

* Yellow vests? and what next ?

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A social movement is defined not only by its demands and duration but by its motion. It appears in a specific environment linked to a set of circumstances and evolves inexorably like any living social organism: if its development (or its growth) only depends on its duration, its objectives change, evolving from specific to more general ones; as the movement gathers momentum, new participants intervene, helping to change its strategies and goals. However, if it stagnates or shrinks, disagreements hidden in the dynamics of the movement spring up openly, accelerating its dislocation. In any case, unless this movement begins to question the very foundations of the capitalist system over an increasingly extended territory, it must confront this same system nationally which, to a degree or another, will seek to control it and defeat it. The system will use a mixture of repression, partial concessions and integration, or simply buy time to let the movement die.

The “Yellow Vests” can’t escape this logic, which applies to the evolution of every social movement. They won’t be able to avoid such a fate, if their struggle remains in its current state. Even if it goes through many ups and downs, even if its participants feel desperate when they contemplate its programmed failure.

The “Yellow Vests” are the product of a revolt. This movement unifies, in a multifaceted protest, certain social categories which can’t be strictly defined in terms of class. They protest against a system which inevitably affects them, individually, making their lives difficult and destroying any hope of a better situation. If “a drop of diesel makes the vase overflow,” this “vase” was already full of daily frustrations. We can find numerous accounts of popular distress that no leader wanted to hear. Obviously, this situation has gradually been taking shape over the past decades and no government had addressed the situation. This led to a disaffection and distancing from politics, traditional parties and trade unions: in the end, the “Yellow Vests” movement is only the active outcome of what was internalized before. A snowball effect appeared: the deafness of relevant authorities and the usual intermediaries nurtured this disaffection; it caused an even greater incapacity to temper the growing problems of everyday life. Perhaps the fact that Macron jettisoned many traditional avenues for mediation (a choice which enabled him to win the presidential elections) pushed people to believe he would hear them – even though he never displayed such intention. Their hopes were betrayed because Macron only wanted one thing : to enforce radical reforms. And these reforms created discontent among those who were ousted from these reformed structures (several reports show that many “Rassemblement national¹” voters secretly hoped Macron would accomplish part of their wishes).

A MISH-MASH OF REVOLT

Can this widespread mistrust of politics and politicians, this refusal of representation (an essential tool of the parliamentary system), lead to a global challenge of the capitalist system in itself ? Can these proposals of “grassroot democracy“ lead to such outcome? At the present stage, and despite some isolated declarations, this does not seem likely.

As the discontent and mistrust towards any representation affects all classes, except the capitalists and those who enjoy high incomes, of course, we find in this movement a heterogeneous mish-mash of active participants united only by this “revolt” (this is not an insurrection, let alone a revolution, at least for the moment, even seen through its most general perspectives). The “Yellow Vests” put forward a set of demands which must be granted by a political system that they are also challenging. This obvious paradox applies both to immediate material demands and to a political reform implementing new structures within which the Yellow Vests could be heard, where they could freely speak and elaborate more than just wishes. However when it comes to the nature of the power they could acquire, everything remains vague and imprecise – except demands for a referendum.

¹ Since June 2018, the Rassemblement national led by Marine Le Pen is the new name of the Front national founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, her father, in October 1972. (*Translator’s note.*)

The Yellow Vests are only united around two points : they are protesting against their living conditions and they wish to create a new political structure in which they can speak at will (and perhaps decide). That's why this movement is able to bring together trades people, shopkeepers, small and mid-level businessmen, as well as all sorts of precarious workers: employees with low income (who endure tough working conditions, temporary work, short-term contracts, part-time work, etc.), the unemployed or those on social benefits, pensioners with low pensions, etc.

If the movement mobilizes what we call the "Deep France," (i.e., the countryside, villages and small towns) more than big cities, it hinges upon two kind of protests :

- blockades : actually this movement attempts more to "filter" the cars than to block them on the roundabouts (the number of which has been providentially multiplied in the past years) ;
- Saturday demonstrations in nearby cities, every week, since November 17th 2018. These demonstrations are completely different from the blockades because they polarize other political oppositions.

