

The Yellow Vests

Alejandro Teitelbaum

The mobilisation of the yellow vests raised expectations and rejections and also multiple interpretations. Among the latter, some deem that it is a new way of expressing the conflict between those who have more and those who have less, given the inability to assume it on the part of traditional organisations: unions, "left" parties, etc.

Relative to the inability of traditional organisations to assume, organise and bring to a successful conclusion the struggles, first the Fordism, then the Welfare State and now the new "management" have been grinding off the level of consciousness of the workers, which has been reflected for a long time in trade union organisations and in the multicoloured arch of the "lefts".

Lars Svendsen writes: [the workers] "... ended up accepting the salary relationship and the resulting division of labour. Contrary to what revolutionary Marxism expected, they stopped questioning the capitalist paradigm, contenting themselves with the more modest ambition to improve their condition within the system. That also meant that their hope for freedom and personal fulfilment laid in their role as consumers. Their main objective was to increase their salaries in order to consume more (Lars Svendsen, *Le travail, Gagner sa vie, à quel prix? Editions Autrement, Paris, September 2013, page 140*).

To Svendsen's reflection it can be added that the trade union slogan of "the preservation of the sources of work" includes the armaments industry (the origin of gigantic benefits for its owners and the great powers and the system's lifeline in times of crisis) where its workers "earn a living" and many other people "earn their death". The old slogan expressed somewhat lyrically: "to transform the swords into plows" has been forgotten. According to the last five-year report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the United States, Russia, France, Germany and China control three quarters of the market for arms sales in the world. Arms sales between 2013 and 2017 were 10% higher than those registered between 2008 and 2012; at the price of dislodged states, destroyed cities, hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of displaced people. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-47490873>.

Henry Ford, at the start of the twentieth century, introduced into his factories Taylorism or the "scientific organisation of work" or chain work. This stultifying work exhausted workers, many of whom chose to leave it. Faced with an extremely high turnover rate, Ford found the solution: to increase wages vertically to \$ 5 per day, which he could do without decreasing the benefits given the huge increase in productivity and the steep decline in production cost that resulted from the introduction of chain work. The new wages in Ford's factories allowed its workers to become consumers, including the cars Ford manufactured. The workers, who did not feel at all interested in a repetitive job that left no room for any initiative on their part, recovered outside of work their human condition (or believed to recover it) as consumers, thanks to the relatively high wages that they perceived.

This situation became generalised in the most industrialised countries, especially after the Second World War and in a very circumscribed and temporary way in some peripheral countries. It is what was called "the Welfare State". "The state of Well-being is not, as one often hears it said, a state that fills the gaps of the capitalist system or heals the wounds inflicted by the system through social benefits. The welfare state is set as an imperative to maintain a growth rate, whatever it may be, provided

it is positive, and to distribute compensation in a way that always secures a check and balance with the salary relationship.
" (Dominique Meda, *Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition*, Ed. Aubier, Paris, 1995, page 135).

The Welfare State ended more or less abruptly with the fall of the capitalist profit rate and the consequent fall in real wages. To give new impetus to the capitalist economy and reverse the declining trend in the rate of profits, the application of new technology (robotics, electronics, computing) to industry and services began to become widespread.

The introduction of new technologies required another form of worker participation in production, which could no longer be reduced to that of mere automaton. The exploitation system had to be modified and made flawless, because new techniques, including computer science, required different levels of training and knowledge, which led to the blurring of the boundaries between manual and intellectual work.

This is how "management" is born in its different variants, all tending essentially to make wage-earners feel involved —along with the bosses— in a common effort for the welfare of all. The new "management" points to human resources psychology. Personnel managers (or Human Resources Directors) will talk about "creativity" and "team spirit", about "personal achievement through work", that work can —and should be— entertaining, ("work is fun") etc. and manuals on the topic are published. Even "funsultants" or "funcilitors" are hired to introduce into the minds of workers the idea that work is entertaining, that it is like a game ("gamification").

If the employees are asked if they are satisfied in their work, many will answer assent, that if they did not work their lives would be meaningless. And this is true even for those who perform the simplest tasks.

In the Fordist chain the company seizes the body of the worker, with the new "management" it seizes his spirit. Svendsen writes: "The motivations and objectives of the employee and the organisation are presumed to be in perfect harmony: The "new management" penetrates the soul of each employee. Instead of imposing discipline on him from the outside, it motivates him from the inside."

