

A PLAY WITH NO END

What the Gilets Jaunes really want

By Christopher Ketcham



When I caught up with the Gilets Jaunes on March 2, near the Jardin du Ranelagh, they were moving in such a mass through the streets that all traffic had come to a halt. The residents of Passy, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Paris, stood agape and apart and afraid. Many of the shops and businesses along the route of the march, which that day crossed seven and a

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half miles of the city, were shuttered for the occasion, the proprietors fearful of the volatile crowd, who mostly hailed from outside Paris and were considered a rabble of invaders.

Among the marchers' goals were disrupting business as usual, halting commerce, spreading disorder, and, in doing all of these, making themselves heard. They had been in the streets every Saturday since the first Gilets Jaunes action on November 17, 2018, when almost three hundred thousand citizens gathered across France in protest of taxes and fiscal

reforms they felt unfairly burdened the poor, the working class, retirees, pensioners, and the unemployed. On two Saturdays in December, as the movement escalated, they had rallied by the thousands in Paris and, in an eruption of terrific vandalism, caused millions of dollars of property damage in the world's most expensive city. On December 1, demonstrators had rampaged through Paris's luxury districts: on the Champs-Élysées, Avenue Hoche, Opéra, on the Rue de Rivoli, at Place Saint-Augustin, and on Boulevard Haussmann, shattering



storefront windows, looting, and setting cars on fire. At Place Vendôme, home of world-famous jewelry boutiques, the Gilets piled up plastic Christmas trees and set them aflame, declaring that Père Noël, father of consumption, had come with a vengeance. In the neighborhood around Place de l'Étoile, mansions were vandalized and burned. These were the redoubts of the despised haute bourgeoisie, who lounged in ease while the rest of France languished, and riot was the answer to that inequity.

There had been much violence and much suffering since December, and not just in Paris. Citizens in Rouen, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Lyon, Nîmes, Nantes, and Nice bombarded cops with hammers, ball bearings, rocks, and cobblestones torn from the streets. The more serious among the protesters threw Molotov cocktails that set the cops on fire. There were pitched battles against the *forces de l'ordre* that ended with the demonstrators bloodied and driven back under a wave of truncheons. Hundreds of properties were ransacked and set on fire, with at least 2,200 protesters injured, some of them losing eyes, jaws, hands, and feet from the rubber bullets, tear-gas rounds, and dispersal grenades that police officers and gendarmes fired in enormous volumes to scatter the crowds. By mid-December, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, faced

with civil unrest exceeding any since the student protests of 1968, declared a state of national emergency. "The people allude to the French Revolution," a professor of political science at Paris's Sciences Po told the *New York Times*: "We have to cut off the head of the king."

Now on March 2, the Gilets Jaunes, clothed in their yellow vests, the reflective safety gear that motorists in France are required to carry and that had become the group's mark of solidarity, streamed along the Rue du Ranelagh. They chanted "Paris, wake up!" and a call-and-response of "Are you tired? No, we are not tired!" A few carried the French tricolor, the national flag with roots in the revolution of 1789, which they held high on long poles. Some periodically launched into a bellowing, guttural, basso rendition of the "Marseillaise," as the Gilets did whenever they gathered. "Listen to the sound in the fields," they sang,

*The howling of these fearsome soldiers
They are coming into our midst
To cut the throats of your sons and
consorts.*

I was racing to join them when I passed two exquisitely dressed women who stared with worried, petulant faces as they walked their dogs in the park. One of them lived on the other side of the Rue du Ranelagh and said she dared not approach the mob. "France's elites have not felt such fear in half a

century," *Le Monde diplomatique*, a left-leaning monthly newspaper, had editorialized in February, the month I arrived in Paris, "and it's not the usual fear of losing an election, failing to 'reform,' or seeing their shares slide on the stock market, but fear of insurrection, revolt, and loss of power."

By the spring, the Gilets Jaunes had morphed into a movement that broadly eclipsed their initial intent, which was to protest a modest increase in fuel taxes imposed in 2018 by the Macron government. The new

carbon tax—nine cents more per liter of diesel, four cents more per liter of gasoline—may have been the proximate cause that galvanized the Gilets, but the worsening conditions of what the protesters called "*l'injustice fiscale*" provided the powder for an explosion.

