

# LE MONDE *diplomatique*

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GILETS JAUNES TAKE ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICIANS

## France's class wars

The working class was supposed to have been edged out of active politics, but instead France's elites have been frightened into making concessions by this winter's uprising of the yellow vests. Its continuing popularity suggests that it is recasting French politics.

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BY SERGE HALIMI & PIERRE RIMBERT

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**F**RANCE's elites have not felt such fear in half a century, and it's not the usual fear of losing an election, failing to 'reform' or seeing their shares slide on the stock market, but fear of insurrection, revolt, and loss of power. The street protests on 1 December 2018 caused some to feel a sudden chill. As BFM TV's star news anchor Ruth Elkrief shuddered: 'The most urgent thing is for people to go home.' The channel was showing footage of yellow vest protesters determined to claim a better life for themselves.

A few days later, a journalist from the pro-business daily *L'Opinion* revealed on TV that 'all the big industrial groups are going to give out bonuses, because they were really scared for a time that their heads would end up on stakes. So after that terrible Saturday when all the damage was done [1 December], the big firms called Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, the head of Medef [France's largest employers' federation], and told him to "drop everything! Drop it all, or else..." They felt physically threatened.'

On the same programme, the head of a polling organisation claimed top bosses were 'actually very worried' and said that the atmosphere reminded him of similar events in 1936 and 1968 that he had read about: "There comes a time when you say to yourself, "You have to be able to give away large sums to avoid losing what's most important"" (1). At the time of the Popular Front (1936-8), Benoît Frachon, head of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), reported that during negotiations at Matignon, the French prime minister's residence, bosses had 'given in across the board' after a bout

of unofficial strikes and factory occupations.

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Luc Ferry

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Such a cave-in of the elite is rare, but it also brings a lesson from history: those who have felt fear do not forgive those who caused it or those who witnessed it (2). The yellow vest movement has provoked a reaction that has many precedents because it has proved enduring, hard to grasp, leaderless, speaks a language that institutions do not understand, and remains determined despite police repression and popular despite hostile media coverage of damage done on days of mass protest. In times when social groups crystallise and there is undisguised class struggle, everyone has to choose sides. The centre

ground disappears. And even the most liberal, educated and distinguished people drop any pretence of peaceful coexistence. Fear robs them of their composure.

Alexis de Tocqueville was similarly affected when he wrote about the events of June 1848 in Paris in his memoirs. Soldiers sent in by the ruling bourgeoisie, who believed that ‘only the cannon can settle our century’s questions’, had massacred impoverished workers (3). Forgetting his good manners, Tocqueville described the socialist leader Auguste Blanqui as having ‘a dirty look, like a pallid, mouldy corpse. He looked as if he had lived in a sewer and only just come out. He reminded me of a snake having its tail pinched.’

## ‘League of the underclass’

During the Paris Commune in 1871, there was a similar transformation of thought among intellectuals and artists, some of whom had been fair-weather progressives. The poet Leconte de Lisle was infuriated by ‘this league of all the underclass, all the useless people, all the envious, the murderers, the thieves.’ Gustave Flaubert thought that ‘the first remedy should be to end universal suffrage, the disgrace of the human mind.’ Émile Zola, reassured by the punishment that had resulted in 20,000 deaths and almost 40,000 arrests, thought it offered a moral for the working class: ‘The bloodbath they have just experienced was perhaps a horrible necessity to calm some of their fevers’ (4).

Jacques Chirac's former education minister Luc Ferry, a doctor of philosophy and political science, may have had the outrageous pronouncements of his predecessors in mind when, in a radio interview on 7 January, he called on the forces of law and order to strengthen their response to the yellow vests, saying, 'They should actually use their weapons for once' against 'these thugs, these bastards from the far right or far left or from the suburbs who come looking for a fight with the police.'

