Spring 2020

Culture in a Yellow Vest: The Role of Popular Culture in Social Protest

Teresa Derr
Western Washington University

Teresa Derr

Spring 2020

Senior Project: The Use of Popular Culture in Social Protest

Culture in a Yellow Vest: The Role of Popular Culture in Social Protest

Introduction

Culture is a broad, complex concept that has been understood to be the "bundle of messages that a given people have in common: their shared experiences, shared perceptions and values, and shared consciousness" (MacDonald 10, 1991). Culture can be expressed in several ways, as people draw on these shared elements and create artifacts that represent culture in different ways that are more visibly seen. Some of the cultural artifacts last through generations, which the culture accepts as an inherent part of the shared experience. However, other artifacts are more superficial, only representing the common consciousness of a culture for a generation or two in the form of popular culture. Popular culture is difficult to define because the artifacts that fall into this subcategory of culture are constantly changing. However, it can be understood as the "cultural artifacts that are the most accessible to the most amount of people that they find to be of interest, popular to them. It is informed by the broad contours of common culture, common ideas, and common definitions of society, a nation, patriotism, and other ideas" (Goren 484, 2016). These artifacts can come in several forms, from music to artwork to internet humor to any other representation of the deeper layers of culture that are popular in the here and now. France has several such objects of popular culture. One place that these are the most visible is in France's protests, of which they have several. France is known, after all, for having a deeply rooted tradition of protesting (Grenier, 2018).

One of the most recent set of protests, the Yellow Vest Protests, aka *Les Gilets Jaunes*, has been a rich example of the use of popular culture in social protests. These protests have become a social movement, per Tarrow's (2011) definition: "Collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities" (9), and in this long, continuous social movement, the protests have had time to grow as a collective identity and adopt symbols of France within its movement. In identifying the aspects of popular culture that were effective in garnering attention and sparking the spread of the protest, it is possible to try to identify how one can more effectively use popular culture in

other protests. The fact that the Yellow Vests had some degree of success in some areas makes this a nuanced example to study and learn from. Using the Civil Sphere's EMM-Framing theory, I argue that if protesters can use popular culture to tap into the emotive, moral, and mnemonic reactions of the people in their society, then their protest will gain more attention from the society and be more successful overall.

Background on Historical Culture of Protest in France

When considering the history of France, it quickly becomes evident that the Yellow Vest protests are nothing new. Ever since France's Revolution in 1789, protests have been a staple of French society. Every time that the French take to the streets, create a barricade, and start throwing Molotov cocktails, it is reminiscent of their past, calling to their fellow Frenchmen to remember their history and join the fight against whatever they have deemed is the current oppressive regime (Murphey, 2011). It is within this history and culture of protest that the Yellow Vest protests are set in, and to understand the thought process behind the protesters and the impact they had it is important to understand this framework.

Since the 17th century, urban protest has been a part of French daily life. The French have been people who air their grievances since they were peasants and masters, although the peasants have always had to fight for their grievances to be taken seriously. The first big revolution in France included the Lords of the land calling their peasants "*Jacquerie*", a name suggesting they were idiots and attention-seekers (Barry, 2020). However, the peasants did not sit back and take this. They took to the streets in rioting mobs, challenging the people in power and starting to reveal the corrupt nature of the political system. Their protests took multiple forms, such as spontaneous crowd protests, organized factional parties, and combinations of these types, but they provided for a dynamic social interaction that has remained in the people's memory ever since (Beik, 1990). Thus, the urban protests that are now so important to French life were started, and the influence that the peasants had remains today.

Since the peasants revolted against their Lords, France has retained a distrust in authority, assuming that people in positions of power are willing to take advantage of them as has been done in the past. Mass unemployment also raises concerns, as employees are viewed as desperate for a job and willing to suffer poor conditions by employers, which makes employees distrust them more. (Gobry, 2019). Gopnik (2018) argues that when overcentralized authority refuses to

take the concerns of the masses seriously, protesting is the only method left to people who want to create change in their government. Part of the solution to this was the creation of unions. Unions such as the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) hold a lot of power in France, enough to disrupt public life (Sanchez, 2020). Strikes and protests are organized by unions with the intention of bringing basic services to a standstill. However, most of these protests organized by unions are done within a framework that has been developed by France in order to accommodate such events. As Murphey (2011) explains:

> The announcement of the intention to strike is made by established unions with clear spokespersons and a well-disciplined membership, and it is generally issued well in advance, allowing those who might be affected by it to plan accordingly. Further, essential services are often maintained, albeit at a reduced rate. Such moments of contestation also tend to be highly managed and supervised. Law enforcement officials are alerted, streets are closed to traffic, and union representatives flank gatherings, all in an effort to maintain public order and safety (983).

This shows just how ingrained within the society and culture protests are, that there is a well-organized routine for protesting, guidelines to follow, and procedures for dealing with the protesting. This, of course limits the impact that protests can have, if they cease to be disruptive. Contentious politics loses its power once the authorities are wise to the tactics (Tarrow, 2011).