The context was the government's widening embrace of the doctrines of neoliberalism. A nation decried by its governing elites as creaking, slow-growth, debt-ridden, and unemployment-plagued—out of step with the free-wheeling global economy—was to be liberated at last from the constraints of the social-welfare state that had been in place since the 1940s. Jump-starting the machine of growth meant, of course, cutting social spending—it meant, that is, a program of austerity for those most in need of help. The cornerstones of the peculiarly stalwart French sense of *égalité* and *fraternité* were to be loosened and perhaps eventually dissolved. This, after all, was what the European Union and the International Monetary Fund demanded of member states for the greater good of capital flow.

Elected in 2017, Emmanuel Macron—a youthful and imperious former investment banker at Rothschild, where he had amassed considerable wealth—enacted a program that amounted to the most extensive overhaul of the systems of welfare, taxation, and regulation in modern French history. Macron abolished a long-standing tax on assets above \$1.5 million, replac-

ing it with a more modest property tax that exempted other forms of wealth. He reduced government support for university students and for low-income housing, and he made it easier for businesses to fire employees. He pushed for the privatization of highways and railways and airports. At the same time, he oversaw continuing cuts to public transit, public hospitals, and public schools, along with the closure of maternity wards, childcare centers, and post offices in already underserved areas, primarily in rural, semirural, and what was called “peri-urban” France, the struggling belts of development surrounding the more prosperous cities.

Granted, Macron was simply expanding and accelerating the investor-friendly reforms of his predecessor, the centrist Socialist François Hollande, under whom Macron had served as minister of the economy and who had ended his own presidency with a record low approval rating of 4 percent. Part of what drove the Gilets to agitation, to the state of what they called *ras-le-bol*—a peculiarly French expression of exasperation, nearly untranslatable, that means something like “the bowl is filled”—is that the parties of the putative left in recent years appeared indistinguishable from those of the right. Wherever French voters had turned, somehow there was still a neoliberal lording over them in the Élysée Palace, favoring the diktats of the European Union, the forces of unregulated markets, the juggernaut of globalization.

Then came the carbon tax. Macron implemented it to curb the nation’s emissions, part of his intention “to make our planet great again.” His phrasing purposely mocked Donald Trump’s climate-change denialism, and in the eyes of the international community it framed Macron as a heroic progressive at the vanguard of the most important issue of our time. At home, however, Macron’s tax seemed to place the burden of ecological responsibility on the classes

least able to bear it: those in the poorest parts of France, outside the big cities, who depended more than ever on their cars for transport in places where rail and bus services were disappearing under the regime of austerity and whose village centers—not so long ago places of boulangeries, boucheries, patisseries, cafés, brasseries, and bars—had been hollowed out by multinationals and e-commerce.

Meanwhile, Paris made out fine, its exclusivity such that a mere 7 percent

MACRON’S CARBON TAX PLACED THE BURDEN OF ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY ON THOSE LEAST ABLE TO BEAR IT

of new homeowners in the city each year now come from the working class. It was not lost on the protesters that the poor and the rich have very different carbon footprints. I heard the same complaint from Gilets repeatedly: “The rich, they are the ones taking the airplanes. They are the ones consuming more.” The wealthiest 10 percent of French citizens emit some seventeen metric tons of carbon per capita, according to a 2015 Oxfam study, while

the poorest 50 percent emit less than five. (In the United States, the disparity is even more pronounced, with the top 10 percent emitting fifty metric tons per capita and the bottom 50 percent emitting eight.) The hypocrisy seen to be embedded in the Macron carbon tax, more than any other factor, roused to action the Gilets whom I interviewed. This fact pointed toward a concrete reality underlying the inchoate passion of the movement, which was that if you want to deal with climate change globally you need first to topple the regimes of the rich locally.

During a March 16 protest along the Champs-Élysées—the eighteenth Saturday in a row on which the Gilets had been at it, and a day of extraordinary vandalism eclipsed only by the violence of early December—a Gilet named Claude Josset, sixty-four years old, a factory mechanic from the suburbs of Paris who oversaw the production of concrete, wore a smile on his face as he explained that “the rich have a problem before them now.”

