

Lessons from the “Yellow Vests” movement

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What should we be thinking, or what passes for thinking without running around barking, about the violent and sustained contradistinction between the Yellow Vests movement and state powers, led by the diminutive President Macron?

I stated clearly, right after the final round of the presidential elections, that I would neither rally to the cause of Marine Le Pen, captain of the parliamentary extreme right, nor to Macron, who was leading a “democratic coup d’état”, as a pseudo-reformer at the behest of Big Capital.

I shall certainly modify nothing in my judgment of Macron. I have nothing but disdain for him. But what to say about the Yellow Vests movement? I must admit that, in its initial stages last year, I discerned nothing in its make-up, its assertions or in its behaviour that was *politically* novel or progressive.

I can affirm, without hesitation, that there are numerous reasons for the revolt and one can thus consider the movement as legitimate. I am only too aware of the desertification of the rural landscape; the mournful silence of the desolate streets in small and even in middle-sized towns; the increasing estrangement of the masses from public services, which are being privatised bit by bit: dispensaries, hospitals, schools, post offices, railway stations, telephone services. I am only too aware that impoverishment, at first stealthily, then rapidly, is affecting a population which, forty years ago, enjoyed a buying power that continuously improved. There can be no doubt that new and worsening forms of fiscal creep are partially to blame for this impoverishment. I cannot fail to be aware that survival for whole families has become a struggle, especially for the many women who are particularly active in the Yellow Vests movement.

To sum up: in France, there is great unhappiness among those we can call working people, mainly in the provinces and with modest salaries, and among the middle class. The Yellow Vests movement is a striking manifestation of this unhappiness in the form of active and violent revolt.

The historic and economic reasons for this uprising are crystal clear for all those who wish to pay attention to them. The Yellow Vests believe their miseries originated forty years ago: on the whole, the eighties marked the beginning of a long capitalist-oligarchy counter-revolution, wrongly referred to as “neo-liberal” when it was simply “liberal”. This meant a return to the savagery of nineteenth century capitalism. This counter-revolution manifested itself as a reaction to the ten “Red years” – more or less from 1965 to 1975 – whose French epicentre lay in the May 1968 protests and whose global epicentre was in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. It was impelled further by the collapse of the world-wide Communist project in the Soviet Union and then China: nothing in the world then stood in the way of capitalism and its profiteers, especially the transnational billionaire oligarchy, exercising unlimited powers.

Of course, the French bourgeoisie latched onto this counter-revolutionary movement. The activities of the “new philosophers” even provided intellectual and ideological capital while they saw to it that the Communist Idea was run down everywhere as being not only “false” but even criminal. A number of intellectuals, renegades of May 1968 and of Maoism, became the conscientious watchdogs of this

bourgeois and liberal counter-revolution, using fetishist and anodyne terms like “liberty”, “democracy” or “our republic”.

All the same, the situation in France, from the eighties until today, slowly went downhill. This country can no longer claim to be what it was during the “glorious thirty years” of post-war reconstruction. France is no longer a strong world power, a conquering imperial power. It is compared nowadays to Italy or even Greece. Competition forces it back everywhere, its colonial returns are coming to an end and, to keep them up, it has to pursue many costly and risky military operations in Africa. What is more, since labour costs for workers, for example in Asia, are notably lower than in France, larger industries are slowly but surely decamping to foreign parts. This massive de-industrialisation brings in its wake a kind of social ruin which extends to entire regions, such as Lorraine with its steelworks or the North with its textile factories and coal mines, right up to the suburbs of Paris, which are abandoned to real estate speculation on the endless wasteland left by decaying industries.