One might assume that the Yellow Vests are simply another form of this, the next step in French history that continues the tension between the modern-day peasants (the masses) and the modern-day Lords (the elites). It is simply, it can be assumed, people who are trying to live in an exciting time where change is taking place, just like the Frenchmen's ancestors did (Gopnik, 2018). However, while these protests are certainly influenced greatly by such a rich history of protest, these protests will likely join the list of notable protests because of the scale and class of masses who are joining the protests. The majority of protesters were the lower-middle class, those who do not have the luxury to protest in such a nice, rule-following fashion, nor to simply participate because it is exciting. Most notably, the Yellow Vest Protests did not follow the proper procedures for protesting that France society has arranged itself around, thus creating an attention-grabbing disruption of the public life (Lichfield 2019 & Gobry, 2019). This disregard for the modern rules of acceptable protests means that the Yellow Vests can have a greater impact, because the tactic they are using is not hindered by the authorities being aware of their methods. Furthermore, it reminds people of the oldest French traditions, where people fought for

their rights and demanded equality in the streets, without permission, and calls people to do the same (Murphey, 2011 & Sanchez, 2020).

Background of The Yellow Vests

The Yellow Vests movement took Paris and the world by storm on November 17, 2018 when 283,000 people all over France took to the streets in large cities, small towns, and at local roundabouts. The movement was named the Yellow vests because people in bright yellow safety vests blocked roads to protest the rising taxes on diesel prices (Lichfield 2019). This internet-driven movement truly began in May of 2018, when businesswoman Pricillia Ludosky and car fanatic Eric Drouet started an online petition to draw attention to the rising taxes on diesel prices. In October of the same year, Drouet had the idea to promote a nationwide protest on the streets of France (Lichfield 2019). People latched onto the idea, which was spread through social media, especially as a Facebook event (Bell, 2019), and the result has been one of the biggest and longest sustained movements that France has ever seen.

One of the reasons that this movement was so big and lasted so long was the absence of a narrow identity that could exclude people. There was no recognized leader of the movement, nor any formal structure. People from all sides of the political spectrum supported this movement, even people who previously supported President Macron (BBC 2018). One visible identity category was class, as it was mainly low- and middle-class people who were protesting. These are people with low-paying jobs, such as artisans, small businesspeople, secretaries, factory workers, IT workers, delivery workers, and care workers (Lichfield 2019). Many protesters were also from the rural areas, the small towns and cities in the periphery. Something many had in common was an inability to pay off their bills for the month (Chrisafis 2018). For these people, the gas tax was one more cost they could not afford, thus sparking their participation in the movement.

While the sparking factor for this movement was the rising gas prices, there were several other grievances that protestors offered as reasons for their initial participation on the first Saturday protest and kept them protesting on every following Saturday. The increase of 6.5 cents per liter on diesel and 2.9 cents per liter on petrol was simply the breaking point for many (BBC 2018). Lichfield (2019) reviewed some of these grievances, examining a lack of public services, new taxes on certain pensions, a decrease in taxes for the wealthy, and a reduction of the speed

limit in rural France. There were also people taking issue with President Macron's policies, which have been seen as making life easier for the rich while burdening the working class, (Atkin 2018). The feelings surrounding the change of the speed limit reflects some of how the people have viewed President Macron's policies. Rural people view speeding citations as a way for the government to take more money from *ploucs* (yokels) or *pecnos* (rednecks), while letting the rich off easy.

Both this and the ire at the rising tax of fuel prices stemmed from the high cost of living and the way in which this favors the rich. Not needing to drive can be taken as a sign of wealth in France, as people who live closer to the city centers and therefore do not need a car must be rich due to the high cost of living in the city. Therefore, more speeding fines and higher prices of gas would disproportionately affect those who must live further away from the city, which are more likely to be low- and middle-class people (Nossiter 2018). These people have expressed concern over the increasing bills they must pay and their decreasing funds, which would only have gotten worse with the new tax. Protestors also felt that their needs and concerns were being passed over in favor of the wealthy elite's agenda. They felt they were not being listened to by the government and so do not trust the government. This led to concerns that the government would not actually use the tax money to support environmental causes as it is claiming (Bell 2019). These factors came together to create a sense of anger. Words that the protestors used include *mépris* (contempt) and *ras le bol*, (an idiom meaning being fed up). These words show the feelings of the protestors, that they had been looked down upon in contempt, slighted, and ignored for the last time, and they were sick of it. They were pushing back against those whom they perceive to be at fault.

Using the collective feelings of discontentment, the protestors effectively mobilized the affronted population into becoming protestors. The main tactic used by protestors was to march in the streets and block roundabouts without following the proper channels set up by the French government. The first Saturday protest on November 17, 2018 was the biggest and most peaceful of the movement. The protesters then decided to continue to protest every Saturday in order to accomplish their goals (Lichfield 2019). At many of the subsequent protests, there was disorganized violence and vandalism in large cities such as Paris, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes or Caen (the protests in smaller towns were more peaceful). The fourth weekend of protests, police

feared that the protesters would use live ammunition and explosives, but the threat never manifested (Lichfield 2019). The protesters engaged in different forms of disruption, including: blocking roads, building and burning barricades, blocking off oil depots, highways, and other transportation venues (France24 2018), and damaging toll booths. Speed cameras were vandalized by protesters, with 250 cameras being broken beyond repair and 1,500 more needing repairs (The Local 2018). There were instances of civilians and journalists being assaulted during these protests (BBC 2018), especially those viewed as "elites". Other symbols of wealth and status, such as banks or luxury cars, were also vandalized (Bell 2019).

