another. One can think about it in terms of this: one party as a subject (maker of the claim) and the other as an object (receiver of a claim). Claims always involve at least one subject reaching visibly towards at least one object. In the case of this study, the Gilets jaunes (subject) makes claims to the government (object) (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 8).

We enter the realm of *politics* when we interact with institutions of government, either dealing with them directly or engaging in activities bearing on governmental rights, interests and regulations. Most politics, however, involves little or no contention. People mostly go about in their life without making any specific claims on other people. Like for example,

registering for benefits, cash government checks, answer census takers or show their passports to immigration officers (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 8).

The presence or absence of government and contention makes a difference for three big reasons. First people who are in control of government have advantages over those who are not. Even where government is weak, controlling it gives the means of collecting taxes, regulating people's behavior and distributing resources.

Hence, political contention puts at risk, however slightly, the advantages of those who enjoy governmental power (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 8).

Second, government always make rules that govern contention, who can make what collective claims, by what means and with what outcomes (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 8).

Third, governments control substantial coercive means such as police forces, armies, prisons, courts and things a like. The availability of governmental coercion gives an edge to political contention that rarely exists outside the political arena. In political contention, large-scale violence always remains possible (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 9).

Contentious politics contains, as we will see, complicated social processes. Explaining any complicated social process involves three steps (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 28).

1. Description of the process
2. Decomposition of the process into its basic causes
3. Reassembly of those causes into a more general account of how the process takes place.

These three steps are exactly the ones I will use in order to answer the research questions:

- What is the originality of the Gilets jaunes movement when placing it in the long duration of French contentious history?
- What societal factors made the Gilets jaunes movement appear in France in November 2018?

Below I will further elaborate the reasons why this approach is relevant in order to answer the research questions.

Tilly & Tarrow divide their concepts into two sections:



1. *Descriptive concepts that makes up an elementary guide to description of the processes we mean to explain*
2. *Explanatory concepts* (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 28).

The descriptive concepts elaborated in *Contentious Politics* are: political actors, political identities, contentious performances and repertoires. The explanatory are: sites, conditions, streams of contention, episodes, outcomes, mechanisms, and processes (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 28). Due to the short and niched nature of this thesis I will not be able to, neither would it be fitting to apply all these concepts on this study.

## 2.1 Descriptive concept

In accordance to the purpose of the study I have chosen to focus on one descriptive concept, contentious performances/contentious repertoires.

- Contentious performances and repertoires: relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes claims on another set of political actors. Arrays of performances that are currently known and available within some set of political actors (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 14-15).

The contentious performances and repertoires that will be studied in this thesis are those of earlier French protest movements. These will be compared with the contentious performances of the Gilets jaunes in order reach a conclusion on the topic of their uniqueness.

As I mentioned before, this concept serves as a justification for the importance of studying the history of French protest movements. As Tilly and Tarrow writes (2015, p. 28) “contentious politics is complicated, any observer who wants to explain contention needs a reliable guide to description and explanation”.

The reason behind me choosing only one of the four possible descriptive concepts is that the main aspects of this concept is enough to cover all integral parts of my historic hypothesis. My hypothesis being that the acts committed by the Gilets jaunes have historic precedents but that the movement also have new features that have not been seen before. Though studying earlier examples of French contentious performances and repertoires, I will,

as mentioned above, be able to paint a picture of the history of French protest movements through the lenses of this concept. I will more precisely, encircle historic features that have, I argue, been archetypal in traditional French protest movements. This approach will also give me the possibility to encircle in what ways the Gilets jaunes movement does not correspond to earlier movements. This will hence help me to respond to the first research question: What is the originality of the Gilets jaunes when placing in the long duration of French contentious history? I will do this through making deductions from the known facts about earlier movements.

## 2.2 Explanatory concept

In similarity to the descriptive concepts, this study will only involve one of Tilly and Tarrow's explanatory concepts; conditions. This once again due to the fact that studying the conditions that have acted as prerequisites for the Gilets jaunes movement is sufficient to answer the second research question.

In order to be able to answer the research question I need, as mentioned, to study the conditions of the current contention. By conditions Tilly and Tarrow mean characteristics of sites and relations among sites that shape the contention occurring in and across them. In their book Tilly and Tarrow mention for example that in Italy of 1966, an array of political organizations and existing connections among them provided the background for the cycle of conflict that occurred over the next seven years (Tilly – Tarrow 2015, p. 237).

