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# **The Yellow Vests Movement: Civil Unrest and Increasing Inequality in the 21st Century**

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## **Abstract**

The Yellow Vests Movement has been regarded as one of the biggest civil unrest movements of the past decades. Alongside a wide media coverage and international reach, the movement has become prominent in bringing forth the discussion on inequality and its impacts on society. The current project aims to review the Yellow Vests Movement within a theoretical framework, possibly shedding new light into the matter.

A somewhat novel theoretical approach to civil unrest movements will be used. Research studies that link any relationships between real or perceived societal inequalities and popular dissatisfaction will be brought forth. In the particular case of the Yellow Vests Movement, given their demands, economic inequalities will be focused on, and the authors Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz will be the base of this paper. Methodologically, a classic single case study is used.

Our research findings indicate that the Yellow Vests Movement is a contemporary civil unrest movement deriving from an increased perception of economic unfairness by middle and working classes, and that the aforementioned unfairness is based on real increasing wealth and income disparities that surged in the last two decades. It also exemplifies the potential societal setbacks that may repeatedly occur if these underlying issues are not addressed going forward.

By reviewing the Yellow Vests Movement in a novel light, this work hopes to point out economic inequality as one the biggest issues affecting modern nations, its potential repercussions and its complexity. Additionally, the work aims to help public management in the policy-making process by exposing that issue in an academic manner.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The Yellow Vests Movement

The Yellow Vests Movement, or The Yellow Jackets Movement, known by its French demonym *Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes*, is a protest movement that began in France by October of 2018. The name derives from the members' characteristic use of yellow visibility safety vests. Its participants were initially motivated by rising fuel prices, that trigger soon to be more generalized to the high cost of living to locals. Beginning through an online petition which achieved nearly a million signatures (Ludosky, 2019), the movement eventually went on to the streets, arising mass demonstration by mid-November.

The main claim of the movement is that the ongoing national government tax-reforms have been disproportionate, putting an undue burden on the working middle-class (Leclerc, 2018). Particularly, and much more later in the movement, strains of rural, semi-rural and peripheral urban populations claimed to be specially affected by the negative impacts of the reforms (Spire, 2018).

Its members have initially demanded for a lowering of the fuel taxes, a reintroduction of the *l'impôt de solidarité sur la fortune* (ISF), the “solidarity tax on wealth”, a wealth tax on French citizens with a net worth above €1,300,000, abolished in 2017 (Mathieu, 2008), and the overdue implementation of the *Référendum d'initiative citoyenne* (France 24, 2008). Known by its abbreviation RIC, and often translated as “citizens' initiative referendum”, the proposal consists in a constitutional amendment to permit direct consultation of the citizenry by referendum, concerning the proposition of laws, the revocation of politicians' mandates, and any changes in the constitution (Lauwereys, 2018).

Further on, at the end of November, through a proxy media group called *l'France Bleu*, the group made public a list containing 42 different demands directed to the government, becoming from then the basis in which the continuing protests were structured. The group then argued that the list represented a renewed grip of the people on democracy, social justice and economic balance (France Bleu, 2018).

Going from two years ago to the present day, the movement eventually developed a greater reach both in terms of internal organization and on its impact in quotidian stability. Demonstrations were varied in nature, involving the blocking of major roads, fuel depots, and sourcing centers; public marches; large picketings, many of which evolved into full-blown riots.

Confrontation with the police was commonplace in those riots, with some like Fansten *et al.* (2018) claiming that the violence present was not seen in the country since those in the May 1968' riots.

In response, the government has deployed swift police intervention to riots, the clash in which multiple incidences of injuries have been reported. In total, so far as it is reasonably possible to ascertain, 11 deaths were confirmed (Coquaz, 2019) and an estimated 4.000 were injured, including protesters and police (Sputnik, 2019). The incidences of counter-violence against the protesters have been the target criticism by national and international media outlets, citing an overuse of force (Domoney, 2019). Nevertheless, the same international recognition the movement had by its clashes, it had by empathic similarity; other movements around the globe, either with the same or likely reasons, have adopted the yellow vest as a symbol of same-mindedness (Henley, 2018).

Moreover, the movement remains neutral in the political *spectrum*. A poll on voting for the 2017 national election has shown that few Yellow Vests members have voted for the political establishment; most have voted either far-left or far-right. Alternatively, the group has been defined as anti-political in nature. Such may be interpreted as the "disdain for traditional politics" being one of the core beliefs in a majority of its members, or more practically, the idea that the government is not doing enough to protect its people from injustice (Rose & Baker, 2018). Besides its apolitical, grassroots, fighting for economic equality traits, the mass of protesters reflect a largely populist voice (Bell, 2019).

### 1.1.1. The Yellow Vest As a Symbol

Even though the movement derived its name and is readily identifiable from the use of the yellow safety visibility vest, the leadership has yet to explain how come and why this symbol was chosen. So far, neither members nor non-members have admitted to have knowledge of such, or claimed to be its originator. Nevertheless, since its inception, the vest has become "a unifying thread and call to arms" amongst participants (Friedman, 2018). Possible reasons for the adoption of the symbol are that the vest is inexpensive, easy to wear, highly visible, and associated both with working-class people and to being a distress signal. Another main factor might be its availability since French law requires, as of 2008, that all drivers possess one in their car.