The most effective tactic used by the movement was the yellow vest itself, which contributed to the performance and spectacle of the protests. The origin of this idea has remained uncredited, but it was a genius move. The bright yellow, high-visibility vest is often associated with the working class and with distress signals. It is easy to wear over any other clothes, and because of a road law in France, most people with cars already owned at least one. Due to the striking color, it stood out in pictures in the media and internet. All of this made the vest a symbol for the movement that has gained traction even in other countries, with the vest being something people have rallied around (Friedman 2018).

Despite pushbacks and resistance from the government, the immediate goal of the movement was accomplished: the government reversed the decision to raise gas tax on December 5th, 2018 (Chrisafis 2018). However, the protests continued to happen, and after a year of sustained movement, the protests had other successes, including getting a 10-billion-euro aid package for lower-class people and changes to certain laws (Bell 2019). This was not without a cost. Over the course of the protests, eleven people died, twenty-four people lost an eye, five people lost a hand (Bock 2019), and 2,400 protesters and 1,800 policemen were injured in some other manner (Chrisafis 2018). The cost to the state, in terms of repairs and funding for extra policemen, was estimated at 297 million euros, while businesses were estimated to have lost 850 million euros in revenue (in part due to a decline in tourism) (Chrisafis 2018). Authorities also condemned protesters for their vandalism of national monuments like the Arc de Triomphe and a statue of a French general (Bock 2019). However, some viewed this as worth it, not just because of the changes achieved, but also because of the lasting mark on French society that has sparked many other protests in France.

Literature Review

One of the most prominent ways that the Yellow Vest protests mobilize people and remind them of their history is by visibly incorporating symbols of French culture into the protests. Culture is a powerful tool for protestors in any protest. In examining culture in terms of protests, Valassopoulos and Mostafa (2014) argues that culture can come from any and all levels of society and spread to all the diverse communities found within any one society. Culture can easily shape identities, taking and remaking the old ones into new ones. It is within the space of cultural identities that people interact with political events, including protests. Part of the reason that culture can accomplish this so easily is that it contains within it the set of values and ideals that a group of people uphold. These values can influence people's participation in protest and their response to political events (Lee, 1993).

It is easiest to see this taking place when people use symbols of popular culture in order to change their societies. Popular culture is the ever-changing set of cultural artifacts that represent the deep-seated values a culture holds, using whatever medium is "in" at the time to share culture with the people in a society (Brown, 2019). Popular culture, which often takes the form of movies, music, books, artwork, and other forms of mass-media, shapes people's perceptions of their cultural values and the world that they live in. These symbols of cultures are often common threads that connect people across generations and classes, which makes it an excellent tool protestors can use to increase participation in their protest. Popular culture can create shared emotions over a few obsessions, drawing out feelings of togetherness through anger or fascination. Those seeking to cause change in their societies have been able to harness this in order to further their cause (Brown, 2018). Thus, the use of popular culture in protest is an important piece to consider when looking at the ways that societies are constantly changing and people are fighting for their rights.

In studying protests, cultural impacts are a relatively recent addition to the body of literature. Tarrow (2011), one of the most fundamental authors in contentious politics, identified three possible meanings culture could have for social movements: Culture as a social-psychological phenomenon that changes values, beliefs, and opinions, culture as signs with specific meanings, and culture as a frame for the worldview a person has through which they view certain events (231). It is on this groundwork that theories on the use of popular culture

have been built. One I found most useful in examining this topic was Brooks' 2015 Civil Sphere's EMM-Framing Theory, with EMM standing for Emotive, Moral, and Mnemonic. This theory argues that culture matters within social protest and presents an argument for why, based on the emotions that popular culture can evoke, the moral values influenced by ideological orientations, and how rememberable the discourses are. The theory also takes into account the role of celebrities in leading thought patterns and creating a collective identity.

First, culture as a social-psychological idea that can shape identities and beliefs applies to popular culture too. The Civil Sphere EMM-Framing theory considers popular culture as able to shape ideology, collective identity, and political socialization in a cyclical manner. Mass-mediated popular culture products, such as books, films, shows, music, and others, can reach a large audience, creating a collective idea. The idea can stick in people's minds when it manages to tap into the cognitive beliefs, emotional responses, and the moral evaluations of society. When the idea is furthered by those Brooks calls "celebrity thought leaders" (11), which are famous people whom some people tend to follow blindly, those who might not have otherwise had exposure to the idea pick up on it, furthering the creation of a collective identity around a certain thought. Much of this shaping of ideas, persuasion of people to certain identities and thoughts, happens slowly, as cultural discourses change and evolve over time. It is the emotional attachment and the moral belief that shapes the message into something memorable that can have an effect in politics, shifting individuals participation and voting habits, thus bringing about the changes in values, beliefs, and opinions. The effect that politics and popular culture can have on one another is what creates the cycle, but they both stem from deeply rooted cultural identities.

