



# The ‘end of the world’ vs. the ‘end of the month’: understanding social resistance to sustainability transition agendas, a lesson from the Yellow Vests in France

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the Yellow Vests movement and the extent it constitutes an original platform for resistance to a sustainability transition agenda in the French context. The movement represents a disruption to global climate mitigation solutions that are often formalized at a global scale, and illustrates cultural and economic constraints in providing social justice in the age of climate change. Using a cultural performative approach, this case study reveals the relevance of framing and cultural analyses to understand such resistance. This qualitative exploration initiates a narrative analysis to assess how the universal resolve of the 2015 Paris Conference and the related legitimacy of the sustainability discourse has been further contested by the Yellow Vests and their fractured framing. From the ‘*end of the world*’ to the ‘*end of the month*’, we investigate the rise and fall of the legitimacy of the French sustainability discourse by analysing politicians’ and activists’ speeches, historical narratives as well as visual materials of resistance in France in the context of sustainability transitions. Tip of a broader social crisis, the movement reveals an original conflict of temporalities, symptomatic of the inevitable interdependency of socio-economic inequalities to sustainability transitions. Beyond the resistance itself, the Yellow Vests embody an original exemplar for the importance of cultural appropriation within the sustainability discourse’ legitimation processes.

**Keywords** Yellow Vests · Culture · France · Sustainability transition · Discourse · Climate change

## Introduction

Protests rose throughout France and grew to be a nationwide demonstration paralyzing the institutions and the economy for weeks at the aftermath of the parliamentary vote of the 2019 national budget by the French Assembly which led to rise of diesel prices by 6.5 cents/l (Journal Officiel de la République 2018; Delrue 2018). From November 2018,

the “Gilets Jaunes” (Yellow Vests) revealed unprecedentedly conceived obstacles towards sustainability transition policies and their actual acceptability. While the “elites are talking about the end of the world”, a protester claimed, “we are talking about the end of the month” (in Rérolle 2018). As the representative share of the population that is mostly affected by the planned carbon tax, the Yellow Vests underlined a dichotomy of local and global discourse over the impact and need for climate mitigation policies. This movement also sparked the recent discussions on just transition frameworks and raise concerns on the socio-economic impacts on sustainability policies as well as it illustrates the gap between what sustainability means at a local context and the universal and resolved breath of the commitments provided by the Paris Agreement.

The time-sensitive issue calls for an actualization of general understandings as to how sustainability transitions happen, and more specifically why they might not happen. A rapid transition towards low-carbon development across the world has been contested in the context of just transition which aims to acknowledge the differentiated impacts

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of green transitions on all of society, especially on energy and industry workers. Although energy justice and more broadly distributive justice have been a common lens in analyzing local resistances to climate projects such as renewable energy implementations and even conservation policies, in this paper, we want to highlight importance of cultural, perceptive and context-specific contingencies in sparking a nation-wide resistance. This paper intends to evaluate a nation-wide resistance displayed by the Yellow Vests in the context of sustainability transitions and social acceptability in different cultural contexts.

This paper aims at investigating how cultural legitimacy and polarized framings may influence the evolution of the sustainability discourse in one given context. To do so, we inquire the following: to what extent the emerging framing fracture between the ‘*end of the world*’ and the ‘*end of the month*’ revealed through the Yellow Vests crisis, may account for context-specific and cultural contingencies of resistance to sustainability transitions? Our analysis informs both academics and decision-makers to further apprehend different scales of social resistance towards climate policies which would not only rely on socio-economic variables, but more deeply upon cultural, perceptive and context-specific contingencies. In this regard, our contribution in this paper is twofold: (1) empirically we contribute to the further exploration of just transition by explaining set of cultural and framing characteristics of a social movement, (2) theoretically, we explore how stronger context-specific stance can be integrated into transition frameworks.

The empirical evidence for this paper is derived from a longitudinal case study that is based on multiples sources of data (Pettigrew 1990) to allow for more dynamic triangulation (Flyvbjerg 2006, 2011; Yin 2017) As a time-sensitive and recent issue, analysing the Yellow Vests movement involved a diversity of media such as newspapers, brochures, news clips, television debates, presidential speeches, all to assess the variety of framings of the sustainability discourse in France. The investigation consists in two parts involving a narrative and tracing process analyses to deploy an in-depth qualitative exploration of public performances, discourse and framing, as well as images and symbols conveyed in the underlined case. Narrative analysis entails the capture of socially situated knowledge and sense-making configurations in their own texture of experience. The study of narrative plots thus allows to capture equivocal processes and to provide analytical focus while constructing analytic chronologies and a tracing process of a given case history turned into a case study (Pettigrew 1990; Pentland 1999; Beach 2017).

The article is structured as follows. First, in “[Background: climate mitigation in France: a commitment challenged by its dependence to diesel](#)”, we describe the climate mitigation politics and fossil-fuel dependency in France as a

background of the problem. Later, in “[Framing: an approach to understand sustainability transitions](#)”, we introduce the theoretical stand of the paper through cultural performative approach. “Case study: framing struggles from the Paris Conference to the Paris of the Yellow Vests” discusses the case study in chronological order of the events by starting with the aftermath of the 2015 Paris Conference (November 2015–January 2016) and following with the spark of the Yellow Vests crisis (November 2018–January 2019). This would allow for an exploration of the evolution of the sustainability discourse in France, and account for its shifting legitimacy undermined by the rise of a disruptive framing struggle, further analysed in “[Analysis](#)”. The paper ends with discussion and conclusion in “[Conclusions and discussion](#)”.