Power usually operates through distinct, sometimes competing, sub-groups — senior civil servants, both French and European, intellectuals, bosses, journalists, the conservative right, and the moderate left. Within this cosy framework, turns are taken in power, and these obey certain democratic rituals of elections followed by periods of quiescence. In Lille in 1900, the socialist leader Jules Guesde had already seen through this political game to which the capitalist class owed its longevity in power: 'It is divided into progressive bourgeoisie and republican bourgeoisie, clerical bourgeoisie and free-thinking bourgeoisie, in such a way that a defeated faction can always be replaced in power by another faction from the same class, which is also [our] enemy. It's a ship with watertight partitions which can take in water on one side without being any less unsinkable.' But sometimes the sea gets rough and the vessel's stability is threatened. In such a situation, squabbles need to be set aside to present a united front and keep it afloat.

That is what the middle class has done when faced with the yellow vests. Its usual spokespeople, who carefully maintain the appearance of a plurality of opinion when times are calm, have unanimously compared protestors to racists, antisemites, homophobes, plotters and troublemakers — but mostly to ignoramuses. 'Yellow vests, will stupidity win?' Sébastien Le Foll asked in *Le Point* (10 January). 'The

real yellow vests', Bruno Jeudy suggested on BFM TV, 'are fighting without reflecting, without thinking' (8 December). 'The lowest instincts are prevailing, with no regard for the most basic good manners,' wrote Vincent Trémolet de Villers in *Le Figaro* (4 December).





Paris Commune, 1871: a 'pétroleuse' about to set fire to buildings in Paris.  
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## 'Troublesome hicks'

This 'movement of troublesome Poujadist hicks' (Jean Quatremer, Twitter, 29 December) led by a 'hate-filled minority' (Denis Olivennes, *Marianne*, 9 January) is easily described as 'an outpouring of rage and hate' (*Le Monde* editorial, 4 December) in which 'hordes of losers and looters,' 'consumed by resentment as though by lice' (Franz-Olivier Giesbert, *Le Point*, 13 December and 10 January), give free rein to their 'noxious impulses' (Hervé Gattegnio, *Le Journal du dimanche*, 9 December). 'How many dead will these new hicks have on their consciences?' asked Jacques Julliard (*Le Figaro*, 7 January).

Public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, while concerned about these 'blind, naked hatreds with a will of their own' (*Le Point*, 13 December), still deigned to sign a petition in *Le Parisien* inviting the yellow vests to 'turn their anger into debate' (*Le Parisien*, 7 December). No luck in getting them to do that so, as Pascal Bruckner said, thank God 'the police have calmly saved the Republic' from the 'barbarians' and the 'hooded mob' (*Le Figaro*, 10 December).

A whole social universe has banded together, from the Greens to the remnants of the Socialist Party, from the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) to the presenters on France Inter's

morning show (a ‘partnership of intelligence’ according to the station director), to pillory any politicians who express solidarity with the movement. They stand accused of undermining democracy and not sharing their fear. Hopefully, these troublemakers could be controlled by the old trick of looking for anything linking any yellow vest spokesperson with any view the far right might have once expressed or defended. But wouldn’t such a line of reasoning mean that violence against journalists had to be encouraged, just because Marine Le Pen called it ‘the very negation of democracy and respect for others, without which there is no constructive exchange, no democratic life, no social life’ (*Le Figaro*, 17 January)?

## ‘Down to the last euro’

The reflex reactions of the bourgeois bloc that forms Emmanuel Macron’s electoral base were starkly revealed when *Le Monde* published a sympathetic profile of a family of yellow vests, ‘Arnaud and Jessica: down to the last euro’ (16 December). There were hundreds of angry comments in reaction to the story online: ‘Not a very smart couple... Isn’t true poverty in some cases cultural rather than financial?’ ‘The pathological problem of the poor: their ability to live beyond their means.’ ‘Don’t let’s imagine we can make them researchers, engineers and creatives. Their four children will be just like their parents: a burden on society.’ ‘What do they want the president to do? Go round every day to make sure Jessica takes her pill?’ The journalist who wrote the piece was stunned by this barrage of attacks, with their ‘paternalistic’ overtones (5). But paternalism suggests just a family dispute, while

the readers of a reputedly moderate paper were actually sounding the alarm for class war.

