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There's Yellow in the Air - The "Gilets jaunes", a major political event in Europe

Friday 14 December 2018, by [DURAND Cédric](#) (Date first published: 11 December 2018).

With its background in responses to the flurry of reforms that Emmanuel Macron has sought to push through since 2017, the Gilets Jaunes has already become a major political event in Europe. In this article, Cedric Durand looks at the background to the movement, and asks where it might be heading.

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As a popular uprising for tax justice and in defence of living standards, the *gilets jaunes* have crystallized converging sources of anger against Emmanuel Macron and, beyond that, against the neoliberal globalized capitalism he embodies. Which is going to engulf the other, the *gilets jaunes* or the Macronist structure? The mere fact that the question arises is already extraordinary, and a rudimentary political examination can only reinforce this observation. The arrogance of the presidential class and its proximity to the financial community have contributed significantly to the rise of pressure in the cauldron exploding today. But the political question posed by the *gilets jaunes* goes beyond Macron himself. A historical fissure has opened. The task of all anti-capitalist forces is to widen the breach.

Brought to a stop

As a rearguard of the neoliberalism triumphant in the 1990s, Emmanuel Macron and his supporters came to power by a combination of circumstances. They embarked right away on the structural adjustment programme that decades of resistance had persistently slowed. The blitzkrieg was a success. Employment law, taxation, privatizations... Playing on the psychological advantage of a surprise election victory, the new team moved forward simultaneously on all fronts, unrolling without hesitation an agenda entirely structured by the eternal watchwords of capital — competitiveness and attractiveness for investors.

Reforms were proceeding at such a frenetic pace that, by a domino effect through the institutions, they threatened to break up what remained of the social compromise that has distinguished France since the mid-twentieth century. That was indeed the objective. Emmanuel Macron had made total determination his trademark. Last spring, he told Fox News that there was 'no chance' he would back down on SNCF reform because, he said, 'If I stop, how do you think I'll be able to modernize the country?'

Well, it's done! Emmanuel Macron has been stopped. He is down on one knee. For the first time in his five-year term, the government gave way to the street. By first deciding to cancel the planned fuel tax rise and then making a series of limited concessions on living standards, Macron admitted his capitulation to the popular movement. And as he had rightly anticipated, the main meaning of this enforced halt is that the neoliberal normalization of France he had set himself the mission of accomplishing cannot proceed in the immediate future.

Swelling up from the depths of the country, the anger of the *gilets jaunes* brusquely confirmed the 'illusion of the bourgeois bloc' identified by Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini. [1] Make France a 'Start-up Nation', mobilize finance to save the climate, play 'first past the post'... the positive indicators that the Macron roadmap set its sights on are few and far between. And all the fewer since, with the initial balance-sheet now drawn up, they have not been confirmed by either real disposable income or employment.

At the top, firms and the very rich received immediate dividends from the election of their candidate. At the bottom, however, the middle and working classes bore the full brunt of the new government's policies. These policies have increased the tax burden, to which right-wing sections of the middle and working classes are particularly sensitive, while at the same time undermining the collective guarantees, public services and social protection which are most important for the left wing. The *gilets jaunes* movement is a counter-attack on both fronts. From both right and left, therefore, it has brutally cut off the political fuel supply for a government that is now running on empty and in the emergency lane.

A time of discord

In four weeks, the *gilets jaunes* revolt has become a major political event, perhaps even the most important in France in the last fifty years. Its proto-revolutionary power is the product of a unique combination.

First of all, a very particular geography. This is a movement which drew a tight mesh across the whole national territory, at motorway tollbooths and roundabouts. In this way it assumed high visibility and a strongly transversal character - bringing together many different social categories - as well as a powerful potential to spread. It is significant that 20 per cent of the French population consider themselves *gilets jaunes*. [2] Once the yellow vest became a floating signifier of the revolt, its network structure allowed all kinds of appropriation and variation, thus facilitating the aggregation of different sources of anger and their convergence in the middle of Paris, right alongside the sites of power.

