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Three Vignettes

Popular Sovereignty in French History

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In November 2018 hundreds of thousands of yellow-vest-clad French took to the streets and roadways of France to protest a planned gas tax. In doing so they were also expressing a broad frustration with their sense of disempowerment within the French Republic. Images of the *gilets jaunes* wearing the Phrygian caps worn by French revolutionaries 230 years earlier circulated in the press. Some protestors carried banners that expressly put the actions of 2018 in a chronological relationship to 1789. The links between the foundational street activity of the French Revolution and the modern protestors of the twenty-first century were made purposely clear by participants and commentators alike, making explicit the vital French tradition of political and social action in the name of the people and popular sovereignty – from Abbé Sieyès' 1789 pamphlet "*What is the Third Estate*" through the *gilets jaunes* protests begun in the fall of 2018. Within the French context the texts, images, symbols, rituals, and procedures that both gave birth to and sprang from the revolution are evidence of the creative fiction that sits at the base of investigations of the people and popular sovereignty.[1] While the French Revolution was a foundational moment for the invocation of popular sovereignty to support a new concept of rule and government, over centuries French leaders and citizens have continually invoked popular sovereignty to claim political legitimacy and make demands for a variety of political and social ends. At times the concept has been used to support a liberal ideal of the nation, at other times it has buttressed far-right claims to the nation. More recently it has been used by the National Front (now *Rassemblement National*) to rally for an exit from the European Union and the *gilets jaunes* in their protests against the French government of Emmanuel Macron.

[1] Morgan, *Inventing the People*, is an essential work on this topic and an important theoretical context for other chapters in this collection.

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A look at three historical moments in the life of the nation captures the constancy, as well as the evolution, of the concept of popular sovereignty within French politics and society. Starting with a consideration of origins in the French Revolution (of course!), to the interwar internal battles of the Third Republic (with Franco-French civil strife around the meaning and uses of popular sovereignty), through to the popular protests of the yellow-vest movement, the chapter does not simply track the historical existence of claims to popular sovereignty, but also shows its uses across the political spectrum and the impact of couching political and social claims in the language of popular sovereignty and the demands of the people. A consideration of uses of "popular sovereignty" as rhetoric and a call to collective action across liberal and illiberal ideologies – sometimes calling on an inclusive idea of "the people" other times an exclusive idea – also illustrates the "endemic" nature of tensions and contradictions within popular sovereignty, as noted in this volume's introduction and many chapters.

The vignettes of French history also show the importance of cultural embeddedness of expressions of popular will, the purposeful taking on of sartorial expressions of popular protests and political expression, and the malleability of that concept across centuries of French national politics and society – also endemic aspects of France's particular popular sovereignty. These three events, spanning over two centuries, are moments of invention, inversion, and transition in the political uses of popular sovereignty by the people and moments of expressed grievances – via the streets, documents, and clothing – as well as evidence of the perpetual reenactment and redefinition of the people's role within the democratic legitimizing claim that sovereignty resides in the people.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION IN SYMBOL, DEED, AND LEGACY

It is almost impossible to discuss French history without paying one's due to the French Revolution. While some of this is an inflated sense of the universal truths "gifted" to the world by the revolution, some of it is well deserved. A detailed blow-by-blow recounting of the French Revolution isn't necessary, yet a discussion of French ideas of popular sovereignty must address and acknowledge the ideals, language, actions, and legacies of the French Revolution. The First French Republic (1792–1804) was short lived, but it created a new set of assumptions and expectations about the relationship of the nation and the people, and many generations after the revolution, indeed to this day (and not just in France) those assumptions remain a legitimizing force in claims to popular sovereignty. The revolution reconfigured ideas of French sovereignty from residing in the monarchy and body of the king to one embodied in the people. The language of the French Revolution would come to rely heavily on ideals of the role of the people and from that time forward many French, and historians of France, would argue that all subsequent claims to the right and capacity to rule resided with the people. It was a concept expressed and reaffirmed in

both abstract invocations of the nation, as well as in the specific philosophical undergirding of the nation: that a purposeful coming together of the people was the basis for a legitimate claim to sovereignty.

