

Wuhan Labs, Antitrust, Unrest in France, and Catalysts – What Happens Next – 8.1.2021
Andrew Hussey QA

Larry Bernstein:

How strong are the democratic principles? How strong are the methods of changing power?

Andrew Hussey:

I think most historians of France would agree that the dynamics of French history has been determined by a series of dates, 1789, 1830, 1848, 1870, 1941, 1968. These are all moments where there's a convulsion, and they're either revolutions or near revolutions when power is confronted by the people.

I have never known such disarray in French politics. I've never known such anger and hate, and I've been in France for several decades, towards the French political classes.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about Macron. So what's unbelievable by American political terms is where a third party would come in and not only win the presidential election, but also win the legislative election as well. How do we explain how a third party could sweep? And then almost moments later, seemingly rejected by a large portion of the population and the Yellow Jackets. How do you have both a democratic revolution in one moment and the very next moment, such anger and disgust of the new regime?

Andrew Hussey:

I think you've got straight to the heart of the issue here. Macron had no political tribe behind him. You can think of French politics, going right back to the revolution, as a tribe divided between right and left. So the democratic revolution of the centrist coming in is an invention of a new form of politics, which turns out to be an illusion.

Macron is bound to fail because of great big macroeconomic and geopolitical factors that he can't control. And when the generation that have voted him in discovers this fact, they're going to feel politically homeless, and they're going to feel betrayed. And that's why I started off the talk by talking about my shock at the anger. Because what I didn't say was that the people who were throwing stones and rioting, they weren't just young kids smashing things up. There were people my age, late 50s, who were seeing their pensions being eroded, they were seeing a future of poverty. And I think the French people feel they've been let down by Macron who's a globalized, English-speaking cosmopolitan, but has no connection to the real French people or their way of life.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about Marine Le Pen next.. In her previous selection, she was anti-Euro. She was anti-European Union. What are your thoughts on the role of the Yellow Jackets and their support of Marine Le Pen. And why is Marine Le Pen shifting to a more pro-European Union?

Andrew Hussey:

I think Marine Le Pen has moved away from the position of what was called FREXIT because the failure of Brexit. The British experiment is seen to have failed, and it seems to be high risk in France. So Marine Le Pen is reflecting popular opinion.

Now, as far as the Yellow Jackets and support for Marine Le Pen, I think it's very complicated because the *gilet jaunes* are not one homogenous political group. They have no leader, they have no spokesperson, and they don't seem to have any ideology. There are people involved in the far right, there are nationalist groups, but there are also people involved in the far left.

I'm going to be optimistic here. Most French people are not naturally fascist, they're not naturally supporters of the far right, they're not naturally supporters of Marine Le Pen. And she has failed very badly in these regional elections, not quite as bad as Macron, but they failed to win a single region. And they failed to win the region in the south, which was their base.

I believe in the soft power of the working class. If you despise them enough, they're going to push back. But it doesn't mean that they're going to put push back in terms of expressing nationalist ideologies. They're not homophobic. They're not racist, but they're represented in French culture, which presents them like that. And I think that's where a lot of the anger comes.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go back to that riot you were in. It's shocking for an American listener because we've had race-related riots during the Black Lives Matter movement here in the United States. They lasted a couple of days. What seemed to be different was that the Yellow Jackets seemed to be going on for weeks, and that they didn't have specific demands, and that there was real anger. What is it that they want? What are they trying to accomplish? How will this play out?

Andrew Hussey:

It started off as a peaceful protest about hiking gas prices in the countryside, which Macron had imposed. It was a grassroots movement with people wearing the yellow jackets at roundabouts.

Why they were complaining was because there's no transport infrastructure in the countryside. There's very few buses. The great trains, the TGV, they connect the great cities, but if you were trying to get from Paris to a small town in the rural north, then it's very difficult. They are literally physically disconnected from France.

I think the peaceful protests started off as a kind of, "We've had enough. This is actually affecting our lives."

It turned into a weekly spectacle. If you live in Paris, as I do, and I have done for a long time, you get used to demonstrations. Often they do end in violence, and often towards the end of the evening, kids will come in start smashing stuff up, setting fire to cars, and so on.

What was interesting about the Gilets Jaunes was it seemed to be both spontaneous and driven by emotion. In other words, it wasn't just the sort of casual, "We're just going to fight the police." They were like staged battles. I have to say, as well, that I'm speaking from the left, but I'm not necessarily an enemy of the police. The police were actually sort of caught in the middle between the realpolitik of the government and the Gilets Jaunes.

You could see, the Gilets Jaunes shouting at the police, "Why aren't you on our side?" Because the police have been underpaid. They're often the targets of attacks in the Banlieues.