Part of the reason that this cycle is so effective is the signs and significant meaning that cultural symbols have, which are also represented in popular culture. Signs and symbols can deepen an activist or protestors commitment to their belief. Signs and symbols are also used to explain the protest, usually through binaries. Human beings have a tendency to view things through a simplified lens: good or bad, black or white. Culture relies on this, as it is often a study in dualities to understand the symbols of culture. Popular culture falls into the same pattern, as keeping things simple is an easy way to evoke strong emotions about a single thing, to ease consciences about moral arguments, and to remain memorable. Portraying certain people, ideas,

or events through certain signs in popular culture along this binary can expand the collective identity and affect the outcome of the protests.

Finally, Brooks' theory also upholds Tarrow's idea that culture is a powerful framing device. Frames are defined as a "deeply internalized, cognitive schema that filter people's perceptions and understandings of daily life" (10). It is through these frames that people understand both popular culture and social protest and judge them based on their moral and emotive intuitions, without consciously weighing evidence for or against them. Popular culture and social protests can use framing devices to make their causes appear worthy on the split-second judgement that they receive, usually by tapping into the signs and symbols of culture that people have already judged "good". It is these "immediate gut level emotional reactions", which are culturally determined, that "guide people's ethical decisions and reflect their underlying moral foundations or ideological orientations" (13). Using popular culture to frame social protests in a way that taps into these can allow protestors to persuade others to join their collective identity. Popular culture can use value amplification to reach a wider base of people and attract them to the cause.

This Civil-Sphere's EMM-Framing Theory can be applied to many elements of popular culture. Music is one of the most common examples of popular culture in social protest. Music also fits into the theory remarkably well. Music taps into people emotions and moral beliefs, through its sweeping sounds and powerful lyrics, and is often memorable for the same reasons. Brooks (2015) used music as the example for the theory, noting that music can affect behaviors and attitudes due to the way it taps into the emotions, morality, and memory of people. Other scholars have noted the power of music in various protests. Music can help protesters articulate their demands, act as a call out of the oppressive regime, and can bolster collective identity building during the protests themselves. Popular music can also catch on in other countries, bringing attention to the protest internationally (Valassopoulos & Mostafa 2014). Thus, music is a powerful tool in social protest.

Memes are another example of popular culture that are a more modern development and addition to the social movement tactical toolbox. Memes have a broad definition, but they mostly refer to "still images that are appropriated from popular culture and news media and remixed by individuals to include additional textual or visual commentary" (Huntington 78, 2016). They are

often humorous, but recent academic studies show that they provide the same type of identity building, idea shaping space that music does, albeit in a different manner. Huntington (2016) argues that memes can be considered as a "neatly packaged visual argument" (91) in modern social protests because of the commentary they provide on events. Memes can only be understood in the context that they were created, and not all who see the meme will understand it past simple humor. Memes allow individuals to participate in a public action that connects them to the greater collective identity (Huntington, 2016). Regardless of whether or not the meme is understood, it works so effectively because it taps into emotions, via humor, can be a moral commentary, and is short, simple, and memorable. Memes are symbols of popular culture, allowing individuals to put their identity stamp on the larger culture that they are a part of.

Memes and music are simply two examples of popular culture being used in social movements because of their use powerful emotive, moral, and mnemonic framing device. Books, news media, artwork, films, and shows could all be analyzed in the same way, demonstrating their use in social protest.

Method and Data

Examining the use of popular culture in the Yellow Vest Protests was interesting. To find examples of popular culture, I first reached out to the people in France with whom I am acquainted, Emma Sanchez and Florine Barry. I asked them for their thoughts on the protests, as well as examples of popular culture that they saw in the protests, on the assumption that those in France would know what was well-known and effective in building collective identity. Then I used the information that they sent me to shape my research for examples of popular information that they sent me, and other examples that were commented on in the news media. As I am proficient in French, I looked at both French and English news sites, and found lots of examples of people using popular culture in France.

Music

As the soundtrack of the protest remains the easiest place to see popular culture in social movements, I looked for music first. Emma and Florine mentioned some pieces of music that they heard during the protests. The use of "*La Marseillaise*", which is the French national anthem, has cultural importance and can bring up emotions for French people. "*Le Chant des*

Partisans" is the national hymn of resistance from World War 2. The song "*Bella Ciao*" is an Italian revolutionary song from the TV show the *La Casa de Papel* (also known as Money Heist, in English). Several famous artists and songs of protest were played, such as RENAUD's "*Société tu m'auras pas*", "*Vous N'aurez Pas ma Liberté de Penser*" by Florent Pagny which translates to "You Will not Take Away my Freedom of Thought," Geores Brassens "*La Mauvaise Réputation*", and several songs by Serge Gainsbourg. Many rap and hip-hop artists have also contributed to the repertoire of songs that have been played during the protests. Kopp Johnson's "*Gilet Jaune*", D1ST1's "*Gilets Jaunes*", D. Ace's "Social Tensions", and Bilar's "Government", "Democracy" and the "The work of the Black" are examples of this type of genre of song.