His fellow protesters, in one of the many melees that day, had attempted to break the police cordon that held back the crowd from heading toward the Place de la Concorde and the nearby Élysée Palace, the official home of



President Macron. Explosions in the distance shook our ears, and the “Marseillaise” sounded out through plumes of tear gas. A surge against the police sought to open the way to Concorde. I joined it, and I was hit with the gas and fled. Josset asked me whether I was okay.

“We will hold the Champs as a strategic point of blockade,” he told me. He wore a yellow vest and a newsboy cap, and he had glittering eyes. “Look around you: this is the avenue of the rich. It is symbolic to hold it. But our message is not just here. It must be worldwide. It’s on the world level that we must change things. The rich are in every country. They have billions upon billions, and they always want more. We cannot always have more on our little planet. We fight for human value, so that all people can live with dignity. And for that we have to share.”

I asked Josset about the policies he hoped to put in place with the weekly disruptions. He suggested that I read the movement’s demands, published in leaflets and online. Among other things, the *Gilets* called for a reinstatement of the tax on the superrich; regulation and heavy taxation of monopolistic tech interests (the GAFAs, as shorthand in French with an air of contempt: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple); lower taxes on small businesses and individual proprietors; more funding for public schools, hospitals, childcare; more public transit; limits on executive compensation; higher minimum wages and unemployment payouts; a countrywide transition from fossil fuels through progressive measures, in which the rich pay for the transition; and much else that ranged as far as a call for the toppling of the Fifth Republic, a rewriting of the constitution, and, if necessary, “Frexit” from the E.U.

The *Gilets* also demanded a radical reform of the legislative process. Mass popular referenda, held at regular intervals, would annul laws considered inimical to the public interest and, presumably, enact laws for the good of all the people. These “*referendums d’initiative citoyennes*,” or R.I.C., would be used to eject from power, as if with the swoop of a guillotine, hated elected officials such as Emmanuel Macron. The R.I.C. would be a program of extreme direct democracy.



None of these proposals are what come immediately to mind when most people think of the *Gilets Jaunes*. In February, after three months of protests, Serge Halimi, the editor in chief of *Le Monde diplomatique*, surveyed for readers the preponderance of French media commentary on the movement and found it to be seething with contempt. The *Gilets* comprised a “hate-filled minority,” said *Marianne*, a Paris weekly, and a horde of “losers” who were “consumed by resentment as though by lice,” according to *Le Point*, another weekly. “Yellow vests, will stupidity win?” asked a *Le Point* editorialist. They were “troublesome Poujadist hicks,” said a journalist at *Libération*.¹ They were “barbarians” and a “hooded mob,” according to *Le Figaro*, which quoted a constitutional expert who inveighed against the “reversion to a primitive form of class struggle.” Luc Ferry, a prominent French philosopher and political scientist, stated that the police “should actually use their weapons for once” against “these thugs, these bastards . . . from the suburbs who come looking for a fight.”

This contempt was coupled with falsehoods. The *Gilets*, it was said, were merely a vehicle for Marine Le Pen’s right-wing National Front (recently re-

branded as the *Rassemblement National*, or National Rally), whose supporters’ primary concern was to make France great again by oppressing or deporting the country’s 5.7 million Muslims. The *Gilets* wanted gays oppressed as well, the public was informed, along with Jews, along with anyone who failed to meet the criteria of an idealized Gallic identity the flag of which the *Gilets* were purported to be carrying.

“In times when social groups crystallize and there is undisguised class struggle,” Halimi wrote,

everyone has to choose sides. The center ground disappears. And even the most liberal, educated, and distinguished people drop any pretense of peaceful coexistence. . . . That is what the middle class has done when faced with the *Gilets Jaunes*. Its usual spokespeople, who carefully maintain the appearance of a plurality of opinion when times are calm, have unanimously compared protesters to racists, anti-Semites, homophobes, plotters, and troublemakers. . . . A whole social universe has banded together, from the Greens to the remnants of the Socialist Party, from the French Democratic Confederation of Labour to the presenters on France Inter’s morning show.

