

Preface to the Paperback Edition

In France, in November 2018, far from the great metropolitan centers, people wearing yellow high-visibility vests blocked traffic circles in small towns, medium-sized cities, and rural areas. Most of them had never taken part in a demonstration before; few had been politically active until then. What is more, the protesters did not represent any political party or labor union; they had no leader. The yellow-vest movement does not repeat history, neither the French Revolution nor the class conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is something altogether new, the product of twenty-first-century globalization. Supported by a majority of French public opinion, it has brought together people from very different backgrounds: industrial workers, office workers, small business owners, farmers, young people, middle-aged members of the labor force, retired men and women. These ordinary people, mainly from the working class but in any case unprompted by class consciousness, all have the sense of having been demoted to the status of second-class citizens.

While the immediate cause of the protests was an increase in fuel taxes and the decrease in purchasing power it entailed, the movement gives expression to a much more profound anxiety, one that may without exaggeration be called existential. Ordinary people came together to say to the rest of the nation, "We exist, and we are not going to go away." It therefore makes no sense to analyze their grievances

with reference to the social and political tensions of earlier centuries. This is not a struggle opposing the traditional working class to employers, or extreme elements on the left to extreme elements on the right; it is a matter instead of people of modest means standing up to the wealthy, refusing to be beaten into submission by the winners from globalization and all those who are protected against its most harmful effects.

This protest, by virtue not only of its sociological diversity but also of its geographical extent, illustrates the fundamental cleavage in Western societies today, between the downtrodden inhabitants of the peripheries and their rich masters in the great cities from which they have been driven out. It poses the central question that democracies will face in the years ahead: What is to be the fate of the working classes in a globalized system of manufacturing, trade, and finance whose outstanding feature is the deindustrialization of developed countries?

Ideology is not the driving force of the yellow-vest movement. Its members are for the most part unmoored from traditional political attachments. Workers who used to vote for the left, farmers who used to vote for the right, private-sector wage earners and low-level civil servants on both the right and the left have all joined together to say to the elites, to the political class, to the prosperous inhabitants of the nation's largest cities, "You cannot have a society without us." In Europe, as in the United States, the current popular unrest springs from the determination of the working-class populations of the periphery to make themselves seen, and their voices heard, after decades of neglect and marginalization.

While the working class in France has adopted the yellow vest as a symbol of its resolve, in Great Britain it has used the campaign to leave Europe to remind the dominant classes of its existence. Everywhere in

the West, the losers from globalization are searching for ways to call attention to their plight. They do not see themselves as belonging to a new proletariat; nonetheless they do share a common perception of the prevailing economic regime and the conviction of having been culturally and geographically isolated in areas outside the largest cities, the places where jobs and wealth are created. There is nothing in the least irrational about this view. It is not the result of manipulation by demagogues; it is a sober-minded appraisal of the present situation, the result of firsthand experience.

Populist movements in France and elsewhere have given rise to concerns that they run the risk of reviving the discredited totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. There can be no doubt that this risk is real. But we must not lose sight of the fact that the fundamental issue, having to do with the economic and, above all, the cultural integration of ordinary citizens, is a specifically twenty-first-century problem. ~~It is the consequence of an integrative economic model that concentrates wealth in the major metropolitan centers, which is to say, in the hands of those who already enjoy the greatest shares of wealth.~~ The challenge that democracies are confronted with today is assuring prosperity and social justice in peripheral France no less than in Paris, in the Sheffield of England no less than in London, in the Rust Belt no less than in New York, in the "fly-over" states no less than in Los Angeles.

The inability of French elites to grasp the motivations of the protesters is especially troubling in this regard. The astonishment of intellectuals, politicians, and journalists in the face of a movement supported by more than half the people cannot help but recall the astonishment of British elites at the vote in favor of leaving the European Union and of American elites at the election of Donald Trump. To listen to the new bourgeoisie in France, as in Great Britain and the United States, one

would think they had discovered the last tribe of Amazonia living in their own country and, to their horror, suddenly realized that it actually constitutes a majority of the population. A discovery they made, by the way, only because they saw it on television.

