

Forgotten France Rises Up

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France's yellow vests, coming together in informally organised groups, took just one month to challenge policies on taxation, education, transport and environment, and make the Macron government back down.

December 15, place de l'Opéra, Paris. Three yellow vests read out an address 'to the French people and the president of the Republic, **Emmanuel Macron**' saying:

'This movement belongs to no one and to everyone. It gives voice to a people who for 40 years have been dispossessed of everything that enabled them to believe in their future and their greatness.'

The anger provoked by a fuel tax produced, within a month, a wider diagnosis of what ails society and democracy. Mass movements that bring together people with minimal organisation encourage rapid politicisation, which explains why 'the people' have discovered that they are 'dispossessed of their future' a year after electing as president a man who boasts he swept aside the two parties that alternated in power for 40 years.

Macron has come unstuck. As did previous wunderkinder just as young, smiling and modern: **Laurent Fabius, Tony Blair, Matteo Renzi**. The liberal bourgeoisie are hugely disappointed. His French presidential election win in 2017 — whether it was a miracle or a divine surprise — had given them hope that France had become a haven of tranquillity in a troubled West. When Macron was crowned (to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*), *The Economist*, that standard-bearer for the views of the international ruling class, put him on its front cover, grinning as he walked on water.

But the sea has swallowed up Macron, too sure of his own instincts and too contemptuous of other people's economic plight. Social distress is generally only a backdrop to an election campaign, used to explain the choice of those who vote the wrong way. But when old angers build and new ones are stirred up without consideration for those enduring them, then, as the new interior minister Christophe Castaner put it (1), the 'monster' can spring out of its box. And then, anything becomes possible.

France's amnesia about the history of the left explains why there have been so few comparisons between the yellow vest movement and the strikes of 1936, during the Popular Front, which prompted similar elite surprise at the workers' living conditions and their demand to be treated with dignity. Philosopher and campaigner Simone Weil wrote: 'All those who are strangers to this life of slavery are incapable of understanding what has

proved decisive in this situation. In this movement it is not about this or that particular demand, however important ... After always having submitted, endured everything, accepted everything in silence for months and years, it is about daring to straighten up, to stand up. To take your turn to speak' (2).

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