### **Background: climate mitigation in France: a commitment challenged by its dependence to diesel**

As a host of the COP21, France demonstrated a strong support to the Paris Agreement’s resolutions (UNFCCC 2015a). In line with the country’s “unremitting commitment” (République Française 2016, p.4), official reports well convey the intent to improve its performance both in reducing its carbon imprint while ensuring high standards of living and welfare for its citizens. Formulation of climate mitigation policy in France precedes this endeavour. The Energy Transition for Green Growth Act displays the resolve to tackle GHG emissions to 40% by 2020 from 1990 levels (Legifrance 2015). In addition to that, despite its carbon intensive transport sector (27% of total domestic GHG emissions) (OECD 2016a), France integrated environmental taxation as one of the main tools for its strategy towards energy transition. Tackling fuel consumption stands at the core of the country’s fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goal 13, “Climate Action” (République Française 2016). France remains nonetheless highly dependent on diesel with one of the highest rates of gasoline vehicles ownership in Europe (OECD 2016b). Due to preferential taxation on non-refined fuel, diesel cars represented no less than 59% of total private vehicle ownership in 2018, compared to 35% in 2000 (CCFA 2019). In 2018, total diesel consumption reached 39.4 billion litres on a total fuel consumption of 49.9 billion litres, accounting for 78.9% of energy use in transportation in the country (UFIP 2019). While diesel represents 80% of fuel sales in France, tax on fuel is the 4th most important state revenue, thresholding at €28.5 billion in 2016 (Connaissances des énergies 2019).

France’s high dependency on diesel stands as an exception in the European landscape due to specific preferential policy choices enacted in the early 2000s (Hivert 2013). This dependence further demonstrates strongly imbedded

socio-economic, demographic and geographic specificities, in which diesel use is mainly associated with more driving needs of middle and low-income households mainly located in peripheral regions (Hivert 2013). Generally brought as an efficient cost-effective tool in reducing GHG emissions (OECDa), carbon pricing and more precisely fuel taxes may, however, display strong unequal bearings and regressive distributional consequences in given contexts (Teixidó and Verde 2017). In France, diesel use highlights important socio-economic interdependencies and regressive incidences, and further challenges the government's goal of "tackling fuel poverty" and "socio-spatial segregation" (République Française 2016). This conflict between intended efficiency of climate mitigation and providing socio-economic justice highlights the paradox brought by the polluter-pays principles applied at the domestic level. Such discord would dramatically find its materialization throughout the rise of a crisis that could divide France onwards: the Yellow Vests.

On November 17th, demonstrations sparked across the country gathering more than 290,000 protesters (Emanuele 2018). With growing sentiment of injustice, the movement grew in support while unifying the "France from below" (Gagné 2018). Wearing a yellow vest, this high visibility jacket legally required for every driver in case of emergency, protesters blocked every Saturday road traffic and occupied the Champs Elysées avenue in Paris. Along the weeks, claims shifted to an overall dispute over the French President as the persona of French elites. With growing violence, the movement imposed itself as a paralyzing force, and compelled the government to take drastic responsive measures, among which the withdrawal of the diesel tax nonetheless voted by the French Assembly on December 28th (Emanuele, 2018). The movement has been constituted by a specific representative share of the population: according to recent studies, the Yellow Vests are characterized by the following features: 48% are aged over 50, ¾ are using a motor vehicle everyday, 65% are having difficulties making ends meet with a standard of living amounted at €1.486/month, compared to a national average of €1.777 (Elabe and Institut Montaigne 2019).

According to Fourquet and Manternach's study (2018), the movement is representative of a "downgraded middle class". Stagnant income, eroded buying power, rising taxes and prices, the *end of the month* has become too costly. Nor too 'poor' to benefit from social welfare, nor 'rich' enough to live "with dignity", this movement embodies the protesting rise of the "Invisible France", a middle class that has become peripheral and disregarded, striving to impose itself back onto the public view (Fourquet and Manternach 2018). In this respect, Guilluy (2018a, b) advances the demise of the middle class as not only to be solely accounted by economic, social and spatial indicators, but also by the loss of their

cultural status. From desirable to deplorable, belonging to the "middle" is not anymore synonymous to social ascension and integration. Once the very embodiment of dominant values of society, peripheral classes have seen their cultural reference shattered as globalisation, deindustrialisation and socio-spatial relegation went by (Guilluy 2018a, b). This cultural ostracism stands as the consequence of structural effects, but not solely. It is further appropriated by the metropolitan discourse, from concentrated urban elites. This cultural representation of the Periphery from 'Above' thus contributes to its growing invisibility and misrecognition Guilluy (2018a, b) argues. As said, social conflict has been replaced by a distinction between a dominant model defined as morally valuable, and a "cultural otherness" depicting a peripheral, diverse, and insecure France, which resonates with the *'end of the month'* identity.

### Framing: an approach to understand sustainability transitions

Framing is recognized as a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000). According to that, "movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Ibid: 613). Transition scholars have adopted collective action frames emerged in social movements theory to highlight framing struggles enacted between dominant and emerging discourses, between political elites and peripheral interests, whose dialogue and contentions would actualize the public debate in relation to sustainability transitions.

Sustainability transition journeys vary from one another, because they imply different cultural, discursive and framing contexts. The success of transition journeys originally relies on the cultural legitimization of its resonance within a given society. The concept of 'cultural legitimacy' is brought by Geels and Verhees (2011) in their study of the Dutch discourse on nuclear energy and perception of the Chernobyl crisis. It is performed throughout contention processes in which competing visions debate on the public stage and attempt to influence public opinion to gain support about a given issue (Geels and Verhees 2011). Through these processes, agents henceforth frame their perceptions in such ways to influence the general discourse. The 'framing struggles' are defined as these cognitive contentions on the public stage that can influence broader discourses if they display strong enough salience and plausibility.