Furthermore, as the movement grew and crossed local boundaries, the yellow vest has been used as a symbol of other groups internationally. Protesters around the globe have

adopted the symbology to express sympathy and likeness of condition; as one of the original members in France commented, “the uniform of this revolution is as accessible as the frustration and fury”, referencing a worldwide surge. Even though the like-mindedness of movements outside Europe has been acknowledged, also groups with diverse or sometimes conflicting interests that still use the yellow vest as a symbol have been pinpointed (Cigainero, 2018).

## 1.1.2. Causes and Mechanisms

### 1.1.2.1. Fuel Taxes

One of the initial complaints of the movement was an increase in fuel taxes; not only the prices of petrol and diesel ramped up by 15% and 23% respectively, between 2017 and 2018, but the French government also promoted heavier taxes on fossil fuels starting in 2018, with diesel taxes being increased by 14% and petrol taxes by 7,5% over the course of one year (LePoint, 2018).

The protesters claimed the increases were an unfair burden on working individuals, who should not become liable for the bulk of the cost of the overall carbon tax. Additionally, Salies (2019) cites discontentment amongst rural inhabitants that depend on car transportation for their daily lives; according to him, austerity measures and budget balancing could have been made fairer, if only the rising tax base would've been progressively distributed to include more high-income citizens.

### 1.1.2.2. Economic Reforms

Viewed as a widespread collection of unfair austerity policies, the movement members claimed that the increases in fuel taxes were intended as a way to finance tax cuts for big business (Lough, 2018). According to Rubin and Somini (2018), while Macron said the hefting up was to promote France's international competitiveness, the popular opinion didn't buy it: most of the Yellow Vests members want to fight climate change, but are opposed to forcing the working class and the poor to pay for a problem caused by multinational corporations.

### 1.1.2.4. Popular Discontentment

Perhaps as part of a greater context of popular discontentment with the governmental reforms of French president Emmanuel Macron, the movement might be viewed as the grassroots response to the working class' perception of Macron as the “president of the very rich” (Berdah, 2018). Evidence of an ever-growing civil dissatisfaction is the plummeting of the

current government's approval rates (from 47% to 25% over the course of 2018) and several popular calls for the resignation of ministers of state (Raffy, 2018).

## 1.2. Increasing Inequality in the 21st Century

Inequality in general, and in particular economic inequality, is a topic that has been increasingly discussed in academia, the media and social discourse. Some may call it “the defining issue of our time” (Sargent, 2013), while others argue that “we now face a crossroads” (Stiglitz, 2013). Both of these authors' thoughts come from the perspective that a high level of in-country inequality may raise a number of social-economic problems.

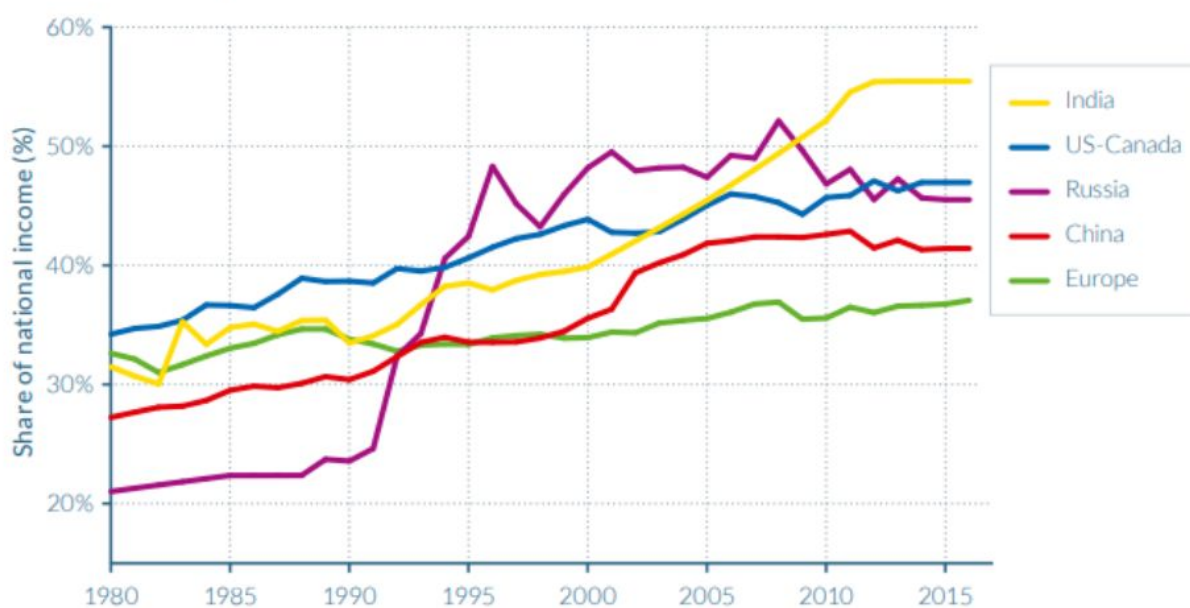
Economic inequality has increased in nearly all countries in recent decades (WIL, 2017). The richest 10% of the world's population now claim 60% of global income (Anand, 2014) and 88% of global stored wealth (Credit Suisse, 2015). See figure 1 below for a picture of the evolution of income concentration amongst the world's largest nations since the 80's:

**Figure 1:** Top 10% income shares across the world, 1980-2016.

Source: World Inequality Lab, The World Inequality Report (WIL, 2017).

