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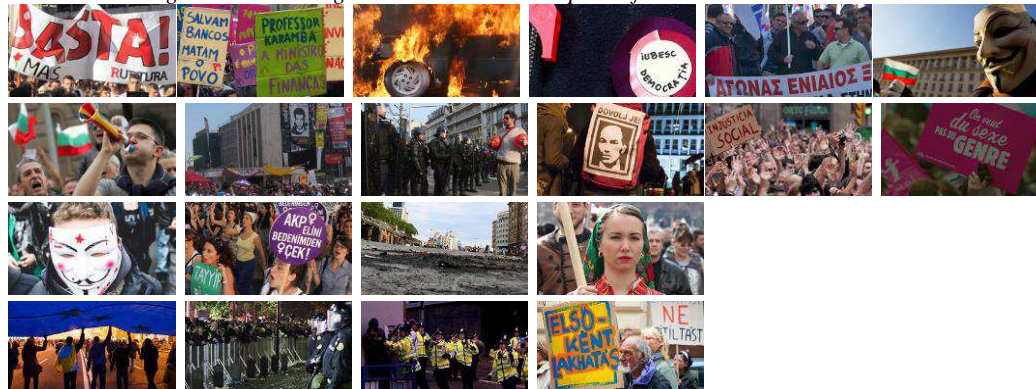
# The French Spring of la Manif pour tous: Conservative Protests against Same-Sex Marriage and Adoption in France

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by Léa Morabito

On September 14th and 15th 2013, *la Manif pour tous*, a French protest group fighting against same-sex marriage, organized a summer school near Paris to celebrate a year of mobilization against the Taubira law. This law, named after the French Minister of Justice, Christiane Taubira, passed in April 2013, legalizing same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex married couples. In August, *le Printemps français*, another group protesting against the law, had also organized a summer school, which lasted a week and took place in a castle in the countryside. The summer schools were opportunities to take stock of the protests organized for the past year, but also to plan new offensives against the socialist government

and its projects dealing with family and education. These groups' new *bêtes noires* are now the extension of medically assisted procreation to lesbian couples – which was excluded from the Taubira law but is demanded by LGBT groups – and what conservative groups call 'gender ideology', especially at school. These conservative groups denounce the promotion of sex and sexual undifferentiation leading to the normalization of homosexuality, transgenderism and queerness.

In spite of their failure to prevent the passing of the law, *la Manif pour tous* and *le Printemps français* display a willingness to keep on protesting and consider their year-lasting mobilization to be a victory. Their protests have been extensively covered by the media, who sometimes mocked the mobilizations and their leaders, but also showed a real surprise and interest when faced with these unusual conservative protests. They are also a puzzling object for researchers interested in social movements and protests because of their extent and the repertoires of contention they use, but also because of the socio-political characteristics of protestors who have not taken to the streets until recently. Moreover, studying these mobilizations also leads to new questions concerning the religious and political networks with which they have links.

The first rally against the bill was organized in several cities on October 23rd 2012, by *Alliance Vita*, a pro-life organization founded by the Catholic politician Christine Boutin, well-known for her opposition to the PACS bill of 1999, which legalized domestic partnership for same-sex couples as well as for heterosexual couples. Ironically, this rally has since become famous because of the photograph of two young women kissing in front of the protestors. The first massive demonstration against the bill occurred on November 17th 2012, and was organized by the new action group *la Manif pour tous*, led by the controversial humorist and columnist Frigide Barjot, who is close to some right-wing and Catholic networks. This demonstration aimed to celebrate and protect the complementarity of men and women as the foundation of filiation and family. This quite festive pink, white, and blue atmosphere has remained the trademark of *la Manif pour tous*. Before the beginning of the march, Frigide Barjot explained that pink balloons and flags symbolized women, blue ones symbolized men, and white ones symbolized homosexuals and lesbians. She claimed it was a way to tell the latter that they were loved by protestors, who were not homophobic but rather wanted to protect the very idea of 'family' and 'civilization'. A day later, the traditionalist Catholics forming the Civitas group also demonstrated against the bill. This led to some violent confrontations between the protestors and Femen activists who showed up as half-naked nuns in order to disrupt the march.

By the fall of 2012, those who opposed the bill had already started to organize. Since then, many demonstrations have been held at national or local levels before and even after the passing of the law. For instance, Civitas organized street prayers in front of the Senate while the law was debated, but in the meantime *la Manif pour tous* was also holding its own rally. *La Manif pour tous* then took lead of the protests against the bill. Not only did it impose its image and style, but it also developed a real convening power as well as a structured organization. It is necessary to underline that this collective, often called a 'nebula' by the media, has evolved during the months of its mobilization and is a complicated object to define and describe.