In this thesis, the conditions (which will be further elaborated in chapter 4) that provided the background for the cycle of conflict that erupted with the emergence of the Gilets jaunes in November 2018 are: reforms made by the government, stagnating salaries, increased cost for public services, decreased purchasing power and the perceived contempt from the societal and political elites towards the lower classes and people living on the countryside.

This approach which is studying the conditions of the French contemporary political and social climate will give me the necessary means to stipulate the most important factors behind the apparition of the Gilets jaunes, all of this in order to answer the first research question: What societal factors made the Gilets jaunes movement appear in France in November 2018?

### 3 Historical analysis

This chapter sets out to respond to the first research question: what is the originality of the Gilets jaunes movement when placing in the long duration of French contentious history?

This chapter will hence treat some of the most important precedent French protest movements that I will continuously compare with the Gilets jaunes movement.

It can almost be said to be common knowledge that French history is full of examples of political and societal contention in form of riots, strikes and revolutions. In schools, all over the world students are taught about the French revolution during which the French managed to overthrow the monarchy that had since centuries lived in luxury while the French peasants barely had enough bread to feed their families. Many have also heard about the events of May 1968 which spread to greater parts of the western world and had an important impact on the society in which we live today (Freysenet 2019).

These are probably the two most well-known examples that have helped to create the general picture that appears in the heads of many when they think about French political contention.

These are indeed two of the most important instances of French political contention but in order to create a bigger picture of the history of French contention in order to understand the place of the Gilets jaunes within it, one needs to dig deeper.

Since November 2018, many have been tempted to compare the Gilets jaunes to earlier French protest movements. In the long French history, there are many examples of protest movements and riots that could be compared to the Gilets jaunes. I will, however, due to the short nature of this thesis concentrate on four examples of earlier protest movements. I have chosen these movements as they are the most often occurring in French media and in articles written by French scholars in sociology and history when trying to put the Gilets jaunes in the light of history. These movements are:

1. The Jacqueries
2. The Manifestation of February 6, 1934
3. Poujadisme

4. May 1968

### 3.1 The Jacqueries

G rard Noiriel, mentions in “*Une histoire populaire de la France : De la guerre de Cents Ans   nos jours*” (2018, p. 40) that the French state was built around taxes. This is in itself not unique as this is the case with many states, but in France the anti-fiscal struggle has played an extremely important role in forming its history. It is in context to this long history you need to study the Gilets jaunes in order to understand the movement. Directly when the royal tax system was starting to be put in place in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, around the time of Joan of Arc, peasants started to protest against it (Noiriel 2018, p. 40). The culmination of the first of these public uprisings took place between 1378 and 1382. When the royal power tried to impose new taxes on merchandise, revolts broke out in all parts of the kingdom. In Paris, thousands of rioters armed with mallets massacred tax collectors and tried to put a merchant provost to power (Noiriel 2018, p. 45)

This is just an example out of many popular uprisings during this period. These uprisings go under the term “Jacqueries” and have played an important role in French history. They are, still today almost common knowledge in the French psyche and are almost always referenced when comparing different kinds of protests against taxes in France (Noiriel 2019, p. 28). When discussing the Gilets jaunes movement, comparisons with these well-known riots are prevalent. This, even though such a comparison, according to Noiriel is anachronistic and not viable as the social contestations was completely different. The “Jacqueries” occurred in a context marked by the Hundred Years’ War and the Black Death and was conducted in many cases by people on the brinks of dying of hunger (Noiriel 2019, p. 28)

Even though the historical prerequisites for the two movements do not match, it is interesting to note that there are real comparisons between the two. The comparisons generally carry on the fact that both movements challenged and challenge the established order and points out what is perceived as fiscal and social injustice. In the 14<sup>th</sup> hundreds and in the autumn of 2018 and spring of 2019 men and women violently protest against a government that they consider have abandoned them. Against lords who did not longer protect their subjects as they had before when it comes to the “Jacqueries” and against a government that is among other things responsible for the disappearance and degrading

quality of social services in many parts of the country when it comes to the Gilets jaunes (Muller 2019).

## 3.2 The Manifestation of February 6, 1934

Observers have also made the comparison with the manifestation of February 6, 1934 which was an anti-parliamentary manifestation with the aim to overturn the Third Republic (1870-1940) trying to illegally infiltrate the Élysée. The movements per se do not have many things in common with the Gilets jaunes as the protesters of February 6 were extremely well organized and were supported by several political parties on the right divide of the political spectrum. In contrast to the Gilets jaunes, the movement concentrated old combatants from the first World War that almost reassembled a paramilitary group and not ordinary citizens as is the case with the Gilets jaunes. However, what makes the comparison interesting is that the Gilets jaunes as the movement of February 6, 1934 as earlier mentioned tried to march in to the Élysée<sup>1</sup>. This and the fact that one of the most often occurring demands of the Gilets jaunes is an abolishment of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic, which reassembles the goal of the February 6 movement whose goal was to abolish the Third Republic (Noiriel 2019, p. 32).

