

The color of France's “yellow vests”

By Aurélien Delpirou

***Jacquerie*, revolt of the peripheries, or revenge of the working class? The initial analysis of the “yellow vest” (*gilets jaunes*) movement has unleashed sociological prejudices. Yet this movement reflects not so much a France split in two as a multiplicity of territorial interdependencies.**

The mobilization of the yellow vests has, in recent days, received exceptional media coverage. While journalists were on the lookout for the slightest incident, a few recurring media figures appeared one after the other in TV studios to offer their analysis and interpretation of the movement. Naturally, they each saw the movement as a validation of their own theories of the current state of French society. Some terms were hits, like *jacquerie*—a reference to French peasant uprisings during the Old Regime—which was first used by Éric Zemmour on Friday, November 16, before being picked up by the regional press.¹ *Le Figaro*, for its part, came to the defense of the new *ploucs-émisaires*,² while on the radio station Europe 1, Christophe Guilluy almost rejoiced in the revolt of “his” “peripheral France”³—which Franz-Olivier Giesbert more curtly called “*that France*” (*cette France-là*)—and Nicolas Baverez pontificated on the revenge of “base-level citizens.”

Beyond their symbolic violence and condescension, these remarks, repeated *ad nauseam urbi et orbi*, tell us less about the yellow vests than about the social and spatial conceptions of their authors. Furthermore, while deeper study and analytical hindsight will be

¹ It is worth remembering, for all purposes, that in 2016, 1,6% of the French labor force were farmers.

² This term combines *boucs-émisaires*, or “scapegoats,” with *ploucs*, i.e., unsophisticated people.

³ Guilluy is known for his essay, *La France périphérique: Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires* (Flammarion, 2015).

needed to understand precisely what this movement was about, it seems worthwhile to deconstruct immediately some of the common places in which public debate is steeped. We would like to explore four of these concepts, which have been systematically formulated as antonyms: town vs. country, city-centers vs. peri-urban zones, “bobos” (i.e., bohemian-bourgeois) vs. “popular classes,” and privileged metropolises vs. territories forgotten by the state. Though a stable analytical framework has yet to be formulated, having some perspective on these caricatural ideas is a first step towards a better understanding of the dynamics and stakes of the current uprising.

Town (Paris) vs. country (the provinces)?

As indicated in a note by the intelligence services circulated in the press,⁴ the movement’s initiators hail, for the most part from the Île-de-France, and specifically greater Paris—in other words, the most urbanized area of the capital-region. And with good reason: the inhabitants of this region are at least as concerned as the rest of the French by growing car-related expenses. While they use their cars a bit less and their trips are somewhat shorter, they spend an average of 75 minutes per day in their vehicles, compared to 45 minutes for inhabitants of rural areas.⁵ In short, their time-budget largely makes up for their lower travel-related costs, which helps to explain the uprising’s genesis and roots in the Paris region.

More generally, most scholars believe that France’s territory is now fully urbanized: 61.5 million people, or 92% of the population, currently live under the city’s influence and live an urban lifestyle. While rurality as a landscape, a social aspiration, and a system of values has never disappeared—and has even been revalorized in recent times—major social and spatial cleavages now run through urban spaces. Indeed, major cities are simultaneously the privileged sites of wealth concentration and places of entrenched poverty: in France, two-thirds of households that live below the threshold of poverty live in dense areas of urbanized space.⁶

It would thus be a mistake to analyze the yellow vest movement as a *jacquerie* of underprivileged rural populations against wealthy city-dwellers. It corresponds, rather, to the multiplicity of territorial and functional interdependencies found in vast urban regions, in

4 See for example: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/social/2018/11/14/20011-20181114ARTFIG00006-qui-sont-les-gilets-jaunes-qui-manifesteront-samedi.php>

5 Source: Enquête nationale transports et déplacements 2008 [<http://www.statistiques.developpement-durable.gouv.fr/sources-methodes/enquete-nomenclature/1543/139/enquete-nationale-transports-deplacements-entd-2008.html>]

6 Source: Rapport sur la pauvreté en France, 2018 [https://www.inegalites.fr/IMG/pdf/web_rapport_sur_la_pauvrete_en_france_2018_observatoire_des_inegalites_et_compas.pdf]

which lie juxtaposed fragments of dense city life, patches of suburbia, revitalized and hard-up towns, zones of vibrancy, natural and agricultural spaces, shopping centers, service-sector and logistical centers, and so on. Cars are often the necessary condition for accessing these various spaces and the variety of resources they offer. It is precisely because they make it possible to take advantage of the assortment of activities found in what have been called “metapoles” (Ascher, 1997) that cars could trigger the yellow vests’ discontent.

