



Interview with Eric Walberg and Rodney Shakespeare, author of *Binary Economics: the new paradigm* (1999)

1) *What is the major problem of the French yellow vests that has pushed them into the streets?*

This protest started not in Paris, but among motorists across the country, especially farmers, whose livelihood is on the line, with no easy option to reduce fuel consumption to produce and transport food to the hungry, newly ecologically conscious city folk. “Our organizations support the demands of tax and social justice brought by the movement of yellow vests. They call for demonstrations Saturday, December 15, for social justice and tax, for a real democracy, for equal rights, for a true ecological transition.”

2) *How can social justice be assessed in France? Is everyone treated the same in this country?*

France is in many ways a model country in today's world. It is now in its fifth republic, each one ending in collapse and rebirth, now a mix of parliamentary and presidential rule, since WWII, a statist social democracy, guaranteeing health, education and a minimum welfare, but with little cohesion. This is social justice on the cheap, there no longer being a strong socialist force to fight the dismantling of what social justice there is.

While the yellow vests are more middle class, white, they represent a common anger. The large Arab and African minority (12%) has grown, since 2004, when 200,000 immigrants entered the country annually, one in three from Africa. France's larger Arab and African population seethes, frustrated by a racist norm, which increasingly harsh neoliberal policies makes worse.

France prides itself on its secularism, banning full face cover for women, and even headscarves in schools, but this targeting of Muslims merely emphasizes that non-Muslims have nothing to bind them together except latent racism. The embrace of neoliberalism has meant greater inequality, exacerbating the problem, stoking resentment which erupts but is never really addressed.

3) *How do you see the fate of this unrest?*

The past month of yellow vest protests is winding down, with 8 deaths so far and 200 arrests. The angry uprising across the nation arguably is more widespread and representative than the May 1968 rebellion. That was more a cultural protest, inspired by students calling for the overthrow of capitalism, joined by workers, with their staid unions in tow. Capitalism, more equitable in its earlier postwar phase, was not overthrown and the general strike petered out after 7 weeks, leaving little lasting evidence of change.

The current movement shows the economic despair that the French feel, calling for a political leader who will dare to overturn the present neoliberal course. Sadly, there seems little possibility for France to lead the way to a solution, with the West in its current rightwing drift. A Trump or Bolsonaro could come to power in the next presidential election in 2122, the National Rally leader Marie Le Pen the most likely candidate. But while this would mean a halt to immigration from Africa, at least the welfare policies in place would continue, as National Rally must be populist to get elected. However, a radical move away from the current neoliberalism is not on NR's agenda.

4) *Would it spread to other corners of Europe?*

The movement of unrest recalls the 2010 protests in Greece against the EU, which elected a protest government, Siriza, which immediately caved in to UE diktat. Greece had no real support within the EU, and is still in recession, having buckling to Central Bank pressure, consolidating neoliberal policies, and selling off public property.

The yellow vests, however, are gaining support across Europe, with British and Belgians spontaneously holding their own yellow vest protests. Ironically, the yellow vest became the protest symbol in France, as it is required by law for all motorists to carry in case of breakdown. As societies break down under their present yoke, ordinary citizens will turn to whatever is handy to call attention to their plight. This outburst is an augur of what is to come as Europe lurches along, under the glaring eye of the American empire. They are a catalyst for the widespread malaise.

5) *What is their demand and what would be the fate of Macron?*

France's smooth talking, elegant President Macron lives on a different planet from simple French citizens. He cancelled the wealth tax soon after coming to power in 2017, already defining himself as "the president of the rich". He tried to paper over this crack by fashioning himself as the world's wise statesman, solving the world's problems single-handed, moving from talks on Syria to Ukraine, calling out Trump and Putin, trying to show his evenhandedness. His critics call him wishy-washy, out of his depth, always returning to the American-led fold, despite attempts to woo, to act as a wise mediator with America's latest bete noire, be it Russia, Iran, Canada, China.

While he plays his violin, Paris (and not only) burns. It is hard to image that protesters, i.e., most of France, will be mollified by his backtracking on fuel prices, wages, education 'reforms'. Macron refused to reinstate a wealth tax, showing where his real interests lie. His offer of a slight increase in the minimum wage has mere added to the protesters' wrath. Not yet halfway through his five-year term, Macron is already a lame duck. His attempt to fashion himself as a world statesman will now haunt him.

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