One of the essential attributes that this revolutionary upheaval ushered in was a new idea of the public and the concept of public opinion. But, from well before the end of the monarchy and the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, polemicists, philosophers, and, indeed, the soon-to-be-guillotined king and queen, appealed to the public to usher in a new idea of France or to preserve the *ancien régime*. No matter the "side," leaders and would-be-leaders across the political spectrum (a spectrum of left and right which was born in the revolution) were forced evermore to appeal to a public to legitimate their claims to govern. And it was not just in a traditional sense of government that a public and a concept of popular sovereignty was being transformed in late eighteenth-century France. New concepts of sovereignty and public claims by the populace to be the expression of popular sovereignty were being proclaimed and circulated in documents, popular press, political clubs, anthems, festivals, symbols, and clothing. And while there would be ongoing debate (to this day) about ideals of the French nation and who can legitimately claim to speak for it, the process and expressions of those claims – including the very act of going into public space and asserting the right to do so because of the connection of the masses and popular sovereignty – and donning symbols and clothing and singing the anthems of these movements continues to be the legacy of the French Revolution and part of what has been "embedded in the political consciousness transmitted by the national culture" of the French.[2] The French Revolution offers a glimpse into particular French ideas about popular sovereignty that is expressed, transmitted, and passed on in national culture, through sartorial expressions, newspapers, popular movements that are distinguished from political parties, and going out into the streets *en masse* to claim, and perpetually reclaim, the right and legitimacy of the sovereignty of the people.

The French Revolution is sometimes considered one of the first moments of public opinion polling for the French state. And while even French absolutists couldn't maintain arbitrary rule or entirely dismiss consideration of the people, the 1789 decision to gather the Estates General was the first notice that the idea of who could or should be involved in government decisions had clearly expanded from the monarchical ideal inherited from the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV. Those previous Bourbon kings had not been "forced" to gather the broader group of French to give legitimacy to the process of tax collecting. The last time the Estates General had been convened was 1614. Louis XVI's "breaking" of a 175-year streak was the point of no return to a new age of popular sovereignty.

In the great debates about the nature of how the Estates General should meet the state went about collecting *cahiers de doléance*. These "notebooks

[2] Zolberg, "Moments of Madness," 184.

of grievance" are telling compilations of the annoyances and degradations experienced and resented by segments of the French population. In many ways the *cahiers de doléance* were the incipient French nation conducting opinion polling and setting up the expectation that public opinion would be considered in broad political decision-making. It is telling that in January 2019, in the midst of popular unrest and the French taking to the streets in general protest, President Emmanuel Macron announced that there would be a modern collection of *cahiers de doléance*. This move, even the term itself, harkened back to the origin story of the French Republic – a story that the French have been reenacting for centuries and makes clear the ways that both the government and the people feel compelled to reenact the narrative. These continuities confirm Zolberg's thesis that ideas of the public and popular sovereignty are embedded in French national culture – whether for the person in the street or for the head of the government – and that both the conflicts and tensions around popular sovereignty, including disputes about who the people are and who is allowed to claim that belonging, as well as the perpetual reenactment of that claim, are endemic to French popular sovereignty.

In 1789 the *cahiers des doléance* – across the three estates of clergy, nobility, and the Third Estate (all the rest) – indicated that all wanted some form of representation and constitutional rule.[3] These eighteenth-century surveys created an expectation that the frustrations and desires expressed in the notebooks would be addressed. It also set the assumption of mass engagement in the workings of France and in many ways augured the move to a republic. And, finally, it established a precedent for French political action for the future: The people shall be consulted and any legitimate claim to rule in France must consider the role of the people and their claims to sovereignty.

At the same time when the notebooks of grievance were being collected a foundational document of the revolution was circulating. Abbé Sieyès' "What is the Third Estate?" is exhibit A in the revolutionary power of language in the construction of French popular sovereignty.[4] The revolutionary pamphlet turned the procedural conversation about how the Estates General should vote into a broad indictment of the privileging of the First and Second Estates (the clergy and the nobility). Sieyès argued that the Third Estate (the masses who were not part of the First or Third Estate) had been nothing in the political order and yet, in fact, were "everything." As Sieyès wrote, "What is the will of the nation? It is the result of individual will, just as the Nation is the aggregate of the individuals who compose it. It is impossible to conceive of a legitimate association that does not have for its goal the common security, the common liberty, in short, the public good."[5]

[3] Cobb and Jones, *The French Revolution*, 29–30.
[4] Sieyès, "What Is the Third Estate?," 63–70.
[5] Ibid.