City-centers vs. peri-urban zones?

On the basis of the interventions in the media by a few of the movement’s charismatic figures, the yellow vests were quickly equated with inhabitants “relegated” to peri-urban zones surrounding urban conglomerations.⁷ There is no denying that dependence on cars increases with distance from city-centers. Peri-urban life means longer trips and greater use of motorized vehicles (Cailly, 2008). This situation is not due to chance or fate. On the one hand, peri-urbanization was strongly encouraged in the 1980s and 90s—in other words, after urban planning was decentralized—by mayors who were eager to develop their towns by any means necessary, even if this meant scattering along the periphery—while separating them from each other—individual housing lots, shopping centers, and even major public services (Merlin, 2009). This urban dispersal, which in its scale is unique in Europe, was also promoted by the state through an increasing number of measures designed to provide access to home ownership. Thus rather than awkwardly trying to exploit the movement for political benefits, national and local elected official might begin by acknowledging their own responsibility in bringing it about. On the other hand, the ways in which households (as well as companies) establish themselves in peri-urban zones and the rural fringes of major cities are multiple and complex: moving away from city-centers is always the result of a mixture of choice and constraint. Indeed, every recent study (for example, Dodier, 2012; Girard, 2013; Lambert, 2013) emphasizes the diversity of social profiles and the fluidity of residential trajectories of per-urban residents, radically contradicting analyses that stress “relegation” and “sedentism.”

Peri-urban France is not a zoo! It is vibrant, active, and diverse. It creates more jobs than city-centers,⁸ including in sectors requiring high levels of qualification (Nessi et al., 2016). It comprises—as can be seen in the yellow vests’ charismatic representatives—established CEOs, as well as workers who have moved out of social housing; small shopkeepers drawn by the relatively low cost of land and real estate, as well as public-sector employees who want to live closer to work; retirees seeking a peaceful lifestyle, and young managers who need housing adopted to their family plans (Rivière, 2012). Nationally, peri-

7 A peri-urban town, according to the INSEE (the French statistical agency), is one in which at least 40% of its employed resident population works in the urban center in whose zone of influence it finds itself.

8 More than 400,000 jobs were created in peri-urban zones between 1982 and 2007, while 800,000 employees worked in peri-urban areas during the same period (INSEE).

urban residents earn a higher annual median income (20,975 €) than inhabitants of city-centers (19,887 €).⁹

The one problem is that despite their vitality and diversity—and even their “maturity” (Nessi et al., 2016)—peri-urban spaces still have a bad reputation. Since the 1990s, in response to political injunctions emphasizing durability, they have been analyzed almost exclusively from the derogatory perspectives of endangered city life (Lévy, 2003), car dependence (Dupuy, 1999), social and spatial retreat (Charmes, 2011), environmental unsustainability (Desjardins and Mettetal, 2012), and even architectural and landscape ugliness (as evidenced in the 2010 cover of *Telerama* devoted to “Ugly France”). These catastrophic and guilt-inducing visions have contributed to feeding a sense of anger among the elected officials and inhabitants of these territories, of which the yellow vests are clearly an expression.

Bobos vs. proles?

The media have been largely silent on the social character of the yellow vest movement. Collections of testimonials and the first on-the-ground studies tend to show that most of those who are actively involved in the protests come from the middle class and the consolidated factions of the working class: nurses, social workers, schoolteachers, midlevel administrative personnel working for local government, industrial technicians, sales department employees, company accountants, and so on. These so-called “intermediary” professions represent one fourth of all jobs—a figure that is on the rise. Their income and purchasing power have been relatively stable for the past twenty years, while remaining very sensitive to tax policy and to the state of the economy, including fluctuations in gas prices—which, as we know, was the spark that set the protests ablaze. But it is only a spark: the share of car-related expenses has remained stable since 1990, in contrast, for example, to those relating to housing (which is constantly on the rise, particularly in city centers and for the least well-off households). Gas and gas taxes represent only a fourth of such expenses, far less than the share devoted to insurance and maintenance. Thus the revolt seems to be rooted in a twofold feeling that purchasing power is generally growing weaker and that the tax burden that the government places on households is unjust.

