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Neoliberalism and Its Socio-Economic Subjugation of the Working Class as the Cause of the Yellow Vest Movement in the Hauts-de-France and Grand Est regions of France from 1980 to 2019

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December 16th, 2019

Table of Contents

I. Abstract

II. Introduction

III. Literature Review

IV. Theoretic Framework

V. Methodology

VI. Limitations

VII. Case Studies

VIII. Analysis

IX. Conclusion

X. Bibliography

I. Abstract

This paper offers an insight into the cause of the Yellow Vest Movement in France. I argue that the Yellow Vest Movement was not simply caused by the Gas Tax passed under the Macron Administration, but by years of subjugation of the working-class under neoliberal ideology stemming from the 1980s and continuing to 2019. The two northern regions of Grand Est and Hauts-de-France known historically for their working-class communities are examined in order to see how neoliberalism has subjugated the working-class over the past forty years. Using the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Édouard Louis, Florence Aubenas, François Ruffin, and my own research from my time in Reims, I demonstrate how globalization, deregulation, and rise in support for right-wing politics have pressured these communities to protest concluding that the outbreak of the Yellow Vest Movement is endemic of the pressures felt by working-class people under neoliberalism.

Key Terms: Neoliberalism, Yellow Vest, Bourdieu, Protest, Northern France

II. Introduction

Glass lay in the grout of the cobblestoned streets. Windshields, bank windows, storefronts, and the windows to security booths at Veuve-Cliquot had been either spider-webbed or completely shattered during the night. It was evident that the goal of the attack was not to force entry, it was to leave a mark. The only establishments and cars spared were those with a yellow reflective vest in the window or on the dashboard. Like the sacrificial lamb's blood painted on the doors of the Jews in biblical Egypt, those with a visible display of a vest were passed over by the destructive force. The morning following these acts ushered in the wail of car horns and "PUTAIN, MA VOITURE"¹. A demonstration in the Place Royale had formed, stopping traffic in the rotary. Before the statue of Louis XIV stood men and women clad in yellow reflective vests. Megaphones projected anti-Macron chants, call-and-response exclamations about how the rich are killing France, and boos toward those working in the bank in the Place Royale reverberated off the stone façades. This was the Yellow Vest Movement.

The Yellow Vest Movement is cited as originating from a tax, coming from the office of former-banker turned president, Emmanuel Macron in November 2018 (Paye, 2019). The tax was part of the government's initiatives to reduce CO2 emissions and rendered gas roughly \$6 per gallon (*The Daily*, 2019). This political move angered particularly those who are reliant on gas (i.e., those who live in rural communities, working-class individuals, those without access to reliable public transportation, and farmers who use gas-powered machines to harvest and cultivate). Those outraged by Macron and his government took to Facebook; posting videos of

¹ Translation: "Fuck, my car!"

themselves calling for collective action and protests. One video suggested that French people against the tax start using the reflective yellow vest as a collective symbol of protest - the yellow vests required by French law to be in every car. The yellow vest came to embody these grievances and became both the symbol and the name for this movement.

The gas tax disproportionately affected the working-class. The tax became emblematic of a president who lived within the Paris bubble, with access to reliable public transport, who did not have to worry about the personal financial burden of filling his tank. This sentiment, the idea that a political figure is detached from the society for which they are intended to serve is articulated by Edouard Louis as *les grandes figures*, a concept coming from his most recent work *Qui a tué mon père* (Louis, 2018) .

The media buzz concerning the tax and Macron brought to light other grievances against the president. This included the narrative of Macron as a president who is putting globalist, supranational European values above the working-class French citizen. This mishegoss of malcontent toward the President of the French Republic was harnessed and laid the groundwork for the formation of the Yellow Vest Movement.

The movement manifested differently across the countries, but the four main factors that unified them all were: A resentfulness toward Marcon and the desire to remove him from office, a malcontent with the growing wealth gap in France, a strong yet leaderless organization and an emblematic use of the yellow vest. In order to understand the movement I examine two different regions that were touched by the Yellow Vest Movement, the Grand Est and Hauts-de-France. I chose these two regions because of their history concerning working class families, manufacturing, and industry as well as the fact that the movement in these regions is the most

average. By average, I mean least extreme. Paris Yellow Vest Protests, for example, devolved into protestors often became extremely violent and hostile. Often contained islamaphobic, anti-semitic, and xenophobic protestors among their ranks which cued the rhetoric and attention away from the four tenants of the movement and rendered a more sensitive movement.

The Yellow Vest protestors in the Grand Est, for example, often called for direct democracy, their experience with Macron has disillusioned them to governance all together. The Yellow Vest Movement itself is without a single leader. The movement was largely apolitical movement that has become politicized. This is more in line with the international Yellow Vest Movement. A movement whose rhetoric was focused on Macron, wealth inequality, the leaderless nature of the movement as a display of democracy, and they symbol of the yellow vest.

I am arguing that legislative policies and politics from the 1980s that conformed to neoliberalism and continued to develop in France have contributed to the building of political pressure. This pressure broke with the Gas Tax, a policy under the Macron administration that catalyzed the Yellow Vest Movement. I argue that the Yellow Vest Movement was born from years of political subjugation of the working-class as a result of neoliberal policies and the politics of *les grandes figures*. To support this argument and diachronic analysis of neoliberalism in relation to the working-class, I look at the regions of Hauts-de-France and Grand Est. These two regions have a historical and strong working-class population that has been documented by renowned authors from the 1980s with *La misère du monde* to the present.

The importance of the paper lies in the subject; there is a lack of literature on the causes for the Yellow Vest Movement, especially in these two regions. There is a wealth of journalistic

articles that recount the timeline of the movement, but they largely start from the first Facebook videos of working-class French citizens outraged by the gas tax calling for those affected to protest wearing the yellow vest required to be kept in the trunk of every car in France by law. This analysis of the movement is myopic and ignores the history of the subjugation of the working-class in order to keep up with the globalization of market economies in the 1980s, and the increased economic competition of European countries, with the growth of the European Union. I will attempt to fill this gap in the literature using a socio-political analysis of Northern France concerning the working-class, and how the government and its policies manifest in their struggles.

