

‘The *gilets jaunes* are unstoppable’

Christophe Guilluy on the cultural divide driving the yellow vests.

The *gilets jaunes* (yellow vest) movement has rattled the French establishment. For several months, crowds ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands have been taking to the streets every weekend across the whole of [France](#). They have had enormous success, extracting major concessions from the government. They continue to march.

Back in 2014, geographer Christopher Guilluy’s study of *la France périphérique* (peripheral France) caused a media sensation. It drew attention to the economic, cultural and political exclusion of the working classes, most of whom now live outside the major cities. It highlighted the conditions that would later give rise to the yellow-vest phenomenon. Guilluy has developed on these themes in his recent books, *No Society* and *The Twilight of the Elite: Prosperity, the Periphery and the Future of France*.

spiked caught up with Guilluy to get his view on the causes and consequences of the yellow-vest movement.

spiked: What exactly do you mean by ‘peripheral France’?

Christophe Guilluy: ‘Peripheral France’ is about the geographic distribution of the working classes across France. Fifteen years ago, I noticed that the majority of working-class people actually live very far away from the major globalised cities – far from Paris, Lyon and Toulouse, and also very far from London and New York.

Technically, our globalised economic model performs well. It produces a lot of wealth. But it doesn’t need the majority of the population to function. It has no real need for the manual workers, labourers and even small-business owners outside of the big cities. Paris creates enough wealth for the whole of France, and London does the same in Britain. But you cannot build a society around this. The *gilets jaunes* is a revolt of the working classes who live in these places.

They tend to be people in work, but who don’t earn very much, between 1000€ and 2000€ per month. Some of them are very poor if they are unemployed. Others were once middle-class. What they all have in common is that they live in areas where there is hardly any work left. They know that even if they have a job today, they could lose it tomorrow and they won’t find anything else.

spiked: What is the role of culture in the yellow-vest movement?

Guilluy: Not only does peripheral France fare badly in the modern economy, it is also culturally misunderstood by the elite. The yellow-vest movement is a truly 21st-century movement in that it is cultural as well as political. Cultural validation is extremely important in our era.

One illustration of this cultural divide is that most modern, progressive social movements and protests are quickly endorsed by celebrities, actors, the media and the intellectuals. But none of them approve of the *gilets jaunes*. Their emergence has caused a kind of psychological shock to the cultural establishment. It is exactly the same shock that the British elites experienced with the Brexit vote and that they are still experiencing now, three years later.

The Brexit vote had a lot to do with culture, too, I think. It was more than just the question of leaving the EU. Many voters wanted to remind the political class that they exist. That's what French people are using the *gilets jaunes* for – to say *we exist*. We are seeing the same phenomenon in populist revolts across the world.

spiked: How have the working-classes come to be excluded?

Guilluy: All the growth and dynamism is in the major cities, but people cannot just move there. The cities are inaccessible, particularly thanks to mounting housing costs. The big cities today are like medieval citadels. It is like we are going back to the city-states of the Middle Ages. Funnily enough, Paris is going to start charging people for entry, just like the excise duties you used to have to pay to enter a town in the Middle Ages.

The cities themselves have become very unequal, too. The Parisian economy needs executives and qualified professionals. It also needs workers, predominantly immigrants, for the construction industry and catering et cetera. Business relies on this very specific demographic mix. The problem is that 'the people' outside of this still exist. In fact, 'Peripheral France' actually encompasses the majority of French people.

spiked: What role has the liberal metropolitan elite played in this?

Guilluy: We have a new bourgeoisie, but because they are very cool and progressive, it creates the impression that there is no class conflict anymore. It is really difficult to oppose the hipsters when they say they care about the poor and about minorities.

But actually, they are very much complicit in relegating the working classes to the sidelines. Not only do they benefit enormously from the globalised economy, but they have also produced a dominant cultural discourse which ostracises working-class people. Think of the 'deplorables' evoked by Hillary Clinton. There is a similar view of the working class in France and Britain. They are looked upon as if they are some kind of Amazonian tribe. The problem for the elites is that it is a very big tribe.

The middle-class reaction to the yellow vests has been telling. Immediately, the protesters were denounced as xenophobes, anti-Semites and homophobes. The elites present themselves as anti-fascist and anti-racist but this is merely a way of defending their class interests. It is the only argument they can muster to defend their status, but it is not working anymore.

Now the elites are afraid. For the first time, there is a movement which cannot be controlled through the normal political mechanisms. The *gilets jaunes* didn't emerge from the trade unions or the political parties. It cannot be stopped. There is no 'off' button. Either the intelligentsia will be forced to properly acknowledge the existence of these people, or they will have to opt for a kind of soft totalitarianism.

A lot has been made of the fact that the yellow vests' demands vary a great deal. But above all, it's a demand for democracy. Fundamentally, they are democrats – they want to be taken seriously and they want to be integrated into the economic order.

spiked: How can we begin to address these demands?

Guilluy: First of all, the bourgeoisie needs a cultural revolution, particularly in universities and in the media. They need to stop insulting the working class, to stop thinking of all the *gilets jaunes* as imbeciles.

Cultural respect is fundamental: there will be no economic or political integration until there is cultural integration. Then, of course, we need to think differently about the economy. That means dispensing with neoliberal dogma. We need to think beyond Paris, London and New York.

Christophe Guilluy was talking to Fraser Myers.