

# Yellow Vests: Rural France in Revolt

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**The gilets jaunes have put the social ills of rural France at the heart of public debate. These areas aren't "backward," they're suffering from decades of attacks on social welfare and living conditions.**

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Ever since the movement first burst on the scene on November 17, France's political and intellectual debate has continued to revolve around the gilets jaunes. President Emmanuel Macron's first concessions, abolishing a fuel tax and raising benefits for the lowest paid, failed to put a stop to the protests, and the executive is still struggling to get a handle on the crisis. Although city-center marches in recent weeks drew fewer demonstrators than we saw in December, there is continuing defiance, expressed at the countless roundabouts occupied by protesters despite the chill.

Most of these roundabouts are in rural parts of France, on the outskirts of towns of a few thousand inhabitants. And it is no accident that this unique movement arose and took shape in the countryside. While economic injustice is also felt in major cities, this protest most importantly reveals the deeper transformations in the living and working conditions of rural people.

In this sense, it is significant that the movement was born from a protest over fuel taxes. Deindustrialization compounded by the "restructuring" of public services and stores have meant that people living in the countryside rack up considerable mileage on the road, bringing their children to school, going to work, doing their shopping, or visiting the doctor. For them, having a properly functioning car has become essential — along with the fuel to run it.

This process is mainly the result of deindustrialization that took place in the 1980s, with the entrenchment of the industrial crisis. This forced these citizens to seek work farther from home while also keeping up with family demands, for instance if they have a spouse working in another town or a dependent parent in need of regular help.

Ever since then, the places where people work and live have become increasingly dissociated. And yet this is not the only recent transformation of French country life. To understand the gilets jaunes mobilization, we need to explore the transformation of class relations in the French countryside, including the political dispossession of its inhabitants.

## A Widening Gap

There is, of course, social diversity in rural France. But it is largely typified by an overrepresentation of the working classes employed as wage-laborers in manufacturing and service jobs or owning small businesses (tradesmen, shopkeepers, farmers). The significant percentage of workers with

little formal education contrasts with the low presence of the higher social classes and people working in intellectual fields, who overwhelmingly live in cities. This socio-spatial segregation owes to real-estate markets and the concentration of executive and intellectual jobs in major cities, while manufacturing and logistics are now mainly based in rural and suburban areas.

This spatial distance between social classes is rooted in a separation in which “intellectual work” is ranked above “manual work.” This is itself legitimated by an educational system which relegates children from working-class homes to paths preparing them for subaltern jobs. The symbolic devaluation of manual work and the geographical distance of the upper social classes fuel the gilets jaunes movement, and indeed many protesters feel that society looks down on them.

Their life experiences and relationship to work further feed into a sense of rejection (which they interpret as arrogance) by national and regional elites who know nothing of their daily lives, the difficulties they face in making ends meet, or what they know. Some of these abilities — manual skill and a sense for reusing diverse materials — are even put to use in the construction of the shelters on display at the roundabout protests.

So even in rural areas, the spatial distance between social classes has grown, since upper management increasingly tends to reside elsewhere. Factory and public company management commonly used to come from local families, rose up through the ranks, and were involved in local life. Since the 1990s, new policies for recruiting and training managers have weakened this type of local promotion.

Today, the new managers are rarely from working-class backgrounds and are more mobile, meaning that they are only passing through leadership positions in companies subject to managerial re-organization. They know little of the work actually done on the shop floor or service departments because they have never done it themselves, their knowledge instead being derived from their lengthy education. Most commute from regional capitals or Paris, so they are much less invested in community life than their predecessors. They don't play soccer with other employees after work or shop the same stores. Their families and friends are not in the town where they work. They come from someplace else. They are city people that are just passing through, and their distance from local working-class people is indissociably social and spatial.

This sense of social distance is a widespread phenomenon, seen in factories and banks, hospitals and schools. One symbol of these transformations removing intellectual figures from rural working-class people's daily lives is the latest generation of schoolteachers, who are less and less likely to move to the small towns where they are assigned. Like doctors and administrators in local government, many prefer to live in a city and commute to work. The result for the public they serve is a feeling of dispossession. This helps explain these latter's sensitivity to the violence of the language of “experts” and the cultural domination of national political elites.

## **The Disintegration of Local Democracy**

Seeking to respond to the protests, the government organized local meetings to listen to the popular concerns they had raised. But the outcome of the Macron administration's hurriedly launched “Great National Debate” is so uncertain precisely because the malaise runs so deep. In fact, for several decades now, residents of rural areas of France have been subjected to new forms of dispossession.

This sentiment is re-enforced by changes in how France is structured politically. Twenty years ago, a new level of government was introduced in non-urban areas — Communautés de communes, “communities of towns” roughly the size of a county. These political and administrative bodies are

formed through the ex officio appointment of mayors or council members from participating towns, and were initially created to increase the effectiveness of public intervention by allowing greater investment.

Recently, smaller Communautés were obliged to merge, and all were granted more consequential powers and budgets. This was the latest step in a process removing decision-making from the town level and bolstering the influence of a given Communauté's administrative center (usually its largest town) and the clout of their presidents and other officers, whose educations went much farther than the rural average.

The social distance between the population at large and these leaders, elected by other elected officials, fuels feelings of having no say in decisions affecting everyday life, even more so as Communauté issues are rarely discussed at the town level. This is also why there is so much skepticism about Macron's "National Debate," run locally by local elected officials: even before the Debate began, many in the movement spoke of being dispossessed of their bid for political expression.

The increasing rarity of public discussion of local policy develops amid a more general weakening of representative systems. Municipal election campaigns often take place without there being any public meetings, and today plans for creating or merging Communautés de Communes are made without consulting their potential constituencies. In fact, public participation is rarely solicited for anything, and local party organizations no longer exist to pass along the message and work around this weakened "local democracy." Indeed, the disintegration of political parties, especially on the Left, is especially strong in rural areas.

Left-leaning parties have mostly disappeared from small towns, where local elected officials instead emphasize their distance from party structures. Communist and Socialist Party activists have lost their privileged ties with the trade unions and are mainly concentrated among the cultural middle classes of the larger cities. Even the strong recent electoral rise of the Front National (recently renamed Rassemblement National) in rural constituencies has rarely translated into greater activism for the far-right organization.

Meanwhile, the concurrent decline in trade unionism has narrowed the other avenue historically available to the working classes for asserting their rights. This dearth of opportunities for activist sociability is also a likely explanation for the appeal of gilet jaune barricades and encampments, as politically diverse places to meet and talk with others across class lines.

Under these conditions, little can be expected from Macron's "Great National Debate." But these protests have succeeded in putting the reality of rural people's lives in the media spotlight and made the rising wealth of a minority, often living in city centers, even less tolerable. More deeply, this movement is an opportunity to rebuild local activist networks rooted in the working classes. The roundabout protests have established ties between different social categories, from pensioners to single mothers, the unemployed, and temporary workers, and sometimes also with trade unionists and community activists. Whatever happens to the movement itself, these meetings have made it possible to forge new links at the small-town level. With tax injustice and hard-hit purchasing power now a subject of sustained discussion, the bases are being set for a strong politicization in rural France.

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- Jacobin, 03.24.2019:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/03/gilets-jaunes-rural-dispossession-macron>

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