**Figure E2a**

**Top 10% income shares across the world, 1980-2016: Rising inequality almost everywhere, but at different speeds**



Hardoon *et al.* (2016) showed that wealth inequality has become worse when viewed through time: the richest 62 people now own more than the poorest half of the world. They also noted that the wealth of the richest 1% has been increasing swiftly since 2008, along with their share of total wealth, to the point that by 2016 the 1% had more wealth than the rest of the world's population combined, for the first time in history. According to an article by Hickel (2017), global inequality has tripled since 1960. See figures 2 and 3 below for Anand's evolution of GINI coefficients and Hickel's gap between the richest and the poorest countries up to 2010:

**Figure 2:** Global income inequality, as measured by GINI coefficients.

Source: Anand, S. (2014).

**Table 1.** Global income inequality, 1988–2005.

Year	Global inequality			Without China	Absolute global inequality
	Top 1% (%)	Top decile (%)	Gini	Gini	Gini
1988	17.3	58.5	0.726	0.501	0.569
1993	17.6	58.5	0.727	0.535	0.614
1998	19.6	59.5	0.722	0.552	0.649
2002	20.6	62.0	0.735	0.575	0.698
2005	20.7	60.0	0.727	0.578	0.727

**Figure 3:** Absolute gap between richest and poorest countries.

Source: Hickel, J. (2017).

**Table 3.** Absolute gap between richest and poorest countries (gross domestic product [GDP] per capita, 1990 Int. GK\$).

	1800	1900	1960	1980	2000	2010
Absolute gap	2194	5354	12,065	18,438	28,488	30,465
Avg annual change over previous period (%)	–	+0.90	+1.36	+2.14	+2.20	+0.67

### 1.3. Research Question

The present research paper has elected the following as the main research question: “To what extent is the Yellow Vests Movement a reflection of rising inequality?”. This comes from the context of a problematic approach to civil unrest movements, of which the Yellow Vests Movement is a potential example, and the deriving issues it may cause to society. From that same context, two deriving sub-questions follow.



These sub-questions are, firstly, “is the movement a reflection of real or perceived increasing economic inequality?”. Secondly, “what issues arise to society at large if civil unrest movements, like the Yellow Vests, could be considered reflections of inequality?”. The present work has the objectives of both answering the research questions and being of potential help in policy-making. As discussed below, this will be achieved through a single-case study methodology, reviewing the Yellow Vests Movement in the light of a novel theoretical framework.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Study Design

#### 2.1.1. Methodological Proposal and Research Design

When deciding an adequate methodological proposal and its subsequent research design, Brewer & Hunter (2006) ask the question ‘What does your design aim to do?’ as a primary guide unto defining research design appropriately. To answer that question, specifically for the proposed research question in this paper: the design aims at evaluating a conjecture and its intensity (“To what extent is the Yellow Vests Movement a reflection of rising inequality?”), being that prevalent in society in a contemporary setting. It is, as well, even if on a second plane of inquiry, to put to test discourses and narratives that permeate our communication vehicles (various media formats) and ultimately influence public policy decisions on local, national and supranational levels.

Given that answer, the purpose of the study strongly suggests a qualitative analysis on a one-case study (The Yellow Vests Movement) *versus* a most relevant theoretical framework that addresses inequalities (particularly of the economic sort) and their potential reflections on society. This methodological approach derives due to the intrinsic qualitative nature of narrative, of the discourse on both the movement, the media, the government and other social *strata*. By juxtaposing a qualitative rise of so particular discursive hypotheses, the ones pertaining to the Yellow Vests movement, we aim to reach some conclusions through different perspectives given by academic theory (thus either reinforcing it or refuting it) and to create more clarity on the nature of the problem being studied (economic inequalities and civil unrest).

### 2.1.2. The Case Study Framework

Within the methodological case study framework, case selection is crucial in determining how a particular research question is tackled. In this project, a wide spectrum of possibilities have been assessed on how to better understand the Yellow Vests Movement as a possible reflection of rising inequality; from a single-case study to comparable many-cases studies (Lamnek, 2010). Each has its advantages and disadvantages, particularly in regards to the depth of analysis achieved versus the level of abstraction and/or generalization that can be drawn.

Although a first glimpse on the topic excludes the methodology of case-selection for many comparable movements worldwide, since the main focus of this project is one civil unrest movement alone, nevertheless a quick positioning of the spectrum is due, that will serve as the justification upon which a single case study being analyzed against a related theoretical framework was chosen. According to Landman & Carvalho (2017), a single-case study allows a greater in-depth understanding of the research question and its intricacies, purposefully putting it into the well-deserved context the relationship to be studied needs to be rightly unveiled (either from theory-building or theory-confirming standpoint).

Having said that, single-case studies might suffer from a lack of abstraction power due to its single-nature: relationships borne out of single cases might not translate well into a large number of cases, particularly if the case studied contains idiosyncrasies that classify it as an statistical outlier and/or peculiar case when put through the many-cases (large-N) methodology.