## 3.3 Poujadisme

Further, several newspapers and politicians have also compared the Gilets jaunes with the Poudjadiste movement, that was created in 1953 as a response to the French government wanting to have tougher fiscal regulation of small businesses in order to stop tax evasion. This movement was an important political player during the mid 50's, succeeding to elect 52 deputies to the National Assembly in the election of 1956, one of them being Jean-Marie Le Pen, future founder and long-time leader of the rightist extreme party Front National (Muller 2019).

The most relevant common point with the Poujadisme is the anti-elite and anti-fiscal dimension, which as we already have gone through is a red thread in French history. This

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the French President

similarity is however not sufficient for it to be regarded as the same sort of movement as the social morphology do not reassembles that of the Gilets jaunes whose sociological basis of is more complex (Spire 2018). In 1953, it was small business owners that opposed a new sort of fiscal control set up by the government. When wanting to unite car owners against the new tax on fuel in the starting days of the movement, the Gilets jaunes aimed at uniting a much wider audience and brought together different socio-professional and political categories that were not used to demonstrate together which has had an important impact on the nature of the movement and might be a reason to why the movement still has not taken political sides (Spire 2018).

What they have in common nevertheless is, first and foremost the explicit anger towards the tax system which has led to the use of physical violence as well as the “montées vers Paris”, people from different parts of France coming to Paris to protest against the government (Muller 2019).

Further, the Poudjadistes were since the beginning well organized around the Union for the Defense of Tradesmen and Artisans and positioned itself already in the early days of the movement on the right or far right on the political spectrum. This, while the Gilets jaunes, as we already know, refuses to take political sides and do not have a central organization (Muller 2019).

### 3.4 May 1968

Comparisons with May 1968 entered the discussion with force after the third protest act Saturday, December 1, 2018. This as it was this day they when the Gilets jaunes movement took its first real violent turn. This day the French witnessed scenes of chaos: violent clashes took place between police and protesters around place de l'Étoile in Paris, cars and trucks burned, barricades were built on the Champs-Élysées, several administrative offices set on fire which resulted in the arrest of many hundreds of protesters (La Chaîne Info 2019).

One of the first to do the comparison was the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, stating that these scenes were “Unheard of since May 1968. The situation is very serious. We are going through is a major crisis. We must take full action against it [the violence]” (La Chaîne Info 2019).

The sociologist Jean-Pierre Le Goff, present in May 1968 argues in an interview with La Chaîne Info (2009) that there are similarities between the movements, but that those are

only superficial. The common aspects, he argues, lies in the similar methods of protest and that the forces of order have difficulties in controlling the protesters. Another similar point is the influence of the media. In 1968, while listening to certain radio commentators one had the impression that all of Paris was in insurrection. Today, the Gilets jaunes movement have been very mediatized as well. There is also, he argues a similarity in that both movement were caused by social crisis, however different (La Chaîne Info 2019).

One of the main differences are that in May 1968, France and all Europe was in a period of economic growth that had endured since the end of World War II, the future was positive, and the notion of social progress was clear. There was no problem of unemployment. The actors of this movement were driven by ideology and by a positive, hopeful vision of the future of society in mind. The motivation of the movement was not social despair, rather the opposite (La Chaîne Info 2019).

Further, a big difference is also the fact that the protests of May 1968 was, if not lead, then supervised by unions and other structured labor organizations, primarily by the French General Confederation of Labor and positioned itself very clearly on the left of the political divide (La Chaîne Info 2019).

### 3.5 Results from analysis

As we have seen this far, French history is full of examples of contentious movements that have protested against tax increases, life standards, the ruling elite and the political system like the Gilets jaunes movement does. In this way, one can argue that the Gilets jaunes only follow the model in the long history of French contention, and that what they protest against and what they represent is not anything new. However, through studying these earlier cases of French protest movements there is one aspect that catches the eye that does not seem to have any precedent. That is the lack of organization and the refusal to incorporate itself on the left-right political spectrum.

French protest movements are traditionally, as we have seen in this chapter, very well organized by either political parties or interest organizations as in 1934, specific professional organizations as was the case with the Poujadistes in the during the 50s or unions as was the case in May 1968.

