

# **Contribution to the Rupture in Progress**

**A Translation from France on the Yellow Vest Movement**

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The following text appeared yesterday on the French platform lundimatin; they describe it as the best sociological and political analysis to date on the yellow vest movement. Although we are no more optimistic about the “non-ideological” character of the first phase of the yellow vest phenomenon than we are about the antiquated methods of organization it supplanted, the movement itself has become a battleground to determine what form the next wave of opposition to neoliberal austerity will assume—and no one can afford to stand aside. This text concludes with a cool-headed appraisal of the risks and possibilities before the *gilets jaunes* and all who will follow in their wake.

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“I’ll end up becoming a communist ...”

-Brigitte Bardot, interview with *Le Parisien*, December 1, 2018

“Beautiful as an impure insurrection”

(graffiti seen on a building façade on the Champs-Élysées)

## Decompositions

Even if it soon proves fragile, for now, one of the principle merits of the current mobilization is to have sent the rhetoric and the tactical repertoire of the left movements of the past century to the Grévin Museum<sup>1</sup>—all while demanding more justice and equality and without reproducing the anti-tax rhetoric of the post-war right and extreme-right. After the collapse of the Social Democrats signified in France by Macron’s election, we see the collapse of the communists, the (in)soumis,<sup>2</sup> the leftists, anarchists, members of the “ultra-left,” and other class struggle professionals or spokespeople of radical chic: and a majority of them, after sneering or holding their noses, are running at full speed after the movement with their factions, unions, parties, media coverage, and blog posts. Welcome to the rearguard!

The delay is obvious, the protest is funereal. Everyone can foresee the calls, editorials, motions, petitions, the route from Place de la République to Bastille announced by the prefecture, their protest marshals and their black bloc, the committees coordinating and negotiating between representatives and rulers, the little theater of representativeness between the leaders or delegates and the “base,” taking the floor through the press or in general assemblies. In short, the final ruins of the welfare state, or rather, of its forms of protest, have gone up in smoke; they are not only useless, but above all obsolete and pathetic, the terms of a completely dead language that may still be spoken for a long time by the ghosts that come to haunt them. One can always count on bureaucrats, professionals, or trainees, and on the army of organic intellectuals of emptiness, to play the ventriloquist, to play the grand game of the Party, to imagine themselves once more in the avant-garde of a movement, for which they are in reality just sad street sweepers bringing up the rear.

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<sup>1</sup> A wax museum.

<sup>2</sup> The *Insoumis*, the “untamed” or “not submissive,” is the populist democratic socialist party of Mélenchon. The parentheses in the original French text convey doubt as to whether it is more correct to describe Mélenchon’s devotees as tamed or untamed.

Here they are proposing watchwords, soon to be constitutions, enacting rules of good collective conduct, exhorting the inversion of the power struggle, rambling on learnedly about the pre-revolutionary characteristics of the situation, infiltrating protests and meetings, calling for the convergence of struggles... These practices, these speeches were already hollow incantations last year during the movements of the railway workers and the students—they are hollower than ever today. For the novelty, the tenacity of the first successes of the “yellow vests” cruelly illuminate the series of almost systematic defeats that have taken place over the past several years in France and the general decomposition into which all the currents of the left, so proud of their heritage and singularity and always so stupidly heroic in their posturing, have sunk little by little over half a century. Far from being an obstacle, it’s precisely the much-disparaged ideological impurity of the movement that has enabled it to spread and rendered obsolete all the unifying voluntarisms of specialized organizations and activists. To the professionals of the leftist order and the insurrectionary dis-order, the movement of “yellow vests” only offers an invitation to travel, to a participation that will finally be free of the established collectivities, like so many ideological and material weights of the past.

