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From The Sans-Culottes To The Yellow Vests: Historical Emotion, National Identity And The Persistence Of Cultural Memory

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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that the French Revolution of 1789 was a significant cause behind the Yellow Vest movement due to a phenomenon known as cultural memory, better defined as a concrete reservoir of significant events or fables serving to shape a nation's identity as well as carrying emotions from history to the present. It goes on to declare that members of the Yellow Vest movement drew inspiration from the Revolution, influencing their mode of protest, end goals and unique solidarity due to the Revolution's status as a core aspect of French cultural memory. Through comparisons of parallels between facets of the Revolution and the Yellow Vest, the impact of the former on the latter can be cleanly drawn out. Further, the experiencing of emotions like that of the *sans-culottes* by the Yellow Vests is another key reason behind the Revolution's influence. This paper then shows that cultural memory drove this similarity in emotion via analysis of connections between specific artwork from both movements.

Keywords: *French Revolution, Yellow Vest movement, cultural memory, collective memory, national identity, Pathosformel, popular sovereignty, sans-culottes*

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 2018, hundreds of thousands of *gilets jaunes*, or Yellow Vests, thronged France's streets in retaliation against Emmanuel Macron's fuel tax. Diverse, politically unaffiliated and claiming to be the voice of the people, they were viewed as descendants of the *sans-culottes*, the radical abolitionists of the 1789 French Revolution. The movement was named after their adoption of the neon safety precaution vests mandatory for every motorist to own, a striking parallel to the unifying motif of the trouser-wearing *sans-culottes* (Jetten et al., 2020). Though the former was a response to inequality and the latter a revolution against monarchy, both were movements against perceived elitism and for the notion that government power resides, in part, within the consent of the people. This important core of French character can be connected through two centuries of history. This paper asserts that, through parallels in the progression and artwork between the Yellow Vest movement and the French Revolution, the tendency to protest the upper class and for popular sovereignty lies ingrained in French national character and cultural memory. As such, the Revolution is a partial cause of the Yellow Vest movement.

Introductions to Cultural Memory via Memory Figures & Art Theory

The connection between the French Revolution and the *gilets jaunes* illustrates an idea that is a key aspect of French identity. First, what it means to belong to a nation has to be defined in the context of this paper so the importance of cultural memory can be properly understood. A national identity is not solely based on race, politics, or citizenship, but rather united through a cultural and historical link (Renan, 1882). This definition allows members of a nation to experience a shared collective memory, to draw emotion from works of a cultural past, and desire to coexist and perpetuate a common heritage. As a specific, defined group, they should possess shared emotions, values and ideas that define events occurring within their group's history— wars, revolts, celebrations— in such ways that differ from those outside the group (Assmann, 2011). But defining a nation solely through a political lens would cause difficulty for its people to harbor a unified cultural memory; history offers many instances of countries that have contained multiple nations with distinct collective memories within their borders, and experienced strife as a result (Renan, 1882). Nations cannot be defined through a nationalistic or ethnic lens either, since many have been formed from mixed ethnic races that nevertheless bore cultural pasts of their own.

If a nation has an identity, it also has a collective memory, which branches into cultural memory— a phenomenon that enshrines certain traditions and events (Assmann, 2000). A collective memory, or a memory shared by a wider group, exists to transmit a collective identity, where events and stories key to the identity of the group inscribe themselves. There are two brands of collective memory: communicative memory, which is relatively short-term and relying on word of mouth, and cultural memory, which is less fluid and more concrete.

The latter is based on the history of a nation and grounded in collective experiences, cultural traditions, or fabled legends that have been instrumental in forming aspects of national identity. It spans great lengths of time, serving as the 'diachronic axis' to the more limited 'synchronic axis' of communicative memory. Naturally, a culture cannot have a physical memory in a mystical sense; rather it is the individuals who make up the whole that have it instilled within them due to a desire to belong. Central events— also known as memory figures— that are vital to national identity, including the Revolutionary War to Americans or the Exodus to the Israelites, are the most significant cores of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011). These exist as points that a nation structures its collective identity around, imbued with symbolic meanings that persist across centuries. The United States' Revolutionary War, for instance, acts as a channel for the values of liberty and self-governance. While the memory figure itself remains fixed, similar to a figurative anchor, these values are adapted to fit the needs of each passing generation. Accordingly, members of a nation can recognise the impact of their memory figures, comprehend their depth and development, and might draw reference to them.