Exploring social resistance to transitions is although complex and presents strong normative and contextual contingencies (Köhler et al. 2019). It involves intricate multi-dimensionality such as agency, policy design, the

acceptability and feasibility of such policies, justice, and even the role of social movements. It reaches factual and empirical borders of human societies and their political, economic, social and finally cultural realities. The multipolarity of acceptability of sustainability transitions has been the subject matter of the most recent stream of literature, which furthers the relevance of social and cultural variables to fully grasp emergent divergences and preferences towards climate change mitigation (Adger et al. 2009, 2013; Alló and Loureiro 2014; Geels and Verhees 2011).

According to Adger et al. (2013), cultural dimensions are relevant in outlining powers of transition paths. Nonetheless vague, cultural features characterize specific frameworks and contexts in which they are enacted through symbols, given habits and perceptions (Swidler 1986). Adger et al. (2013) account for deeper analysis within cultural dimensions of societies as key conditional power of their response, acceptability and adaptation to climate change. The relevance of cultural features thus invites to broaden the analytical scope while being confronted to rather invisible and abstract concepts. Consequently, tensions arise between the universal scale of climate change challenges and their actual resonance within specific values, visions, cultural worldviews and contexts. They may subsequently activate forceful antagonisms and cognitive discords, which this paper testify through the Yellow Vests exemplar. To account for these, the analysis borrows from the cultural performative approach where cultural perceptions and discourses are mapped in five dimensions of salience and plausibility, defined in Geels and Verhees (2011, p.914) in Table 1.

### Case study: framing struggles from the Paris conference to the Paris of the yellow vests

In this section, we present a qualitative investigation of the sustainability discourse and its evolutive legitimacy from the Paris Conference (“The Paris Conference, sustainability and revolution: the creation of cultural legitimacy in “making History” (November 2015–January 2016)”) to the Yellow Vests crisis (“Each end of the month is the end of the world: The Yellow Vests and contested legitimacy of the sustainability discourse (November 2018–January 2019)”),

according to the five dimensions of salience and plausibility suggested by Geels and Verhees (2011) reported in Table 1. The second part shall receive greater attention for the argument’s interest on the framing struggle between the ‘end of the world’ and the ‘end of the month’. The case study provides narrative plots to provide stronger analytical focus, and attempt to explain a given process (Pettigrew 1990). It is to be noted the five dimensions of salience and plausibility are used here not as a “one size fits all” framework, but rather as the narrative plot, thus following a maintained chronology.

### The Paris conference, sustainability and revolution: the creation of cultural legitimacy in “making History” (November 2015–January 2016)

The “Paris Conference” and the “Paris Agreement” supported the creation of cultural legitimacy of the sustainability discourse within the French society. The Conference’s conveyed “historical success” was domestically translated as a ‘French success’, strong of its diplomacy and applauded resolve for climate action. Along this national achievement, it supported the legitimacy of the sustainability discourse throughout successive positive and unifying framings.

### Macro-cultural resonance

Climate change, environmental impacts on human societies, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development have increasingly become important repertoires within French society since the early 2000s (Ipsos and Sopra Storia 2015). Although, the drastic impacts of the 2008 economic crisis, along with the rise of terrorism, have gradually pushed environmental concerns into the background (Ipsos and Sopra Storia 2015). The 2015 Paris Conference is however acknowledged to revive a French repertoire of sustainability (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015). The unifying character of the COP21 conveyed throughout the twelve days of negotiations reached a climax during the closing speech of the French Minister of Foreign Affairs and President of the Conference, Laurent Fabius (Le Monde 2015a). The success of the conference was transmitted through all forms of media: news reports, debates, press, social networks, etc., and for weeks onwards. News articles related an “euphoria of the

**Table 1** The five dimensions for discourse plausibility and salience (Geels and Verhees 2011, p. 914)

*Actor credibility* the status or perceived expertise of the social groups advocating particular frames

*Empirical fit* the perceived correspondence between the frame and real-world events (the more ‘evidence’ a frame/discourse can claim, the higher its empirical fit)

*Centrality* the perceived importance of the topic or debate to particular audiences (relative to other topics or debates)

*Experiential commensurability* the resonance between the frame and the everyday experiences of audiences (if frames are very abstract have little bearing on people’s daily life, experiential commensurability is low)

*Macro-cultural resonance* the fit between frames and cultural repertoires (deep structures)

Paris Conference” (Lewino 2015) and an “immense success” (Laystary et al. 2015), and celebrate the skills of the French diplomacy able to monitor such a gathering (Marre 2016). The conference embodied in the French discursive landscape an “awakening of consciousnesses” and the importance of climate action (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015). For the Ipsos polling institute (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015), there is in France a “before and after COP21”, updating French people’s concerns and resolve to take a more active part in the global effort for climate mitigation.

Sensitive to symbols and national myths, French civil society henceforth welcomed the COP21 as an opportunity for greater unity nationwide. Echoing its inclusive message “*The planet is in our hands*”, sustainability discourse shifted into a call for a “green revolution” (Gaboulaud et al. 2015), under which all French will be reassembled. News articles, TV and radio shows successively narrate climate change as an opportunity to overcome historical frontiers and fulfil humanity’s dream for universality. As symbolical and lyrical as it can be, sustainability discourse at the aftermath of the COP21 adopts unifying traits, which encompass the whole society, and linked to positive frames of revolution. The closing discourse of the Conference by the French President Hollande well represents such specific French inclination:

French President François Hollande’s closing speech of the COP21

(Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2015). The reported translation is self-made as the official one takes substantial liberties from the original meaning and cultural linking to the French Revolution, intended to resonate in regard of a French audience.