The *gilets jaunes* mobilization, initiated on social networks, is not subject to any trade-union or political framework. It certainly has been assisted by activists from these. Very often, among the groups involved in this action, there are a few individuals who have had trade-union, political, or voluntary organization experience or have been involved in civic struggles or ZADs. [3] Above all, this struggle has produced a new synthesis in which the build-up of rage contained far too long, and the accumulated experience of the struggles of recent years, together sound a call for revenge.

The ship of state is caught in a strong swell... The fact that the first retreat was made so cacophonously - with more than twenty-four hours of ambiguity on 4 and 5 December as to whether the fuel tax was being merely postponed or dropped altogether - is symptomatic of the disarray that has taken hold of the highest circles of power. Even before the crisis broke out, the momentum of a stunning presidential victory had evaporated. The government had narrowed, the police hierarchy had been weakened by the Benalla affair, [4] the young guard of presidential advisers were deaf to

the feedback from the civil service and blind to the political situation, disoriented parliamentarians were regularly absent, and the president's new party had failed to establish itself: devoid of any local anchorage, it was completely ineffective in stemming the wave. Burned by the welcome he received at Le Puy en Velay, where he was heckled and insulted, Emmanuel Macron went to ground in his palace. He was 'a little lost', said one adviser. Actually, he was panicking, afraid for his life.

All these elements contributed to the isolation of the executive, an isolation that from 5 December Macron tried to break. First, by forming a coalition against 'disorder' and 'violence', which he managed with some success before the demonstrations of 8 December. The prime minister could afford the luxury of thanking all the political leaders, trade unions and associations who had agreed to join his call for calm - thus trying to counterbalance a frustrating reality. Despite a strategy of maximum tension and a brutal and massive repression, the mobilization has not weakened but is taking root. There are still as many people on the street, and new connections have been made with the ecologists of the climate marches and with young people in the schools.

In the aftermath of 8 December, the executive has continued its attempts to break its encirclement by seeking a new political combination that would allow it to strengthen its base. Consulting in all directions, it did a bit for household incomes and sought new supporters outside its parliamentary majority, numerically strong but socially very narrow. This was the political backdrop to the presidential broadcast of 10 December. Some ranting about republican order, an act of forced contrition, and concessions calculated as accurately as possible in the hope of easing the pressure. Nothing more than that.

This is an admission of weakness and an encouragement to continue the mobilization. But it should not make us forget that the government still has many cards to play, up to the complete suspension of ordinary democratic freedoms. The constitution allows the president to resort to emergency powers. In 1958, De Gaulle could reassure people by saying: 'Do you think that at sixty-seven I'm going to start a career as a dictator?' Now it's Emmanuel Macron who has Article 16 at his disposal and is only forty years old... The shadow of an authoritarian future hangs over a regime that has entered an existential crisis.

Contradictions among the 'gilets jaunes' people

One of the singularities of this movement is that it raises the question of power head-on. 'Macron resign!' is a unanimous slogan that towers above all others. But the social content of this demand remains indefinite. A battle for this is being played out on social media, in speeches, on yellow sweaters, on posters, on walls... This is obviously a major difficulty.

In this movement, left- and right-wing emotions coexist in great confusion — a large mass of people who are not very politicized, anti-capitalist activists, and fascists. Besides, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the accession to power of Bolsonaro in Brazil, of the M5S-Lega alliance in Italy, and even of Trump in the United States, were all to varying degrees examples of social mobilization with an initially indefinite content: against the rise in bus fares in Brazil, against corruption and taxes considered unfair in Italy, and against the bank bailouts in the case of the Tea Party in the USA - even if the Republican Party connection was more obvious here.

To put it briefly, these loose movements that have characterized the 2010s all seek a way out of neoliberalism. An exit that can take place in two directions. The first is that of a retrenchment to the national community, the object being to try and stifle class polarization by identity panic. If the main enemy becomes the migrant or Chinese imports, a new pro-capitalist policy is possible.

This is the Trump-Salvini-Wauquiez-Le Pen strategy, which breaks with the ideology of happy globalization, the better to consolidate the political gains made by the richest classes in recent decades. This line even inspires the present government. As witness the crude manipulation attempted by the minister of action and public accounts, Gérald Darmanin, when he answered *Le Figaro*'s questions on 7 December: 'This is not just a tax revolt, but an identity crisis [...] they are concerned for the future of our children, the place of religions and in particular Islam.'