Evidence of Sieyès' ideas is clearly enshrined in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, adopted by the National Assembly in August 1789: "representatives of the French people have resolved to set forth the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man … Further, the source of all sovereignty resides in the nation. The law is the expression of the general will and all citizens attain the right to participate personally, or through their representatives, in its formation."[6]

The nation being created in this document is one that places the power to rule, and its very sovereignty, in the people (though the citizen, an evolution from the French subject, in this formative invocation is a male citizen). While the question of whether women could exercise sovereignty was a debated revolutionary issue, there is no question that they played important revolutionary roles – most notably in the Women's March to Versailles and the subsequent removal of Louis XVI back to Paris.[7] In many ways there is evidence of women's actions of and claims to popular sovereignty being decisively important in the revolution, even as they would not be enfranchised until over 150 years later.

The concept fashioned by the revolutionary documents was that the nation was the expression of both collective and individual identities and freedoms. The claimed universality of that sentiment (argued both at the time and since by the French) became the greatest legacy of the French Revolution. Equally, the summoning of connection and accessibility – the appeal to citizens and not subjects – was an aspect of French sovereignty that would be invoked over and over again by the French and by denizens of countries across the globe.

The foundational importance of popular sovereignty within French political and social tradition is not just apparent in the founding documents of the nation, but in many other areas that would continue to have meaning and value throughout French society – in both specific episodic moments within French history and as the common social, cultural, and political language of the French.

One of the symbols of the power of the people – or specifically a show of patriotic fervor during the revolution – was the bonnet rouge, or Phrygian cap (a reference to the cap of liberty worn by freed slaves) that originated with speakers at political clubs. By 1792, with the increasing power of the Jacobin Club, the cap came to be a general symbol of the Revolution and was associated with popular politics.[8] Worn in the streets along with the tricolor cockade (the red, white, and blue of the revolutionary supporters), these symbols were shorthand public expressions of political allegiance to certain revolutionary ideals and to the very idea of citizens openly expressing their politics in the streets. The red cap would reappear in defining moments of French street politics (including in 2018 protests) and would sometimes be challenged by other sartorial markers, such as the blue shirts of 1930s fascists.

[6] "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen," 77–79.
[7] Olympe de Gouges, "The Declaration of the Rights of Woman."
[8] Cobb and Jones, *The French Revolution*, 139.

The very form of political debate that had its origins in the French Revolution would be one of the key attributes "embedded" in French national culture. The French Revolution set a precedent for expressions of popular sovereignty that were separate from parties and formal representative government. For example, the many political sensibilities and beliefs in the French Revolution were often expressed through political clubs, organizations that were open to a much broader group than those who had access to the election of a representative or service as a representative. The Girondins, the Cordeliers, and the Feuillants were all political clubs which, in the absence of political parties, played important roles in political debate and information dissemination. Along with their newspapers, these clubs were the locus of mass debate and political activity. And while these political clubs had some strong leaders, most famous if not infamous the Jacobin leader Maximillian Robespierre, the fact of the diffuse leadership of the clubs, and the correlation to diffuse leadership within the Assembly, also meant that the French Revolution set a precedent of both collective decision-making, as well as a recurrent return to popular sovereignty and "taking to the barricades" over a single strong leader.[9]

The French Revolution had such wealth of political clubs and was so defined by direct political action and ensuing political violence that historians of the period often struggle to make sense of the different moments and stages of the revolution. By 1793 the argument about the intrinsic sovereignty of the people and their rights and claims vis-à-vis the government was well established (and it was about to become more democratic and enshrined in a new constitution). The Jacobin club, supported by the radical sans-culottes (yet another sartorial expression of politics), had taken control of the Convention (the structural inheritor of the National Assembly) and was pushing the revolution into a more democratic and more violent stage. One of the many legacies of the French Revolution would be the impact of the Terror (1793–1795), a stage in the revolution that amplified and sanctioned political violence in the name of democratic expansion, revolutionary dedication, and the assurance of ideals of popular sovereignty. And while many groups would be left out of the formal rights and privileges of the republic in the transition from French subjects to imagined French citizens, the French Revolution by and large offered a liberal and inclusive idea of popular sovereignty (certainly compared to French absolutist monarch), but, as we shall see, the same language and forms of appeal to be the people could also be used to create an exclusionary idea of the nation. These manipulations and conflicts within popular sovereignty on the road

[9] Certainly there were strong leaders in the postrevolutionary period. However, within the republican French tradition, the perceived problem and therefore absence of strong leadership was not "resolved" until the Fifth Republic. By that time the idea of reenacting popular sovereignty in the streets or an embeddedness of collective memory, as Zolberg phrases it, was so well established that even the strong presidency established by the Fifth Republic could not counteract the French cultural and political culture of distrust of mediation between the will of the people and the government.