*“After the Human Rights, today you have proclaimed the Rights for Humanity. I am proud France has hosted this conference, proud the United Nations have been able to take their responsibility, proud ideals of justice have prevailed, proud our generation have decided for world we won’t know. December 12th, 2015 can be not only a historic day but a great day for the planet. Where many revolutions have occurred, we are living today in Paris the most beautiful of all revolutions, the most pacific, the revolution for climate change”*

### Experiential commensurability

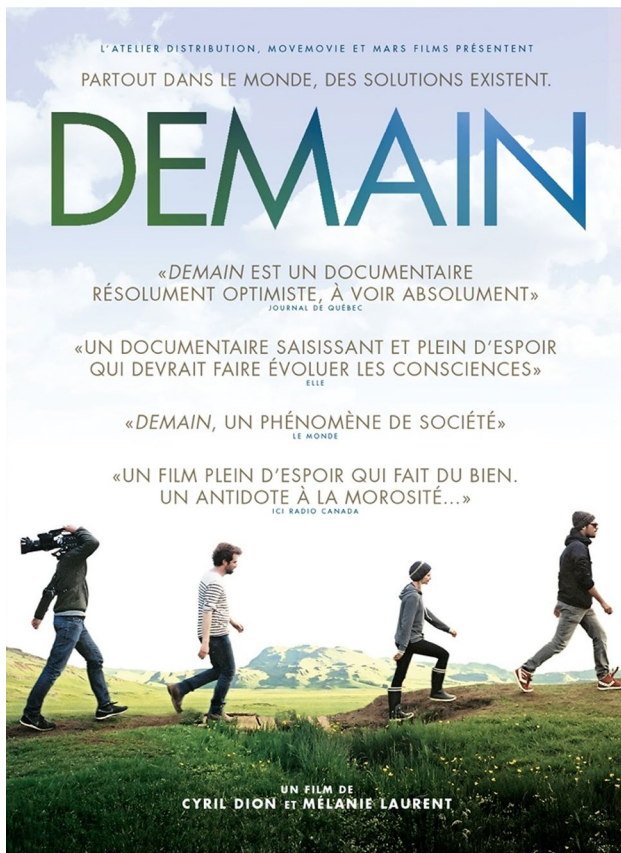
The Paris Conference permeated within people’s lives and interactions within their immediate environment, and enhanced the experiential commensurability of the sustainability discourse. In the wake of the COP21, perceptions about climate change and the need for stronger action infused across French society. 72% of French people were convinced by its success in mobilizing awareness around environmental challenges (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015). While one in two were confident in the reaching

power of the Paris Agreement (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015), the conference further succeeded to materialize the abstract threat of climate change (Ministère de la Transition Ecologique et Solidaire 2018). From collective euphoria deployed in the media, discourse shifted into more positive frames towards experienced and concrete projects. At the eve of the COP21, the “Train for the Climate” met substantial success across the country. Gathering more than 23,000 visitors across 19 cities, the “messenger of the climate” aimed at enhancing public awareness at the local level in an interactive fashion (SNCF 2015). In direct contact with local populations, initiatives as such multiplied after the Conference to answer greater demand for understanding climate action.

Turning local actors into global facilitators (Dantec 2015), the profusion of content and discourse after the COP21 evolved into accessible, simplified and interactive frames such as video tutorials and campaigns (Le Monde 2015b). Contents were devoted to explaining climate change within inclusive framings, which supported the emergence of positive discourse towards sustainability and changes of behaviours. A significant example may be found in Cyril Dion and Mélanie Laurent’s movie “Demain” (Tomorrow) (2015), released only 3 days after the closing of the COP21 (Fig. 1). The movie recorded a million tickets sold in France and was screened in 27 other countries. Sketching a proactive and positive picture, this movie played a great influence into general perceptions about climate change and concrete initiatives for a sustainable future (Demain le Film 2015).

### Actor credibility

The COP21 brought strong political credibility to the various attending state representatives. Strong focus converged on the presence of heads of state such as US President Obama, Russian President Putin, German Chancellor Merkel, etc. Brought as a diplomatic success for alignment around the universal cause for climate change, the credibility of the Paris conference was reinforced by the unprecedented involvement of scientists, experts, NGOs, companies and representatives of the civil society. Beyond a stage for political negotiations, the COP21 stood as a platform for discussions among experts and various actors to design innovative solutions and support the different SDGs (UNFCCC 2015b). Different panels and side events were also devoted to the “French National Cause”, during which French scientists and NGOs converged in the “Coalition Climat 21” to discuss sustainability projects at the domestic level. Along the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2015a), other accords were ratified between different categories of actors in close cooperation with the States (UNFCCC 2015b).



**Fig. 1** Official Poster of the movie “Demain”—(Demain Le Film, 2015), and translation

### Centrality

The positive resonance of the sustainability discourse within French society was further reinforced by the involvement of economic actors (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015). The implication of non-state parties supplemented the political resolve in opening discussions for stronger sustainability practices to a larger panel of players. As such, the involvement of companies contributed to greater ‘centrality’ of the conference’s positive framing of the climate action discourse. For French companies, the Paris Conference initiated a “green strategy” posing cheaper access to green technologies and sustainable practices at a narrower level. The involvement of non-state actors was unprecedented and acclaimed in the media (Ipsos and Game Changers 2015; D’Abundo 2015; UNFCCC 2015b). It stimulated greater public awareness and prospective materialization of sustainable practices within production and consumption processes. It showed the public that solutions would be brought in the market for consumers to participate in the effort while adapting their behaviours. This inclusive framing from companies sponsored increased public attention to the resonance of the Paris Conference discourse.

### Empirical fit

The legitimacy of the COP21 discourse got further shielded through various evidence of successful applications of mitigation policies, both in France and abroad. Among these, the Californian exemplar was advanced as a pioneering model for ambitious sustainability strategy. To convey such initiatives as achievable to the French public, the “Californian green success” was delivered through news articles and reports. It is portrayed as a rewarding example of mitigation policies in a developed economy followed by positive socio-economic impacts, such as employment and well-being (Novethic 2015; BFM Business 2015). Even after the abrupt US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in June 2017, California pursued its effort through different independent partnerships with multiple towns, regions and countries (UNFCCC 2015a; Lesnes 2017).

