

France and its Culture of Protest – From 1789 to the Macron Era

Cristina Coellen

A December Saturday afternoon in Paris. Saturdays usually see busy streets, and especially now that the lockdown has been lifted, swarms of people hunting for Christmas presents; but since mid-November, Saturdays in Paris also mean one other thing: it is time for a *manif*, a protest (the abbreviation of the word “manifestation”) somewhere in the city. On 24 November 2020, the *Assemblée nationale*, which together with the Senate forms the French Parliament, adopted the law for *Sécurité globale*, drawing on an idea from the Minister of the Interior, Gérard Darmanin. It is a proposition that has made headlines even abroad and has, to put it mildly, caused considerable controversy, leading to the protests every weekend that I have witnessed as during my year abroad stay in the capital. The “Law for Globalised Security”, as it could be translated, proposes a prohibition of the filming or taking photos of police officers in order to protect their physical and mental integrity, with transgressions being punishable by a fine of 45,000 euros or a year in prison.¹ Act of police violence, of which France has the highest incidence rate in Europe, need little explaining.^{2,3} Following outbreaks of violence at the first protests after the announcement of the new law and international

outrage, the government has now proposed to reword the law – yet the protests continue, and they begin to extend to more deeply rooted social issues.

On this Saturday, the *manif* taking place in the city centre is however far from escalating; indeed, the protestors are barely visible behind the wall of heavily armed police officers and the dozens of police vehicles closing off the roads around the area. A few faint shouts and whistles are heard somewhere, but the presence of the police forces that look like they are being deployed to stop a civil war does seem somewhat excessive. Can this be considered an overreaction on the part of the French government? Yet the weekends before did see scenes of considerable violence: burning cars, thousands of people in the streets, fights between the police and protesters. Naturally, Emmanuel Macron’s government is keen to avoid a repetition of these events. Yet the protests and their violence work in favour of those opposing the new law. The crucial role of the police in containing them and their use of force has, in the eyes of the public, demonstrated precisely why it is necessary to maintain the right to film and photograph scenes such as these.

The expression of public opinion and political discontent that manifests itself in the protests is

¹ ZEIT ONLINE (2020), ‘Frankreichs Regierung überarbeitet umstrittenes Sicherheitsgesetz’, ZEIT ONLINE, 30 November 2020 [Online]. Accessed at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-11/polizeigewalt-frankreich-proteste-sicherheitsgesetz-videos-polizeieinsatz> [Accessed 22 December 2020].

² Franceinfo (2020), ‘“Sécurité globale” : l’article 24 est “une atteinte à la liberté d’expression”, estime le Conseil de l’Europe’, Franceinfo, 18 December 2020. Available at: ‘“Sécurité globale” : l’article 24 est “une atteinte à la liberté d’expression”, estime le Conseil de l’Europe (francetvinfo.fr)’. [Accessed 25 December 2020].

³ France culture (2020), ‘Comment sortir des violences policières ?’, France culture, 16 December 2020 [Online]. Accessed at: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/esprit-de-justice/comment-sortir-des-violences-policieres?fbclid=IwAR2BZ8uLg-MHpY3118ZciN-0cpcuY2ueu436J0mIbknWfb27s112bz-R6z18> [Accessed 22 December 2020].

nothing new in France; indeed, it has almost become part of the image of the French population abroad. France stands out in Europe for what could almost be called a culture of political protest: from the French Revolution, the archetype of modern civil revolutions, to the protests of the *gilets jaunes* that have shaken the French Republic since October 2018. Yet the scenes that can be witnessed in Paris and elsewhere in France, the heated public debate over the new law, and the excessive use of the national police, illustrate a troubled relationship between the state and its citizens. What role popular protest has played in this context, and what factors have contributed to its pertinent manifestations in 2020?

To examine this issue, it is necessary to analyse the evolution of protest in France throughout modern history by using two case studies, notably the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1871 Paris Commune. Subsequently, is the consideration of more recent events such as the *gilets jaunes* movement during the era Macron, as well as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and its management by the French Government. The final factor is the consideration of the role of the police in particular, and its function in protest culture and as a representative force of the state. This leads to the conclusion that, while protest culture has necessarily evolved throughout French history, many of the issues that cause popular protest have not, thus leading to today's tense relationship between state and citizens in France.

