



END OF THE MONTH, END OF THE WORLD

SIMON FAIRLIE describes how the *Gilet Jaune* movement in France is evolving a constructive approach to the ecological crisis.

My first encounter with the *gilets jaunes* was on an edge-of-town roundabout at Bédarieux, a small former industrial town in Languedoc's rural hinterland. After a couple of weeks in France, I'd read much about them, been handed leaflets through the car window, and seen their hi-vis jackets displayed on the dashboards of cars, but never met an active gilet jaune in the flesh. Here was a pack of them, complete with banners and placards, beneath a French *tricolore*, on "Acte XV", the 15th consecutive Saturday of demonstrations.

I parked up and came to chat. There were about 20 of them milling round a long trestle table drinking wine, while a spiral of sausage sizzled away on a barbecue, and they were in high spirits. I asked them what they were protesting about: their main complaint was the cost of living, the struggle to make ends meet at the *fin du mois*, the "end of the month". "*On crève de faim*" — we are starving — exclaimed a man with thinning hair back-combed with grease, though the sausages and the abundance of red wine at €1.50 a litre suggested otherwise. Another, with ruffled hair and a moustache, sensing that exaggeration was unhelpful, explained how a minimum wage of less than €1200 a month, minus €400 for rent, was insufficient to pay for everything that a modern lifestyle required. The politicians, corporations, and shareholders pocketed the profits, while President Macron was reducing the amount of tax the *élite* had to pay.

Concern about the cost of living has proved to be a matter of consensus amongst all *gilets jaunes*. But as my conversation with the two men continued, ideological differences between them appeared, which came to a head on the subject of renewable energy. Brylcreem maintained that for solar panels to be of any use "it would require the entire land surface of France and there would be nothing to eat"; Moustache begged to differ. He actually had solar panels of his own, which is

relatively unusual in France, where nuclear reigns supreme. Brylcreem, I surmised, was probably a supporter of Marine Le Pen's right wing *Rassemblement National*, whereas Moustache might well have voted for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the nearest French equivalent to Jeremy Corbyn.

This rift was reflected both within and between other gilet jaune groups that I talked to. At Décazeville, a rusting former steel town in the Aveyron, I asked a group of *gilets* whether they were right or left wing. "We have no political allegiance" they assured me; but then two of them went off on a racist rant about how immigrants were trashing the flats that they were given rent free — "if you're so keen on them why don't you English take ours?"

Twenty-two kilometres down the road in the next town, Capdenac, I asked the same question to another group, and got a different answer. "We are all leftists here" a woman told me. "This afternoon we are going to join a March for the Climate in Figeac." She handed me a leaflet produced by the CGT, the left wing trades union confederation.

Such openly expressed political affiliation, however, is the exception. The *gilet jaune* movement as a whole is resistant to categorisation within the traditional poles of left and right. Its mercurial nature, and its unexpected tenacity have triggered a huge national debate in France, and there are lessons the UK can draw from this phenomenon.

The Iconography of Yellow

The movement began as a national day of action against increases in the tax on petrol and diesel, which had been imposed as part of the Government's "ecological transition" strategy to address climate change. It was kicked off by a lorry driver called Eric Drouet, who had the inspired notion of inviting people to show their support by sticking a hi-vis

jacket on the dashboard of their car. Not only did all drivers already have one, as it is mandatory to carry one in a road vehicle in France; they are easily noticed and photographed on demonstrations, and you can write your own slogan on the back of them with a marker pen.

From the other side of the channel this didn't look too clever. For British activists, hi-vis jackets are the uniform of the enemy, or more specifically their hired security guards. Yellow Wednesday was the violent eviction of a protest camp from Twyford Down in 1992 that, like Drouet's call to action, kicked off a nationwide movement — the successful direct action campaign against roadbuilding. Besides, who would choose something as ugly and as unecological as a PVC jacket for their livery? Within a short time came an answer: UKIP supporters were sporting them on their demonstrations.