The consequences are that the French bourgeoisie, with its dominant oligarchy of shareholders on the CAC 40, can no longer keep a politically servile middle class in employment, as it had done previously, especially before the 2008 crisis. This middle class has actually been the historical cornerstone for the pre-eminence of the various electoral manifestations of the right, a pre-eminence directed against unionised workers in the large industrial complexes, who had been won over to communism during the '20s and, of course, during the period from 1980 to 1990. This explains the present uprising by a large and grassroots part of the middle class, who feel they have been abandoned, against Macron as the agent of local capitalist “modernisation”. This modernisation involves turning the screws ever tighter, economising, promoting austerity, privatising without any concern for the well-being of the middle class, a concern that was the price for their consent for the prevailing system thirty years ago.

The Yellow Vests, in the face of undeniable impoverishment, wish to extract a steep price for that consent. That is absurd, though, because, firstly, Macronism is exactly the expected result when the oligarchy had less need of the costly support of the middle classes after the waning of the communist danger; and, secondly, it can no longer afford to pay for electoral servility on the same scale as before. Logically, therefore, advances are made disguised as “necessary reforms” to achieve authoritarian politics. A new form of state power will be the platform for robust “austerity”, extending from the unemployed and workers right into the lower ranks of the middle class. This is handy for the true masters of this world, namely the principal shareholders of large groups in industry, commerce, raw materials, transport and communication.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848, Marx had already assessed this kind of scenario, and spoke precisely about what we now call our Yellow Vests. He wrote this: *The middle class, small manufacturers, retailers, artisans, and peasants struggle against the Bourgeoisie because they pose a threat to their existence as middle class. They are not revolutionaries but conservatives: moreover, they are even reactionaries; they want history to go into reverse gear.*

The demands of today are ever more shrill, as the French bourgeoisie is no longer able to keep up, let alone increase, its buying power in the wake of developments in global capitalism. The Yellow Vests, it is true, are “in combat with the Bourgeoisie”, as Marx put it. But they are struggling for the restoration of an antique and worn-out order, not to achieve a new social and political order, which, since the nineteenth

century, goes by the names of "socialism" or, especially, "communism". Because, over almost two centuries, everything that was not identified as having a more or less revolutionary bent, was, quite rightly, associated with capitalist reaction. In politics there were only two major directions. We must indisputably return to that certitude: two paths, in politics, two only, and no specks of "democratic" dust of pseudo-trending, under the aegis of a self-declared "liberal" oligarchy.

This general assessment allows us to examine the real characteristics of the Yellow Vests movement. The, as it were, spontaneous nature of the movement, not impelled by forces outside the mainstream of the uprising, is actually, as Marx suggested, "reactionary" but in a more modern sense: the subjectivity of the movement could be called individual populism, mobilising personal rage against new forms of slavery now imposed on everyone by the Dictatorship of Capital.

That is why it is wrong to say, as some do, that the Yellow Vests movement is intrinsically fascist. No. Fascism, more often than not, mobilises identity, nationality or racial impulses, with great discipline, even militaristically. In the present disorganised uprising, there are all sorts of people from all sorts of trades, as is always the case amongst the urban middle class, and they are, therefore, for this reason alone, individualistic, and they often and sincerely consider themselves to be democrats and have faith in the law of the Republic, which today cuts no ice at all. In fact, for the great majority, their true political convictions are fickle.

In this movement as manifested in its initial "pure" form, I can find nothing that appeals to me, that pricks my interest, that mobilises me, except for its rare collective action, its commands and its repeated slogans. Its public pronouncements, its random disorganisation, its style of action, its perceived lack of general philosophy and strategic vision means it is wholly without political inventiveness. I am unconvinced by its hostility to all manifestations of leadership and its obsessional fear of centralisation and of unified association. This fear conflates democracy with individualism as do all modern reactionaries. There is nothing in its nature that makes it a long-term progressive, innovative and all-conquering force against the odious and miserable Macron.