Looking back on history, the most extreme form of political protest by a population is the revolution, in which not only the state or form of governance is challenged, but an attempt is made to overturn and replace the current system of governance. Not every political protest leads to revolution, but every revolution is a form of political protest; especially in the context of the French Revolution of 1789. This was one of the most significant events in modern European history for not only the violence with which it brought about the evolution from absolutist monarchy to republic, but also for the profound effects it had on the relationship

between the people and the state. Indeed, Paolo Gerbaudo calls the French Revolution a, "watershed moment", embodying the break between pre-modern and modern social movements and protest culture.⁴

The revolutionary process began in a situation of profound economic distress for the majority of French society, and in particular the lower-middle classes, such as small craftsmen. The Third Estate, the representatives of the bourgeoisie and peasants, consequently demanded the creation of a National Assembly, and the absolutist monarchy was abolished. Until 1792, the political situation remained somewhat unstable, as a shift to a constitutional monarchy was attempted at first; upon the poorly attempted flight of Louis XVI however, it became clear that the powerless monarch was not willing to cooperate with the National Assembly's new vision of society and politics.⁵ Thus, there followed the most prominent events of the Revolution, notably the beheading of the King and his wife, and the terrorization of the country under Robespierre. The violence of the Revolution is well-documented; from events such as the Storming of the Bastille in 1789 to the Reign of Terror that followed under the new regime, the revolutionary process, so crucial for the advancement of democracy and the creation of a modern state, cost many lives. The accessibility of weapons to the population – at least in comparison to today's society – as well as the economic plight of the lower classes and politically unstable situation, acted as strong incitements to a forceful taking over of the monarchist institutions. However, the Revolution and its events were also critiqued by some French contemporaries, the most powerful voice among them being the philosopher Joseph de Maistre. In his eyes, the violent excess of the overturn of the monarchy was proof that democracy, the rule of the people, was more dangerous as a form of governance than monarchy.⁶ Such arguments speak clearly of the unprecedented change that the Revolution constituted in Europe at this time, notably the challenge it posed to the monarchy as dominant model of governance across the continent, as well as the principles established

⁴ P. Gerbaudo, (2020), 'The Pandemic Crowd', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, p.65.

⁵ C. Hobson, (2015), 'The Crucible of Democracy: The French Revolution', in: *The Rise of Democracy. Revolution, War and Transformations in International Politics since 1776*, Edinburgh University Press, p. 87.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.98.

through the constitution, that even played a role in inciting the French Revolutionary Wars.⁷ As Christopher Hobson notes, the creation of a constitution furthermore cemented the importance of the event beyond the French borders, as it went directly against the principles of the absolutist monarchy, in which all political power resided with the king.⁸ The concept of democracy shifts power to the people; while the success of the Revolution remains questionable, especially in the light of Robespierre's Reign of Terror and ultimately Napoleon's ascent to power, it cannot be denied that 1789 marked a point of profound transformation in the relationship between people and state in both France and Europe.

Almost a century later, many more incidents of popular protest against the state had taken place, notably, 1848 involved a European wave of revolutions and attempted revolts. Yet in France, it is in 1871 that another event of significance took place: the establishment and short life of the Paris Commune are both relevant as symptoms of political currents and an evolution of protest culture during the nineteenth century. In 1871, France was yet again in a highly unstable political and economic climate, as after a war lost against Prussia, they were forced to concede the Alsace region. However, France not only had to overcome the humiliation of defeat and the loss of territory, but also the end of the *Second Empire* following the forced abdication of Napoleon III and yet another transition to a republican model of state.⁹ In this political vacuum, the Parisian National Guard, composed of many soldiers issued from the working class. Refusing to be disarmed by the monarchist National Assembly, they democratically elected a Central Committee that directly opposed the National Assembly.¹⁰ The monarchist government, already based at Versailles, lost control of the city to the National Guard as a result.

