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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**ELITE THEORY AND THE YELLOW VESTS MOVEMENT**

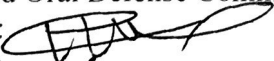
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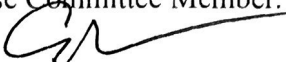
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Title:** Elite Theory and the Yellow Vests Movement
- Author:** Benjamin L. Pennington, Maj, USMC
- Thesis:** Whereas many scholars of social movements focus on opportunity structures and framing to explain the increasing strength of movements, I argue that elite theory provides a more accurate explanation for the rise of the Yellow Vests Movement in France. In this paper, I highlight such factors as elite accountability, elite circulation, and elite unification to better understand the rise of this movement.
- Discussion:** The longevity, size, and uniqueness of the 2018-2020 Yellow Vests Movement present a case study worthy of exploration. The analysis provided in this paper uses the significant components of classical elite theory to assess France's social conditions leading up to Yellow Vests protests to see if they accurately explain protester grievances. The exclusion of theories presented by democratic elite theorists from this essay is due to their disagreement with classical elite theorists' arguments. The basis for determining which elite theories to use for examination was their alignment to Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca's works. Quantitative analysis is included where possible, but the majority of the paper relies on qualitative analysis. The Yellow Vests Movement's focus on systemic inequality and the French elite's failures position it as an ideal case for the study of classical elite theory.
- Conclusion:** The three elite theory categories that best explain the Yellow Vests Movement are elite accountability, elite circulation, and elite unification. Analysis of France's social conditions and protester grievances shows a high correlation with elite theorists' arguments. The accuracy in which classical elite theory explains the social conditions that gave rise to a significant episode of contentious politics in a modern democracy makes it worthy of consideration by contemporary political and social scientists.

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The subject for this thesis was of interest to me because I have a desire to understand social systems and their impact on individuals. Systems advantage some while at the same time disadvantaging others. Unlike most other social movement theories, classical elite theory cuts right to the root cause of social disorder by examining the effects of human nature on system functionality.

The purpose of this paper is to show how classical elite theory can be used to analyze the social conditions of democratic societies to explain collective action movements. A thorough study of elite theory provides the areas of elite accountability, elite circulation, and elite unification as the best organization for analysis. By organizing research into those categories, researchers can better determine if the source of conflict is due to system-related or policy-related issues, and whether movements are likely to result in revolution.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Claire Metelits, for her mentoring throughout the entire process. There were many times I was frustrated, overly passionate, and panicked but you calmly organized me and got me back on track. Furthermore, your advice and guidance about how to synthesize information and organize thoughts are my most prized take-aways from Command and Staff College. Finally, I would like to thank my wife and two sweet boys—who had to endure many one-way discussions about elite theory.

## **Introduction**

The size and duration of France's 2018-2019 *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement and protesters' widespread claims of systemic inequality presents a great case for examination by classical elite theory.<sup>1</sup> The changes brought on by globalization and the election of President Emmanuel Macron exacerbated French social conditions that already favored France's upper-class citizens. The deteriorating circumstances brought together citizens with a diverse range of ages, social backgrounds, political leanings, and ethnic makeup. The size, consistency, and destructiveness of the group triggered an equal response from the police. The government's initial response was to suppress the movement, but as the movement grew in size and intensity President Macron softened his approach and gave in to most of the protesters' demands. His concessions may have only temporarily quelled the social unrest though, because his solutions addressed easily recognizable policy issues, but ignored the movement's real source of frustration—systemic inequality.

Whereas many scholars of social movements focus on opportunity structures and framing to explain the increasing strength of movements, I argue that elite theory provides a more accurate explanation for the rise of the Yellow Vest Movement in France. In this paper, I highlight such factors as elite accountability, elite circulation, and elite unification to better understand the rise of this movement. The first part of this paper will examine elite theory and provide a general background of the Yellow Vests Movement. The second portion will break down protesters' grievances into the main components of classical theory to determine the accuracy of theorists' arguments. The third and fourth parts will provide recommendations for further analysis and the paper's conclusion.

