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## France's Yellow Vests: Lessons from a Revolt

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## Introduction by Michael C. Behrent, Appalachian State University

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In the ongoing saga of contemporary populism, France's Yellow Vest movement has sounded something like the other shoe dropping. In 2016, Brexit and Donald Trump's election shattered prevailing political orthodoxies by mobilizing populations around a potent cocktail of xenophobia, protectionism, and sovereignty. Forces with a family resemblance to these movements are calling the shots in Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Yet while France had for years been a major breeding ground of far-right ideas, it seemed, in its May 2017 presidential election, to dodge the populist bullet: Emmanuel Macron's triumph over Marine Le Pen was widely touted as a victory of hope, tolerance, and internationalism over fear, hate, and nationalist retrenchment.

Of course, the idea of a Macronian settlement to the 'social fracture' that has haunted France for decades always seemed a little forced. However impressive his meteoric rise, Macron's landslide victory owed much to the fact that he went head-to-head with a rival whose political reach was limited (although expanding). For all his celebrated brilliance and charisma, his image was marked, from early on, by incidents in which he hectoring unemployed protestors and glibly mused about the fate of 'people who are nothing,' even as he waxed utopian about a France in which a thousand start-ups would bloom. Reforms benefiting the affluent constituencies that supported him (notably the abolition of the wealth tax) and a lack of urgency in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations were signs that Macron was hardly the consensus president he purported to be.

Like a populist boomerang, the Yellow Vests struck France unsuspectingly, just when it seemed to have ducked the furies raging in other countries. Last November, the movement stirred to life as a spontaneous reaction to a gas tax increase imposed by Macron's government. The protestors consisted largely of men and women living in France's exurbs and rural areas who struggle to make ends meet, who saw this tax hike as the last in a long series of hardships and indignities they have endured. As their symbol, they adopted the *gilets jaunes*—the yellow vests—that the government had declared obligatory for all drivers, thus, in a classic revolutionary gesture, transforming a mandate from the state into an emblem of revolt. In addition to occupying *ronds-points* (roundabouts)—the upheaval's other major symbol—the protestors organized regular weekend marches on Paris, targeting the capital's tony neighborhoods and frequently clashing with the police. By December, Macron felt enough pressure that he rescinded his gas tax increase and proposed conciliatory measures, including a higher minimum wage. He also promised a 'great national debate' in the new year. Yet the movement continued, and the weekly demonstrations in Paris—dubbed 'acts'—seemed to have become a quasi-permanent feature of French political life. For 'Act 22,' held last April 13, the Yellow Vests still managed to draw 30,000 protestors into the streets, including 5,000 in Paris.

So extensively has the movement been commented upon that a literature review of sorts can already be assembled. Perhaps the central debate concerns the nature of the social cleavage that the Yellow Vests have brought into focus. Broadly speaking, the movement has highlighted the fault line around which most populist movements have organized themselves: that between the 'people below' and the 'elites above.' For the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, the essence of populism lies in accentuating the differences between

the “people” and the “elites” to empower the former.<sup>1</sup> This, she maintains, is precisely what the Yellow Vests have attempted to do.<sup>2</sup>

But who are the “people” thus conceived? Mouffe believes that this concept’s appeal lies in its ability to amalgamate a wide range of interests and identities. Yet many commentators have tried to explain the Yellow Vests in terms of more specific fractures running through French society. For some, the relevant cleavage is primarily economic. Thus Julia Cagé, an economist, states that “the ‘Yellow Vest’ crisis is a crisis in purchasing power.”<sup>3</sup> This situation degenerated due to Macron’s economic policies, including such measures as a reduction in housing assistance and the abolition of the wealth tax. As a result, the purchasing power of the wealthiest has received a boost, while for everyone else, it has stagnated or declined. Support for Macron, moreover, breaks down very precisely along class lines.

Others see the relevant cleavage as geographic rather than economic. Alternatively, one could say that geographic divisions have become reliable indicators of economic ones. This is the thesis that has long been advanced by the geographer Christophe Guilluy, whose books have acquired a prophetic aura in the Yellow-Vest era. For Guilluy, the major rift running through contemporary society is territorial: it separates cultural and economic elites dwelling in large cities that are plugged into and largely benefit from the global economy from the working classes comprising “peripheral France,” who are primarily located in smaller towns and rural areas that are economically stagnant and severed from global networks. At first glance, the Yellow Vest movement seems to match Guilluy’s analysis perfectly. Not only did Macron’s gas tax crystallize the anxieties of a population that, due to its location, depends heavily on cars, but the Yellow Vest demonstrations in Paris attempted to turn the tables on the scorn they believe has been heaped on exurban and rural populations. For the Yellow Vests, moreover, Macron personally exemplifies the economic advantages and cultural self-satisfaction of globalization’s triumphant “winners.”<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars, however, reject Guilluy’s sharp distinction between urban elites and “peripheral France” (which dovetails nicely with Mouffe’s distinction between those “above” and those “below”) as a misguided simplification that obscures more than it clarifies. Aurélien Delpirou, for instance, points out that many of the Yellow Vests are located in the greater Paris region (the country’s most highly urbanized area), that so-called peripheral France is socially diverse and includes economically vibrant areas, and that these regions have, over the long term, received significant investment from the state. The problems the Yellow Vests have raised eschew facile generalizations: they are the result of complex trends such as peri-urbanization, transportation

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<sup>1</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe, “Gilets jaunes: ‘Une réaction à l’explosion des inégalités entre les super riches et les classes moyennes,’” *Libération*, 3 December 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/12/03/gilets-jaunes-une-reaction-a-l-explosion-des-inegalites-entre-les-super-riches-et-les-classes-moyenn\\_1695788](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/12/03/gilets-jaunes-une-reaction-a-l-explosion-des-inegalites-entre-les-super-riches-et-les-classes-moyenn_1695788)

<sup>3</sup> Julia Cagé, “La crise des ‘gilets jaunes’ est une crise du pouvoir d’achat,” *Le Monde*, 3 December 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/03/julia-cage-la-crise-des-gilets-jaunes-est-une-crise-du-pouvoir-d-achat\\_5391851\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/03/julia-cage-la-crise-des-gilets-jaunes-est-une-crise-du-pouvoir-d-achat_5391851_3232.html).

<sup>4</sup> Christophe Guilluy’s main works are *Fractures françaises* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), *La France périphérique. Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), and *Le Crépuscule de la France d’en haut* (Paris: Flammarion, 2016).

policies aimed at facilitating travel within the peripheries, and recognizing the distinct interests of peri-urban populations. Those who advance “simplistic or unfounded sociological arguments” rather than “well-argued analysis and reasoning,” Delpirou cautions, “run the risk of overlooking the real issues, and even fanning the movement’s flames.”<sup>5</sup>

Some have emphasized the political divisions that exist within the Yellow Vest movement—between those elements within it that are firmly on the left (supporting Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s *La France insoumise*) and those in the orbit of the far right (notably Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement nationale*). As one scholar notes, the movement “oscillates between national revolution and social revolution.”<sup>6</sup> The way in which contemporary anti-elitism can provide a platform for emotions and rhetoric that recall a darker era was on display at the Yellow Vest demonstration held in Paris on February 16, when the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut was the target of violent anti-Semitic slurs. Several government figures (notably Prime Minister Édouard Philippe) denounced the movement’s racist and anti-Semitic tendencies. But at the same time, politicians associated with *La France insoumise* accused the government of “instrumentalizing” the anti-Semitism charge to discredit the protestors. Some of the Yellow Vests have explicitly denounced anti-Semitism. But while tensions between these tendencies are discernable, they have, at least for now, been overcome by the Yellow Vests’ insistence on their unity vis-à-vis the political establishment.

Another view is that the Yellow Vests cannot be defined by any traditional cleavage, as the concerns they articulate are still inchoate. Their goal, moreover, seems precisely to elaborate a new political language and project. Their activism is premised on a politics of recognition that characterizes many movements described as ‘populist.’ Those who participate in Yellow Vest actions see themselves as an ignored and invisible population, accustomed to being humiliated and patronized by those in power. They are tired of endless ‘Macronsplaining.’ As Gérard Noiriel notes, the “denunciation of the contempt of the powerful always recurs in great popular struggles, and the Yellow Vests simply confirm this rule.”<sup>7</sup> Other have seen the Yellow Vest as a response to the polarization of the job market between jobs with high “added value” and less “productive,” poorly remunerated service-sector jobs (issues explored by Patrick Artus and Marie-Paul Virard in their recent essay *Et si les salariés se révoltaient?*<sup>8</sup>). According to one commentator, the Yellow Vests refuse a “coldly rational and disembodied worldview, in which everything revolves around efficiency, returns, [and]

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<sup>5</sup> Aurélien Delpirou, “The Color of France’s ‘Yellow Vests,’” trans. Michael C. Behrent, *Books & Ideas*, December 17, 2018, <https://booksandideas.net/The-color-of-France-s-yellow-vests.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvain Bouloque, “Les ‘gilets jaunes’ oscillent entre révolution nationale et révolution sociale,” interview with Marc-Olivier Bherer, *Le Monde*, 8 December 2019, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/10/sylvain-bouloque-les-gilets-jaunes-oscillent-entre-revolution-nationale-et-revolution-sociale\\_5395152\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/10/sylvain-bouloque-les-gilets-jaunes-oscillent-entre-revolution-nationale-et-revolution-sociale_5395152_3232.html).