Validations of the empirical fit of the Paris Conference with real-world applications are likewise found in France at the local scale. Featured as dynamic contributors to tackle down national emissions, French ‘territorial collectivities’ (French administrative territorial subdivisions) are underlined as local players with global facilitator power (Dantec 2015). Along a stronger focus on the “Made in France” within local production processes and consumers’ choice, the relevance of the municipal level for mitigation was strengthened in the discourse (Dantec 2015). The 2008 European “Covenant of Mayors” was actualized as a primary example of French local commitment to fulfil the 2020 Horizon European objectives (Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy 2008). French municipalities and regions enjoyed renewed national focus upon their abilities to influence their citizens’ daily habits, lifestyles, lodging, transport and nutrition. From local actors to global facilitators, the successful assessment of these ‘territorial collectivities’ further reinforced the empirical fit of the COP21 resolve in real-world and experienced settings.

### Summary: the cultural legitimacy of the Paris Conference discourse, ‘A Revolution for Climate Change’

The positive frames deployed by the COP21, along with emerging cultural activities on various levels, all converge to solid salience and plausibility of its committed discourse. The Paris Conference was not only optimistically welcomed by the French audience, but also received as an inclusive opportunity to radiate through its diplomatic success. Enjoying the political spotlight, strong links were established throughout French society with its historical legacy, and supported public appropriation of the fight against climate change. Brought as the “*Revolution for climate change*”, even so the “*most beautiful of all*” (François Hollande, in Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2015), it

found even stronger grounds within the French discourse as it echoed deeply embedded symbolisms, political culture and historical resonance. As the host of History and stage for unparalleled universal resolve for the planet's future, French citizens were subject to positive exposure and ascendance over change.

Despite a general euphoria, apprehensions and doubts started to emerge after the COP21 as to its ambitious goals could actually be reached. From 2016, the applauds gave way to uncertainties once the processes of national policy design engaged. Attention shifted towards concrete applicability of such resolve. To what extent the universal commitment to tackle carbon emissions would be translated within a domestic setting, implying specific political, socio-economic and even cultural contingencies? Only 3 years later, the Yellow Vests stood as the symptom of such inexorable challenge. Out of a national momentum, nothing predicted the rise of such dissent and resistance towards a single mitigation tax policy. Confronted to the rise of the Yellow Vests, sustainability discourse would face trial by the emerging framing struggle of the *'end of the month'*. Henceforth framed as the *'end of the world'*, the sustainability discourse would thus become strongly contested, if not paralyzed.

### Each end of the month is the end of the world: the Yellow Vests and contested legitimacy of the sustainability discourse (November 2018–January 2019)

France is no stranger to revolution nor to vocal public discontent. These are both part of its historical and cultural fibres, and constitute a unifying platform for the French people to articulate its will and aspirations. Although, the Yellow Vests demonstrations embraced an unmatched character with their framing polarization. Dissociated from the *'end of the month'*, the previously legitimated *'end of the world'* discourse would face high contestation within a framing struggle that would strongly undermine its salience and plausibility. Facing a yellow wave, the fractured sustainability discourse would ultimately be overcome by more pressing social disarray, and be further set aside in favour of national unity and universality of cultural symbolisms.

#### Experiential commensurability

The movement introduced itself onto the public stage on November 17th when more than 280,000 protesters flooded the streets of major cities and blocked toll booths throughout the country. "*Gilets jaunes, colère noire*" (Yellow Vests, Black Anger) and "Macron, demission" is read on signs. The duality and opposition expressed throughout the protests sanctioned a specific orientation of the discourse for weeks

onwards. At the aftermath of the first weeks of protests, the framing struggle emerges:

A Yellow Vest's words quoted in Rérolle 2018

*"The elites are talking about the end of the world when we are talking about the end of the month"*

The fracture is launched, and it would successively orient the following debates, and further define the emerging framing discord. From November 17th, sustainability discourse stands torn apart facing an inexorable dilemma: the less buying power, the further climate urgency stands from daily realities. The *'end of the world'* becomes associated to centralized political and intellectual elites who can afford to worry about it, and whose scale of experience outruns the limited contexts, specific to struggling economic fringes of society. On the other side of the spectrum, the Yellow Vests embody the "France from below" confronting the "Parisian bobos" uprooted from reality (Duhamel 2018). Condemning the "obscure forces from above" (Huyghe and Liccia 2019), the *'end of the month'* players extend the fracture to broader social and cultural realities. It displays unjust centralization of power imposing constraints to an already struggling population. Embodiment of this political verticality, Macron becomes the target of all converging clamours which demand resignation the "President of the rich" (Fig. 2).

The once inclusive COP21 discourse would loose from this point forward its resonance within French society now that it is argued at odds with the actual reality of the audience's daily lives. Henceforth polarized, sustainability discourse embodies the straw breaking the camel's back that actualizes traditional cleavages. "Once you belong to the low classes, you are entitled to nothing and you endure everything" declares one of the protesters (BFMTV 2019). Assembling the France of the end of the month unable to afford any 'other pleasures', the Yellow Vests embody these citizens pushed out of the social consumer existence that governs a developed economy such as France's.



**Fig. 2** Protest sign: "The Yellow Vests are talking to you, Mr. Macron you have to resign, otherwise there will be a Revolution!" (JEFF PACHOUD/AFP)

The framing struggle between the ‘*end of the world*’ and the ‘*end of the month*’ deprives the urgency of climate change of any experiential commensurability in a consequent polarized discourse. The environmental alert is deemed only audible by those who socially exist through substantial comfort of resources. In contrast, for those deprived of a social future, the daily material anxiety precedes all when “*each end of the month is the end of the world*” (Foessel 2018). In contrast with the COP21 inclusive discourse, the Yellow “we” conveys an aggregate of “I” opposed to the rest of the society, united in their fight against injustice. This rising collective individualism transpires within cultural productions that followed the movement. The documentary “*J’veux du soleil!*” (I want some sun!) by François Ruffin and Gilles Perret (2019) (Fig. 3), and I Muvrini’s song “*Fin de mois, fin du monde*” (2019), both well translate the fracture within experienced daily lives of the audience. Dissociated from any empirical social reality, sustainability discourse would henceforward be engaged in a powerful hiatus between the ‘*end of the world*’ and the ‘*end of the month*’. Two framings, two realities, clashed in a dialogue of the deaf, with at its convergence the presidential figure of Emmanuel Macron which crystallizes all the passions.



