

Anti-Hollande sentiments have fuelled the popularity of France's Manif pour Tous movement

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*In May, France signed gay marriage into law, a move that was met with mass protests from the right wing Manif pour Tous movement. How has this movement met with such success in a country that is predominantly tolerant in sexual matters? **John Gaffney** argues that the movement's success has fed on the negative sentiment towards the French President, François Hollande, and fears from the far right that gay marriage legislation could lead to even more dramatic social and cultural changes. He writes that the Manif pour Tous' followers may yet flock to Marine Le Pen's far right Front National, which will cause further headaches for an already beleaguered Hollande.*



On 18 May, gay marriage became law in France. The movement against the law, however, has been a stunning political success. Not in terms of outcomes: the law was passed. But in a country that measures something's political significance in its demonstrations, rallies, and ability to mobilise, the *Manif pour Tous* is the most successful right-wing phenomenon in decades.

Four major marches in Paris between November and May, large demonstrations in a host of other cities and towns, daily and 'spontaneous' lightning demos throughout the period, and a media presence worthy of a Coca Cola or Nike advertising campaign, put millions of people onto the streets. For the final demonstration on 26 May, 500 buses and a dozen trains were hired to transport demonstrators from the provinces to Paris. Three massive processions from various points in the city each converged on and filled to overflowing the open space of the Place des Invalides. And this was after the bill had passed into law.



Manif Pour Tous march Credit: Jean-François Gornet (Creative Commons BY SA)

Who are they? Right-wing, yes, for the most part. Quite a few swivel-eyed loons. All the violent far right groups you can think of, of which there are dozens – Génération Identitaire, the Gud, for example. But to concentrate on the

movement's radical elements for an explanation of what has happened would be to miss the movement's significance. The movement has its 'Neuilly' aspect; Barbour jackets and Burberry scarves aplenty; and the deep involvement of Roman Catholic Church organisations – of the official 37 organisations constituting the *Manif pour Tous*, 15 were phantom organisations that didn't really exist and most of the rest were linked to the Church. (one of the most prominent, *Civitas*, even the Church shies away from). Along with the fundamentalist Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, and Jewish organisations, even some Buddhists have supported the movement. But for the most part it was families – and in fact children by the thousands. And they were peaceful; they came, they demonstrated, they went home. Most of the arrests on 26 May (350 in all) were on the edges of the demo or because of fighting between the police and hard right groups afterwards.

The Home Secretary, Manuel Valls, told families not to come for their own safety. They came in their thousands. For the 26 May demo there were 4,500 police on duty. We should add to this an equivalent number of the *Manif*'s own security and crowd control people, many of whom kept the hard right groups away throughout the day. That's 9,000 people. It is true that the leadership of the movement has radicalised, sweeping its main spokeswoman, the eccentric but media friendly Frigide Barjot, to one side. But not since the 1930s has France seen its right materialise in this way. For the last 50 years, the French right has always been behind on everything progressive: decriminalising homosexuality, abortion laws, divorce, contraception, equal rights, and civil partnerships. And it has gained nothing from these rearguard struggles (Giscard's reforms were only passed because the left voted for them). That isn't the case with this protest. The large demonstrations have awoken or reawoken a [Girondin](#) France alongside the hard right. Revolutionary *bonnets rouges*, calls for liberty, and even talk of the [Vendée genocide](#) of 1793 have featured in these demos. *Tout et n'importe quoi* has poured into this protest movement, whose dynamic isn't really about gay marriage at all. So why has this dreadful mess happened, and what will be the consequences?

Overall France is not anti-gay, probably less so than most countries. And there is a general tolerance on sexual and 'lifestyle' matters. The national majority in favour of gay marriage is significant. But the *Manif pour Tous* was fuelled by two things beyond its extreme right connections.

First, the movement has flourished in a national climate of utter exasperation with the government and the President. François Hollande is the most unpopular President France has ever had. Most of the French public look at the social protest and think 'serves you right'. Public hostility to the *Manif* has been muted because it is an anti-Hollande movement. And if there were a true anti-Hollande movement it would contain about three-quarters of the country. Many are furious that the gay marriage bill has taken up so many hundreds of parliamentary hours to the detriment of finding solutions to the financial crisis the country is in.

Second, the French don't know anything about Gender Theory. No one has read Judith Butler. What we might call political homosexuality, Gay Pride, is seen by many in provincial France as an Anglo-Saxon import. Over and above this, the legislation was seen by many as a Trojan horse for IVF-for-all and surrogacy, and therefore, for many, the commodification of children (and because of changes to the *Code Civil*, the wiping from their memory of their 'origins'), and dramatic social and cultural changes as a result. It won't have dramatic effects at all, not at the wider social level, but it is a highly emotional subject in a country that sees itself as holding children and childhood as sacred.

The left has a large responsibility in allowing all of these things to coalesce into major social protest. All of the progressive legislation mentioned above came as a result of struggle, but also of debate. And on this issue there has been no debate. Over the last ten years the Socialists have debated nothing of interest, instead simply fighting one another like cats in a bag over who was going to be their presidential candidate. Hollande promised to heal the wounds of Sarkozy's divisive rule, yet today France has never been so divided.

At one level, in his wildest dreams Hollande could not have hoped for more – a right-wing movement like the *Manif pour Tous* that has sent the right into turmoil, and has seen far-right rioters appearing everywhere and smashing everything. Surely, this could only profit the left. Well, that would be a serious miscalculation. It is true that the mainstream right was divided by the protest. It got involved, but has been riven with internal division as a result, and

is effectively leaderless.

Marine le Pen and the *Front National*, on the other hand, have profited greatly – and will do so even more in the future. Officially, the FN did not associate with the protest. Individual members did, and many of the extremist groups have clear – or, rather, unclear – links to the FN. But the political constituency that the *Manif* has created may flock to the FN in the future. The political harvest for us all may be bitter weeds.

In the space of a few weeks, the social protest of provincial France has (re)created *la France profonde* as a political entity. One of the consequences of this is that French politics will soon take another forceful and unpredictable turn. Another, sadly, is that the left will now be extremely reluctant to introduce bold and progressive reforms for the foreseeable future. One can only hope that it uses the time for reflection and debate about the kind of society we want to live in.

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