<sup>7</sup> Gérard Noiriel, “Les ‘gilets jaunes’ remplacent la question sociale au centre du jeu politique,” interview with Nicolas Truong, *Le Monde*, 27 November 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/11/27/gerard-noiriel-les-gilets-jaunes-replacent-la-question-sociale-au-centre-du-jeu-politique\\_5389042\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/11/27/gerard-noiriel-les-gilets-jaunes-replacent-la-question-sociale-au-centre-du-jeu-politique_5389042_3232.html).

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Artus and Marie-Paul Virard, *Et si les salariés se révoltaient?* (Paris: Fayard, 2018).

productivity, as if a country or life could be reduced to an Excel chart.”<sup>9</sup> Such post-materialist concerns as meaning, recognition, and dignity thus seem as central to Yellow Vest discourse as purchasing power and improved public services.

Many see the Yellow Vests not simply as the product of social divisions, but as a challenge for French democracy. In many respects, the movement is the result of a crisis of representation. France’s political class recruits almost entirely from society’s more affluent sectors. Macron’s election seems only to have accentuated this trend. As philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa notes, “for the first time since 1848, there is not one authentic worker” in the French parliament (which, like the president, was elected in 2017).<sup>10</sup> The sense that some constituencies lack any meaningful political representation explains why the Yellow Vests have called for such innovative measures (for France, anyway) as referendums by citizens’ initiative. Moreover, French democracy appears all the more wanting in light of the extraordinary articulateness that the Yellow Vests have displayed on a mass level, thanks largely to social media. Noiriél observes that the “ease with which working-class leaders express themselves before the cameras at present is the result of a twofold process of democratization: an increase in the level of education and the diffusion of techniques of audiovisual communication to all levels of society.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Pierre Rosanvallon concludes that the Yellow Vests testify to the fact that, “for the first time in history of our society, public opinion has become a material reality ... [D]irect speech imposes itself as a democratic form.” This is why, he contends, democracy must take a “narrative” turn: understanding the stories people tell about themselves has become as central to politics as representing their interests.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, many have wondered where the Yellow Vest movement belongs in France’s venerable tradition of social and political protest. Though historical comparisons have abounded, there also exist good reasons to stress the movement’s unprecedented character. The revolt has been described as a latter-day *jacquerie* (a term for medieval and early modern peasant uprisings), yet the demographics of the Yellow Vests are not entirely rural and their movement quickly lost its spontaneous character. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner compared the Yellow Vests to the fascist leagues that attempted to overthrow the Third Republic during the riots of February 6, 1934. The Yellow Vests, however, are by no means anti-republican, and Castaner’s remark was widely dismissed as an attempt to tarnish the movement by equating it with fascism. The way the Yellow Vests arose out of nowhere to become the dominant issue in French politics has invited comparisons to May ’68: but the *rond-point* demonstrators can hardly be described as a youth movement; and if one takes ’68’s work stoppages as the point of comparison, it must be recognized, as Daniel Gordon notes in his contribution to this forum, that at no point have the Yellow Vests been on strike. Perhaps the most frequently invoked historical analogy is *Poujadisme*, in reference to the shopkeepers’ revolt led by Pierre Poujade that

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<sup>9</sup> Brice Teinturier, *Le Monde*, “es ‘gilets jaunes’ se sont sentis ignorés,” interview with Gérard Courtois, *Le Monde*, 8 December 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/12/08/les-gilets-jaunes-se-sont-sentis-ignores\\_5394523\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/12/08/les-gilets-jaunes-se-sont-sentis-ignores_5394523_823448.html).

<sup>10</sup> Jean Claude Michéa, interview with *Dissent*, forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> Noiriél, “Les ‘gilets jaunes’ replacent la question sociale.”

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, “La révolte des ‘gilets jaunes’ révèle le basculement dans un nouvel âge du social,” interview with Nicolas Truong, *Le Monde*, 8 December 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/08/pierre-rosanvallon-la-revolte-des-gilets-jaunes-revele-le-basculement-dans-un-nouvel-age-du-social\\_5394432\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/12/08/pierre-rosanvallon-la-revolte-des-gilets-jaunes-revele-le-basculement-dans-un-nouvel-age-du-social_5394432_3232.html).

unsettled France in the 1950s. Like the Yellow Vests, the Poujadists were rooted in the lower middle class, rejected unjust and meddlesome tax burdens, and expressed ambivalence about modernity. But after first calling itself apolitical, the Poujadist movement transformed itself to a political party with far-right tendencies (one of its first elected officials being Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National Front's longtime leader). So far, the Yellow Vests have resisted attempts at 'political recuperation.' Moreover, as some have pointed out, the Yellow Vests include many salaried workers, whereas the Poujadists were largely self-employed. These historical comparisons have served primarily to highlight everything that makes the Yellow Vest revolt groundbreaking.

The contributors to this forum address these and other issues raised by the Yellow Vest movement. Valérie Charolles connects the movement's sociological identity to its implications for French democracy. She sees the Yellow Vests as a reaction to thirty years of neoliberal policies that have segregated French society into economic enclaves, in which those "above" have little contact—let alone regard—for those "below." France, she believes, must recast its democracy to ensure that it serves the interests of the *polis*, rather than a narrow elite, notably by abandoning constitutional provisions that make the president virtually unaccountable to voters for five-year stretches. While recognizing that the movement is broadly working and lower-middle class, Emile Chabal maintains that what really unites the Yellow Vests is their political views: a disdain for Macron and the state (notably its tax policies), as well as a deep sense that society has given them a raw deal. He argues that the movement's true significance lies in the "dynamic and fraught relationship between state and citizens" the Yellow Vests have brought to light, and which is evident in their wariness of the very state they expect to redress their grievances. Chabal suspects that the movement presages an era of sustained political dissatisfaction. Finally, for Daniel Gordon, any interpretation of the Yellow Vest movement will miss its mark if it downplays its members' concern with driving. The Yellow Vests represent a "popular cross-class coalition of drivers ... whose moral economy is located at the petrol or diesel pump, in a defense of entitlement to what they have called 'our gas'." This mobilization in the name of a fair price for fuel—which motivates Gordon's invocation of E.P. Thompson's well-known concept—lays bare the contradictions of a social and economic model in which people depend greatly on their cars, even as this reliance undermines their communities (for instance, by discouraging investment in public transportation). For this reason, Gordon argues, the Yellow Vests "are both victims and actors in the spiral of decline which is killing rural France."

The point on which the authors agree is that the crisis, at least for now, seems intractable: the protestors have brought to the surface demands and anxieties that no contemporary politician seems capable of adequately addressing. The Yellow Vests, in this way, constitute a particularly perilous moment in the chronic stress test democratic societies are currently undergoing.

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**Daniel A. Gordon** is Senior Lecturer in European History at Edge Hill University, UK, and a member of the Editorial Board of *Modern and Contemporary France*. The author of *Immigrants and Intellectuals: May '68 and the Rise of Anti-Racism in France* (Merlin Press, 2012), he is currently working on a history from below of transport use in postwar France. His recent publications include "Talking Out of Revolution: Henri Krasucki and Jacques Chirac's Secret Pigalle Negotiations and the Resolution of the French General Strike of May-June 1968," *Labour History Review* 83:3 (December 2018), 219-247; "Review Article: Full Speed Ahead? The Trente Glorieuses in a Rear View Mirror," *Contemporary European History* 26:1 (February 2017), pp. 189-199; "L'économie morale des banlieusards: aux origines de la 'crise des transports' des années 1970 en France," *Vingtième Siècle* 126 (October-December 2015), 119-131; "Review Article: Pomp and Circumstance," *Modern and Contemporary France* 23:2 (May 2015), 249-255.



## Essay by Emile Chabal, University of Edinburgh

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*Who Are the Gilets Jaunes?*

More than any other recent social movement in Europe, the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) lend themselves to over-interpretation. This is partly because of their leaderless and amorphous quality, but also because they throw some of France's deepest pathologies into sharp relief, without offering any consensus about what should be done about them.

This has not, of course, prevented commentators from trying to explain what is going on—and it should come as no surprise that the various readings of the *gilets jaunes* follow well-worn political fault lines. At the center of the political spectrum, troubled social-democrats and supporters of President Emmanuel Macron have cast the movement as a backward-looking reaction to economic change and environmental reforms. Understandable, yes, but out-of-touch with the inevitable rolling reforms of the French state, if not potentially dangerous for the anti-democratic tendencies that have surfaced repeatedly at the fringes of the movement. On the right and the far-right, there is a sense that the *gilets jaunes* have finally spoken some home truths to the French elite. Their complaints about high taxes, insecurity, and immigration resonate with a right-wing electorate that has long shared these concerns. Amongst both the center-right *Les Républicains* party and the far-right *Front national*, there is a desire to capture this discontent and turn it into electoral capital. The far-left, too, feel that the *gilets jaunes* have revealed the hollowness of French politics, even if the focus here is mostly on *pouvoir d'achat* (household income) and the feeling amongst many members of the movement that contemporary France has become a mean, individualistic, and acquisitive place. Finally, the most starry-eyed left-wing activists see in the *gilets jaunes* an extension of the *Nuit debout* protests of 2016.

These are obviously incompatible interpretations. The *gilets jaunes* cannot be both reactionary provincials, clinging to their diesel cars and occasionally indulging in online conspiracy theories about mass immigration, and simultaneously the anti-capitalist second coming of the Paris Commune. Nor does it make much sense to affix analytical labels like “populist” to the movement, without stopping to explain what such terms mean and how they might help us understand the movement. Instead, I suggest we should first try to explore what we know about the movement based on the limited research that exists, before proposing a few tentative interpretations that place the *gilets jaunes* back in the longer history of French protest movements, while recognizing their complexity and their novelty.