What is the reason for this partial localism, what does bring together members belonging to all classes²? One explanation lies in the progressive desertification of the rural areas, a process which started in the 1950s. At that time movements already appeared which pretended to defend the "middle classes" and they took on a political character (the Poujade movement in 1956 ; the CID-Unati of Gérard Nicoud in 1969-1980). The mechanization of agriculture and the process of land consolidation led to a considerable exodus of agricultural workers to industrial sites near cities; the extinction of small trade and craft industry was directly linked to the impressive shortage of the available customers based in rural areas. The establishment of supermarkets and hypermarkets reduced what was left of this class even more, and more recently ecommerce subsequently reduced the space for small business, further including small local supermarkets.

With this transformation, having a car became more vital than in the cities: the survivors of small trade and craft industry were forced to widen their field of action. Sedentary survivors, pensioners, and employees working in hypermarkets or in the many medium-sized factories remaining in the countryside, had to use a car because public transport had become scarce or disappeared (to reduce costs, the state closed many secondary railway lines or unprofitable railway stations). The survivors who belong to the traditional "middle classes" cannot be ignored, but their participation in the "Yellow Vests" movement does not give it the unified and coherent character which was inherent to this class of "small artisans and shopkeepers" in the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike the population of large or medium-sized towns which enjoy a decent network of public transport, the inhabitants of villages and small towns must, whatever their social status, use a car to go to work, buy food and other necessities. The automobile has become an important element of their daily expenditures ; the price of a liter of fuel has therefore become a sensitive issue where diesel is concerned; the entire rural population is affected, at different levels, by the increase of its price. It is also deeply frustrated because the state provided incentives for the purchase of diesel cars and then totally changed its position : diesel is now presented as most polluting than other motor fuels and must be eradicated at all costs.

In a way, one could argue that in the cities which benefit from an extensive public transport network, the popular supporters of the "Yellow Vests" are not so much preoccupied by car and diesel prices but by other questions : housing for example. Somebody who receives social benefits like the RSA (Active Solidarity Income³) can survive in the countryside if he/she has a garden and enjoys local solidarity,

² "Classes moyennes" is a vague concept which is very much disputed. Opinion leaders tend to think that a good part of the French working class belongs to the "middle classes", and many workers tend to think the same. Here, I guess the author uses this word to designate both the old and new petty bourgeoisie. (*Translator's note.*)

³ According to the INSEE (National Statistics Institute) "*The active solidarity income (RSA) came into force on June 1st 2009 (...). The active solidarity income is an allocation which completes the initial household resources to reach the level of a guaranteed income. The guaranteed income is calculated as the sum of a lump sum, the amount of which varies according to the household composition and the number of childs ; and of a fraction of the professional income of household members fixed by decree to 62 %.(...)Its purpose is to "guarantee its recipients sufficient means for living, in order to combat poverty, encourage the exercise of or return to professional activity and assist in the social integration*

despite the expenses related to car ownership, while in the city, the same person will endure even more difficult living conditions.

EXTREMELY HETEROGENEOUS SITUATIONS AND DEMANDS

If the situations of the Yellow Vests are very different, this also applies to their demands. Their vocabulary is particularly vague as they use terms like “people,” “citizens,” etc. which obscure existing social differentiations. In order to solve their undifferentiated problems, the “people” and “citizens” usually direct their demands at the political power, in this case President Macron, who embodies the state all by himself. Yet a president has little power over many of these demands. As regards wages, for example, companies set working conditions and wages, and sometimes sign contractual agreements. The political power sets the framework for negotiations governing all working conditions and the minimum wage (the SMIC). This hourly and monthly salary is calculated on a weekly basis of 35 hours and only sets a minimum amount: real wages depend essentially on the working hours and the position in the wage hierarchy ; it is entirely conditioned by the balance of forces in each company and by the attitude of its managers. As the nature of the salary (short term contract, part-time job, temporary work, etc.) depends on company management, actual salary varies greatly. Political power is not capable of intervening in this process— as we have seen in recent alleged “concessions”, the state can only transfer urgent requests to the decision makers, nothing more.