## Turning Point

The mobilization underway has no need of being inflated—or rather, competed with, if one knows how to read between the lines of the deposed little chiefs’ revanchist declarations—by existing or parallel movements. In the roundabouts and in the streets, by blockade or by riot, it is already bringing together forces that are heterogeneous, politically diverse, or even opposed (though often sociologically close) to encounter and to clash. Instead of using preexisting ideas or shared class consciousness or even videos and messages exchanged on social networks, the movement clings to local sociability, old and commonplace, to interactions outside of the workplace, in the cafés, groups, sports clubs, buildings, neighborhoods. Because the religious character of progressive ideology, with its hackneyed myths and empty rituals, is completely foreign to them, the “yellow vests” don’t appear in the first two weeks of the movement to carry assurances or pat interpretations of their common misery. With suppleness and adaptation, at the risk of division and dissolution, they take to the streets, advance on crossroads and tollbooths without prejudice, without imposed certitude, free of the pathological intellectualism and idealism of the left and of leftists and their fantasy of the proletariat, the historical subject and the universal class.

The movement is situated at the turning point between two periods of capitalism and the modes of government associated with them. In its content more than in its form, it bears the marks of the past, but leaves glimpses of a possible future of struggles or uprisings. The critique of the tax, the demand for redistribution, the correction of inequalities—all these are addressed to a regulatory state that has largely disappeared. At the same time, the movement wants less tax and more state. It only attacks the state to the extent to which it has withdrawn from the urban and semi-rural zones. And though until recently the issue was a question of purchasing power, that was the case only as a consequence of ignoring the salaries that for the most part determine the general level of purchasing power even more than taxation does. A remarkable trait of the current period is that no one in the government has thought of blaming the bosses for their wage policies. This tactically incomprehensible restriction of focus demonstrates better

than any discourse what interests the leading politicians of the current regime serve, even at their own peril.

Since it defies the parties and expresses itself outside of unions—and even, at the beginning, against them—the movement also confronts the entire system of representation of interests that dates from the Second World War and from the Fifth Republic: a set of mechanisms of delegation attached to the Keynesian administration of capitalism. In thus dismissing the left and leftists to ancient tradition, or better, to formaldehyde, the “yellow vests” complete for some the demands for autonomy that have been expressed since May 1968. But for the same reason, they are also in harmony with the program of destruction of union organizations and democratic institutions that has been implemented under advanced capitalism since the 1970s. Or rather, they are its irreducible remainder, the emergence of which some had prophesied. Keynesian, libertarian, and neoliberal by turns, or all at once, the movement brings with it, in its relationship to the state, the economy, and history, the stigmata of these dying political ideas and the ambivalences of our time.

Nevertheless, the movement proposes, albeit in a still paradoxical form, the first mass politicization of the ecological question in France. This is why one would be wrong to relate the mobilization only to the conditions of class, status, and profession, and to create an oversimplified opposition between the problems of the end of the month and the question of the end of the world. This old reflex is also a remnant of the old regime of regulation and protest. In the movement of the “yellow vests,” labor is not the epicenter any more than purchasing power really is. What the movement protests, beyond ecological injustices (the rich destroy much more of the planet than the poor, even while eating organic and sorting their trash, but the poor are the ones who must bear the costs of the “ecological transition”), is above all the enormous differences that exist in relation to circulation, which have hardly been politicized until now. Rather than expressing itself in the name of a social position, in this sense the movement makes mobility (and its different regimes: constrained or chosen, diffuse or concentrated) the principal focus of the mobilizations, and, in blocking traffic, the cardinal instrument of the conflict.

## **The Three Vests**

On the level of concrete mobilization, the chief quality of the movement will have been to have invented a new tactic and a new dramaturgy of the social struggle. Weak means, perfectly put into play, will have sufficed to create a level of crisis that has rarely been attained politically in France over the past several decades. The logic of numbers and convergence, which was part and parcel of the mobilizations of the Keynesian period, is no longer the decisive factor: no more need to count on high school and college students, on the unemployed and the retired, on their availability and on their time; nor to seek a central, mediatized, Parisian resonance chamber to give the movement its strength and legitimacy. The unique combination of a proliferation of small groupings in the spaces without spontaneous political life for half a century; of the practice of blockades; and of the obvious, natural, ancestral recourse to the riot, reaching to the very hearts of the local, regional, and national urban centers, has supplanted, at least temporarily, the repertoire of the strike with its imposing and well-established figure.