*Who are the gilets jaunes?*

There is still relatively little research on the *gilets jaunes*. Nevertheless, various in-depth articles, as well as some fieldwork and opinion polling, allow us to make some preliminary observations about the actual people who are involved in the movement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tristan Guerra, Frédéric Gonthier, Chloé Alexandre, Florent Gougou, and Simon Persico, “Qui sont vraiment les ‘gilets jaunes’? Les résultats d’une étude sociologique, » in *Le Monde* (26 January 2019); Camille Bedock, Antoine Bernard de Raymond, Magali Della Sudda, Théo Grémion, Emmanuelle Reungoat, and Tinette Schnatterer, “‘Gilets jaunes’: une enquête pionnière sur la ‘révolte des revenus modestes’, » (11 December 2018); William Audureau et Adrien Sénecat, “Plongée au cœur du Facebook des ‘gilets jaunes’,” in *Le Monde* (30 January 2019); “‘Qui sont et que veulent les ‘gilets jaunes’? Entretien avec Benoît Coquard” in *Contretemps* (23 November 2018),



Broadly speaking, the average *gilet jaune* would appear to be over the age of 30, employed, a car owner, and living in provincial, semi-rural France. He or she—there does not seem to be an obvious gender imbalance—is very likely to belong to a modest socio-economic demographic, generally described as ‘working-class’ or ‘lower middle-class’ in English. The other noteworthy characteristic of the *gilets jaunes* is their geographical diversity: there have been protests across metropolitan France and in the overseas territories (especially Réunion). Politically, the average protestor is as likely to identify with the right as the left, and many of those standing on roundabouts or manning barricades claim never to have protested before. Indeed, what unites the protestors politically is that they are extremely unhappy with their personal, professional and economic situation, as well as the state of the country.

This stock character portrait does not, obviously, apply to everyone. The instigators of the *gilets jaunes*—whose online videos became the catalyst for the protests—lean decidedly to the right. One is a hard-working and well-spoken provincial woman, whose viral video focused on high fuel taxes; several others are more shadowy figures, with a penchant for conspiracy theories and far-right ideas. They share little in common, but they belong recognizably to a disgruntled *peuple de droite* that has a long pedigree in French politics.

Another group that does not fit the average *gilet jaune* profile is the minority of violent protesters who have burned cars in Paris or torched toll booths on French motorways. The biographies of many of those involved in the most egregious violence suggest either that they have track records of robust political engagement, usually as part of extreme political movements, or are simply looking to profit from public disorder. Again, these people—often witheringly referred to as *casseurs* (breakers) by the police—will be familiar to students of French protest.

*What do the gilets jaunes tell us?*

It is understandable that journalists should have assigned outsize importance to the movement’s visible leaders and its most spectacular instances of violence, but neither of these can explain why the *gilets jaunes* have been so successful. For this, we need to go back to the diverse profiles of the average *gilet jaune*.

First and foremost, we should recognize the fact that these are truly nationwide protests. Not since 1968 has there been this degree of sustained political mobilization in such a diversity of regions. Small villages, medium-sized towns, large conurbations: every level of French society has been touched by the *gilets jaunes*. Admittedly, heavily urbanized areas and city *banlieues* (suburbs) have not been fertile recruiting grounds, but cities have still become sites of confrontation as protestors have repeatedly targeted government buildings in urban centers. This geographical reach is reflected in the strategies and tactics employed by the protestors. The use of barricades and blockades on major roads is reminiscent of French farmers’ protests since the 1970s, while the camps at roundabouts are an original take on the sit-in and occupation, transposed onto that most ubiquitous of French traffic management strategies (it is surely no coincidence that France has the highest number of roundabouts in the world—almost 50,000, according to the latest estimates).

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<https://www.contretemps.eu/sociologie-gilets-jaunes/>; and the research on the *gilets jaunes* conducted by the CEVIPOF at Sciences Po, available online at <http://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/fr/actualites/qui-sont-les-gilets-jaunes-et-leurs-soutiens>.

We should also recognize the symbolic power of the yellow vest itself. Immediately visible and highly photogenic, the standard-issue yellow vest must by law be carried inside every vehicle. Police routinely stop motorists—often near roundabouts—and dish out fines to those who do not have one. The yellow vest thus represents both state authority and the imposition of unwanted external norms. To wear it during a protest is to use a tool of the state against the state. Moreover, its ubiquity means that it is accessible to anyone. Not surprisingly, many motorists display a yellow vest on their car or van dashboards, even when they cannot actively join a protest.

This spontaneous solidarity has been read by those on the far-left as the beginning of an anti-capitalist revolt against austerity and neo-liberalism. This may yet prove to be true. But, for now, a more persuasive reading is that *gilets jaunes* protests have provided a unique opportunity to recreate interpersonal solidarities that have been damaged by the depopulation or rapid transformation of many rural or semi-rural communities. As much as anything, a weekly protest on a nearby roundabout is a way of meeting people and sharing common grievances. The often carnivalesque atmosphere of *gilet jaune* demonstrations on roundabouts, near motorway sliproads, and at toll booths suggest that the movement serves an important social function.

At the same time, it evidently also has a more political purpose. Although the *gilets jaunes* have found it hard to develop a unified platform, the movement has coalesced around some key demands. These include lower taxation, greater social security benefits, support for low-income workers, extension of public services, and more representative public institutions. There has also been a great deal of anger directed at Emmanuel Macron's lofty, "Jupiterian" presidentialism.

The range of solutions on offer is bewildering. Some protesters have focused exclusively on taxes; others have made poverty their rallying cry; still others have demanded the introduction of new forms of popular political participation—such as the 'citizens referendum'—that are reminiscent of radical democratic ideas on the French left. However, the one thing that all the protesters agree on is that the state is at fault. This obsession with the state is one of the few things that unites *gilets jaunes* from the smallest roundabout in rural Ardèche to the biggest march on the Champs-Élysées in Paris.

And, yet, to judge by the proposed solutions, the majority of the *gilets jaunes* are also seeking redress from the state. They want lower taxes, but they believe there should be more public spending. They want less bureaucracy and less state intervention, but they argue passionately for more public services. Again, these contradictions will be familiar to those who study contemporary French politics. The dynamic and fraught relationship between state and citizens has an essential part of the French social contract, at least since the late eighteenth century.

*The gilets jaunes: hypocrisy or hope?*

There is no doubt that the *gilets jaunes* expose one of the core tensions of many Western European countries, namely an inability on the part of the state to respond to rising expectations. This has been exacerbated by a declining faith in the capacity of the state since the first neo-liberal wave of the 1980s and, in France especially, a gap between a technocratic elite and a restless working-class. Seen this way, the *gilets jaunes* represent an authentic revolt of the 'people,' warts and all. The political diversity and formlessness of the movement reflects the experiences of those who have been protesting.

Even so, a revolt is not a revolution—and there is unlikely to be much political direction to the *gilets jaunes* once the weekly protests have dissipated. The movement certainly contains elements of the Poujadist tax protests of the 1950s, the anti-authoritarian yearnings of the 1960s, and present-day denunciations of France’s supposedly incestuous ruling class. But the most lasting effect of the *gilets jaunes* will probably be a widespread sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. What this might mean for French politics is anyone’s guess.

**Essay by Valérie Charolles, école des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris)**  
**Translated for H-Diplo by Michael C. Behrent**

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*On a Superior Tone that is Out of Place in Democracy*

Since November 2018, the yellow vests in France have initiated a movement that has surprised the state and yet which was predictable.

This movement, launched in October 2018 by a video posted on social media to protest a rise in gas and diesel taxes, resulted in the blocking of roads and roundabouts, followed by regular Saturday demonstrations, in which confrontations with the police were frequent. As the participants' demands grew and met with broad support in public opinion, on 5 December 2018, President Emmanuel Macron, who had hitherto proved inflexible, announced that the tax increase would be eliminated. Confronted with continued mobilization, he announced, on December 10, measures benefiting low-income individuals that would cost over 10 billion euros annually and the organization of a great national date. The latter is still underway and will conclude in April. It is not out of the question that it will result in the organization of a referendum consisting of multiple questions.

Offering a sequence shot of the yellow-vest movement from a philosophical perspective, we will concentrate on two points.

*The question of economic and social justice*

One entry point into the yellow-vest movement is that it was formed in territories lying beyond the major metropolitan zones and centered on demands emphasizing the fact that these regions' inhabitants—*sans-culottes*, as it were, in relation to a Parisian and internationalized aristocracy—had been forgotten.

Greek democracy had many faults, notably the fact that it excluded women. But it flourished on a breeding-ground with characteristics that are worth recalling. Its territorial organization was based on ten districts ("demos") consisting of portions of the city center, slivers of farmland, and bits of coastline with access to the sea, each district thus combining all the city's activities. Each of these districts took turns fulfilling administrative functions for part of the year, preparing the laws that the assembly alone had the power to approve or reject. While this is not the form of democracy that has since prevailed, one sees how, in such a system, the divide between territories and between citizens and those who represent them did not grow as wide as it has with current institutions.

What makes the present situation so explosive is the fact that the people in France who are demonstrating do not have much to lose: after thirty years of policies designed to facilitate corporate growth on the expectation—which has since proved illusory—that this will benefit employees, they have lost their illusions as well as their financial resources. They have also witnessed the creation of a category of "ultra-rich"<sup>1</sup> that has benefited from globalized capitalism, has often found ways not to pay the taxes they owe, and to whom President Macron, as soon as he was inaugurated, offered new fiscal gifts.

