

Political Life in France

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It was the beginning of December, the streets of Paris had been transformed from their usual grey, albeit rather beautiful, buildings into something straight out of a Hallmark Christmas movie. Christmas markets had been set up throughout the city allowing Parisiens and tourists alike to stop and browse the stalls or have a cup of *vin chaud* before continuing with their evening at surrounding bars and cafés. It was a Saturday. The weekends were typically the busiest days to visit Paris, yet for the past few weeks the streets every Saturday were eerily quiet. Store windows had been boarded up, restaurants had pulled their chairs in and locked their doors, tourists were advised to leave the city, and local parisiens had opted to stay inside for the day. As we wandered through the city, we happened upon numerous blocked streets. Police sirens blared in the background, echoing off the buildings of the narrow roads. Stumbling upon a Christmas market, alive and untouched in a city that had essentially shut down, felt almost like walking onto a movie set.

The year that I moved to France to do my exchange was one of the most politically tense years that I could've chosen to live there. France is a very politically engaged country and is no stranger to civil disobedience and unrest. During the two semesters that I studied in France, I experienced this political tension firsthand. Since mid-November of 2018, French people had taken to the streets to protest both in Paris, and in various major cities throughout the country. They called themselves the "*Gilets Jaunes*" or "Yellow Vests" after their attire: a yellow vest that every person in Europe is required by law to carry in their car. What began originally as a protest against the

increasing taxes on gas, quickly became a demonstration against an accumulation of issues that had frustrated the lives of the general public. The protesters came from both the political left and the right, united in a movement of the working people against the French elite. From economic inequality and housing insecurity, to resentment with the governing elite, the demands of the *Gilets Jaunes* were exhaustive, disorganized, and not entirely coherent. However, what was clear was that this was a development that was gaining momentum and that there was no foreseeable end to the public demonstrations and violence that had come to characterize the movement.

We had only been walking through the Christmas market for a few minutes before we saw the first group of people running around the corner. Screaming voices bounced off the walls of *le centre pompidou* and the Christmas stalls, lingering in the adjacent square. Without hesitation store owners began closing their doors, boarding up their windows and locking the customers inside. “*Fermez les fenêtres!*” a shopkeeper yelled at her neighbouring Christmas stalls, grabbing the notebook that I had been looking at out of my hand and scrambling to roll down her window. We had been careful to avoid the *Avenue des Champs-Élysées* all day knowing that that was where the epicenter of protests, and police retaliation was taking place. We were unprepared to get caught in midst of the conflict, in a Christmas market of all places. The *Gilets Jaunes* came running down the street, not marching peacefully as we had seen in other parts of the city earlier in the day. Right behind them white police vans followed, with riot police marching together, shields raised in anticipation of violent clashes with the protesters. My friend grabbed my arm and pulled me into the crowd of fleeing onlookers. We ducked into the nearest metro station, catching a train to the other side of the Seine

away from the conflict. We then got off in the Latin Quarter and found the nearest café with a TV. For the next couple of hours we watched the news attentively, continuously refreshing our twitter feeds for updates on the clashes between the *Gilets Jaunes* and the police in the street where we had stood just moments earlier.

Although the *Gilets Jaunes* protests were undoubtedly the most violent during the winter of 2018, the movement has continued to take place every weekend for several months well into 2019. Each time something significant happened within French society, it encouraged the protests to endure further.

On March 15, 2019, thousands of students in cities around the world skipped school and took to the streets to protest climate change and the lack of accountability and action taken by governments to address this issue. Though I was not in Paris the day of the march, I was able to attend the event in my city, Reims, where high school and university students alike left class to participate. At noon, a crowd gathered in front of the cathedral, megaphones and cardboard signs in hand. We made our way from the cathedral, to the mayor's office, then finally downtown, with our signs in the air, chanting in unison.