In this thesis, I explore the role of neoliberalism in the nexus of the Yellow Vest Movement in the two northern regions of Hauts-de-France and Grand Est. Through literary, academic, journalistic, and conversational accounts, I explore troubles faced by the working-class of these two regions and trace the genesis of these problems to a source largely defined by neoliberal ideology and practices.

I will review literature recounting academic engagement with neoliberalism, contemporary authors engaging with the working-class of the Hauts-de-France and Grand Est, academic articles concerned with the Yellow Vest movement, and finally articles about the Yellow Vests from journalistic sources. I will implement Bourdieusian concepts of neoliberalism in my theoretical framework as articulated in *La misère du monde* and in his 1998 article describing the essence of neoliberalism in order to explore the condition of the socio-economic and political conditions of the working-class in these two regions of Northern France (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu, 1998). In the Methodology section, I explain the source of my own personal

field research: interviews informally conducted during my year in Reims that took place in bars around the city. I will illustrate and discuss two case studies. The first case study is on the Hauts-de-France region and the second is on the Grand Est region. Both of these case studies are divided into three subsections: the first concerning the effect of globalization on the working-class, the second on the deregulation and destabilization of public services in these regions, and the third on the growth in support for right-wing politics. This is then followed by an analysis and finally, my conclusion where demonstrate how this research and analysis of neoliberalism and the working-class is applicable to other situations around the world.

In order to understand the complexity and weight of these terms, and their role in the formulation of the Yellow Vest Movement in Northern France, it is necessary to look at previously established literature. Most notable, the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Florence Aubenas, François Ruffin, and Édouard Louis play pivotal roles in the construction of this thesis and the arguments I make in support of neoliberalism being the cause of the Yellow Vest Movement.

III. Literature Review

Academic Engagement with Neoliberalism from the 1980s to 1990s

According to Laval, Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most important writers from the end of the last century (Laval, 5).² Bourdieu analyzed the society in which he lived by looking critically at neoliberalism (Laval, 5). One of the paradigms that is necessary to understand the context of the Yellow Vest Movement is neoliberalism and how its policies have affected the working-class throughout recent history. Bourdieu's work, particularly *La misère du monde* took place in the

² All translations in this thesis were done by myself.

mid to late 1980s and was published in the 1990s (Laval, 2018). The temporality of Pierre Bourdieu's work and his conceptualization of neoliberalism is the academic basis for my analysis on the evolution of class-based unrest regarding the ruling class.

According to Laval, aside from the context in which they wrote, their approaches also mark a difference in their approach to analyzing the socio-political state of the French people; "Foucault is more specifically preoccupied with the norm that imposes itself on people's lives while Bourdieu is first sensitive to the 'extreme inequality before the reasons of life'" (Laval, 11). Bourdieu's sensibility toward equality makes his analysis of the Yellow Vest Movement relevant in relation to neoliberalism, in addition to the context in which he wrote. Laval argues that Bourdieu's work is a living testament of the progression of neoliberal politics, the transformation of the ruling class, the growth in power for large enterprises and the corresponding weakening of working-class organizations, the increased presence of neoliberalism due to construction of a connected Europe, and the domination of financial capital (Laval, 17). All of this accumulates in the claim that Bourdieu was the principle opponent of neoliberalism, labeled the "anti-neoliberal intellectual" by the media in the mid-nineties (Laval, 17). Bourdieu made his public appearance as truly anti-neoliberal in his work *la misère du monde* (Laval, 17).

"The Essence of Neoliberalism", published in 1998 in *Le Monde diplomatique*. Written by Pierre Bourdieu, it is a scathing critique on neoliberalism, defining the economic framework as "a program for destroying collective structures which may impede pure market logic" (Bourdieu, 1998). I use Bourdieu's definition of neoliberalism as the working definition of neoliberalism throughout this thesis. According to the article, neoliberalism is made possible by the politics of globalization of the financial markets and financial deregulation, and revitalization

and adaptation of older liberal models (Bourdieu, 1998). This is the reason why I have divided my case studies into three subsections.

Bourdieu's critiques of neoliberalism and his dissection of the school of thought precede one of his most influential works, *La misère du monde*.

La misère du monde is an amalgamation of interviews conducted by himself and a team of researchers during the mid to late 1980s (Bourdieu, 1993). This sociological analysis of working-class individuals and families living in France overarchingly articulates the failures of the State to help economically struggling people, and the deterioration of public services. *La misère du monde* offers rich descriptions and an intimate look into the lives of working-class people living across France, including those found in the northern departments of the country. The geography of the country is not a vital part of *La misère du monde* (many of the interviews do not mention where they took place and the interviewees do not mention where they are located) (Bourdieu, 1993). Works that follow *La misère du monde* take on a more geographically specific lens, looking closely at particular regions of the country. I focus on works pertaining to the northernmost part of the country, which are used due to their relevance to the Yellow Vest Movement. The French tradition of political and social sciences continues to examine themes of class inequality on an economic, cultural, and social level. The concepts of cultural capital and economic disadvantage are consistently in the discourse when analyzing the conditions of the working-class. Transcribed interviews followed by analyses that demonstrate the economic, political, and social is a style of sociological observation that has continued in the French tradition of political and social science. This is evidenced by the more contemporary works of Florence Aubenas, François Ruffin, and Édouard Louis.

Contemporary Authors Engaging with the French Working Class in the North

Florence Aubenas is a reporter for *Le Monde* and her book *En France* follows a similar style and topic as Bourdieu. *En France: Chroniques* is an assemblage of accounts gathered from articles Aubenas wrote for *Le Monde* from 2012 to 2014 that relate to the rise in support for the politically right-wing party *Le Front National* among the French electorate (Aubenas, 2014). With chapters describing scenes at CAF³ offices in Northern France, city halls, and other modes of political engagement and social services, Aubenas's work follows the tradition of interview-centric analysis of working-class people as a means of exploring socially, politically, and economically systematic struggles as seen in *La misère du monde*. As a result of her journalistic style, the work lacks direct engagement with political discourse, unlike in Bourdieu's work. This stylistic difference is inherent in their work, as Aubenas is not an academic. Moreover, her discipline offers variation in the perspectives concerning the working-class. Chronologically, another source that engages with the French working-class is the documentary *Merci Patron !* directed by François Ruffin. His views on politics and background in journalism act almost as a bridge between the camps of journalism and political science.

