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'Driven by the same fear'

What's going on in France? Luc Rouban on common causes of left and right-wing protests and the role of Macron

Read this interview in German or Russian.

In France, we've seen violent social demonstrations for months now. How do you explain the increase in intensity of these movements from very different origins?

Here, we have to distinguish the professional protest movements of state employees from the yellow vest movement. The former oppose privatisation or demand more resources for the correct execution of growing public tasks, both in the field of security and in health and education.

However, these protest movements express even more strongly the great concern about the neoliberal course of the various governments since 2007. The neoliberal reforms have led to a reduction in staffing and budgets, even if this reduction is much smaller than in Germany in the 1990s.

On top of the questions of costs or working conditions, there's a much more philosophical one, namely that of the future of the public service, which has been a cornerstone of the French Republic in France since 1875. It combines the idea of solidarity, a positivist philosophy that gives priority to education and science and secularism, which makes the state the guarantor of civil harmony by neutralising religions in the public sphere. The concept of public service "à la française" is completely different from that of "services of general interest" as developed by the European Union, which legitimises or supports the privatisation of public services.

Although it might differ depending on professional background, the demonstrations express a deep fear of the end of a societal model deeply rooted in the culture of civil servants and users of public services.

Behind all these protests, there's this idea that secularism is no longer

respected, that national solidarity no longer works or that the leading classes aren't interested in it and that science is giving way to ignorance. The protesting teachers, policemen, doctors and nurses believe that through their daily work they have to compensate for a social change caused by globalised capitalism, which now leads to insecurity, violence and social exclusion.

Then what are the yellow vests about?

The Yellow Vests movement is a protest movement organised by ordinary citizens within social networks. Trade unions are not involved. This protest movement is often quite violent, but it's driven by the same fear.

The yellow vests are essentially people from the lower middle classes who fear a deterioration in their standard of living or the standard of living of future generations. They reject capitalism, but not small businesses, and they oppose the state because they believe it exerts unfair tax pressure and restricts the supply of public services, especially in rural areas.

The populist dimension is very present in the yellow vest movement. Its political centre – at least when analysing the electorate that supports this movement – therefore sees itself closer to Marine Le Pen's "Rassemblement National" than to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's "France Insoumise".

Overall, one can observe two protest movements with very different political origins – left-wing and radical left-wing as far as professional organisations are concerned, radical and right-wing as far as yellow vests are concerned. But they have two causes in common: the end of a way of life secured by public services and the rejection of globalised capitalism.

To what extent is President Macron responsible for the current crisis?

We better speak of "Macronism" as a doctrine than just Emmanuel Macron's approach. Macronism is both a victim and a protagonist of this development, which it has accelerated. Macron wanted to get politics unstuck between left and right, and to promote social and professional mobility.

One of Macron's aims was to change the social system in such a way that the responsibility of the individual is emphasised. Legal regulations that make working life inflexible, especially in the public sector, should be eliminated.

In summary, Macronism is the application of managerial rules to politics: pragmatism, effectiveness, cost reduction. The annoying

thing is that this doctrine only provides new social resources to those who already have them. Macronism, which initially claimed to be a doctrine "for the right and the left", has slipped further and further to the right. Macron forgot the instability of the social safety net and its dependence on public services. Nor has he shown the electorate a common vision. Many are currently wondering what Macronism actually means beyond an electoral strategy for 2022.

Compared with most other countries, France shows a fairly satisfactory level of income distribution overall. So what's not working?

What doesn't work can be put into a few words: In economic terms, the majority of French people aren't liberal and they reject capitalism. They remain very egalitarian and rely on well-functioning public services. Accordingly, the elites who are committed to adapting to financial globalisation and want to strengthen individual responsibility are perceived at best as insensitive privileged people living in their own luxury bubble. At worst, they are seen as corrupt cynics who pursue their policies on the back of the little man in order to profit from them themselves. The same arguments can be found in the press before 1789.

These protest movements often emerge directly from the population, far away from representative organisations. Shouldn't organisations like the trade unions also have to think about their lack of representativeness?

Yes, the trade unions are also in a crisis. There are many indicators that a large majority of employees are sceptical towards them. They are considered too bureaucratic and they are said to have distanced themselves from concrete, everyday problems. They are also accused of not having made a difference when factories were closed down, or when the civil service was reformed.

Although the strikes in December 2019 against the pension reform give the impression that the trade unions have once again become central players in the conflict. But they have only staged the conflict. That doesn't maen that the trade unions will suddenly become popular again. The yellow vest movement has completely passed them by and in some cases even turned against them, as on 1 May this year.

The pension reform in particular is the target of the protest movements. What is the source of the conflict?

The conflict is basically about the social model. Many French people are looking forward to their pension, they think that now the most

beautiful period of their lives will follow – that period of life when they finally have a certain independence, when they can do what they really like. This is something that's very important in France.

The battle for public opinion will not be about financing pensions, but about extending working hours. This is a strategic point in the conflict between the government and the CFDT (French Reformist Federation of Trade Unions).

In other words, the conflict has taken on such proportions because for many French people it is a matter of escaping the economic logic and focusing on the quality of life.

This interview was conducted by Benjamin Schreiber.



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