The Yellow Vests’s acts of resistance take place outside the field of capital-labor class relations and outside of the balance of power within companies (no significant strike has broken out to support the actions of the “Yellow Vests”). Therefore, for the movement “to exist,” it had to find another field of intervention besides calling a strike – although some Yellow Vests call their presence on the roundabouts as a “strike”. They therefore use means of struggle which function outside the factories and companies : from blocking logistics tools and demonstrating in the street to vandalizing luxury shops and attempting to attack state buildings.

Workers who participate in the “Yellow Vests” movement do so on an individual basis, except for a few local or regional trade unions, such as truck drivers in Brittany, for a brief period. Even blocking hypermarkets, oil depots, refineries and sometimes local companies is decided by this general movement, which intends to paralyse the logistics infrastructure.

A FEW TENS OF THOUSANDS

Through its blockades and weekly events, the movement does not mobilize large numbers. One could even conclude that the road blockades (curiously railways have never been affected, until now) and the attempts to storm the seats of power in Paris and certain provincial cities, show the weakness of a minority movement. The strength of the Yellow Vests resides only in their determination and in the echoes of sympathy they find among a large majority of the population. If, as in South Korea or elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of people (not defined by any precise class basis) demonstrate for a specific goal, every day or every week-end, for weeks or months, there is no need for violence. On October 20th 2018, when tens of thousands of “Yellow Vests” tried to reach the presidential palace next to the Champs-Élysées, 700,000 British protested in London against the Brexit. We are far from 300,000 or so demonstrators across France.

Even if we can have some doubts about the accuracy of these statistics, we are not faced with a mass movement: in comparison with these 200,000 or 300,000 people, we must say that these heterogeneous social categories represent tens of millions⁴ of people throughout France. This movement regroups very

of recipients” (Law n°2008-1249 of December 1st 2008). ” Behind these beautiful words, the financial reality is the following : if you live alone you will get 550 euros per month ; if you are a couple 826 euros ; if you are alone with one children 826 euros ; if you are a couple with one child 991 euros, and so on. This implies that you will have to choose, specially if you live in a big town : either you will buy food, either you will pay your rent (translator’s note).

⁴ 26,6 millions of people are active in France and 3 million are unemployed. There are 14 millions people in retirement. (*Translator’s note.*)

different social categories which are engaged in a proxy struggle ; it therefore enjoys purely verbal support, not active popular support. This explains the methods of struggle, used both in the blockades and demonstrations, and the sheer determination of its “avant-garde.” However, this cannot hide the weakness of the “Yellow Vests” and ultimately their reduced impact on the French productive system.

Apart from this “moral” support which is both a force and a weakness, the Yellow Vests have provoked other reactions, some which are only verbal and expressed in the media, others which have more substantial consequences.

SUPPORTS AND SOLIDARITIES

It is very difficult to determine the positive (or negative) influence of the numerous texts that swept through the media. All sorts of people (including ourselves), some of whom were not interested at all in social or class struggles before, think that they must now approve, condemn or give advice to the Yellow Vests. We don’t know if this avalanche of comments plays any role in the movement, but beyond words and speeches, the massive broadcasting of mere images of every form of (individual and official) social media strengthens popular support for the movement and the solidarity has come from very different horizons, up until now.

The different powers cannot control the propaganda of the social networks which both restore the truth against official propaganda and produce independent strains of thought. Of course, this stream of comments and information gives way to many so-called “fake news,” but while these can influence individual opinions, they hardly affect the characteristics and orientations of the Yellow Vests.