The Amiens based leftist writer, director, and editor-in-chief of *Fakir* François Ruffin's documentary *Merci Patron !* focuses on the waning manufacturing sector of the region through the story of Jocelyn and Serge Klur, former workers in a factory that produced luxury clothing for the brand Kenzo, owned by LVMH (Ruffin, 2016). When the factory was moved to Poland, the Klurs found themselves unemployed, struggling with debt, and at risk of losing their house.

³ Caisse d'allocations familiales: Government service that distributes money to families and individuals

Ruffin sets out to make Bernard Arnault, the owner of LVMH, pay for the imperilment of the Klur's life. This documentary highlights many of the sensitivities that would become part of the Yellow Vest Movement's ideology: the migration of manufacturing from France to Eastern and Central Europe, the accountability of the economically advantaged, and the disillusionment felt by the working class due to contemporary politics. Aubenas and Ruffin have a shared regional interest, the working-class of northern France found within the Hauts-de-France region. In addition to their geographic similarity, they both approach politics from a journalistic standpoint, a lens through which one can observe the current Yellow Vest Movement as most of the pieces concerning the protests are articles from news sources. In order to return to the more academic perspective of French socio-political study of the working-class, while staying firmly in the same regions, Édouard Louis offers important and impactful insight.

Louis is a Bourdieusian writer from Picardie, a department within the Hauts-de-France region, who studied in Amiens (Louis, 2014). His intellectual ties to Bourdieu and his geographic focus on Picardie are what render him important for this thesis. His most recent work *Qui a tué mon père* is a remarkably short autobiographical piece that recounts the story of his father, a working-class factory worker whose deteriorating health is a result of political actions of *Les grandes figures* in conjunction with rigid gendered societal norms (Louis, 2018). *Les grandes figures* are people of power who make and enact political policies concerning topics that do not affect them. The line in the book that summarizes the paradigm of the piece is: "this history of your body accuses the political history" (Louis, 2018). Three aspects of *Qui a tué mon père* are particularly applicable to the study of the Yellow Vest Movement: firstly, the narrative of how his father comes to the realization that "there must be a good revolution" after years of

suffering as a result of the deregulation of social services; secondly, the application of the concept of *les grandes figures*, i.e., people of power whose ideas become actualized through institutional means with an effect on those not directly involved (i.e., the working-class); thirdly, the exacting list of governmental legislation, policy, and statements that directly expedited the deterioration of his father. This intimate and personal account is riddled with Bourdieusian concepts, while at the same time expresses sentiments that are echoed by the Yellow Vest Movement. *Qui a tué mon père* was published seven months after the first Yellow Vest protest in November of 2018.

These three sources will act as case studies as they explore and articulate the condition of the working-class in the Hauts-de-France region in the first six years before the Yellow Vest movement began protesting. From these sources one can see the “final straws,” the result of years of socio-political subjugation that led to the outbreak of the movement. These sources are even more important because of the lack of academic and peer-reviewed articles analyzing the movement.

Academic Articles that Concern the Yellow Vest Movement

Academic sources written on the Yellow Vest Movement are limited (Morozov, Petrovski, Gavrilets, 2019; Mahfund, Adam-Troian, 2019). "The Yellow Vests Movement-A Case of Long-Transient Dynamics" focuses on the use of mathematical models of social dynamics and uses the development of the Yellow Vest Movement as a case study. The aim of the paper is not the study of the movement, but the study of how the mathematical models were used to analyze the movement (Morozov, Petrovski, Gavrilets, 2019). Though seemingly

divergent from the topic of this thesis, the research done by (Morozov, Petrovski, Gavrilets, 2019) demonstrates inadvertently connect the social movement of the Yellow Vest Movement to political and economic factors that account for the movements relatively long duration. Though the study is on mathematical models of social dynamics, the study shows that there is a connection between this social movement and the political and economic policies of the French government that are account for the length of the movements duration. The limitations of this research in relation to this thesis are the study was only conducted in Paris and the focus of the research is in predicting the length of the protests not the causes for the protest.

The most pertinent academic source related to the Yellow Vest Movement is "'Macron Demission!': Loss of Significance Generates Violent Extremism for the Yellow Vests through Feelings of Anomia" (Mahfund, Adam-Troian, 2019). Mahfund and Adam-Troian approach the Yellow Vest Movement from an anthropological lens and hypothesize that the reason for the violence from the French citizenry is a means to regain a sense of control. This paper, though unique, is not directly related to the chronological development of the movement through an anthropological lens. The paper focuses on violent extremism and why the Yellow Vests' protests were so violent in Paris; not the reasons or the context of why they were protesting. In addition, neither of these articles focus on the regions of Hauts-de-France and the Grand Est (where protesting never reached the same level of physical violence as witnessed in Paris), which are important regions to study in order to understand the struggles of the industrial working-class. The importance of these articles is that they discuss the Yellow Vest Movement through a peer-reviewed, academic lens. Literature of this nature is difficult to come by, due to the contemporary nature of the movement. Additionally, it is hard to find scholarly articles in

English on the topic for the same reason. From these sources, I gained a broader understanding of the movement, with a particular focus on the occurrences in Paris. These sources helped articulate what exactly it means to support the Yellow Vest Movement, a difficult task when the movement is leaderless and manifests differently in different cities. These articles showed that the four overarching stances that define every Yellow Vest Protest across France is, A resentmentfulness toward President Macron and the desire to remove him from office, a malcontent with the growing wealth gap in France, a strong yet leaderless organization and an emblematic use of the yellow vest.