Moreover the *gilet jaune* demonstrations looked worryingly similar to the British fuel refinery blockades mounted in 2000 by an alliance of truck-drivers and farmers (allegedly with the tacit co-operation of the fuel companies). Their target was the “fuel duty escalator”, an annual increase in petrol tax of three per cent above inflation imposed in 1993 as a way of tackling global warming — one of the few good things ever introduced by a Conservative government. Prime minister Tony Blair, who two years later would send troops into Iraq to protect British oil interests there, was not prepared to risk petrol supplies at home, and quickly capitulated to the protesters.

Macron's tax was almost identical to the earlier British one, and Macron was as quick as Blair to drop it in the face of public protest. Yet when Macron cancelled the tax, shortly after violent demonstrations on 1 December, the protesters didn't go away. They weren't lorry drivers and farmers, but a mixed bunch of rather ordinary people, who used the momentum of the fuel tax protest to press forward a host of other demands. They were outraged that Macron had reduced taxes on the super rich and were offended by his contemptuous attitude towards the common people — “people who are nothing” as he once called them. In September, Macron had echoed Norman Tebbit's “on your bike” gaffe when he told a young horticulturalist that he only had to “cross the road” to get a job. A woman responded that she had had to “scale a mountain” to find hers.

It was no coincidence that the fuel tax issue kick-started a protest whose iconography is so deeply embedded in the culture of the motor car. The movement was initially publicised online, but what made the brand catch on was the *gilet* on the dashboard of the car — if you had no car then you had no dashboard, and probably no *gilet*. The arena of protest was not the factory or university, outside the town hall, or in one's neighbourhood — it was on roundabouts at the outskirts of town, where the only people who could see it



Act XVII, 16 March: left wing *gilets jaunes* stop cars in the road at Capdenac; 22 kilometres away at a roundabout outside Décazeville, anti-immigration *gilets* relax under their gazebo.

were motorists, and sometimes at motorway tollgates and fuel depots. Aside from ending the fuel tax, other early demands were the abolition of motorway tolls and of a recent reduction of the speed limit from 90 to 80kph.

Over the last few months it has become a commonplace that the people involved are from the “periphery” of society, in a sense that is as much geographical as sociological.¹ They are not rich urbanites, *bobos* (bohemian-bourgeois), leftist intellectuals or students; nor are they the farmers who are normally keen to take to the barricades. The *gilets* of Bédarieux told me that there was not a single farmworker amongst them: “we do not mix together”. And they aren't the poor immigrant underclass of the metropolitan suburbs, the *banlieues*, who went on the rampage in 2005. One former inner city rioter told the newspaper *Libération* “why should we join them when they never joined us?”²

Great Automobile Nation

If there is any pattern, the *gilets jaunes* are quite likely to live in dormitory towns that had once been villages on the edge of cities, or in former market or industrial towns that have been forsaken by the global economy. In these wildernesses, competing for a job often means a long commute; and if there ever was a town centre, it is progressively being eviscerated.³ France embraced the transatlantic policy of siting retail outlets on the outside of town in what they call “*grandes surfaces*” earlier and more enthusiastically than any country in Europe. A French professor of town planning writes:

This did not happen by chance, nor was it inevitable. Peri-urbanisation was strongly encouraged in the 1980s and 1990s . . . by mayors anxious to see their communes develop by any means, even if it meant scattering low density housing, retail centres and public services around the edge of towns. This dispersed development, unrivalled in scale anywhere in Europe, was encouraged by the Government's numerous financial incentives for property development.⁴

Thus the shopping centre of Bédarieux is verging on fifty percent empty shops. The majority of its retail space, including the town's largest baker's shop, is sited at the edge of town where people can access it only by motor vehicle — as is its modernistic Lycée, named after the artist Fernand Léger. The nearest large town, Béziers, boasts two monstrous out of town shopping malls, while its old-town centre is in a state of dilapidation and a dismal place in which to shop.



Gilets jaunes worn at a climate march in Paris on 8 December 2018. A running dialogue between the gilets movement and climate campaigners is encapsulated in the banner which reads “End of the world, end of the month: change the system, not the climate.”

The *gilet jaune* phenomenon is to a degree an expression of despair at the failure of the culture of the motor car to live up to its promise. And French policy, vis à vis the car, has been to promise a great deal. In President Macron’s words France is “a great automobile nation”. France’s road network is about three times as long as Britain’s while their country is twice as large as Britain. They have 11,612 kilometres of motorway, much of it tolled by private corporations, and most of it built after 1994, the year when the UK stopped adding to its motorway network of less than 3,500 kilometres. Yet France’s level of car ownership per person is just nine percent more than in Britain; and the French on average drive about nine percent further than do the British.