Moreover, the 20% of the French who do not drive have yet to be considered. They cannot be reduced to urban bobos. Most of them belong to young households without qualifications or jobs, who are not able to take on the costs of a motor vehicle and are, for this reason, the complete “captive” of public transport (Rougé, 2005). Yet what differentiates the working classes among themselves is whether or not they have access to stable employment, for which owning a car is often a necessary condition. These households are among the

⁹ Source: INSEE.

recipients of mobility assistance measures that the government rushed to elaborate. But everything suggests that they did not participate massively in the demonstrations. Furthermore, these measures could have counterproductive effects on the yellow vests, several representatives of which have said that they refuse to be equated with the “assisted” who receive assistance from the state.¹⁰ This discourse was, incidentally, embraced by several national political figures, such as Laurent Wauquiez—a strange position that consists, in simultaneously seeing *social redistribution* that benefits weaker families as a form of “assistance,”¹¹ while demanding more *spatial redistribution* in favor of the most disfavored territories.¹² As if the latter existed as such, independently of their populations.

Privileged France vs. abandoned spaces?

Finally, several commentators have analyzed the yellow vests movement as the consequence of a “two speed” approach to public policy that systematically privileges dynamic metropolitan spaces at the expense of the rest of the country.¹³ Indeed, the concentration of the means of territorial development on major cities is a notable trend of the past twenty years. Cities have benefited from major urban renewal projects, as much in city-centers (train stations, tramways) as in the neighborhoods targeted by urban policy (urban renewal) and in the inner periphery (competitiveness centers). But this trend occurred after five decades of so-called “territorial rebalancing” policies intended to contain the development of the Paris region and to revitalize, through decentralization, the “French desert” (Gravier, 1947). Moreover, specific action continues to be taken on behalf of rural spaces to address the structural handicaps that penalize them in territorial competition. It is in the “interterritorial space” of small and mid-sized towns and, to a lesser extent, the fringes of major conglomerations that state action has been incomplete and indecisive.

Yet these territories do not find themselves in a situation of political and social abandonment: they have strong representation in parliament (much more, say, than do the suburbs of major urban conglomerations), management and planning structures the competencies of which have been strengthened by recent legislation, and numerous civic initiatives, and even, despite increasing constraints, not insignificant financial levers (European Union assistance, planning contracts, and tax exemption mechanisms). The real

10 See for example: <https://rcf.fr/actualite/les-gilets-jaunes-ne-sont-pas-la-france-des-assistes-mais-celle-qui-veut-vivre-de-son-trav>

11 See: <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/politique/030818825023-laurent-wauquiez-la-droite-doit-se-donner-une-regle-dor-simple-pas-daugmentation-dimpot-2127464.php>

12 See: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/09/20/a-divonne-les-bains-laurent-wauquiez-se-pose-en-defenseur-de-la-france-peripherique-et-des-classes-moyennes_5357991_823448.html

13 See for example: <https://fr.novopress.info/212611/gilets-jaunes-eric-zemmour-le-17-novembre-une-jacquerie-fiscale/>

problem is that they have never been the object of *ad hoc* policies. Thus in peri-urban areas, government action has focused on fighting the process of urban sprawl at the risk of overlooking spaces that were created because of it (Roux, Vanier, 2008). Transportation policies offer a striking illustration of this unacknowledged issue: conceived historically to improve access to city centers and to break suburban isolation, these policies are less effective in assisting individual travel in the peripheries (Massot, 2010). And in small and mid-sized towns, which are far from always being globalization's "losers" (Baudelle et Tallec, 2008), the solutions proposed too often duplicate those implemented in major cities and are thus poorly adapted to local contexts (Béhar, 2011). Thus rather than taking up the mantle of victimhood, the key is to create circumstances that would allow for the elaboration and implementation of innovative policies capable of reconciling at the local level residential choice, economic constraint, and ecological moderation.

Finally, by spreading simplistic or unfounded sociological arguments at the expense of well-argued analysis and reasoning, the self-proclaimed yellow-vest specialists run the risk of overlooking the real stakes, and even fanning the movement's flames. Opposing—as commentators have implicitly done—"peri-urban drivers" and the "privileged residents of city centers," the "good poor" and the "bad poor," and territories that are "winning" to "abandoned" spaces may offer a reassuring framework—and lower the number of those who *deserve* help. But it has never solved their problems.

First published in *laviedesides.fr*, 23 November 2018.

Translated from the French by Michael Behrent.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 17 December 2018.

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Published in laviedesidees.fr, November 23, 2018.