## **Elite Theory**

There are two central bodies of thought within elite theory—classical and democratic. Classical theory supposes that an organized elite minority rules over an unorganized majority in society.<sup>2</sup> The theory centrally focuses on the societal systems put in place that create civilization's ruling classes, and not on individuals within society that wield power. It was first developed in response to the democratic revolution that took place in Europe during the eighteenth-century.<sup>3</sup> The socialist and democratic socialist governments that rose up out of the revolution exhibited propensities that differed from those they were designed to exhibit.<sup>4</sup> Political researchers' documentation of the way in which societal systems were altered in the name of self-gain by the systems' most powerful beneficiaries forms the basis of classical theory.<sup>5</sup> While governments evolve, classical elite theory contends that human nature does not; therefore, in every civilization a small group of powerful people will emerge who use their means to manipulate the established social structure to fulfill selfish desires.<sup>6</sup>

Democratic elite theory differs from classical theory in its emphasis on the influence elites have on democratic systems. It argues that differentiation and dispersion of elites in liberal democracies makes it impossible to organize, thereby demoting them to system participants, albeit highly influential ones.<sup>7</sup> Theorists put forth that the expression of representative democracy that non-elites exercise gives them control over the political elite, which keeps other elites in check by limiting their power through the implementation of laws, legislation, and control of federal funding.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the accuracy of democratic theory is reliant upon the proper functioning of a democratic political system.

This paper will primarily utilize the classical method to analyze France's social structure to see if it accurately explains the rise of the Yellow Vests movement. The decision to use classical theory instead of democratic theory is due to the nature of the grievances expressed by

Yellow Vests protesters. The lodging of inequality complaints against the state, execution of contentious demonstrations in Paris' wealthiest neighborhoods, and the class-based organization of the movement are evidence of a system more closely aligned to the conditions presented by classical theory than other social movement theories.

Accountability, circulation, and unification are key components of classical elite theory. Gaetano Mosca asserts that holding elites accountable for their actions is one of the main underpinnings of a democratic government. Yet, elites are likely to manipulate rules to legally and morally legitimize their power.<sup>9</sup> Mosca refers to this process as the "political formula."<sup>10</sup> An example that he drew upon was that of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. He states that Roman elites selectively impressed Christian doctrine into Rome's moral and political fabric in order to enhance their power, wealth, and influence.<sup>11</sup> Mosca's political formula is the link between elite theory and democracy.

Mosca held that all political systems are distinguishable through the identification of their organization and formation.<sup>12</sup> The output of his formulated approach to political system identification provides four possible government types, two of which pertain to democracies: autocratic-democratic and liberal-democratic.<sup>13</sup> In both types, Mosca believed representative democracy to be a façade.<sup>14</sup> He estimated that there is always an organized elite that rules over the unorganized majority.<sup>15</sup> Because of that fact, the unorganized majority's options for political representation are limited to a narrow field of elite-backed candidates—who only serve to protect the interest of their benefactors.<sup>16</sup> The identification of political systems builds upon Mosca's political formula theory and is necessary for recognition of system accountability features.

Classical elite theory proposes that the history of civilization is best understood by studying the replacement of elites.<sup>17</sup> Theorists' hypothesis is that elites cannot rule indefinitely.

Their eventual replacement brings to bear the inequalities the societal system has imposed on societies unorganized majority, and the coming to the fore of the new elite brings about new systems that are designed to balance inequality. However, once new systems are in place, the new elites start the cycle all over again. For example, the social struggle that started in Rome during the turn of the fifth century between the Plebeian class and Rome's ruling class, the Patricians.<sup>18</sup> The Plebeians fought for three hundred years to obtain equality, and when they attained it, they used their newfound power to repress a new social group—Christians.<sup>19</sup> This “circulation” of elites is a primary component of elite theory. For the system to remain viable, the ruling class requires consistent recruitment from the middle stratum of society—without which the system would lose its ties to the rest of society.<sup>20</sup> For Mosca, severe social unrest is the result of a weak ruling class and the isolation of the lower classes from the ruling class.<sup>21</sup> In his assessment, the impact of social upheaval will be a sudden influx of non-elites into the ruling class, or revolution.<sup>22</sup>

Elite circulation refers to the changing of elite “residues”, not merely the replacement of individuals.<sup>23</sup> Residues are generalized categories of human actions.<sup>24</sup> For Pareto, the elite class consists of those in society with either a residue of innovation or consolidation.<sup>25</sup> He describes innovators as those inclined to create and explore and consolidators as those who favor security and consolidation.<sup>26</sup> Innovators and consolidators remain in constant competition, each trying to take power or keep power.<sup>27</sup> The most stable societies are those that maintain a ruling class with a healthy balance between both residues.<sup>28</sup> The more the elite group's makeup favors innovators over consolidators or vice versa, the less it can meet society's needs.<sup>29</sup> The best way to avoid imbalances is by ensuring there are no obstructions to the methods by which non-elites can become elite.<sup>30</sup> Failure to maintain a healthy balance between elite residues can lead to severe

social unrest, and at worst, revolution.<sup>31</sup> In other words, healthy societies have an unrestricted pathway to the elite class, which naturally positions them to have the appropriate residue makeup. The destiny of states that restrict the path to the ruling class is societal unrest.

