



Fear of a Yellow Planet

The *Gilets Jaunes* and the End of the Modern World-System

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Abstract

The emergence of the Gilet Jaunes has seen a section of the popular classes present a significant challenge to the elite-driven ideological frameworks that have dominated since the end of the cold war: neoliberalism and the Clash of Civilisations. What Immanuel Wallerstein calls 'centrist liberalism' has been the dominant ideological foundation of the modern world-system since the late nineteenth century. Its current form, neoliberalism, is in crisis across the core of the world-system, intensified following the Great Recession of 2008. This has invited new challenges from revived and reconstituted political formations of both right and left. Populist movements are a part of this process of ideological reconstitution, and the Gilets Jaunes are an important example of progressive populism calling for social and economic justice. What was triggered by a protest directed at increased fuel taxes rapidly escalated into a much broader protest movement whose influence has spread beyond French borders. Importantly, the Gilet Jaunes have brought a layer of the French working-classes into the public realm in dramatic fashion, raising issues such as equality, public welfare, and participatory and direct democracy that challenge neo-liberal norms. The agenda that has emerged from the Gilet Jaunes illustrates the way in which a working-class left is being reconstituted in opposition to forces of the political right. The article addresses three main questions: Why have the Gilet Jaunes emerged? Who makes up these protests? What do they mean?

Keywords: Gilet Jaunes/Yellow Vests, Horizontalism, Populism, Protest.



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The battle is now between nationalists and globalists
—Marine Le Pen, January 13, 2019 (De Clerq 2019)

The emergence of the *Gilets Jaunes* in France since November 2018 has created great uncertainty across the European political spectrum. Sections of the political left have viewed the movement with suspicion, as a form of *Poujadism*, or perhaps worse, the harbinger of a far-right grassroots movement (Badiou 2019). To that end budget Minister Gerard Darmanin condemned the protests as a brown plague (“la peste brune”) (Johnstone 2018). Conversely French neoliberal elites have alternated between being sympathetic with the anger of the movement while also reserving the right to use brutal force to suppress it. Over 1900 protestors have been injured so far, including major facial traumas and blindness caused by the use of flashballs by the police.¹ There have also been 13 deaths and over 12,000 arrests (Caelinnan 2019). The violent confrontations that have occurred have caused great fear and anxiety for the French government, which had not anticipated such a reaction to their policies (Bertho 2018).²

The political right, too, are caught between the familiar demand for order to be restored while at the same time seeing this as an opportunity to undermine the President and Government, and potentially recruit a new layer of supporters to their own cause. Hence Marine Le Pen’s attempt to claim the mantle of the “Yellow Vests” by framing the nature of the rebellion in terms of two familiar and competing post-Cold War global narratives: a clash of civilisations versus neoliberalism and the end of history. The *Gilets Jaunes* protest movement does not fall neatly into either of those categories, and hence has led to much uncertainty from political commentators as to what the movement signifies. Given the strong tradition of insurrection in French political culture, it is unsurprising that such a movement should emerge in the wake of ongoing attacks on the living standards of the general population, coupled with the ambition of the Macron administration to reward its wealthy supporters with extraordinary tax breaks (Cole 2017).³ I argue that the *Gilets Jaunes* are best understood as a popular protest for social and economic justice and

¹ Flashballs are classified as a ‘less lethal’ weapon than other types of bullet, but have caused great damage to both protestors and non-participants alike.

² For example, 25 year old Brahim Moussa was shot by police in Lille in December 2018 with a flashball and after one month in a coma died in hospital. The widespread use of lethal force by the police has triggered a nationwide movement to disarm the French police. See the ‘Dossier Repression’ in *La Brique*, a local independent newspaper in Lille, No. 58 Printemps 2019, ‘Lacrymocartie’, pp. 9-22, <http://www.labrique.net/index.php/numeros/1047-n-58-printemps-2019-lacrymocratie>, (retrieved June 19th 2019).

³ President Macron is estimated to have a personal fortune of \$31.5m (Hodgkin 2017). Macron won 82% of the vote from those classified as being of superior socio-professional class, a record for any President and an indicator of his most important support base. As with other progressive neoliberals such as Tony Blair, Macron was heavily supported by a group of French oligarchs, the ‘club des milles’, who paid for just under 50% of his campaign funding (€6.3m). Details were revealed in leaked documents from the *En Marche!* campaign and widely covered in the French media (See Magnaudeix and Mathieu 2017).

that, unlike other protests across the core zone of the world-system, it isn't driven by nationalism or xenophobia, despite the claims of its critics.

President Macron critiqued the *Gilets Jaunes* by suggesting that some French people aren't prepared to work for what they want, reinforcing neoliberal depictions of the lazy working-classes who are contrasted unfavourably with the industrious wealth-creating entrepreneurs (Davies 2017). In contrast, *Gilets Jaunes* protesters proclaim that they are tired from working too many hours to survive month by month. Macron's argument reflects what his *Gilets Jaunes* critics describe as general contempt towards the people who are suffering under his attempts to turn France into a "start-up nation" of digital entrepreneurs (Macron 2017:67-82; Amable and Palombarini 2018; Bock 2019a; Pedder 2018:169-198). The *Gilets Jaunes* are important, then, because they represent the latest expression of social opposition to a systemic crisis engulfing the core of the world-system.

Since the end of the Cold War the two narratives of the end of history and the clash of civilisations have dominated the geo-culture of the world-system and have had great power as political rhetoric in framing the terms of much global political elite debate (Wilkin 2018). This historic juncture has coincided with the decline or retreat of the global statist left, whether in the form of communism or social democracy. The latter has shifted towards complete acceptance of the market, to the extent that social democratic parties have come to align with a cosmopolitan form of neoliberalism. Nancy Fraser calls such types "progressive neoliberals" (Fraser 2017).

The *Gilets Jaunes* are a response to the local and national manifestation of a number of world-systemic crises that cannot easily be resolved by political elites in the core. Most important is that the ideology of centrist liberalism has reached a moment of profound crisis, facing challenges from the ethno-nationalist forces of the political right and far-right, as well as from a reconstituted and more fragile political left (Wallerstein 2011; Wilkin 2018). In short, the traditional methods used by political elites in the core to manage a capitalist system in permanent crisis of accumulation and governance are at their limits (Smith 2004). The fundamental problem facing the governments in core states is that of managing the conflict between citizens demanding better public services, welfare and pay, as opposed to meeting the interests of capital, which largely demands the opposite. A decade of austerity has created increasingly open social conflict across the core zone. In this respect, the *Gilets Jaunes* are a protest against the consequences of both austerity and the marketization of society, bringing together people with nominally very different political outlooks.

