

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

France's Yellow Vests Reveal a Crisis of Mobility in All Its Forms

By **Michael Kimmelman**

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SENLIS, France — After more than a month of furious, antigovernment demonstrations across France, it is easy to forget that a gasoline tax set all this off.

A few cents per liter at the pump. A pebble in the sea of the French economy. A step to address climate change, according to President Emmanuel Macron.

Of course, that's not how millions of workers who depend on their cars saw it.

Mobility is the story of globalization and its inequities. Mobility means more than trains, planes and automobiles, after all. It also includes social and economic mobility — being too poor to afford a car, being rich enough to transfer money out of the country. These are all inextricably linked. Weeks of protests by the Yellow Vests have made that clear.

Many of these protesters, predominantly white working poor and middle class people who scrape by on their paychecks and pensions, live in what the author Christophe Guilluy has called “peripheral France.” The term is meant to imply both a state of being and the thousands of small, struggling cities, towns and rural districts beyond the inner-ring suburbs of places like Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon or Lille.

“As small businesses have been dying in these smaller cities and towns, people find themselves forced to seek jobs elsewhere and to shop even for basic goods in malls,” said Alexis Spire, a French sociologist. “They need cars to survive, because regional trains and buses have declined or no longer serve them. Once you begin to unpack the Yellow Vest phenomenon, the uprising is a lot about mobility.”

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An empty train platform during a strike in April to protest a planned overhaul SNCF, the French rail

operator. The company is at least \$56 billion in debt. Christophe Simon/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Experts have been drawing parallels between the Yellow Vests and the social rifts exposed by Donald J. Trump's election in the United States and Britain's plan to leave the European Union. But there are also larger trends at work in France, involving the evolution of cities, the impact of cars, and the geography of race and class — trends rooted in the postwar years.

In 1947, the book "Paris and the French Desert," by a young geographer named Jean-François Gravier, helped inspire Charles de Gaulle to reorganize the country — decentralizing resources, redistributing industry, promoting regional cities and creating new towns linked by a nationwide web of publicly funded rail lines.

Modern, decentralized France spread a promise of prosperity and mobility. For decades, the promise was kept. Until it wasn't.

As a handful of big cities thrived with globalization, France's regional governments, saddled with more financial burdens, became caught in a vicious cycle. Capital disappeared along with factories and jobs. Revenues shrank, debts mounted and infrastructure declined.

Among the hardest hit services were the regional railways, run by the French rail company, SNCF, which overwhelmingly invested in high-speed trains that served the big, prospering cities and is now \$56 billion in debt. With service atrophying, people need their cars.



A protest near Marseille this month. Sylvain Thomas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The gasoline tax “exposed a profound cultural fracture,” said Olivier Galland, a director at the National Center for Scientific Research.

On a recent morning, I visited a highway roundabout at Senlis, in the northern region of Oise, where two dozen Yellow Vest protesters huddled around a trash-can fire, sipping cups of tomato soup. Passing drivers honked in sympathy.

It's no accident that the movement takes its name from the Day-Glo vests that French motorists are required to keep in their vehicles. Like the fuel tax, the vests are a burden imposed on drivers by the state, and, for a population that has felt ignored, they also are an ideal, ready-made tool for getting noticed.

“The government makes us pay for these ourselves,” Valérie Lemaire, one of the protesters at the roundabout, said, pointing to her jacket and stamping her feet in the freezing mud. “We pay, pay, pay.”

Oise is peripheral France. It includes Senlis, a pretty, prosperous bedroom community. But it is also an area where deindustrialization and inadequate public transit have taken a toll.



The protests have forced President Emmanuel Macron, center, to backtrack on some tax increases and offer incentives for the poorest workers. Geoffroy Van Der Hasselt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Just across the road from the Yellow Vest encampment is a new Amazon depot, which offers warehouse jobs. This area used to have better-paying factories. Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport — less than an hour's drive to the south on the highway,

depending on traffic — is the major employer these days. Creil, 15 minutes from Senlis, is a poor city of 35,000 with a largely vacant downtown and blocks of public housing. It is home to many baggage handlers and airport security guards.

There's no direct train to the airport, and buses are infrequent. So people have to drive if they don't want to trek into the middle of Paris and then back out again. Avoiding the slower regional roads is also costly, even without factoring in gas, because the French government ceded authority over hefty highway tolls to a private company some years ago.

A tollbooth is visible from the roundabout. The Yellow Vest protesters stormed it in November — allowing traffic through without paying. “We paid to build the roads with our taxes,” Christophe Bartel, a 47-year-old protester, told me. “Now we're supposed to pay private companies a fortune to use our own roads? It is a scandal. We're fed up.”

The protesters also blockaded a nearby mall that has been drawing business from city centers like Creil's.

Claude Letranchant, 59, had scrawled a message on the back of his yellow vest: “Ecology is only an alibi,” referring to the climate argument for the fuel tax.



Housing prices have skyrocketed in big cities like Paris, driving working people to areas where public transport is much worse. Benoit Tessier/Reuters

“I am a strong environmentalist,” Mr. Letranchant said. “Everybody here is.” He waved toward the other protesters warming themselves by the fire. They nodded.

“What Macron said about the fuel tax was only political,” Mr. Letranchant insisted. “We don’t care for politics, only for each other.”

There’s no question Mr. Macron has made himself a convenient piñata for the protesters. They saw him cut taxes for companies and the rich. They saw airlines, spewing tons of carbon to move globe-trotters around, paying no tax for fuel. They saw themselves being strapped with a disconnected president’s commitment to meet European Union debt standards.

And they have stopped seeing themselves embraced by French intellectuals and heroized in French movies and by labor unions, whose membership has shrunk dramatically. They found themselves out of sight and out of mind in Paris.

Which is why it is also impossible to separate the fury over the fuel tax from housing prices, which have skyrocketed in big cities like Paris, driving working people to areas where home prices are lower but public transport much worse.



A tollbooth near Marseille that was set ablaze by Yellow Vest protesters. In many cases, the French government ceded authority over highway tolls to a private company.

Gerard Julien/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

As Mr. Guilluy put it: “Mobility is liberty expressed through geography.”

“Working families in small cities and towns who used to send their children to jobs and universities in big cities like Paris don’t have the money to do that now,” he said. “A city like Paris prides itself on being an open society, but to these people it has come to seem more like a medieval castle, a place closed to the disenfranchised, who are made to feel invisible.”

At the shabby train station in Creil, I came across Henri Djonga and his 2-year-old son, Andi, swaddled in a hooded coat. Every morning, Mr. Djonga said, he takes a 5 a.m. train to Paris to work at a minimum-wage job moving boxes. He used to live some miles away in Compiègne, he said, but that required an extra two hours’ commute each day, so he and his family settled in Creil, at greater expense.

“Trains are frequently delayed,” he told me. “The system is not reliable. But it’s better than driving.”

He still pays to own a car because his wife and children can’t buy groceries or get to school or pick him up from the station without one. So he supports the Yellow Vests, he said, adding, “We all do in Creil.”

I asked how much of a difference it made that Mr. Macron has postponed the fuel tax and promised an extra 100 euros a month — about \$115 — for those earning minimum wage.

Mr. Djonga shrugged. “Not enough,” he said and headed off with Andi toward the shuttered streets.

Pierre Desorgues contributed reporting.

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