This is an aspect that many French observers have noticed. The aforementioned historian Gérard Noiriel whose career is dedicated to French social movements and whose work I have cited several occasions in this chapter is one of them. He writes, in line with this conclusion that what is the real originality with this movement is the dimension of national spontaneous mobilization (Noiriel 2019, p 15)

Danielle Tartakowsky, scholar in social movement history at Paris 8, that recently came out with the book "*L'État Détricoté : De la Résistance à la République en marche*", in which she studies the French history since 1945 until today, is on the same track. She argues as well that these protests are unique as the Gilets jaunes began as an organic, grassroots movement, born in the frustration of normal working and middle-class people (Quartz 2018).

Another novelty that has to do with the lack of organization is that this movement claims to be apolitical and have demands that crosses the political spectrum. This is unique. As we have seen in this chapter, France's blue-collar movements have traditionally been affiliated with left wing parties and workers' unions, while its socially conservative movements have been linked to the right and religious groups. The yellow vest is an amorphous group of people from all different political leanings in France, including communists, conservatives, far-right extremists, anarchists and even centrists who identify as former Macron supporters. This sets them astray from the tradition (Quartz 2018).

This feature is very interesting and breaks with much of earlier research. Tartakowsky among others, concluded in her study "*Les Droites et la rue*" - that was written just after "La Manif pour tous" (a protest movement against same sex marriage that was created by catholic organizations in 2012) - that in order for a big social movement on the left on the political spectrum to work in France, it has to have the support from unions and political parties, even on the highest political level. And for a big social movement on the right of the political spectrum is to work it has to have catholic organizations or rightist political parties backing it (Quartz 2018). It is apparent that this conclusion does no longer hold. Tartakowsky herself admits this in an interview (Quartz 2018), saying that the aforementioned aspects confirm the unprecedented character of this movement.

A topic that has not been raised in this thesis is which factors made it possible for the movement to mobilize as fast and powerful as it did without any central organization. Noiriel (2019, p. 16) and Tartakowsky (Quartz 2019) mentions the importance social media have had for the movement to organize.



As the purpose of this study is to give an answer to the question; in what consists the originality of the Gilets jaunes, and not how the movement managed to mobilize without a central organization this is not a question that will be treated in this thesis. I acknowledge however that further studies need to be done on this topic. I would encourage anyone willing to take this step.

Having answered the first research question from a historical point of view, I will now turn to the second and do a contemporary analysis of the societal factors that made the Gilets jaunes movement appear in France in November 2018.

## 4 Contemporary analysis

When facing the Gilets jaunes in November 2018, French politicians and especially the government reacted with surprise when it came to the severity of the claimed suffering of the French working class. Many are those who admit that they did not see this social and political revolt coming. The situation is the same when it comes to sociologists and political commentators (Fretel-Offerlé p. 149).

This even though French elected officials have a vast apparatus at their disposal, including human resources and devices dedicated to collect the pleas and petitions of their fellow citizens (Fretel-Offerlé p. 149).

### 4.1 Letters to the President

One of these devices that are meant to be used as an indicator of the pleas of the French citizens is the Élysée post office where around 70 officials work daily with filing and responding to letters sent to the French president. The post office receives around one million letters every year. More than 2500 per day. With the proliferation of communication on social media, the number of letters addressed to the president have been diminishing during the last decade. However, the entirety of these letters can be supposed to give important hints as to what are the concerns of the French general public (Fretel-Offerlé p. 150).

Two French scholars, Julien Fretel and Michel Offerlé conducted during the end of François Hollande's five-year presidential period (2012-2017) an investigation on these letters. Their study consisted in analyzing in detail the multitude of the letters. In January 2019, in the wake of the appearance of the Gilets jaunes, they published an article called "*Ce que devrait savoir le Président*", "What the president should know" connecting their research with the claims of the aforementioned movement (Fretel-Offerlé p. 149).

By studying the letters that Offerlé and Fretel's article give access to, I found three focal points which seemed to upset the authors of these letters. These are:

- Anger towards the tax system,
- Diminishing purchasing power (mainly due to higher living costs and stagnant salaries)
- Perceived contempt from the societal and political elites towards the lower classes and people living on the countryside.

These letters are interesting to study as they fit well with the argumentation of the Gilets jaunes. The purpose of using them is to show that the anger incarnated by the Gilets jaunes is something that has been built up during several years.

But before attacking these topics it is of importance to understand why these letters are addressed to the president.