American media followed the lead of their colleagues in France, hewing to the narrative of country-bumpkin savages gone berserk. Reporting for *The New Republic*, Alexander Hurst called

¹ Poujadism briefly flourished in the 1950s, when Pierre Poujade, a shopkeeper in rural France who sold books and stationery, organized tax-protesting small-business owners.



the Gilets “ugly” and “illiberal,” their rise “inseparable from far-right politics.” Hurst purported to unveil the “Anti-Semitic Heart of the Yellow Vest Movement,” the proof being a few disparate incidents of protesters cursing Jews in the street or making Nazi salutes, behavior that somehow was to define a movement involving hundreds of thousands of people. Adam Nossiter at the *New York Times*, writing in December, opted for a portrait of Gilets in the down-and-out town of Guéret, in central France, where the “acidic ... novels by a famous native son, the anti-Semitic 20th-century writer Marcel Jouhandeau” had accustomed the residents of Guéret “to being mocked as the epitome of provincial backwardness.” Nossiter characterized the Gilets with sly innuendo: they were all of them “the descendants of those who inspired Jouhandeau’s characters.” The *Times*’ editorial board exercised its discernment with a laughably inapt description of the Gilets as the “cousins” of “the Americans who voted for Donald Trump, and the Poles, Hungarians and Italians who elected populist, anti-democratic governments.”

In three weeks of interviewing scores of Gilets chosen at random in the streets of Paris, in other cities such as Rouen, and in small towns around the capital, I found not one who fit this profile—not one supporter of the National Rally or Marine Le Pen, not one who mentioned Jews, or

expressed hatred of immigrants or Muslims, or whose ideas of governance could be remotely described as “illiberal.” When I mentioned Donald Trump, what I got in response, from those who bothered to follow U.S. politics, was spitting invective coupled with disgust at “stupid Americans” for having elected him.²

Among the Gilets I met in Paris was a twenty-nine-year-old priest named Cyrgue Dessauce, of the Communauté Aïn Karem, a Catholic parish in the city, who wore leather sandals and a wooden cross around his neck and held at his stomach a framed portrait of the mother of Christ. “This is a movement that defends the poor,” he told me, “that demands the government serve the common good and not serve the economy.” I met a fifty-three-year-old woman named Nathalie Konik, a seasonal worker who was unemployed when we spoke, who carried a *djembe* and, to the beat of the drum, called out a plea for “the 140,000 homeless people across France, who we don’t see in the capital since they sleep in our forests, by streams, in the woods. I am outraged at the sight of

²Make of this man-on-the-street survey what you will. It is not meant to be definitive. Halimi interviewed Gilets in the streets of Paris early on and told me he did meet Le Pen supporters who “do not necessarily like to admit it.” In the recent European Parliament elections, a third of self-described Gilets Jaunes supporters voted for Le Pen’s slate.

these families sleeping in the forest! One would have thought that it came out of Zola’s tales!” On the Champs-Élysées I met a bespectacled thirteen-year-old named Louis Pines, who wore on his yellow vest a badge that read THE POLITICIAN THINKS OF THE NEXT ELECTION, THE STATESMAN THINKS OF THE NEXT GENERATION. His friend Romann Ramfal, a seventeen-year-old whose mother had emigrated from Mauritius, told me, “We see our parents struggling every day. That’s why we are Gilets Jaunes.” A pale sixty-one-year-old blonde named Nelly Urbanik proffered a leaflet that described the “scandal” of the planned privatization of the Paris airports. A dashing handsome twenty-year-old business student named Romain Choquet-Hubert told me that “this is the people against the elites. For us, liberalism is finished in France.” He stood before a wall of police like an animal unleashed, barking insults, challenging them to attack, laughing at their masked faces—“Your cowardly masks! What a shameful disgusting embarrassment you amount to, servants of Macron!”—and then pulled me aside and on his smartphone swiped to find a chart of French voting profiles. Fifty-four percent of people employed as police officers voted for Le Pen in the last presidential election. “You see the racists, the fascists,” he told me. “It’s the police.”

In April, following the “Assembly of Assemblies,” a meeting in Saint-Nazaire of the regional representatives of the Gilets, the movement officially announced its intention to force France “to abandon capitalism” and “end the expropriation of the Living.” Yannick Jadot, an environmental activist and Gilets supporter who in 2009 was elected as a French representative to the European Parliament, summed up the thinking in an interview with Agence France-Presse: “The climate explosion, and the explosion of social inequality, are two symptoms of the same model of development that harms the environment just as it harms men and women.” The April *appel* invited the French people, with the specter of climate disaster foremost in mind, “to create together, by all means necessary, a new grassroots social-ecological movement.”