On the other end of the spectrum, comparable many-case studies give well into the generalization/abstraction scale, but limit the depth of analysis since, by its nature, the large number of cases being analyzed prevent the account of context to be carried over to the big picture; in that sense, variables have to be standardized (e.g. by functionality) and information is lost in the process.

A few-cases studies stand somewhere in the middle of both scales, with the particularity that case selection is even more crucial, for the final result of the relationship-affirming study is highly sensitive to the inclusion/exclusion of cases: careful consideration must be taken by the researcher to avoid flawed methodologies and biases of selection. Although the final decision is to focus solely in a single-case (The Yellow Vests), given the potential benefits of comparison, similar or inspired recent movements will be pointed out below (section 4.1. *in Analysis*).

The selection of a single-case study goes hand-in-hand with the proposed project's function, or objective; Landman & Carvalho (2017) states that if a single-case paper can answer reasonably the research question tackled, it can then serve a variety of roles. It can provide information that can be used for comparative studies, called contextual description. It can also generate hypotheses, and serve as 'plausibility probes', affirming and confirming theories, or denying/falsifying them; it can raise questions to be further put to test in a larger set of studies; it can finally shed light on possible causal inferences. The case selection on those studies is pretty much *sui generis* (Heath, 2013), depending on the question or theory and accompanying relationships raised into light.

Therefore, the choice of a single-case study, analyzing the Yellow Vests Movement as a potential reflection of the rising socio-economic inequalities in modern developed states, is justified by the strengths above mentioned: in-depth insight into the problem and proper focus on contextualization. Albeit comparable movements will be touched upon briefly later on, no comparative study is being formulated here: such would require a loss of touch with the ground-up approach of seeing the French Yellow Vests possibly as one example of civil unrest in response to changing societal conditions.

### 2.1.3. Causality and Complexity

One of the aims of this study is to better understand the Yellow Vests Movement as an emerging social form of unrest, resulting from the general perception of dissatisfaction amongst middle and working-class *strati* of society. This perception might well derive from a feeling of too much existing inequalities between social groups, particularly towards the rich. One cannot, however, establish either a definite causal link on inequality and unrest (even though they may be correlated), nor reach all definitions of the idea of inequality in a single study.

Therefore, to address the latter point, we will be using both wealth and income inequality as a proxy variable to the whole of social inequality. This might be criticized as simplistic, but for practicality reasons, it will suffice given three considerations: first, income inequality has already been established as highly correlated with social unrest by the previous literature (as seen in section 3 below); secondly, the Yellow Vests Movement has stated direct and indirect reasoning that wealth inequality is amongst the generating factors for dissatisfaction; thirdly, as shown in section 1 above, wealth and income inequality have risen substantially as phenomena over the past 20 years on well-developed economies globally.

However, we cannot forget the complexity of the matter, so any true direct links are theoretically questionable. Even though Marmot *et al.* (2010) finds out a robust intercorrelation between income inequality and negative social outcomes, he warns mostly against direct suppositions. According to them, social inequalities are complex in nature, which means that one should not make the mistake of assuming a mono-causal explanation for all forms of observable negative outcomes.

Further, social inequalities are a wide category, which includes not only income, but also education, class, employment status, gender, power, and overall wealth. Despite this fact, there seems to be outstanding consensus amongst social researchers that most forms of inequality influence individual well-being negatively, with sufficient evidence henceforth, and supported by a range of other studies (Marmot *et al.*, 2010). The negative influence of perceived inequality on social unrest (e.g. the Yellow Vests Movement) can then be asserted reasonably.

## 2.2. Empirical Evidence and Documentation

The study will encompass, firstly, a qualitative document analysis as source, pertaining to primary-sourced material such as articles, news feeds, traditional and non-traditional press releases of the internet, and will consist of a comprehensive documentation selection out of diverse media outlets, only and singularly picked if there is a narrative present on the debate topic of the Yellow Vests Movement (or comparable movements) and, alternatively, discourse on socio-economic inequalities.

According to Peter Hall (2006), it is crucial to select not only a diverse basis of outlets (mainstream media, internet, printed press, social media) but more importantly a diverse basis of varied 'speakers': both traditionally considered as politically left-leaning, right-leaning, neutral, prominent figures of public opinion on both sides of the spectrum, and all in equal proportion. This ensures that most relevant paradigms of thought on the problem are included in the design.

Secondly, a literature review on the topic will be exposed as a dual-part methodology. The literature review will encompass the already established theoretical background work and also independent research papers on the topic, the last of which might well generate distinct perspectives of explanation on the issue.

### 3. Theoretical Background

In order to further realize a proper analysis on the Yellow Vests Movement, particularly as an emerging symptom of social dissatisfaction with the societal *status quo* on modern welfare states, a theoretical background involving both Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz as main authors was chosen. Both have written extensively on matters of social inequality, focusing on the negative effects of wealth and income gaps in contemporary nations.

Furthermore, the two authors have come from distinct geographical sets of academia (Piketty from continental European thought and Stiglitz from the relatively liberal north-eastern United States), albeit reaching the same conclusions independently, which strengthens the argument for redistributive measures of wealth in order to alleviate the problem, to be seen below (part 4 - Analysis).