Amable notes that in France (as in other nation-states of the core zone of the modern world-system) dominant institutions have been established as the result of historic political compromises between social classes and through constructing an implicit social compact to ensure a minimum standard of living for all (Amable 2017; Tilly 1993:1-9; Moore 1978). The emergence of neoliberalism in France under the Giscard Presidency (1974-81) has seen this compact being

abandoned by French governing elites, much to the detriment of the working-classes (McMillan 1991:190-203; Prasad 2005; Amable et al. 2012; Amable and Palombarini 2018:51-64). Such compacts underpin the stability of social life in the core, limiting class war to the “form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes” (Bourdieu 1984:165). The emergence of the Gilets Jaunes illustrates what can happen when the dominant classes withdraw from this social compact and the subordinate classes, fuelled by a sense of moral indignation, are freed to act and search for a new compact of their choosing (Nossiter 2018).

The article addresses three main questions: Why have the Gilets Jaunes emerged? What do they mean? Who are they? It is the second of these questions which is perhaps the most important to address, as the movement embraces ideas that its critics see as being in conflict with each other, such as the demand to cancel a new eco-tax while also calling for sustainable society. The Gilet Jaunes have responded to this by pointing out that the proposed eco-tax is not, in fact, a green tax at all. The money raised is being used to help balance the budget in accord with European Union (EU) neoliberal budgetary constraints, rather than supporting green energy (Stangler 2018).

The article is based upon a mixture of materials which combine to establish what Manicas calls a ‘framework of understanding’ of the Gilets Jaunes (Manicas 2006): (1) Contemporary French (and other) media coverage; (2) Social media; (3) Academic literature and surveys; and (4) Participant observation and conversation with Gilets Jaunes before and during their Acts in Lille.

Populism: The Return of the Yellow Peril

“The seizure of a city by the disenchanting, the oppressed, by those sick of rotten politics, is in itself no assurance of progress...one rarely gets the revolution one expects” - Frederick Busi (Busi 1971: 397-408)

Busi’s cautionary comments on the Paris Commune are apposite when considering the emergence of the Gilets Jaunes. As with the Paris Commune, both events were unexpected and largely driven by a variety of conflicting impulses, ideologies and ambitions (Jellinek 2006). Historically the political left has tended to claim the mantle of authentic working-class insurrection, but at the same time both the Commune and the Gilets Jaunes movement created problems for the institutional left in France and elsewhere. As with the Commune there is a lack of unified ideology or theory behind the Gilets Jaunes, which has led critics to dismiss them as a form of populism. This has been the response from French Marxist Alain Badiou, for example (Badiou 2019). In a similar vein, Italian Marxist Enzo Traverso argues that as a concept, populism reduces all such movements into one

category. Rather than disaggregating different populisms Traverso warns against using the concept at all. Indeed, as others have noted, populism has helped overtly authoritarian right-wing Presidents, including Trump and Bolsonaro (Traverso 2019).

The depiction of the *Gilets Jaunes* in the political and mainstream media, as with their *Communard* forebears, has often been mocking, contemptuous and conceited. The novelist Edouard Oliver, whose background is from a poor Northern working-class family who happen to be *Gilets Jaunes*, has responded to the attacks upon the protests by noting that “the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, doesn’t care about contradicting itself. One day, the working-class were ‘authentic,’ almost ‘good savages.’ And the day after they were racist, homophobic horrible people” (Schwartz 2019). The satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, for example, represents them as their cartoon character “Les Beaufs.” This depicts a boorish, philistine and lazy brother-in-law who is effectively a social parasite, and this captures well the disdain felt by sections of France’s cultural elites towards the *Gilets Jaunes* (Neffati 2019). A depiction of the *Gilets Jaunes* has been formed that establishes the idea that a new form of ‘Yellow Peril’ has emerged from which the political system needs to be immunised. Why then, have the *Gilets Jaunes* emerged at this moment in time?

World-System in Crisis: The challenge to Centrist Liberalism

In world-systems analysis the concept of geo-culture is one of three central systemic factors in the construction of the modern world-system, alongside the capitalist world economy and the interstate system. The concept of geoculture refers to the construction of beliefs, ideologies and systems of knowledge that have come to shape the modern world (Wallerstein 1992). Crucially it incorporates what Wallerstein has referred to as “centrist liberalism,” which has emerged over the course of the nineteenth century as the main geocultural ideology across the core nation-states of the world-system (Wallerstein 2011). As the core has both constructed and dominated the modern world-system, its ideas have underpinned its major institutions, rules and laws, while also being contested by a variety of social and political movements. Centrist liberalism can be viewed as an ideology that emerges out of the Enlightenment which has generated radically different social paths. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century centrist liberalism became hegemonic in the core and either defeated its main ideological rivals (fascism, communism) while others (e.g. social democracy, conservatism) were forced to incorporate liberalism into their ideological frameworks. The end of the Cold War has generated significant challenges to centrist liberalism in its current neoliberal form, as its ideological claims run into the realities of political, economic and ideological crises. The promise of neoliberalism and its appeal is in its rhetorical claim to deliver individual freedom and prosperity. The impact of global austerity and historically

unprecedented levels of inequality, however, have contradicted this to such an extent that alternate political ideologies have gained traction across the world-system during the same period. This paper argues that it is the contingent conjuncture of these crises that has provided the context in which the Gilets Jaunes have emerged (Smith and Fetner 2009; Smith and Wiest 2012). However, to understand the Gilets Jaunes we need to address the specific impact of these crises upon French society.

The first world-systemic crisis to consider is the impact of the Great Recession and neo-liberalism on French political economy. The globalization of financial capitalism in the wake of neoliberal reforms from the late-1970s onwards has created a global market in which capital can accumulate with increasing ease at the expense of the working and non-working popular classes (Hudson 2012). For capital from the core, this has shifted towards what Hudson views as a classical parasitical form of accumulation, draining productive wealth from core economies, which then flows to the super-rich, rather than being invested in innovation, production and well-paid jobs (Hudson 2015). This has been coupled with long-term reductions in the state's role in economy and society, most importantly its role as a source of welfare and public service provision. At the same time, state action that reinforces the accumulation of private capital largely unchallenged in the mainstream media. This is a point made most clearly during the widespread mainstream media support for the U.S.- and EU-led global financial initiative to support the banking system in 2008 (Quantitative Easing).