Beyond this common trait, three practical and tactical tendencies currently appear to divide the movement and determine its future. The first is electoralist in its heart, “citizenist” in its

fringes. It already calls for the formation of a brand new political movement, for the constitution of candidacies for the next European elections, and it no doubt dreams of a destiny comparable to that of the Five Star Movement in Italy, or Podemos in Spain, or the Tea Party in the US. This is a matter of weighing in on the existing political game via representatives whose social characteristics are as similar as possible to the characteristics of their constituents. The most radical ones in this camp are not satisfied with the current political institutions and demand that these be completely transformed immediately: they want their referendum or their “Nuit debout”,<sup>3</sup> but in the giant soccer stadiums where they imagine a new deliberative democracy will be invented and put into practice.

A second polarity within the movement is openly in favor of negotiation. It expressed itself in the press last Sunday by calling for discussions with the government and by accepting, before retracting, its invitations. A more or less rebellious fraction of the parliamentary representatives and politicians of the majority responded, with representatives of the opposition, the unions, and the heads or seconds-in-command of the party, by calling for a change in course: complete transformations of the *Estates General* [legislative assemblies], taxation, ecology, inequalities, and other burning subjects. This pole dominated the debates in the third week, but it is quite contested inside the movement, which doesn't see how a new Grenelle Accords,<sup>4</sup> *a fortiori* without unions or legitimate representatives and probably diluted with time, could possibly address the rage. After a false start, the government's principal advantage is now the time of year; they hope to drown the opposition in end-of-the-year parties and make the discussion last several months. We know as well that, in other circumstances, the *Estates General* could not dress the wounds.

The third core of the movement is *dégagiste* (oppositional) and, at its margins, insurrectionary or even revolutionary. It expressed itself this weekend in Paris and in the prefectures, demanding the immediate resignation of Macron without any other program. It obtained results that are unprecedented for several decades in France by reaching the rich neighborhoods west of the capital and responding to the forces of order with an unheard-of enthusiasm despite the police repression, the numerous victims of violence, hands ripped off, faces battered. A few statistics offer an idea of the violence underway: on December 1, the police shot as many grenades in Paris as they had in France throughout the entirety of 2017 (*Libération*, December 3, 2018). It is possible that the very acute character of these confrontations has been, in part, the product of a governmental calculation aiming to disqualify the riotous fractions of the movement. This strategy failed last week. It has been the object of mass propaganda once again this week. Whatever happens, the best prospects of this segment of the movement are reminiscent of the Arab revolts of 2011, when a very heterogeneous political mobilization brought down several authoritarian regimes, but without succeeding in going further and affirming a revolutionary positivity.

This portrait wouldn't be complete without recalling that the neo-fascist possibility spans the three camps of the movement. The extreme right is present in all of them. The identitarian and authoritarian tension is also a possible scenario for all of the tendencies: in alliance with (like in Italy) or by absorption into the electoralists; by disgust or its counterpart, if the negotiators win the day; by backlash or counter-revolution, if the putschists of the left or the insurgents triumph. The extreme right in ambush! All the good spirits are demoralized. Will that be enough to tarnish the movement? In reality, the neo-fascist possibility has been present in France since

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<sup>3</sup> *Nuit Debout*, “up all night,” was a French knockoff of Occupy that took place in 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The accord that effectively ended the insurrectionary events of May 1968.

Macron's election: it is its necessary double and the most probable consequence. The emergence of the extreme right is occurring everywhere today as the logical consequence of maintaining the neoliberal economic order and police state in conjunction with social crisis, witnessed by the authoritarian turn in many countries since 2008. The existence of this danger is not uplifting, but it is the obvious proof that we are at a crossroads in France, in Europe, and beyond. In critical times, history is always uncertain and molten; the purists and the hygienists of the mind and of politics are at a loss. If they are not yet illiberal, the "yellow vests" are already anti-liberal. But who can say whether they wish for new liberties?