I am aware that opponents who are to the right of the movement, especially amongst the renegade intellectuals, those ex-revolutionaries who became the praise-singers of police powers once the oligarchs and the state had offered them a platform for their liberal chit-chat, accuse the Yellow Vests uprising of anti-Semitism or homophobia or, worse still, of "being a danger to our Republic". I am also aware that, if there are traces of all that, they do not arise from a shared belief, but through the presence of active infiltration of the extreme right into a movement so confused that it is vulnerable to all sorts of manipulation. But let us not deceive ourselves: clear signs, notably of short-sighted nationalism, of latent hostility towards intellectuals, of demagogic "democratism" in the crypto-fascist style of "the people against the élites" and of random pronouncements should make one wary of considering what we see today as a global phenomenon. Let's face the fact that gossip-mongering in the "social networks", which passes as objective fact for the majority of the Yellow Vests, means that the movement seethes with ludicrous conspiracy theories throughout.

There was once a proverb: "All that moves isn't red." For the moment there is unquestionably no "red" in the Yellow Vests movement, and although it certainly "moves", all I see, besides yellow, is the tricolore, which has always been a bit suspect in my eyes.

Naturally, the ultra-left, the antifas, those woken from their sleepwalking, those folk who are always jumping on the bandwagon of a “movement”, and those gloating at the “imminent insurrection” all celebrate the democratic pronouncements (that are actually short-sighted and individualist), ushering in the cult of decentralised gatherings and imagine they will soon be re-storming the Bastille. But this cheerful carnival fails to impress me: over ten years and more, it has led to terrible setbacks which have cost people dearly. The “movements” in contemporary history, from Egypt and the “Arab Spring”, to Occupy Wall Street, to the central squares in Turkey, to Greek riots, to the indignities suffered all over in Greece, to the outrage of Nuit Debout and from Nuit Debout to the Yellow Vests and a whole lot more, all seem wholly to ignore the implacable and stark rules that govern the world today. Once the exhilaration of the movements, the demonstrations, and the miscellaneous occupations has dissipated, people are astonished at how hard it is to make a mark, how they are always a failure, and how they have merely contributed to making the opposition more determined. The truth is that they have not even scratched the surface of true adversarial action for finding a different, universally applicable means of confronting contemporary capitalism.

Actually, nothing is more important than being aware of the lessons to be learnt from this sequence of “movements”, including the Yellow Vests. It can all be summed up in a single maxim: a movement which unites only around what is negative will either fail and result more often than not in a situation worse than that which obtained at the outset, or it will divide in two, giving rise to the emergence from its creative energy of an affirmative political creed truly opposed to the dominant order underpinned by disciplined organisation.

All the movements of the past few years have followed almost the same, and it must be said, catastrophic, trajectory wherever they arose and however long they lasted:

- at first, a unified front against the government in power. This is the “liberating” moment: “Mubarak must go!” to “Let’s party with Macron”.

- unity maintained by a complementary, wholly negative watchword, after a period of anarchy and disorder when its sustainability begins to teeter for the masses: watchwords like “down with oppression!” or “down with police violence!” at which point the “movement”, in the absence of real political content, has nothing to rely on but its wounds;

- unity undone by the electoral process in which one part decides to participate, the rest, not, without any real political substance backing those in favour or those against. At the time of writing these lines, the electoral polls give Macron the same score that he had before the Yellow Vests emerged and the overall vote for the Right and the Extreme Right more than 60% and the only hope for the defunct left, La France Insoumise, 7%;

- as a result, through the electoral process, something worse comes to power. Either the incumbent coalition wins, and with a crushing majority (which was the case in May 1968 in France); or a “new” formation, hostile to the movement and even less agreeable, takes the laurels (in Egypt, first the Muslim Brotherhood and then the army under Al Sissi; Erdogan in Turkey); or the left-wing chatterers are elected but immediately surrender their substance (like Syriza in Greece); or the extreme Right wins on its own (the case of Trump in the USA); or a group which emerges from the movement joins forces with the extreme Right to secure itself a place at the

government table (the case in Italy where the Five Star movement allied itself with the Fascistoids of the Northern League). Let's face it, the latter is possible in France if an organisation claiming to emerge from the "Yellow Vests" works out an alliance with Marine Le Pen's electoral sect.