So why does the picture of the *Gilets Jaunes* as far-right xenophobes persist? The French establishment's slandering of the *Gilets*, according to Serge Halimi, was entirely in service of class interests. The middle and upper classes had closed ranks around Macron and against the movement beginning in December, when polls showed continuing popular support for the *Gilets* despite their weekly disruptions. "Because the bourgeoisie didn't know where this would go," Halimi told me. "They saw an upsurge of spontaneous actors that were unfamiliar and frightening, and they came to believe that Macron was the only thing that stood between them and the mob. They were truly afraid that support of a violent revolt would lead at the very least to economic chaos."

Related to this fear, Halimi told me, "was a desire to tar or debase the revolutionary political-economic component with an undesirable social component." The *Gilets* were not only racist, Jew-hating, gay-bashing, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and nationalistic, but also so ignorant and illiterate that they were unfit for the rigors of the global economy. Halimi cited Socialist Party luminary Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who in a 2002 book had laid out the lines of demarcation between those who would lead France in the age of globalization and those who would not. Among the former, said Strauss-Kahn, who heavily influenced Macron's inner circle of advisers, were "salaried workers, savvy, informed, and educated, who form the backbone of our society. They assure its stability, because of their attachment to the 'market economy.'" As for "the least well-off group, alas, one cannot always expect peaceful participation in a parliamentary democracy."

For American journalists, the misconstruing of the *Gilets* may have been due to the attempt to shoehorn them into the American political spectrum, but for the French, especially the country's elites, the *Gilets* bore a troubling resemblance to the *sansculottes* of the revolution, who also got their name for their choice of clothing. The *sansculottes* were "a movement of the laboring poor, small craftsmen, shopkeepers, artisans, tiny entrepreneurs," wrote the historian Eric Hobsbawm, and they too

sought an "egalitarian and libertarian democracy, localized and direct." They "provided the main striking-force of the revolution—the actual demonstrators, rioters, constructors of barricades." Hobsbawm posited that the *sansculottes*, driven by "hostility to the rich," innovated a new model of social change:

direct action or rioting, the smashing of machines, shops or the houses of the rich.... [S]uch direct action by otherwise politically immature men and women could turn into a decisive force, especially if it occurred in capital cities or other politically sensitive spots.

As it happens, the ideologues who rose to power in 1793 on the backs of the *sansculottes*, inaugurating the

WHEN POLLS SHOWED POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE GILETS, THE MIDDLE AND UPPER CLASSES CLOSED RANKS AROUND MACRON

Reign of Terror—among them, Maximilien Robespierre, Georges Danton, and Jean-Paul Marat, the leading figures who directed the Committee of Public Safety's guillotining of 17,000 citizens—offered the first hazy outline of what was to become the social-welfare system under threat today. "Society is obliged to provide for the subsistence of all its members, either by procuring work for them or by assuring the means of existence to those who are unable to work," wrote Robespierre, a lawyer, in his "Proposed Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen." Marat, a journalist prone to "mad calls for mob violence," as Will and Ariel Durant wrote in their history of the period, declared the need for massive wealth redistribution, free and universal public schooling, and "an assured subsistence" for the poor and the unemployed, including "the wherewithal to feed, lodge and clothe themselves suitably, provision for attendance in sickness and old age, and for bringing up children." If these things were not given freely, warned the leadership of the Terror, then the poor had the right to take them by force, using the power of riot.