The yellow vests movement marks the failure of a project born in the late 1980s and later led by the evangelists of social liberalism, to create a centrist republic in France that would end ideological upheavals by pushing the working class out of public debate and political institutions (6). The working class, though still the majority of the population, was too fractious, and would have to make space — *all* the space — for the educated middle class.

France's 'turn to rigour' in 1983, the liberal counter-revolution driven by New Zealand's Labour Party (1984), and in the late 1990s the third way of Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schröder, all seemed to have carried out this plan. As social democracy bedded down in the apparatus of the state and made itself at home in the media and on company boards, it banished its former working-class supporters to the political wilderness. (During the 2016 election campaign in the US, there was little surprise when Hillary Clinton told campaign donors that core Trump supporters were a 'basket of deplorables'.)

The situation in France is little better. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a socialist who shaped the views of many of Macron's inner circle, explained in a book in 2002 that his party's base had to be 'members of intermediate groups, consisting overwhelmingly of salaried workers, savvy, informed and educated, who form the backbone of our society. They assure its stability, because of their attachment to the "market economy".' As for less savvy members of society, their fate was sealed: 'Of the least well-off group, alas, one cannot always expect peaceful participation in a parliamentary democracy. Not that

they are uninterested in history, but their irruptions sometimes manifest with violence' (7). Those people needed to be considered only once every five years, and then usually to deplore the number of them who voted for the far right. After that, they could return to oblivion and invisibility (when Strauss-Kahn wrote this, road safety laws did not yet compel all drivers to carry a yellow vest in their cars).

The strategy worked. The French working class was excluded from political representation, and even physically excluded from the centre of France's big cities: with just 4% of new home-owners from the working class each year, Paris in 2019 is like Versailles in 1789. They are also excluded from the television screen, where 60% of those who appear in news programmes come from the highest qualified 9% of the population (8). As far as Macron is concerned, the working class might as well not exist. He believes Europe is 'an old continent of petit bourgeois who feel secure living in material comfort' (9).

But this social world, which was supposed to have been obliterated, deemed too resistant to academic effort and training and therefore responsible for its own fate, has come to life again under the Arc de Triumph and on the Champs-Élysées, and at roundabouts across the country. A confused and perturbed Jean-Éric Schoettl, councillor of state and constitutional expert, described 'a reversion to a primitive form of class struggle' in *Le Figaro* (11 January).



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## Who's right and who's left?

The plan to remove the majority of the population from the political arena may have gone awry, but another item on the ruling class's agenda is enjoying unexpected success, and that is the blurring of distinction between right and left. The idea, which became dominant after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was to push any position that challenged the neoliberal 'circle of reason' (in the words of essayist Alain Minc) to the discredited extremist margins. Political legitimacy would no longer depend on a vision of the world — capitalist or socialist, nationalist or internationalist, conservative or emancipatory, authoritarian or democratic — but on the dichotomy between those who are reasonable and those who are radical, between open and closed, progressive and populist. The rejection of the distinction between right and left, which journalists currently blame on the yellow vests, is the working-class version of the bourgeois bloc's longstanding policy of blurring distinctions.

This winter, demands for tax justice, improved living standards and rejection of state authoritarianism are the focus of attention, but the struggle over employee exploitation and social ownership of the means of production has been almost entirely absent. The reintroduction of the solidarity wealth tax; a return to the 90 km/h speed limit on minor roads; tighter control of politicians' expenses; a Citizens' Initiative Referendum (RIC): none of these will challenge the subordination of workers in the workplace, the fundamental division of income or the hollow nature of popular sovereignty in the EU or a globalised world.