That is because unity nourished by the negative is in no condition to create policy and is bound to be steamrollered in any battle in which it engages. Beyond proposing something more than denial, the enemy must be identified and what it means to launch something different must be understood – something, anything, truly different to what the enemy is doing. This implies the requirement for a minimum of true knowledge of what contemporary world capitalism means, of how France, in its decadence, fits in, of solutions of the communist type to the problems of ownership, the family (inheritance) and the State and of measures to be implemented immediately to reach these solutions, such as an accord, informed by an historical perspective, on the forms of organisation appropriate to meet these needs.

Only an organisation established on new ground can achieve this and be capable, at some time in the future, of rallying a part of [the middle classes] which is in such disarray. It is also possible, as Marx wrote, that the middle class *will act in a revolutionary way for fear of being sucked into the Proletariat: they will thus defend their future interests and not their present interests; they will abandon their own attitudes for those of the proletariat.*

In this, there is a precious pointer to a partly positive conclusion, but on one principal issue: in the Yellow Vests movement there doubtless lies a potentially very interesting Left-wing minority: those who are activists in the movement who have actually discovered that they need to consider their future and not their present objectives and to find a future way to rally around something more than their persistent grievances concerning buying-power, taxes or parliamentary reform.

This minority would consist of the real people inasmuch as it reflects a constant political conviction of there being a way truly hostile to the liberal counter-revolution.

Naturally, on their own, the Yellow Vests as they are now could never represent "the people" without mass incorporation of a new proletariat. Otherwise, that would mean reducing the least advantaged of the middle class simply to reclaim its former social status before its decline. To be "the people" in today's politics, the masses must mobilise together with a strong core contingent of the nomadic proletariat of our suburbs; a proletariat from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. It must give clear evidence of its break with the dominant order. Firstly, it must display visible signs like the red flag instead of the tricolore. What is declared in tracts and on banners must give directives and slogans which show its antagonism to the order. Its minimal demands should be, for example, the complete ending of privatisations and the undoing of all that has been undertaken since the eighties. Its central theme should be collective control over the means of production, the banking system and all public services (health, education, transport, communication). In short, the political actors should not be happy merely to exist by gathering a few thousand malcontents, even if there are at my estimation, one hundred thousand of them, and to demand from what they, quite rightly, call a detestable state, that it gives you "consideration", that it organises referendums (for what? I ask), improves maintenance of local services and raises your buying power a little and lowers taxes.

After all its antics and bluster, the Yellow Vests movement could hereafter become very useful, from the point of view of its future, as Marx said. If we actually

confine ourselves to the minority of activists in the movement who, through the power of meeting, acting and discussions, have intuitively understood that they need to develop an overarching vision, on the world stage, not just for France, and identify the true source of their discontent, namely the liberal counter-revolution, and would thus be ready to construct step-by-step a new force, then these Yellow Vests will ponder their future and doubtless contribute to the existence of a political people. That is why we need to engage with them, and, if they consent, organise with them meetings where the first principles will be constituted for what we may call, indeed what, to be clear, we must call, communism, yes, a new communism even if this word has been accursed and arcane over the past thirty years. The rejection of this word, as experience has shown, has been the signal for an unprecedented political retrogression, against which, unconsciously, all the “movements” of the recent past have risen up, including the better segment of the Yellow Vests: the militants who trust in a better world.

These new militants, in the first place, will lend their support to what I consider indispensable: the creation wherever possible of schools in large suburbs and little deserted towns, to teach and discuss unambiguously and lucidly, the laws of Big Capital and how to combat them under the aegis of a completely different political framework. If such a network of schools for red politics were to exist this would begin a movement which would be of true significance through its indirect power of enlightenment beyond the episode of “Yellow Vests against white Macron”, towards a future and better episode.

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