Adolphe Thiers' Government was able

to reclaim the capital after three brief months of socialist governance.¹¹ The failure of the Commune was due to numerous factors. Notably, the *communards*, as they were called, did not extend their influence outside of Paris; furthermore, the new Central Committee delayed their march on Versailles to confront the government's troops, favouring instead elections and debates on social measures in the Commune. Together with other issues, these delays ultimately allowed the governmental forces to engage the Parisian National Guard in fighting to reclaim the capital. During the battles, the barricade became a characteristic sight in Paris, as they were useful in blocking narrow streets in areas such as Montmartre.¹² The retaliation from the governmental troops was arguably merciless, as the *communards* ultimately remained inferior in numbers; Samuel Bernstein writes that "[d]uring the last and bloody week of the Commune the Versailles soldiers were no less brutal with the women than with the men. Of the 20,000 Parisians killed in and around Paris during that week many were women. Hundreds of others were dragged to Versailles and condemned to prison or deportation."¹³ The Paris Commune thus demonstrates several parallels to the 1789 Revolution, notably the political and economic precariousness that acted as a foundation for this popular uprising. Furthermore, the rejection of the current form of state – in this case, the monarchist National Assembly – manifested itself through a spontaneous and rapid taking of control, although the social and political basis for discontent among the population existed already.

How has political protest in France evolved in this century? In the era of Emmanuel Macron's presidency, which forms the crucial background of our topic, this culture of protest finds its most prominent recent symptom in the birth of the *gilets jaunes* movement, or the Yellow Vests as they are known in English. With changes to fuel prices in

⁷ Hobson, 'The Crucible of Democracy', p.90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹ S. Bernstein, (1941), 'The Paris Commune', *Science & Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p.117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.119.

¹¹ A. Damien, (2008), 'Thiers et la Commune de Paris : violence contre violence', *La Revue administrative*, Janvier 2008, 61e Année, No. 361, p.8.

¹² C. Lapostolle, (1988), 'Plus vrai que le vrai. Stratégie photographique et Commune de Paris', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Vol. 73, p. 68.

¹³ Bernstein, 'The Paris Commune', p.136.

2018, protests began taking place all over France, soon beginning to use the characteristic yellow security vests as a unifying symbol as they incorporated more serious social grievances such as rising cost of living and poverty.¹⁴ Jim Aulich even describes the reasons for the growth of the movement as follows: “The gilets jaunes in France [...] were [...] born of powerlessness, suppression, and a lack of voice and opportunity experienced by large sections of society.”¹⁵ Despite the visual unity of the movement, the protests were decentralized, without specific leadership and splintered into local groups.¹⁶ The role of social media, such as Facebook groups, was of considerable importance despite the otherwise loose structure of the movement, thus highlighting the significance of technology in modern political protest.¹⁷ Yet the *gilets jaunes* demonstrations were also marked by excesses of violence: while numbers of injured persons differ according to various sources, they are worrying in any case. The Ministry of the Interior suggests there could have been as many as 1800 protesters and 1000 police officers injured during the first few months of protest.¹⁸ Among injured protestors, injuries to the head, with the loss of eyes, were the most common due to the use of rubber bullets by the police forces charged with the control of the demonstrations. While the protests are arguably less fatal than those of the previous centuries, the violence erupting during these *manifestations* worried organizations, such as Amnesty International, and those witnessing the extent of the physical damage, including paramedics.¹⁹ Although the movement subsided in

the first half of 2019, it stands out among examples of political protest in contemporary France.

The protests over the last few years have not taken place without any cause whatsoever, as the discontent over the raised fuel prices that sparked the *gilets jaunes* was just one issue amongst many. The political measures taken under Macron have included numerous economic reforms; according to a study by the OFCE, the French Observatory for the Economic Situation – an organization allegedly situated towards the left of the political spectrum – these reforms have benefited above all the richest members of the French population, while the poorest 5% saw their economic status shrink.²⁰ As the *Le Monde* newspaper notes, Macron has potentially demonstrated that the opposition’s slogan at his election, “Macron is a President for the rich!” is not entirely false.²¹ Economic precarity, a notable polarization of society, as well as several terrorist attacks despite measures such as the *plan Vigipirate*, the deployment of the armed forces to ensure internal security: the accumulation of factors such as these contribute to the political tension in the country and thus form a basis for protest.²² After the social unrest that sparked the *gilets jaunes* movement, the political situation was shaken once more when the Covid-19 pandemic of this year confronted the government. The management of the pandemic in France, as in many other countries, has been subject to much criticism from all ends of the political spectrum, and even from international voices. The German newspaper *Die Zeit*, for instance, painted a worrying picture of Emmanuel Macron’s way