If the movement now enjoys massive solidarity, it’s impossible to measure its importance and impact on its duration, extension, demands and level of violence. This solidarity is multifaceted and does not imply direct participation in various actions. (We will deal later with the solidarity between its active participants and the forms it can take ~~later~~.) Beyond the declarations reproduced in the media, from a long speech to a short message, including friendly gestures such as the people blowing their horns when they pass a blockade, food and other goods brought to the roadblocks and so on are the first material forms of support: these initiatives express “active” sympathy for the movement but don’t go any further. We can call these people “interested/disinterested,” as they will not gain anything from the victories won by the movement or by any structural reform.

A second group of Yellow Vests’ supporters can be labelled “interested/interested.” Not only they help, but also they try to influence the perspectives and directions of the movement. This is inevitable. In any struggle of any dimension, all sorts of “marginal” elements seek to join in. Given the heterogeneous interclassist nature of the “Yellow Vests,” different local marginal forces believe they can benefit from this movement and succeed to put an end to their own isolation and relative inaction, and therefore recruit new sympathizers. These supporters come from national political groups, such as «La France Insoumise⁵» of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the “Rassemblement national” of Marine Le Pen ; they also come from local activist groups, that belong to the right, the far right and the ultra-left. This infiltration is not necessarily obvious because the members of these “marginal” forces can present themselves as individual “citizens,” thus concealing their true political positions and intentions (they are not necessarily recognized in road pickets near middle-sized towns, and even less so in demonstrations). Some local groups may also participate in more open manner and, once accepted, gain a certain influence in discussions about strategies and political positions, thanks to their previous militant experience.

POLITICAL POSITION AND STRATEGY

Although these two points – political position and strategy – are closely linked, we will separate them in order to analyze them. Regardless of any “external” influences such as those just mentioned, we have nevertheless to specify that the original “Yellow Vests”, through their very heterogeneity, did not necessarily need this “contribution” to try to define their political expression and strategy.

⁵ Born in February 2016 « La France insoumise » is supposedly a “movement,” in fact an electoral front for the « Parti de gauche » created in 2009 and its allies. (*Translator’s note.*)

We are no longer in a situation where churches, parties and unions, national or local mainstream media (newspapers, radios, etc.) inform a majority of uneducated people. These times are over. The general level of education has increased, therefore the possibility for independent thought has also grown ; most people have acquired an in-depth knowledge through all sorts of social intermingling (starting with their holidays) but especially through the exponential extension of social media, television and Internet., Everyone can learn about what's happening around the world "in real time," to use technocratic jargon. Even without great curiosity, one can absorb a lot of information and reflect on the attitudes of leaders, on the policies they promote and the reactions these policies cause. This situation is very different from what it was just a decade ago. It partly explains the decline of professional knowledge "intermediaries" (trade unionists, party militants, journalists, publishers, etc.). In other words, the "Yellow Vests" were originally able, through their own analysis of the impact made by political decisions on their class interests, to get an idea of, and determine, the best means to defend themselves. Obviously, this "knowledge" is linked both to their local condition and problems. But this change in the channels of "knowledge" has produced a negative counter-effect: it contributed to reinforcing the individualism and isolation of everyone in their home "cocoon," a situation which is much more common among the rural than in the city populations. The disappearance of these educational organizations is partly linked to the development of individualized tasks (at home or elsewhere), and has reduced the possibilities of socialization; you can have dozens of virtual "friends" on Facebook and have no real contact with your neighbors. This is much more common in rural areas where the spaces for socialization like the local shop, school, post office, etc., have disappeared.