**Fig. 3** Official poster of the movie “*J’veux du soleil!*” (I want some sun!) (2019)

## Empirical fit

While reinforced after the Paris Conference by real-world applications, foreign and domestic, the now-dissociated ‘*end of the world*’ from the ‘*end of the month*’ is being further deprived of its empirical fit. In response, President Macron’s speech on November 27th displayed his resolve to stick to the diesel tax increase and further France’s pledge to climate mitigation (Élysée 2018a). Even though he promises to reconcile both, the president acknowledges the need for stronger focus on the “environmental alarm” (Élysée 2018a). In light of the framing antagonism, the President attempts converging the two dimensions in reminding the empiricity of the sustainability discourse, and lists future policies devoted to the country’s energy transition and the creation of jobs (Élysée 2018a). He recalls in numbers the incidences of pollution on human health (48,000 deaths a year), and their prominence over road and domestic accidents, suicides, homicides, drownings, etc. (Élysée 2018a). In this attempt to reintegrate environmental themes within an experienced reality, President Macron intended to revitalise the legitimacy of the sustainability discourse and overcome its dissociation from real-world experience. Furthermore, to appease the Yellow uprisings he resolutely promises:

President Emmanuel Macron’s speech (excerpt) on November 27th, 2018

(in Élysée 2018a)

*“I refuse for the ecological transition to exacerbate inequalities between territories, and aggravate our fellow citizens’ situation who live in rural or peripheric areas”*

Merging sustainability discourse with the Yellow Vests’ demands was the aim of the President’s responding speech on November 27th. However, following ‘acts’ of protests demonstrated a failed attempt to reinforce the empirical fit as much as the Yellow Vests were not receptive to the President’s words. Not only the movement grew in support and in force, it also furthered a growing distrust of the Presidential figure and the political elites seen as deaf, if not blind towards the people’s hardship.

## Actor credibility

After this speech, the French President has been since portrayed with insensitive traits such as “President of the rich”, “corrupted by the banks”, towards the daily struggle experienced by the “Forgotten of the Republic” (BFMTV 2019). Awakening distrust against the people’s representatives, the Yellow Vests powerfully echoed revolutionary framings inherited from the French Revolution and the “sans-culottes” against King Louis XVI. Charging the President’s “Jupiterian” identity, protesters attacked Macron’s credibility in the blame of his authoritarian rule, his arrogance and class contempt (Lazar 2018). In regard



to the Yellow Vests, President came to personify the deep social divide between fortunate and enlightened elites on one hand, and the less well-off on the other (Lazar 2018). Portrayed as a true monarch reminiscing from the Old Regime and privileges, credibility of President Macron was undermined as a political leader and stood as the scapegoat which popular dissents converged upon.

### Centrality

Only 4 days after the President's speech, 'Act III' of the Yellow Vests protests constituted a turning point in the sustainability discourse polarization and loss of its centrality. December 1st, 2018 is the day when "everything changed" (Chapuis 2019). Strangely reminiscent of the Bastille Day (July 14th, 1789), it sanctified strong rise of violence between protesters and police forces on the Champs Elysées, symbol of Parisian luxury. Burning cars, assailed shop windows, damaged monuments and companies' headquarters on the famous avenue bore witness of the hostilities. From December 1st, "France is in fear" in view of violent protesters henceforth as "troublemakers" (les 'casseurs', those who break) (Darnault et al. 2018). Not only the Yellow Vests protested corporate actors in degrading building facades, but more importantly damaged parts of the Arc of Triumph (Fig. 4), which resonated as a grave insult for those attached to the Republic's symbolism and unity. From this day onwards, the polarization in the society was to be deepened as these events materialized a fracture between now-portrayed violent Yellow Vests and Parisian elites.

Moreover, the protesters' claims gradually focused on the preferential reduction of the ISF wealth tax, which favoured companies rather than the middle- and low-income households left to their monthly struggle of making ends meet (Cori 2018). From a dissociation in the discourse to social polarization of society, the framing fracture between '*end of the world*' and '*end of the month*' irreversibly shifted the legitimacy of the French sustainability discourse into a violent awakening of social inequalities and class cleavages. More than a loss of centrality, it sanctioned a conflict of temporalities between an immediate end against a long-term vision on the '*end of the world*', which would transfer from polarized framings into socially materialized division of the French social fabric (Ledoux 2018). From December 1st, France is divided into two "sides": the ones who can afford a tomorrow, reflect on it and sound the alarm for climate and the ones who can only make their everyday struggle heard on the streets in burning the elites' cars, damage shops and monumental symbols.



**Fig. 4** Damaged Sculpture of the 'Allegory of Liberty' from the Arc of Triumph, symbol of the French Republic, following the December 1st protests

### Macro-cultural resonance

In light of such brutality, which culminated on December 7th when some protesters attempted to trespass the Prime Minister's residence (Emanuele 2018), President Macron finally responded to the Yellow Vests' call during a speech he addressed the 10th (Elysée 2018b). Along with a freeze of the diesel tax, the President announced several measures aimed at the increase of buying power of the middle- and low-income shares of the population (Elysée 2018b). Making amends, he agreed that "the expected effort was too high" and subsequently prioritized the "economic and social state of emergency" over climate change (Elysée 2018b). Facing such disturbing violence, President Macron favoured national unity over discord, which reached the point of no return in its irreversible framing that so intensely polarized French society. For keeping unity by preventing a revolutionary reminiscence of History, the President took the side of social reconciliation over the discord for the future.