to a stable French Republic as well as the nation-specific glimpses offered by Katznelson and Shani give further evidence to this volume's overarching argument. While the people remain the basic unit of political authorization across many national and historical examples, the tensions, contradictions, and frictions over who the people are also remain.[10]

FROM THE REVOLUTION TO THE THIRD REPUBLIC, WITH A BRIEF STOP IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

Despite the brief life of the First Republic and the increasing authoritarianism of Napoleonic rule that came after it, neither Napoleon nor post-Napoleonic monarchical restoration would rid the country of the idea of popular sovereignty as the legitimizing force of a nation. In fact, it was in the fifty years after the fall of the First French Republic that the proclaimed faith in the nation, not the kingdom, as the greatest expression of popular sovereignty sees its fullest potential – especially as it was taken up by partisans across the political spectrum. As industrialization and urbanization became hallmarks of nineteenth-century Europe, and changed the realities of life for a great majority of individuals, the French revolutionary activities of the mid-nineteenth century gave further credence to the power of popular sovereignty. Inspired by nineteenth-century ideologies of liberalism, nationalism, and socialism, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 appealed to ideals of popular sovereignty in different ways. In France, where revolutionary activity should also be seen in the context of fighting back stolid attempts to restore the French monarchy, a new phrase conveyed the immediate power and option of the physical insertion of the body of the people into political action: "To the barricades!" A growing industrialized working class, along with students and the poor, took to the streets to protest the repressive measures of the restored Bourbon dynasty (1814–1830). They did so in the name of the nation and the legitimacy of sovereignty via more expansive national representation. As one of the great legacies of the French Revolution was the idea that the "people," and not just those with aristocratic titles, should participate in government, the activists of the 1830s pushed for the expansion of representative possibilities – to ensure that popular sovereignty would have real meaning within the nation – and to ensure that the right to govern was given by those who were governed.

By and large when nineteenth-century activists referred to nationalists they were inspired by the ideas of the French Revolution and considered the actions of a more and more enfranchised population to be a key component of the nation. The struggle of the new nation was in many ways practical. There was no question that a key component of any government had to be that it heeded the opinions (and actions) of its citizens.

[10] See Katznelson, "As God Rules the Universe" and Shani, Chapter 9, in this volume.

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While invocations and expressions of popular sovereignty continued throughout the nineteenth century, in the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, as well as in dramatic moments such as the 1870 Paris Commune, the early twentieth century provides a different lens to viewing the claims to popular sovereignty within French political and social life and shows a moment of contention, and some would argue inversion, of that concept.

THE FASCIST LEAGUES AND POPULAR FRONT OF THE INTERWAR YEARS

In the first decades of the twentieth century, parties and movements from across the political spectrum came to lay claim to the populist side of popular sovereignty. France was not alone among European nations in the interwar years to see the proliferation of groups of the extreme-right that claimed, among other things, that it was parliamentary democracy that was corrupt and neither the republican system of the left nor the right truly represented the will of the people. Within France, league (*ligue*) was the designated terms for these organizations, which, by their own choice, were not political parties, as inherent in league existence was a criticism of political parties. "Neither right nor left" was the proud proclamation of many of these movements, capturing their disdain for traditional party politics.

The leagues formed in the years of the long shadow of the end of World War I. The five-year period following the Treaty of Versailles (1919) was one of political and economic instability in France. The depreciation and instability of the French franc, inflation, cabinet instability within the government, and, in 1923, the controversial decision to occupy the Ruhr to exact reparations from Germany (a move generally seen as unsuccessful) plagued a country still physically and psychologically recuperating from the death and injury of millions and a war-torn countryside. These issues alone fueled extreme-right action and rhetoric against the apparent inability of the Third Republic's Parliament to lead the country. Added to such anger was the sentiment that the French had sacrificed greatly, even disproportionately, during the war and deserved a government capable of restoring French predominance and glory. When, in 1924, the *Cartel des Gauches* came into power many on the extreme-right saw the repudiation of all that France had given up in the war and the threat that, not only would the usual incapacity of the Parliament continue to plague the nation, but with the left in the coalition government Bolshevism and Leninism would soon destroy the country.[11]

It was in this context that the first group of rightist populist leagues were formed. The Jeunesses Patriotes, founded in 1924 by Pierre Taittinger, and Le Faisceau, formed in 1925 by Georges Valois, a former member of the Action Française, were anti-communist and anti-parliamentarian. While the Jeunesses

[11] The Cartel of the Left was a political alliance between the so-called Radical-Socialist Party, the French branch of the Workers' International (SFIO), and smaller left-republican parties.