Larry Bernstein:

We had an author, Paul Embery, he wrote a book called Despised: Why the Modern Left Loathes the Working Class.

Paul mentions that a very similar sort of phenomenon exists in the UK, that there was an enormous number of working class communities who've always been Labour, and at the last major election, they voted Conservative. Labour has gone globalist, cosmopolitan, opposed to Brexit. All the expressions you described about the French elite, he also describes as the English elite. And the British working class, the very people that you know and grew up with in Liverpool have switched parties, and I'm wondering how you think about the same phenomena that exists in the UK? How does it compare and contrast with what you're seeing in France?

Andrew Hussey:

I think the phenomenon in the UK of formerly traditional Labour communities voting Conservative is very paralleled in France. I think the one thing that they do have in common is that they feel despised by a left which seems to promote minorities over majorities.

Labour keeps failing in Britain, because it no longer represents the family that it originally gave birth to. And it's true. My dad voted Conservative in the last election, he's an old style, working class guy from Liverpool. But why is he interested in the LGBT rights or transphobia rights or whatever, he's not interested at all. It doesn't mean that he's homophobic or racist or anything like that, it means that these are not things which interest him.

Larry Bernstein:

I hear from my French-Jewish friends that it is unlivable for a Jewish person to live in France today?

Andrew Hussey:

I don't know whether it's unlivable, but it's very, very difficult and very frightening to be a Jew in France these days. I say this because I have a small, very close group of Jewish friends, some of whom have family who went to the camps and family who survived the occupation.

There's deep wounds that have never really healed. One is the extent to which the French, for a long time, denied any active participation in what happened during the Second World War.

The Jews are seen as a target by two very specific groups in France at the moment. This is a very taboo subject, but it's true. One group that hates the Jews and blames the Jews is the Muslim population of France. Not all of them, of course, but, to a large extent, and certainly the extreme Islamist population, blames the Jews for the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Then what they do is they map that template of the Israel-Palestine conflict onto the way they feel in France. You'll see kids walking around the Banlieues with t-shirts identifying themselves with Gaza, and things like that. That they see ... The French are like the Israelis, and it's occupied territory, that the Jews control everything.

Then you've got a very separate population which thinks the same thing, but it's coming from a completely different angle. This is the extreme form of Catholicism and right-wing nationalism.

I attended an anti-gay-marriage demonstration organized by Catholics. The graffiti at the end baffled me. As the demonstration broke up, there were two slogans, one of which said, "Death to homos," and the other one said, "Death to Jews." What was the connection between the two? The only connection I could make was that Jews represents modernity. They represent culture, civilized values. These are the things that reactionary Catholics reject, and they see same-sex marriage as part of that modernity.

It's strange how the mainly white, far-right Catholic groups speak the same language as the angry Jihadis of the banlieue. Once again, the Jews are the victims, are the people blamed for everything that goes wrong in France.

A Jewish friend of mine born in Tunisia, came to France when Tunisia became independent. He said, "When I was a young man, France was a paradise for Jews. Now it's turning into an inferno."

Larry Bernstein:

I get that. Switching back to the Muslim population, I was first introduced to you by your book, The French Intifada. It described sort of a cancer growing just outside of suburban Paris, where there were these two communities that were not only not getting along, but were, it seemed, potentially getting ready for war.

Yes, the Yellow Jackets have taken the news, yes, Macron has changed the political dynamics slightly. Is the problem still festering?

Andrew Hussey:

Yeah. I think it's going to be an enormous problem in the years ahead. Since 2015, the year of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, I think that there's been a very hard-headed military and intelligence operations which have muted a lot of Islamist activity.

It's been reduced more to a problem of criminality, which it isn't. It's an ideological problem. But the disaffection which makes jihadi, and this is why I was interested in the French Intifada, hasn't gone away.

I'm going to be very honest about my opinions here, I think it's important that the Banlieues are improved physically and economically, and transport is improved, and unemployment is improved. But that is not the whole answer. Throughout The French Intifada, this is very taboo, and I've got into a lot of trouble for saying this, is that this is not just about politics, it's about psychoanalysis.

I say this because, if you follow the pattern of the young Jihadi: young guy, smokes dope, hangs out, acts like a gangster. It's girls, drugs, showing off, et cetera. Minor criminality. Maybe gets locked up, and then starts to question who he is, what he is, where his identity is.

I did a lot of work in French prisons. I could see that French prisons were the engine room of radicalism in France. Because what happens is that this prototype guy meets somebody who's a self-proclaimed Imam, who says, "This is what the problem is. The problem is that you're not French, that you don't belong here. You belong in the Muslim civilization. You have the possibility to actually become a soldier for God."

I don't like to be an apocalyptic doomsayer, but I think this is a reality. If there is an answer, I don't know what it is.