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<sup>1</sup> *Billionaires Insights* 2018, UBS and PWC; <https://www.pwc.ch/en/insights/fs/billionaires-insights.html>.

Yet to be stable, all societies require fairness. The profound injustice of the contemporary economic and social system is the source of the yellow-vest movement's power. In France, diesel and gas for individually owned cars is taxed, but not the heavy fuel oil of ships that transport merchandise from faraway countries or the kerosene used in planes. All transactions are taxed, except speculative transactions occurring on financial markets, despite the fact that France has supported such a measure since 2008 and a European mechanism was created for this purpose.

As Hannah Arendt explained in 1951 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “[w]hat prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness ... has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century.”<sup>2</sup> We must recognize that, despite France's wealth, which makes it one of the most prosperous countries in terms of GDP per inhabitant, this risk exists. It must be taken seriously, particularly since it is not confined to France alone.

An answer implies deep questioning of the place and functioning of the economic realm in contemporary society. Indeed, it is a mistake to assume that there is no way out of the current situation; multiple options exist. At the economic and social level, reason demands, for instance, that an end be brought to the asymmetry that has introduced into the economic system a power relationship that has hardened considerably at the global level, and whose bias in favor of finance and the risks to which it exposes the planet are insufficiently combatted.

Placing companies, not finance, at the heart of the economic realm, in keeping with liberalism's foundational texts (notably Adam Smith's<sup>3</sup>), and making work a value, including a book value, within companies: all this should be defended, debated, and taken into consideration. Similarly, if France and Europe want to take responsibility for and defend the merits of the social contract they have chosen, they must stop accepting pointless international comparisons concerning levels of public spending, while finding other ways to account for private and insurance expenditures covering what is a matter of private expenditure or insurance in other countries. Such demands would mean pushing to the front of the international stage not only the World Bank, but such institutions as the International Labor Organization and the World Health Organization, at least as much as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), 478.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith argues that labor is the original source of all wealth (see his introduction) and that competition must prevent the emergence of positions of power in the economic realm (books one to three). See Valérie Charolles, *Le libéralisme contre le capitalisme* (Liberalism against Capitalism) (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See Charolles, “Neuf thèses pour sortir de l'enfer économique” (Nine Theories to Escape Economic Hell), *Le Débat* 178 (2014): 101-113.

But for such a debate to occur, institutions must allow it, recognizing, to paraphrase what Immanuel Kant once said about philosophy, that a “superior tone” is out of place in democracy.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Democratic and Institutional Question*

The constitution of the Fifth Republic, which has been in effect since 1958, has evolved gradually and, since the introduction of the five-year term in 2002, gives the French president prerogatives without parallel in other democracies. At the same time as the 2002 constitutional reform, the law was also changed to require that parliament be elected immediately after the president, while preserving the two-round majoritarian electoral system. Thus while the French vote often,<sup>6</sup> the close proximity, since 2002, of presidential and legislative elections, both based on a two-round majoritarian system, has, in practice, given the keys to power to a single individual for five years. This is what allowed Macron, for example, to decree on December 10 an expenditure of 10 billion euros and to have it adopted by parliament immediately. Yet a democracy cannot be based on the intelligence of one person, even the president—and all the more so when citizens have had their choice confiscated from them due to the presence, in the second round, of a far-right candidate, as occurred with Macron’s election in 2017.

None of the other great democracies have such institutions: the American president is elected for a shorter period—four years—and legislative elections occur every two years. Neither Germany nor the United Kingdom has a president elected directly by the people, and members of parliament are selected either through proportional representation or one-round voting. Ultimately, French institutions are closest to those of Russia.

After the forced passage of the labor law reform, cuts in the tax revenues of local governments, a health plan that overlooked nurses, and an array of tax decisions benefiting the well-off, such as the abolition of the wealth tax, it comes as no surprise that it was on the ground—through the horizontal character of multiple local movements—that the state was challenged. Not only was the king directly contested by the people, but he also found himself almost naked, since he had refused any role to intermediary powers.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘people,’ incidentally, is, philosophically speaking, an inadequate term, and the definition of democracy as government by the people and for the people can be misleading. It is better to speak of government by and for citizens. This is more consistent with the meaning of Athenian democracy, that is, a democracy in which there is no elite hanging over the population (even if this elite is meritocratic or elected rather than hereditary), working, allegedly, for a people to whom it does not belong. A citizens’ democracy is a democracy working for the *polis*, the city, and for the citizens as a whole, including those who did not vote for the representatives who were ultimately elected. It is also a democracy in which elected officials, including the

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy” (1796), trans. Peter Fennes, in Fennes, ed., *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 51-82.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to national elections, there are municipal, departmental, regional, and European elections.

<sup>7</sup> This is evident in the lack of an immediate government response to the proposal by France’s largest trade union to initiate social and environmental negotiations.

most powerful among them, are also citizens, deserving of respect like any other citizen. In short, democracy means giving power not to the people or an elite but to citizens, in a framework that respects the separation between the powers of the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary and which guarantees freedom.

Does this mean the French constitution should be changed? This debate (along with the creation of a referendum by popular initiative) is much discussed by intellectuals and is among the topics that citizens have raised during the “great debate.” It is obviously one solution, though it is not among the most likely to be implemented by the current government.

Other, simpler paths are possible. They do not require a constitutional revision, but a change in election law and the election calendar. Choosing a parliament in one round (as in the United Kingdom) or through proportional representation (as in Germany), or for a two-and-a-half-year term—i.e., half the presidential term, like in the United States: there are many options for ending the electoral monarchy that characterizes France and for giving legislative power to parliament.

This would also be a step towards ensuring that elected officials are not guided by the tiny minority of the ultra-rich, the powerful lords created by globalized capitalism, who cannot constitute a model of good behavior: the law should rest with women and men who embody the diversity of the citizenry, with elected officials and leaders who live as citizens, as in northern Europe or as with the mayors of most French towns, who have managed to maintain the trust of their citizens—or, rather, their fellow citizens, since it is by remaining citizens deserving of equal respect that this trust can be preserved.



**Essay by Valérie Charolles, école des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris)**

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*D'un ton grand seigneur qui n'est pas de mise en démocratie*

**D**epuis novembre 2018, il se joue en France avec les « gilets jaunes » un mouvement qui a surpris le pouvoir et qui était pourtant prévisible.

Ce mouvement, lancé en octobre 2018 par une vidéo postée sur les réseaux sociaux pour protester contre la hausse des taxes sur l'essence et le diesel, s'est traduit par le blocage de routes et de ronds-points puis par des manifestations le samedi, durant lesquelles les heurts avec les forces de l'ordre sont nombreux. Alors que les revendications des participants s'étaient étendues et bénéficiaient d'un large soutien dans l'opinion publique, le Président de la République, jusque-là inflexible, a annoncé le 5 décembre la suppression de la hausse des taxes. Face au maintien de la mobilisation, il a annoncé le 10 décembre des mesures en faveur des personnes modestes d'un coût annuel de plus de 10 milliards d'euro et l'organisation d'un grand débat national. Ce dernier est en cours et s'achèvera en avril. Il n'est pas exclu qu'il débouche sur l'organisation d'un référendum à questions multiples.

Pour faire un plan séquence de ce mouvement sous l'angle philosophique, on se concentrera ici sur deux points.

*La question de la justice économique et sociale*

Un point d'entrée du mouvement des gilets jaunes est qu'il s'est constitué dans les territoires situés hors des grandes aires métropolitaines, autour de revendications mettant en avant l'oubli dont feraient l'objet les habitants de ces territoires, sortes de « sans-culottes » face à l'aristocratie parisienne et internationalisée.

La démocratie grecque avait de nombreux défauts et notamment le fait que les femmes en étaient exclues. Mais elle a prospéré sur un terreau utile de rappeler. Son organisation territoriale reposait d'abord sur dix circonscriptions (les *dèmes* ou « *demoi* ») composées d'une portion de la ville centre, d'une part des territoires agricoles et d'un morceau de côte pour l'accès à la mer, chaque circonscription pouvant donc combiner toutes les activités de la cité. Ces circonscriptions occupaient ensuite les fonctions administratives à tour de rôle une partie de l'année pour préparer les lois que l'Assemblée avait seule le pouvoir d'adopter ou de refuser. Si ce n'est pas le modèle démocratique qui s'est imposé, on voit bien comment, dans un tel système, la brisure entre territoires et entre les citoyens et ceux qui les représentent ne peut prospérer aussi fortement que dans les institutions actuelles.

Ce qui rend la situation présente particulièrement explosive, c'est que ceux qui manifestent en France n'ont pas grand-chose à perdre : en 30 ans de politique visant à permettre aux entreprises de se développer dans la perspective qui s'est révélée illusoire que ceci bénéficie à leurs salariés, ils ont perdu leurs illusions mais aussi leurs moyens financiers. Et ils ont regardé se créer une catégorie d'« ultra-riches »<sup>1</sup> qui a profité du capitalisme mondialisé, a souvent trouvé les moyens de ne pas verser les impôts qu'elle aurait dû payer, et à laquelle le Président français a octroyé à son arrivée des largesses fiscales.

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<sup>1</sup> *Billionaires Insights* 2018, UBS and PWC; <https://www.pwc.ch/en/insights/fs/billionaires-insights.html>.