Fretel and Offerlé writes that the President of the French Republic function as a central and emblematic figure of indefinite power that one addresses concerning everything. It is striking to note that he has this kind of symbolic role. Even though the French president has more political power compared to other European heads of states, this “presidentialization” is less constitutionally legally inscribed than deeply embedded in the conscience of the general French citizen. This has to do with the vast political power the highest representative of the French state and republic historically have had during several centuries dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Fretel-Offerlé p. 152). In many of the letters the president is addressed as a last resort for people expressing their dissatisfaction over an economic or social situation that is deemed intolerable. This kind of approach to the president is unheard of in the absolute majority of European countries (Fretel-Offerlé p. 152).

This may serve as an explication to why Emmanuel Macron has been and continues to be one of the main targets of the Gilets jaunes and to why demands of his resignation is one of the most important slogans and demands of the movement (Le Cain 2018). This as he as the supposition goes, is seen as the impersonation of French political power and in the heads of the protesters is responsible for everything that in their minds have gone wrong with France, without really having factual knowledge of the actual presidential political mandate and what he in reality is personally responsible for.

It is striking to note that many of these letters mention all of these three aforementioned topics. Below I will present excerpts from three different letters in order to illustrate the form that these could take.

*“I will explain to you why I am dissatisfied. I’m a truck driver, and with the taxation on overtime work we have lost 250 € per month. On top of that we have **the increase of the general tax and petrol prices** [...] Do the calculations, **this represents a 500 € per month decrease of my purchasing power**. Without counting the taxes... Would you be ready to reduce your salary with 25 % as is going to be the case for me. I don’t think so. Put yourself for a moment in our position” (Fretel-Offerlé p. 154).*

*“In this last year of your mandate, **I note that my pension (1 272 euros and 12 cents) have not increased since you took office**. Let us be accurate. The CNAV granted me a generous increase of 80 cents in January 2016 while the IRANTEC during the same period have granted me an increase of 35 cents. You’ll understand that I won’t thank anyone for this situation. Especially as during the last four years, **the price of rents, public services, assurances and food haven’t ceased to increase**. I’ll add that the CAF took away all my housing benefits in 2015” (Fretel-Offerlé p. 153).*

*“Mr. President, [...] Well hidden in their palace, fattened by the public money they joyfully waste on their own comfort and luxury [...] **The French are no idiots**: they were already convinced of the incompetence, powerlessness and corruption of their elected officials. [...] **You take the French for a resigned and passive people**, who you think will swallow anything you want. You are mistaken [...] (Fretel-Offerlé p. 156).*

These letters are, as my argument goes, not far away from the opinions expressed by the Gilets jaunes protesters. During the protest rallies slogans like “world champions in tax”, “Social injustice = Social anger”, “We’re coming to get you” (Feertchak 2018) have a clear connection to the dissatisfaction found in these letters.

When protesters express themselves on TV, social media or in newspapers they often express a very similar line of thinking. In the quarterly journal *Revue Politique et Parlementaire* several Gilets jaunes protesters are interviewed, here one can read complaints of a similar nature as we saw in the letters (Trivollier 2019, p. 163)

*“My salary is the equivalent of the median salary after 14 years in the business, but with two kids I do not do very well financially [...] When my old car broke down, **I bought a diesel car as you got a premium** for that at the time. But a couple of months after this the government decided **to take away the premium and put more taxes on diesel**, this made my blood boil” (Trivollier 2019, p. 163).*

*“I followed the movement from the beginning and I decided quickly to go out to the roundabouts. [...] it was **the increase on the diesel tax** that was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I have always voted to the left, in 2012 on Hollande and 2017 on Macron, but I **no longer have any faith in politics**. Both the right and the left lies to us, **thinks that we are fools and give the rich gifts in form of tax cuts**” (Trivollier 2019, p. 164).*

*“The government increased my invalidity pension with 15 € but took away 20 € on my housing benefits [...]. In the roundabouts, I’ve meet people in great difficulty. We can’t take it anymore!” (Trivollier 2019, p. 170)*

*“Emmanuel Macron is a puppet for the banks and lobbies. **I can no longer accept the contempt he has for us** and his stupid remarks like “the only thing you need to do to find a job is to cross the street” (Trivollier 2019, p. 164).*

*“The fuel tax was the spark, but it’s **tiny compared to everything else!** They [politicians and the media] talk about a “grunt” but **that is extremely contemptuous**. It’s a real anger that is being expressed, and it has been **lasting for several years**” (Trivollier 2019, p. 165).*

As mentioned before, the comparison between the letters that date at least two and a half years (Fretel-Offerlé p. 152) and the statements by the Gilets jaunes that stretch from January to March 2019 shows that the phenomenon in large is not something that has evolved during the last couple of months, on the contrary, it shows that the prerequisites for the movement has existed for a significant amount of time.