~~The emergence of resistance from below has caused all the social perceptions imposed from above over the past four decades to fall apart. Everywhere the dynamics of popular discontent arise not only from a certain economic sociology but also from a certain geography, the bleak landscape of impoverished rural areas and deindustrialized towns and smaller cities. For forty years, France had been idealized as a benign hodgepodge, a sort of patchwork quilt seamlessly sewn together by a shared spirit of patriotism. The yellow-vest movement exposed the absurdity of the official view by showing that most French people do not feel they really belong, do not feel at home in their own country. The fantasy peddled by the dominant classes in France and other countries—of an atomized society without class conflict, without an underclass, a tranquil agglomeration of docile minorities, a society of individuals whose separate interests magically coincide—is now on the verge of collapse.~~

No one will dispute that Western societies have in the meantime all become more plural, more ethnically diverse. Yet this has not prevented the formation of a broad-based coalition of the least well-off. In this connection the question of minorities is revelatory. It has often been said that the yellow-vest movement is a movement of white people. It is quite true that minorities were not represented in large numbers on traffic circles throughout the country last fall. But this is because for the most part they do not live in peripheral France. Nevertheless, minorities were indeed present; they simply did not show up waving the flags of ethnic and cultural identity. It should also be kept in mind that the yellow-vest movement has had a great impact in

~~overseas departments and territories (notably Réunion and Guadeloupe), where black and mixed-race members of the working class recognize that this "white" populist protest is theirs as well. Keep in mind, too, that a majority of voters in these places, where whites constitute a minority, cast their ballots for Marine Le Pen's National Rally party in the 2019 European elections.~~

~~Another distinguishing characteristic of the movement is its autonomy. The yellow vests have no leader and owe allegiance to no party or labor union. This state of affairs is a response to the secession of elites first analyzed almost twenty-five years ago by the historian Christopher Lasch. The withdrawal of the upper classes into a world of their own, cut off from their less fortunate fellow citizens, was steadily accelerated with the growing concentration of wealth and economic opportunity in the largest cities, the new medieval citadels of the twenty-first century. In France, as in all other developed countries, the self-segregation of people at the top has provoked a corresponding reaction on the part of people at the bottom.~~

~~What is called "populism" is only the political form of a declaration of cultural independence by the working class. It is exactly this sense of autonomy that accounts in large measure for the power and the permanence of the protests we are witnessing today. At the same time, however, in unleashing a wave of panic throughout the upper classes, it has in its turn brought about a realignment of interests at the top. The old bourgeoisie and the new bourgeoisie have stood together during the present crisis, joining forces in support of a new political movement of the center right. Macronism, this in a desperate attempt to delegitimize the populist revolt. A further proof of the yellow-vest movement's independence is that although both the extreme left and the extreme right have done their best to exploit its underlying impulse for their own purposes, most of the protesters have kept their distance from the extremes.~~

~~Walled away in their new citadels, the gentrified metropolises, the upper classes have underestimated the movement's staying power because they have failed to understand its true source in a deep-seated will to survive. Confronted with working-class unrest on the peripheries, Paris has become a vast safe room. One sees the same thing occurring elsewhere. London, Frankfurt, Milan, and New York, though they see themselves as noble embodiments of the open society, have all gradually been transformed into urban fortresses providing a fearful bourgeoisie with shelter from populist retribution. The European elections of May 2019 confirmed this tendency: from Sweden to Italy, from Germany to Great Britain, all the major cities are united in their determination to be seen as safe havens of democracy, places where civilization can be defended against the barbarian onslaught.~~