#### 3.1. Thomas Piketty

Piketty is a French economist that has focused his academic research on matters of wealth and income inequality, particularly of its effects on societal well-being later on (PSE, 2020). According to Daniel Henninger (2009), Piketty's strong points when analysing the phenomena of wealth and income inequalities are both taking a historical and a statistical approach while being methodologically rigorous in his endeavour.

The former author has been innovative in his use of historical tax records as a valid measure of economic data, when treated with the appropriate care. That data has then proved to be useful in assessing wealth accumulation of the societal elites in the past, compared to the rest of society, an area to this point understudied (Piketty, 1994).

##### 3.1.1. Capital in the Twenty-First Century

The most memorable contribution of the author to the study of the development and the current state of economic inequalities is his book "Capital in the 21st Century"; the publishing is a treatise on the themes of wealth concentrations and distributions over the last 250 years, although the analysis itself could be considered exclusive to the western-centric geopolitical sphere (The Economist, 2020).

The main argument of the book is that the rate of capital return is greater than the rate of economic growth in modern developed countries, especially amongst the major capital owners

and which in turn, over time, creates inevitably an inertia towards wealth concentration (Piketty, 2013). According to the author, that inertia has been observed to not be self-correcting, at least in the nearly three centuries analyzed. Additionally, as an in depth study on long-term economic inequality, the book reaches the conclusion that inequalities are not an accident, but rather a feature of capitalism that can only be reversed only through state intervention (Cooper, 2014).

In an related study, the author's ongoing partnership with Emmanuel Saez showed that, in France as of 2012, the top 10% of earners took more than half of the country's total income (Saez, 2013). Together they've used the books' methodological approach to other geographical areas, like the United States, demonstrating the same pattern of evidence as to what is present in continental Europe (Piketty & Saez, 2003).

Furthermore, Piketty states that the most effective strategy modern states can apply to address this problem is enforcing redistribution through a progressive global tax on wealth. Paul Krugman (2014), in an adding review of Piketty's work, raises the thought that if this is not readily implemented, the soon to be future may hold issues within society's harmonious development, although he also acknowledges the difficulties in implementing such widespread public policies. Other academics, like Robert Boyer (2014), not only agree to the point of such public policy implementations to be infeasible, but also hold it as being its main challenge in reverting this forecasted scenario.

### 3.1.2. Capital and Ideology

Perhaps as a successor to Piketty's previous book, "Capital and Ideology" broadens the scope of analysis in two different fronts. Firstly, it includes a wider scope of geopolitical realms being discussed, alongside their distinct modes of socio-economical functioning. According to the author, societies have had idiosyncratic modes of evolution and therefore varying resulting structural mechanisms.

He begins by making a broader analysis of inequality modes in history, going from old ways of concentration of wealth such as cultural power and land holdings, to the development of "ownership societies" during the last two centuries; a further distinction is made between these capital ownership societies of Europe and North America and those of colonial/slave nature. Nevertheless, and bringing forth arguments from his previous work, each mode has the same end result, and holds the inertia to maintain wealth accumulated in a minority parcel of the population, "the elite" (Piketty, 2019).

Secondly, it broadens his first work by introducing both the historical and contemporary justifications for the maintenance of inequality levels. According to his theory, these prevailing discourses that permeate all classes of society have a greater value in shaping the institutional framework that holds the wealth accumulation inertia than technological or purely economical factors. Elliott (2019) and Krugman (2020) state that the author's thoughts go in opposition to what traditional Marxist thought ascertains, namely class struggle happening through ownership of technology and productive investment.

In own Piketty's terms, these prevailing discourses are ideologies, hence the title, and his analysis of the last parcel of the twentieth-century to the present day goes on to propose that we have evolved increasingly from income producing societies to "inheritance" societies, typical of the second half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, both the author's books referenced here still point out to the same most effective solution: a progressive global tax on wealth. A novel approach in his last book is, however, the implementation of a payment distributed to citizens by their country at the age of 25, which he calls "inheritance for all" (Piketty, 2019).

#### 3.1.2.1. The Case of France

While following the overall trend on the increasing inequality caused by the accumulation inertia since the 19th century, France has shown a brief period of a reversal in the trend immediately *post* World War II. According to the author, this was due to a decrease in estate promoted inequalities. The shrinking inequality during this period resulted from a highly progressive income tax after the war, which upset the dynamics of estate accumulation by reducing the surplus money available for saving by the wealthiest (Piketty, 2019).

Furthermore, he states that tax cuts and thus a decrease in the financial contribution to society by the wealthy has been happening in France since the 1990's, assisting in the rebuilding of the earlier large fortunes of the rentier class. The conclusion seems to be the re-implementation of progressive taxation on wealth in the country, for which, Capital and Ideologie argues, it is then necessary to re-examine the ideological systems which attempted to justify the forms of inequality presented in the current scenario's institutional configurations.

### 3.2. Joseph Stiglitz

Joseph Stiglitz is an american economist that has been prominent in the current policy debate, given his academic contributions to the field of economics, and particularly relevant to this work are his views on inequality. He is known for his support of pgressive land taxes, his

critical view on the effects of unhindered globalization, and also by opposing groups advocating *laissez-faire* capitalism, which he calls "free-market fundamentalists" (Orszag, 2015).