The mob that had been unleashed was an ugly, vicious, blood-soaked creature. At the charging of the Bastille in July 1789—the event of July 14 that France commemorates as its most hallowed national holiday—the rioters, seizing rifles, cannons, and gunpowder, decapitated the fort commander, piked his head, and paraded it through the streets. By August the uprising that had spread across the country was "indiscriminate in its fury," according to the Durants. There were "countless assassinations of lords or rich bourgeois," and everywhere aristocrats who had abandoned their homes encountered "spontaneous anarchy." A deputy to the National Assembly reported that "property of all kinds is a prey to the most criminal violence; on all sides châteaux are being burned, convents destroyed." At the Abbey of Murbach in Alsace, the peasants who had worked the surrounding land "burned its library, carried off its plate and linen, uncorked its wine casks, drank what they could, and let the remainder flow down the drain." In September 1792, as a royalist army converged on Paris to restore Louis XVI to power, the *sansculottes*, their fury fanned by Marat's editorials, descended on the priests, aristocrats, and royalists who had been imprisoned by the thousands as sympathizers of counterrevolution. The world would not be free, as the credo of the day advised, until the last king was strangled with the intestines of the last priest. At the Carmelite convent and the Abbaye jail in Paris, the crowd killed the priests, after summary judgment, with swords, knives, and clubs. At another prison in the city, the Princesse de Lamballe, "once very rich and very beautiful," a beloved friend of Marie Antoinette, was beheaded, her body mutilated, her heart torn out and eaten.

On Saturday, March 16, an estimated 10,000 people gathered on the Champs-Élysées, spreading such chaos that French media afterward declared it "the Saturday of too much." The protesters included Claude Josset; a retiree in her late sixties named Marie-Thérèse Marchon, who carried the tricolor on a pole; the

enraged business student Romain Choquet-Hubert; a fifty-year-old quality-control technician for the French aeronautics company Safran named Mark Lafont; a twenty-three-year-old unemployed woman named Léa Beauvais, who was a volunteer medic tasked with attending to the wounded; and a professional dancer in her late forties named Caroline Alriq, from Bordeaux, whose grandfather had fought in the Resistance during World War II and who had a habit of declaring a *collaborateur* anyone who conceded to neoliberalism in France. "It's been five months that I've hardly slept," Alriq told me. "I've put my all into this movement. I do it for my grandfather at the very least. Most French were not like him. Most French were silent collaborators." Every one of these people, and almost every person I met during the protest on the Champs-Élysées that day, lived outside Paris. There were no leaders to whom they pointed for reference or whom they championed for office, no charismatic figure who spoke for them, and, unlike participants in the protests and strikes typically mounted in France, they espoused no party affiliation. They were leaderless, anarchistic, a mass of individuals acting together—and the only way to understand the whole was to understand each of them.

By noon, the crowd had been cordoned by police so that they could not move toward the Place de la Concorde or the Élysée Palace at the eastern end of the Champs. I was standing near the cordon as the line of riot cops—faceless, masked, armored—stared down the Gilets. A terrific explosion nearby resounded in my eardrums—it was a firework, which the protesters often tossed at cops and elsewhere, lit to spread confusion. There was a massing of thousands of people who chanted "Let us pass!" Suddenly, as if shot from a cannon, the crowd launched into the wall of police, whose defensive line broke like a twig, the officers falling to the ground, and a flood of humanity was let loose. The police mounted a furious counterattack with tear gas, their batons swinging and their shields slamming into the crowd, which was sent scattering back the way it came.

I was caught in the mad panic, pushed against a wall, and briefly suffo-

cated. My throat closed when the gas hit, but I wore a balaclava and goggles and a bandanna over my face, and I escaped the worst of it. Those who were less fortunate, unprotected, were temporarily blinded, howling, clutching one another, arms out, skin inflamed, snot pouring from noses, some with foam bubbling at their lips. Marie-Thérèse Marchon, carrying her tricolor, wailing hysterically, repeated over and over, "We continue! We continue! We continue!" I saw an old woman nearby, about the same age as Marchon, beaten with truncheons. A boyish man with big smiling eyes—he looked to be no older than eighteen—turned to me and said, "Do not be afraid." He unwrapped his own flag, within which a cobblestone lay nestled. Moments later, with a screechy yawp, he unleashed it at the police.