~~In France, the insurgency that arose from the periphery has shaken the moral certainties of a self-styled "cool" bourgeoisie, sure of its own benevolence, that had founded its claim to cultural and political domination on the invisibility of the working class. Terrified by muffled noises of dissatisfaction that already a few years earlier had begun to be heard from the forgotten lands of France, the elites thought to defend themselves by accusing anyone who dared to complain about the state of the nation of being a fascist. But this will not be enough; by now it is too late. Throughout the West, the working class has finally prevailed in the one thing that matters, the battle over cultural perceptions. Excluded until now, ostracized, deprived of economic security and denied political power, the working class was supposed to have vanished from history. Today, however, contrary to all expectation, it exerts a soft but nonetheless very real power that is hastening the end of the new bourgeoisie's hegemony. In all Western democracies today, political wisdom is being stood on its head.~~

One by one, the claims to superior knowledge and expertise on which the authorized version of the world depends are being exposed for what they are—baseless fabrications. This disillusionment is not the result of any ideology, still less the storming of any Bastille; it is due to the perseverance of a working class forced to bear the burdens of a reality that at every point contradicts the dream world of the dominant classes. As against the elites' campaign to shrink the welfare state and privatize public services, the working class insists on the necessity of preserving the common good by protecting these services; as against the urge to deregulate and denationalize, it demands that the common good be conceived in national terms; as against the fable of hypermobility, it points to the hard facts of working-class sedentarization; finally, as against the pleasant fiction that everyone has the same opportunities in life, it tries as well as it can to make the most of what it has, drawing on its own substantial reserves of cultural capital in the form of mutual aid and solidarity.

~~The soft power of the working class does not signal a desire to retreat from the world, quite the opposite; it expresses a determination to remake society so that the common interest will be defended and democracy revitalized. This is not a fascist moment that we are witnessing; it is a democratic moment that forces the affluent hipsters of the higher France to squarely face up to their hypocrisy. Holed up in their metropolitan strongholds—redoubts that are no less mental than physical—they can no longer go on hawking the myth of an open society while keeping it closed to the least well-off. That time has now passed.~~

To think that the movements led by the yellow vests in France and the Brexiteers across the Channel are a transitory phenomenon is quite mistaken. They are evidence of a profound and lasting recalibration of the balance of power in Western societies that has brought

forth a new era of political polarization. Both Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron are products of this rebalancing. It is not an accident of history that such men have been elected to high office. In an age of economic globalization and popular discontent, they are two sides of the same coin. Like it or not, Trumpono-Macronism is here to stay. It is the new normal.

~~Everywhere in the West, the working classes have engineered a novel kind of revolution. Paradoxically, or perhaps not, the withdrawal from society of the people at the top has liberated and empowered the people at the bottom, who make up most of the population. This is what class conflict in the twenty-first century looks like. History is not repeating itself in the West; what we are seeing is a revolution in slow motion. Little by little, the rulers' hold on power slips away; little by little, democratic legitimacy passes to the side of the revolutionaries. If Paris does not wish to suffer the fate of King's Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms in *Game of Thrones*, the dominant classes will have to accept that without the working class there can be no society. The moment has now come at last for the dominant classes to set their watches to working-class time.~~

Paris, July 2019

Introduction

Amid a fanfare of republican self-congratulation, France has embraced globalization in all its glory. Wherever one looks, from the chronic alternation between traditional parties of the center left and center right to the denial of democracy itself, with the farcical referendum of 2005 on a European constitution, it is plain to see that France has become an "American" society like all the rest, inegalitarian and multicultural. In the space of a few decades, the implacable law of global markets has asserted its authority everywhere, replacing a society founded on egalitarian ideals by a polarized society seething with tensions of every sort beneath a placid surface. The unprecedented social and cultural disruption provoked by this sudden swing has until now been covered up by a patriotic blast of trumpets. But this republican fanfare, though it grows louder and louder, rings ever more false with the passage of time. As in all the other developed countries, the new economic order does not cease sowing division and discord.

How could things have changed so quickly? How could a dominant class, by definition minuscule, have managed to impose an economic model that no one, and especially not the working classes, had chosen? How was this model able to win acceptance so easily, when criticism of a system run by bankers (and the wealthy oligarchs they are assumed to serve) is a commonplace of intellectual commentary and political debate?