It was pretty daring to bring Islam into the price of gasoline and living standards! Unfortunately, this reaction echoes with the efforts of the far right to make the so-called 'Marrakech Pact' on migration a key issue in *gilets jaunes* discussions. We need to be clear about one thing: at the international level, the nationalist right is one step ahead. And from the point of view of capital, this is also the least dangerous path.

The second path is that of the left and the social movements, a direction clearly developed in the critique of neoliberalism since the 1990s. Among the *gilets jaunes*, demands for social justice, wage increases, defence of public services and hostility to the oligarchy have been fuelled by several decades of criticism of globalized and financialized capitalism. The centrality of demands for the restoration of the wealth tax, and the circulation of videos of François Ruffin or Olivier Besancenot, testify to the strength of this left wing of the movement.

But the fact that these demands have taken shape outside the organized left and social movements, and that the mobilization has abruptly raised the question of power, is also a disavowal. The denunciation of neoliberalism by the left has not prevailed as a clearly articulated strategic perspective. If we want to make another international comparison, the emergence of Podemos as a counterpoint to the Spanish 'movement of the squares' looked an exemplary case of political success for the left. Unfortunately, however, this opportunity has now been stymied by its agreement to support the PSOE government, and seems to be reaching its own limits.

There is no need here to detail the circumstances, battles and divergent pathways that distinguish the different trajectories mentioned. We need only remember these recent experiences to emphasize that the tremendous political energy already released by the *gilets jaunes* will not remain without a future. Today, the urgency is to hold and widen the front, to extract everything possible from the government, to try to destabilize it until it falls, to learn and discover new political horizons together. But it is equally urgent, at the same time, to anticipate the battle that will follow. And here, a polarization is already emerging between the far right and the consistent left.

Questions of ends

It is certainly not accidental that it was the rise in fuel prices that set fire to the accumulated social exasperation. This is in fact a symptom of a much deeper discrepancy than the contradictions of Macronism. As has been repeated in many variations, one of the key aspects of the current turbulence is the disarticulation between the longer timeframe of global warming and the short-term problem of making ends meet. But it is no less important to note that the current conflagration is also the result of the collision between democratic aspirations and the iron discipline of globalization.

In this regard, Olivier Blanchard, former chief economist of the IMF, posted this surprising tweet on 6 December: 'Could it be that, given the political constraints on the demand for redistribution and the constraints bound up with the mobility of capital, we are not in a position to reduce inequality and insecurity sufficiently to prevent populism and revolution? What comes after capitalism?'

What does come after capitalism? That is indeed the elephant in the room, a room in which popular demands, ecological crisis and economic impasse jostle together.

The philosopher Fredric Jameson wrote that it was now 'easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'. Locked in the eternal present of neoliberalism, captured by the incessant whirlwind of market injunctions, our societies have lost the sense of history. The future is reduced to two equally depressing options: eternal repetition of what is already here, or apocalypse. For Jameson, what really matters is that the time once again starts to transmit signals of otherness, change, utopia: 'The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings.' [5]

A history made of human beings. For this to happen, the anger that drives roadblocks and barricades is an essential energy. But it will not be enough. It will also require the collective ambition to invent a future that is qualitatively different from market eternity.

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P.S.

Verso Books, 13 December 2018:

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4177-there-s-yellow-in-the-air>

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- Translated by David Fernbach.

Footnotes

[1] Bruno Amable and Stefano Palombarini, *l'illusion du bloc bourgeois*, Raisons d'agir, 2017.

[2] Jérôme Fourquet, 'Les "gilets jaunes", un mouvement en voie de durcissement', *Le Figaro*, 6 December 2018.

[3] ['Zone d'aménagement différé', i.e. 'deferred development site'. The pioneering Zadistes were militants who occupied the projected airport site at Notre-Dame-des-Landes.]

[4] [The security officer Alexandre Benalla was deputy chief of staff to President Macron. On 18 July 2018, he was identified beating up a young protester. Macron, who seems to have been personally close to Benalla, defended his chief of staff, who escaped with a two-week suspension. An investigation by the Senate is still under way.]

[5] Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003.