A clear process for an event becoming a memory figure is outlined within the Book of Deuteronomy (Assmann, 2011). A classic example of this memorialisation is the French Revolution, which follows seven steps toward immortalisation in cultural memory. Three of these steps include constant circulation through many generations, festivals of collective memorisation, oral transmission— into poetry or song— and canonisation, or the exalting a memory into the status of an ultimate authority. Memory figures are then categorized into a system of ideas or a teaching, representing attitudes and values, to future generations. While their existence and significance are fixed, their interpretations can shift across time, metamorphosing to fit the needs of future generations. Applying this framework to France, it becomes clear that the French Revolution is a memory figure intensely ingrained within the French heritage and memory as the historical catalyst which transformed the monarchy into a republic. It fulfills every step from Deuteronomy: perpetual discussion across the centuries, the Bastille Day national holiday, the national anthem of *La Marseillaise*, and the revolutionaries' own attempts to canonise the event with multiple drafts of the constitution. As such, the Revolution's role as a memory figure provides reason for the Yellow Vests' desire to adopt its symbolism, motive and legitimacy.

Cultural memory also carries intense emotions from past events to the present day, which can be preserved within cultural artifacts, including artwork. This maintains the emotional significance of historical symbols and monuments, offering explanation as to why individuals sharing the same national heritage can still recognize and sympathise with past emotions instead of merely remembering them. Aby Warburg was a revolutionary art historian whose work in cultural memory showed that art acts a vehicle carrying emotional expressions across stretches of time. According to his ideas, the emotional imprint carried by cultural memory is called an *Engram*, or the memory-trace of emotions left behind during powerful experiences (Warburg, 1905, as cited in Badea, 2021). The leftover fear from the Reign of Terror is one example; subsequently, people belonging to French national identity today can empathize with it. The artistic manifestation of *Engram*, enabling its

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transmission across history within art, is known as *Pathosformel*, or pathos formula. It is a repetition of a specific gesture or visual tone within a piece of art that embodies a specific feeling, regardless of the period it was created. For example, the reappearance of the Greek portrayal of a nymph, with billowing hair and robes– a classic depiction of energy and dynamism– in different periods across history is *Pathosformel* (Badea, 2021). The process is as such: artists use *Pathosformel* to create a physical representation of the *Engram*. Viewers, regardless of whether they witness it days or decades later, can recognize the emotion.

This objectification of historical emotion via art bridges past and present, allowing for historical attitudes to be absorbed and reiterated by those in the present (Assmann, 2011). *Pathosformel* does not mean that contemporary citizens feel identical emotions to their predecessors; rather it is a bridge letting them feel empathy and mold previous circumstances to fit their own context. This phenomenon can be applied to certain art pieces of the Yellow Vest movement that are replicas of works of the French Revolution. Artists of the former may have revived the *Engram* originating from the Revolution into the modern age by mimicking the gestures of the works of that period, thereby creating new *Pathosformel*. In due course, this paper will examine the connection between *Liberty Leading the People* and a Yellow Vest replica, as well as the *La Marseillaise* sculpture and a contemporary mural reinterpretation, to showcase how art can link the French Revolution and the *gilets jaunes*. Having established how cultural memory functions through memory figures and *Pathosformel*, it must now be determined if the Yellow Vest movement demonstrates this connection in practice. In order to do so, a closer look at the movement itself is required.