Patriotes claimed between 100,000 and 300,000 members[12] and Le Faisceau much fewer, the far-right group that could lay greater claim to expressing and harnessing popular sovereignty was the Croix de Feu. Founded in 1927 by Maurice d'Hortoy, the Croix de Feu is best known under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel François La Rocque, who took over the group in 1930. The Croix de Feu began as a loose association of veterans and under La Rocque it was transformed into a league of the extreme-right. By 1934, the Croix de Feu had over half a million members. The debate about the fascist nature of the Croix de Feu is ongoing and filled with more intensity than discussion about other groups, at least in part because it garnered the greatest amount of support.[13]

In 1926 Raymond Poincaré's victory brought the right back into power and in 1928 the franc was stabilized. This led to some quieting on the part of the 1920s leagues: Valois dissolved Le Faisceau in 1928, although the Jeunesses Patriotes continued their work. Further, the economic developments of 1927–1931 seemed to favor the French. Despite the New York stock market crash in 1929 France had a relatively healthy economy into 1931. This would change by 1932, at which point another left-wing Cartel government was elected. By that time France was suffering from the impact of global depression and over the course of four years France would have six governments, each, again, illustrating to the right the ineptness of the Third Republic's parliamentary form. A second group of fascist and extreme-right groups formed, with appeals to populism and claims to be recapturing sovereignty lost to parliamentary politics.[14]

It was in that context that the Solidarité Française was founded by François Coty in 1933, as was Marcel Bucard's Le Francisme.[15] All the leagues shared paramilitary structures of brigades, legions, and local sections. They all shared

[12] Milza, "L'Ultra-Droite des Années Trente," 164; Berstein and Berstein, *Dictionnaire Historique*, 449. Milza, Berstein, and Berstein give different estimates of membership (between 100,000 and 300,000).

[13] At the dissolution of the leagues in 1936 La Rocque created the Parti Social Français, which had close to 800,000 members before the war. See Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave* and *French Fascism: The Second Wave*; Irvine, "Fascism in France."

[14] Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave* and *French Fascism: The Second Wave*.

[15] Like all the leagues, the work of the group was publicized through a paper owned by Coty, *L'Ami de Peuple*, founded in 1928, and an eponymous publication, *La Solidarité Française*. The group claimed to have 300,000 members in 1934, although, like all the leagues, there is great variation in league membership statistics. Milza, "L'Ultra-Droite" and Milza, *Fascisme Français*, 146. René Rémond also places the membership of SF at no more than 10,000. Rémond, *The Right Wing in France*, 282. Milza argues that they never had more than 10,000, of which no more than 4,000–5,000 were active militants. Soucy, also noting the Solidarité Française's exaggeration of its membership, cites the police estimate of 180,000 members in February, with 80,000 in Paris. Soucy provides a breakdown of the membership of the SF as different historians estimate it: "Zeev Sternhell has estimated that the SF had no more than 20,000 members in 1934, with only 3,000 shock troops in Paris. Jean-Paul Brunet has described the SF as a groupuscule with no more than 1,500 members in all of France … Richard Millmann, accepts the official police estimate of 180,000 … but concludes that SF activists were far less numerous, with fewer than 2,000 participating." Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave*, 61.

a strategy of direct action in the streets and advocated violence as a way to assert their political views, published their own presses, recruited heavily among veterans, and students and claimed to truly represent the French nation. They also shared the same sartorial expression: a uniform of a blue shirt and the straight-armed (*à la romaine*) salute. They were anti-parliamentary, in favor of suppressing the left and Marxism, desiring the end of the Third Republic and intent on the installation of a corporatist state. They launched attacks on Marxists, Communists, Jews, and Free-masons, whom they often linked together as being part of corrupt influences within the Third Republic.[16]

The leagues formation, structure, street action, and admiration of violence all point to the perceived rupture between the people and the republic by the late 1920s. The instability of the Third Republic (1870–1940) – parliamentary volatility and headline-grabbing scandals featuring members of parliament led to an erosion of French belief in the republic's claim to legitimacy via popular sovereignty. As Kevin Passmore notes, the moments of the interwar years show the "complexity and diversity of social power in early 20th century France" and in many ways the evolution of the "people" in discourse and popular insurrection.[17] Further, the perception that there was a crisis in the French Republic, meant there was one, and across the political spectrum the events of the 1930s indicate the ways traditional parties were perceived as not responding to or enacting the will of the people. The recourse for many, again, across the political spectrum, was to "take to the streets."[18]