In other words the French are not making as much use of the infrastructure so lavishly provided them as they could do, and the reason appears to be that they cannot afford to. According to *Le Figaro*, in 2016 the average French person spent about €6,000 a year on their car, equivalent to 43 percent of the net minimum wage of €13,836.⁵ Small wonder that people living on the periphery worry about the price of fuel. French governments have allowed road-builders and retail corporations to construct US-style infrastructure on a scale that would only be affordable for the majority if fuel were as cheap as it is in the US.

Awareness of these problems is reflected in the literature of the *gilets jaunes*. Amongst the demands in a widely reproduced list totalling 42 in all, are the following seven relating to transport (in the order in which they appear):

- Support small businesses in villages and town-centres: stop building large commercial zones around large towns which put small shopkeepers out of business.
- End taxes on petrol and diesel.
- Stop outsourcing industries, to protect expertise and jobs.
- Abolish the CICE (a tax benefit for businesses) and use the money to kick start a French hydrogen-powered car industry.
- No more closures of outlying transport links, post offices, schools and maternity hospitals.
- Prioritise transport of freight by rail.
- Taxes on fuel for shipping and flights.

The Role of Media

The technology more frequently associated with the *gilets jaunes* uprising is not the motor car, but social media. Some commentators have sought to attribute the populist success of the movement to the frictionless communication provided by Facebook and Twitter, to the filter bubble effect of Facebook algorithms, or even to interference by Russian hackers.⁶

It comes as no surprise that these platforms played a key role in alerting and co-ordinating people, given that social media is now the primary means of communication for a lot of people. But we do not characterise earlier rebellions by the dominant media that informed them — be it word of mouth, letter-press, telephone, or email — so it is doubtful how much agency should be attributed to social media. If the rebellion had never ventured beyond the internet, it would have had little impact.

In any case the build up for the protests involved a dialogue between social media, the mainstream press and the street — and the catalyst was a local newspaper. In May Priscillia Ludosky set up an on-line petition against fuel tax increases. For five months nothing happened, and the petition secured 700 signatures. Then it was spotted by her local rag, *La République de Seine-et-Marne*, and featured in an article, published on 12 October, which was read by the wife of a petrol-headed lorry driver in the same area called Eric Drouet. Drouet contacted Ludosky, put the petition on his Facebook page, with a call to action on 17 November, and it was at this point that it went viral.

Within a week there were over 100,000 signatories to the petition. On October 21, the daily paper *Le Parisien* featured the movement and other titles soon followed suit. Over the next weekend, according to Drouet, the number of people who had pledged to demonstrate on 17 November rose from 13,000 to 93,000. On 24 October Drouet put online his inspired notion for supporters to display their *gilets jaunes*, and within a few days dashboards so adorned were appearing in the streets. By the end of October Drouet was becoming a celebrity, giving a seven minute interview on BFM, France’s most popular TV news channel.

The mainstream media undoubtedly helped to swell the number of people on the early demonstrations — 287,000 on the 17 November according to the Government. But it is also in the nature of the press to identify spokes(wo)men and create figureheads: over the following weeks a number of so-called leaders appeared in newspapers and on TV, ranging from moderates such as Ingrid Levavasseur to sulphurous right wingers such as Maxime Nicolle and Christophe Chalençon.⁷ Some journalists tried to picture Drouet as hard right — he looked the part — but if he was a supporter of Marine Le Pen's party he wisely wasn't letting on, refusing to say who he had voted for in the Presidential elections because he viewed it as irrelevant.

Various political parties, sensing they were getting left behind by events, cosied up to the *gilets* in different ways. Marine Le Pen put a hi-vis jacket behind the windscreen of her Citroën but kept away from the demonstrations on the grounds that they were “no place for the head of a political party”. Jean-Luc Melenchon, head of the left wing party *La France Insoumise*, made clumsy approaches to Drouet that were rebuffed. The CGT at first condemned the protests but then thought better of it and in February organised a strike in their support.⁸

As for *bobos* and *soixante-huitards* — left-leaning types who in England might be classed as Guardian readers — many keep their distance. They are happy that the *gilets* are challenging Macron's neo-liberal agenda, but wary of the movement's inchoate character, its right wing elements, and what *Libération* called its “magma of motley demands”.