French membership in the EU has done little to alleviate the symptoms of this economic crisis. Indeed, the EU has added difficulties for successive French governments by enshrining the German ordoliberal principles associated with the German central bank at the heart of its constitutional revisions since the Single European Act in 1986. This has created an EU where the market has increasingly come to transcend the idea of Social Europe (Drahokoupil and Horn 2008). Thus, the EU has imposed austerity upon its member states during the Great Recession while acting to bail out the Franco-German banks most responsible for and exposed by the mortgage lending crisis. The impact of austerity has helped drive workers' pay down and create a Europe-wide stratum of citizens enduring in-work poverty (Eurostat 2018; Romei 2018). Such policies merely reinforce criticisms of the EU made by populist movements, and serve to reinforce the view that the EU is an undemocratic and unaccountable bureaucratic institution where decisions are made in favour of elites, at the expense of the majority of the EU population (Mair 2013).

The Macron Presidency and *En Marche!* government were elected in a campaign that offered to end old political practices by transforming the French social, economic and political systems. In practice, this meant introducing deeper neoliberal reforms than either of his immediate predecessors—Presidents Hollande and Sarkozy—had been able to do, despite their commitment to austerity in the form of changes to pensions, the right to strike, welfare entitlement, and

employment relations between employers and unions (Raymond 2013; Cleaver 2017: 15; Kus 2006). Macron's government has begun to make more significant inroads into what it sees as the obstacles to a properly functioning market society, most importantly dismantling the French labour codes guaranteeing rights to workers. Thus, the rights of employees and unions have been weakened further, benefits cut for the most disadvantaged, and the wealth of France's 1% significantly boosted by tax cuts ostensibly designed to trigger investment in innovation, research and development (BBC News 2017).

The tax cuts from the first budget of the Macron government gave France's wealthiest tax payers an extra €582'000 per annum. The top 1000 each received an additional €172'000 per annum. Overall 44% of the total benefit of the budget goes to the top 1% of earners, leading the President to comment that "we must celebrate those who succeed" (Stangler 2017). In France the top 1% now own 20% of the nation's wealth and are increasing their wealth more quickly than comparable elites in any other country, including China (Sazonov 2019; Alderman 2018). As Prime Minister Edouard Philippe (former member of the Republican Party) laughingly responded to a question from two *Financial Times* journalists who had noted that the policies introduced by the government were not actually progressive or in keeping with the rhetoric of the Macron Presidential campaign: "yes, what did you expect?" (Chassany and Stoddard 2017). As Hudson has noted wryly, the fact that there is no historical evidence that such tax cuts for the rich will produce increased investment and jobs is irrelevant to neoliberal ideology. This has become a firmly established theoretical truth among neoliberal elites regardless of historical evidence—an infallible article of faith, not reason (Hudson 2012).

The second crisis that has fueled the Gilets Jaunes protests is a political one. Representative democracy as a system of government has, as U.S. political scientist John Higley notes, always been a system of (democratic) *elite* government (Higley 2006). The significance of this point is that it means that representative democracy places a limit on the ability of the population to govern itself (Van der Walt 2016). Rather, political elites, forming a professional cadre of representatives, act on behalf of the citizenry, whose role is to elect them. The historical development of democracy in the modern world-system illustrates this point clearly. In the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries "democracy" was a term of abuse akin to "anarchist" in the nineteenth century (Graeber 2013). The assumption by the governing classes was that democracy was chaos and rule by the *rabble*, as Thomas Hobbes described it (Ashcraft 1971). Democracy did not emerge, then, as a result of enlightened elites bestowing it upon the masses but precisely the other way around: democracy was built from below by the popular classes (Van der Walt 2016). The governing classes of property and power, by contrast, saw representative democracy as a way of constraining and limiting democracy from being extended into wider areas of social, political, and economic life (Higley 2006).

For Pierre Bourdieu this process was established through the construction of what he called a “political field” composed of rules, resources, institutions and agents who were involved in a (social) game over the right to represent collective interests. As such Bourdieu notes that the dice were loaded in favour of those social groups who had established the rules of the game and who subsequently have enjoyed the most power to revise them over time and space in order to preserve their social power and authority. Richard Sennett has made a similar point about the constraining nature of social rules in capitalist societies that serve to co-opt and constrain popular opposition to injustices (Sennett 1978: 295; Bourdieu 1984: 171-202). The Gilets Jaunes have triggered fear among governing elites precisely because they have abandoned the political field and no longer wish to play by the established rules (Guilluy 2019: 101).

In terms of the ambition to transform society the most apt historical reference for the Gilets Jaunes is to the French revolution, where the conflicting ideas over the form of democracy that the republic should take can be viewed, broadly, as a struggle between nascent working-class proponents of direct democracy and federalism (Sans-Culottes, Enrages) and a bourgeois professional class (Jacobins) who wanted a form of centralised state with a representative government that would ultimately constrain working-class power (Livesey 2001; Soubel 1980; Hunt 2004). This point is relevant because one of the main unifying themes that the Gilets Jaunes have argued for is that they do not want just *another* government. Rather, they want a change in the nature of the political system itself towards direct or participatory democracy (Le Monde 2018; Stangler 2018; Altman 2014). Hence the idea of a Citizens Referendum Initiative (RIC), which would effectively transform the balance of power in the political system. One consequence of this would be to create a new Sixth Republic where the political system would establish popular assemblies to produce policies and figures who would, in effect, become akin to delegates rather than representatives. To this end, local assemblies have already emerged in a number of locations to explore these ideas (Chouard 2019: 103-123; Mimoun, R. and S. Freeman-Woolpert 2019).

These ideas of direct working-class control of communities (and perhaps workplaces, though this has not featured as strongly thus far in the protests) resonates with the French syndicalist tradition, which proved influential in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The possibility that syndicalist-type practices of direct action and workers control of communities might return in France in 2018-2019 is a major shock to neoliberal elites across Europe (Mitchell 1978; Pataud and Pouget 1990; Van der Walt 2016). For forty years it has been neoliberalism that has defined the meaning of what it is to have a rational, cosmopolitan and universal ideology (Fraser 2017; Harvey 2007). For neoliberalism, class is a category to be transcended by progress towards a market society shaped by unending competition, meritocracy and equality of opportunity. At the very least, the Gilets Jaunes, like the Occupy movement before it, have raised

fundamental questions about the dominance of neoliberal ideology in the core and the irreducibility of class conflict in a capitalist society (Bray 2013; Nossiter 2018).