In addition to a claim to popular sovereignty and calls to action to take to the streets, the extreme-right political groups also projected a sense of solidarity and ideology by their dress. Within the groups of the far and fascist right all wore uniforms of blue (both men and women sporting French blue shirts) and gave the straight-armed Roman salute. Adherents of the different leagues wore some variation of the militarized blue shirt (the color itself also known as French army blue) and served as a visual expression of membership in a specific group and, like uniforms more generally, spoke to the individual's willingness to subsume their identity within a larger group and political ideology. The blue shirts of the fascist uniform, along with the straight-armed salute, was the sartorial expression and evidence of the hierarchical and paramilitary structure of politics under far-right ideals – and like armies, this army of political ideologues expected violence.

The violence and street action of the rightist leagues led to the coalescence of the left in the mid-1930s. And the response of the Socialists, Communists, and Radicals to the actions of the far-right would be the birth of the Popular Front – a brief few years of leftist unity. They too would have their counterimages to the dress of the far-right. The partisans of what would be the Popular

[16] Various pamphlets and paper, AN F7 series.
[17] Passmore, "The Construction of Crisis," 151–52.
[18] Passmore, *France in the Era of Fascism*, 173.

Front would be defined by their closed fist salute – in visual and ideological contrast to the open-hand salute – and images of the periods show the Phrygian cap again being worn in the streets as historical and ideological uniform.

In action and in dress, both ends of the ideological spectrum were called upon, a French drama was acted out, and a foundational concept from revolutionary days was reaffirmed. For the most dramatic illustration of the impulse to assert popular sovereignty and reenact the French revolutionary formation and claiming of that right we turn to early 1934 which provides a sense of the polarization of politics of the extreme left and right, as well as the impetus of both groups to take to the streets in a show of direct action and critique of the status quo. The demonstration of early 1934 began with the January actions of the far-right – as they gathered, in their paramilitary uniforms, outside the Chamber of Deputies. These actions, as reported by the press, "were interpreted as a sign of the 'awakening of the people.'"[19] As one follows those actions into early February, it is evident that the increasingly authoritarian, anti-parliamentary, and militaristic "leagues" – who claimed they were neither right nor left, but for the people – were planning to hold the centrist (Radical) government accountable (or so they argued) by taking to the streets. What became known as the February riots had a mix of causes: the Stavisky affair, a financial scandal that seemed to touch men high up in the ruling Radical Socialist party; Prime Minister Daladier's firing of Chiappe, the Police Prefect sympathetic to rightist causes and action; and general rightist upset with the leftist government in power.[20] Add to that the very existence of the populist leagues which for years had taken to the pages of the press, the streets, neighborhood associations, camps, and schools to argue that the form of government that existed in France was not a legitimate form, that it did not truly respect the will of the people. The combination of these things brought the leagues again to the streets of Paris on February 6, 1934. The leagues gathered by the Chamber of Deputies and appeared intent on storming the Chamber. The demonstration escalated and by the end of the evening fifteen people were dead and hundreds injured. The extent to which February 6 was an event planned by the leagues – their attempt at a fascist putsch – has been a topic of debate since the day it happened. While not successful as a takeover of the right, the riots and their aftermath did lead to the resignation of Daladier's Radical cabinet, and the ascendance of a more rightist regime under Gaston Doumergue. The February 6 demonstration was a significant event for the leagues and they would invoke the memory, as well as the league "martyrs," at every turn.

The extreme-right's awakening and street activity and street action by the left – the ascent of Leon Blum and the Popular Front – are exemplars of a

[19] *Journal des Débats*, 5, January 13, 1934, as cited by Passmore, *France in the Era of Fascism*, 188.

[20] Bernard and Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic*, 219–28; Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave*, 30–33; Wright, *France in Modern Times*, 356–60.

particular power and malleability of the French tradition of direct action and a popular assertion of the sovereignty of the people. Both the right and the left in a few months in 1934 through to 1936 were asserting that representative government, and those holding the reins of the nation, had veered too far to party protections and away from a duty to the people. The especially notable aspect of this at a particular moment in the interwar years is that this critique and response span the political spectrum. That the left and right responded by taking to the streets and expressing their conviction that the sovereignty of the people was being ignored, and that they were reasserting the will of the people, illustrates the national repertoires of French ideals of government and the role of the masses, outside of discrete party politics, to remind those governing that the people must be heeded. That they did so with their own ideals and symbols – often in opposition to each other – shows not only the malleability of those expressions, but also the foundational aspects of it. All the groups "in the streets" were reminding the structures of power (political parties, individual leaders, and the republic at large) that the people, whatever their actual politics, were always in a position to renegotiate the terms of agreement – that they held the ultimate legitimacy of sovereignty residing in the people.