President Emmanuel Macron's speech (excerpt) on December 10th, 2018

(in Elysée 2018b)

*"My only concern, it is you; my only fight, it is for you. Our only fight, it is for France"*

In his speech, words activate a unifying myth of the “we”, the “us”, gathered around a vision of a nation in agreement with both its identity, common roots and values. For national unity, sustainability discourse is laid aside in favour of a revived collective project which would offer an “opportunity for all” (Elysée 2018b). In order for preserve unity and for the unifying values of the Republic to prevail and resonate to all, sustainability discourse has been suspended. Henceforth, beyond a non-resonance, it is suppressed in favour of a regained cultural echo of unity symbols of French history and identity.

### Analysis

The presented exploration (summarized in Table 2) reveals that, despite a primary universal and motivational resolve, a country’s cultural and social acceptability of mitigation may be contested, if not undermined by emerging framing struggles once applied in a given context.

Opposing the *end of the month* with the *end of the world*, the Yellow Vests underlined a dichotomy of discourse and meaning over the impact and need for sustainability. It translates the apparent discord between, on one hand, social concerns carried by protesters struggling every month in eking out a living; and on the other, the ‘*end of the world*’

carried out by political elites to emphasize urgent need for climate mitigation. This emerging polarization of realities revealed in the framing struggle conveys sustainability challenges dissociated from and in conflict with some people’s struggling daily lives in a developed economy. As said, what sustainability means and how it is framed matters both in its acceptance and rejection. There has been attempts in the literature to formulate semantic and discourse framing of transition (Rotmans and Loorbach 2009; Geels and Verhees 2011). What does sustainability mean to societies actually fluctuates in consonance with a given culture, a given discourse, and given framings within a cultural context. Which meaning we apply to objects or ideas is subject to variation in function of language, habits and lifestyles, and collective sense making. As said, comprehending sustainability transitions and their directionalities relies in the exploration of their ‘language’, and the competing framings enacted within the ‘transition arena’ (Rotmans and Loorbach 2009).

Ability to afford a monthly living becomes a true barometer of the proximity assigned to environmental concerns. It portrays sustainability challenges dissociated from and in conflict with people’s socio-economic reality in a developed economy. The Yellow Vests may stand as the symptom of the inevitable interdependency of socio-economic inequalities to sustainability transitions. This contest in the discourse conveys such correlation. It

**Table 2** Rise and fall of the legitimacy of the French Sustainability Discourse Findings from salience and plausibility analysis from the Paris Conference to the Yellow Vests crisis

2015 Paris Conference					High Cultural legitimacy of the sustainability discourse
✓ Macro-cultural resonance:	✓ Experiential Commensurability	✓ Actor Credibility	✓ Centrality	✓ Empirical Fit:	
Sustainability discourse at the aftermath of the COP 21 adopts unifying traits, which encompass the whole society, and is linked to embedded myths, cultural symbols, and positive frames of revolution and national narratives.	From a collective euphoria deployed in the media, discourse shifted into more positive and motivational frames towards experienced and concrete projects experienced through civil society (films, campaigns, “train of the climate”, etc.)	Diplomatic success for the French delegation and more generally for France as the host country. Credibility further reinforced by the unprecedented involvement of scientists, experts, NGOs, companies and representatives of the civil society.	Unprecedented involvement of companies and economic actors and non-state parties at the COP 21 supplemented the political resolve. Conveyed the implementation of stronger sustainability practices to a larger panel of players and a “green strategy”	Validation of the empirical fit of the Paris Conference resolve with real-world applications: diffusion of the Californian model of “green success”, and commitment of the French municipalities at the local level	Solid salience and plausibility of the committed discourse initiated by the Paris Conference, and found even stronger grounds within the French cognitive space as it echoed deeply-embedded symbolisms, political culture and historical resonance
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">DIESEL TAX announced in 2019 National budget (tool for climate mitigation)</div>					
Yellow Vests (Nov 2018 – Jan 2019): The ‘end of the world’ vs the ‘end of the month’					Contestation of legitimacy and abdication of the sustainability discourse
✗ Experiential Commensurability	✗ Empirical Fit	✗ Actor Credibility	✗ Centrality	✗ Macro-cultural resonance	
Nov 17 <sup>th</sup> , 2018: “The elites are talking about the <i>end of the world</i> when we are talking about <i>making ends meet</i> ”: an individual experience of inequality that transpires through various cultural productions (cinema, songs, etc.)	Nov 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2018: Facing the crisis, President Macron attempts to revive the relevance and universal character of the urgency of climate mitigation by recalling numbers (pollution and related deaths), and overcome the difficult dissociation from real-world experience. Failure with the movement henceforward growing in support and force	From Nov 27 <sup>th</sup> , 2018, growing loss of credibility of President Macron who becomes the target of all converging clamours which demand his resignation for being the “President of the rich”, blamed for his insensitivity and class contempt	Dec 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2018: Act III “when everything changed”. A turning point in violence and fracture. Violent protests and damages of shops, companies’ HQ once key players during the Paris Conference, and public monuments on the Champs-Élysées. The players are now divided into two “sides”: the elites who can afford a tomorrow, the less well-off	Dec 10 <sup>th</sup> , 2018: Macron yields, cancels the diesel tax. The “ <i>economic and social state of emergency</i> ” is now prioritized over climate change mitigation. The President takes the side of social reconciliation over the discord for the future, and invokes unifying values and historic symbols to revive the myth of French identity.	The ‘end of the month’ overcomes the ‘end of the world’ through undermined, if not defeated, salience and plausibility engaged during the Yellow Vests crisis. To “ <i>turn the anger into an opportunity</i> ” for national unity the legitimacy of the sustainability discourse had to be disengaged.

translates a socio-cultural polarisation inevitably embedded within the unequal character of transition policies, set aside and overlooked by the euphoric political and cultural successes of the Paris Conference. Beyond the feasibility of a given policy, the framing struggle reveals a conflict in which the less-proximate and expensive sustainability discourse would not prevail in face of the more immediate reality of the *'end of the month'*. Beyond the power of universal ideals such as justice and resolve for change, the multiplicity of contingencies in a given context may play as strong obstacles to their implementation (Klasen and Fleurbaey 2018). The presented study and tension between framings confirms the irremediable tension between universal agendas of change and their empirical application (Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad 2018; Klasen and Fleurbaey 2018).

