

The Movement of the Yellow Vests in France

The Latest Spectre Haunting Europe?

Bill Brown

2019

Five months after its explosive appearance on the French scene, the mass movement of the Yellow Vests (les Gilets jaunes) stands at a crossroads. It faces many choices.

Should it remain outside of the properly political world or should it enter into it and engage in debate: and even electoral campaigns? If it does the latter doesn't it risk recuperation by the existing parties?

Should the movement try to remain a national one or should it fall back upon its regional and local constituencies? How does it both keep going and become more radical? These are among the questions being discussed in France today.

The mass movement of the Yellow Vests isn't easy to summarize. In the words of Raoul Vaneigem, a former member of the Situationist International and a participant in the occupations movement of May 1968, the Yellow Vests "are a heterogeneous movement, a nebula in which all kinds of politicized people and those who have dropped politics from their everyday preoccupations are all mixed together."

But the unprecedented heterogeneity of the Yellow Vests—the fact that it isn't a single movement, but several movements moving with and against each other—hasn't stopped various observers from making summary judgments about them.

Not surprisingly, most of these judgments are negative, even when they have been made by people who, one might think, should be sympathetic, given that there is so much talk about revolution in the spectacle and so little real revolution in the streets.

Depending on the axes they have to grind, these commentators focus on the presence of reformists or nationalistic or far-right elements among the Yellow Vests and use their real, but highly exaggerated presence to minimize, disparage or reject the movement as a whole.

In point of fact, the movement has its roots in a rather conventional form of leftism. In response to French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement in May 2018 that taxes on fuel (first proposed in 2014 but delayed until then) would be raised in order to pay for environmental protection, Priscilla Ludosky, an immigrant from Martinique, started an online petition to protest it. One million people eventually signed it.

A more direct form of protest against these measures began on Facebook on 26 October 2018, when a call was issued for motorists to drive their cars to Paris on 17 November (a Saturday) and engage in a traffic slow-down on a major artery. "We make it clear," the original posting declared, "that we are not part of any organization (or political party). This event comes from the French people only!"

On its own terms, this protest was a great success; thousands of people participated in it. When it was over, many of the demonstrators, wearing the yellow vests that French law requires drivers to have in their cars in case of emergency, marched on the Champs-Élysées and occupied dozens of traffic circles. Thus was the movement of the Yellow Vests born.

It is worth noting that beneath these complaints against cynical price rigging was something more complex. In France, perhaps more so than anywhere else in Europe, people depend upon their cars for just about everything

because of decades of urban planning, which has deliberately emptied out French city centers and built sprawling suburbs in which there are fewer people, services, and jobs.

Suburban residents must go into the city to have access to them. So, any protest against artificially inflated gas prices is also, at some level, a protest against urban planning and the obligation to own and use a car.

These facts go a long way towards explaining why the Yellow Vests chose to blockade and occupy traffic circles, not with their cars, but with their bodies. Whether consciously or not, these politicized social gatherings clearly reveal a powerful desire to regain the very things that suburbs, highways, and shopping centers have destroyed, such as interpersonal encounters, exchanges, and helping hands, which are increasingly lacking in people's everyday lives.

But the movement didn't stop after 17 November. In fact, it widened and gathered steam. Protesters continued to gather every Saturday, not only in Paris, but elsewhere in France as well. Their numbers began to swell. Furthermore, instead of merely protesting *against* certain measures, the emerging movement started to make demands *in favor of* major changes in the social order.

On 29 November, a delegation of eight Yellow Vests presented 42 demands that focused on a range of topics such as transportation, purchasing power, taxes, social security, work, democracy, public services, business operations, health, housing, immigration, and fair transition to a low carbon economy.

On 2 December, a collective calling itself the "Free Yellow Vests" made proposals that echoed back to the French Revolution including an Estates General and referendums that would allow the citizenry to oversee the government's policies concerning the economy, fiscal matters, and social issues. The crystallization of this trend was the proposal for a Citizens' Referendum Initiative that would pass legislation without going through the French Parliament.

It was at this point that the government started to backpedal, at least where the increases in taxes on gasoline were concerned. On 4 December, it declared a six-month moratorium on the fuel price hikes, and then, a day later, that increases wouldn't take place until 2020.

At the same time, the government began an intense crackdown on the protesters, some of whom weren't content (or had never been content) with so-called peaceful protest. There were riots, barricades set on fire, and intense confrontations with the police, not just in Paris, but also all over the country.

On 8 December, fearing "the beginning of insurrection and civil war," the government mobilized almost 90,000 heavily armed riot police. These militarized cops equipped with flash-balls, tear gas, and tanks became increasingly violent, and hundreds of demonstrators were injured, some of them seriously.

But as 2018 became 2019, the Yellow Vests didn't stop occupying traffic circles, or rioting, covering walls with militant and clever graffiti, and calling for Macron's resignation. Indeed, they kept trying to widen and escalate their movement, in particular, by trying to get their local assemblies to come together into an assembly of assemblies and begin practicing direct democracy. At the same time, there have been clear statements from several Yellow Vest communities that they will not tolerate Nazis, nationalists, racists or anti-Semites in their midst.

But what comes next? It is a bad sign that the Yellow Vests have shown no interest to date in engaging in work stoppages, strikes, or occupying factories. It doesn't seem likely that the movement can gain any real hold on capitalism unless it does, because that is still where capitalism lives: in the workplace.

If the police prevent the Yellow Vests from occupying traffic circles, they will certainly lose the toehold they now maintain. They will be forced to turn to electoral politics, a dead-end for radical movements, electing reform candidates or running for office themselves as a group of ten already have.

When asked if the Yellow Vests represent a step backward from the great workers' movements of the 20th century, including May 1968, Raoul Vaneigem said, "Yes [...] but, as I have written, the proletarian consciousness that wrested its social benefits from the State was only a historical form of human consciousness. This consciousness is now being reborn before our very eyes [...] Lucidity is groping, finding its way through uncertainties [...] Everything is possible, even self-managing assemblies in the middle of street intersections, villages and neighborhoods."

In other words, the revolutionary content of the movement of the Yellow Vests lies in the possibilities for the future that it has opened up in the midst of a world that has proclaimed that there are no possibilities other than the current dismal state of affairs.

Bill Brown lives in New York City. For over 30 years, he's been the publisher of NOT BORED! **not-bored.org**, a Situationist inspired journal.



Bill Brown
The Movement of the Yellow Vests in France
The Latest Spectre Haunting Europe?
2019

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/403-spring-2019/the-movement-of-the-yellow-vests-in-france>
Fifth Estate #403, Spring 2019

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)