The songs that have historical importance to France are evident in their cultural impact. The French anthem and WWII resistance song can easily evoke emotions for the French people, as they contain lots of significance and symbolism within the lyrics. They can draw out people's moral obligations and duties to fight for what the French values are, which are encompassed within the idea of the song itself. They are also memorable, as the French National Anthem, if only because they had to learn it at one point.

Some of the classic protest songs speak to overthrowing oppressive regimes, using the lyrics and nostalgic emotions evoked by the song to push people to fight for a better world. Renaud's "*Société tu m'auras pas*" is a good example of this. The lyrics speak of someone seeing the problems with society at large, watching people cry while those in authority create absurd laws. The final verse of the song is a warning to those in authority, saying:

> "Demain, prends garde à ta peau, à ton fric, à ton boulot
> Car la vérité vaincra, La Commune refleurira
> Mais en attendant, je chante et je te crache à la gueule
> Cette petite chanson méchante que t'écoutes dans ton fauteuil"
> (*Tomorrow, Watch your skin, your money, your job*
> *For the Truth will win, The Commune will flourish again*
> *But while I wait, I sing and spit in your face*
> *This little mean song that you listen to in your armchair*)[1]

[1] My own translation

These lyrics evoke a sense of righteous fury, pride in the truth, and stubbornness that can draw out emotions even listening to it without the historical context the French have.

The final set of songs, the rap songs, have been analyzed more recently. French hip-hop has a culture of protest within the genre itself, born out of frustration with inequality, racism, and unresolved social tensions (Gjevori, 2019). Many of the artists are people who identify with the people from impoverished banlieues, such as the migrants and families of migrants, lower class people, and those who face discrimination. These songs are more specifically about the Yellow Vest Protests, written within the past few years and sung at the protests. The lyrics of the songs speak to this, as in D1ST1's "*Gilets Jaunes*" where he says "The rage of the people, I see it every Saturday" and D. Ace's "Social tensions" where he talks about "Let me put on my yellow vest to defend my ideas". These songs are able to connect to the youth of today, pulling out their fierce emotions of unfairness and their burning passion for equality. They are also able to connect to the moral injustices that the youth perceive and ask for correction. Finally, to those who enjoy this type of music, they are memorable.

So, music in the Yellow Vest Protests fits into EMM-Framing theory and supports the protesters active demands for better conditions. They draw others into the protest to, through a large variety in the genre of songs, connecting people across generations and classes. All of this shows the importance of music as popular culture in social protest.

Artwork

One famous painting in France about protesting is "*La Liberté Guidant le Peuple*" by Eugène Delacroix painted in 1830. Emma explained that the woman in the painting is Marianne. She is a personification of the French republic and of liberty (Sanchez 2020). This painting is often found representing the French protests, and people have taken this image and used it in the Yellow Vest protests too. The image itself evokes emotions, calls people to action, and is associated with the moral high ground. It is also very memorable, as people all around the world have seen this image. Using it in the Yellow Vest Protests, people have taken and used the image itself, have modified it, or have taken inspiration from it to use in their street demonstrations.


The painting on the left is the original painting. The one on the right has Marianne waving a yellow flag, instead of the French flag. This subtle difference draws attention to the Yellow Vest protests. It says that Marianne is leading the Yellow Vest Protesters and that they are morally correct to be fighting for their liberty. It draws out nostalgic emotions and brings forth a sense of duty as French people to keep fighting for their rights.

Another way that this image has been used in the protests is as a form of street art. Feminist performance artist Deborah De Robertis led a group of women dressed to represent Marianne in the protests. These women are painted silver and dressed in red hoodies with a cockade in the colors of the French flag. The most notable thing about the women, however, is that they are protesting dressed up as Marianne bare-chested. This obviously creates very strong emotions, as they are taking the cultural symbol that is Marianne and representing her. It draws on people's morals, perhaps in a way that forces people to confront their potentially hypocritical moral compasses, as some would deem nudity morally inappropriate while also supporting the way that they further the cause of the Yellow Vest Protests. It also is very memorable, which De Robertis said was part of what she was hoping to accomplish (Rea, 2018).

Memes

Part of the artwork used in the Yellow Vest protests was online, through memes. These I simply found by googling and sifting through the results. I found ones that I understood the humor of, although there were several that probably meant more to the French people who created them. These memes were commentaries on social life in France, about how people were perceiving the protest.

1[2].

2[3].

3[4].

The first meme translates to: "Me in a car: 'There are five minutes left to get to my job interview and I do not see what could delay me.' The Yellow Vests: Strut through door to surprise the person. The second meme translates to: Yellow Vests How… We see them (image

[2] Meme found on https://fr.memedroid.com/memes/tag/embauch%C3%A9
[3] Meme found on https://fr.memedroid.com/memes/tag/warior
[4] Meme found on https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/12/07/gilets-jaunes-des-ronds-points-gilets-jaunes-des-reseaux-meme-combat_1696396

of protesters), They see themselves (image of soldiers), The media sees them (image of teens running) and The government sees them (image of minions from Despicable Me). The third meme is a compilation of Facebook stories from an account called Gilet Jaune (Glad, 2018). The first picture has the caption *mdrr*, which means *mort de rire*, which translates literally to died of laughing (in English, lol). The second picture seems to be another artwork with a yellow vest photoshopped onto the person revolting. The third is a block of text that translates to: "All the Paris *banlieue* 91 92 93 94 95 77 78 will be there Saturday in all of Paris to support the Yellow Vests… It will be hot, hot hot… women and children, to be careful, it might be better to not come…"

