“Macron Demission !”: Loss of significance generates violent extremism for the Yellow Vests through feelings of anomia.¹

Abstract

After over 2 months of demonstration, 12 casualties, 3142 injuries and more than 5000 custodies, the question of why the Yellow Vest (YV) protests turned so violent remains. In line with a Significance Quest perspective on violent extremism (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011) the present contribution assessed whether the motivation to restore a sense of control and purpose could explain why French citizens engage in violent YV extremism. We hypothesized that personal loss of significance should predict intentions to display YV violence through increased feelings of *anomia*. Cross-sectional (Study 1, $N = 776$, general population) and experimental (Study 2, $N = 511$, undergraduates) mediation analyses corroborated this hypothesis independently of other known predictors of violent extremism. These results provide a first existential-motivational explanation of YV violence in France and highlight the key role of *anomia* as a predictor of violent extremism under Loss of Significance.

Keywords: Yellow Vests Protest, Activism, Political Violence, Significance Quest Theory, Significance Loss, Anomia.

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‘Macron is not responsible for the situation but he’s there at the wrong time. And his behaviour doesn’t help at all...’ - Jacques, 67, Yellow Vest.

‘He despises the people, he doesn’t hear us [...] he doesn’t respect people.’ - Bertrand, 33, Yellow Vest.

‘He sometimes has words which are not worthy of a President [...] he’s taking us for fools, he’s arrogant’ - Jacqueline, 62, Yellow Vest²

‘We don’t live, we survive...’ - Sandra, 45, Yellow Vest.

INTRODUCTION

On December the 1st of 2018, approximately 136,000 citizens protested across France. Despite the seemingly low number of attendees (out of more than 66,000,000 citizens), what would be later known as the 3rd act of the Yellow Vests (YV) protest movement turned out to be one of the most violent. Following degradation of national monuments (*Arc de Triomphe*) both police and protesters’ violence quickly escalated, leading to a total of 263 injuries and 412 arrests that day in Paris only. From that protest and on, ‘urban warfare’ scenes in Paris (i.e. burning cars and barricades on the streets) became a weekly routine at each Saturday YV protest, leading the government to back down on their policy reform agenda and to propose minor raises in some welfare benefits for workers. After the government’s offers and cancellation of the measure that ignited the movement (increased tax on gas), the YV movement did not stop.

Departing from their original concerns for tax fairness and redistributive justice, the YV now broadened their demands to include institutional reforms aiming to increase direct democratic processes (such as the possibility to conduct citizen-initiated referendums). After 2 months and 22 days of demonstration, 12 deaths (protesters and civilians³), 3142 injured (protesters, civilians and police) and more than 5000 custodies (1500 in one day⁴), French

² Le Parisien, December, 05, 2018

³ Civilians are people who did not take part of the demonstrations.

⁴ The 8th of December 2018 (Interior ministry, November, 17 – December, 17).

officials seem puzzled. In fact, one could wonder how such violent outburst of magnitude never seen since the 1968 May riots did happen.

Currently, social scientists have put forward various explanations in relations to the YV movement. The few studies conducted so far have highlighted links between low-income, rural-area background, realistic threats (socio-economic factors), political extremism, conspiracism (ideological factors) and optimism/pessimism about the future (cognitive factors; see Alesina, Harnoss & Rapoport, 2018; Algan, Beasley, Cohen, Foucault, & Peron, 2019; IFOP, 2019) in driving support for (and self-identification as) YV. Nonetheless, most of these studies rely on polls and highlight descriptive tendencies linked with participants' belonging to (or support for) the YV. Also, these tendencies are not sufficient to explain the dynamical aspect of the YV movement. In fact, if stable factors (as one's worldview and social ecology) drive protest violence, how can we explain its sudden outburst in the fall of 2018? Furthermore, if it is true that structural, ideological and cognitive factors play a role in shaping political engagement and violence, one of the most robust predictors of violent extremism remains motivational (Kruglanski et al, 2014). Therefore, in line with a Significance Quest perspective on violent extremism (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011) the present contribution will try to assess whether the motivation to restore a sense of control, meaning and living a purposeful life could be a potent explanation to why French citizens engage in violent collective action for the YV movement.

Political violence and significance motives

Political violence refers to the recourse to violent actions on behalf of a political cause. It is widespread around the world, across the ideological spectrum, and the use of violence to achieve political goals has been a renewed focus of research since the last two decades. So far, it has been found that political violence serves to restore a sense of meaning, control, justice, honor and dignity in the face of perceived threats and humiliations (Kruglanski &

Orehek, 2011 ; Troian et al., 2019; Webber et al., 2017). Individuals will engage in political violence depending on its prevalence in their own social network (Sageman, 2004), their exposure to legitimization of political violence (Atran, 2016) and their motivation to search for a significant purpose in life (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Social psychological investigation of violent extremism has highlighted the importance of this latter factor for understanding intentions to engage in violent actions.