Historical Overview of the Yellow Vest Movement (2018-2020)

On November 17, 2018, more than two hundred thousand protestors across France donned neon yellow security vests, barricading roads, waving flags and fighting against riot police (BBC, 2018). By December 1st, the movement was no longer a protest but an insurrection. In Paris six buildings were lit aflame, dozens of shops ransacked, and the Arc de Triomphe graffitied (The Local/AFP, 2018). The catalyst appeared to be the steep rise in the carbon tax, rising from €30.50 to €44.60 per tonne of CO₂ (Liotta et al., 2024). Meant to combat climate change, what Emmanuel Macron's administration failed to consider was the effect on low-income groups in rural areas– the environment was not a priority these people placed before their own livelihoods, especially since they primarily relied on diesel cars to travel. This was the final step to igniting the anti-elitism and distrust in Macron's policies that had been festering against a backdrop of economic inequality (Jetten et al., 2020). In the first year of Macron's presidency, the increase in taxation was proportionally greater than the wealth produced, and the new taxes disproportionately affected lower-income groups. Social mobility also appeared to be ineffective: redistribution through taxes did not provide for equal opportunities at all, with it taking more than six generations for a person at the bottom end of income distribution to reach the mean income level (Jetten et al., 2020).

The Yellow Vests' decision to frame themselves as 'the people' is precisely what allowed them to adopt revolutionary imagery. They did not only want to lower the fuel tax but to gain a better channel to communicate with the government and to improve the economic situation of the lower classes as a whole, and they did so by framing themselves as the manifestation of the people (Hayat, 2024). Though the movement's constituents covered a wide spectrum of ideological beliefs, they were all united under the same banner. Because of this the movement had no official representation and could deem itself apolitical, with the addition of its lack of a manifesto or party affiliation. Many slogans marking this idea were scrawled on the back of yellow vests, one eloquent example being: *'I am Yellow Vest, I am the people, I am a woman, a man, a child, I am of all colors, I am of all religions and without religion, I am democracy, I am France, I am liberty, equality and fraternity, and I rise up in the face of injustice'* (Hayat, 2024, p. 643). The *gilets jaunes* positioned themselves within conflict as the common people— not only farmers but also teachers, nurses, truck drivers, shopkeepers— versus the oppressive elites, pushing for economic change. (Jetten et al., 2020).

The Yellow Vest movement 'claimed to *be* the sovereign people, i.e the ultimate holder of political legitimacy, on which the political system was based, and who had been betrayed by their representatives' (Hayat, 2024, p. 643). They wielded popular sovereignty, which in their eyes was the holding of constituent power, as the people to demand change from their government. To maintain the legitimacy of its claim, the movement adopted much of its imagery from the *sans-culottes* of the Revolution of 1789, a reference immediately understandable as a message of popular unity with the underlying threat of overthrowing political leaders. Many protestors bore the tricolor flag and even carried fake guillotines. But unlike the *sans-culottes* this remained a threat; the main motive was continued as a reminder to current leaders to abide by the people's desires. In November 2018, 42 'directives of the people' were published by self-proclaimed representatives, aiming for financial and economic improvement and civil service reform (Hayat, 2024). While not a whole encapsulation of the movement's aims, these directives serve as a hallmark for the movement's goal: to remind their political leaders that their power is derived from the people, and it is their duty to ensure the economic and overall wellbeing of the citizens of the nation. The Yellow Vests' deliberate adoption of revolutionary imagery was not accidental but drew upon a reservoir of cultural memory which originated from the Revolution itself. To understand this memory source, we must then explore more of the French Revolution.

To understand whether this fierce resistance truly hails from the Revolution, we must examine the Revolution's own origins. Prior to 1789, a ruling hierarchy had been gradually established in the country after the Renaissance and the end of the feudal era, taking shape in the *Ancien Régime* and the three estates. The first and second estates owned about two fifths of the French land and amassed great wealth (Dabney, 1888). On the other hand, the third estate, consisting of 98% of the population and made up of the commoners, peasants and urban workers, was largely poor and bore the burden of paying the direct taxes. They were also stripped of most

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political power: each estate held one vote in the Estates-General, so influence was disproportionately spread among the population.

Historical Overview of the French Revolution (1789)

Ideas of popular sovereignty and the social contract became popular amongst revolutionary thinkers and in time with the rest of the country (Dabney, 1888). Jean Jacques Rousseau was one such highly influential thinker whose social contract called for the erasure of despotism and championed the legitimacy of the ruler to be derived from the governed. In this way citizens surrender their rights to the general will and retain their moral autonomy, since they would be financing laws for the people, not for the private interests of a monarch. Such ideas were the foundation of the Enlightenment, inflaming the ever-growing fervor of the third estate.