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, German poet and essayist, wrote in the 1960s: "Material exploitation must be hidden behind non-material exploitation and obtain the consensus of individuals through new means. The accumulation of political power serves as a screen for the accumulation of wealth. It not only takes over the ability to work, but the ability to judge and pronounce. The exploitation is not suppressed, but the consciousness of it is". (*Culture ou mise en condition? Collection 10/18, Paris 1973, pp. 18-19*).

Marcuse wrote in the Preface of *The One-Dimensional Man* (1954) that "it is all the more difficult to transcend this way of life as soon as satisfaction increases as a function of the mass of merchandise". This (the instinctive satisfaction), according to Marcuse, "helps the system to perpetuate itself".

A part of the "left" even went so far as to say that with the yellow vests the "final struggle" was beginning to overthrow the system.

The dominant classes with their centuries-old experience of exercising power made —with doubts and vacillations— what they had to do: —they announced some negligible economic concessions (temporary suspension of the tax increase on gasoline and the promise of increasing 100 euros to those who earn the minimum wage (the latter promise is largely fallacious see <https://www.marianne.net/economie/smic-100-euros-augmentation-prime-d-activite-pour-qui>); —repressed the demonstrators with unprecedented brutality, with methods inherited from the repression against the popular revolts in the former French colonies; —discredited the movement with the help of the marginal groups and anarchists who went to the demonstrations to break, set fire and some to steal, from provocateurs infiltrated by the repressive apparatus of the State, and with the terrible image provided by the participation in the demonstrations of small fascist and racist groups; which was fully exploited by the Government and the media. And, by the way, the excessive violence of the police repression also played a provocative role that incited the reaction, sometimes violent, of the peaceful demonstrators.

A defence bullet launcher (DBL) is, according to the terminology of the French administration, a "non-lethal weapon" that uses a projectile designed to deform on impact and thus limit the risk of penetration into the body, but with a power of neutralisation enough to deter or arrest an individual. According to certain sources, the DBL system can present traumatic effects at close range and can cause serious injuries that can be irreversible or even deadly.

In France, this type of weapon, which is not used in any other country in Europe, has been adopted by police forces as an intermediate weapon between the rattle and a lethal weapon. Flash-Balls have caused many injuries, some serious. Between 2004 and 2013 the use of DBL has caused a death and the loss of an eye suffered by 23 people. The balance of the repression to the yellow vests with DBL is 22 losses of one eye, five hands torn off and one death.

The Council of Europe and the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations have called on the French Government to stop the use of DBL.

To these exhortations Macron —"humanitarian" in Venezuela and arms salesman to the bloodthirsty dictatorship in Egypt— responded by justifying the use of the DBL-Flash-Ball. (See Backslide in (in) human rights in France denounced to the UN https://www.alainet.org/en/article/198635?utm_source=email&utm_campaign=alain-amlatina).

We think that a correct characterisation of this movement is lacking. And we believe that it is because the appropriate method has not been used. What is consistent in analysing in detail the social classes and strata that participate in the movement, their level of consciousness, their underlying spontaneous ideologies, etc.; framing this analysis in a solid knowledge of the socioeconomic structures of the country and the relationship of forces actually existing.

It is the method that Marx advocated. In point 3 (The method of political economy) of his Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx wrote:

When examining a given country from the standpoint of political economy, we begin with its population, the division of the population into classes, town and country, the sea, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, prices, etc.

It would seem to be the proper thing to start with the real and concrete elements, with the actual preconditions, e.g., to start in the sphere of economy with population, which forms the basis and the subject of the whole social process of production. Closer consideration shows, however, that this is wrong. Population is an abstraction if, for instance, one disregards the classes of which it is composed.

These classes are in turn remain empty terms if one does not know the factors on which they depend, e.g., wage-labour, capital, and so on. These presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage-labour, without value, money, price, etc. If one were to take population as the point of departure, it would be a very vague notion of a complex whole and through closer definition one would arrive analytically at increasingly simple concepts; from imaginary concrete terms one would move to more and more tenuous abstractions until one reached the most simple definitions. From there it would be necessary to make the journey again in the opposite direction until one arrived once more at the concept of population, which is this time not a vague notion of a whole, but a totality comprising many determinations and relations. The first course is the historical one taken by political economy at its inception. The seventeenth-century economists, for example, always took as their starting point the living organism, the population, the nation, the State, several States, etc., but analysis led them always in the end to the discovery of a few decisive abstract, general relations, such as division of labour, money, and value. When these separate factors were more or less clearly deduced and established, economic systems were evolved which from simple concepts, such as labour, division of labour, demand, exchange-value, advanced to categories like State, international exchange and world market.