Indeed, individuals tend to have a positive image of themselves (Rogers, 1951; Steele, 1988; Tesser, 1988). Experiencing situations of humiliation creates an inconsistency between the positive image that one wishes to form and the reality of this experience (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001). Thus, individuals will behave in order to reduce the anxiety due to the discrepancy between an ideal state of self-positive image and the reality of experiencing humiliation (Festinger, 1957; Jonas et al., 2014). And because worldviews (e.g. sets of religious/ideological meaning systems) provide individuals with a sense of meaning and control, self-related threats generally lead to cognitive/behavioural extremization (Jonas et al., 2014; Xu & Mc Gregor, 2018). This psychological tendency to compensate self-threat related anxiety through ideological extremization forms the basis for Significance Quest Theory (SQT, Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2016; Kruglanski et al, 2014).

In short, SQT suggests that individuals are guided by their fundamental need to feel meaningful. According to this theory, extreme behaviors are the results of a need to restore individual significance, importance and effectiveness. Relatedly, strong significance loss is associated with an increased extremism among radicalized people (Webber et al., 2017). Also, individuals who have experienced significant economic or relational loss are more likely to engage in violent actions (Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2016). There is now ample evidence for a causal role of Loss of Significance (LoS) in generating violent political behavior (Jasko,

Lafree, & Kruglanski, 2016; Webber et al. 2017; Schumpe, Bélanger, Moyano, & Nisa, 2018).

From significance to anomia

In addition to the direct humiliation-compensation motive driving LoS' effects on violent extremism, research shows that other existential motivations (e.g. pertaining to control, freedom, meaning motives, see Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Jonas et al., 2014) underpin politically violent behaviour. We argue these could help make sense of YV-related violence. In fact, significance/meaning is just one of five existential concerns that make up a very potent construct for understanding violent extremism: anomia (see Troian et al., 2019).

Anomia is defined as a psychological state including feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, social isolation, normlessness and self-estrangement (Smith & Bohm, 2008; Troian et al., 2019). A recent study run in Turkey, France, Belgium and Brazil by Troian and collaborators (2019) showed that, in line with SQT and findings from the experimental existential psychology literature (e.g. Xu & Mc Gregor, 2018), anomia is a predictor of violent extremism independently of participants' political orientation. This individual level construct stems from sociological work on anomie, which differs from anomia in that it refers to a societal state of normlessness (Durkheim, 1897). If anomic societies can generate increased anomia (Levina, Perejolkina, Martinsone, Mihailova, & Kolesnikova, 2018; Meier & Bell, 1959; Merton, 1938; Seeman, 1959, 1975; Smith & Bohm, 2008; Zhao & Cao, 2010; Teymoori et al., 2016), we argue that existential threats, such as LoS could affect violent extremism through increased anomia.

An existential take on Yellow Vests violence?

There is converging evidence that support the use SQT/anomia perspective on the YV. For instance, one of the main responses of YV representatives to accusations of displaying political violence as a group is to reply that government members ‘despises’ them and does not listen to their concerns⁵. Furthermore, according to a recent note from the Observatory of Well-Being (Algan, et al., 2019), people who report strongly supporting the Yellow Vests protests are mostly made of Marine Le Pen (i.e. far right) and Jean- Luc Mélenchon (i.e. far left) voters in the 2017 presidential elections in France. And we know individuals who endorse more extreme beliefs are those who experience more situations of LoS (Jonas et al., 2014; Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2016). A significant proportion of YV supporters is also made up of non-voters, indicating potential feelings of political apathy thus powerlessness (Algan et al., 2019). Moreover, 70% of YV supporters live below the median income in France and 24% say they have big financial difficulties (Algan, et al., 2019). This might be indicative of marginalized/deprived situations, which typically generate feelings of anomia (Smith & Bohm, 2008; Levina, Perejolkina, Martinsone, Mihailova, & Kolesnikova, 2018).

In addition, several national newspapers highlighted the numerous reforms implemented by the French President in his first term year. Terms like ‘social breakdown’, ‘violent reforms’, ‘scribbled politic’⁶, and the reactions of unions from different sectors (public, private) all illustrated feelings of despair and loss of dignity experienced by the French. These reforms, perceived as threatening by a majority of French (as indicated by the still > 50% of public opinion in favor of the YV, IFPSOS, 2019), along with the perceived ‘despising’, ‘arrogant’ attitude of the French president may have contributed to increases in violent actions during the YV protests (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011; Stürmer, Rohmann, Froehlich, & van der Noll, 2017; Troian et al., 2019; Webber et al., 2017). Many protesters

⁵ Franceinfo, January, 06, 2019 ; L’Humanité, December, 13, 2018

⁶ Les Echos, May, 05, 2018

from middle-class individuals, expressed that they felt contempt from urban elites⁷. Finally, during the YV protests, attendees were exposed to both political violence and perceived lack of support from the government because of police-enacted violence. Perceived lack of support, power, means and norms straightforwardly refer to the construct of anomia (Srole, 1956; see Smith & Bohm, 2008).