Embracing a simple framing oriented towards straightforward concepts of power, people and democracy, the Yellow Vests embody a unifying struggle based on individual experiences of inequality. Once the *'end of the world'* evoked, a rise to abstraction and universality inevitably occurs, setting aside secondary concerns. The threatened future of humanity stands for a universal awakening and resolve for action, while buying power is only circumscribed to one share of the population's concerns, even though it represents a majority in numbers. Even though struggling, these categories remain at a global scale far well-off compared to other populations and convey greater dissent to adapt to climate-related impediments as they have far more less to lose. The Yellow Vests resistance thus reveals the so-far overlooked impact of transition injustices in a developed country, but more importantly the difficulty to qualify and appease this dissent.

At the tip of this unprecedented crisis, further lies an almost caricatural contrast between climate change and social challenges, which nonetheless reveals unexpected fractures: between socio-economic realities, between Paris and the Periphery, between antagonistic experiences of change. These have been formulated through the discord between the *'end of the world'* and the *'end of the month'*. For Guilluy (2018a, b), "France is deeply fractured, and the Gilets Jaunes are just a symptom". The framing struggle conveyed in the study mirrors deeper socio-spatial afflictions. The contest between the *"end of the world"* and the *"end of the month"* reflects underlying social fractures widening the gap between the France from Above and the one from 'Below', the winners and the losers of globalisation, the high and the low classes, the centre and the periphery. The growing environmental impediment for change substantially revives vehement class struggles across economic, social, political and cultural dimensions.

## Conclusions and discussion

As a response to the updating force of the Yellow Vests crisis, this article attempts to integrate different 'ontologies' to understand resistance to sustainability transition with a cultural-performative approach and a narrative process tracing. Using the concept of cultural legitimacy (Geels and Verhees 2011), the case study allowed us to account for discursive and framing factors at play within the perception of change, and whether it might be accepted or not given a cultural repertoire. The Yellow Vests moment is presented as a "sustainability transition drama", in which the antagonistic framings of the *'end of the world'* and the *'end of the month'* are contesting onto the public stage to influence the direction of France's sustainability agenda. Such discord is argued to display unexpected and paralyzing barriers towards effective transition solutions. This fracture not only incapacitates and polarizes the domestic discourse about sustainability and climate action; but further finds its genesis within a deeply rooted loss-identified repertoire of French cultural perception and experience of sustainability, contingent to a specific socio-political culture, and history symbolized by revolution and dissent.

In the end, sustainability discourse is found to be highly legitimated in a universal discourse as long as it is remotely portrayed within motivational and inclusive features. Once materialized, tensions may arise and find in extreme cases a complete fracture of temporalities; in which the reality of the *'end of the world'* no longer relates to the daily experienced struggle of the *'end of the month'*. As revealed by the Yellow Vests crisis and this framing struggle, sustainability transition in spite embraces here the contours of a deemed 'unjust' process; that is intimately linked to regressive distributional incidences which finally becomes the trigger of revolutionary afflictions. These times are ones of transition. Although it is an anticipatory process enacted in the present in which unfolds the future, the pictured framing struggle in the discourse between the *'end of the world'* and the *'end of the month'* remarkably recalls the powerful ascendance of contingencies emanating from culture and historical experiences. Beyond the resistance itself, the Yellow Vests embody an original exemplar for the importance of cultural appropriation within the sustainability discourse' legitimation processes.

This perspective further highlights the vague nature of universal agendas of change and their debatable range. Such case displays an original disruption occurring across the very process of implementing change while *leaving no one behind* as prescribed by the Paris Agreement and related 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2015). And so, within a developed context, in which supposedly

populations are deemed much less exposed than others globally. Although such given categories might not stand formerly as being left behind according to general indicators of economic and social development, their very feeling of being left behind plays as much strongly in the socio-political balance. As this paper mirrors, although change is needed, it does not stand as granted as it may have seemed since the ultimate moment of the Paris Conference in 2015. Indeed, the motivational breadth of international efforts for sustainability are being countered by opposite forces in Western liberal democracies, particularly in France as shown. In a European context already burdened by the Brexit shock, the surge of the 2018 Yellow Vests movement well testifies of this, and the power of sustainability transitions to stir traditional social cleavages in a developed economy, thus experienced and felt as unjust. As said, beyond addressing who is being left behind and what should be done to promote greater inclusive sustainable development, the presented case further calls for acknowledging the relevance of more volatile features and to broaden the analytical scope while confronted to rather abstract sustainability agendas. Here comes the issue of the value of one's reality compared to another, and how such dialogue between them ought to be sorted out within conceptualizations and frameworks of change. Because change is an inherently contested process, it is vital for sustainability scientists to constitute sites in which contestations and perceptions can be voiced in their plurality, both empirically and in agency. The very update brought up by this case opens up a need to turning out analyses while addressing issues of acceptability of change in a developed setting. A focus on resistance, which is rooted in informally feeling rather than in formally being, may offer opportunities for both academics and decision-makers to further apprehend different scales of acceptability and normative ability of societies towards sustainability transitions, which would not only rely on socio-economic variables, but more deeply upon cultural features, experiences and perceptions.

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