Fin du Monde, Fin du Mois

But how motley are these demands? There are indeed many autonomous groups around the country voicing their views independent of any central organisation, but in fact their published demands are often strikingly similar and have a certain coherence.

The majority of them focus on the cost of living and seek to combat austerity and precarity: increases in minimum wage and pensions, rent controls, increased taxes on the wealthy and on corporations, nationalisation of utilities, combatting tax evasion, and so forth. Some combine this with ecological measures such as tax breaks and support for home insulation, taxes on airline and shipping fuel. A number are aimed at making the government and the constitution more democratic, notably the demand for a Swiss style referendum system. A few (four of the 42 demands mentioned above) address the vexed question of migration.

In April the Assembly of Assemblies, a national conference of delegates from 235 local *gilet* groups, issued its “Final Appeal” which demands:

“a general improvement of salaries, pensions, and social services, in particular in respect of the nine million people who live below the poverty threshold. Recognising the urgent need to address the ecological crisis, we assert *fin du monde, fin du mois* (end of the world, end of the month) — same logic, same struggle”.

The *gilet* Assembly borrowed this slogan from Nicolas Hulot, former Minister for Ecological Transition, who resigned in protest at Macron's policies, stating: “we must address the

struggle people have to make ends meet at the end of the month; but we must also confront the prospect of the end of the world”.

Any initial concern that the campaign against fuel tax might get taken up and manipulated by right wing climate deniers and nationalist xenophobes has not materialised. Instead there is a broad consensus within the *gilet jaune* movement that measures to address climate change will only work if they are consistent with social justice.

Moral Economy of the *Gilets Jaunes*

“What gives the *gilet jaune* movement its coherence,” social researcher Samuel Hayat has noted, “is also what enabled it to catch on and to keep going: it is anchored in what one could call ‘the moral economy of the people’”.

The term “moral economy” was coined by historian EP Thompson, to describe the stance taken in 18th century food riots by common people who demanded that regulations relating to the price and sale of bread be fully maintained and observed. Though fiercely and cleverly fought, these riots had little revolutionary potential: instead they sought to re-establish customs and standards which served to safeguard a degree of fairness and reciprocity in class relations, but which had been undermined by the forces of an aggressive market economy. The rioters were progressive, in the sense that they wanted more equitable distribution of wealth, but conservative in the sense that they referred to a previously upheld moral code that was being abused.

A similar stance is shared by many *gilets jaunes*, who contest the increasing burden of taxation placed on the poor to the advantage of the wealthy, and who see manufacturing industries outsourced, labour casualised and public services declining, while a “creative class” of *bobos* flourishes. It is the moral economy's combination of a progressive social programme with a conservative sense of culture and duty that has enabled discontents of both left and right to work together and forge a coherent body of demands.

Even the four demands concerning immigration (whether or not one agrees with them) are essentially a call for the government to meet established obligations. One can detect the influence of left wing progressives in the first two, and conservatives in the last two:

- Root causes of forced migrations should be addressed;
- Asylum seekers should be treated decently, and provided with lodging, security, food and education.
- Asylum-seekers whose applications fail should be returned to their home country.
- A comprehensive programme of integration for migrants should be initiated, including education in French language and culture.

Analysis of the body of demands however suggests that, if anything, the progressive left wing agenda is dominant. A survey of *gilets jaunes* at Bordeaux, one of the hotspots of the movement, found that 42 per cent were from the left, 12 per cent from the right and 33 per cent had no political affiliations.⁹ One may hazard that some of the leftists drawn to the movement are more politically articulate than the majority



Left: Police in hi-vis jackets confront similarly attired pro-Brexit demonstrators in Manchester on 5 January 2019. Right: a week later French *gilets jaunes* cross the channel to lead left wing anti-austerity demonstrators, some in hi-vis jackets, in a march through London. Same uniform, similar complaints – but very different proposed solutions.