Therefore, we argue that a main driver of violent extremism for the YV might be feelings of anomia, stemming from chronic situations of marginalization within a part of the population, intensified by the recent economic policy reforms implemented by the newly elected French government at a fast pace (rapid economic changes are considered as generating societal situations of anomie, see Teymoori et al., 2016) and triggered by personal feelings of LoS (from personal experiences of failure or government responses perceived as ‘contemptuous’; i.e. LoS). Hypothesizing a LoS-driven anomia mechanism behind YV violence also has the advantage of explaining why YV violence did not decrease following the presidential address on December the 10th of 2018. In fact, the welfare increases proposed by the president were deemed insulting by the YV, while his apologies were perceived as too late and not credible (as indicated by monitoring of social media reactions on YV pages the following morning, Bertheliet, 2019).

Hypotheses

To explore whether LoS could generate political violence through feelings of anomia, we decided to conduct a series of two studies, using first a cross-sectional design which results would then be experimentally corroborated. These studies would include measures of political activism, radicalism, non-normative (i.e. illegal) collective action and intentions to engage in armed struggle. If LoS indeed generates violent extremism through anomia, the following hypotheses should not be rejected:

⁷ Le Parisien, November, 17, 2018

H1: In line with Troian et al. (2019) anomia should be positively correlated with measures of political violence and activism.

H2: LoS should be positively correlated with anomia (manipulated LoS should increase feelings of anomia).

H3: LoS (measured or manipulated) should be positively correlated with measures of political violence and activism.

H4: An indirect effect of LoS on political violence and activism outcomes through anomia should be observed in our two studies.

Ethical and methodological statement.

The studies were conducted in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration (WMO, 1964) and its later amendments, the ethical principles of the French Code of Ethics for Psychologists (CNCDP, 2012), and the 2016 APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2017). Data underlying these findings are openly available at [OSF LINK MASKED FOR ANONYMOUS PEER REVIEW].

STUDY 1

To provide a first test of our main hypothesis, we decided to conduct a cross-sectional investigation a large (if not representative) sample of the general population.

Method

Participants

We aimed at recruiting at least 250 participants to provide stable estimates of the links between the constructs under investigation (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). Online questionnaire links were randomly disseminated among social network groups with topics such as helping, tips and sales groups, including politics (left, right, far-left, far right and

yellow vest pages) between December the 12th of 2018 and January the 12th of 2018. Our final sample is made of 776 French individuals from the general population (28.48% male, 50.39% female, 21.13% unreported; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.02$, $SD = 15.19$).

Materials & Procedure

The study was introduced as a study on political opinions, emotions and personal worldviews. After a brief introduction section, participants were invited to complete the series of measures listed below (all scale items are detailed in appendix 1).

Loss of Significance. To measure perceived personal loss of significance (LoS), we used a measure taken from Webber et al. (2017, study 1). It consists in asking participants how often they experienced situations during which they felt ashamed, humiliated, and that people laughed at them (5-point Likert, from 1 ‘*never*’ to ‘*all the time*’, $M = 2.25$, $SD = .88$, $\alpha = .81$).

Anomia. Our measure of anomia was the Middleton Alienation scale (Lytkina, 2015). This measure was chosen because it is a modern, short instrument tapping in all of the five dimensions of anomia (one item each) unlike other anomie scales assessing perceived normlessness and social distrust only (i.e. Teymoori et al., 2016; 4-point Likert, from 1 ‘*strongly disagree*’ to 4 ‘*strongly agree*’, $M = 2.28$, $SD = .67$, $\alpha = .66$).

Activism-Radicalism Intentions Scale. We used a modified version of the Activism-Radicalism Intentions scale from Moskalenko & Mc Cauley (2009) because it is generally reliable, generic, and very short (see Scarcella, Page, & Furtado, 2016). The original scale assesses both intentions to engage in activism (4 items) and in violent collective action to defend the cause of a group that is important to them (i.e. Radicalism, 4 items), which they are asked to indicate before filling the items (e.g., ‘*I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group even if I thought the protest might turn violent*’). Here we set the

group to ‘Yellow Vests’ to obtain a measure of intentions to engage in Activism (4-point Likert, from 1 ‘*very unlikely*’ to 4 ‘*very likely*’, $M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .93$) and Radicalism (4-point Likert, from 1 ‘*very unlikely*’ to 4 ‘*very likely*’, $M = 1.97$, $SD = .88$, $\alpha = .87$) for the movement.

Intentions to engage in Armed Struggle. We used two items adapted from Moskalenko & Mc Cauley (2009) that were not included in their Activism-Radicalism scale to compute a score of intentions to engage in armed struggle for the Yellow Vests (4-point Likert, from 1 ‘*very unlikely*’ to 4 ‘*very likely*’, $M = 1.45$, $SD = .64$, $r = .47$, $p < .001$).