According to him, doing a historical analysis from both an economic and a sociological perspective leads one to believe that "there is no such thing as an invisible hand", in the sense that the classical assumption of free markets being efficient as if guided by unseen forces does not hold true in reality (Stiglitz, 2002). His theories develop a logic that explains why unfettered markets often not only do not lead to social justice, but do not even produce efficient outcomes.

Stiglitz has also demonstrated some evidence that austerity programs are ineffective in combating public deficits and creates unwanted issues such as unemployment and economic stagnation. He has been cited as being against the austerity measures adopted by governments such as of Spain and Greece in the *post* Eurocrisis scenario, believing the authorities were responding wrongly to social problems (Altman, 2006).

### 3.2.1. The Price of Inequality

In his 2012 book "The Price of Inequality", Stiglitz gives a brief overview of the state of increasing inequalities in modern societies, and in particular of economic inequalities, and some propositions on how to address the problem. According to him, the inequalities that we see in society nowadays is but an end-effect of a long stretch of unregulated markets; like Piketty, the author believes that inequality is self-perpetuating, and that it is reinforced by the vast amount of political power the wealthy hold to control legislative and regulatory activity (Stiglitz, 2012). In his words, "politics have shaped the market, and shaped it in ways that advantage the top at the expense of the rest".

While supporting the process of globalization and technological changes, believing these are not at the heart of differences in wealth, he does criticize free markets as the solution to economic-driven problems, by pointing out that reducing taxation and regulatory demands act as to restrict competition and give corporations undue power in politics. He states in his work that free markets are good for society if they are competitive in a fair way, so the government needs to regulate them to be socially beneficial (Stiglitz, 2012). The book additionally points out that concentrating market power in too few hands is just as bad as excessive regulation, citing rent-seeking for causing inequality, with the wealthy using their power to shape monopolies and incur favorable treatment by the government.



### 3.4. Other Studies on the Effects of Inequality

To better understand the Yellow Vests Movement addressed in this paper, its causes, mechanisms and repercussions, it is crucial to then understand what are the effects of inequality on society's well-being in general. Here we will not delineate the nature of the inequality itself, rather than give a more broad overview of the existing literature on the effects of inequality on society and the individual; inequality being of any nature, whether real or perceived.

Schuppert (2012) presents a comprehensive meta-analysis of empirical research on the effects of inequality. His review shows the significant negative effects of inequality, particularly evident on the aspects of public health, vulnerability to violence, and social trust. Each may, regardless of the nature of the issue, create or intensify the general sense of dissatisfaction in a population and its potential consequences (e.g. civil unrest).

Furthermore, he makes a distinction between harmful social inequality and otherwise innocuous unequal material distributions, unequal opportunities and starting gates. The main lesson of the study, according to the author, is to differentiate both and address them in different forms through public policy implementation. The former is a structural problem to be corrected promptly, to averse its negative impacts, while the latter is a natural emergent phenomenon (to some extent) in group cohabitation (Schuppert, 2012).

We will see a comprehensive and consistent pattern of negative impacts of inequality, be it real or perceived, in both individual and societal well-being throughout academia. Particularly, strong empirical evidence links inequalities and social dissatisfaction amongst a wide range of research, alongside the emerging trait that these relationships have been true both across time (e.g. the 60's-70's) and geography (not only in the western world, but also in e.g. India, China, The Middle-East).

As an example from India, a group of North American researchers led by Breza (2018) have statistically demonstrated that both labour productivity and worker well-being at the job are negatively impacted by pay inequality. In their study, they show that the presence of a high degree of pay difference led to diminished output, a drop in attendance of 18% and a relevant difficulty in worker cooperation. These effects, while true regardless, were increased when the wage differences were perceived as unjust, and decreased when perceived as just.

In another study on China, Zavoretti (2010) analyzes the contemporary Chinese *modus operandi* and proposes a relationship between the growing economic inequality of the post-Mao

regime with a series of recent civil unrest events. In it, she recognizes wealth inequality as the main side-effect of the country's ongoing economic miracle, and then as a potential threat to the region's stability and prosperity. Further, she uses variables such as GDP, poverty rates, citizens well-being, access to social benefits and unemployment figures to argue that these increase the dimensions of privilege and vulnerability amongst classes, promoting social instability.

Pressman (2018) argues in a recent study of violence in Israel that, not only intra-group inequalities but also inter-group inequalities can precipitate civil disobedience and violent acts, including hate crimes. While studying the causes of attacks between Israelis and Palestinians, he finds the horizontal inequalities of economic, political and social realms amongst the two social-ethnic groups to be crucial in the motivation for the violence. Particularly, economic inequality plays a bigger role, and the perception of this level of inequality is distinct in Israel and Palestine. He recognizes intra-group pressures inside Israel, a sense of the elites *versus* the masses, and consequently recommends policies to reduce economic disparity.

As an example from the past, Cruz-Viesca *et al.* (2018) reviews the economic-political background of the Watts riots in Los Angeles, 1965. Their conclusion is that the profound wealth inequality present in the city at that time was one of the biggest factors on the development of the protests. The wealth gap had a considerable racial dimension, and was perceived by the protesters largely in real-estate ownership (or housing costs and difficulties).