The collective gathered 37 associations in March 2013. There are currently 33 of them. One noticeable evolution of this formation was the split between *la Manif pour tous* and *le Printemps français* after the demonstration of March 24th. Some protestors tried to reach the

Champs Elysées in spite of the prefecture's ban, and violent confrontations took place between protestors and the police. Frigide Barjot refused to back up the protestors involved in these events, whereas Beatrice Bourges – the founder of *le Printemps français* and then still spokesperson of *la Manif pour tous* – denounced the abuse of the police and decided to quit the collective to assume a more radical opposition to the bill. Another shift happened when Frigide Barjot quit at the end of May. Her declarations in favor of civil union for same-sex couples contradicted the claims of the movement. She founded a new organization called *l'Avenir pour tous*, but *la Manif pour tous* remains at the head of the mobilization with the strongest convening power, identity, and visibility.

Moreover, the multiplication of actions and sub-groups of protestors with their own identity tended to weaken the boundaries of the organizations. For instance, Hommen, a group of young men who protest bare-chested and wearing white masks, was founded after the March 24th march, when *le Printemps français* left *la Manif pour tous*. There is also the group *les Veilleurs*, which is very close to *la Manif pour tous*, who gathered to sing and read texts after the demonstrations that took place during the debates held by the National Assembly. *Les Veilleurs* then extended their actions to different cities during the spring and summer.

This diversification and multiplication of groups and forms of protests tends to complicate the fieldwork and the observation of these protests. Indeed, when researching these events, one had to be available – *la Manif pour tous* was marching every evening during part of the parliamentary debates – but also very reactive, as many actions of those different groups were planned at the last minute and announced by email and on social networks.

Another difficulty in conducting fieldwork had to do with the violent events that happened after several demonstrations since March 24th and the presence of the police. Some protestors assaulted police and journalists at the end of demonstrations that took place near the National Assembly while politicians were debating the law. Some protestors even assaulted the security service of *la Manif pour tous*, ensured by voluntary demonstrators, who were still standing between protestors and the police at the end of the demonstration on April 18th. The presence of far-right protestors needs to be investigated so as to better understand these events, but other demonstrators seemed to have been involved too. Moreover, when the demonstration was over and people were supposed to have left, many stayed behind, and several groups discussed the need for more radical actions. Not far from the confrontation between protestors and policemen, the sitting of *les Veilleurs* was also closely surrounded by police who tried to make them leave. The growing number of actions against the bill led to increased policing of protests, a factor which is complicated to deal with as a researcher. Some actions – even actions such as sittings that didn't involve violence – led to the arrest of protestors and to police custodies. In reaction to this, the movement emphasized its pacifist dimension, and protestors presented themselves as martyrs and victims of state violence.





This diversification of actions contributing to a long-lasting mobilization as well as this pacifist and festive image are truly new in the context of such a conservative movement. This can seem puzzling for researchers used to progressive social movements – especially in France, a country with a strong tradition of social protest linked to trade unions and left-wing activism. Here the social structure of participation is quite unusual. Demonstrations brought together mostly upper-class white people. The real diversity of the movement was generational. Indeed, many young people got involved in the different groups, but many older people were also marching, and there were even some families with young children. These demonstrators were quite unfamiliar with protest culture and practices. At the first demonstrations, instructions that had also been sent by email and made available on the website of *Manif pour tous* were read to the crowd before marches. One suggestion was to walk far enough from the other demonstrators so that everybody could be counted. The organizers underlined that the CGT (one of the largest confederations of trade unions) did so in their own marches. A learning process thus took place, spanning several months, and investigating the political socialization processes it involves would be a promising research topic. This learning process and the creation of new protest codes and practices are also linked to an organizational process. *La Manif pour tous* is indeed organized at different levels all over France and even abroad. Furthermore, it is also possible to analyze the organizational structure through the repartition of responsibilities and powers, and it would be interesting to study the role of the communication pole in the framing process.

And yet, the apparent originality and novelty of this movement must not make us forget about its continuity with past conservative movements and the fact that it is embedded in networks that are already structured and have a long history. Indeed, among associations that are part of *la Manif pour tous*, some are *ad hoc* organizations with very few members, created in order to fight the bill, but others are directly linked to Catholic networks. The organization can thus rely on Catholic movements such as *la Confédération Nationale des Associations Familiales Catholiques*, but also on pro-life groups. Mobilization against the Taubira law has been activated through these networks and may have even reinforced them.

My last point is about the link of these mobilizations to politics. Just as it claims its independence from any religion, *la Manif pour Tous* defines itself as an apolitical movement.

However, it is very interesting to study articulations between social movements and institutionalized politics, especially their relationship with right-wing political parties. This area has yet to be explored by researchers working on social movements and those interested in political parties. For instance, a collective of ‘mayors for childhood’ is directly involved in the movement. There is also a group of right-wing parliamentarians mobilized against the bill: *l’Entente parlementaire pour la famille*, whose members were very active during parliamentary debates and often joined street demonstrations. Indeed, right-wing political parties opposed the bill in Parliament and in the streets. Some members of the UMP (the center-right party, Union for a Popular Movement) and of the FN (the far-right National Front) joined the demonstrations, and Jean-François Copé, president of the UMP, even called for his supporters to demonstrate. Same-sex marriage thus polarized the government and the opposition, as well as the left and the right. Given the municipal and European elections that will take place in 2014, it seems necessary to pay more attention to the potential evolution of the relationship between politics and conservative movements.

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