The third factor of structural crisis that underpins the emergence of the *Gilets Jaunes* is that of the media and communication. The move towards a digital world-system has led to a ‘digitopia,’ a world-system in which the digital revolution has both the capacity to aid liberation, but also to control populations through the extended powers of both the state and the main digital corporations to monitor, survey, gather information and develop new techniques of control based upon behavioural psychology (Matz et al 2017; Balakrishnan 2017; Kosinski et al 2013). As Alex Carey and others have argued, representative democracy across the core has evolved alongside national media and mass communication industries over the course of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries (Carey 1997). This has taken a number of forms: the rise to prominence of the public relations industry in the production of news itself; the commercialisation of the media and its impact upon its objectives and ideological orientation; the importance of nationalism rather than objectivity in the mainstream media’s self-identity and construction of news; the state as a primary source for information; and the links between mainstream media firms and political elites. These elements combine to help define a commonsense frame of meaning about what is and is not politically, economically and socially possible (Boyd-Barrett 2004; Carey 1997; Ewen 2008). To this end President Macron has been revealed as being closely supported by the owners of major French media firms and other members of the French oligarchy (Branco 2019). As if to illustrate this complex media-state-government relationship, on December 9th 2018 well-known TV presenter on BFM TV, Ruth Elkrief, abandoned her journalistic neutrality and despairingly told *Gilet Jaunes* protesters that ‘the most important thing is for people to go home’ (Halimi and Rimbart 2018).

The explosion of digital media forms and social media since 2005, however, has helped challenge if not undermine the power the mainstream media has had in framing political debates (Van Dijck 2013). Not only is income from advertising revenue shrinking for the mainstream media, but increasingly younger people are bypassing it in search of news and other information using blogs, social media and other digital communication (PWC 2019). Historically in France, the President and government have had strong powers over the media ranging from censorship to being the defining sources of information about current events (Kuhn 2011: 101-120).

Unsurprisingly the *Gilets Jaunes* have been mobilized and to some extent organized through social media platforms, most importantly through the use of Facebook to coordinate protests and YouTube to release live footage of protests and police violence against protestors (Wacquant 2009). France remains the only country in Europe where the police can use hand grenades against civil protests, and these have been used in the hundreds against the *Gilet Jaunes*. This has been strongly condemned by Amnesty International, and the French journalist David Dufresne has set

up a blog chronicling illegal uses of force by the French police during the protests (Amnesty International 2018; Dufresne 2007). As noted earlier, these social media platforms have provided a crucial public space within which Gilets Jaunes can become a visible part of French public life.

Indeed, the digital era of communication for social movements is based around ideas of a self-help, do-it-yourself media culture, which reflects strands of anarchist and feminist social theory about the importance of free expression, cooperation, self-help and direct action as the means to produce progressive social change (Owens and Palmer 2013). This is not to say that the Gilets Jaunes (or other contemporary social movements) are examples of anarchist social movements or that organization can be carried out simply via social media. Rather, it is to note the distinctly libertarian outlook of many, though not all, progressive protest movements since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of authoritarian socialism (Bray 2013: 44-47; Graeber 2013; Van der Walt 2016). In this sense such movements draw upon these anarchist and feminist ideas, consciously or otherwise, in both the ways in which they are trying to organize themselves and in the demands that they are making.

Allied to these structural crises is the sense of injustice at both the current state of society and the proposed neoliberal transformation of France by the Macron Presidency. As Barrington Moore noted when comparing the German and Russian revolutions, a sense of moral outrage and injustice has been pivotal in unifying and sustaining movements (Moore 1978). This last factor is crucial in understanding the agency underpinning the Gilets Jaunes and features on placards, banner, signs and vests at protests.

Les Beaufs are coming!

In comparison with the UK and the United States, French governments have been more selective in their attempts to introduce neoliberal policies (Amble 2003 2017). The Macron Presidency, sharing the symbolism, concepts and imagery of other young progressive neoliberal leaders such as Tony Blair, Justin Trudeau and Barak Obama, has been far more determined in its attempts to transform French society and economy in line with neoliberal precepts (Macron 2017). This has been aided by the 2017 landslide electoral victory of both Macron and his hastily formed populist party, *En Marche!*, a result distorted by a number of factors to give Macron the appearance of unprecedented popularity (Nossiter 2018). Neoliberal critics blamed previous governments' failures on what Anglo-American financial media like to describe as France's failing and inefficient statist economic and political system (Hoffmann 1964, 2000; Elliot 2017). Here was a much lauded "popular revolution" from above launched by a self-declared political outsider who would transform the political system and modernise the country (Macron 2017). In practice, as

critics have noted, this has meant following neoliberal precepts to make it more business friendly, to reduce employee rights, and dismantle France's social safety net.

As the President himself acknowledged in a public address after the national debate triggered by the Gilets Jaunes protests: "I asked myself: Should we stop everything that was done over the past two years? Did we take a wrong turn? I believe quite the opposite." The answer was not that he had erred, but simply that he had not moved fast enough in his reforms (Marin 2019; Rubin 2017; Habermas 2017). As President Macron said during the Presidential election campaign, "France is blocked by the self-serving tendencies of its elite... And I'll tell you a little secret: I know it, I was part of it" (Rose 2017). Macron's own embrace of populism as a critique of the French system is hardly mentioned at all in a generally supportive mainstream media. By contrast, when the Gilets Jaunes make similar comments about a corrupt elite-led system they are dismissed as part of a conspiracy theory.

Two years on, the originality of the Macron Presidency and its system-transforming promises appear far less persuasive, and the administration has been bedevilled by both financial and political corruption scandals of a kind familiar to French politics (Marlowe 2018). Again, and as with Occupy Wall Street, disappointment in the reality of a young progressive neoliberal political leader (Obama, Macron) has been a crucial factor in encouraging the Gilet Jaunes protests. Rather than cleaning up the system and bringing about beneficial social change, Macron has very swiftly revealed himself to be a continuation of the political establishment. By comparison, it is the Gilets Jaunes who appear to represent a profound challenge to the French political system with their call for a Sixth Republic. President Macron's ground-breaking *En Marche!* movement has been outmanoeuvred. Who, then, are the Gilets Jaunes and what do they stand for?

Gilets Jaunes En Marche!