News Articles that Concern the Yellow Vest Movement

There is no shortage of news sources engaging with the Yellow Vest Movement. As it is an on-going movement, almost every major news source has covered the protests (Grossman, 2019; Schwartz, 2018; Ollivier, 2018; *BBC News*, 2018; Bennhold, 2019). From the first protest in November of 2018, to the present day, news sources have been the largest producers of content pertaining to the Yellow Vest Movement. Articles from international sources such as the *New York Times* and *BBC News* often simply explain what the Yellow Vest protestors are demanding and the chronological narrative of the protests while French news sources such as *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* are more analytical in their writing, summarizing the events and critiquing or supporting the protestors (Ollivier, 2018; de Guigné, 2019). Additionally, *Fakir*, the satirical leftist publication under Francois Ruffin is largely focused on the analytical aspect of the movement as well but with a different tone.

One podcast from *The Daily*, a show produced by the *New York Times* supported the research I did while in Reims, a city of about 100,000 people in the Grand Est region (Bennhold, 2019). The podcast explores why the Rémois are disenchanted with the European Union, why they support the Yellow Vest Movement, and why some residents go to the same highway intersection (in the podcast the narrator claims the intersection is in Reims but it is technically in Thillois, a suburb of the city) and stop traffic as their form of protest of the gas tax. I interviewed similar people and received similar answers to my questions and from my conversations.

IV. Theoretical Framework

In order to examine my case studies, I have chosen a Bourdieusian approach, which is largely a sociological approach to the literature. In order to understand what extent neo-liberalism has influenced the lives of the working-class of Northern France and caused the Yellow Vest Movement, the work of Pierre Bourdieu particularly in *la misère du monde* and his article in *Le Monde diplomatique* are pertinent. In order to dissect the two case studies of the Hauts-de-France and Grand Est regions, I have divided them into three subcategories. These subcategories align with facets of socio-economic and political actions that are found within neoliberal ideology according to Bourdieu's article: the globalization of local and national economies, the deregulation (in particular of the deregulation of public services), and the rise of right-wing political discourse.

This thesis uses theoretical concepts from both political sciences, economics, and sociology in order to explore the interplay between neoliberalism, the socio-economic struggles of the working-class, politics, and the rise of the apolitical Yellow Vest Movement.

V. Methodology

A majority of the methodology used in this thesis is centered around analyzing discourse pertaining to the Yellow Vest Movement. In addition to published literary works, news-sources, satirical publication, peer-reviewed academic articles, podcasts, and sociological texts, I conducted my own informal interviews with French citizens during my time in Reims. Starting in December 2018 (approximately one month after the first Yellow Vest Protest), I would go to bars throughout Reims and converse with locals, asking their opinions on the topic. From these conversation and interviews, I gained a particular view of the intricacies of the movement from the point of view of those from various economic levels. I will be using four of these interviews in this paper: Arno, son of a gendarme and a second-year medical student who has lived in Reims for the last 6 years and worked in the champagne vineyards over the summers to make extra money, Raphaël, a 20 year old couturier native of Reims who also worked in the champagne fields, and Muriel, a retired neurologist, producer and owner of a small champagne house and heir to a major producer of Burgundy and my host for my time abroad. Finally, Simon, the owner and curator of a local art gallery who had extremely strong opinions on the Yellow Vest Movement, and was in strong support of an anarchical political revolution. Each of these conversations influenced my understanding of the movement and its origins in the neoliberal ideology as felt by French citizens.

VI Limitations

Some limitations I came across in my research are the contemporary nature of the movement and the limited amount of peer-reviewed research of the Yellow Vest Movement

outside of Paris. Each day I spent working on this thesis, more information came out on the movement largely pertaining to its dwindling presence and power in the French political scheme (*Le Monde*, 2019; Amsili, 2019; *Europe1*, 2019). Also, in relation to the recent nature of this topic, there is a very limited selection of peer-reviewed academic articles on the topic of the Yellow Vest Movement. For this reason, many of my sources are from credited journalistic sources such as *Le Monde*, *The New York Times* and other anglophone and francophone publications.

In relation to the structure of the Yellow Vest Movement itself, it is an apolitical and leaderless movement, meaning that different manifestations of the Yellow Vest Movement pop-up across France with different sensibilities and aims. They share the similarity that they are all anti-Macron and come from the gas tax, but how they wish to enact change in the French political climate and the nature of the protests is largely different. For example, the Yellow Vest protests in Paris were fairly violent and often critiqued for being anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and anarchist, while conversely, the protests in Reims and Thillois were mostly non-violent and focused mostly on anti-Macron ideology and the issue of wealth inequality. During my year in Reims, I saw only two violent Yellow Vest protests in Reims. One, where the protesters smashed the windows of every bank in the center of town, and the second, where protesters lit a small shack on fire in the park across from the Gare de Reims at the top of Place d'Erlon, both taking place in the spring of 2019. Due to this plurality, I have stuck to the median movement, meaning that for this paper the Yellow Vest Movement is an apolitical, leaderless group of French citizens who wish to see the gas tax repealed and Macron out of office, and moreover, wealth inequality addressed through legislature.

VII. Case Studies

About Hauts-de- France

Hauts-de-France is the northernmost region of the country and is bordered by Belgium to the north, Normandy to the southwest, Île-de-France to the south, and Grand Est to the east.

Hauts-de-France is the result of the departmental merger as part of the territorial reform of French regions in 2014. Officially effective in January 2016, Hauts-de-France is composed of two departments: Picardie and Nord-Pas-de-Calais. The region is largely known for its industry and factory-based labor (Ruffin, 2016). Hauts-de-France is also the second poorest region of the country, following only Corsica. 18.6% of the inhabitants of Hauts-de-France live below the median income (*The Local*, 2019). Additionally, Nord-Pas-de-Calais is one of the poorest departments in France (*The Local*, 2019).

This history of industry and factory-based work and statistically low-income families are what make the region such an interesting study when looking at the history of neoliberalism in France, particularly in relation to the Yellow Vest Movement. Otherwise stated, the industrial history of this region would lead one to believe that the residents would support ideologies, movements, and political parties that supported collective work systems such as unions, workers' rights, and other state-based institutions that help protect and advocate for workers. These parties, historically, have been left-leaning political parties such as the Socialist Party, however I demonstrate the right-leaning political parties have been the ones to have a strong following in the region. This is seen particularly in *En France* by Florence Aubenas (Aubenas, 2014).