The study of elites further developed under Robert Putnam who examined elite mobility systems.<sup>32</sup> The advancement of industrial societies spurred a focus on a new wave of elites—powerful technocrats.<sup>33</sup> Part of his progress examines the systems that societies use to separate people desiring positions of power from those who have positions of power.<sup>34</sup> That is, the rules and norms that guide elite recruitment and act as gatekeepers to the ruling class.<sup>35</sup> Research on elite mobility found that merit was the superior system of recruitment.<sup>36</sup> While such study highlighted the superiority of meritocratic recruitment systems, it did not account for the disproportionate balance of resources between societal classes, which has the propensity to thwart meritocratic recruitment systems. The analysis of systems is critical to circulation theories because it provides a methodology by which researchers can comprehend the restrictiveness of a society's route to the elite class.

Finally, elite unification provides further insight into social unrest. John Higley and Michael Burton find that unified national elites are rare but have stable regimes, while dis-unified national elites are the most common but produce unstable governments.<sup>37</sup> Research on this aspect of elite theory reinforced other findings by identifying elite disunity as the source of severe political instability.<sup>38</sup> Elite conflict can be categorized into two levels: system-level, which can lead to revolution, and policy-level, which culminates with collective protest.<sup>39</sup> This multi-level analysis is significant in its own right, but even more so when combined with the study of elites' capacity to rule. As opposed to earlier analysis, the work of scholars such as

Michael Burton, John Higley, and G. Lowell Field, it becomes clear that elite power is synonymous with elite unity.

Elite disunity diminishes the control the ruling class maintains over society, and it erodes its legitimacy in using force to defend its interests. Pareto put forth that of the two residues, innovators are less likely to resort to violence.<sup>40</sup> The application of force is necessary for elites to put-down challenges to their power.<sup>41</sup> For that reason, an overabundance of innovators in the elite can lead to revolution.<sup>42</sup> In the area of revolution, Crane Brinton developed three preconditions: restricted elite circulation, the ruling class's failure to use force, and elite disunity.<sup>43</sup> The revolutionary lens created by Pareto and Brinton's work provides a means of understanding why contentious politics sometimes conclude with collective protests and other times with revolution.

In modern democratic societies, the classical definition of elite control, one which equates elite unification with the ability to control through the application of violence, is not holistic enough. A distinction is required between direct control, where desired outcomes are sought through force, and indirect control, where wanted results are pursued through means other than force—for example, using ownership of media to establish and respond to movement narratives. This distinction does not depart from classical theory. It pronounces the subsidiary components of elite unification to better distinguish how elites in democratic societies leverage their resources to achieve control, vice the methods historically employed by autocratic elites.

Researchers have primarily abandoned classical elite theory in the study of collective social movements in democratic countries. The justification for its abandonment is its lack of empirical evidence.<sup>44</sup> Many of the components that comprise the theory are qualitative in nature and have definitions that lack consensus.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the perceived success of liberal

democracies over the past century are perceived to have sidelined many of the arguments provided by classical theorists. The counterargument to the claims levied against classical elite theory is that they are discriminatory and premature. Claims lacking quantitative analysis are in need of testing, not overlooking. Lastly, the exploitation of complex social systems is a process that can take hundreds of years. Liberal democracy exploded onto the world stage after World War II.<sup>46</sup> It is too early to know if it can or will prove to be immune to classical theory claims.

### **The Yellow Vest Movement**

The Yellow Vests was the collective action movement that engulfed France between 2018-2020.<sup>47</sup> The vests represented the high-visibility clothing that people were mandated to wear when their automobiles broke down.<sup>48</sup> The event that triggered the Yellow Vests Movement was the creation of a tax on diesel fuel carbon.<sup>49</sup> Yellow vests were befitting then, since the carbon tax on diesel fuel affected automobile drivers, and all automobile drivers were required to have a yellow vest. The vests helped identify the protesters who were largely made up of the rural working class.<sup>50</sup> Whereas the French elite were located largely in Paris, where public transportation has been the primary transportation method (and thus were not affected by the additional tax), the law affected the lower middle class living outside the large cities<sup>51</sup> As the protests raged on, the movement swelled to tens of thousands of protesters.<sup>52</sup> The group's contentious performances ranged from mass protesting at street intersections to destructive demonstrations in the wealthy portions of big cities.<sup>53</sup> The participants' makeup was that of private-sector citizens with low levels of income security, education, and benefits—namely, truckers, factory employees, healthcare workers, and retirees.<sup>54</sup> The extraordinary size of the movement resulted in an equally astonishing list of demands that reflected the group's diverse nature.<sup>55</sup> Still, the recurring collective action frames were that of economic inequality and

disloyal governance.<sup>56</sup> The movement's pitting of lower-income French citizens against France's ruling class makes it an exceptional case for the study of elite theory authenticity.