Or, toute société, pour être stable, a besoin de justice. L'injustice profonde du système économique et social contemporain est ce qui fait la puissance du mouvement des gilets jaunes. On taxe en France le diesel et l'essence de la voiture particulière mais pas le fioul lourd des navires qui transportent les marchandises venant de pays lointains, ni le kérozène utilisé par les avions. On taxe toutes les transactions, excepté les transactions spéculatives sur les marchés financiers alors que la France soutient une telle mesure depuis 2008 et qu'un mécanisme européen a été prévu à cet effet.

Comme l'expose Hannah Arendt en 1951 dans *Le système totalitaire* « ce qui, dans le monde non totalitaire, prépare les hommes à une domination totalitaire, c'est le fait que la désolation (...) est devenue l'expérience quotidienne des masses toujours croissantes de notre siècle.<sup>2</sup> » Il nous faut constater que, malgré la richesse de la France qui la place parmi les 35 nations les plus aisées en termes de produit intérieur brut par habitant, ce risque existe. Il faut le prendre au sérieux, d'autant qu'il n'est pas cantonné à la France.

Y répondre suppose d'interroger en profondeur la place prise par la sphère économique dans la société contemporaine et la manière dont elle fonctionne. Il est en effet faux de considérer qu'il n'y a pas d'issue possible à la situation actuelle ; il y en a de multiples. Sur le plan économique et social, la raison voudrait par exemple que l'on mette un terme à l'asymétrie qui marque le système économique avec un rapport de force qui s'est singulièrement durci au niveau mondial et dont les biais en faveur de la finance et les risques qu'il fait courir à la planète ne sont pas suffisamment combattus.

Mettre au cœur de la sphère économique l'entreprise et non la finance, comme nous y invite le corpus libéral des origines (on pense ici en particulier à Adam Smith<sup>3</sup>), faire du travail une valeur, y compris comptable, au sein des entreprises : tout ceci peut être défendu, débattu et pris en compte. De même, si la France et l'Europe veulent assumer et défendre en raison le contrat social qu'elles ont choisi, elles devraient cesser d'accepter des comparaisons internationales dénuées de sens sur le poids de la dépense publique, celle-ci y prenant en charge ce qui relève de dépenses ou d'assurances privées ailleurs. De telles revendications supposeraient également de mettre en avant au niveau international, outre la Banque Mondiale, des institutions comme l'Organisation Internationale du Travail ou encore l'Organisation Mondiale de la Santé, au moins autant que le Fonds Monétaire International (FMI).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 1951 ; Seuil, 1972, 217.

<sup>3</sup> *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776, avec notamment l'idée que le travail est la source originaire de toute richesse (introduction) et que la concurrence doit permettre d'éviter que des positions de pouvoirs ne puissent se mettre en place dans la sphère économique (livres I à III). On renverra sur ces points à *Liberalism against Capitalism*, Valérie Charolles, Fayard, 2006 (en français).

<sup>4</sup> On pourra se reporter sur ces points notamment à « Nine Theories to Escape Economic Hell », Valérie Charolles, *Le Débat*, 2014.1.

Mais, pour arriver à ce type de débats, encore faut-il que les institutions le permettent et, pour reprendre la formulation de Immanuel Kant concernant la philosophie, admettre que le « ton grand seigneur » n'est pas de mise en démocratie.<sup>5</sup>

### *La question démocratique et institutionnelle*

La constitution française, en vigueur depuis 1958, à savoir la V<sup>ème</sup> République, a progressivement évolué et donne au Président français des prérogatives inégalées parmi les grandes démocraties depuis 2002 et la mise en place quinquennat. C'est qu'en même temps que cette réforme constitutionnelle, la loi a prévu l'élection du Parlement directement après celle du Président de la République et maintenu un système électoral majoritaire à deux tours. Ainsi, même si l'on vote souvent en France,<sup>6</sup> la coïncidence entre élections présidentielle et législative au scrutin majoritaire à deux tours revient depuis 2002 à donner pendant cinq ans les clés du pouvoir national à un homme. C'est ce qui a permis à Emmanuel Macron de décider par exemple le 10 décembre dernier plus de 10 milliards d'euros de dépenses et de les faire adopter immédiatement par le Parlement. Or, la démocratie ne peut pas reposer sur l'intelligence d'un homme, fût-il président de la République, d'autant que le choix des citoyens est largement confisqué quand le *Front national*, l'extrême droite, est présent au second tour, ce qui fût le cas lors de l'élection d'Emmanuel Macron.

Aucune des grandes démocraties n'a de telles institutions : le président américain est élu pour une durée plus courte, quatre ans, et le parlement est renouvelé au bout de deux ans ; ni l'Allemagne, ni le Royaume-Uni n'ont de président directement élu par les citoyens et leurs parlementaires sont choisis à la proportionnelle ou au vote à un tour. C'est finalement de la Russie que les institutions françaises sont les plus proches.

Après le passage en force de la réforme du droit du travail, les coupes dans les recettes des collectivités locales, un plan santé sans mesures pour les infirmiers et infirmières et un ensemble de décisions fiscales, comme la suppression de l'impôt sur la fortune, favorisant les plus aisés, c'est ainsi sans surprise par le terrain, par l'horizontalité de multiples mouvements locaux que le pouvoir a été mis en cause. Le roi s'est retrouvé ainsi directement contesté par le peuple et presque nu puisqu'il n'a pas voulu laisser leur place aux pouvoirs intermédiaires.<sup>7</sup>

Le peuple n'est d'ailleurs pas, au plan philosophique, le terme adéquat, et la définition de la démocratie comme un gouvernement par le peuple et pour le peuple peut être trompeuse. Mieux vaudrait parler de gouvernement par et pour le citoyen. C'est plus conforme à ce qu'était le sens de la démocratie athénienne c'est-à-dire une démocratie qui ne soit pas en surplomb de la population avec une élite (certes élue ou méritocratique et non plus héréditaire) censée œuvrer pour un peuple dont elle ne ferait pas partie. Une démocratie citoyenne est une démocratie travaillant pour la *polis*, la cité, et pour l'ensemble des citoyens, y

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<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *D'un ton grand seigneur adopté naguère en philosophie, On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy*, 1796.

<sup>6</sup> Aux élections de niveau national s'ajoutent les élections municipales, départementales, régionales et européennes.

<sup>7</sup> Comme en témoigne l'absence de réponse immédiate à la main tendue en décembre par le premier syndicat français pour lancer des négociations sociales et environnementales.

compris ceux qui n'ont pas voté pour les représentants finalement élus. C'est aussi une démocratie dans laquelle les élus, y compris le plus puissant d'entre eux, sont également des citoyens, auxquels on doit respect comme à tout autre citoyen. Bref, la démocratie n'est pas donner le pouvoir au peuple ou à une élite mais aux citoyens, dans un cadre qui respecte la séparation entre les pouvoirs exécutif, législatif et judiciaire, et qui garantit les libertés.

Faut-il alors changer de constitution en France ? Ce débat (ainsi que la mise en place d'un référendum d'initiative populaire) anime très largement la sphère intellectuelle et fait partie des sujets soulevés par les citoyens dans le cadre du grand débat. C'est évidemment une issue, dont il n'est pas le plus probable qu'elle soit retenue par le pouvoir en place. D'autres chemins, plus simples, sont possibles. Ils ne passent pas par la révision de la constitution mais par le changement de la loi électorale et de son calendrier : élire le Parlement au scrutin à un tour (comme au Royaume-Uni), à la proportionnelle (comme en Allemagne), ou encore pour deux ans et demi, soit la moitié du mandat présidentiel comme aux Etats-Unis : il est de nombreuses possibilités pour en finir avec la monarchie électorale qui caractérise la France et donner le pouvoir législatif au Parlement.

Ce serait aussi un pas pour garantir que les élus ne se mesurent pas à la petite minorité d'ultra-riches, de grands seigneurs, que le capitalisme mondialisé a générée et qui ne saurait constituer un modèle de comportement : la loi mérite de reposer sur des femmes et des hommes qui incarnent la diversité des citoyens, avec des élus et des dirigeants qui vivent comme des citoyens, sur le modèle de l'Europe du Nord ou encore sur celui des maires de la plus grande partie des communes françaises qui ont su garder la confiance des citoyens ou plutôt de leurs concitoyens car c'est en restant des citoyens auxquels on doit respect autant qu'aux autres que cette confiance s'est maintenue.

Essay by Daniel A. Gordon, Edge Hill University

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*The Gilets Jaunes and the Moral Economy of Driving*

Arguably the key to understanding the origins of the *gilet jaunes* (yellow vests) is the moral economy of car use. Granted, the movement channels a much wider anger. Knowing the depth of contempt with which French President Emanuel Macron, whose smug arrogance knows no bounds, is held in villages which, after decades of slow economic death, are split only between voters for Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the hard left and Marine Le Pen on the far right, I was not surprised at the fury of the current movement. But the movement's initial spark was a collective refusal of an increase in fuel taxes. While there is manifestly a wider issue with levels of household disposable income, the tendency in some commentaries to dismiss the fuel element as merely incidental<sup>1</sup> risks missing something important.