Larry Bernstein:

We don't spend a lot of time in the United States thinking about the French civil war in Algeria. Algeria was a part of France. It was a state. And there was a multi-million population of French civilians. They were living a French life. When the Algerians voted overwhelmingly among its Muslim population for an independent Algeria, the French moved from Algeria back to the mainland, but they also brought with them a substantial number of Muslim Algerians who had helped fight for France.

And it's that very population that has been unable to assimilate, how does France deal with that?

Andrew Hussey:

The population you're referring to are called Harkis that's the Arabic term, which describes the people who fought for France. After the end of the Algerian war in 1962, a lot of these people were abandoned and left in Algeria.

And the few that managed to get to France, they found that Mother France didn't really care for them. They were given bad shantytown housing, and they were caught between two worlds, an Algeria, which was independent and proud, and becoming even more Muslim, and a country they fought for, but which didn't recognize or honor the sacrifices that they'd made.

But that belongs to the 1960s and '70s. And the real challenge which are now the fourth and fifth generations of that population, who wonder how they've ended up in this situation.

And I think that the Algerian war has never, ever gone away in the psyche of either the French people or the Muslim, the French Muslim population of France.

I interviewed the footballer Zidane several years ago, who is of Algerian origin. France played Algeria football, soccer, in 2001. And there was a riot, the pitch was invaded, and the match

was abandoned. And he said it was the worst moment of his life. Zidane had won the world cup for France, it was regarded as the great symbol of unity. But what the fans were chanting at that match, and which left Zidane in tears, was the phrase Zidane was a traitor who was working for the French. And there's a long-standing myth in the Banlieue that Zidane comes from a family of the Harkis. And when I asked him about this, he didn't want to talk about it.

Larry Bernstein:

That's an incredible story. One of the aspects that I think shocked me was the army coup attempt against De Gaulle during the Algerian civil war, when De Gaulle was unwilling to continue to push for continued French ownership of Algeria. The French army, the air force and the paratroopers attempted a coup, and for a G7 country to have attempted a coup, as recently as the early 1960s, is really a shock.

To what extent is the army if they do see disorder, if the rioting in the streets gets out of control, do you think there is a potential for a coup in France?

Andrew Hussey:

I've just written about this with a story that's been pretty much overlooked in the Anglo American world, which was published in April, which was a letter from generals, mainly retired generals, from the French army, but then backed up by a petition by several thousand serving soldiers, who said that they were prepared to step in and a civil war was brewing.

This is a very small minority group of people, but it has to be taken seriously. 70% of people in a poll agreed with the complaints that the generals were making, that the banlieue were out of control, that the French army were out there in Mali or wherever they were, in the Sahara fighting radical Islam, dying at the hands of Islamists, while the French government were making concessions towards them.

So if you're living in Bordeaux or Nice or Paris, it might seem ridiculous, the idea of a coup. But it's not so far away, the near coup that you described in 1961 happened in what is now a G7 country that France really did stand on the brink of a civil war.

The United States and France, as far as I'm aware, are the only two countries which are built on an idea, the pursuit of happiness, and in France: liberte, egalite, fraternite. And the role of the army in France is to be an agent of the Republic. The role of the police, the gendarmerie is to defend the Republic. And when they see, the killing, the execution, the beheading of priests or teachers, such as the case in November with the teacher, Samuel Paty, it's the idea of the Republic is like a secular religion. And the role of the army, the role of the police is to defend the values of this secular religion.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned French perceptions of Brexit.

And you mentioned that the belief in France is that Brexit has not been effective, hasn't worked. First of all, why do they believe that? Second, the vaccine has been successfully distributed in the UK, and it's been a bit delayed in France and the rest of the European Union.

And that failure could be indicative of the problems of a supranational government dealing with a crisis versus a nation state.

Andrew Hussey:

There was a small group of French people, mainly on the right, who thought that maybe Britain had done the right thing and that this was going to work. But I think what they've seen from the French side of the channel is not the success but rather a shambles.

France has been very vaccine skeptical, because in 2008, a new diabetes drug came out and killed quite a lot of people. So people are anxious about the dangers of new drugs.

I can't think of a single person that I know from different social strata or from different political camps who thinks Brexit's been a success.

Larry Bernstein:

I'd like to end each session on a note of optimism.

Andrew Hussey:

I'm a believer in the working class in France. I think the abstentionism in the recent elections shows a very healthy sort of suspicion of the political classes at the moment. In the long term, it's always been the French working classes that have been the backbone of the nation. And I say that because I come from a Liverpool working class background, and I kind of have firsthand knowledge of how actually true that is.

And that's what is driving me to write the book at the moment, it's called France, The Invisible Nation. And I'm optimistic that the long history of the working class in France will outlive the short term history of 21st century globalization.