The French Revolution began with a final convening of the Estates General in 1789, moving to a revolutionary government, the end of monarchy and rise of the common people (William Glenn Gray Purdue University, n.d.) The French people ached for change, and their desire was only fueled by an economic crisis from a year of terrible weather and failed crops. When Louis XVI convened the three estates to request a tax raise, Third Estate representatives demanded to vote by head count instead of the original single vote (Doyle, 1989). They, along with some members of the nobility and clergy, formed the National Assembly, claiming sovereign power. In August they adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as a statement of universal principles, functioning as the founding document of the Revolution. Highly significant was Article VI, defining political law as an expression of the general will, from direct or indirect participation of the people. The document also ensured no figure or institution could wield authority without the consent of the governed. *Sans-culottes*, radical members of the lower-class— who were without culottes, or the silk pants worn by the elite— emerged as a significant political force, with the numbers to intimidate the government into abiding by their demands (Doyle, 1989). In July they stormed the Bastille prison and raided its gunpowder to prevent possible retaliation from military forces. Soon after, the monarchy fell altogether and was replaced by the First French Republic. In the countryside, citizens demolished feudal rule and organized counterrevolutionary movements, and peasants were taking up arms against their feudal lords. Fueled by grain shortages and economic distress, they were swept into paranoia, listening to rumors of nobles attempting to starve the revolutionary cause by hoarding supplies and tithes. The Great Fear swept across the provinces, and in its midst peasants destroyed not granaries, but evidence of feudal obligations and symbols of power.

Terror became the rule of the day as the Revolutionary Wars went on and increased under Robespierre's leadership. (Doyle, 1989). The *sans-culottes* pushed relentlessly for national conscription and punishment for enemies of the cause. They wrenched control of the Paris Commune, stormed the Tuileries Palace alongside the radicalized National Guard and forced the imprisonment of Louis XVI (Doyle, 1989). In a newfound wave of

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fervor, the Reign of Terror flared up and would result in the execution of tens of thousands. By July of 1794, the guillotine blade ceased falling. The nation rebuilt itself after Thermidor, and the Revolution was over.

Comparison through Historical Similarities

Through analysis on the similarities between the motives, philosophies, actions and constituents of the French Revolution and the Yellow Vests, we can demonstrate that cultural memory is the reason why the former was a partial cause of the latter. The Revolution, a memory figure from which more than mere inspiration was drawn, holds great influence over the French national identity. Consequently, its impact meant that it became a viable foundation for the Yellow Vests' methods of protest, their goals and even emotions. The urban *sans-culottes* of 1789 yearned for democracy, and for a while they were able to directly influence their government's actions through popular pressure. Furious at the injustice of the old regime, they were the engine of the Revolution. Even so, their end goal was not direct democracy but rather the induction of a republic, leading them to control the Paris and the National Guard to force pressure on the government– but not to replace them (Hayat, 2024). The *sans-culottes* justified their methods of protest by claiming to be sovereign, the representatives of the people, in accordance with principles of the Declaration of the Man of the Rights and the Citizen. This allowed them to interpret the government as an engine for the general will, its existence in line with their consent.

The *gilets jaunes* functioned similarly in their claims to represent the French people. They understood the role of the *sans-culottes* and administered their legitimacy for their own cause, particularly using slogans– '*I am Yellow Vest, I am the people*'– and symbols– most famously the tricolor and the guillotine (Hayat, 2024). The use of the yellow vest itself not only suited the movement's needs but doubled as a reference to the *sans-culottes*. The high-visibility yellow jackets were universally accessible, and considering that motorists primarily wore them, they were a direct outcry against the fuel tax hike. But like how the *sans-culottes*' style of dress was a mark of status and a rejection of the aristocracy, the high-visibility yellow jackets signalled solidarity amongst lower/middle class members (Julie et al., 2021). Naturally, there remain differences between the movements. The Revolution revitalised modern democracy against a stagnant monarchy using the temporary implementation of Montesquieu and Rousseau's ideas and the *sans-culottes* as its radical engines. Meanwhile, the Yellow Vests pressured an elitist government for reform against economic stagnation and political powerlessness, operating on a smaller scale. At their core, however, these two movements were similar in that they strove for political change against systems favoring the high-earning and elite. They professed to be vessels of the people, the true sovereigns of the nation, who should have authority over their governments out of the general will. Part of the reason for these similarities is the French Revolution's status as a significant memory figure, acting as a historical example for the Yellow Vests to draw upon. In turn, the *gilets jaunes* were not simply passive recipients of history; their adoption of the revolutionary memory figure was deliberate, a political strategy, owing to their awareness that

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the revolutionary symbols held great power in the French cultural imagination. They borrowed and deployed this aspect of their cultural identity, along with the *Engram* from the same event to their advantage.