To understand who they Gilets Jaunes are we can turn to the narrative of events that have taken place since November 2018. The Gilets Jaunes protest began on November 17, 2018, with more than 300,000 protestors across the country taking part in what was dubbed "Act I." Its origins are linked to two converging events: An online petition in May 2018 set up by Priscillia Ludosky and Eric Drouet protesting against fuel costs, which was followed in October by a Facebook page calling on French citizens to block roads as a protest against the fuel tax by wearing the "Yellow Vest" (Lichfield 2019). It has also emerged against the backdrop of wider social and industrial protests in France by teachers, nurses and high school students (Stangler 2018). All of these are directed against the extension of the market into areas of previously un-commodified social life (education, health, welfare). The initial Act I saw protestors across the country occupying roundabouts and seizing them as public spaces to talk, debate, and think through the purpose of

their protests (Halimi 2019). There was an initial suspicion and uncertainty on the part of those taking part, suspicion of being manipulated by the media, political parties and trade unions. The protests have emphasized independence and the local over the national in terms of organization, but very swiftly a series of demands and aims emerged which have helped link the protests nationally beyond simply an opposition to a fuel tax.

Spatially, the Gilets Jaunes are spread across France and have an important presence in rural areas and small towns. They cannot be viewed as simply a rural vs. urban social protest. Indeed, the geographical dispersal has shown it to be both a national and international protest, as the Yellow Vest symbol and idea has seeped across borders into countries across Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa (Delpirou 2018). Importantly, it has enjoyed the overwhelming support of the French population in opinion polls, 67%, which suggests that its impact resonates far beyond the presence of those attending weekly protests (Stangler 2018). In France, the symbolic significance of the Yellow Vest high-visibility jacket is that it serves as a uniform for every French citizen, as they are legally required for any car owner. As a banner in Lille on Saturday January nineteenth 2019 said: “When the people see red, the streets see yellow.” However, unlike other colour revolutions of the past twenty years, the Gilets Jaunes revolution is a call for social and economic justice rather than being nationalist in outlook (Delpirou 2018; Chouard 2019: 13-24). By way of contrast, and to illustrate the ambiguous nature of political symbols, in the UK the appearance of a very small Yellow Vest pro-Brexit group has been the work of the far right (Spooner 2019).

Who are they?

Rather than being a social movement (new or old) the Gilet Jaunes are best viewed as a progressive protest movement of patriotic and largely, but not exclusively, working-class citizens whose ideas and arguments have developed rapidly towards a coherent and far-reaching agenda calling for social justice. This patriotism is closer to ideas of Republicanism and the active role of the virtuous citizen than it is to nationalism. As the movement has evolved, so have its ideas, and the movement’s “Peoples Directives,” published on November 29, 2018, represents a programme to transform France and establish a new conception of what constitutes a good society. *Le Monde* described Gilets Jaunes demands as being on the far left of the French political spectrum (Chouard 2019:108-112; Tillet 2018).

The social composition of protests has been wide-ranging, including people from France’s ethnic minority communities. The Gilets Jaunes movement has already broadened its support base to build links with environmental groups, peace groups, LGBTQ groups, anti-racist campaigns, and unions (Descamps 2019; Graham 2019). The far-right has indeed been present at protests, as

liberal critics have noted. This is hardly surprising, however, in that the political party with the most loyal and committed supporters in France is the *National Rally* (formerly *National Front*) with a hard-core of around 25% of the total electorate (Stockemer 2017). It would be strange, then, if protests involving tens of thousands of French citizens did not include any from the far right. Yet, it is another thing to say that the agenda of the Gilet Jaunes reflects that presence. Indeed, a survey carried out by social scientists in France (*Le Monde* 2018; Chouard 2019) revealed that a majority (58%) identified with the left or far-left, while just 18% identified with the right or far-right. Common portrayals frame the movement as anti- or apolitical.

As a populist protest, however, the Gilets Jaunes have brought together people with radically different political outlooks. This complicates how we should understand the movement. As we will see, its ideas have evolved rapidly towards a progressive series of demands for social justice, placing them clearly on the progressive side of the spectrum of populist movements (Street 2018). The extent to which *all* Gilets Jaunes have come to accept this progressive agenda is not clear at this stage. Nonetheless, protestors continued to take part in weekly Acts after the publication of its statement of aims on November 29th.

Regarding social background, the survey of protesters revealed that a third were “employees,” and 14% were manual workers, while a quarter were unemployed, disabled, or retired. Another 15% were mid-level professionals or managers, and 10% were artisans, shopkeepers and small business owners. In terms of class background, the Gilet Jaunes are primarily French working-class on modest incomes, with the average declared monthly household income at €1700, 30% less than the income for all households (*Le Monde* 2018). More broadly, they can be categorised as the popular classes, incorporating different strata of the working and non-working poor, be they in manual or non-manual occupations, white collar jobs or artisans, alongside the unemployed, retired and disabled (Van der Walt 2016: 355; Guilluy 2014). The survey found a number of demands and ideas that clearly situate the Gilets Jaunes as a radical protest for social and economic justice (see table 1).

If the survey is a meaningful sample of Gilets Jaunes aspirations, then it is hard to see how these goals would fit easily with the agendas of the political right and far-right in France, who wish to preserve hierarchies in society and who remain firmly opposed to social and economic equality (Stockemer 2017; Declair 1999). While the appeal to national or popular sovereignty has great resonance with the far-right across Europe, the other items on the agenda, such as equality, popular control of politicians, and solidarity with the poor and marginalised groups in society, are hardly the themes of the political right, let alone the far-right. Of course, the far-right have a tradition of draping themselves in socialist rhetoric in order to attract working-class support, but in practice their agenda is antithetical to the idea of working-class emancipation and self-government of

Table 1. Key Gilets Jaunes demands for social and economic justice

Strongly progressive taxation
Better public transport and services
Abolition of the senate
Better pay for workers
Citizens Referendum Initiative
A 6 th Republic
An end to homelessness in France
MPs to earn the national average as a salary
Universal social security
Mass investment in sustainable transport
Creation of an environmentally sustainable society
The end of austerity policies
Increased support for the disabled
Increased welfare for the needy
Introduction of a maximum wage of €15000 per month
Rent control
Immediate end to closure of public infrastructural services e.g. post offices, train lines, schools and nurseries

Source: Dianara (2018)

communities and workplaces (Hayes 2014). The fact that these demands are not situated within a single, recognizable political ideology (socialism, communism, anarchism) backed by a political party is beside the point. Neither the French nor the Russian revolution was *caused* by a political party, and indeed in the latter case when the Bolsheviks took power (with popular support) they rapidly turned the weapons of the state against the very working-classes who had led the revolution (Aves 1996; Baron 2017). Thus, the Gilets Jaunes may have very good reasons for resisting the presence of political parties in their actions.