of those wedded to a right-wing agenda. As a result, while the right wing views of certain media-crowned figureheads are grounded in concerns about immigration, nationhood and so on, the actual demands being advanced by the movement are for the most part progressive. As academics Sandra Laugier and Albert Ogien wrote in *Libération*, left-wing *gilets jaunes*

“by keeping their political affiliations in the background, have helped to draw up a list of political demands (concerning salaries, tax justice, direct democracy etc) which succeed in marginalising the xenophobic, homophobic and authoritarian tendencies that tainted the movement in its early days.”¹⁰

Hi-vis Britain

It is fashionable, nowadays, to maintain that the traditional distinctions between left and right in politics are dissolving. The *gilets jaunes*’ rejection of party politics and the failure of both Le Pen and Macron to profit from the movement might appear to bear this out. The groundbreaking contribution of the *gilet jaune* uprising has been to conflate the energy of both left and right under a more or less coherent programme of resistance to austerity and neo-liberalism, and the demand that fiscal measures to address the environmental crisis should be applied equitably.

But that does not mean that opposing currents of nationalism on the one hand and anarcho-socialism on the other are now flowing as one. Beneath the veneer of yellow PVC, they remain volatile. The ostensibly democratic call for Swiss-style citizens’ referendums could turn out to be a Trojan horse for policies targetting refugees and freedom of movement, as has indeed been the case in Switzerland. It could also consolidate support for Frexit — French departure from the European Union — a move which has widespread support amongst *tricolore*-toting *gilets jaunes*, even if it is deemed too “political” to be listed amongst their demands.

In Britain, already rent in two by the Brexit referendum, the chances of a united front of left and right against austerity and neoliberalism are slim. This is certainly not going to occur through protesters adopting the uniform of the riot police and their security guards (see photos above). But Britain has much to learn from the way in which the *gilet jaune* movement

has been steered in a benign direction. Anti-fascist protests against the likes of Tommy Robinson every time he shows up will do little to prevent the rise of right wing populism, and may even aggravate it. It would be better to ignore him. A more promising way forward might be to nudge the disaffected towards a non-party platform of economic, fiscal and environmental justice.

This applies particularly to the environmental movement and supporters of the Extinction Rebellion, many of whom are young *bobos*. Addressing climate change within the short time-frame available will require governments to apply austerity measures. If the burden of these falls disproportionately upon the less privileged, then the chances are high that a right-wing contrarian in the Trump mould will gain their allegiance. The alternative is a broad popular front ensuring that wealthy consumers are targeted first and foremost in the name of environmental justice — in other words, rationing. We have a very long way to go, but the way that the *gilet jaune* movement has so far dealt with these issues offers some hope.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The periphrastic analysis owes much to Christophe Guilluy, author of *No Society*. See C Guilluy, ‘France is Deeply Fractured. Gilets Jaunes are Just a Symptom’, *The Guardian*, 2 Dec 2018.
2. Cited in Jeremy Harding, ‘Among the Gilets Jaunes’, *London Review of Books*, 21 March 2019.
3. Inhabitants of the Ile de France area around Paris, where both Eric Drouet and Priscillia Ludosky live, spend on average 75 minutes a day in their car, compared to 45 minutes in rural areas. *Enquête Nationale Transport et Déplacements*, 2008, cited in Aurélien Delpirou, ‘La Teinte des Gilets’ in J Confavreux (ed), *Le Fond de l’Air est Jaune*, Editions du Seuil, 2019.
4. A Delpirou, *ibid*.
5. C Maligorne, ‘Ce Que Vous Coûte Réellement Votre Voiture’, *Le Figaro*, 29 March 2018, The cheapest car analysed was a Dacia Logan diesel which cost €4,900 a year.
6. F-B Huyghe et al, *Dans la Tête des Gilets Jaunes*, VA Editions, 2019.
7. Rhys Blakely, ‘Russian Accounts Fuel French Outrage Online’, *The Times* Dec 8, 2018.
8. Ingrid Levavasseur for a time headed a proposed list of *Gilet Jaune* parliamentary candidates. Maxime Nicolle made his name with a number of racist pronouncements. Christophe Chalençon had stood as a right wing candidate in various elections, and in January met with the populist Italian deputy prime minister, Luigi Di Maio.
9. ‘Gilets Jaunes au Bout de Souffle’, *Aujourd’hui en France*, 23 Feb 2019; *Le Journal des Gilets Jaunes*, No 1, Feb -Mars 2019.
10. F-B Huyghe et al, *op cit* 6, p 31-2.
11. Sandra Laugier and Albert Ogien, Un Gilet Jaune à l’Elysée? *Libération*, 13 Dec 2018