Non-Normative Collective Action. A seven items scale was created to assess the extent to which participants report intending to engage in non-normative (i.e. illegal) collective actions. These were designed by taking examples from real actions used by the Yellow Vests (see appendix 1; 7-point Likert, from 1 ‘*completely disagree*’ to 7 ‘*completely agree*’, $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.85$, $\alpha = .90$).

Identification with the Yellow vests. Because of government monitoring and repression of the movement at the time of data collection, we thought that directly asking participants whether they considered themselves as Yellow Vests might be too sensitive. To avoid suspicion from participants, as a proxy, we used a single-item measure of identification with the Yellow Vests (see Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2013; 7-point Likert, from 1 ‘*not at all*’ to 7 ‘*completely*’, $M = 3.82$, $SD = 2.17$).

Political Ideology. A single-item measure of political ideology was used, allowing us to also compute a political extremism score as indicated by participants’ scores distance from the middle of the scale (9-point Likert, from 1 ‘*far-left*’ to 7 ‘*far-right*’, $M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.88$).

Demographics. Participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, and yearly income (brackets from ‘less than 30,000€’ coded 1 to ‘more than 120,000€’ coded 5, $M = 1.70$, $SD = .88$).

Results

Correlation analyses. To test our hypotheses, we first conducted Pearson bivariate correlations analyses (the full table of correlation between variables can be seen in appendix 2). As expected, there was a positive association between anomia and LoS, $r = .31$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, anomia was positively linked with intentions to engage in Armed Struggle ($r = .34$, $p < .001$), Radicalism ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), Activism ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) and Non-Normative Collective Action ($r = .42$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, LoS was positively linked with intentions to engage in Radicalism ($r = .09$, $p = .019$), Activism ($r = .08$, $p = .035$), Non-Normative Collective Action ($r = .10$, $p = .007$) but not Armed Struggle ($r = .06$, $p = .014$). Thus H1, H2 and H3 received partial support. However, the strongest correlate of political engagement and violence was Identification with the Yellow Vests ($r = .66$, $p < .001$ with Radicalism; $r = .79$, $p < .001$ with Activism; $r = .72$, $p < .001$ with Non-Normative Collective Action and $r = .56$, $p < .001$ with Armed Struggle). Because of this and because the other measures correlate, to some extent, with both activism and measures of political violence, the robustness of our mediation model will have to be checked with these constructs as covariates.

Mediation analyses. To test our mediation hypotheses, we decided to conduct bootstrap mediation analyses with the help of PROCESS ($N_{\text{trials}} = 5000$; Hayes, 2012). More information regarding bootstrap methods and the inner workings of PROCESS can be obtained in Hayes (2017). All the regression analyses behind the mediation models can be found as supplementary materials. Supporting H4, the analyses suggested indirect effects of LoS on intentions to engage in Radicalism, Armed Struggle, Non-Normative Collective

action, and Activism (see figure 1). These indirect effects held even after adjusting for identification with the Yellow Vests, political ideology/extremism and demographics. Adjusted indirect effects were $\beta = .05$, 95%CI[.02; .07] for Radicalism, $\beta = .03$, 95%CI[.01; .06] for Armed Struggle, $\beta = .03$, 95%CI[.01; .05] for Non-Normative Collective Action. Interestingly, the indirect effect of LoS on Activism (i.e. a measure of non-violent engagement into political action) through anomia did not hold, $\beta = -.01$, 95%CI[-.02; .01].

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Discussion

Results from this first study were globally in line with our hypothesis that LoS drives feelings of anomia, which in turn predicts intentions to engage in political violence in support for the Yellow Vests. The mediation models were total, which suggests anomia should be a very proximal predictor of our measures. Nevertheless, given the pattern of correlation between our measures and other known predictors of political violence, we could not rule out confounding factors as a likely explanation for the observed indirect effect of LoS through anomia (see Fiedler, Harris, & Schott, 2018). Therefore, we decided to conduct an experimental study to corroborate these cross-sectional findings.

STUDY 2

Design

The experiment was based on a simple two conditions between-subjects design (control vs. Loss of Significance manipulation). To induce feelings of Loss of Significance, we decided to conduct a conceptual replication of Webber et al.'s (2017) study 3. Accordingly, participants were primed with LoS through the following autobiographical recall task: *'think back to a situation in which you were feeling humiliated and ashamed because*

(you felt like) people were laughing at you. Provide a detailed description of who humiliated you, what this (these) person(s) did, and how you felt during this experience.' (Webber et al., 2017; p.7). Participants in the control condition were asked to recall the last time they watched TV, to provide a detailed description of what they watched and how this made them feel (Webber et al., 2017; Study 3).

Prior to data collection we conducted a power analysis to determine the appropriate sample size. Given the results of our cross-sectional study, we expected a small link between LoS and anomia (expected $b = .31$) and small to medium links between anomia and our four dependent variables ($.1 < \text{expected betas} < .3$ for adjusted results). According to simulation results, with such expected effect sizes, between 400 and 462 participants were required to achieve 80% power to detect the indirect effect (see Fritz & McKinnon, 2007; table of simulation 3). We therefore decided to recruit a total of $N = 500$ participants, which would also allow us to gain precise slope estimates in each condition (250 each; Schönbrodt, & Perugini, 2013).