*“Et un, et deux, et trois degrés, c’est un crime contre l’humanité”*

(And one, and two, and three degrees, it’s a crime against humanity)

*“Rejoignez-nous, ne nous regardez pas.”*

(Join us, don’t look at us)

In contrast to the violent *Gilets Jaunes* protests that had been taking place every weekend for the previous 5 months, the climate march was peaceful, student-led and had clear expectations of the government. Started by 16-year old Greta Thunberg in Sweden, the climate protests have become a global initiative to urge the international community to take immediate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and curb the negative effects of climate change. It was an ambivalent feeling, marching with my fellow classmates, as local representatives and the press watched from the sideline. On one hand, there was a sense of optimism as the students rallied behind a unifying cause that has been one of the greatest social issues since the day we were born, and will ultimately affect us for the rest of our lives. On the other, you could feel the frustration and desperation as we gathered around the mayor's office, feeling that our cries were falling on deaf ears. Following the original protest on March 15th, student-led climate marches have continued to occur around the world, indicating the ongoing battle to make climate change policy a top priority within local and international politics.

The final incident that marked the end of my experience living in France was the devastating fire at the *Notre Dame de Paris*. On April 15th around 6:30 pm, a fire broke out on the roof of the cathedral, destroying the majority of the wooden roof and the central spire. Within seconds, there was an outpouring of grief on social media, as media outlets and individuals around the world mourned the loss of one of the world's greatest architectural and cultural structures. In the moment, the conversations surrounding the fire were ones of disbelief and heartbreak. Upon reflection, many people online began to critique the public sentiments and statements put forward by prominent people in regards to the fire. While the Notre Dame burned in Paris, the Al-Aqsa Mosque in

Jerusalem, the third holiest place for Muslims, raged on with very little media attention or public outcry. That same energy that people used to express their sorrow at the loss of the Notre Dame was lacking on social media when three historic Black churches were targeted and burned down within 10 days in Louisiana just two weeks earlier.

Traditional media coverage, and discussions on social media tend to prioritize certain global stories over others. While it is understandable that stories closer to home will receive more coverage than those that have little connection to where we live, what becomes an issue is when we put more of our thoughts and sympathy towards a physical building than the loss of human life. According to Vox Media, as of April 17th 2019, over one billion dollars had been raised in support for the Notre Dame Cathedral. <sup>[1]</sup> While it was a devastating loss to French culture, religion, and history, not a single person died or was injured in the fire. In contrast, when Cyclone Idai hit the Southeast region of Africa last March, killing hundreds of people and forcing thousands more to be displaced from their homes in Mozambique, Tanzania, and Malawi, the international community failed to raise the same type of funds that the Notre Dame had received to support aid relief.<sup>[2]</sup> The Notre Dame fire precipitated a global discussion on the types of issues that are most important to global audiences. The fact that so much money was raised in so little time in support of reconstructing a building, yet millions of people remain displaced, below the poverty line, or subject to persecution demonstrates how the billionaires of the world prioritize the use of their money. Many cultural heritage sites around the world do not have the same privilege of being rebuilt when they are destroyed. The culturally rich sites in Aleppo destroyed during the Syrian war, or the cultural heritage destroyed in the 2003 invasion of Iraq didn't receive billions of dollars from celebrities or the political elite to be restored. While mourning the loss of a French

church, and mourning the lives of people killed by climate-related storms in Mozambique are not mutually exclusive, it is important to recognize the social and cultural factors at play that influence people to post a picture on Instagram or Twitter grieving the loss of one over the other.

If the past year living in France has taught me anything, it is that there is no excuse not to be politically engaged and aware of issues taking place around the world. With the technology we have today and social media playing a huge part in our daily lives, we are more connected than ever before with people across the globe. One student's personal protests in Sweden can spark a global movement in hope for a greener future thanks to the internet's power to mobilize mass groups of people. Conversely, the ability for mass mobilization can lead to violent demonstrations such as the "*Gilets Jaunes*" with no comprehensible motives or foreseeable end in sight. Finally, international journalism is much more accessible thanks to the influence of social media. Thus, there is really no excuse for ignorance, or only following news that pertains to one part of the world. Within seconds, anyone can find information about news in any country, not just taking place in major cities such as Paris.





## References

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[2] Rodgers, L., Fletcher, G., & Bryson, M. (2019, March, 22). Cyclone Idai: How the storm tore into Southern Africa." *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47638696>