That the assertion of the far-right leagues to be reclaiming France in the name of popular sovereignty was matched by the same claim on the political left is part of what makes this period important for a broader consideration of the power of popular sovereignty within the French tradition. Perhaps it is ironic that the street violence of the far-right ushered in the direct street action of the leftist Popular Front. Both groups saw themselves as acting within a patriotic French tradition – even those on the right who often criticized the "chaos" of republican politics.

The election of Blum and the Popular Front coalition in 1936 gave even greater focus to the enmity of the leagues. The election of a Socialist, who groups like the Solidarité Française referred to as "Le Juif," seemed to confirm fascist fears. Blum's dissolution of the leagues in June 1936 – tired of their anti-Republican harangues as well as physical attacks upon him – forced most of them to re-form as political parties, now specifically attacking Blum and the Popular Front. While the left responded to the street action of the right, the Popular Front strikes of 1936 would continue with that tradition, and was part of the perpetual reenactment and further establishment of popular assertion of sovereignty.

As historians of these leagues often point out, the ideologies of these groups could be both vague and inconsistent. The movements were clear about their anti-communism and anti-parliamentarianism, their nationalism, their belief in a strong leader, and their use of paramilitary organization and blue shirt uniforms. As much as the leagues are often portrayed as the interwar years' great threat to the French tradition of popular sovereignty (as it related to republicanism), they can also be viewed within the French revolutionary tradition of the Jacobins – going into the streets and asserting their right to speak for the people and have a direct impact on the polity – unmediated by parliamentary representatives.

THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE NATIONAL FRONT, AND THE *GILETS JAUNES*

The revival of extreme-right organization in Europe in the last decade, and the meteoric rise of the French National Front in that time, also provides a moment to reflect on French ideas of popular sovereignty and the ways that different political affiliations come to both question and or reaffirm certain policies and actions in the name of popular.

The 2017 French presidential election, as well as late 2018 popular protests against the policies of Emmanuel Macron's administration, are a modern example of contentious French ideas about popular protest and its connection to popular sovereignty – and again begs the question of the connection of popular sovereignty to traditional democratic ideals (the process of voting, e.g.).

The 2017 elections in France confirmed the increasing popularity of the far-right National Front. Though the party, since renamed *Rassemblement National*, lost to Emmanuel Macron's *La Republique En March* in run-off elections, the polarizing election illustrates the ways in which political parties employ the language of sovereignty to legitimate their claims to govern the people, and capture partisans by raising the specter of a government that does not, so they would claim, represent the people or, by extension, respect the ideals of popular sovereignty. The foundational claim of *Rassemblement National*, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, has been the promise of a Free France and the "return to France of her national sovereignty. Towards a Europe of independent nations, in service to the people."[21] The 2017 claim of Le Pen's party to truly represent the people can be best understood in the context of this volume's introductory framing: that globalization (in this case represented by the bureaucracy of the European Union) "impinges on the sovereignty of the nation state and threatens the integrity of democratic rule."[22]

As noted in the opening of this chapter, in late 2018 a new movement of "popular sovereignty" became active in France. The origin of the group lay in anger and protest against a new environmentally focused tax on gasoline fuel. The government of Emmanuel Macron claimed that the tax was in support of mitigating the damages of burning fossil fuels and in the context of trying to hold true to the Paris Agreement signed by France in 2016. The protestors, many of whom were from the more remote exurban areas of France that did not enjoy easy access to public mass transportation noted that this tax disproportionately punished the poor (and those already farther away from the well-funded larger cities of France) and was evidence of the French president's greater concern for global politics than the impact of such actions on the people and local concerns. The protestors began to coalesce around this specific tax though they quickly made connections to additional inequalities in French life.

[21] www.rassemblementnational.com "Rendre a la France sa souverainte nationale. Vers une Europe des nations independantes, au service des peoples."

[22] See the introduction to this volume, p. 5

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The protestors chose as their sartorial symbol and moniker *gilets jaunes* or yellow vests, so named for the high-visibility neon yellow vests that all French motorists are required to have to indicate automotive distress. This clothing and name proved meaningful in multiple ways. First, it exposed another French law that many saw as a cost imposed by the state. However, because it is the law most had complied with it and had these vests, which made it easy for all French car owners to easily express solidarity with each other. Further, the vests had been designated by the law as an indication of distress, and, indeed, the *gilets jaunes* were indicating distress, just not precisely the kind the state had imagined.