It is clear, then, that the agenda of the Gilets Jaunes cannot be met by the current government and President, or indeed by the mainstream political parties. Instead, the latter attempted to divide the movement by offering to have a “great national debate” around some, but not all, of the issues raised by the protests, as well as offering some small concessions on welfare benefits, though not on the €3.2 billion tax cuts for the rich. The debate lasted 2 months and was centred on meetings at town halls across France. It largely fell flat, and failed to demobilize the protests (Beardsley 2019; Free West Media 2019; Marin 2019).

If the initial actions and events of the Gilets Jaunes were based around occupying public spaces in which to talk and articulate their opposition to government policies, then it swiftly became an organized protest using a mixture of social media platforms and, crucially, local networks of protestors. In Lille, for example, organizing meetings took place weekly in the working-class district of Lomme. Anyone could attend and help prepare for the coming week’s

Act, taking place every Saturday. This has led to more orchestrated protests led by women dressed as *Marianne*, the goddess of liberty in the French Revolution, or by wheelchair users (Gallot 2018; Gerbaudo 2012: 40). In addition, more specific targets have been selected for protests including occupying motor way toll-booths to allow cars to pass through for free in protest of the privatisation and increasing costs of the road system, and blocking access to shopping centres next to motorways (Mimoun and Woolpert 2019). In the long run these tactics are hard to sustain, so the future of the movement is far from clear. Understandably over the course of 2019 numbers turning out for the weekly Acts declined with spikes in support for specific events such as May Day, the first anniversary of the Protests, and the beginning of the General Strike in December 2019.

Female Gilets Jaunes have placed themselves at the centre of opposition to government policies and account for 45% of participants. Indeed many protestors report that this is the first time they have ever protested (Dianara 2018). Notably working-class woman, usually less active in public life, are strongly represented in the movement and have organized women-only protest events (Lombard-Latune 2018; La Voix du Nord 2019; Fontaine and Pelerin 2018). Women have borne the brunt of cuts in social spending in terms of pay, poverty, care support and raising families. In the current era, it is women who have largely taken on the role of workers and carers, supporting ageing relatives where the state has retreated from its welfare obligations (Eurostat 2018; Giulluy 2019: 139). Walking with the Gilets Jaunes on Act XII in Lille it was apparent how working-class women protestors felt empowered by the act of being in the street and the centre of a protest where they could sing, dance, and mock the heavily armed police militias in a playful manner. They showed no fear of the state presence and the atmosphere was one of joy, defiance and celebration, with many Gilets Jaunes taking photos of themselves and each other, in apparent amazement at the fact that they were actually there at all. This sense of joy and empowerment is one noted in many similar protests and revolutionary moments, including on-going revolutions in the Sudan and Algeria. As Achcar observes this is a feeling that emerges when previously subject or marginal voices find themselves at the centre of public life (Achcar 2019). This is an important part of the reconstitution of the working-class across the core as women increasingly take on roles that cut across work and society and expand their presence in trade unions. Austerity leads to the hyper-exploitation of women across the world-system in terms off their expanded social roles and stagnant wages and benefits (Bassell and Emejulu, 2017; Gallot 2019).

The New Totalitarianism: Centrist Liberals lose their heads...

There have been important counter-narratives defining the Gilets Jaunes as being something quite different from what this analysis proposes. These ideological developments of the Gilets Jaunes

are hard to square with the condemnation of them as being anti-Semitic, politically far-right, and racist. This view is not supported by the national survey, which found that less than 2% of the Gilets Jaunes expressed anti-migrant sentiment.⁴ However, the important question here is to consider *why* the Gilets Jaunes have been viewed as being far-right or anti-Semitic, part of the wave of neo-totalitarians, given that the evidence makes it abundantly clear that they are not. There are two main answers to this: first, conceptual confusion over populism and second geocultural conflict.

Conceptual confusion over populism. As a concept, populism has proven to be protean if not undefinable. Populism is often viewed by its critics in particular as being one monolithic ideological entity comprised of: a distrust of elites and valorisation of the people; a mass movement led by a charismatic leader; a movement dominated by negative and irrational emotions which lead to xenophobia, support for violence and conflict; a contempt for democracy; an ethno-nationalist outlook; and a Manichean world-view (Toth and Demeter 2019).

There are, however, two problems with such lists of the characteristics of populism when applied to the Gilets Jaunes. The first is that only one of these categories, distrust of elites, applies to the Gilets Jaunes. Does this mean, therefore, that the Gilets Jaunes cannot be viewed as being a populist protest? Only if one accepts such a limited view of populism can this be the case. As has been stressed elsewhere, populist movements can be viewed as being part of the global reconstitution of both the political left and right (Street 2018; Wilkin 2018). In this respect the emergence of the Gilets Jaunes is much closer to conceptions of protest or social movements associated with the rise of modernity, rather than the later conception of New Social Movement Theory associated with post-industrial societies where class as a form of political identity was seen to have lost its significance (Conway 2017). The main list of characteristics of populism are more easily found in the populism of the political right than they are of the left. The second point is that the list of characteristics associated with populism (usually in a pejorative manner) can in fact be found in many of the mainstream liberal democratic parties across the core of the world-system. As noted, President Macron himself has drawn upon populist rhetoric to distinguish himself from previous governing French elites. Indeed, his *En Marche!* Political party can be viewed as a populist movement of ‘ordinary people’ against the established political party system. So there is clear conceptual slippage between what distinguishes populism from legitimate political ideologies.

Geocultural conflict & challenges to centrist liberalism. Centrist liberalism has been under threat since the end of the Cold War, as the numerous contradictions and crises it has generated have intensified. While centrist liberalism responded to the Great Depression with the emergence

⁴ Fernbach (2018); Chouard (2019).

of forms of Keynesianism, and to the crisis of profitability and working-class militancy in the 1970s with neoliberalism, it is now under intense pressure. Crucially, it has generated little by way of a new ideological shift in response to the Great Recession, and this period represents an interregnum in the world-system where dominant material and ideological structures have weakened, and where agency and the battle of ideas take on heightened importance (Schmidt and Thatcher 2014). Hence, since the end of the Cold War we have seen the emergence and increasing importance of both progressive and reactionary populist movements (Wilkin 2018). Understandably, those political parties and governing institutions in the core nation-states that have been committed to centrist liberalism view *all* populism as a threat to liberalism and democracy and treat it accordingly. This has seen the use of a range of rhetorical attacks on the reconstituted left and right as though they are simply the same totalitarian threat to liberal democracy. Thus, the Gilets Jaunes have been presented as being anti-democratic and anti-Semitic (Bock 2019b). There has been a concerted intellectual attack upon populism in general by those political and intellectual figures committed to centrist liberalism who view it as being at best a manifestation of what Le Bon called the “tyranny of the majority.”