Of course, movements learn as they go; they set new objectives as they encounter unexpected obstacles and opportunities. At the time of the Estates General in 1789, there were only a few republicans in the whole of France. Expressing solidarity with the yellow vests is therefore a way to encourage their action in the right direction, towards justice and emancipation, while remaining aware that others are encouraging it in the opposite direction, and counting on social anger benefiting the far right in May's European elections.

Isolating the yellow vests politically would encourage such an outcome; the authorities and media are trying to make them unacceptable to the progressive middle class by exaggerating the significance of any bigoted statement one of them might make. The possible success of this effort would validate Macron's strategy since 2017, which has been to reduce political life to a clash between liberals, such as himself, and populists (10). Once this divide has been established, he could condemn his own 'basket of deplorables' on the right and the left, relating any domestic challenge to the actions of a 'populist internationale', which would lump together Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Italy's Matteo Salvini along with Polish conservatives, British socialists, German nationalists and La France Insoumise (the leftwing party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon).

Macron will have to resolve a paradox, though. As his support comes from a narrow social base, he will only be able to implement his 'reforms' of unemployment insurance, pensions and public services at the cost of a stronger political authoritarianism, backed by police repression and a nod to the hard right with a 'big debate about immigration'. The irony is that, having lectured 'illiberal' governments all round the world, Macron may yet borrow most of their playbook.

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*Translated by George Miller*

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- (1) 'L'Info du vrai', Canal Plus, 13 December 2018.
- (2) See Louis Bodin and Jean Touchard, *Front populaire: 1936*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1961.
- (3) Auguste Romieu, *Le Spectre rouge de 1852*, Ledoyen, Paris, 1851, quoted in Christophe Ippolito, 'La fabrique du discours politique sur 1848 dans *L'Éducation sentimentale*', no 17, Pau, 2017.
- (4) Paul Lidsky, *Les Écrivains contre la Commune* (Writers against the Commune), La Découverte, Paris, 1999 (1st edition, 1970).
- (5) Faustine Vincent, 'Pourquoi le quotidien d'un couple de "gilets jaunes" dérange des lecteurs [[https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/12/20/pourquoi-le-quotidien-d-un-couple-de-gilets-jaunes-derange-une-partie-des-lecteurs\\_5400408\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2018/12/20/pourquoi-le-quotidien-d-un-couple-de-gilets-jaunes-derange-une-partie-des-lecteurs_5400408_3224.html)]' (Why the daily life of a yellow vest couple disturbs readers), *Le Monde*, 20 December 2018.
- (6) See Laurent Bonelli, 'Les architectes du social-libéralisme [<https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/mav/72/BONELLI/56162>]' (The architects of social liberalism), *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 1998.
- (7) Dominique Strauss-Kahn, *La Flamme et la Cendre* (The flame and the ash), Grasset, Paris, 2002. See Serge Halimi, 'Flamme bourgeoise, cendre prolétarienne [<https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2002/03/HALIMI/8809>]' (Bourgeois flame, proletarian ash), *Le Monde diplomatique*, March 2002.



- (8) 'Baromètre de la diversité de la société française' (Barometer of diversity in French society), 2017 figures, Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel, Paris, December 2017.
- (9) 'L'histoire redevient tragique: une rencontre avec Emmanuel Macron' (History becomes tragic again: an encounter with Emmanuel Macron), Alexandre Duval-Stalla and Michel Crépu, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, no 630, Paris, May 2018.
- (10) See '[Not the world order we wanted](#)', Serge Halimi and Pierre Rimbert, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, September 2018.

TRANSLATIONS >>

FRANÇAIS [Lutte de classes en France \(fr\)](#)

ESPAÑOL [Lucha de clases en Francia \(es\)](#)

DEUTSCH [Klassenkampf in Frankreich \(de\)](#)