This sartorial expression of public connectedness and group distress at the imposition of a tax that pushed working people to the brink of poverty captured the imagination of many, and hundreds of thousands participated in the initial protests. The vests became the 2018 equivalent of the tricolor or Phrygian cap of the revolution. Many protestors wore them along with home-fashioned *bonnets rouges* and carried signs specifically drawing the connection between 1789 and 2018 (and usually with a thread through 1968 as well). The vest could be seen on mannequins in shop windows – illustrating a shop owner's political sympathies or perhaps with the hope that it would ensure against any shop damage as the protests did result in broken window and damaged cars (though many argued that this was done by individuals who were simply taking advantage of legitimate political activity in the street to act as "hooligans").

The powerful seizure of a top-down law (requiring motorists to have yellow vests) for popular expression proved both deeply powerful and self-consciously connected to a broader French history of protests in the streets. Many protestors quickly made claims to other aspects of popular sovereignty, including the RIC (*Référendum d'initiatve citoyenne*), or the citizen's referendum initiative, in order "to give back the *parole* to the people."[23]

The *gilets jaunes* protests began in November 2018 and continued to grow into early December. The car-related vests proved a rallying point in other ways for protestors as they coalesced around important traffic circles and thoroughfares throughout France. Heading into the holiday season their protests were a powerful disrupter of holiday shoppers (something the French government seemed especially sensitive to in the somewhat stagnant French economy) and images of shop windows boarded up or being smashed on Paris' Champs Elysees became a powerful image transmitted throughout the world. Based on polls at the time most French supported the protestors, especially their right to protest (as they should in a free liberal democratic society); however, the website of the Mayor of Paris also indicated the terms by which activities of popular protest might be judged. In early December 2018 the Paris Mayor's office[24] unequivocally not only supported the individual and collective right to popular protest, but also noted the damage done in unequivocally "popular"

[23] RIC website and *Paris Soir*.
[24] *Mairie de Paris* site.

terms. In noting the damage to trees and protective grates, the Mayor tallied the damage in cost to the people.

The *gilets jaunes* were notable (and visually noticeable!) not only for their bright yellow vests, but also for their lack of clear leadership. While much of the rallying to the cause or organizing for protests happened, unsurprisingly, over social media, there did not emerge a leader or leaders who would claim to speak for others or seemed to be in control of the movement. This was the work of a populist movement, not a party. This also fits quite neatly with earlier French popular movements, including the revolution and interwar leagues previously discussed. While historians can speak of individual leaders of particular political clubs during the French Revolution or initial founders of the interwar leagues, there are no "founding father" equivalents to be found in those movements (something discussed in the eighteenth century as well as by historians since).

The visual power of yellow vests in the streets *en masse* was not lost on those who were less supportive of the disruption and feared the violence and economic loss due to *gilets jaunes* action. By mid-December another group took to the streets to express their frustration with the ongoing *gilets jaunes* protests – the *foulards rouges* (red scarves). The *foulards rouges* were also calling on a sartorial and cultural symbol and urged people to go out into the streets and assert their political claim to sovereignty. Red of course is one of the colors of the French flag and had been a symbol during the French Revolution. Or perhaps they were operating on the assumption that many French just might have a red scarf (just as surely as a motorist would have a yellow safety vest in their car trunk). And, once again, even those who are in some ways against protesting in the streets seem bound by French collective memory and social and cultural embeddedness to go out into the streets to protest it!

The Saturday protests of the *gilets jaunes* continued for over a year, until a global pandemic intervened. The "taking to the streets" of individuals across a broad spectrum – not guided by or proclaiming allegiance to a particular party – is just the most recent example of French reenactment of the national narrative and collective memory around popular sovereignty and shows both the power of that narrative and the centuries-long use and reworking of the claim itself. At this time, more than three years after the beginning of *gilets jaunes* actions, the movement continues, though with less force, partially, of course, because of the impact that Covid has had across the globe, but also because of disagreements within the always amorphous group of who "the people" are, evidence of the built-in tension within claims to popular sovereignty of the people. Across two and a half centuries of French history these vignettes capture, as the volume's introduction makes clear, the tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences that inhere in the concept and practices of *popular sovereignty*. As France enters a new presidential election cycle these enduring frictions continue and will play out through official political structures, as well as collective street action and competing claims of sovereignty, as is the endemic nature of popular sovereignty.