## 4.2 A French social malaise?

Serge Paugam, sociologist at École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris illustrates this argument even further. He writes that it is in many ways difficult to grasp the Gilets jaunes movement as it brings to surface multiple forms of resentment and frustration that have accumulated over time in French civil society that are hard to find immediately (Paugam 2018, p. 37)

He writes that this anger comes from modestly paid employees in both the private and public sector, artisans, small scale entrepreneurs, pensioners close to the poverty line, workers in precarious positions and have gradually spread to farmers and students (Paugam 2018, p. 37)

In a country like France, accustomed to taking into consideration and negotiate the specific demands of different professional groups when they come knocking on the governmental doors in Paris, this movement have surprised in its capacity to, as we saw in the precedent chapter, completely bypass union organizations and political parties in its quest to express its discontentment (Paugam 2018, p. 37)

Even though it seems like nothing could predict it with exactitude, several studies have treated the topic of the social malaise that seem to have been one of the main prerequisites for the Gilets jaunes movement to come to existence. One of these are “*La Misère du monde*” edited by Pierre Bourdieu, published in 1993. In this study, Bourdieu and his colleagues analyses different forms of social suffering based on in-depth interviews with individuals from different social classes but sharing common traits. Various forms of social suffering are analyzed through in-depth interviews with individuals belonging to different social classes, but having in common the daily painful experience of what is called “*misère de position*” “*misery of position*”. Which is defined as a kind of psychological distress emanating from a lack of self-confidence and a feeling of uselessness (Paugam 2018, p. 38)

In this study, people from the merges of society, unemployed, and people far away from the labor market play a certain role but what Bourdieu and his colleagues intended was to widen the score and meticulously also study among others, farmers in difficulty, steel-workers worried about the uncertain future of the industry, postmen and women, shopkeepers, social workers, administrators, teachers and journalists in order to be able to rise to the surface different kinds of suffering that often are ignored, but according to the authors have unexpected outlets at the political level. (Paugam 2018, p. 38)

These people, the “*excluded from the interior*” that Bourdieu and his colleagues studied over 25 years ago reassembles in many ways the people making up the majority of the Gilets jaunes movement; they are invisible. They are not in the news. Even though many of them are close to the poverty line, they are not considered as poor and are hence not eligible for social support. Some might have gotten to know unemployment, but they are not in its entirety a group characterized by unemployment. On the contrary, they work, often hard, but do not feel that they are recognized for the work they do. They are often forced to, for lack of anything better, stay at jobs that does not give any satisfaction. They go about their daily lives without

having a real control of their future, without being able to make any projects and in the end of every month having a hard time making ends meet (Paugam 2018, p. 39)

It is here, in order to understand the ordeal of people in this situation, important to relate it to the social norms in the society. As the great majority of them have internalized the norms of the societal model in which they live and despite their efforts, feel like they live under relatively precarious conditions - as is the case for many of the Gilets jaunes - they inevitably experience a sense of frustration and injustice (Paugam 2018, p. 39)

### 4.3 The French notion of justice

Another interesting study on this topic was conducted in 2009 by Michel Forsé & Olivier Galland called "*La France face aux inégalités et à la justice sociale*," "France facing inequality and social justice". It showed that life-dissatisfaction in French society grew mainly because of three essential factors:

1. Being in the same situation the last ten years;
2. Being less payed than one's friends, parents and people in the same age;
3. Feeling discriminated when it comes to salary and housing (Paugam 2018, p. 40)

This study also points at another specificity that is highly relevant when it comes to French contention and hence the Gilets jaunes. The French does not have a more egalitarian ideal than citizens of other European countries. However, it seems as though the French are more sensitive to the notion of injustice than their European neighbors (Paugam 2018, p. 40)

The two notions may seem similar but they are not identical. Equality is measurable, justice is more subjective, it induces a moral dimension. The works of Forsé and Galland show as mentioned above that the French are not more egalitarian than other comparable nationalities, when brought to choose which kind of society they would like to live in, they do generally not opt for the one in which the income gaps are the lowest. They rather choose a society combining three principles: satisfaction of basic needs, reduction of inequalities, and merit (Freysenet 2019).