In similar fashion, a range of intellectuals committed to centrist liberalism have made statements and issued manifestos denouncing populism in general, and the Gilets Jaunes in particular, as being the outcome of the actions of the Kremlin and the neo-Machiavellian President Putin (*Guardian* 2019). As critical analyses these attacks lack nuance or evidence and tend to rely on assertion and unsubstantiated charges. But as political rhetoric they are very effective in trying to protect the legitimacy of centrist liberalism from those that would challenge it. The attacks upon and smears of the Gilets Jaunes are more persuasively understood, then, as taking place not because the movement is opposed to democracy but because it is a threat to the inequalities of wealth, privilege and power for which centrist liberalism provides ideological justification.

As noted, the protestors have been able to stream actions live and record police violence to challenge the government narrative that many of the protestors are thugs and prone to acts of violence (Caelinnan 2019). While violent outbursts have been a part of protests, it has always been the police who carry and use the means of lethal force, including killing an elderly woman watching events unfold in Marseille from the balcony of her apartment during Act III (1st December 2018). Prominent banners at weekly protests now feature many of these victims as a symbol of the Gilets Jaunes opposition to the state, as well as calling for non-violent direct action. Luc Ferry, former Minister of Education and renowned intellectual, said of the police that “they should actually use their weapons for once, . . . , those thugs, those bastards from the far right and the far left or from the suburbs who come looking for a fight with the police” (Halimi and Rimbart 2019). Given the rate of injuries inflicted so far on Gilet Jaunes and bystanders of all ages, overwhelmingly non-violent protesters, this is a remarkable comment that says much about the

fears stoked by the Gilet Jaunes among sections of France's liberal intelligentsia who openly espouse violence against them.

Horizontalism: Organisation, Leadership and Structure

An important characteristic of the Gilets Jaunes that helps define who they are and what the movement means is reflected in the ways in which they organise and mobilise their activities. Among Gilets Jaunes there has been a deliberate attempt to downplay the idea that there are spokespeople or leaders of the movement, with those seeking to speak on behalf of the movement being subject to condemnation. In short, anyone who dons a Yellow Vest is a member of the protest movement, which leaves the nature of its social protest open to being easily distorted by sexist or racist comments by individuals, although such incidents are not unchallenged by other Gilets Jaunes (Bock 2019b). The abuse directed at the conservative figure, Alain Finkielkraut, is a good example of this, and it has been used to perpetuate the smear that the Gilet Jaunes is an anti-Semitic movement. The person detained by the police over this incident has been linked to the Jihadist Salafi movement, which may explain why he was even able to recognise Finkielkraut.⁵

Supporters and critics alike have noted the importance of 'horizontalism,' the idea that new social and protest movements are leaderless and non-hierarchical networks where agreement is based on consensus rather than majority voting (Sitrin 2007, 2012; Van der Walt 2016). As Paris-based organiser Tina de Sansonetti has said, "this is what is unique about our movement... We're seeing a horizontality we haven't experienced before in France" (Mimoun and Woolpert 2018). Nonetheless on December 6th, 8 people were selected to represent the movement in initial talks with the government about its resolution (Halimi 2019).

Horizontalism has roots in many of the progressive social movements that have emerged since the end of the Cold War, from the Zapatistas to the on-going revolution taking place in Rojava, Northern Syria. Indeed the Zapatista slogan "Ya Basta!" ("Enough is enough!") is a regular sign on Gilet Jaunes protests. This concept of horizontalism is strongly associated with forms of feminist and anarchist social thought (Graeber 2013).

⁵ Building on this theme of anti-Semitism and the Gilets Jaunes President Macron has repeatedly sought to cloak himself in the role of the 'defender' of France's Jewish population by introducing measures that would make anti-Zionism an anti-Semitic crime punishable by the state. This move has been strongly condemned by Maxime Benatouil, a leading member of the French-Jewish Union for Peace (UJFP) and an anti-Zionist, as an attempt to curb legitimate criticism of Israel's occupation of Palestine and ongoing attacks on Palestinians (Border 2019). G. Bensussan, 'Le spectre de l'antisémitisme hante les manifestations des "gilets jaunes"', *Le Monde* February 18th. [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/02/18/le-spectre-de-l-antisemitisme-hante-les-manifestations-des-gilets-jaunes_5424740_3232.html?xtmc=antisemitisme les gilet jaunes&xtcr=3](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/02/18/le-spectre-de-l-antisemitisme-hante-les-manifestations-des-gilets-jaunes_5424740_3232.html?xtmc=antisemitisme%20les%20gilet%20jaunes&xtcr=3) (last viewed February 28th 2019). D. Border, 'Interview with Maxime Benatouil'. *Jacobin* February 27th 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/macron-antisemitism-zionism-racism> (last viewed February 28th 2019).

Critics of horizontalism have argued that without leadership and hierarchy this leaves a movement that might dissipate and produce little of concrete good (Gerbaudo 2012; Roberts 2014: 176-177; Smith and Glidden 2012). In fact, the protests have already changed government policy by forcing the President to retreat on a number of measures. Whatever the limitations of horizontalism for its critics, for its supporters it is a way of preventing an elite or vanguard from taking over the movement and also of keeping it under democratic control. It is an attempt to create a different kind of democratic culture. To be clear, neither anarchist nor feminist social thought make the case for disorganization as a principle: that is largely a charge levelled by their critics. The issue is about the *means* by which organization and social change takes place. Historically this has taken either of two forms for antisystemic movements that have sought to challenge the dominant pillars of the modern world-system (e.g. working-class movements, the women's movement, environmental movements, anti-racist movements): hierarchical *or* horizontal (Van der Walt 2016; Wallerstein 2017).

Taking the hierarchical method of leadership and organization first, this has been led by groups who claim the mantle of authority to speak and act on behalf of their membership or supporters, sometimes in the form of revolutionary vanguards. The most obvious example here has been with Marxist parties claiming to act and speak on behalf of the working-class, but it could also include any hierarchical form of social movement organization. In this model, organization is directed by a leadership whose claim to authority rests upon superior knowledge, experience, skills, intellect and a democratic election process. Crucially, this authority is accepted by supporters and members of such movements as being legitimate.