### **Elite Accountability**

One of the top frustrations of the Yellow Vest protesters was the lack of French elite accountability. The way in which French citizens realize elite accountability is through elected representation, adherence to established government norms and policies, and a fair governing system. Departure from system expectations created a gap that exceeded what citizens were willing to tolerate.

### *Citizen Representation*

Citizen representation is the cornerstone of democracy. The appointment of trustworthy decision-makers into positions of political power systematically builds confidence in the system. France's government has drifted away from its standing as a representative democracy.<sup>57</sup> Its government is dominated by the Parisian elite and is significantly underrepresented by the cultures and social classes that make up most of the French population.<sup>58</sup> The government's irreflective social representation produces systemic distrust, which was vocalized through the Yellow Vests' demand for *Référendum d'Initiative Citoyenne* (RIC).<sup>59</sup> RIC is the French term used to characterize a government with a direct democracy component. Direct democracy is commonly invoked when representative democracy loses its legitimacy.<sup>60</sup> One poll noted that 81 percent of Yellow Vests participants did not trust politicians, and 71 percent believed them to be corrupt.<sup>61</sup> Their views are not isolated though, on average, polls show that 70 percent of all French citizens believe that democracy in France is failing, with nearly the same amount stating that neither of the two most prevalent political parties can be trusted to govern.<sup>62</sup> The perceived loss of valid democratic representation in France is in keeping with Mosca's assertion that an

elite minority can exercise control over a democratic political system. The Yellow Vests protesters' vanishing confidence in French political appointees' trustworthiness is a sign that they no longer believe politicians are serving their interests.

In France, the idea of public servitude has been turned upside down.<sup>63</sup> Government careers are the source of wealth and influence, not sacrifice and selflessness.<sup>64</sup> Ideally, French political appointees ensure career government employees serve the common good; however, since high-level government employees and French elites are one and the same, politicians are instead indebted to government careerists. Because elite policy initiatives are generally aligned to self-interest, citizens require responsive political representation to alter elite policy priorities.<sup>65</sup> To the average citizen, President Macron's policy initiatives are grounded almost entirely in elite interests. For instance, one of Macron's first actions was to replace France's solidarity tax on wealth with a real estate levy—a move that benefited France's wealthiest citizens.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, his string of automobile-related taxes was instituted in the name of environmental responsibility, but the financial burden was primarily placed on France's middle-lower income citizens.<sup>67</sup> Macron's policies' good intentions fell flat with Yellow Vests protesters—who represent the largest sect of French society. However, the ignorance of his policy initiatives' effects does not seem to be a result of malintent. Instead, they are most likely due to his lack of understanding and empathy for lower-class citizens' social struggles. A consequence that Pareto and Mosca put forth as a result of restricting elite recruitment from the middle stratum of society. Had there been a proper balance of citizen representation, Macron's political ambitions would have been checked and his miscues vetoed—eliminating citizens' need to protest.

Legitimate political representation requires succeeding in two realms, the first being the legal and the second being the public. President Macron achieved a legal victory, but he did not

win the battle of public acceptance. Mosca's assessment that an organized elite selects democratic appointees and that appointees are obligated to their sponsors is a perfect depiction of Macron's situation. His candidacy was planned out a year before France's election at an annual Bilderberg Group conference—a private conference of European and North American political elites.<sup>68</sup> His post-presidency policy initiatives reflect his loyalty to the social elites who supported his election. Only 16.5 percent of registered constituents voted for Macron within France, which helps explain his indifference towards regular citizens' difficulties and concerns.<sup>69</sup> More concerning, though, was Macron's ability to fill 60 percent of the National Assembly seats with representatives from his party.<sup>70</sup> The combination of the two outcomes demonstrates the elites' ability to exercise minority rule within a democratic system, which lends credence to Pareto and Mosca's claim to that fact.

#### *Established Norms and Policies*

French citizens believe that their government system is a liberal democracy, but President Macron's disregard for democratic norms, policies, and authority structure more accurately categorizes it as an aristocratic autocracy. The vacuum of normal democratic processes has created an expectation gap. In an autocratic government, citizens anticipate and accept rule from the top. On the contrary, in democratic societies, decisions are derived from the plurality of institutions that comprise democracy. Thus, Macron's bypassing of trade unions, political parties, media, interest groups, and local officials have crippled French democracy.<sup>71</sup> In terms of legality, he has not done anything unlawful. Politicians pander to democratic institutions out of systemic necessity, not because of dutiful principles. What the Yellow Vests movement highlighted is that democratic organizations are an essential element of democracy. Bypassing them when the opportunity presents itself severely undermines the design of the system.