France has been a republic of drivers ever since the time of President Charles De Gaulle and his Porsche-driving Prime Minister and successor Georges Pompidou, when Jacques Tati's film *Playtime* first satirized the absurdity of the roundabout—now the *gilets jaunes*' key site of contestation. One of the most significant social changes of the last six decades is the growth of driving, and the decline of walking. As late as 1970, though, car ownership was still limited enough even on the very outskirts of the Paris conurbation for it to be possible to create a popular cross-class movement to defend the moral economy of public transport fares that was critical of the car lobby.<sup>2</sup> By contrast today, we have a popular cross-class coalition of drivers occupying more or less the same geographical territory, but whose moral economy is located at the petrol or diesel pump, in a defense of entitlement to what one popular *gilets jaunes* anthem terms “*notre carburant*” (our gas).<sup>3</sup> Eric Drouet for example, the most heavily mediatized face of the *gilets jaunes*, is a lorry driver and big-car enthusiast from Melun, a classic 1970s rootless new town on the far southern fringes of the Ile-de-France.<sup>4</sup> Just as public transport users in 1970 protested not simply because the government raised prices, but because this followed a long period when they had become accustomed to cheap subsidized fares,<sup>5</sup> so arguably the

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<sup>1</sup> This explanation is convenient for those on the left attempting to square the circle of supporting action on climate change and support for the *gilets jaunes*: for example, Nathalie Bennett, “COP24: Voices Rising,” 20 December 2018, <https://greenworld.org.uk/article/cop24-voices-rising>.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel A. Gordon, “L'économie morale des banlieusards: aux origines de la 'crise des transports' dans la France des années 1970,” *Vingtième Siècle* 128 (October-December 2015):119-131, which sought to apply E. P. Thompson's notion of moral economy to modern society—an allusion also now being made in relation to the *gilets jaunes* by, for example, Jean-Luc Pasquinet, “La décroissance et les 'gilets jaunes,’” 22 January 2019, <http://ladecroissance.xyz/2019/01/22/1200/>.

<sup>3</sup> “La Chanson des gilets jaunes,” 23 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEyizFV3LxI>.

<sup>4</sup> Rémi Duchemin, “Qui est Eric Drouet, ce 'gilet jaune' qui appelle à entrer dans l'Elysée,” 6 December 2018, <https://www.europe1.fr/societe/qui-est-eric-drouet-ce-gilet-jaune-qui-appelle-a-entrer-dans-l-elysee-3815003>; Francois Lapart, “Une ville à la campagne: Melun-Sénart,” *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* 32 (1986): 101-106.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, “Economie morale des banlieusards.”

diesel tax increase has caused outrage because a rapid rise in prices since 2016 followed a decade when the proportion of diesel pump prices taken in tax actually went down.<sup>6</sup>

Foreign correspondents have been shocked by the relatively advanced age of those rioting in Paris, and their prompt timekeeping, commencing battle as early as 8:30 AM, before departing relatively early in the evening. But this reflects the demography of largely middle-aged and often self-employed protesters, drawn from what former President Nicolas Sarkozy once called the ‘France which gets up early.’ Yet if the numerically big battalions appear to come from a kind of semi-suburban in-between located 40-60 km from city centers,<sup>7</sup> the *gilets jaunes* are also popular in the countryside, where car dependency is greatest. On-the-ground observations by the sociologist Benoît Coquard suggest that rural *gilets jaunes*, who include as many women as men, define themselves in opposition both upwards to “*les gros riches*” (the fat cats) and downwards to “*les cas soc’ qui ont pas de voiture*” (the “welfare recipients” who don’t have cars).<sup>8</sup> So the movement draws strength from a certain egalitarian solidarity, but this is not without its exclusions—or indeed its relative privileges compared to previous generations. Today’s villages are no longer more or less self-sufficient communities, but rather uneasily inhabit the margins of a globalized economy, revolving around a similar driving-and-supermarket-based logic to those of suburbs throughout the developed world. The elephant in the room is that this bears a presumption to a level of entitlement to mobility each day far exceeding that of any previous generation in history,<sup>9</sup> as distances between home and work multiply and multiply. To get by, a self-employed person in a sparsely populated area indeed has to drive distances that are incompatible with any serious attempt to decarbonize the economy. And as Coquard points out, the more local public services are cut, the further people have to drive.<sup>10</sup>

So arguably what is coming home to roost with the current crisis is the entire model of a society based on mass car ownership—which back in 1973, André Gorz, the prophet of anti-automobilism, argued was “an absolute triumph of bourgeois ideology at the level of everyday life.”<sup>11</sup> Local shops shut because supermarkets, around which *gilets jaunes* congregate because that is the depressing geography of exurban France today, are

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<sup>6</sup> *Le Monde*, 31 October 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Jérôme Fourquet, “Gilets jaunes’: radiographie sociologique et culturelle d’un mouvement,” 22 January 2019, [http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2019/01/22/01002-20190122ARTFIG00260-gilets-jaunes-radiographie-sociologique-et-culturelle-d-un-mouvement.php?redirect\\_premium](http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2019/01/22/01002-20190122ARTFIG00260-gilets-jaunes-radiographie-sociologique-et-culturelle-d-un-mouvement.php?redirect_premium).

<sup>8</sup> Benoît Coquard, “Qui sont et que veulent les ‘gilets jaunes’? Entretien avec Benoît Coquard,” 23 November 2018, <http://www.contretemps.eu/sociologie-gilets-jaunes/>; see also Anon, “Classes d’encadrement et prolétaires dans le ‘mouvement des gilets jaunes,’” 25 November 2018, <https://agitationautonome.com/2018/11/25/classes-dencadrement-et-proletaires-dans-le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean-François Mouhot, “‘We are All Slave Owners Now’: Fossil Fuels, Energy Consumption and the Legacy of Slave Abolition,” in Mark Levene, Rob Johnson, and Penny Roberts, eds, *History at the End of the World? History, Climate Change and the Possibility of Closure* (Humanities-Ebooks, 2010), 132-147.

<sup>10</sup> Coquard, “Entretien.”

<sup>11</sup> André Gorz, “The Social Ideology of the Motor Car,” first published in *Le Sauvage*, September-October 1973, translation at <http://unevenearth.org/2018/08/the-social-ideology-of-the-motorcar/>.

superficially cheaper, and their customers are no longer willing or able to pay a moral economy price for the continuation of local shops: supermarket customers are literally driving small shopkeepers into bankruptcy. For most people in non-urban France today, transport to all intents and purposes equals car. When the average household spends some 5,500 euros a year on motoring,<sup>12</sup> in part due to choosing larger, more fuel-intensive cars,<sup>13</sup> car ownership has become a poverty trap. No wonder any increase in fuel costs feels like the last straw. Thanks to subsidies from devolved regional assemblies, in some rural areas reasonably priced public transport does exist, albeit at very infrequent service levels, and which Macron's SNCF reforms threaten.<sup>14</sup> But the level of planning and self-restraint required to rely permanently on a combination of walking, cycling, and a bare-bones public transport system are so alien to the expectations of modern people that public transport use there is in reality largely limited to teenagers. *Gilets jaunes* are thus locked in a tragedy as both victims and actors in the spiral of decline which is killing rural France.

Defenders of the *gilets jaunes* on the left have asserted that the movement is not anti-environmental.<sup>15</sup> There were even some attempts at convergence with the Climate March of 8 December,<sup>16</sup> and Ingrid Levavasseur, leader of one of two rival *gilets jaunes* European elections lists, was formerly a Green voter.<sup>17</sup> Certainly Macron's combination of higher fuel taxes with abolishing a wealth tax—tellingly, the one aspect of his policy he has not compromised on at all—have exposed the bankruptcy of his greenwashed neoliberalism by transgressing popular understandings of fairness. Macron has thereby provided a textbook example of how not to do environmental policy, of why any effective transition from fossil fuels must be socially just. Yet this does leave the small matter that cars are a major contributor to the process whereby we are destroying the physical conditions for the survival of our species on the only planet we have. And yet we protest with the vociferousness of an eighteenth-century bread rioter against attempt to make their use more expensive. Reportedly among the anarchist participants to have joined battle are veterans of the successful struggle to stop an airport being built at Notre-Dame-des-Landes<sup>18</sup>—which effectively means they have moved from actions that reduce future carbon emissions to ones that increase them. Outside Paris, the *gilet jaunes*' repertoire of action includes go-slow *opérations escargots* (“snail operations”) and roadblocks, the peri-urban

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<sup>12</sup> Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 122.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Monde*, 15 November 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Stopping the closure of local rail lines does feature among the less prominent demands of the movement: Robert Joumard, “Analyse des revendications des gilets jaunes,” 5 December 2018, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/robert-joumard/blog/051218/analyse-des-revendications-des-gilets-jaunes>.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Emily Atkin, “France's Yellow Vest Protesters Want to Fight Climate Change,” 10 December 2018, <https://newrepublic.com/article/152585/frances-yellow-vest-protesters-want-fight-climate-change>.

<sup>16</sup> *Le Monde*, 7 December 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Saviana, “Qui est Ingrid Levavasseur, à la tête d'une liste gilets jaunes aux européennes,” 24 January 2019. <https://www.marianne.net/politique/qui-est-ingrid-levavasseur-liste-gilet-jaune-europeennes>.

<sup>18</sup> *Times*, 4 December 2018.



militant's equivalent of the urban protester's sit-in—but posing a greater safety risk. All but one of the ten deaths so far attributed to the protests have been in traffic accidents associated with blockades.