Marx formulates the same idea in more general terms, applicable not only to economic-social research, but to research in any field that purports to be rigorous:

The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination. The first procedure attenuates meaningful images to abstract definitions, the second leads from abstract definitions by way of reasoning to the reproduction of the concrete situation. Hegel accordingly conceived the illusory idea that the real world is the result of thinking which causes its own synthesis, its own deepening and its own movement; whereas the method of advancing from the abstract to the concrete is simply the way in which thinking assimilates the concrete and reproduces it as a concrete mental category. (Marx, Introduction to the critique of political economy, 1857, point 3, (The method of political economy).

And for this we must overcome the simplification that divides society "between those who have the most and those who have least" or the one preferred by right and left populisms between "those above and those below" and based on the basic observation that society is composed of classes objectively and irreducibly antagonistic: on the one hand the owners of the means of production and change and on the other the producers of goods and services that generate with their work the profit of the former. This results in the two fundamental contradictions of capitalism —impossible to solve within the system: 1) the one existing between production which is social and appropriation which is private, thus generating the increasing inequalities between social classes.¹ 2) the contradiction between the growing development of the productive forces (now it is said that we are in the fourth technological revolution: artificial intelligence) and the existing relations of production. A contradiction that inevitably generates unemployment (higher productivity: less need for human work time), that capitalism cannot solve because it cannot drastically reduce the working day and redistribute income without calling into question the system itself.

The AI as a business has unleashed fierce competition between groups such as Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple (the so-called GAFA). According to PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) one of the "big four" of the world, of audit and "consulting" for large companies, the IA from now until 2030 could contribute 15,7 billion dollars to the world economy (6,6 billion increase in productivity and 9 trillion100 billion for its effect on consumption). Always according to PwC, the AI will increase the GDP of China by 26%, the US by 14.5% and Europe by 9.9%.

It is symptomatic that the big consultants make predictions in terms of GDP and benefits, and not of social repercussions, since they work for the big owners of the different forms of AI, eager for profit and protected by patents and briefs.

But other voices are manifested to alert - from different perspectives - about the repercussions in terms of employment. With a common denominator in which everyone agrees: IT, electronics and AI are going to occupy more and more places of work hitherto carried out by human beings, from the least qualified to the relatively qualified. And even certain qualified jobs.

There are those who predict a huge loss of jobs and, as a consequence, a high rate of unemployment among people with few or medium-sized skills. On the other hand, others argue that new technologies cause on the one hand the disappearance of existing jobs but on the other generate new jobs, which makes it possible to maintain the usual employment rates.

But the truth is that, on the one hand, unemployment increases and will continue to increase on a trend, although with pendular rates. That is to say with periods of strong increase followed by periods of certain decrease.

¹ Most of the benefit resulting from the increase in productivity increases the capitalist income and a minimum part is incorporated into the salary, although not always. This is how a constant of the capitalist system is the deepening of inequality in the distribution of the product.

But what has been rising steadily for decades is the exploitation of employees and lately in a dizzying and ruthless way, as can be seen with several signs: cutting labour legislation, decreasing the purchasing power of employees and retirees, increasing the intensity of work and of the working day, increase in the age of retirement, etc.

Hegel already wrote about it more than 200 years ago: *Man reduces work for the whole, not for individuals, for which, on the contrary, it increases it, because the more work becomes mechanical, the less value it has and the more man must work (...)* The reduction of the value of work is proportional to the increase in the productivity of labour (...) factories and manufactures base their existence on the misery of a class (GF Hegel, Realphilosophie, 1805-6).

In other words: the fundamental and permanent conflicts of the current system are what condition and determine in a certain way other conflicts between the antagonistic classes as well as inside them.

Coming back to the yellow vests, its social composition is heterogeneous, but basically mostly low middle class: artisans, small traders and farmers. There is little participation of workers and the population of the most disadvantaged boroughs. That is, the sectors most systematically hit by social inequalities.²

This may explain why the main demand generated by the movement was the low tax on gasoline, for the revaluation of wages and unemployment were absent from the claims at the beginning. Subsequently, during the course of the movement, other claims were incorporated. Needless to say that the ideological arch of the yellow vests is very vast and lacking in coherence. This is how different approaches emerge between the yellow vests and some have taken the path of running for the elections.