These memes demonstrate the presence of the yellow vest protesters online, as well as non-yellow vest protesters responses to them. They also reveal how people perceive the protesters, especially through the "how __ see them" meme. They are short, are supposed to be humorous, and can be memorable if they are well done. The use of humor to poke fun at protestors and the government sets the entire thing into context. Furthermore, by the spreading of memes on the internet, more people learn about the Yellow Vest protests. The use of social media to alert people of what is happening and when, along with a dose of humor to entice people to show up, is an effective tactic in gaining support.

Slogans

Almost as a subgenre of memes is the use of slogans, both online and during the protests through chants or signs. Florine told me about the use of the slogan "*Faites l'amour pas le guerre*", which translates to "Make love not war", which is a reference to the May 1968 protests led by students, one of the biggest protests in French history. This brings forth the emotions and moral relevance of those protests and brings them into the current protests. The short, impactful words make it memorable. Emma told me about the hashtag #*JesuisCharlie*, which is a reference to a magazine that was attacked by terrorists that shocked French society. She also mentioned the use of pieces of poems and famous articles, such as "*Le Déserteur*" by Boris Vian and "*J'accuse*" by Emile Zola. Both of these speak of against oppression and governmental powers, which can be powerful to remind people of during these new protests.

People have also taken the famous French slogan "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*", which translates to "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity", and modified it to be used in the protests.

Florine mentioned people changing the words to "*Libertaxe, égalitaxe, fraternitaxe*", to show their disagreement with the tax on diesel that President Macron proposed which was the spark of these protests. I also found examples of people changing the words to "*Liberté, égalité, Flashball*" as a cry against the police using flash grenades to coral protestors. Several people lost an eye to these weapons, and people gathered in solidarity around them. I also found examples of the slogan being used to rally people. The image I found translates to: "Since November 17, we have found the brotherhood. Now we are going to recover the liberty and equality. Join with the history of France."

[5]

Literature

There is some French literature that is popular when talking about protests in general. Albert Camus' 1951 *The Rebel* is one of the fundamental essays on rebellion and revolution in society. Emma brought up the use of *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo, which is about the Revolution. She said that the character of Gavroche, representing a kid fighting during the Revolution, was especially poignant (Sanchez 2020). As far as popular culture literature goes, due to the recent nature of the protests, Yellow Vest Protests literature is still developing. Florine brought up *Plein le dos, 365 Gilets Jaunes*, translating to "Off Our Backs", a collection of photographs and inscriptions bound into a book (Barry, 2020). Much of the protests themselves were covered by several newspapers and magazines such as *Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération*, and *Le Pariesien*. The stories that have been run have kept society up to date, keeping the protests fresh in the

[5] Images pulled from Facebook groups
https://www.facebook.com/GiletsJaunesToulouse/posts/2277990132233387/ and
https://www.facebook.com/605068499505134/photos/a.608583849153599/2890388034306491/?type=3

minds of people. They comment on the emotions and morality of the people, both those involved in the protests and those standing on the side, as well as the government's take on the issues.

Celebrity Thought Leaders

People in France who have been instrumental in guiding the protests include Jean-Luc Mélenchon who leads the left-wing party "La France Insoumise" (the disobedient France). People in the entertainment business like Juliette Binoche and Emmanuelle Béart, as well as the writers Édouard Louis and Annie Ernaux have publicly supported the movement, as have academics like Danièle Sallenave, who wrote essays on the movement (Afp, 2019). Actors such as Frank Dubosc, Patrick Sébastien, and Line Renaud have also given their support to the protests (Hoedts, 2019). Hoedts (2019) finds this to be especially important for popular culture, as these actors are being role models for actors in the future who would take action within the culture. It also means that people who follow these famous people, actor, comedian, writer, and academic alike, are all exposed to the protests and the ideas that people are fighting for.

Others who would likely fit the definition of 'celebrity thought leader' are the people who started the movement, Eric Drouet and Priscillia Ludosky. These people have the default respect given to them as the ones who sparked the movement, and their Facebook page, "la france en colère !!!" has 285 000 members. Other Facebook pages with lots of followers also shape the movement, such as Maxime Nicolle, aka Fly Rider, who runs the Facebook page "Fly Rider infos blocage" which has 126 000 members. This page often has live streams of the demonstrations (Glad, 2018). Those on Facebook, which has been the main mobilization tool of the movement, keep the conversation going and shape the collective identity of the movement, often at the prompting of these leaders.

Analysis

As I made clear in the explanations of my data - the music, artwork, memes, slogans, literature, and celebrity thought leaders - the Civil Sphere's EMM-Framing Theory can be used to understand the effects of using these elements in the protest. They all draw out emotions, uphold moral codes, and are memorable, which means that the reasons for protesting stick better. This means that participation in the protests is likely to increase, as people are more likely to be attracted to things which spark their emotions, with which they agree, and which they remember

easily. However, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly the impact this use of these cultural elements can have on the outcome of the protest, or even on the development and the demonstration itself. This is why it is important to study these cultural elements in the context of the French historical culture of protest.