Given all that, what is remarkable about the current movement is not its size—even at their November-early December height, these were far from being even the largest demonstrations of 2018,<sup>19</sup> let alone another 1968—but rather the unusual combination of high levels of public support and not inconsiderable violence. Such support, while drawing on the shared moral-economy understandings of citizens in the republic of drivers, was forged in no small part by an early media portrayal that was astonishingly sympathetic considering the degree of violence associated with Parisian *journées* like November 24 and December 1. Television stations and newspapers were hyping up the movement well before the first day of action on November 17; subsequent events took a while to diminish the extent to which it was favorably depicted. As media historian Alexis Lévrier suggests, the irony of the *gilets jaunes*' apparent hatred of, and in some cases violence against, journalists, is that the movement is sustained by a game of mutual fascination between the two.<sup>20</sup>

Such widespread support might explain why policing of “Act I” of the series of protests appeared surprisingly hands-off. By contrast, by the time of “Act IV” on December 8, policing preparations were approaching the apocalyptic, complete with armored cars, with worrying reports of police brutality ensuing as the use of rubber bullets and other noxious weapons became widespread.<sup>21</sup> The sense that the state's violence against their bodies is subject to impunity has hardened the resolve of many participants.

But might a supplementary part of the explanation for widespread support be that the bodies clothed by the yellow vests are mostly white? At one level this is a banal observation, reflecting the predominant demographics of rural/peri-urban France. Yet it affects perceptions significantly. The magazine *Valeurs actuelles*, whose predominant readership is, judging from its editorial content and advertisements, prosperous elderly reactionaries, drooled over the *gilets jaunes* like some *gauchiste* publication circa 1968.<sup>22</sup> One can imagine the reaction of *Valeurs actuelles* readers if black or brown-skinned rioters had burnt cars on the Boulevard Haussmann or built barricades on the Champs Élysées, let alone defiled the Arc de Triomphe. People in deprived multiethnic outer suburbs of Paris, when questioned as to their non-participation in the *gilets jaunes*, have attributed this to a fear, surely well-founded, that they would be the first to be arrested, as well as to the point they that have long endured precisely the kind of issues now pointed to by *gilets jaunes*—declining incomes, the closure of shops and public services—without attracting much public sympathy.<sup>23</sup> Indeed an implicitly racialized counterposing of the solidly legitimate *peuple* of peri-urban France to the

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<sup>19</sup> *Libération*, 6 December 2018.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Monde*, 13-14 January 2019.

<sup>21</sup> See Jane Caelinnan, “Rubber Bullet Liberalism,” February 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/gilets-jaunes-police-repression-macron>.

<sup>22</sup> *Valeurs actuelles*, 6-12 December 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Sébastien Morelli et al, “Gilets jaunes: pourquoi le mouvement ne prend pas dans les cités,” 24 January 2019, <http://www.leparisien.fr/info-paris-ile-de-france-oise/gilets-jaunes-pourquoi-le-mouvement-ne-prend-pas-dans-les-cites-24-01-2019-7996065.php#xtor=AD-148142355>.

illegitimate *racaille* (scum) of the *banlieues* (suburbs) has sometimes made explicit by protesters themselves.<sup>24</sup> Every good social movement needs a prophet, and the *gilets jaunes*' seems to be the geographer Christophe Guilluy, who for some time has been arguing that, out of an excessive focus on the *banlieues*, policy-makers have taken their eye off the ball of the immiseration of what he terms *La France périphérique*: “the social question is not limited to the other side of the *périph*”—the circular road separating Paris from the suburbs—“but to the other side of metropolises.”<sup>25</sup> Yet unlike in the riots of 2005, no one is questioning the integration into French society of *gilets jaunes* or that they have legitimate grievances. The oft-repeated claim that these are the worst civil disturbances in Paris since 1968 is only true because the largely immobile rioters of 2005 ransacked their own *banlieues*, lacking the relative mobility and sense of belonging that entices provincial *gilets jaunes* to embark on their weekly siege of the despised elegant neighborhoods of Paris. As some extreme Right participants put it as early as November 24, “*On est chez nous!*”—“We’re at home!”<sup>26</sup>

Marine Le Pen’s *Rassemblement national* (National Rally) has—in contrast to such ultra-right *groupuscules* for whom Le Pen is too moderate and who were in the thick of the action from the start—deliberately kept a relatively low profile in relation to the *gilets jaunes*. For the ex-National Front’s cultural hegemony over large swathes of popular opinion is already widespread enough for direct intervention to be unnecessary. Facebook-fostered conspiracy theories, with particular reference to the Marrakesh Agreement on migration, and climate change denial, have been doing the rounds. Disturbingly, for some, antisemitism appears to offer an explanation for Macron, the former Rothschilds banker.<sup>27</sup> Some *gilets jaunes* have performed Dieudonné-style *quenelles*<sup>28</sup>; others have shopped refugees to the *gendarmes* or thrown *boules* at a Bulgarian lorry driver.<sup>29</sup>

Yet there is an irony here. While the typical process by which media search for an identifiable “leader” has also halted on Drouot and the Breton hypnotherapist Jacline Mouraud, the petition that inspired them was

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Coates, “The Politics of the *Gilets Jaunes* in France: is the Far-Right only at the Fringes?,” 22 November 2018, <https://tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com/2018/11/22/the-politics-of-the-gilets-jaunes-in-france-is-the-far-right-only-at-the-fringes/>.

<sup>25</sup> Guilluy, *France périphérique*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Pascal Jalabert and Nathalie Mauret, “Cinq heures avec les ‘gilets jaunes’ sur les Champs-Élysées,” 24 November 2018, <https://www.ledauphine.com/france-monde/2018/11/24/cinq-heures-avec-les-gilets-jaunes-sur-les-champs-elysees>.

<sup>27</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, 14 December 2018.

<sup>28</sup> The “*quenelle*” is a gesture popularized by the comedian Dieudonné M’bala M’bala that is widely understood to have an antisemitic meaning.

<sup>29</sup> Pascal Riché, “La ‘quenelle’ antisémite de Dieudonné au menu des gilets jaunes,” 22 December 2018, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20181222.OBS7538/la-quenelle-antisemite-de-dieudonne-au-menu-des-gilets-jaunes.html>; Ronan Tessorière, “Quand des Gilets jaunes dénoncent des migrants aux gendarmes,” 21 November 2018, <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/quand-des-gilets-jaunes-remettent-des-migrants-aux-gendarmes-21-11-2018-7948308.php>; Jade Toussay, “A Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, des gilets jaunes ont pourchassé un poids lourd bulgare sur 12 kilomètres,” 25 December 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/12/25/a-saint-etienne-du-rouvray-des-gilets-jaunes-ont-pourchasse-un-poids-lourd-bulgare-sur-12-kilometres\\_a\\_23626703](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/12/25/a-saint-etienne-du-rouvray-des-gilets-jaunes-ont-pourchasse-un-poids-lourd-bulgare-sur-12-kilometres_a_23626703).

actually started in May 2018 by Priscillia Ludosky, a cosmetics saleswoman originally from Martinique.<sup>30</sup> Another prominent actor in attempts to turn the movement into an electoral force is the Armenian-born singer and community activist Hayk Shahinyan.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the movement can trace its origins slightly earlier to *Colère* (Anger), a proto-*gilet jaunes* movement against a decrease in speed limits to 80km/h, begun in January 2018 in Périgueux by a Portuguese bricklayer, Leandro Nogueira.<sup>32</sup> As well as underlining the angry-motorist origins of the movement—*Colère*'s complaints also included both fuel taxes and motorway tolls, before the movement faded when Nogueira was imprisoned on apparently unrelated charges—Nogueira's case shows the *gilets jaunes* join the long list of quintessentially French phenomena contributed to, or even started by, immigrants.

So it would be as reductive to present the entire movement as a product of the extreme right as it would be to assert that 1968 was caused by a conspiracy of Trotskyist agitators. Yet movements are given distinctive flavors by the general ideological climate of the day. The *gilets jaunes* offer opportunities to many shades of opinion, being light enough in their ideological baggage in this age of political crossdressing to also be hailed as an authentic popular expression by Mélenchon or the Communist mayors of small-town France. Some on the radical left denounced this as collusion with fascism, pointing to the distinctly far right conspiracy-theory laden flavor of the movement.<sup>33</sup> Yet now standing at the roundabouts are too many hitherto apolitical people, and too many voters of the left, for this to be a purely reactionary phenomenon, as much as *Action Française*—members of which popped up in Paris as if clutching a textbook about February 6, 1934 to shout “A bas les voleurs! A bas la République!”<sup>34</sup>—might wish otherwise. A Sciences Po study found that 60% of

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<sup>30</sup> “Priscillia Ludosky, une Martiniquaise derrière les gilets jaunes,” 20 November 2018, <http://www.guadeloupe.franceantilles.fr/actualite/social/priscillia-ludosky-une-martiniquaise-derriere-les-gilets-jaunes-513388.php>. Ludosky, who lives in Savigny-le-Temple not far from Melun in the Seine-et-Marne, attributes her activism to the daily car use necessitated for multiple work appointments when she stopped being a public-transport-commuting employee and became self-employed: Aline Leclerc, “Priscillia Ludosky, porte-parole des gilets jaunes: ‘Ce n’est qu’un premier rendez-vous, on attend d’autres,’” 28 November 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/11/28/priscilla-ludosky-porte-parole-des-gilets-jaunes-ce-n-est-qu-un-premier-rendez-vous-on-en-attend-d-autres\\_5390007\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/11/28/priscilla-ludosky-porte-parole-des-gilets-jaunes-ce-n-est-qu-un-premier-rendez-vous-on-en-attend-d-autres_5390007_3224.html).