Participants & Recruitment Procedure

Given the consequent sample size needed for this experiment and budgetary constraints, we decided to use a sample of undergraduate students from one of the authors' local university. Computerized surveys were sent through the university internal computer system to be disseminated to undergraduate students from February the 7th of 2019 to February the 14th of 2019. They were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions by the survey platform (double-blind randomization procedure) and were compensated with course credit. Researchers regularly checked the sample size and stopped data collection once it reached 500 answers. Our final sample thus consisted of 511 undergraduates (9.1% male, 1.3% unspecified, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.39$, $SD = 3.04$), equally assigned to the experimental conditions ($N_{\text{control}} = 258$, $N_{\text{LoS}} = 253$).

Materials

The study was introduced as a study on political opinions, emotions and personal worldviews. After a brief introduction, section participants were invited to fill up the same demographics as in Study 1 (gender, age and income, $M = 1.84$, $SD = .91$), the same single item measure of political ideology ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.24$) and the same measure of identification with the Yellow Vests ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.67$). These would be used to check the validity of our randomization procedure. Participants were then instructed to complete the priming task and a series of measures in the order listed below. Descriptive statistics for each measure can be found in table 1.

Distractor task. In line with Webber et al. (2017, study 3) and the general model of threat regulation (Jonas et al., 2014), we introduced a delay between the prime and the measures by asking participants to fill up 19 items of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; see appendix 1). These included 10 positive emotion items (5-point Likert, from 1 ‘*not at all*’ to ‘*extremely*’, $M = 2.25$, $SD = .88$, $\alpha = .81$) and 9 negative emotion ones ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .88$, $\alpha = .81$). This was done because research shows that so-called compensatory responses to threats (i.e. responses on domains unrelated to the threatened domain, here political extremization after personal LoS) only occur after some delay (Jonas et al., 2014).

Loss of Significance. We used the same LoS measure as in Study 1. The three items were randomly positioned among the PANAS scale items to hide them from participants’ awareness ($M = 1.65$, $SD = .87$, $\alpha = .75$).

Anomia. Participants were then introduced with the same anomia measure as in Study 1 ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .58$, $\alpha = .60$).

Activism-Radicalism Intentions Scale. The next measure was the same scale as in Study 1 which tapped in intentions to engage in both Activism ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .79$, $\alpha = .89$) and Radicalism ($M = 1.65$, $SD = .73$, $\alpha = .80$) for the Yellow Vests.

Intentions to engage in Armed Struggle. Participants were then asked to fill the same two items measure of intentions to engage in Armed Struggle for the Yellow Vests as in Study 1 ($M = 1.22$, $SD = .49$, $r = .65$, $p < .001$).

Non-Normative Collective Action. Again, the same scale we created in Study 1 was used to assess participants' intentions to engage in illegal collective action with the Yellow Vests ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.40$, $\alpha = .91$).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Results

Randomization checks. As can be seen in table 1, there were no substantial between group differences in demographics (age, gender, income), political ideology, political extremism and identification with the Yellow Vests. Our randomization procedure was therefore deemed adequate.

Manipulation checks. The LoS prime did not affect positive emotions (see table 1) but successfully induced LoS feelings ($d = .36$, $p < .001$). Because it also increased negative emotions ($d = .28$, $p = .002$), our analyses will be re-run with the PANAS negative affect scores as a covariate to assess whether the observed effects are specifically caused by LoS or not.

Main effects of Priming. As can be seen in table 1, the LoS prime did not directly generate more anomia, intentions to engage in radicalism and non-normative collective action. However, it seemed to have increased intentions to engage in activism and armed struggle for

the Yellow Vests, though these results do not reach statistical significance if adjusted for multiple comparison.

Correlation analyses. As expected, there was a positive association between anomia and LoS, $r = .39, p < .001$ (of size equivalent to Study 1, $r = .31$). As in Study 1, anomia was positively linked with intentions to engage Radicalism ($r = .22, p < .001$), Activism ($r = .13, p = .003$) and Non-Normative Collective Action ($r = .22, p < .001$) but, unlike previously, not with Armed Struggle ($r = .34, p < .001$). Replicating our previous findings, LoS was positively linked with intentions to engage in Radicalism ($r = .18, p < .001$), Activism ($r = .13, p = .004$), Non-Normative Collective Action ($r = .18, p < .001$) but, this time, also with Armed Struggle ($r = .17, p < .001$). Therefore H1, H2 and H3 received partial support.