Cultural Memory Within Art Pieces

Via the theories of *Engram* and *Pathosformel*, we can analyse the connection between the Yellow Vest and French Revolution through an artistic lens. By looking at specific examples of *Pathosformel*, a continued visual formula, we can prove that certain *Engram*—the emotional imprint within cultural memory represented by these formulas—had been transmitted from the Revolution to the Yellow Vest movement. One such *Engram* provided the latter with an emotional incentive to organise large-scale revolt. *Liberty Leading the People*, by French romantic painter Eugène Delacroix, is a long-lasting symbol of French resistance and representation of cultural memory (Nora, 1998). It depicts Marianne, a physical personification of the Goddess of Liberty, leading a group of citizens of various social classes across a barricade. Despite *Liberty Leading* not being an original 1789 relic—it is a commemoration of the 1830 July Revolution—Delacroix’s renowned work contains innumerable references to the French Revolution and depicts the same spirit. Not only does it bear the state symbol Marianne, it contains the Phrygian cap worn by the *sans-culottes* and the tricolor flag. One of the painting’s alternate titles even references *La Marseillaise*. This work is a powerful link to the Yellow Vest movement through its connection with a similar mural by street artist Pascal Boyart. He painted a direct reference to *Liberty Leading*, depicting a rallying group of yellow-vested protestors of diverse races instead of the angry workers of 1830—an attempt to contain the rage felt by the Yellow Vests within an art piece (Paris (AFP), 2019). The intense emotion found within Delacroix’s painting was replicated by Boyart and altered to fit the circumstances of the Yellow Vests. Both paintings display the same core meaning: Marianne, symbol of freedom, leads the citizens of France to fight an oppressive government and ensure their demands are realised. According to Warburg, an *Engram* felt during an event is stored in shared cultural memory and can find physical embodiment within art through *Pathosformel*, a specific visual pattern (Warburg, 1905, as cited in Badea, 2021). Viewers of the art, if part of that cultural memory, can recognise and interpret the emotions as they wish. Essentially, Boyart’s work is a continuation of the *Pathosformel* established by *Liberty Leading*. Its preservation of the *Engram* of revolutionary fervor from 1789 is evidence that this *Engram* remained active during the Yellow Vest movement, whose members seem to have adopted that fervor to fuel their own needs.

Further historical analysis of their actions demonstrates that cultural memory shaped certain aspects of the Yellow Vest. Both the *sans-culottes* and Yellow Vests experienced tense economic circumstances as their most urgent catalyst. Not only was the fuel tax viewed as ignorantly harmful by the latter, but taxation in general had also become disproportionate and social mobility was faltering under Macron’s presidency. The *sans-culottes* were pitted against the centuries-old *Ancien Régime* that taxed them heavily, and the catalyst for their anger was the devastating succession of bad harvests that led up to the Estates General assembly. A similarity lies in a slogan