¹⁴ P. Boyer, T. Delemotte et al. (2020), ‘Les déterminants de la mobilisation des Gilets jaunes’, *Revue économique*, Vol. 71, No. 1, p. 110.

¹⁵ J. Aulich, (2020) ‘Conclusion: Reflections on Protest and Political Transformation since 1789’ in McGary, A., Erhart, I., et al, *The Aesthetics of Global Protest. Visual Culture and Communication*, Amsterdam University Press, p. 274.

¹⁶ Boyer et al., ‘Les déterminants de la mobilisation des Gilets jaunes’, p.110.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.111.

¹⁸ E. Tøn, (2020), ‘Gilets jaunes : «Je n’ai jamais vu autant de blessés graves»’, *L’Express*, 19 January 2019 [Online]. Accessed at: https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/gilets-jaunes-je-n-ai-jamais-vu-autant-de-blesses-graves_2058008.html [Accessed 25 December 2020].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ A. Tonnelier, (2020), ‘Avec la politique économique de Macron, « les 5 % de Français les plus pauvres devraient voir leur niveau de vie se réduire »’, *Le Monde*, 05 February 2020 [Online]. Accessed at: https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2020/02/05/la-politique-economique-d-emmanuel-macron-profite-d-abord-aux-actifs-et-aux-plus-aises_6028477_3234.html [accessed 24 December 2020].

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Gouvernement Français (2020), *Le plan Vigipirate*, Accessed at : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/vigipirate> [accessed 26 December 2020].

of leadership during the pandemic, headlining the respective article with the words “Autoritäres Absurdistan” (“The authoritarian Absurdistan”).²³ While the German perspective, where the strong federalism furthers a somewhat different understanding of politics and democracy might be seen as alarmist, it cannot be denied that, under Macron, the efforts to strengthen the state and its apparatus have multiplied, perhaps manifesting itself in the strict pandemic rules implemented in France. This process ultimately brings us back to the law *Sécurité globale*, which has been seen as yet another symptom of Macron’s lean towards the right in an attempt to engage more conservative voters for the presidential election in 2022.²⁴

Much of the contemporary culture of protest that we can witness in France today is however also related to the issue of policing and its use in maintaining public order, a more deeply rooted problem which become especially obvious in recent months. The French police system is arguably quite complex. One hand consists of the *police nationale*, the national police force, which is controlled by the executive branch of the state, specifically the Ministry of the Interior. On the other hand, there also exists the *gendarmerie*, which is de facto a branch of the armed forces and answerable to both the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior.²⁵ While the *police nationale* is usually deployed in larger cities, the *gendarmerie* is more often present in rural settings; however, they often overlap in their functions, in which the control of public protests is also included. In the context of this function, there exist several factors in the police system which are of significance. According to a report by *Brut*, a French online news portal, French police training is completed in one-and-a-half years. However, it has to be doubted whether this time is sufficient for a comprehensive education of future police

officers. As was pointed out in the report, police forces in countries such as Germany, Finland or Norway – all of which have particularly low rates of police violence – are trained for at least three years, thus receiving a more profound education that not only rests on the use of force, but an ethical foundation.²⁶ Likewise, when it comes to maintaining public order in events such as protests, French police are among the most equipped forces in Europe, something which arguably facilitates the use of force in stressful situations and, as a result, the probability of injury of protesters through tear gas, pepper spray or rubber bullets, as was already demonstrated during the *gilets jaunes* demonstrations.²⁷