All of these elements do carry with them some aspects of the historical culture of protest. They pull inspiration from France's rich history of protesting, from the Revolution in 1789 all the way to the recent May 1968 student protests. The music covers all of the time periods while still connecting with the people in the present through the hip-hop genre. The artwork of Marianne is a very representative piece in France, with Marianne appearing on stamps, coins, and town halls (Rea, 2018). The women appearing as her brings to mind all of the various ideals of liberty and freedom that she represents. The memes tap into the younger generations and connect them to the past through the incredible abilities of photoshop. Slogans rally people to the present using the words of the past. Literature can span centuries, and people from today can access and absorb the ideas from their ancestors. Celebrities can guide and shape thoughts based on their own experiences in culture and what they want to see improve in it.

Perhaps because these elements of culture were used and applied to the context of the present, the Yellow Vest protests were extremely large, with numbers as large as 283,000 on the first day, and still reaching numbers of 45,000 three months later (Feertchak 2019). The protests have also gotten widespread attention from all over the world. Spinoff protests adopting the Yellow Vest have also occurred in Iraq, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Israel, and Taiwan (Brancati & Lucardi, 2019). The protestors also accomplished their original goal of blocking the increased tax on diesel gas and enjoyed such success and attention that they continued to protest the general unfair conditions for the lower-middle class families in France. It is impossible to say at this time, but in the future, the yellow vest might become another cultural symbol of France's protests. While there is not one thing that their success can be attributed to, the inclusion of such cultural elements was not a waste of time, space or efforts and perhaps even could be attributed a portion of credit.

Conclusion

Studying the impact of culture on social protests is one way to study the impact culture can have on human rights. Culture permeates so much of our lives and we do not even notice it.

France has a history of protest that is easy to see and a culture that can show up quite visibly in these protests. In writing this paper, I hope to add to the body of literature on the impacts culture can have when one looks for it. The Civil Sphere's EMM-Framing Theory gave me a framework in which to set my examinations of the Yellow Vest Protests as I tried to understand where culture was at work and what it was doing. I was able to apply this theory to the examples of popular culture that I found in the protests, showing how they drew on people's emotions and senses of moralities while being memorable. I hope that by better understanding how popular culture can be used in protests, future protests will be better able to use this tactic to pull together a coherent body of people with a collective identity, shared goals, and common methods.

In studying this use of culture in protest, there were several questions that could branch out into future avenues of study. A question I considered was the impact a culture's history had on its perception and application of human rights. I could clearly see where France's history and culture of protest had affected how the citizens used social protest to fight for their rights, and I wondered what this meant for the way French people viewed their rights. History and the patterns of culture that are evident in history are clearly intertwined topics, as evidenced by the amount of historical cultural artifacts the popular culture was built upon. What does that mean for people who are trying to fight for rights, and how can activists use their history to their best advantage? Future studies could dig into these questions and potentially build off of the research I have compiled in this paper.

Overall, this paper examines the use of popular culture in the Yellow Vest Protests in France and determines that it played a role in contributing to the success of the protests. It remains to be seen exactly how much of a role, as it is impossible to determine exactly the impact the cultural elements had, hidden as they are. However, it is important to attempt to identify the factors that contributed to the Yellow Vests success in order to replicate them. This paper sheds some light on the nuances and complexities of human cultures and explores one way to attempt to trigger a response from people by tapping into their emotions, morals, and memories. It helps connect ideas and thoughts to behaviors, showing there to be a complex reaction that demonstrates a need for further research into the complex field of study that is human beings and their behaviors.

References

Afp. (2019). "Gilets jaunes»: le monde de la culture salue un mouvement «sans précédent»." *La Croix*, May 4. https://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Gilets-jaunes-monde-culture-salue-mouvement-sans-precedent-2019-05-04-1301019596

Atkin, Emily. 2018. “France’s Yellow Vest Protesters Want to Fight Climate Change.” *The New Republic*, December 10. https://newrepublic.com/article/152585/frances-yellow-vest-protesters-want-fight-climate-change

Barry, Florine, personal communication, April 20, 2020.

BBC. 2018. “France fuel unrest: 'Shame' on violent protesters, says Macron.” *BBC News*, November 25. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46331783

Beik, William. (1990). “The Culture of Protest in Seventeenth-Century French Towns.” *Social History, 15*(1), 1-23.