THE LUDDITE WING OF THE *GILETS JAUNES*

Cédric Villani is a mathematician and media dandy who in 2017 was elected to the French parliament as a member of Emmanuel Macron's victorious "En Marche" party. He is the Government's chief authority on artificial intelligence, and in this capacity, on 4 April 2019, he paid a visit to the Massif Central town of Albi, which has pretensions to being a regional hub of digital enterprise. After visiting the Serious Game Centre at the local university, the Ariane Network data housing corporation at Albi's Technopolis Park, and the offices of Electricité de France (EDF), Villani gave the keynote speech at a conference on *Artificial Intelligence and Regional Planning* organised by an industrialists' lobby called Leader Occitanie.

On arrival he was greeted by *gilets jaunes* holding a banner saying "Linky, 5G, Driverless Cars — Is there no end to this idiocy?". When he rose to speak he was interrupted by a group of *gilets* who read out the letter which is printed below.

The cue for this action may have been a similar event at nearby Toulouse in December 2018. In this case it was a group of peasant farmers who interrupted a conference on robotics. But their speech contained pertinent advice for *gilets jaunes*. Translations of both speeches are provided on this and the next page.



Villani, sporting trade-mark silk scarf and oversized spider brooch, on the poster for a speech in Albi.

Dear Cédric Villani

We would like to present you with a Linky "smart" electricity meter. Please accept it: we have paid for it through our electricity tariff.

This little yellow box is a truly remarkable device that has already performed a great public service. It has prompted a widespread recognition of what lies in store for us as we enter the era of big data and algorithms, of driverless cars and 5G. Thanks to ENEDIS, the EDF subsidiary that manufactures Linky, we have been initiated into the wonderful world of the "internet of things", and gained a full appreciation of the levels of deceit used to promote investment in artificial intelligence.

For example, the absurd idea that automation will create employment. Get real: automation *means* dispensing with human labour, including the thousands of ENEDIS employees who will no longer be monitoring electricity meters, or the disastrous collapse of public services. To take another example, the deployment of robotic vehicles directly threatens the livelihoods of 600,000 professional drivers of buses, lorries, taxis etc, about two per cent of the workforce.

And please don't tell us automation will stimulate new enterprises. Licensed bus and lorry drivers will have about as

much chance of creating their own start-up robotics company as horses had of setting up in the production of car parts.

The other problem, M Villani, is that the weather is hot — much hotter than it ought to be in Albi at the beginning of spring. And the Big Data Economy is a voracious consumer of resources; it requires ever increasing numbers of processors, sensors, servers, cables, antennae, screens and so on. It gulps up colossal quantities of energy, primary commodities and metals.

The Linky programme is a classic example: in the name of ecological transition, it starts by scrapping 35 million electric meters in full working order. Then, by digitising the network it generates petabytes of data, which have to be stored and managed in

immense concrete depots that must be kept permanently cool. You are no doubt aware that globally all these data centres already emit as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as the entire airplane industry. How can such a daft programme possibly constitute a kind of "intelligence"?

Finally, whether it is a question of e-medicine, smart homes, or remote controlled vehicles, this brave new world, which translates our lives into a vast pool of data, is inadmissible for one other simple reason. It relies on the forthcoming 5G wireless network which is more of a threat to human health than its less powerful predecessors. Living beings should not be continuously exposed to such powerful electromagnetic fields just to increase the profits of the electronics industry and replicate Silicon Valley around the world.

We campaign for technological restraint and social justice. If you wish to exercise your intellectual curiosity and indulge your fondness for science, whilst securing your political career, why not join those of us who advocate radical ecology and alternatives to capitalism, as the most acceptable and groundbreaking way of confronting the challenges that face us.



The vigorous campaign in France against the introduction of "Linky" smart electricity meters by ENEDIS, a subsidiary of EDF, has become part of the *gilets jaunes*' litany of complaints.

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