Édouard Louis, François Ruffin, and Florence Aubenas all articulate the socio-political struggles of the working class of this region. Édouard Louis in his autobiographical pamphlet entitled *Qui a tué mon père* describes the deterioration of his father, a Picardian man who worked in a factory until his death as a result of a work-related injury and years of political apathy (Louis, 2018). This is the work that deals most directly with the political dimension of his life in Hauts-de-France, in his first book *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, Louis describes his low-income family and community through a lens that is more concerned with the concepts of masculinity, sexuality, and the reason for which he fled the environment in which he was raised (Louis, 2014).

François Ruffin's documentary *Merci Patron !* engages a similar demographic to the one explored in Louis' work. In the documentary, Ruffin follows the Klur family, a married couple living in a hamlet in Picardie who lost their jobs working in a factory that manufactured luxury clothing when the factor was moved to Poland in 2015 (Ruffin, 2016).

A third source that offers a different perspective on the same milieu is the work of Florence Aubenas, a journalist for *Le Monde* whose book, *En France* is an amalgamation of interviews from article she wrote for *Le Monde* that explores the lives and testimonials of those engaging with the growing far right party in 2013 and 2014, *le Front National* (Aubenas, 2014). These three sources paint a comprehensive picture of a suffering working class. A milieu of borderline impoverished and truly impoverished citizens whose survival and safety is heavily dependent on the national government. Due to their precarious economic situations, they are also the most affected by legislation concerning social security, healthcare, insurance, taxes, and labor

laws. For these reasons, the people examined in these texts have been the most visibly affected by the deregulation of the French government since the 1980s.

Globalization and the formation of the EU: Impact on Factory Workers in Hauts-de-France

Touched upon most specifically in Ruffin's documentary, the industrial and manufacturing sectors of Hauts-de-France's economy have been deeply influenced by globalization (Ruffin, 2016). The reason for which Bernard Arnault's factory moves from France to Poland and later to another Eastern European country is fiscal (Ruffin, 2016). Due to variants in member-state legislatures, the price of manufacturing is different across European Union states. The particularity of Franco-Polish economic relations was used as a scare-tactic by the right-wing political parties of France. In particular, the *Front National* (FN) often invokes the importation of cheap labor from Eastern Europe to France and the exportation of manufacturing from France to Eastern Europe as a rhetorical tactic to show the flaws of further integration of France in the European Union (*BBC News*, 2005). One example of this manipulation of narrative in this domain is the figure of *le plombier polonais* (the Polish plumber). *Le plombier polonais* represented skilled, Polish workers who were emigrating into France, thanks to EU free-movement laws, that worked in France at a competitive rate therefore, taking skilled labor jobs away from French citizens (*BBC News*, 2005).

The outsourcing of manufacturing from the region has had a large impact on the working-class left behind. As seen in *Merçi Patron !*, the exportation of industry outside of France has led to economic destabilization of those working in the factories. The globalization of the market by *les grandes figures* and outsourcing of jobs by international corporations is an

effect that is often attributed to neoliberalism. The global, competitive nature of the global capitalist economy results in production fleeing toward regions where it can produce the most product with the least amount of expenditure i.e. often places where exploitation is most easily implemented. The growth of the global market from the 1980s to the present is one of the reasons for which the working-class of this region have been left behind, resulting in a sentiment of disenchantment.

Deregulation and the Evisceration of Public Services Hauts-de-France

A pertinent account of the progressive deregulation of laws concerning social services, health, and worker's rights is Louis' *Qui a tué mon père* (Louis, 2018). "In March 2006, the government of Jacques Chirac, President of France for twelve years, and his Minister of health Xavier Bertrand, announced that dozens of medicines would not be reimbursed by the state, of which, a large portion, medicines against digestive problems... digestive problems were constant for you [his father]" (Louis, pp. 75). The last ten pages of *Qui a tué mon père* are a list of political acts and statements by *les grandes figures* that led to the degradation of this father (Louis. pp. 75-85). From these invocations, one can see a trend toward deregulation and the subjugation of public services. One specific example comes from 2009, when the government under President Nicolas Sarkozy restructured a public system of funds allocated toward French citizens who were not working. The system, referred to as RMI by Louis, was transformed into the RSA was implemented "to favor a return to work" (Louis, pp. 76). Louis shows how this rhetorical and political action played out in reality; his father was "harassed" by the government to return to work despite his father's compromised health, "despite what the factory did to you"

(Louis, pp. 76). *Qui a tué mon père* is a text that articulates the effects of politics on the demographic of people engaged in this paper like no other author. Louis' personal and intimate look into the causation between deregulation and the working-class by way of his father is unique and offers an interesting lens through which to analyze the socio-economic and political situation of the Hauts-de-France region. Similarly, though not nearly as personal, is the accounts from Aubenas, concerning growing popularity of far-right political candidates in working class communities her book, *En France* (Aubenas, 2014).

The Rise of the Right through Popular Election in Working Class Communities in Hauts-de-France

Aubenas's accounts of Hénin-Beaumont (in the Pas-de-Calais department), a working-class city of about 27,000 inhabitants, describe a population in mourning. The six-act tale recounts the surprise win of le *Front National* in the municipal election, “a century of left rule – or almost – had just come to an end... There were tears. Silence. A man cried ‘It’s your fault, the politics. You didn’t respect the people.’ But everyone had already left, as if no one had the strength to look this disaster in the face nor to find the word to describe it” (Aubenas, pp.119). The city had a long history of leftist rule, “everything comes from the left, even the FN” describes one source (Aubenas, pp.120).

One of the reasons for which the FN was able to gain a following and thus election in the city had to do with their promises to lower local taxes, “the FN promised... to lower local taxes by 10% by September” (Aubenas, pp.123). Once the FN had gained a foothold in Hénin-Beaumont, their influence spread throughout the Pas-de-Calais department (Aubenas, pp.

123). In Bruay-la-Buissière, the outgoing socialist mayor accused the FN of a coup. As predicted, the FN did spread quickly throughout the department. Historically known for its working-class population of miners, the far-right party established footholds and offices that continued to gain popularity and therefore, political offices and influence (Aubenas, 2014). What had destabilized the left's control in the area and allowed the basculation of the right?