Mediation analyses. To test our mediation hypotheses, we decided once again to conduct bootstrap mediation analyses with the help of PROCESS ($N_{\text{trials}} = 5000$; Hayes, 2012). All regression analyses behind the mediation models can be found as supplementary materials. Because our manipulation did not directly impact anomia, we wanted to assess whether a serial mediation process was occurring, whereby an indirect effect of manipulated LoS on our dependent variables could be carried through perceived LoS (manipulation check) and anomia. Partially supporting H4, serial mediation analyses suggested indirect effects of our LoS manipulation on intentions to engage in Radicalism, Non-Normative Collective action, and Activism but not Armed Struggle (see figure 2). These indirect effects remained the same even after adjusting for negative affects, hence lending support for the specific role of LoS feelings in driving the effects. Adjusted indirect effects were $\beta = .01, 95\%CI[.001; .02]$ for Radicalism, $\beta = .01, 95\%CI[.001; .01]$ for Non-Normative Collective Action, $\beta = .01, 95\%CI[.001; .01]$ for Activism and $\beta = .001, 95\%CI[-.01; .01]$ for Armed Struggle.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Discussion

This second study allowed us to provide experimental corroboration for a potential mediation of LoS effects on intentions to engage in political violence by anomia. Though our manipulation did not affect anomia directly, indirect effects were found in the predicted direction. Moreover, their small size is typical of what can be found in the Significance Quest literature (e.g. Webber et al., 2017; Schumpe, Bélanger, Moyano, & Nisa, 2018). We were able to replicate the mediation models from Study 1 with the exception that, in this study, indirect effects of the LoS manipulation were not found for intentions to engage in Armed Struggle but were significant as regards Activism. This may be because of difference due to populations (general *vs.* WEIRD, see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) or design (correlational *vs.* experimental). Therefore, subsequent studies should highlight the role of these factors in moderating the link between anomia and Activism/intentions to engage in Armed Struggle. Let us now review the body of evidence we have provided so far and discuss their implications for understanding violent extremism and its antecedents, more specifically in the context of the Yellow Vests protests.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In a first cross-sectional study, we wanted to highlight the links between LoS, anomia and intentions to engage in political violence in support for the Yellow Vests. The results were in line with the suggested theoretical mediation model, which turned out to be total. Notwithstanding, we decided to conduct an experimental study to corroborate these cross-sectional findings. In this second study, we replicated the results found in Study 1 with the exception that the indirect effects from the LoS manipulation were not found for intentions to engage in Armed Struggle but were significant as regards Activism. These results are nevertheless in line with previous research based on Significance Quest Theory, in which people experiencing humiliation and infringement of dignity are found to be more likely to

react in order to restore a positive image by taking violent action on behalf of a cause (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001; Webber et al., 2017). In the present research, this extremism took the form of intentions to engage in violent actions and activism against the government with the Yellow Vests.

Also, we were able to replicate the findings of Troian et al. (2019) regarding the link between anomia and political violence intentions, while providing further evidence for considering the role of feelings of anomia as a key mediator of existential threats' effects on violent extremism. The present research aimed to understand the mechanisms at play behind violent actions with respect to the Yellow Vest protests. Activism, defined as the willingness to take part in a cause lawfully and non-violently, can lead to violent political radicalization (Decker & Pyrooz, 2018; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2012). Conflicts between civilian groups and between groups and the government lead individuals to engage in increasingly radicalized actions (Moskalenko, McCauley, & Rozin, 2006). The results of our study show that these violent actions can be explained by feelings of anomia resulting from the humiliations experienced by some French people enduring difficult economic situations. Thus, intentions to engage in violent actions are partly independent of identification with the Yellow Vests and depend very much on the economic and social situation of individuals and their experience of humiliation in a social context. This was indicated by the absence of correlation between LoS and identification with the YV in our studies.

Ironically, one implication of these results is that State response to the YV crisis might have contributed to its amplification and perseverance through time. Unjustified custody (leaving aside the issues of disproportionate police violence use), as indicated by the unprecedented number of arrests without further prosecution, and public outrage following

the humiliating arrest of 151 junior high school students fastened and forced to kneel down⁸ might have fuelled perceived LoS among the French. In line with SQT, perceived abusive treatment from the police increases violence in protesting (Maguire, Barak, Wells & Katz, 2018) and creates a strong anti-police identity (Stott, Ball, Drury, Neville, Reicher, Boardman, & Choudhury, 2018). And as the violence on protesters' behalf grows, so does police arrests (and potentially abusive ones, see Mooijman, Hoover, Lin, Ji & Dehghani, 2018) which might further increase feelings of LoS and violent extremism among the YV. This could potentially explain the current situation of weekly violent protests still being carried out with a majority of public opinion support even after the French government's attempts to find a solution to this crisis.

Limitations

Despite these interesting findings, some caveats have to be underlined. To begin with, the studies were ran online and not in proper laboratory conditions which we think contributed to the small size of our effects. Besides being made of undergraduates, our second sample is massively more feminine in the second study, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Yet, in the first study, participant gender was more balanced. Also, we did not measure perceived threat whereas research focusing on threat show that it is linked to extreme beliefs and behaviors (Mahfud, Badea, Guimond, Anier & Ernst-Vintila, 2016; Mahfud, Badea, Verkuyten, & Reynolds, 2018; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Maybe, LoS generates more extremism because it increases perceived threat in general, and not necessarily existential concerns as reflected by anomia levels. To test this, a future study should include a measure of perceived threat after the experimental manipulation.