The specificity of the French is rather that they perceive inequality in a sharper manner, or as Forsé and Galland puts it, the gap between the desirable society in which they would like to live and the current society in which they actually live in is bigger than in other comparable countries (Freysenet 2019). 60 % of the French answers yes when asked the question whether the inequality in the country is too big. This compared to the Great Britain

at 31 %, Sweden at 29 % and the United States at 25 %. It might partially be in this gap that the feeling of injustice and anger expressed by the Gilets jaunes have its breeding ground (Galland 2016).

This supposition is given more ground when taking into account what the authors of the study hinted at already in 2009, that the French society's harsh perceptions justice and inequality and the effect that has on its citizens general level of trust to the political system might suggest that the country was on the brink of a serious social crisis (Keslassy 2011). Considering the impact that the Gilets jaunes has had and the anger that has risen to the surface, it can be argued that they foresaw the future perfectly well when it comes to this topic.

#### 4.4 The negative impacts of the Macronian reforms

Another important "raison d'être" for the movement is the "Solidarity tax on wealth" that was abolished by the government January 1, 2018 and replaced by a tax on real estate. This in accordance with Emmanuel Macron's campaign promises. The solidarity tax on wealth or as it was called in French - ISF - was an annual direct wealth tax on those in France having assets above €1,300,000. It was created in 1989 by the then in government Socialist Party and had since then been a major point of cleavage in the French political world. By its opponents it was criticized for being negative for the economy as many French entrepreneurs choose to leave the country due to the heavy tax burden, while its proponents argued that it was an important symbol of fiscal justice with the objective of reducing inequality (Turpyn 2017).

The demand for the return of this tax has since the first weeks been one of the movements most important claims. On the street and in the roundabouts signs like "Rendez l'ISF d'abord" "First, give us back the ISF" are common (Garcin-Berson 2018).

Further, Jacqueline Moraud, Éric Drouet and Precillia Ludosky three of the instigators of the movement, that was mentioned in the introduction, have reiterated several times in media that the return of the ISF is non-negotiable and a necessary condition for the situation to calm down (Bancaud 2018)

The importance the return of this tax has for the movement might be seen as a result of the aforementioned French concept of justice. Similar kinds of taxes have earlier been



abolished in other countries, for example in Italy 1992, Ireland 1997, Germany 1997 and Sweden 2007 without any comparable outbreaks of citizenry anger (Turpyn 2017).

Olivier Galland asserts that the decision to abolish the ISF had an enormous psychological effect and that it played a large role when it comes to Emmanuel Macron's reputation as a "president of the rich". Especially as this decision was taken in the beginning of his mandate and in the same time as there was an increase on the tax on social security contribution – the CSG - that primarily negatively affected pensioners of modest income (Normand 2018).

Sebastien Laye, research fellow at Institut Thomas More writes in his article "*Les raisins de la colère*" "that two series of reforms marked the political debates and analyses in the autumn of 2017. The first one was the transformation of the ISF into the IFI and the flat tax on capital, the second one was the increase of the CSG, a tax that had never been a topic of discussion in the public debate that was sharply and unilaterally increased. It is from this poorly understood reform that it is possible to date the reemergence of purchasing power in the economic and social debate (Laye 2019, p. 79).

In mid 2018 when it became more and more clear that the new economic policies had not born fruit, the French started to attach two images onto the government as a result of the two series of reforms studied above: that Macron is a president for the rich and that of a policy against the purchasing power of the lower and middle classes" (Laye 2019, p. 79)

On top of this came then the announcement of an increase on the tax on car fuel, which would negatively affect working and middle-class people living in rural areas with no access to public transport and that are in many cases dependent on their cars in order to get to work. This would be the reform that finally acted as the trigger for a significant part of the French population to mobilize within the Gilets jaunes movement (Laye 2019, p. 80).

It seems as though all these reforms became a of matrix for the Gilets jaunes movement. This as, instead of only making a small part of the citizenry loose on the new reforms - like all classical reforms usually do - Macron's reforms clotted together the middle class and the pensioners which in short made a majority of the French losers, at least on the short term, to the "Macronisme" (Laye 2019, p. 80)

When reading this, one should not think that the long-term goals of Macron's policies is to enrich the richer even more, while not caring about the lower and middle classes. It is merely a question about a type of liberal economic ideology. When the government lower wealth and income taxes, when it deregulates labor laws, when it is reforming social security

to incite unemployed people to work it does so from an ideological perspective with the conviction that these reforms will help to revitalize the economy. Which will in its turn lower unemployment rates and better the economy of all citizens of the Republic. It does not seem however that the government has succeeded in transferring this message to the people (Schott 2018).