### *Systemic Fairness*

Collective protests that aim to achieve economic justice usually direct frustrations to employers who exercise control over direct wages.<sup>72</sup> Yellow Vests participants aim their direct and indirect wage concerns directly at the state.<sup>73</sup> Attributing injustice to the state and not employers indicates that the government is the perceived root of unjustness. Expectedly, the citizens levying claims of systemic unfairness are the ones that least benefit from the system.<sup>74</sup> They earn enough money to be disqualified for government assistance, but not enough to benefit from the opportunities presented by globalization.<sup>75</sup> To validate their claim, they point to state-mandated levies, which have increased from 41 percent of the gross domestic product in 2009 to 45 percent in 2017.<sup>76</sup> In the first year and a half of Macron's presidency, the government imposed eight additional taxes.<sup>77</sup> The majority of the tax burden has been placed on those in the middle to lower-middle-income brackets.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, France's elite class has seen its tax load either reduce or stay the same.<sup>79</sup> Not only have France's wealthiest citizens been spared from tax increases, but they have also been the primary beneficiaries of the country's increased income capture resulting from globalization.<sup>80</sup> France's economic disparity undoubtedly favors French elites. Still, it is the entirety of the systemic administrative, political, and economic injustices that create the perception elites have designed the system for their benefit. In the case of France, Mosca's political formula appears to be true. However, the creation of a legal system that solidifies the rule of French elites is not a product of manipulation. It is most likely because the political system lacks balanced representation.

### **Elite Circulation**

Elite circulation is the rate and method by which the elite class is replenished. The Yellow Vests Movement's elite-focused contentious performances and President Macron's

suggested abolition of France's most prominent gateway to the ruling class are indications that France's elite circulation process is not operating effectively. The three areas of circulation requiring analysis are mobility, legitimacy, and pliability. The control and influence that elites exert over the rest of society make the elite rotation process the most critical aspect of any state.

### *Mobility*

The path to the highest classes of French society is through one of France's higher education institutions called *grandes écoles*. In construct, France has what Robert Putnam labels a Model IV system—one in which elite status is acquired through education, regardless of social origin.<sup>81</sup> However, the system functions more like that of a Model II—one that requires education to attain elite status, but where access to education is dependent on a high social origin.<sup>82</sup> To understand the reasoning behind the difference, one only needs to look at the social origins of the students selected for the country's top academic institutions. To be competitive for a *grandes écoles*, students must start preparing early in life.<sup>83</sup> They will also have to attend a two-year preparatory school following high school to prepare for the *le baccalauréat*—the French national academic qualification used to determine competitiveness.<sup>84</sup> Socioeconomic factors play an oversized role in student competitiveness.<sup>85</sup> A recent study found that the most significant factor in determining a student's probability of acceptance into a top *grandes écoles* is their proximity to the school and high ranking preparatory schools.<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, for most of France, that means living in or near Paris. School proximity does not capture the full context of the problem, however. Students from families that do not live in-and-around Paris generally come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than their Parisian peers.<sup>87</sup> The side effects of a disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstance are that there are fewer home resources, lower-

quality primary and secondary schools, and students have economically restricted access to top-tier preparatory schools.<sup>88</sup>

Within the web of *grandes écoles*, there are two that stand out against the rest—*Ecole Polytechnique*, also known as X, and *École Nationale d'administration* (ENA).<sup>89</sup> The students that attend X and ENA represent just 0.057 percent of their age cohort, yet they dominate the top echelons of French society.<sup>90</sup> Since 1980, ENA has educated five of the country's last seven presidents and eight of the last seventeen prime ministers. In a study of the top 200 French companies, researchers found that during the 1980s and 90s, X and ENA graduates accounted for half of all chief executives, with other *grandes écoles* institutions accounting for another quarter.<sup>91</sup>

An examination of students' backgrounds that get accepted into France's *grandes écoles* supports the idea that social class affects meritocratic elite recruitment systems. A 2021 study of the *grandes écoles* system by the *Institut des politiques publiques* shows that the students from the top one-third of French society account for three-quarters of all students admitted into a *grandes écoles*.<sup>92</sup> That statistic jumps to 80 percent for the top 10 percent of institutions,<sup>93</sup> and as high as 91 percent for the top four.<sup>94</sup> Compare that to one of the most premier universities in the United States, Harvard University. It receives 80 percent of its undergraduates from the top one-third of American society.<sup>95</sup> While student recruitment from the top one-third of society is similar, Harvard selects 11 percent more students from the bottom two-thirds of society than the top *grandes écoles* schools. Furthermore, Harvard, and other ivy league colleges, have a less direct route to positions that compose the ruling class. Recent research into the educational backgrounds of Forbes' Fortune 100 companies chief executive officers showed that only eleven attended an ivy league college.<sup>96</sup> Thomas Dye, Gaetano Mosca, and Vilfredo Pareto claim that

failure to recruit elites from the middle stratum of society upsets the social order.<sup>97</sup> Given that France's elite gatekeeping system is stifling circulation, and the social order is in disarray, the evidence suggests classical theorists have a valid argument.