Moreover, we are not able to determine the geographical origin of our sample because French legislation regarding the protection of individual privacy and personal data forbids it.

⁸ Les Echos, December, 7, 2018.

However, the YV movement is strongly supported by -mostly rural- residents from South Western, North Eastern and Eastern France (Algan et al., 2019). Political identity is anchored not only in social class but also in geographical location and people living in rural areas are likely to feel more ignored and left behind (Hochschild & Schlozman, 2017). They also consider that power, resources or even respect are not distributed equitably, with favouritism towards urban areas (Cramer, 2016). Thus, we cannot be sure whether our effects result from participants' place of residence or whether they are independent of it, though experimental results from the second study obtained on a highly socially integrated and urban population increases the robustness of our evidence (also, in Study 1 our effects remained significant when controlling for identification with the YV).

CONCLUSION

Both in the national media and during recent public debates, the Yellow Vests were presented as desperate outsiders motivated by economic needs who engage in violence out of 'envy for the riches'. Despite this presentation - considered controversial by members of this movement - the Yellow Vests continue to demonstrate, being now in their 15th act of protest, including episodes of violent outbursts. What the present study shows is that despite realistic concerns, violence in support of the Yellow Vests seems to be underlined by a motivation to restore dignity and a sense of purpose, control over one's life. Besides highlighting the existential motives at play behind YV related violence, our studies show how a polymorphous political movement like the YV is likely to attract radical outsiders not necessarily engaging for political reasons *per se*. We hope these results will contribute to extending SQT to including anomia as a key proximal predictor of political violence, and to highlight potent mechanisms to be tapped into by communication agents for better preventing risks of turmoil and protest violence in times of social crises.

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		Control <i>N</i> = 258 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	LoS <i>N</i> = 253 <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> -values (<i>df</i>)	<i>p</i> - value	<i>d</i> -effect size
<i>Demographics</i>	Age	19.51 (2.88)	19.26 (3.19)	.92 (509)	.36	.08
	% _{male}	10.9 (3.10)	7.9 (2.70)	1.16 (502)	.25	.10
	Income	1.79 (.86)	1.89 (.96)	1.23 (509)	.22	.11
	Id. w. YV	2.31 (1.47)	2.44 (1.64)	.96 (498)	.34	.09
<i>Ideology</i>	Pol. Ideology	4.33 (1.22)	4.23 (1.26)	.92 (509)	.36	.08
	Pol. Extremism	.97 (1.44)	1.03 (1.62)	.40 (509)	.69	.03
<i>Manipulation Checks</i>	Positive Affects	2.75 (.74)	2.67 (.79)	1.11 (491)	.27	.10
	Negative Affects	1.79 (.70)	2.01 (.86)	3.12 (492)	.002	.28**
	LoS	1.50 (.69)	1.81 (1.01)	4.00 (492)	< .001	.36***
<i>Mediator</i>	Anomia	2.07 (.59)	2.10 (.57)	.58 (498)	.56	.05
<i>Measures</i>	Activism Int.	1.78 (.74)	1.94 (.84)	2.18 (498)	.03	.20*
	Radicalism Int.	1.60 (.68)	1.69 (.78)	1.34 (498)	.18	.12
	Armed Struggle	1.18 (.44)	1.26 (.54)	2.00 (498)	.047	.18*
	N/N. Coll. Action	2.13 (1.33)	2.29 (1.46)	1.30 (498)	.19	.12

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of the experiment and between-condition differences (N=511).*

Note. Number between brackets represent *SDs*. **p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

Figure 1. Mediation models for Study 1 measures.* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, numbers represent *beta* coefficients for each path and characters in brackets indicate 95%CI bounds. Number between parentheses represent the total effect of Loss of Significance on the dependent variables. *IE* = indirect effect standardized *beta* coefficient.

Figure 2. Serial mediation models for Study 2 measures.* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, numbers represent *beta* coefficients for each path and characters in brackets indicate 95%CI bounds. *IE* = indirect effect standardized *beta* coefficient. *TE* = total effect of Loss of Significance on the dependent variables.

Appendix 1

Loss of Significance index

In your daily life, how often did you experience situations where...

1. *You felt humiliated*
2. *You felt ashamed*
3. *People laughed at you*

Middleton Alienation Scale

To what extent do you agree with the statement...

1. *I don't have enough possibilities to make an influence on solving the problems we all face today*
2. *I often feel lonely*
3. *Life has become so difficult that I often don't have any idea what I should do*
4. *In order to move forward people often have to break rules*
5. *I don't like my job.*

Activism Intentions Scale

To what extent do you agree with the statement...