Bell, Melissa. 2019. “Gilets jaunes movement sprang from nowhere to stun France. One year on, it's in desperate search of a direction.” *CNN*, November 16. https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/15/europe/gilets-jaunes-anniversary-intl/index.html

Bock, Pauline. 2019. “A year on, the gilets jaunes have lost 24 eyes and five hands – and made a deep mark on French society.” *NewStatesmanAmerica,* November 21. https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2019/11/year-gilets-jaunes-have-lost-24-eyes-and-five-hands-and-made-deep-mark-french

Brancati, Dawn & Lucardi, Adrian. (2019). “Yellow vest protests erupt in Iraq, Bulgaria and b beyond – but don’t expect a ‘yellow wave’.” *The Conversation*, February 5. https://theconversation.com/yellow-vest-protests-erupt-in-iraq-bulgaria-and-beyond-but-dont-expect-a-yellow-wave-110692

Brooks, Jeneve. (2015). “Mass-Mediated Protest Music and Mobilization: Synthesizing the Civil Sphere's EMM-Framing Theory.” *Theory in Action, 8*(3). DOI:10.3798/tia.1937-0237.15014

Brown, Jeffrey A. (2018). "#wheresRey: feminism, protest, and merchandising sexism in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*." *Feminist Media Studies, 18(3)* 335-348. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2017.1313291

Chrisafis, Angelique. 2018. "Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want?" *The Guardian*, December 7. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want

Feertchak, Alexis. 2019. "De l'acte I à l'acte XXIII, la mobilisation des «gilets jaunes» en chiffres." *Le Figaro*, January 22. https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2019/01/12/01002-20190112ARTFIG00126-de-l-acte-i-a-l-acte-ix-la-mobilisation-des-gilets-jaunes-en-chiffres.php

France24. 2018. "France's 'yellow vest' protesters block access to fuel depots." *France 24*, November 19. https://www.france24.com/en/20181119-france-yellow-vest-protesters-block-access-fuel-depots-taxes-total

Franceinfo. 2018. "Zéro SDF, retraites, salaire maximum... Découvrez la liste des revendications des "gilets jaunes."" *France Télévisions*, November 29. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/transports/gilets-jaunes/zero-sdf-retraites-superieures-a-1-200-euros-salaire-maximum-a-15-000-euros-decouvrez-la-longue-liste-des-revendications-des-gilets-jaunes_3077265.html

Friedman, Vanessa. 2018. "The Power of the Yellow Vest." *The New York Times*, December 4. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/fashion/yellow-vests-france-protest-fashion.html

Gjevori, Elis. (2019). "How hip-hop colours the Yellow Vest movement in France." *TRTWORLD,* November 22. https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-hip-hop-colours-the-yellow-vest-movement-in-france-31581

Glad, Vincent. (2018). "Gilets jaunes des ronds-points, gilets jaunes des réseaux, même combat." *Libération*, December 7. https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/12/07/gilets-jaunes-des-ronds-points-gilets-jaunes-des-reseaux-meme-combat_1696396

Gobry, Pascal-Emmanuel. (2019). "The Yellow Rise in Paris: What the protests mean. (Essay)." *Commentary 147*(1), 24-30

Gopnik, Adam. (2018). “The Yellow Vests and Why There Are So Many Street Protests in F France.” *The New Yorker*, December 6. https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-yellow-vests-and-why-there-are-so-many-street-protests-in-france

Goren, Lilly J. (2016). “Politics and Popular Culture.” *Society 53*(5), 482-486. DOI: 10.1007/s12115-016-0053-1

Grenier, Elizabeth. (2018). “'Yellow vest' movement: How artists see it.” *DW*, November 12. https://p.dw.com/p/39oeh

Hoedts, Julie. (2019). “Culture et « Gilets Jaunes » Le Rond-Point, Nouvelle Agora Culturelle ?" *Master IPCI*, January 1. https://www.masteripci.fr/culture-et-gilets-jaunes-le-rond-point-nouvelle-agora-culturelle/

Huntington, Heidi E. (2016). “Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric.” *Communication Studies, 67*(1), 77-93.

Lee, Aie-Rie. (1993). “Culture Shift and Popular Protest in South Korea.” Aie-Rie Lee. Research Article. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wwu.edu/10.1177/0010414093026001003

Lichfield, John. 2018. “Never before have I seen blind anger like this on the streets of Paris.” *The Guardian*, December 3. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/03/paris-streets-riots-violence

Lichfield, John. 2019. “Just who are the gilets jaunes?” *The Guardian*, February 9, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/09/who-really-are-the-gilets-jaunes

MacDonald. George F. (1991). “What is Culture?” *The Journal of Museum Education 16*(1), 9-12.

Murphy, John P. (2011). “Protest or Riot?: Interpreting Collective Action in Contemporary France.” *Anthropological Quarterly, 84*(4), 977-1009.

Nossiter, Adam. 2018. Tear Gas and Water Cannons in Paris as Grass-Roots Protest Takes Aim at Macron.” *The New York Times*, November 24. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/world/europe/france-yellow-vest-protest.html

Rea, Naomi. (2018). “Meet the Performance Artist Who Organized the Iconic Semi-Nude ‘Marianne’ Protest During France’s Yellow Vest Riots.” *Artnet News*, December 26. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/deborah-de-robertis-performance-yellow-vest-1428205

Sanchez, Emma, personal communication, May 11, 2020.

Tarrow, Sidney G. (2011). *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press

The Local. 2018. “Why are half of France's speed cameras out of action?” *The Local Fr*, December 11. https://www.thelocal.fr/20181211/why-are-half-of-frances-speed-cameras-out-of-action

Valassopoulos, Anastasia & Mostafa, Dalia Said. (2014). “Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.” *Popular Music and Society, 37*(5), 638-659.