Furthermore, a more quantitative analysis of the contemporary situation in Los Angeles (and in the United States as a proxy) confirms that the socio-economic conditions in which the Watt riots of 65 developed are still present and widespread. One might infer that this leads to two-fold implications: first, the public policy framework in the US was and still is promoting wealth inequality to this day. Secondly, substantial disparity in education, housing, employment, and wealth is still pervasive in present Los Angeles (Cruz-Viesca *et al.*, 2018), which might accentuate any existing intergroup tensions.

Empirical research on the effects of inequality on societal well-being is broad in scope and of varying conclusions. The complexity of the matter might explain the clear absence of a consensus amongst academics and specialists, apart from the fact that, in general, inequalities tend to present themselves as multiple negative issues in society. Here we will present empirical findings on indicators and possible causal relationships regarding social inequalities.

To illustrate the complex and varied nature of the topic, Schuppert (2012), when tasked with constructing a meta-analysis of these empirical findings, realizes the diverse offer of a wide

set of results on the social effects of inequality. The results available do not necessarily present a coherent picture, since different studies use different indicators and different target groups.

One of the most well-known empirical research studies on the effects of inequality is that of Wilkinson, Richard, and Pickett (2009). Starting from an earlier research of Wilkinson (1992) alone, establishing a direct link between social inequalities and individual health, the group expands the focus arguing that income inequalities and the resulting social stratification not only directly affect health, but also that these inequalities undermine the whole social cohesion and lead to a wide range of social problems.

Empirical data has also been brought forth on the negative effects of lower income in people's physical well-being (Link, 1995). Mortality rates also increase as a given group relative income decreases (Kaplan *et al.*, 1996). Peltzman (2009) shows more recent insight into how much of contemporary societies suffer from substantial inequalities in mortality rates. Physical well-being and mortality rates might induce more weight on the popular perception of social unfairness.

A different perspective, nonetheless confirming the existence of an empirical relationship amongst higher levels of inequality and negative social impacts, comes from the research of Cecchi (2018). The author has demonstrated, through a rigorous statistical model, that there is a direct positive relationship between economic inequality and a citizenry's dissatisfaction with democracy. Having utilized data from 14 countries in Europe, initially trying to filter out the impacts of the 2008 financial crisis on local populations (*e.g.* higher levels of unemployment, poverty and public funding for social protection), his ultimate conclusion is then that the dissatisfaction might eventually pose a problem to modern European welfare states.

Furthermore, the numerical evidence highlights an important factor: that dissatisfaction with democracy, generated by economic injustice, is not only a national phenomenon, but a comprehensive one; being present in many modern European societies, the relationship resists scrutiny and can even be extrapolated globally. As a reduction in the levels of relative poverty and social exclusion increases democratic stability, new analytical tools surge in contemporary governments to try to reduce civil unrest through the implementation of counter-austerity public policies (Cecchi, 2018).

Structural social cohesion is also negatively affected by inequalities, particularly those of income and wealth (Constantin, 2014). Several studies have analyzed crime rates in the light of inequality. While a particular crime rate (*e.g.* homicide) may have no direct relationship with the Yellow Vests Movement, it might serve as a proxy to increased violent tendencies in societies

and be captured by civil unrest-derived groups, showing the degrading nature of social cohesion and cooperation. The implications might be far-reaching to the stability of modern democracies.

Assessing how income inequality leads to a general increase in crime, Elgar and Aitken (2010) found quantitative links between inequality growth and increasing crime rates in a widespread 33 countries study. Their results show that evolving income disparity contributes to more homicides and less social trust. The research was inspired by Daly *et al.* (2001), which former analyzed the US and Canada in a similar manner: there, a tenfold difference was found in homicide rates relative to the degree of inequality on distinct states or provinces.

Perhaps a precursor to the worldwide panorama of Elgar and Aitken conclusions, in a study done by Lederman *et al.* (2002), a similar relationship was found. Crunching data from 20 industrialized countries between 1965 and 1994, they demonstrated a strong relation amongst trends in levels of inequality and criminal offences. Particularly, inequalities seem to affect more the variables of homicide and robberies. Not only were the results significant, they seemed to hold on independently of the varying nature of the inequalities or how they were measured.

## 4. Analysis

In order to achieve the proposed goal of this project, it was important to expose a good comprehensive overview of the whole Yellow Vests Movement. In such, we uncovered not only the historical happenings of the movement, but also enabled putting it and it's mechanisms into light of the contemporary debate on increased inequality. It will be demonstrated during the course of this analysis that the Yellow Vests are just one example of factual and potential civil unrests in modern societies, derived by their proponents' perception of an ever increasing unfairness in the distribution of society's output.

Although the Yellow Vests Movement initially began simply as a few protests against the new taxation rules on fuel (Lynas, 2018), the overall phenomenon is considered to be complex and many other underlying causes have been brought forth. Right after the issue of increased taxation in carbon-based fuels was announced, particularly diesel, the demands of the members of the movement reflected a more socio-economic vertent: the overall discontentment of the working population on living conditions. With this new facade, the movement quickly gained new adepts, grew exponentially and established a more organized plan of action. Members recurred to using the yellow vests as a symbol of belonging, as it was easily and readily available to all,

since French law requires, as of 2008, that all local drivers possess one in their car at all times (Friedman, 2018).