Grand Est

The Grand Est region in the northeastern part of the country is divided into two departments, Champagne and Ardenne. Known for its Grand Cru vineyards that produce the King of Wines and for having the largest cathedral in France, the Grand Est is an interesting region to analyze in our discussion of how neoliberalism has led to the rise of the Yellow Vest Movement.

The Grand Est is often seen as a wealthy region. Its largest city is Reims (though the capital is Chalons-en-Champagne, for reasons dating back to the French Revolution and the Royalist history and sentiments shared by the Rémois during the late 1700s), which had been the site of weekly Yellow Vest Movement protests since the nexus of the movement in November of 2018. Reims superficially seems to be an affluent city self-described as “the city of effervescence,” home of Veuve-Cliquot, Taittenger, Ruinart, Mumm, and other established champagne producers, but in truth Reims faces a class conflict. While the wealthy own the wineries, the working-class harvest and do most of the labor for the vineyards. These workers are reliant on cars to get from place to place in the spacious region, with minimal public transportation. Reims, for example, has two trams that only run from 7am to 9pm, and not at all

on some holidays. Transportation between towns is minimal and if there is an option, it is upwards of 10 euro and controlled by SNCF, as well as reliant on gas powered machines to do perform their jobs.

One feature of the region is the large wealth gap between the citizens, especially between the Ardennes and Champagne departments. Colloquially, those from Ardennes are often seen as “bumpkins” particularly by the more economically endowed Rémois. The stark class difference among the departments of the regions seems to have accentuated the political tensions that have impacted the working-class of the region. To best understand the context in which the working-class conflict and the rise of the Yellow Vest Movement, one must look toward those directly involved. This section engages two sources. Both sources are interviews - one a product of the New York Times podcast *The Daily* that interviewed Rémois members of the Yellow Vest Movement, and the other is my personal interviews conducted in Rémois bars with both members of the Yellow Vest Movement and those sympathetic to the movement but not active, and those against the movement.

Globalization and the formation of the EU Impact on Factory Workers in Grand-Est

France was a founding member of the EU and the French people wanted a steadfast alliance with Germany after the two world wars that ravaged Western Europe. Germany surrendered unconditionally to the Allies in Reims, France in 1945. The history of the Franco-German motor that has run the economic and political mechanism of the EU and much of Western Europe has strong ties to the northernmost regions of France, particularly Reims. Though as time has passed, the idealist narrative of a collective Europe has passed. Within the

last year, a narrative of rivalry has come to light. Globalization and the unification of Europe under the supranational EU has become a point of distaste and distrust. “Here is an example of a factory that has moved to Hungary because it is cheaper to produce there and guess what, Hungary is also part of the European Union. So, this is what Europe is all about. It plays the working-class people of one country against the working-class people of another” (*The Daily*, 2019). This quotation from a taxi driver as featured in *The New York Times* podcast *The Daily*, exemplifies these sentiments.

The Daily's episode on the Yellow Vest Protestors in Reims and Thillois articulates a disdain for the Eastern expansion of the European Union (*The Daily*, 2019). Eastern European producers were able to offer French companies' contracts for production that undercut the French production equivalent. Having seen this, a new fear arose of Eastern Europeans coming to France to directly compete with French citizens for working-class jobs within France. There was a sense that salaries and job opportunities were stagnating in the increasing globalized economy. “We don't live, we just work,” says one interviewee from the podcast.

This is what has created the sense of disillusionment with the EU. The wage stagnation, stagnation of job opportunities, etc., was a result of EU politics and France's role as a member of the EU. The globalization of politics in the European theatre has left many working-class French citizens feeling forgotten, left behind by a government and president focus on initiatives centered on a global scale.

Deregulation and the Evisceration of Public Services in Grand-Est

In a snippet of *The Daily's* episode, the interviewer talks to a couple who have worked in the champagne fields for years earning minimum wage. They are part of the Yellow Vest Movement in Reims and Thillois and their demands align more with the domestic politics of France, largely concerning social benefits for long-sustained corporeal pain attained from their years in the vineyards.

This “France First” sentiment resonates largely among those left by a global economy. [MOU6] In one interview I conducted with Arno M., a second-year medical student who has lived in Reims for six years he briefly mentioned the rhetoric surrounding public services (such as CAF in Reims). “People think that those who collect CAF money are leaching from the government”. Critiques of CAF often sight how easy it is to receive CAF money. I can attest to this as I saw American citizens living in France between August 2018-June 2019 was able to collect an average of about 700 euro a month from the CAF office. This is very common among international students in Reims, particularly those attending Sciences Po Paris campus de Reims. Muriel would often comment about how her previous host students would spend her taxes on SNCF tickets to Paris instead of “giving it back to Reims.” This sentiment is not uncommon and stems from a mixture of rhetorical zeal surrounding money granted to immigrants and taxation heightened by far right-wing politicians and analysts. Under French law, exchange students are seen as de facto French citizens, i.e., given the French equivalent of social security numbers, pay fees for bureaucratic processing that are equivocal to taxes, and are offered protections granted to French citizens. Though to those unfamiliar with the system, it would appear as though foreign students are taking French tax dollars from French tax payers. The financial intricacies of the

situation are more nuanced than this and often hard to decipher given the heated debates concerning protections and services granted to immigrants of various backgrounds and reasons.

A public service that is often critiqued in Champagne-Ardenne is the access to public transport, particularly for those who live in Ardenne. Reims is serviced by two SNCF train stations: Centre Reims and Champagne-Ardenne. Centre Reims connects Reims to a hand-full of cities within the region (Epernay, Chalons-en-Champagne, Laon) and to Paris via TGV and Oui.Go. Centre Reims is serviced through local trams and buses that operate within the confines of the city and reach some of the suburbs. In order to leave the region using the train, one must go to the Champagne-Ardenne station to transfer. This station is also serviced by the trams, but not the city buses as it lies outside of Reims. The limited access to these major points of transportation renders residents reliant on cars, motor scooters, and ride-share services such as BlablaCar to get around the region and beyond. In inaccessibility of public transport therefore creates a reliance on petrol for those outside the city.