At the beginning of the movement, the homogeneity regarding the diesel price quickly turned into a heterogeneity of interests, as shown by its eclectic list of demands. Even external interventions have not changed the situation, and sometimes even accentuated the contradictions we have already underlined. For example, the Rassemblement National implicitly supports the movement, which involves its electoral base, the partial remains of the traditional "middle classes. But its leader, Marine Le Pen, opposes any increase of the SMIC – an important "Yellow Vests" demand, at least for those who are wage-earners. This heterogeneity is currently concealed by a deeper political evolution that reintroduces a homogenization. Because, from the beginning, the demands are not the only political component of the Yellow Vests who also require the creation of new channels for "being heard." Therefore, a common demand for a "citizens' initiative referendum" (RIC) appeared. While this may indeed be a way out for the movement, one can easily quote many historical examples, including some quite recent ones, to prove that this proposal can only lead to a deadlock. Referendums may actually look like an efficient way to express the will of the "people" but they include all the flaws of the representativity process – for example, the majority opposed to the minority (see the British referendum on the Brexit, and the use of the referendum in France by regimes based on the authority of one leader, from Bonaparte to de Gaulle). It is unclear how this slogan came to the fore : either it was imagined by some "Yellow Vests" themselves ; or by some people who wanted to overcome the current heterogeneity ; or, it came from external agents. Whatever the case, it marginalizes the material demands put forward previously. Have the movement's "political" elements taken precedence over "realist" activists ?

Maybe this rise of a single political slogan has come just in time to solve the problem of strategies which changed from week to week. In fact, apart from the Saturday local or central demonstrations, the movement remained rather static without diminishing but also without extending itself. This partly explains the importance of these recent events.

We must now come back to the external interventions whose influence was more evident during weekly demonstrations than on the roadblocks. Road blockades were stagnating and, because the police dislodged them, only " filtering blockades " or merely symbolic gatherings near the roundabouts could survive. The question was therefore how to make the movement more audible to the state and more effective. But when it ceased to be local and became centered on Paris and some major cities, the movement enabled the intervention of anonymous radical nuclei. Those brought an element lacking in a too static and localized struggle.

This radicalization converged upon the radicalization of certain "Yellow Vests" who saw no other way out from their obvious immobilism. But these radical nuclei (from all political sides) have brought violence in the movement, because they hoped to trigger an extension to other social classes. Within certain limits, they were joined by those who are commonly known as "rioting thugs", who saw in these disorders an opportunity to secure free goods

But the aim of this violence, in which these trends played a secondary role, was masked by the fact that the assaults targeted the seats of power: the Elysée presidential palace in Paris, the “préfectures” (police and state headquarters) in the “départements⁶.”

RISING UP ONE DAY PER WEEK

Targeting the seats of power is an old strategy in France, essentially defended by extreme right movements. This is why many people evoked the February 6, 1934 riots, which saw a mixture of Communist Party militants and rightwing First World War veterans backed by far-right leagues confronting each other on the Concorde Square, in order to storm the Palais-Bourbon (National Assembly). Nearly 40 people died and 2,000 were injured on this day. We don't exactly know who thought of these Saturday “acts⁷” (we must admit that sometimes this movement adopts some theatrical postures) which spread through social networks. They were obviously successful as the stagnation of the blockade movement probably demoralized local participants: to raise the stakes against the power structures could rekindle the hope winning

This extension had nothing to do with an insurrection and did not trigger anything else other than its own extended violence, for one evening and one night. Afterwards everyone returned home, to the roadblocks, to his/her personal isolation, to his/her job, until the following Saturday. It is impossible to be an insurgent once a week ! A real insurrection does not limit itself to one day and does not allow a return to a normal life the next morning. This weekly extension was supported by the hope that the right local contacts created with certain professional categories (like truck drivers or the refineries' workers) could incite the labor movement to step in and take over, in keeping with the student movement in May 68.

THE CAPITALIST MACHINE OF PRODUCTION CONTINUES TO RUN

This hope was perhaps not absolutely fallacious as some high schools and universities were blocked by sometimes violent movements. But if “poorly paid” and precarious workers were active among the “Yellow Vests”, the interclassism and the confused demands of this movement have never been unifying forces. And moreover one should not forget, that, for the last two years, all working class struggles launched by trade unions failed because they did not gather enough participants and because the struggle did not last long enough. Some unions tried to implement mediation, others tried to organize sporadic demonstrations to sponsor an indirect support, but there was no collective trend of support among workers, only individual participation, not even in the name of a an organization. In fact, the capitalist machine of production continued to run more or less normally and even the logistics sector was hardly affected, although this was the strategic goal of the “Gilets Jaunes” movement. The weakening of the movement and its programmed failure are probably linked to these disappointed hopes of an extension to the working class, extension which had little chance to occur, given the global context.