written on the backs of many yellow vests—‘For you my children’—which, to some, is reminiscent of the Women’s March on Versailles, occurring due to bread prices being too expensive to feed families (Julie et al., 2021). However, it is not the similar economic anguish—which was circumstantial-- that came about because of cultural memory, but instead the parallels in the responses taken to address them. The *sans-culottes* and *gilets jaunes* were both prone to mob violence— certainly on different scales— and attacks on wealth. The *sans-culottes* stormed the Bastille, marched on Tuileries and took control of the Parisian streets. Rural citizens destroyed symbols of wealth during the Great Fear, making it their priority over looting for riches. The *gilets jaunes* lit streets on fire and clashed severely against law enforcement. They organized hundreds of demonstrations, during many of which they ruined luxury shops and upscale boutiques in the wealthy *arrondissements* of Paris. Both groups experienced ideological divisions within their ranks and were nevertheless united toward a goal beyond politics, targeting both the higher classes and a dysfunctional government. Yellow Vest protestors also mimicked the violence of their predecessors; some held a mock beheading of Macron in effigy, claiming him as the first president to accept symbols of monarchy— he had walked through the Louvre after his election and convened Congress at Versailles (Gabriel, 2019). The *gilets jaunes*, as members of a nation with the French Revolution embedded in its cultural memory, utilized the Revolution as a model for their tactics to challenge the government and force the attention of politicians and their backing elite. Moreover, another example of *Engram* from the Revolution was revived by contemporary Yellow Vest artists and activists, who recognised it as an effective tool to mobilize their audiences.

Boyart’s mural is not the only example of a continuation of *Pathosformel* from the French Revolution. A second instance emerged when the Arc de Triomphe became a canvas for protest, giving rise to the artist Ore’s continuation of the *Pathosformel* of the La Marseille relief sculpture. The sculpture depicts Marianne once again leading armed French men, but this time the work depicts scenes of the 1789 Revolution, specifically during the War of the First Coalition (Brooklyn Museum, n.d). While it was completed in 1836, the sculpture is an even stronger reference to the Revolution than *Liberty Leading the People*. Centuries later, *gilets jaunes* entered the Arc de Triomphe, graffitied its walls and destroyed part of a plaster replica of the sculpture— the centerpiece, a winged Marianne donning a Phrygian cap, with half her face crushed. Ore decided to paint a mural of the destroyed Marianne. He intended to draw on “the power of images from certain demonstrations,” and saw the broken statue as “the failure of our Republic on the issue of equality among citizens” (Le Cain, 2019). In doing so, he appears to have continued the *Pathosformel* originating with the *La Marseillaise* piece, and provided a physical manifestation of the *Engram* that it represented— a memory of the lower classes’ anger toward the failures of the government— which must have been already operating amongst the Yellow Vests. Both the original statue and Ore’s painting emphasize the fierce struggle of the common people, with the capacity for anger and aggravation transferring from the first period to the second. In the former, this intensity was utilised to defend the state against invasion by foreign countries in order to maintain the Revolution and keep the new Republic intact. For the latter, it was used to organise a call for reform against Macron’s government and its pandering to

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the elite. With this, it can be said that this is another instance of the 1789 Revolution inspiring major features of the Yellow Vest using emotional means. In Ore continuing the *Pathosformel*, he proved that *Engram* of lower-class solidarity and anger had surged during the Yellow Vest movement. Once a symbol of liberty, equality and fraternity that the French Revolution supposedly brought, it was now a signal of the *gilets jaunes*' rage, a "failure of our Republic." (Haynes, 2018; Le Cain, 2019).)

CONCLUSION

The Yellow Vests and the French Revolution's *sans-culottes* share core parallels: the source of their legitimacy, the disposition and actions of their members, their symbolism and art. The link between them lies in cultural memory, or more specifically, how it carries historical emotions and the idea of memory figures. Due to the Revolution's status as one such defining moment in French history, *gilets jaunes* drew upon it as a toolkit for inspiration. The second way the Revolution served as a catalyst to the Yellow Vest was through emotions born during the former that passed on to the present, allowing the latter to experience similar revolutionary fervor and anger toward authority. The connection between *Liberty Leading the People* and Pascal Boyart's mural, as well between *La Marseillaise* relief sculpture and Ore's painting, draws proof for this emotional similarity through the art theories of *Pathosformel* and *Engram*. These theories state that the repetition of a certain artistic formula indicates that the emotion represented by the original artwork has been replicated to a new work. While the ability to feel this emotion persists, the context it is felt in and its interpretations can be adjusted to modern situations. Subsequently, the Yellow Vests took the anger and fervor of the *sans-culottes* and adjusted them to fit their own needs. With the ability to revolt so deeply ingrained into French identity, it is almost certain a great movement will come to the forefront once more. It might draw from the Revolution of 1789, or perhaps, after generations have passed, the Yellow Vest movement could emerge as its own memory figure, an impetus for the future.

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