Besides the localized factors such as fuel taxes, ongoing austerity measures, perceived economic injustice and the newly strict governmental enforcement on traffic violations (Bontinck, 2018), specialists have abstracted the reasonings behind the movement to generalized, global mechanisms, like neoliberalism or unhindered capitalism (Durand, 2018), class struggle (Globe, 2019) and globalization (Bourgeot, 2018).

Given that context, and inserting the issues exposed so far within a demonstrated real increase in economic inequality in our modern societies (section 1.2. of this project), France included, it is evident that The Yellow Vests Movement is, to a very large extent, a reflection of increasing inequalities in modern states. This analysis is further reinforced by reviewing the movement on the light of both Piketty and Stiglitz theoretical frameworks (sections 3.1. and 3.2. of this project), both of which share reasonings and evidence-backed publications on the increasing economic inequalities of modern states and how those can incite civil dissatisfaction through the popular perception of unfairness.

While the above answers the main research question, both sub-questions determined in section 1.3. will help to further the understanding of the work's conclusion. Firstly, in regards as to whether the Yellow Vests Movement is a response to real or perceived increases in inequality of recent times, it is evident that the case is both. This project will furthermore theorize that, while economic data showing increasing income and wealth inequalities will not always be accessible to the larger population, nor an academic understanding of it, the very real shifting of social and economic conditions towards unfairness does permeate down, and eventually does result in an apparent perception of increasing inequality in the middle and working classes. Additionally, as seen in section 3.4, studies show that whether the increasing inequality being real or just perceived is irrelevant, as both result in the same consequences (*i.e.* civil unrest), which leads us to the second sub-question below.

Secondly, in regards to the sub-question “what issues might arise to society if civil unrest movements, like the Yellow Vests, could be considered reflections of inequality?”, the conclusion is straightforward: since this project has assessed that the Yellow Vests Movement is, to a large extent, reflective of increasing inequality, the potential problems that may present themselves are both every problem seen in the wake of the Yellow Vests, and every problem evidenced by similar civil unrest movements in recent history (section 3.4. again). They include violence, civilian harm, property damage, inter-group tensions, democratic

representation issues and the social distress we have seen in the development of the Yellow Vests Movement as a response to the perceived rising unfairness; these patterns elucidated here will continue and be intensified if no reversive measures are to be taken by governments promptly.

## 5. Critical Reflections

### 5.1. Comparable Movements

Although a comparative analysis is not on the scope of this work, for the sake of reference and to guide further research, a short list of comparable movements will be presented. The Yellow Vests movement has been a source of inspiration for other civil dissatisfaction demonstrations worldwide, and since its inception, has been compared to other modern populist movements such as the Occupy movement in the United States (Rose & Baker, 2018), the Five Star Movement in Italy (Nossiter, 2018), and Orbanism in Hungary (Gopnik, 2018).

### 5.2. Limitations and Shortcomings

One of the biggest limitations present in this study is the impossibility to ascertain, with a definite degree of confidence, a direct causal relationship between the main variables; that is to say, proof that the Yellow Vests Movement was caused only and directly (*ceteris paribus*) by the increasing inequality manifested in France at the time. Like most research in the social sciences, the relationship is probably more nuanced, depending on context: that is the reason why contextualization was necessary, and ideas like perception and social settings of class were introduced. Nevertheless, given the analysis in section 4, this project definitely abides by the conclusion reached.

Another limiting factor was the lack of available resources, as this project would have great use of interviews with the main members of the movement to assess direct issues of inequality presented here, with available data; or of interviews with government officials striving to implement progressive forms of taxation, evidentiating their main difficulties.

## 6. Conclusion

The Yellow Vests Movement has been a defining historical mark in recent times, when it comes to raising issues of societal inequalities into the public debate. Not the only civil unrest movement of this decade, it is another contributor to the process of striving for a better society, and it shows that popular dissatisfaction and the accompanying popular voice will emerge when conditions are not favorable to the majority of the citizenry. It also demonstrates the power a relatively small group can have in this day and age, to further their views (or at least let the world know them) with a wide media follow-up and international reach.

By reviewing the Yellow Vests Movement with a theoretical approach consisting of specialists on inequality, and other studies relating to civil unrest, this project hopes to contribute to the ongoing discussion of increasing gaps in fair conditions of living in modern nations. And by reaching the overall conclusion that this movement is indeed, to a large extent, the reflection of rising economic inequalities, this project also aims to inform policy makers in their decision process going forward.

Additionally, a single-case study methodological approach permitted not only reaching the above mentioned conclusion, but to also establish context; crossing that context with existing literature, two other points were made: that the perceived increasing inequality by the members of the movement is indeed backed up by a real phenomenon of the last two decades, and that, if the issue is not addressed by the suggested means (e.g. progressive taxation on wealth), negative impacts will be felt in the near future, including violence, inter-group tensions and democratic representation problems.

Overall, the conclusion is that the Yellow Vests Movement is indeed a movement surged from an increased perception of economic unfairness by the middle and working classes, that this unfairness is based on real increasing wealth and income disparities, and that potential societal setbacks may repeatedly occur if these underlying issues are not addressed.

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