## Weak Links

By this measure, the insurrectional riot amounts to nothing, even if the ones that took place November 24 and December 1 in Paris and in some cities in the provinces were of historical scope. We sometimes forget that the French have violently risen up, most often against taxes and the concentration of powers, for nearly four centuries. Over the last hundred years, tolerance for destruction and street violence had considerably weakened. However, since 2016 and the new, fragile understanding between the "black bloc" and assemblies, the demonization of riots has receded. This trend has been reinforced over the past few days by ordinary citizens' encounters with exacerbated police brutality. A tactical course of action could take advantage of this, perhaps provisionally, in order to win the heart of the movement and sharpen the precision with which it aims at targets.

The storming of the Palace de la Republic will not take place. For the moment, there are still many mechanisms in reserve with which to defuse the situation: the dismissal of the government, the declaration of a state of emergency, the army, et cetera. Let us finish mourning all leftism: revolution itself, understood as event, is no longer a necessity, nor even an absolute horizon. Henceforth, the battle can only take place continuously: that is to say, by attacking, according to priority, the weakest parts of the strategic systems of the presiding power. The media and police, to begin with.

The media are effectively divided on this movement. Some media support the anti-tax position of the "yellow vests" to increase the class interests of their owners, all while fearing popular violence. Other media, ideologically closer to the government, in social affinity with the figure that Macron embodies, are nonetheless held to account by their consumers, who support the "yellow vests" even if they aren't participating. In a fluid situation, representation is one of the decisive arms of war. However, social networks and various protest sites only partially correct the monopolistic tendency of traditional audiovisual media when they themselves are not won over by shameless counter-truths. We like to imagine a part of the "yellow vests" interfering as soon as possible with one or several radio and television stations, national ones if possible, associating with defecting journalists, thus enabling the historical developments underway to appear more clearly. At the very least, we must immediately expand the instruments of counter-information that we already have.

The police presence is paradoxically the other weak link in the presiding system. It's a used up, overexploited machine, full of rusty parts and weapons, and whose human cogs experience socio-economic conditions very close to those of the "yellow vests." This proximity could succeed in dividing the ranks of the police, their unions, if they are pushed where their pains have accu-

mulated, softening the base. The task seems rough, difficult, perhaps impossible, but no uprising occurs without at least a partial reversal of the repressive apparatus. Temporality is tight. We can't be sure that this Saturday, the plan decided by the Interior Minister will not be more insidious, avoiding frontal conflicts in favor of targeted arrests—in the German manner, as it were—in order to contain the tension to the point of breathlessness. But will that work when a mass radicalization has taken place over the last two weeks against the ordinary practices of the police? At Pau on December 1, the CRS [riot police] took off their helmets in front of the protestors. Didn't a union (Vigi) already call for an unlimited strike after Saturday? Other unions of civil servants (teachers, fire and rescue departments, the entirety of public services) have formulated similar calls for the next few days and next week. The state apparatus is fissuring slowly.

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Aim well, but also persist, above all. Paris is a riot, but Paris is also a trap. A spectacular showcase. The scale of the movement is local. We hope it will remain local and multiply its points of existence as well as the meetings held there. The generalization of the perspective of local “popular” assemblies, like at Saint-Nazare or at Commercy, that are able to draw together other groups beyond the already mobilized “yellow vests,” would head in this direction. This would take resources, energy, force, mutual aid. Funds for blockades could be organized—including material resources and even online fundraising. Politically, the role of supportive associations and even of sympathetic local elected officials is yet to be determined, like that of the turning of the new year.

All of these considerations, already excessive, are nonetheless small in the face of the questions the movement will face in the future, like those about business and ecology, which have mostly remained on the margins of the current commotion, whereas they are at the heart of all the demands. We will have to return to them. December 8 is only the fourth act of mobilization. All the best tragedies have five.

-Deposed agents of the Imaginary Party  
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