It is not only the use of force or the training that police officers undergo which undermine trust between the police as a representative force of the state and citizens. In this context, we need to return to the measures taken for the current pandemic, in which the police have played an essential role. With the exceptions of Italy and Greece, France has been unique in Europe in that it implemented the system of the so-called *attestation*, a physical or digital document needed to justify every leaving of the house. Not having the *attestation* when outside – or not using it for one of the authorized reasons of leaving the house – is punishable with a fine of 135 euros.²⁸ This concept was introduced during the first wave of infections in March, and during the second wave this autumn, when most other European countries attempted lighter lockdowns, France reintroduced the *attestation*, making it one of the harshest measures on the continent. The verification of the *attestation* is of course left to the police forces, who can demand anyone in the street to show their document and verify it. It goes without saying that this system does very little to further a relationship of trust between police and citizens, and, by extension, between the state

²³ A. Joeres, (2020), ‘Autoritäres Absurdistan’, *DIE ZEIT*, 12 November 2020 [Online]. Accessed at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-11/corona-regeln-frankreich-lockdown-polizei-quarantaene-attest-joggen-sport> [Accessed 23 December 2020].

²⁴ S. Dupont, (2020), ‘Macron se réinvente à droite’, *Les Echos*, 16 June 2020 [Online]. Accessed at: <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/emmanuel-macron-president/macron-se-reinvente-a-droite-1215147> [Accessed 24 December 2020].

²⁵ Ministère de L’Intérieur (2011), *Organisation*, Accessed at : <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Le-ministere/Organisation> [Accessed 26 December 2020].

²⁶ *Brut* (2020) [Facebook], ‘Maintien de l’ordre : France vs. Europe’, *Brut*, 2 December 2020 [Online]. Accessed at: <https://www.facebook.com/brutofficial/videos/866565474080626> (Accessed 25 December 2020).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Gouvernement Français (2020), *Informations Coronavirus*, Accessed at : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus> [Accessed 24 December 2020].

and the citizens. While police violence remains a concern in every instance that it occurs, it is ultimately the executive part of the government, to whom the police are answerable, where these issues should be addressed. It is further problematic that there seems to exist a lack of transparency when it comes to the documentation of police activity, notably in the cases of police violence, response to events such as protests, or verifications of identity as part of patrols.²⁹ A relationship of trust between the citizens and the state cannot be established – or reestablished – without transparency. The excessive use of violence from police, be it during the *gilets jaunes* protests, or current demonstrations against the law *Sécurité globale*, as well as the lack of data available on these issues from the government, correspond to the well-known theory by Max Weber, the philosopher, who defined the modern state as having the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.³⁰ However, it should also be remembered that, as Terry Beitzel writes, “Weber’s social and ethical commitment to nonviolence is implicit. What is explicit is his preference for politics over violence and civil social action over self-indulgence.”³¹

To conclude, the current political climate in France results from a complexity of current issues and societal problems. Social protest in France may have changed its face: from the violence of the French Revolution and the characteristic barricades of the Commune, modern protests have become more dynamic due to technology, but also less deadly in comparison to those of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Yet factors such as these have made the state’s expression of power through for example the excessive deployment of police no less pertinent, demonstrating a certain stance of suspicion against its own citizens. While social tension has certainly augmented in the explosive climate of 2020 and its many restrictive and unprecedented, yet necessary measures,

it is also clear that the political dialogue in France between state and citizens needs to be strengthened. As Paolo Gerbaudo notes: “Two aspects are particularly important to explore with respect to the historical specificity of social movements: the grievances, the social issues or problems that social movements raise and mobilize; and the repertoires of action, the historically layered practices through which these grievances are expressed.”³² Over the course of the modern period, these repertoires of action may have changed in the case of French protest; yet the grievances, although less extreme than during the times of the Revolution, still bear some similarities with their historical counterparts, thus demonstrating the necessity of public protest, yet also its problematic character as an issue between the modern state and its citizens.

²⁹ M. Boutros, (2020), ‘Les mobilisations à l’épreuve de l’opacité policière en France’, *Lien social et Politiques*, Numéro 84, pp. 145-148.

³⁰ T. Beitzel, (2014), ‘The Process of (Nonviolent) Revolution and Max Weber’s Ethics of Responsibility’, *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 31, No. 2, p.15.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.17.

³² Gerbaudo, ‘The Pandemic Crowd’, p. 64.

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