### *Legitimacy*

A ruling class's legitimacy is intertwined with its ability to preserve trust, and holistically depict and address societal concerns. The mainstay of France's power, influence, and wealth reside in Paris. Over the past few decades, the working class has been economically forced out of the city, to the point where they now only account for seven percent of Paris' annual home sales.<sup>98</sup> The separation of the Parisian elite from the rest of society constrains their capability to understand or sympathize with regular French citizens. Furthermore, local governance of France's 36,000 townships has been centralized through the merging of municipal governments into larger regional government bodies.<sup>99</sup> Town mayors, unlike members of parliament and the executive level of government, are held in high regard by French citizens.<sup>100</sup> The small size of towns allows citizens to have a personal relationship with their mayor.<sup>101</sup> The reduction in local authority has resulted in a comparative drop in government responsiveness and accountability, which correlates to a drop in government legitimacy.<sup>102</sup> Macron is the first sitting president in modern history to refuse to speak at the French mayors association's annual convention.<sup>103</sup> His inability to appreciate and understand the necessity of local governance is a symptom of a ruling class with little connection to the citizens that constitute the disorganized majority.

One of the central themes of the Yellow Vest Movement is the demand for legitimate representation.<sup>104</sup> The protesters' distrust of the political elite has pulled into doubt the fidelity of the entire ruling class. To appease the movement, Macron offered to consult with mayors on future policy initiatives,<sup>105</sup> abolish ENA,<sup>106</sup> and retract many of the recently enacted national

levies. The combined effect of his political concessions is to counter restricted elite circulation. If France had a healthy circulatory system, Macron would not have been oblivious to the importance of localized governance. Furthermore, there would be no desire to abolish the country's premier educational institution, and parliament would have been more sensitive to legislative acts that further impact the country's inequality gap.

### *Pliability*

The vitality of elite rule depends on the ruling class' ability to sense and react to changes in society's non-elite population. The two methods by which the ruling class can maintain system stability is through the application of political pressure by the unorganized majority, or socioeconomic osmosis. Liberal democracy is defined by its practice of both approaches. France has abandoned the use of either method. A reduction in socially-reflective political representation has thwarted the middle and low-income citizens' ability to have their ideas and concerns addressed. Likewise, the resource-driven competition for meritocratic advancement has stripped the elite of socioeconomic diversity. The untethering of the ruling class from the rest of French society has caused them to drift apart. With no means to regulate policies, affect systemic injustices, or alter the direction of French society, the disregarded majority is employing collective action to challenge elite power.

### **Elite Unification**

The Yellow Vests Movement has been defined by its lack of leadership and the government's abnormal use of force. Classical elite theory presents the ruling class's control of narrative-shaping resources and ability to provide a consolidated response to challenges lodged against it as its main strength. The factor they put forth as the best determinant to whether elites can successfully overpower movement challengers is intra-elite conflict. Elite conflicts weaken

the ruling class's control and diminish its legitimacy in using violence to quell protests. While the Yellow Vests protesters did not have a present spokesperson, two elites preceded the movement, who broke from the ruling class to speak out against French elitism.

### *Intra-elite Conflict*

Richard Descoings was the head of one of France's most elite academic institutions, Sciences Po-Paris, from 1996 until his death on April 3, 2012.<sup>107</sup> Due to his status as a graduate of ENA and his position at Sciences-Po-Paris, and because he received an annual income higher than that of France's President, it would seem that Descoings should have been an ardent defender of the French elite production process.<sup>108</sup> However, that was not the case. During his time at Sciences Po-Paris, he continually pushed to diversify France's educational system. One of Descoings' primary initiatives was the Priority Education Convention Program. The objective of the program was to increase the circulation of elites from the less-advantaged portions of society.<sup>109</sup> To accomplish the objective, Sciences Po-Paris established a system of remote high school tributaries from whence it could recruit less-economically privileged students than it otherwise received.<sup>110</sup> To overcome the test selection barriers, the institution waived its academic selection process for the students and instead subjected them to faculty interviews.<sup>111</sup> In addition to his efforts to reduce the entry barriers to Sciences Po-Paris for economically and geographically challenged students, Descoings pushed to increase the financial aid for disadvantaged students and created an international exchange program.<sup>112</sup> His primary purpose for sending and receiving international students at Sciences Po-Paris was to disrupt France's future leaders' elitist mindset by exposing them to diverse experiences and opinions. In the end, his collective goal was to create a French ruling class that is more socio-economically representative of its citizens, and that is better able to adapt to changing environments.