In short: with the "help" of the Government the movement tends to be diluted and disappear due to the lack of a sufficient social base in the subordinated classes and of ideological coherence. And now Macron is ready to give the coup de grace calling to stop the demonstrations and speaking against what he calls "the democracy of the mutiny". The same has happened with the "Arab springs" and other "revolutions": ephemeral fires.

The fundamental and secondary conflicts cannot be solved without having as the objective to radically change the current social order, which is a titanic and long-term task. First of all, because the dominant classes completely have at their service the institutions of the State: Government, Parliament, Justice, Police, Armed Forces and international organisations: the UN, the WTO, the IMF, the European Union, etc. and its armed arms: NATO, the so-called "special forces" (paramilitary formations and others) and the fundamentalist and terrorist organisations and groups; the latter actual pawns, occasionally or permanent, voluntary or involuntary, of these ruling classes. And they also have at their disposal the so-called "civil society": the big capital, the media controlled by the former, the part of the intelligentsia and the different social organisations at the service of the system, working together with the State but outside of it as apparatuses of economic domination, ideological hegemony and social control.

This is how there are strategies that are designed to deal with specific real conflicts (relating to gender, environmental pollution, the organisation of education and its contents, those referring to the practices and policies of pharmaceutical monopolies and public health, conflicts between the right to information and its manipulation by media oligopolies,

² Âge, profession, opinions politiques...Qui sont les «gilets jaunes»? <https://www.msn.com/fr-fr/actualite/france/%C3%A2ge-profession-opinions-politiquesqui-sont-les-%C2%ABgilets-jaunes%C2%BB/ar-BBUI6tv>

conflicts between leaders and led ones in all types of organisations, those generated by representative democracy in terminal crisis, etc.) that sometimes evolve into campaigns and demonstrations to vindicate the rights of groups that are particularly stakeholders, but that, because they are not being articulated within the global questioning of the system and the need to end it, they end up fading away or being digested by the system.

In other words, social and group conflicts are multiple and varied but to give them a path to a resolution that overcomes their plight, it is necessary to be formulated within the struggles to resolve the main contradiction inherent to the capitalist system.³

This task is all the more difficult because the so-called lefts, which supposedly would have to be the "organic intellectuals" of the oppressed and exploited classes, are mostly contaminated by different variants —some of them with a critical, rebellious or "transgressor" garb— of the dominant cultures and ideologies. The rigorous analysis of social facts advocated by Marx, can help to open the way to a new society without exploiters or exploited, without oppressed or oppressors as prefigured by Marx in the Grundrisse: *"The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them, and adds that the measure of the value in the communist society happens to be not truly the quantity of work time, but the amount of free time: The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time.*

Useful links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Inside Capitalism
- The Role of the Working Class in the Struggle Against Transnational Corporations
- Capitalism Sucks Our Blood and Kills Us
- To Radically Change the Prevailing Social Order

More on the subject from the author:

- El papel desempeñado por las ideas y culturas dominantes en la preservación del orden vigente. Editorial Dunken, Buenos Aires, 2015. Publicado en Colombia en 2017 (Editorial La Carreta) con el título El colapso del progresismo y el desvarío de las izquierdas. Se encuentra también en internet aquí.
- Explotación capitalista: tiempos modernos y tiempos actuales: <https://www.nodo50.org/ceprid/spip.php?article1796>
- La armadura del capitalismo. Editorial Icaria, España, 2010.

³ When we speak of "capitalist system" we do not refer only to its economic-financial aspects, but to the whole of a system of domination, with its economic-financial but also political, military, social, ideological, cultural, communicational and "informational" components.

- ❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.
- ❖ **About the author:** Alejandro Teitelbaum is a Lawyer, Universidad de Buenos Aires, and a Postgraduate in International Economic Relations at the Institute of Social and Economic Development, Université Paris I. The author worked for many years on the issue of human rights in the realm of global corporations and other business enterprises. As the former Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office in Geneva, for the American Association of Jurists, he spent time toiling with the bureaucracies of the UN and member States in pursuit of an international legal framework that would harness business activity so that it would stop violating a wide array of human rights in its sphere of influence, as is customarily the case today. As such, he witnessed how, time and time again, the bureaucracies succumbed to the will of the leading economic powers, who were adamant at maintaining the preeminence of corporate interest over their responsibility for their infringement on human rights.
- ❖ **Quote this paper as:** Alejandro Teitelbaum: The Yellow Vests – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, April 2019.
- ❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2019. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemer.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemer.org