The Rise of the Right through Popular Election in Working Class Communities in Grand-Est

In the *The Daily* episode, one member of the protests at the rotary in Thillois explains that Macron, the president whom he voted for, is the reason for which he will vote for the Front National in the next election. The FN capitalized on the working-class disillusionment with the left with a rhetoric of France First.

Throughout Reims, “Frexit” stickers adorn flag poles outside the champagne houses. “France First” posters were hung in the Place Royale, a sight of Yellow Vest protesting that was not addressed in *The Daily*. These sentiments were reflected in the premier tour of the 2017

presidential election when Marine Le Pen won the region with 27,78% of the vote (*Le Monde*, 2017).

VIII. Analysis

I argue that the Yellow Vest movement is the result of years of the implementation neo-liberal ideology in French politics. These policies have disproportionately affected the working-class and this can be seen in the examples of the working class in the Hauts-de-France and Grand Est regions. From *La misère du monde*, one can see the initial impact of neo-liberal policies on the lower economic classes of France. In the 21st century, Ruffin's *Merci Paton !* continues to show how facets of neo-liberalism (particularly the globalization of the capitalist market) harm the working class. Aubenas's work demonstrates how public institutions are being affected by these policies and Louis' work shows how these policies affect the lives of the working-class on an intimate level. Finally, one can see how, from this history and these accounts, that Yellow Vest Movement was born from years of neo-liberalism and not simply born from outrage concerning the gas tax.

It is important to remember that Bourdieu's definition of neoliberalism is, otherwise stated, the globalization of the financial market, the deregulation of public services, and the resulting rise in conservative ideology best ascribed to right-wing political parties. To what extent are these facets present in the Grand Est and Hauts-de-France?

Grand Est and Hauts-de-France can be overarchingly described as similar. To more directly analyse these similarities, I will be analyzing the two regions by the categories found in the case study section.

Globalization and the formation of the EU Impact on Factory Workers

In relation to globalization and the formation of the EU, the Grand Est and the Hauts-de-France both were hit by the change in the French economy. Globalization is an integral part of neoliberal policy. How? Neoliberalism as an economic policy is dependent on the globalization of the capitalist market. With the increased introduction of actors and economies into the global capitalist market comes more competition. This competition creates the demand for increased production and sales but with as little increase in the price of production as possible.

The globalization of the market manifests in the lives of working-class French citizens through the outsourcing of jobs and factories to Eastern and Central Europe. The global, competitive nature of the global capitalist economy results in production fleeing toward regions where it can produce the most product with the least amount of expenditure i.e. often places where exploitation is most easily implemented.

EU free-movement laws and other regulations that allow for interstate trade and other commercial activities in addition to the infrastructural connection between states has made outsourcing production to Eastern and Central Europe easy for Western European companies, like LVMH. Additionally, this interconnectivity, according the right-wing political rhetoric is what allows Central and Eastern European skilled workers to come into the country to compete with French-national workers.

Policies concerning the interconnectivity of member states in relation to trade and commerce and their influence on the outsourcing of jobs from France are what have created the

sense of disillusionment with the EU. The wage stagnation, stagnation of job opportunities, and loss of economic opportunity has been credited to the EU politics and France's role as a member state. The globalization of politics in the European theatre has left many working-class French citizens feeling forgotten, left behind by a government and president focus on initiatives centered on a global scale.

These phenomena have been installed progressively, the effects of these actions are noted in *La misère du monde* through the personal accounts of working-class French families

Deregulation and the Evisceration of Public Services

Deregulation is directly addressed by Bourdieu in his definition of neoliberalism. Bourdieu explains how the establishment of neoliberalism is achieved through the destructive transformation of politics. This action aims to destabilize all collective structures in order to promote a free market (Bourdieu, 1998). In his list of examples of collective structures that are seen as obstacles to the free market through a neoliberal lens work groups, workers' unions, collectives and associations cited (Bourdieu, 1998). Later in his career, Bourdieu uses this analysis of neoliberalism in *La misère du monde*, particularly in the chapter "La démission de l'État" (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu bases this section in a diachronic introduction to neoliberalism in France (Bourdieu, p. 337-355). From this section and the following interview between Bourdieu and a municipal employee of a small town in Northern France, one can see how the deregulation of collective structures and bureaucratic ambiguity have led the disillusionment and frustration of those use engage directly with these systems i.e. the working-class and those employee within the system (Bourdieu, p. 351-373). These structures and more are seen in the cases of the Hauts-de-France and the Grand Est. In these two regions,

the deregulation of public services are present in the rhetoric and have added to the socio-political and economic pressure that resulted in the Yellow Vest Protests.

Firstly, Louis and Aubenas discuss the loss of power of unions in the Hauts-de-France. Louis list of actions by *les grandes figures* that led to the degeneration of his father's health demonstrates the destructive deregulation of collective structures that Bourdieu brings to light. From medications no longer being reimbursed by the state, to labor laws, to pensions, Louis illustrates the political deregulatory actions largely composed of economic policies that harm the working-class (Louis, p. 75-83). Though Louis does not always include the reasoning for which *les grandes figures* have implemented these policies, it is clear that the general force behind these changes is economic in nature and can be called neoliberal. Establishing these actions as neoliberal is important when arguing that neoliberalism is the cause for the Yellow Vest Movement because it helps demonstrate how this particular ideology has affected those under its policies. Louis' work connects most easily with Bourdieu's definition of neoliberalism as found in the 1998 article public in *Le monde diplomatique* while Aubenas's work connects most directly with *La misère du monde*, particularly the interview between Bourdieu and the municipal employee.

Aubenas's interrogation of social systems of France is an avenue to analyze the relationship between the people and the state-organized social structures such as CAF. The reason I state that Aubenas's work aligns well with *La misère du monde* is because of both style and topic. Aubenas's journalistic style and transcripts are very similar to the transcripts found in *La misère du monde* (Aubenas, 2014; Bourdieu, 1993). Topically, Aubenas and Bourdieu recount how institutions such as CAF are being hurt by deregulation.