<sup>31</sup> “L’Arménien est devenue l’un des leaders des gilets jaunes en France,” 17 December 2018, <https://fr.azvision.az/news/69195/-larm%C3%A9nien-est-devenu-lun-des-leaders-des-%C2%AB%C2%A0gilets-jaunes%C2%A0%C2%BB-en-france-htm>.

<sup>32</sup> “Groupes Colère: la 1re révolution partie de Facebook?,” 15 February 2018, [https://www.parisdepeches.fr/16-Politique/2048-France/12391-Groupes\\_Colere\\_revolution\\_partie\\_Facebook.html](https://www.parisdepeches.fr/16-Politique/2048-France/12391-Groupes_Colere_revolution_partie_Facebook.html); Vincent Glad, “Comment les gilets jaunes sont nés en janvier sur un rond-point de Dordogne,” 14 December 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/12/14/comment-les-gilets-jaunes-sont-nes-en-janvier-sur-un-rond-point-de-dordogne\\_1697685](https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/12/14/comment-les-gilets-jaunes-sont-nes-en-janvier-sur-un-rond-point-de-dordogne_1697685).

<sup>33</sup> Des anars de Lille, “Le parfum d’un sentiment rare,” n.d. [after 17 November 2018] [http://mondialisme.org/IMG/pdf/le\\_parfum\\_d\\_un\\_sentiment\\_rare\\_3.pdf](http://mondialisme.org/IMG/pdf/le_parfum_d_un_sentiment_rare_3.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Laurent de Boissieu, “Ultra-droite, ultra-gauche ou ‘gilets jaunes’: comment s’y retrouver?,” 2 December 2018, <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/Ultra-droite-ultra-gauche-gilets-jaunes-comment-retrouver-2018-12-02-1200986996>.

*gilets jaunes* do not identify with either left or right, and of those that do, 65% identify with the left.<sup>35</sup> There are elements to the movement's demands that are neither left nor right, just incoherent, such as simultaneously demanding lower taxes and better public services.

Despite the whiff of '68 given off by the burning barricades, tear gas, wounded protesters and assaults on prefectures, any resemblance is rather superficial. Four things the events of winter 2018-2019 do have in common with those of spring 1968 are: they led to an increase in the minimum wage, proving that in France's statist tradition, menacing the state pays dividends; state violence in response to protest itself became a cause of continued protest<sup>36</sup>; they were accompanied by a movement of school students, even if today the relationship between teenage and adult movement appears more opportunistic than organic, with little overlap in demands; and the president sought to defuse opposition with a vague offer of "participation," in this case Macron's *grand débat national* (great national debate). But there is a fundamental difference: although the persistence of their movement demonstrates considerable determination and sacrifice, the *gilets jaunes* are not on strike. As in 1968, the CGT leadership has been highly cautious about the outbreak of a largely spontaneous movement they do not control, suspicious of the cross-class nature of the movement, but unlike in 1968 this line has held. The movement's strength in terms of durable pace—one weekly day of action being more sustainable for the average middle-aged protester than the nightly mobilization of a May '68 or a *Nuit debout*—is also a weakness, with normal life largely continuing to function the rest of the week. Explicit references to '68 have typically been either absent or negative, such as reactionary songsmith Marguerite's dancing-on-a-roundabout satire of the refusal of "*soixante-huitards accomplis*" (sixty-eighters who have 'sold out') such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit to support the *gilets jaunes*,<sup>37</sup> or unfavorable comparisons of the extent of January 27's *foulards rouges* counter-mobilization to the Gaullist semi-equivalent of 30 May 1968.<sup>38</sup>

But when all is said and done, this is a movement with rather more in common with Poujadism<sup>39</sup>—even if today's is a Poujadism of the exurban carpark and roundabout, rather than the small-town stationers of the 1950s. For though more of an element of social solidarity has entered in as the movement developed, the most widely articulated political message of the initial movement in November was what in France is called *un ras-le-bol fiscal* (being "fed up" with taxes). In other words: a classic right-wing attack on taxes as simply

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<sup>35</sup> *Le Monde*, 27-28 January 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Prominent *gilet jaune* Jérôme Rodrigues' severe eye wound at the hands of a police projectile also recalls that of the Maoist Richard Deshayes in 1971, just as the government's proposed *loi anti-casseurs* has echoes of its namesake from 1970.

<sup>37</sup> Marguerite, "The good guys, the bad guys (French yellow vests)," 1 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBiHJxGxz1gor>.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Sugy, "Les foulards rouges voulaient s'inscrire dans une démarche similaire à celle du 30 mai 1968," 28 January 2019, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/histoire/2019/01/28/31005-20190128ARTFIG00228-les-8216foulards-rouges-voulaient-s-inscrire-dans-une-demarche-similaire-a-celle-du-30-mai-68.php>.

<sup>39</sup> "Le mouvement des gilets jaunes est-il un néo-poujadisme?," 27 November 2018, <https://agauche.org/2018/11/27/le-mouvement-des-gilets-jaunes-est-il-un-neo-poujadisme/> explores the similarities.

milking citizens to pay for a corrupt parliamentary class,<sup>40</sup> as if they were not also funding a level of public services that, while very far from perfect, is among the world's highest.<sup>41</sup> This spring, a partial replication of the Poujadist breakthrough of the 1956 parliamentary elections is possible. But the inevitable infighting that destroyed Poujadism has already broken out between rival claimants to the *gilets jaunes*' mantle, including the impossibilist strand associated with Drouet, whose rejection of representative democracy has antecedents on both France's ultra-right and its ultra-left.

Yet it must be acknowledged that the *gilet jaunes*' identity is defined by a masterstroke of political symbolism. Their cause already emblazoned on their body, no placard is necessary, freeing them to engage in the mobile cat-and-mouse games characteristic of recent events. It is handily portable in another sense, in that attempts have been made, albeit with very varying degrees of success, to copycat the movement abroad, precisely because it is apparently easy to do so simply by donning a yellow vest. Many foreign politicians, from Steve Bannon to Sahra Wagenknecht of Germany's left-nationalist Aufstehen,<sup>42</sup> have opportunistically attempted to jump on the bandwagon, just as others have feared it: the Egyptian authorities pre-emptively moved to ban the sale of yellow jackets to private individuals. After the Italian "Movement of '77," the political theorist Toni Negri notoriously wrote, with reference to the face-concealing garment favored by ultra-left terrorists, "I immediately feel the warmth of the workers' and proletarian community again every time I don the ski mask."<sup>43</sup> Arguably in the aftermath of the Paris riots, the yellow-jacket serves a comparable function of vicarious thrill to its international imitators as did Negri's ski mask: every time Donald Trump or Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini metaphorically don their yellow jacket by sending a tweet to wind up Macron, they too feel the warmth of the imaginary proletarian community around them.

If the driving association of the yellow jacket is more specific to the French context, its work-based plebeian connotations are internationally potent. They are to today's service-based economy what the blue overall was to postwar Fordist industrialism—a potential long recognized by conservative strategists like former British Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, frequently photographed wearing one to cement an imagined cross-class community of 'strivers' against 'shirkers.' Since the French protests, the yellow jacket has proved flexible enough to have been adopted simultaneously by anti-racists and African migrants in Italy<sup>44</sup> and far right xenophobes in the UK, a group not generally known for its francophilia. But when transplanted from its

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<sup>40</sup> See for example the placards on the demonstrations filmed in the video for "La Chanson des gilets jaunes."

<sup>41</sup> See the critique of the *gilets jaunes* by the Dordogne-based geographer Jean Chaussade, "Ayons le courage de le dire: nous sommes des privilégiés!," 4 December 2018, <http://jean.chaussade.free.fr/index.php/2018/12/04/ayons-le-courage-de-le-dire-nous-sommes-des-privilegies/>.

<sup>42</sup> *Guardian*, 3 January 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Antonio Negri, "Capitalist Domination and Working-class Sabotage," 1977, <https://libcom.org/library/capitalist-domination-working-class-sabotage-negri>; Tobias Abse, "The Professor in the Balaclava: Toni Negri and Autonomist Politics," *What Next?*, no 22 (2002), <http://www.whatnextjournal.org.uk/Pages/Back/Wnext22/Negri.html>.

<sup>44</sup> "Protestors march against Italy's tough new anti-migrant law," December 16, 2018, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2018/12/16/IN-PICTURES-Protesters-march-against-Italy-s-tough-new-anti-migrant-law.html>.

original context, the very ambiguity of its meanings creates potential for confusion, as when a pro-Brexit demonstration by yellow-jacketed members of the English Defense League outside a popular chain of bakers in Manchester was widely mistaken for a protest against vegan sausage rolls.<sup>45</sup> What was it Marx said about ‘The first time as tragedy, the second as farce’?

As the philosopher Jean-Pierre Denis has argued, demonstrations used to *go* somewhere: the directionlessness of the roundabout is the perfect metaphor for the anonymous dispersal of modern society, making the *gilets jaunes* a movement for our times.<sup>46</sup> In this clash of “Jupiter” and roundabout Poujadism, are we all on a road to nowhere?

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<sup>45</sup> *Guardian*, 8 January 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Pierre Denis, “Les gilets jaunes, ou la révolte des ronds-points à la française,” 1 December 2018, [http://www.lavie.fr/actualite/societe/les-gilets-jaunes-ou-la-revolte-des-ronds-points-a-la-francaise-01-12-2018-94790\\_7.php](http://www.lavie.fr/actualite/societe/les-gilets-jaunes-ou-la-revolte-des-ronds-points-a-la-francaise-01-12-2018-94790_7.php).