Nicolas Sarkozy, France's President from 2007 until 2012, did much to alter the construct of France's ruling class.<sup>113</sup> Following Richard Descoings' lead in diversifying Sciences Po-Paris, Sarkozy pressured all of France's *grandes écoles* to increase financial aid for disadvantaged students.<sup>114</sup> Additionally, he attempted to eliminate their student rankings and merge them with French universities.<sup>115</sup> Aside from modifying France's elite circulation process, Sarkozy also strained to reduce the elite's stranglehold on French society. From the *Révision générale des politiques publiques* (RGPP), a government reform program aimed at reducing public expenditures, he put forth 450 initiatives to improve the French civil service.<sup>116</sup> The RGPP trimmed many excesses within the civil service by eliminating duplicative processes, merging departments, increasing government accountability, and opening high-level positions to citizens from diverse backgrounds.<sup>117</sup> Like Descoings, Sarkozy believed that France's ruling class had become too elite. In his assessment, the only way to correct the system is to diversify elite recruitment and make elites more accountable to regular citizens.

Descoings and Sarkozy's agendas created considerable debate amongst France's elites. Seemingly, there were as many strongly opposed to their ideas as there were in support of them.<sup>118</sup> More importantly, though, was their impact on the middle to lower-income citizens. Classical theorists argue that elite disunity results in social disorder. While theorists collectively present the same conclusion, they do not specifically explain why citizens that make-up the disorganized majority require elite disunity to realize injustices. However, it can be inferred that the unified messaging of systemic fairness broadcast by the ruling class forms the expectations and perceptions of the non-elite. Thus, claims of injustice levied between elites change the disorganized majority's perception of the social system, which creates a gap between system outputs and citizen expectations. The Yellow Vests Movement adds credence to that argument.

The protesters' outrage over systemic inequality, absent representation, and rampant elitism aligns perfectly with Descoings and Sarkozy's outspoken goals of increasing elite diversity and accountability and decreasing the narrowness of French elitism.

### *Control*

At the onset of the Yellow Vests Movement, the French elite were unified but unable to disband the movement using indirect control methods. To avoid the negative consequences of applying violence, elites generally try to disband collective action movements through co-optation, manipulation, exhaustion, and disenchantment.<sup>119</sup> France's ruling class attempted all of the traditional means. In the beginning, it ignored the protesters.<sup>120</sup> By not addressing the protesters' concerns, the government hoped to discourage movement participation. However, as protests raged on, they grew in size and became too large to ignore. The elites' next step was to establish a negative narrative to delegitimize the movement.<sup>121</sup> The government and the media defined protesters as uneducated right-wing extremists who were made up of fascists, rioters, conspiracists, and anti-Semites.<sup>122</sup> Once the movement outgrew its assigned narrative, President Macron established debates to hear protesters' demands.<sup>123</sup> Ultimately, the debates fell flat with movement participants due to their lack of trust in Macron, and because the movement had no agreed upon leader to speak for the group's collective grievances.<sup>124</sup> The failure of France's elites to achieve their desired outcome through indirect control methods is not the outcome expected of a unified ruling class.

Classical theorists state the elites' ownership of physical meeting spaces, media, and facts indirectly give them the ability to control the disorganized majority. The Yellow Vests Movement was defined as a decentralized, leaderless, and internet-organized movement.<sup>125</sup> The movement's lack of centralization and use of private property took away the elites' advantage of

property ownership. Its lack of leadership made it difficult to discredit, and its social media-based organization undercut the elites' ability to deprive the movement of organizational abilities. As it pertains to France, social media's current affordances have severely degraded the ruling class's ability to indirectly control collective action movements.

### *Use of Force*

The force used to quell Yellow Vests protests was uncharacteristically violent and exceeded levels used during the previous five decades.<sup>126</sup> Many of the weapons employed against protesters, such as non-lethal bullets and stinger grenades, are outlawed in most other European countries.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, the protests that typically resulted in violent police clashes were those in France's wealthiest neighborhoods. France, then, is not in-step with classical elite theory. It has an overabundance of innovators in its ruling class, and it places a high value on human sentiment. Two aspects that Pareto argues result in the elites' unwillingness to respond with violence and that often has a revolutionary outcome. Neither of those predictions is true in the case of the Yellow Vests Movement. Therefore, the topic of revolution needs further analysis.