Both Aubenas and the interview in *La misère du monde* show the inaptitudes of CAF. Aubenas describes a CAF office in the Hauts-de-France region, understaffed and inundated with people needing government assistance but not being able to receive enough the institution to counteract their financial strife (Aubenas, 2014). Through the interview between Bourdieu and the municipal employee, Bourdieu shows how CAF's monetary allocations are not enough to counteract the overarching economic woes that are putting the working-class into a precarious financial situation. In my experience with CAF in the Grand Est, I saw this institution is easily manipulated and not helping those that need assistance. The processes and paperwork needed to use the system are easy for those who have enough money to pay for it and for those who have enough time and resources to wait through the processing procedure. This is just one public system, one collective institution with a huge network of French collective structures, but it is a commonality between Bourdieu and Aubenas. This system also is rather controversial as its actions lend themselves to the rhetoric of the right-wing party. In particular, the narrative of immigrants and degenerates siphoning money from the state. This narrative is ammo to the right-wing and is discussed in Aubenas's book. The relationship between the rise in popularity in right-wing political rhetoric and neoliberalism is discussed in Bourdieu's definition of neoliberalism and seen in both the Hauts-de-France and Grand Est.

The Rise of the Right through Popular Election in Working Class Communities

Bourdieu is cautious of labelling neoliberalism as conservative; "but these same forces of "conservation, which it is too easy to treat as conservative, are also, from another point of view, forces of resistance to the establishment of the new order and can become subversive forces"

(Bourdieu, 1998). In the case of Northern France, Neoliberal ideology is assigned to the center to left-leaning political parties, especially Emmanuel Macron. Neoliberal policies tend to produce a rise in support for right-wing political parties by the working-class because globalization and europeanization leave these population behind. This phenomenon is seen in Aubenas's work in the Hauts-de-France and my own experience with the Yellow Vest Movement.

In all, Aubenas's book is a chronicle of public opinion through individual narratives of political thought in France from 2012-2014, the period before the presidential election in which Marine Le Pen would run against Emmanuel Macron (Aubenas, 2014). In relation to northern France, Aubenas demonstrates how the Front National garnered support in the working class community of Hénin-Beaumont and how their tactics in the community were used elsewhere to bolster their support. What is the link between these FN electoral strategies and neoliberalism?

The FN based their rhetoric on principles that are converse to the ideologies of neoliberalism particularly, neoliberal principles that are harmful to the working-class. Namely, globalization, the European Union and taxation are attacked by the FN regularly and cited as the reason for the working-class's disadvantaged financial position in French society (Meunier, 2004; *HARDTalk*, 2016). Aubenas cited the FN's goal to lower taxes in Hénin-Beaumont by 10% as one of the more successful measures that gained the party favor.

In Grand Est, in relation to the Yellow Vest Movement, the Yellow Vest Protestors are so vehemently anti-Macron that they will support anyone but him, adding to the success of Marine Le Pen (*The Daily*, 2019). This apolitical movement has adapted a right-wing leaning political tendency because of their staunch anti-Macron ideology and disillusionment with the European Union as a supranational entity.

The rise of support for the FN is surprising in working-class circles, particularly in northern France because of the history of unions. Ruffin's documentary directly deals with unions and still shows that they do have some influence (Ruffin, 2014). These unions have strongly been supported by left-wing political parties in France, such as the Socialist Party. But, if we return to Bourdieu's definition of neoliberalism, unions are directly cited as an obstacle to the free market under neoliberalism and therefore, systematically destroyed. This destruction of unions and collective workers' rights is what has made way for the right-wing in these regions.

The right-wing has found a new audience, working-class French citizens who feel left behind by globalization and europeanization. These sentiments have, since the 80s, been growing. They have most recently exploded and manifested in a movement that defines itself, not through political party, but through what it does not wish to see in politics. This movement, the Yellow Vest Movement, is a response to the politics of globalization, europeanization, and in sum, neoliberalism as practiced in France from the 1980s to 2019.

IX. Conclusion

I have diachronically looked how neoliberalism has resulted resulted in the outbreak of the Yellow Vest Movement. A movement that has largely been claimed to have been started because of a gas tax, is emblematic of a longer history. Since the 1980s, as documented by Pierre Bourdieu, *les grandes figures* have been implementing economic and political policies sensible to globalization, Europeanization, and the destruction of obstacles to the free market. These characteristics fall under Bourdieu's definition of Neoliberalism. We have seen these neoliberal policies progress in the works of François Ruffin, Florence Aubenas, and Edouard Louis. All the

while, a frustration has been brewing. The working class of Northern France, largely left behind by these past thirty years of neoliberalism, were pressured to push against these socio-economic and political policies. The right-wing political parties, namely the Front National, offered the disillusioned rhetorical support promising tax cuts, France First policies, and security. When Macron passed the Gas Tax, this was the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” The lack of understanding from the ruling class resulted on top of this history of subjugation led to the creation of the Yellow Vest Movement; anti-Macron, anti-globalization, anti-politics, anti-europeanization. The Yellow Vest Movement is the antithesis of neoliberalism.

This thesis is largely a contribution to the discipline of Political Science; analyzing the relationship between protest and neoliberalism from an anthropological or even sociological approach. With this thesis, I hope to offer some insight into an area that is often absent from academic literature. In such a centristic society, France is often reduced to Paris and the rest. By focusing on two regions outside the Île-de-France, I hope to show that French leaders should look toward specialized solutions for conflict within regions, I hope to demonstrate how *les grandes figures* are harmful and need to be addressed directly.

Neoliberalism was not and is not only implemented in France. What could France’s experience with the Yellow Vest Movement teach other nations that are in the late stages of neoliberal policies? For example, in November 2019 (almost exactly a year after the first Yellow Vest protests), student protests decrying an elevation in the fare for public transport broke out in Chile. The fare hike protests developed to become a movement against inequality within the country that has developed as a result of neoliberalism (*Al Jazeera*, 2019). Though this paper stays within northern France, the potential to use this research as a comparison to other regions

in the midst of protesting socio-economic inequality as a result of neoliberal political policies is present.

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