Finally, the government – and Macron in particular – managed to overcome the situation and sail around the most dangerous cape, without actually giving in to the demand that triggered the movement: diesel prices. The suppression of certain diesel taxes and various other measures have brought some extra money to part of the precarious workers, but has not brought any general wage increase, except for those who earn the SMIC. However, this government should not brag : the modest measures it announced will strain the economy to some extent, and have reintroduced the debate around the public debt within the European Union ; no power returns unscathed from such a crisis which shakes up the entire economic, social and political system and significantly changes the relationship between the state and the population as a whole. Here once again we can learn from some historical references.

Will the links created by this movement, especially on the roadblocks and roundabouts, later influence the people's relationship with traditional politics that were already strongly countered by the rise of electoral abstention ? It is hard to say.

⁶ Continental France is divided into 95 “départements”, each one administered by a “préfet”, who is a direct representative of the state. (*Translator's note.*)

⁷ The « Acte XIII » (13th Act) was on February 9th 2019. (*Translator's note.*)

Nevertheless, one can be sure that relations that did not exist before have appeared and created new solidarities, but will they resist, once the movement is over, the existence of opposing class interests ? No doubt some suggestions of another “democratic order” have been debated here and there, but they have remained at a local level and have not been taken up on a national scale, even on social networks. Moreover, how can this common form of organization on road blockades globally influence such a heterogeneous, temporary community, whose objectives passed from detailed, material demands to a certain political generalization ?

As it rose, the movement, limited to one day per week, targeted the power centers and promoted general political demands which replaced the initial material demands. It neglected the positive changes, the relations between participants created by the blockades. A sort of community of life was obviously functioning between these participants of diverse social origins. What will remain after the movement has ended? We are obviously not interested in the formation of new party cells but in common positive actions against the negative aspects of the blockades. In order to create a new world instead of just opposing the present one. Why not dream?

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

What will remain, once the movement is over, the blockades are lifted and the demonstrations stop ? Perhaps the most important product of this movement: freedom of speech. The Yellow Vests enabled many people in rural areas, in small towns of France, to put an end to their daily life of isolation ; they were no longer loners, home talking to their cat or their dog ; they were able to discover new social contacts, unknown until then. The new freedom of speech allowed not only recriminations to be expressed but also many people opened their hearts which they had never done before, even if this process was limited to roundabouts, to local assemblies, and some demonstrations. It did not reach the size of May 1968, but it existed and enabled many people to break with their daily routine and isolation. Here too we don't know what will happen. Those who lived through May '68 have had the bitter experience of seeing these social relations fall back into daily coded routines, once the liberating movement of the general strike disappeared when every one went back to work.

Will it be the same with the lifting of the blockades which enabled, in a limited but very real way, this liberation of speech? In these liberated exchanges on individual lives, the most essential questions remained marginal, as they concerned increasingly general problems, topics that very few sought to address. This is why the conflicted mixture of demands did not include anything about global warming, the nuclear industry, the European Union or any other national or global problem, nothing concerning the radical transformation of the world, A transformation which could put an end to capitalist exploitation.

This situation is linked to the heterogeneous combination of direct material demands with structural methods “to be heard” and freely express oneself. This is what the government is dealing with— apart from repression. On one side, the state offers some financial concessions, and on the other it proposes a potential minor political change – the “citizens’ initiative referendum.” Everything must go back to normal and the momentary freedom of speech should be abandoned. One can always hope, without really believing it, for the persistence of some positive consequences in participants’ daily life, through this freedom of speech and the construction of some community relations outside formal and official ones.

Yet this seems unlikely, because the realities of class divisions will soon restore the reality of social relations under capitalism.

H.S.

(Translated and revised by J.L.Y.)