The Yellow Vests Movement was the result of a system-related problem, not a policy-related issue. System-related conflicts have the propensity to result in revolution. A review of France through the lens of Brinton's revolutionary pre-conditions shows that it only meets one of his three criteria. It does have restricted elite circulation, but the ruling class did not fail to use force, and the elite were unified by the start of the Yellow Vests Movement. That adequately explains the lack of revolution, and it also provides sufficient justification for the social uprising. However, it needs to be stated that a single social movement does not preclude France from a future revolution. System-related social movements are indicators of a failing system.

Macron appeased Yellow Vests protesters through policy concessions. Thus far, the movement's frustrations with the social system remain unaddressed.

### **Recommendations for Further Analysis**

The effect that the internet and social media have on classical elite theory requires analysis. The changing landscape of social structures has disrupted many of the concepts put forth by classical elite theorists. The disorganized majority's use of social media is challenging the organized elite minority's ability to control them. Furthermore, the disorganized majority's decreasing reliance on rising elites has resulted in an upsurge of leaderless movements that change the dynamic of how elites respond to social movements. For instance, the lacking leadership of the Yellow Vests Movement gave control of the movement narrative to France's ruling elite. The elite depicted movement participants as illegitimate troublemakers, thereby justifying the use of violence against them.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, the Yellow Vests had no leader to challenge the established elites or rally protesters to overthrow the government. The innovator elite, sensing no threat, did not shy away from using high levels of force to suppress protests. Lastly, the globalization of information and the narrowing monopoly of social network elites is creating a global elite—elites that have the means to affect social systems well beyond the ones in which they operate. In the absence of a single global social structure, global elites are particularly challenging for classical elite theory. They reside outside of nearly all of the social systems they impact. Therefore, there needs to be further study to determine what effect global elites have on the varying aspects of classical elite theory.

### **Conclusion**

Classical elite theory accurately explains social conditions in France that gave rise to the Yellow Vests Movement. The three elite theory categories that best explain the movement are

elite accountability, elite circulation, and elite unification. Investigating the accountability of French elites shows that the disorganized majority lacks adequate representation, institutions that regular citizens use to alter elite policies are being ignored, and that participants of Yellow Vests protests view the established social system as unfair. Most of the perceived unjustness stems from France's restricted elite circulation process. The French meritocratic recruitment system almost exclusively favors citizens from white-collar families. The effects of systemic class restriction are the bottlenecking of opportunities for France's middle-class to lower-class citizens, unbalancing of elite residues in favor of innovators, and the forming of an elite unable to represent ordinary citizens' needs and concerns. Globalization has deepened the divide between France's elite and the remainder of French society—bringing to the forefront citizens' realization of systemic inequality. Further aiding in Yellow Vests participants awareness of their condition is the rise of internet-based networking. Social media use has diminished the advantage elites generally enjoy through their superior organization and ownership of resources. The organization of Yellow Vests demonstrators was on-par with that of France's organized elite minority. Furthermore, while French elites initially controlled the narrative, it was primarily due to protesters' refusal to establish movement leadership. The accuracy in which classical elite theory explains the social conditions that gave rise to a significant episode of contentious politics in a modern democracy makes it worthy of consideration by contemporary political and social scientists.

## Glossary

Collective Action Frame: Action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization.<sup>129</sup>

Contentious Performance: Relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors.<sup>130</sup>

Contentious Politics: The expression of societies' submerged groups putting pressure on the state.<sup>131</sup>

Disunified National Elite: When elites share few or no understandings about the proprieties of political conduct, and only engage in limited and sporadic interactions across factional or sectoral boundaries.<sup>132</sup>

Elite: Persons who are able, by virtue of their authoritative positions in powerful organizations or access to resources, to affect national social structures regularly and substantially.

Framing: A process in which social actors, media, and members of a society jointly interpret, define, and redefine states of affairs.<sup>133</sup>

Political Identity: The collective names that protesters give themselves or that other people give them.<sup>134</sup>

Ruling Class: The elites within a society that have the power, authority, or influence to establish or alter society's culture, laws, and policies.

Social Movement: A sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities.<sup>135</sup>

Unified National Elite: When elites share a largely tacit consensus about rules and codes of political conduct amounting to a restrained partisanship, and participate in a more or less comprehensively integrated structure of interaction that provides them with relatively reliable and effective access to each other and to the most central decision-makers.<sup>136</sup>

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- <sup>105</sup> Gobry, *The Yellow Rise in Paris*, 29.
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- <sup>108</sup> Gumbel, *France's Got Talent: The Woeful Consequences of French Elitism*.
- <sup>109</sup> Gumbel, *France's Got Talent: The Woeful Consequences of French Elitism*, loc. 1860-1898 of 2386.
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- <sup>123</sup> Paye, *The Yellow Vests in: People or Proletariat?*, 52-53.
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