

## Angry French students take to the streets. British students don't – and I think I know why

By Kitty Sayers, *The Guardian*, Oct 10<sup>th</sup>, 2026

I grew up in France, where all children are taught about the revolutionary roots of their nation and what the state owes its citizens. The lessons leave their mark

Young British people have plenty to be angry about. Crushing student debt, private-school privilege, a housing market they can't enter. Yet unlike their French counterparts, they have little tradition of turning that frustration into collective action. I grew up in France as a Briton, and for years I have watched my French friends do something my British ones never seem to: take to the streets. [...] So what makes the French so different?

First, there's the history. France's republic was born of insurrection and has never forgotten it. French pupils learn that protest, uprising and rioting are the origin story of their freedoms, so these methods are championed in promoting change. We grew up in school with the idea that if you don't like something, you have the power to change it. The language of rights, citizenship and collective power is woven into French education. The French Revolution appears in the curriculum twice, for pupils aged 12 and then again at 16; the student protests of 1968 are taught at age 14 and again at 17.

Protesting is taught as a legally framed fundamental right and a civic responsibility. Of course, with *lycéens* not yet being old enough to vote, protest is the next best thing.

In the final year of *lycée*, pupils study Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social* (The Social Contract), which argues that citizens should only surrender their unrestricted natural liberty in exchange for civil and moral freedoms. You give up your individual interests for the *volonté générale* (general will) – put simply, you pay heavy taxes and in return you expect the country to work. That bargain is how the French understand their relationship with the state. When the government raises the retirement age, lets electricity bills soar or cuts school budgets, that is seen as a breach of the social contract. Protest is the automatic response.

Britons, on the other hand, are subjects of the UK and are characterised more by an American-style individualism and a desire to live and let live. There is less collective spirit. Britain has an extraordinary history of protest, spanning Peterloo, the Chartists, the suffragettes and the poll tax riots, but there is arguably a different cultural relationship to these events. They can be remembered as stand-alone episodes and interruptions to the national story rather than as the story itself. The Thatcher era also did permanent damage to unions, contributing to the British public being a grumbling but compliant one, lacking in organising power.

Because these values are ingrained across French society, and in every generation, the student protesters are emboldened by the firefighters, nurses, lawyers and teachers who have joined them in solidarity. Across social media, you can see these moments of support and unity.

[...] Students in France are not necessarily more political than their British counterparts – young British people are active, but tend to take part in established and larger movements such as Extinction Rebellion or the Gaza protests rather than initiate protests themselves. The biggest difference lies in the French willingness to take to the streets, suddenly and en-masse. Unlike in the UK, the state is something the French are taught to engage with as

citizens, and to challenge when necessary. If anything, the *lycéens* are just being good students.

**The violence sweeping France was never really about schools,** By Thomas Chatterton Williams, *The Atlantic*, Oct 7<sup>th</sup>, 2026

**Much of the protesting by students has become an exercise in nihilistic resentment.**

The French protest too much. Over the past two decades, paroxysms of rage, violence, rioting, arson, and looting have regularly seized the nation, imposing enormous costs on civil society. During the 2005 *banlieue* riots, the deaths of two boys evading police sparked three weeks of severe property destruction and violence. In the years since, pandemonium has broken out over veil bans, the commemoration of NATO's anniversary, the legalization of same-sex marriage, even the arrival of ride-sharing apps.

Today France is once again at the mercy of protesters. Since late last month, student protests have paralyzed the nation's school system. They began on September 17 at a high school outside Paris, in Créteil[...]. This triggered a domino effect in which students across the country demonstrated in solidarity, calling out similar problems in their own schools. Social media supercharged the process[...], creating a spectacle of revolt that spreads online and through text chats that protestors use to mobilize.

According to *Le Monde*, nearly a third of France's 3,700 high schools had been disrupted by October 1, a number that has almost certainly grown. The largest demonstrations so far took place yesterday, extending to 40 cities and drawing an estimated 250,000 participants. My daughter's junior-high school in Paris has been affected too. "Tensions ran high at times," read an email from administrators to parents, "particularly due to numerous arson attempts by individuals from outside the school." Since then, by order of the prefecture, all instruction has stopped.

[...]For some time now, there has been an existential crisis at the heart of French life, rooted in a pervasive sense that the future will never equal the past, that the state cannot achieve what its citizens expect. The national pie is often seen as zero-sum, which explains why so many constituencies, from retirees to high schoolers, refuse to give an inch. Their anger accumulates, then it boils over. And the government is either unwilling or unable to contain it. [...]

Meanwhile, racists and propagandists have been quick to blame the savagery on Islam, accusing unassimilated immigrant populations of undermining French society and Western values. [...] But in reality, the protesters are an extremely diverse coalition. [...]One could make the case that these mindless acts of rebellion are evidence that immigrant groups have actually assimilated quite well, given France's long and bloody history of revolt, stretching back through May '68 to the French Revolution that overthrew the king. [...]