On this topic, Adrian Pabst, professor in political science and international relations at the University of Kent writes that the ruling class in many western countries promotes an abstract and elitist vision long from having common horizons with the majority of the citizens on which the democratic legitimacy rests and that his approach has resulted, in several western countries, in a sort of rebellion against the political system (Pabst 2019, p. 133).

It seems as though this might partially serve as an explanation to the situation in France where a significant portion of the working and middle class have revolted, within the framework of the Gilets jaunes, against this abstract long-term vision as they feel more and more economically and socially fragile due to the neoliberal reforms that continues to go through the French National Assembly during the presidential mandate of Emmanuel Macron (Pabst 2019, p. 127).

## 4.5 Results from analysis

As we have seen in this chapter, all evidence points to that the appearance of the Gilets jaunes is a result of long ongoing discontentment in French society that has been accentuated during the last couple of year and finally erupted with the announcement of the increase of the fuel tax.

From the comparison of the letters to the statements of the Gilets jaunes made in the first section of this chapter we can deduct that the sentiments that the Gilets jaunes express have been existing at least since the presidential mandate of François Hollande (2012-2017). From the same section, through a study of the letters and the statements of the Gilets jaunes I could also derive which are the most important thematics of contention that have acted as prerequisites in the creation of the Gilets jaunes. These are:

- Anger towards the tax system,
- Diminishing purchasing power (mainly due to higher living costs and stagnant salaries)

- Perceived contempt from the societal and political elites towards the lower classes and people living on the countryside.

Further, by studying earlier literature on French social discontentment, more precisely the results found in the study “*La Misère du monde*” edited by Pierre Bourdieu, we can derive that the sentiments that the Gilets jaunes incarnate have their roots further back in history. Reading the results of Bourdieu’s study in the light of what we know about the Gilets jaunes gives a rather solid base for the argument that the prerequisites for the movement, primarily the sentiment of invincibility and the impression that the government are not invested in bettering the situations for the working class, have been existing in French society for at least 25 years.

The picture established in the third section of this chapter with the help of Forsé & Galland’s work “*La France face aux inégalités et à la justice sociale*”, of the French as more sensitive to injustice than other European populations, can be argued to constitute yet another societal factor that played in, in the creation of the Gilets jaunes. One of whose primary motivations is, as we have gone through, to protest against the what they interpret is an unjust tax system.

Lastly, and in connection with the notion of injustice, we see that the reforms that has been made during Emmanuel Macron’s years in power seem to have played a negative role in forming the image of the president in the general layers of the working and middle-class population. The negative image of Macron as a president for the rich and the reforms from which this image is derived seems to have had an important impact to as to why the Gilets jaunes appeared in France in November 2018, the clearest example of this being that it was Macron’s government that was responsible for the tax on car fuel that acted as the main trigger to the creation of the movement.

# 5 Conclusions

## 5.1 Conclusion I

Through studying earlier French contentious movements I have been able to make clear that the Gilets jaunes in many ways have historic precedents. As several protest movements before it, the basic contention that lies behind it is the high tax burden that have been protested against since the 13<sup>th</sup> hundreds', when the state became sufficiently powerful as to impose taxes on its subjects. Furthermore, I conclude that the movement have borrowed significant parts of its repertoires from earlier movements, the most important examples of this being the use of violent actions on the streets, the call for people from different parts of France to come to Paris to protest and the march to the Élysée. Lastly, I conclude that the originality of the Gilets jaunes movement lies in its lack of organization and in its refusal to take political sides. This is something completely new in French modern history and a topic that is interesting for future studies. A hypothesis is that this aspect has been enabled by the growing importance of social media. I would encourage anyone taking the step to study it.

## 5.2 Conclusion II

Through studying the conditions in French politics and society it has become clear to me that some of the factors that caused the Gilets jaunes to mobilize have existed for a long time in French society. The results point to that a significant part of the French citizenry have for a long time felt ignored and unjustly treated by the government. The study further shows that the French seem to be more sensitive to the notion of justice than other comparable populations. We have also been able to see that reforms being made since Emmanuel Macron came to power in May 2017 have been interpreted as negative by large parts of the French population. I argue that the answer to the question; what societal factors made Gilets jaunes appear on the stage in November 2018, are to be found in the intersection between these three

points. When Emmanuel Macron came to power in 2017, he came to power in a country that was already on the brink of a social crisis. The reforms being made after his ascension to power accelerated the problems already existing in French society which in November 2018 erupted in the creation of the Gilets jaunes movement.

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