The second model of leadership, organization, mobilization and social change is one in which social movements organize themselves democratically through systems that produce delegates who are ultimately under control of the membership or the community. Such a grass-roots based model lends itself towards decision-making by consensus, but it does not rule out the possibility of majority decision-making in some forms and on some occasions (Graeber 2013; Van der Walt 2016). Both models aspire to develop an organized social movement but suggest different means to achieve this. Neither implies a simple or straightforward way of achieving organization. What proponents of horizontalism will always stress is that the means by which social change is brought about will be embedded in the ends achieved: hierarchical means will produce hierarchical outcomes.

With regard to the question of leadership, this also can be distinguished in these two models. In the first, leadership is a *structural* outcome of the hierarchical nature of the movement. By contrast the second model is often termed "leaderless" (Castells 2015). It is important to note that this latter model has to contend with the reality that some actors will be more confident, inspiring, and directive than others. Does this therefore make them leaders? Not in the sense that is implied

by the first model. Particular individuals in social and protest movements may take on specific organizing, facilitating and mobilizing roles, but they have no *structural* authority over others. They cannot formally compel members or supporters; only inspire by ideas and/or example. This can still be viewed as a kind of leadership, but it is of a qualitatively different type to that established in the first model (Graeber 2013).

The Gilets Jaunes protests, as with others taking place in the world-system, is an attempt to transform the culture of democracy. Horizontalism and direct democracy requires time, energy and spaces where people can meet to talk and debate (Sitrin 2007: 49; Berry 2019). By contrast, representative democracy is well-suited to capitalism precisely because it reduces democracy to more limited and instrumental activity (Higley 2006; Graeber 2013).

Into the Great Unknown: What happens when Populism fails?

The Gilets Jaunes symbolise a profound challenge to the existing French political system. The movement has emerged in response to a series of crises across the core zone of the modern world-system. In this respect they are best understood as being part of an ongoing wave of anti-capitalist protests that have emerged since the terminal phase of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberalism (Ortiz et al 2013; Smith et al 2015; Robinson, 2014; Chase-Dunn and Niemeyer 2009). The Gilets Jaunes represent an opposition to the intensification of austerity and commodification that have deepened across the core during the Great Recession. To that end, it can be argued that if they were to disappear tomorrow they would most likely reappear again in one form or another, as the material conditions that have helped to incite them persist and deepen. Though their numbers have decreased markedly at weekly events the Gilets Jaunes remain a visible part of contemporary French political culture. The question is: what form would that reappearance take?

In terms of the meaning of the movement, I have challenged the idea that old political categories of right and left have been superseded in a post-ideological age. The appearance of the Gilets Jaunes and other progressive movements and protests around the world suggest that such a reading of the post-cold war era is both ahistoric and exaggerated (Van der Walt 2016). Those categories are currently being reconstituted by social and political movements across the world-system. The impact of the Gilets Jaunes already transcends the borders of the French polity, as the ideas of revolutionary movements have always done, and if it were to become more successful in realising its ambitions, its potential for galvanising social change across Europe is great. Thus, yellow vest protests have emerged from Iran to Taiwan and Spain. The Gilets Jaunes are a protest of the working and non-working poor, largely working class but not exclusively so. And the protest is directed at the impact of neoliberalism on social life, particularly the extension of the market

and the imposition of austerity and transfer of wealth from poor to rich that have shaped the world-system since the mid-1970s.

On January 24th 2019 some Gilets Jaunes announced that they would be running a slate of candidates for the EU elections in 2019. The impact of this upon the movement was limited, and many Gilets Jaunes denounced it as a concession to the system they want to change. However, the political scientist Olivier Costa has said that this was inevitable, and echoing the elite discourse that helps to normalize representative democracy, he went on to note that the Gilets Jaunes would have to succumb to the “rules of the game” because “no Gilets Jaunes leaders have the knowledge, qualities or resources to become a strong [political] leader ... They’re not good at talking or writing, they’re not rich like Trump, they don’t have the network or the connections” (Williamson 2019). The assumptions here are those that help underpin representative democracy: ordinary people are simply incapable of managing public affairs, complex modern societies, or their own workplaces. This analysis fits with the neoliberal view of a post-ideological age in which the larger questions of what constitutes a good society are replaced by the technical need for a de-politicized and ‘competent’ government and leadership (Dommett 2014; Pastorella 2016).

The Gilets Jaunes movement could evolve in a number of directions including simply running out of energy to sustain the weekly protests. The politicization of a large swathe of the French working-class population could no doubt be drawn back into the rules of the existing political field. Equally, and given the high stakes involved in this game, it could help revitalize the left across France and the core zone.

But what if the movement is deemed to have failed by many of its supporters, active or otherwise? Having created a space in which the often invisible and disempowered layers of revitalised French popular classes can protest and dominate the public agenda, some sympathetic critics have argued that it might lead despairing protestors towards the far-right (Giulluy 2019:141). Rather than being a positive challenge to neoliberalism the Gilets Jaunes might inadvertently have strengthened the very forces that are politically opposed to some of the movement’s key aims. This is of course a possibility, but it needs to be tempered by noting that this is not a problem unique to the Gilet Jaunes. If the Gilets Jaunes do indeed fragment along political lines, then it will be a mark of the limitations of populism to change political consciousness in a progressive direction and of the contemporary left to build solidarity with them.

The Gilets Jaunes appear to refute the statement of Marine Le Pen that the battle of the 21st century is between nationalists and neoliberal globalization. Like Macron, Le Pen has an interest in framing the debate as being one between either her party *or* the President’s, her conception of nationalism and the President’s claim to a universal and cosmopolitan neoliberal world-view. Neither ethno-nationalism nor centrist liberalism in its contemporary neoliberal form offer a way for the Gilets Jaunes to realise their demands. Mark Fisher, echoing Slavoj Zizek and Frederic

Jameson, noted that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher 2009: 1). That judgment looks increasingly under challenge in the current phase of the world-system. An alternative global vision is the implicit promise of progressive populist movements around the world-system, one which draws upon the best of the libertarian socialist tradition and rejects socialism's statist and authoritarian past (Prichard, Kinna et al 2017). The Gilets Jaunes have articulated these concepts, however clumsily. For such antisystemic movements to advance would indeed represent a progressive challenge to the foundations of the modern world-system.

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