1. *I could join the Yellow Vests*
2. *I could donate money to the Yellow Vests*
3. *I could give time to the Yellow Vests (e.g. write a petition, give away tracts...)*
4. *I could give one hour of my time to attend a meeting or a march to support the Yellow Vests*

Radicalism Intentions Scale

To what extent do you agree with the statement...

1. *I could still support the Yellow Vests even if they break the law sometimes*
2. *I could still support the Yellow Vests even if they sometimes use violence*
3. *I could attend a protest against the oppression of Yellow Vests even if I knew this protest could turn violent*
4. *I could attack law enforcement or security officers if I saw them brutalize Yellow Vests members*

Armed Struggle Intentions Scale

To what extent do you agree with the statement...

1. *I could engage in armed struggle for the Yellow Vests*
2. *I could take revenge on a member of a group which attacked the Yellow vests, even if I was not sure they were really guilty.*

Non-Normative Collective Action Scale

To what extent do you agree with the statement...

1. *I could barricade roundabouts*
2. *I could join barricading of the universities*
3. *I could attend barricades on highway toll booths*
4. *I could participate in filter checkpoint operations on the highways*
5. *I could participate in making highway tolls free to support the Yellow Vests*
6. *I could participate in maintaining the shut down of luxury shops in Paris*

7. *I could join the barricading of high-schools*

Political Ideology item

1. *Please select the number that best fits your political orientation*

Identification with the Yellow Vests item

1. *To what extent do you identify with the members of the Yellow Vests ?*

Income

What was your household's raw income last year ?

1. *Less than 30,000€*
2. *Between 31,000 and 60,000€*
3. *Between 61,000 and 90,000€*
4. *Between 91,000 and 120,000€*
5. *More than 120,000€*

PANAS items

This measure consists in a series of words describing different affects and different emotions. Think about you and the way you usually feel. Right now, to what extent de you feel...

1. *Motivated*
2. *Anxious*
3. *Excited*
4. *Annoyed*
5. *Strong*
6. *Guilty*
7. *Scared*
8. *Hostile*
9. *Enthusiast*
10. *Proud*
11. *Irritated*
12. *Alert*
13. *Inspired*
14. *Nervous*
15. *Determined*
16. *Vigilant*
17. *Agitated*
18. *Active*
19. *Fearful*

Appendix 2

Table 1. *Summary of Correlation Analyses between LoS, Anomia, Activism-Radicalism Intentions, Intentions to engage in Armed Struggle, Non-Normative Collective Action, Identification with the Yellow Vests, Political Ideology, Political Extremism, Age, Gender and Income (Study 1; N = 776).*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<i>LoS</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Anomia</i>	.31***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Activism Int.</i>	.08*	.34***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Radicalism Int.</i>	.09*	.46***	.72***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Armed Struggle Int.</i>	.06	.34***	.55***	.67***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>N.Norm.Coll. Act.</i>	.10**	.42***	.76***	.72***	.53***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Id. w. YV</i>	.05	.41***	.79***	.66***	.56***	.72***	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Political Id.</i>	.00	-.14***	-.17***	-.22***	.05	-.26***	-.05	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Political Ext.</i>	.03	.14***	.13***	.23***	.27***	.17***	.15***	.28***	-	-	-	-
<i>Income</i>	-.13***	-.23***	-.14***	-.16***	-.17***	-.24***	-.23***	.07	-.09*	-	-	-
<i>Age</i>	-.17***	.04	.32***	.21***	.32***	.25***	.33***	.07	.09*	.01	-	-
<i>Gender</i>	.02	-.02	.03	.12**	.10*	.06	.01	.07	.12**	.06	.15***	-

Note. Numbers represent Pearson correlation coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. *Summary of Correlation Analyses between LoS, Anomia, Activism-Radicalism Intentions, Intentions to engage in Armed Struggle, Non-Normative Collective Action, Identification with the Yellow Vests, Political Ideology, Political Extremism, Age, Gender and Income (Study 2; N = 511).*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
<i>LoS</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Anomia</i>	.39***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Activism Int.</i>	.13**	.13**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Radicalism Int.</i>	.18***	.22***	.70***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Armed Struggle Int.</i>	.17***	.09	.41***	.57***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>N.Norm. Coll. Act.</i>	.18***	.22***	.73***	.66***	.45***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Id. w. YV</i>	.07	.14***	.70***	.57***	.28***	.60***	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Political Id.</i>	-.15***	-.08	-.27***	-.28***	-.13**	-.27***	-.27***	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Political Ext.</i>	.08	.08	.12**	.18***	.11*	.16***	.09*	-.22***	-	-	-	-
<i>Income</i>	-.08	-.13**	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.05	-.13**	-.02	.06	-	-	-
<i>Age</i>	.10*	-.03	.06	.05	-.03	.12**	.04	-.04	.03	-.01	-	-
<i>Gender</i>	.02	.03	-.03	.11**	.01	.07	-.01	-.03	.09*	-.04	.07	-

Note. Numbers represent Pearson correlation coefficients. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.