Now there was a lull, as if a sudden exhaustion had overcome the combatants, and, like a river reversing direction, people turned and proceeded slowly west, up the avenue. This was the pattern all the day long: skirmishes, gassings, and grenadings, the Gilets repulsed at one spot only to rally again and attack at another. There were more chants, "Anti-anti-cap-i-ta-lism" and "Down with Macron!," and the ever-repeated chorus of the "Marseillaise." I met Mark Lafont, the Safran employee, who lived in Montmorency, a suburb of Paris, and who told me, "We are in a financial dictatorship. I am here to topple it." Somewhere in the crowd were his mother and father, both in their seventies, and he worried for them. I joined Lafont as he headed west, toward the Arc de Triomphe, where in the distance rose plumes of more tear gas. I could hear the explosions of grenades and fireworks. I looked away and Lafont was gone. Along the avenue there was a carnival atmosphere, street-fair-like, the Gilets holding sway, sitting on curbs, standing in knots, talking, smoking, conspiring, swilling beer, hooting the war cry of "ah-oo, ah-oo," or pondering with looks of dazed exhaustion.

The sun emerged from racing clouds and lit the avenue. Gilets with sweat on their brows diligently dug up cobbles or chipped fresh stone projectiles from the façades of buildings. At



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irregular intervals they had built barricades—chairs snatched from restaurants, pieces of shattered wooden planters (the plants torn out, the soil scattered), rubber mats stolen from outdoor cafés—and set them on fire, the smoke thick and black, blotting out the sun and sickening to inhale. I passed several burned-out news kiosks, the conflagrations thirty feet high. One of the blazes caught a streetlamp, which exploded, and a crowd of hundreds watched the dance of the flames with a weird reverent silence. (Why, I asked myself, do they destroy the kiosks, those redoubts of small proprietors, people of their own class, who might have been natural allies, who a day later would go on French television, standing before the ruins of their businesses, to express their loathing for the movement? I thought it shameful, stupid, a sign of the mob lashing out, mindless.)

Onward up the avenue I went, where at the Étoile, under the Arc de Triomphe, more battles unfolded. Black-bloc anarchists, clad in gas masks and helmets, led the charge, joined by Gilets who released a rain of cobblestones that crackled on the armor of the riot cops. Molotov cocktails fell on the police and exploded, dousing them in flame. Elsewhere, wielding hammers and pieces of steel pipe and uprooted street signs, the mob smashed windows of the Celio boutique, purveyor of fashionable men's clothing. Shirts and jackets and pants rose in the air like a fountain. They looted the Swarovski jewelry store, its blue boxes scattered in the street by the hundreds, emptied of watches, bracelets, rings, earrings, and brooches. (A Gilet I talked with later said he laughed when he read that the blue Swarovski box is "timeless," according to the company's literature, and that each one "contains a little bit of magic, a sparkling piece of jewelry that can make us feel loved and extraordinary.") They attacked Longchamp, the high-end handbag retailer, and Hugo Boss, the clothier, and Eric Bompard, the "soul of cashmere," and Omega, the luxury Swiss watch manufacturer, the windows shattered, naked mannequins tossed in the street and dismembered, the merchandise looted or stomped or torn to rags. The

glass screens of the A.T.M.s of HSBC were splintered from the blows of hammers. Fouquet's, brasserie of the super-rich where Nicolas Sarkozy, the center-right president of France from 2007 to 2012, celebrated his election victory, was ransacked and immolated. (The sociologists Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot in a 2010 book described Sarkozy's tenure as "an oligarchy, a government of the rich, for the rich.") By the afternoon, when the *pompiers* put out the fire and the posh brasserie was reduced to an ashen wreck, the Gilets gawked at their accomplishment and cracked jokes. "It's such a shame—where are we going to eat tonight?" "I'll take a fried Sarkozy, please, with a burnt Macron." A sixty-year-old woman named Michele Fabiano, who worked with handicapped children in public schools, told me, with proud disdain, "I won't cry for Fouquet's."

Another battle erupted, at the corner of Rue Balzac. A trumpet sounded, an air horn blew, someone beat a drum, veils of tear gas blotted out the sun, and ashes from the flaming kiosks and burning barricades fell on our heads. The crowd attacked with fragments of metal, cobblestones, and pieces of cannibalized bicycles and scooters, showering the projectiles on a line of riot cops who retreated at a run. "It's beautiful to see the people like this," said a man with a beer in hand and no front teeth and the hideous contorted face of a Bosch figure. The crowd tore down metal barriers, erected on a storefront, that were fourteen feet tall and twenty feet wide, and together raised them to form massive shields, which they wielded against the police as they charged up Rue Balzac. The Gilets exulted, bellowing "*ah-oo, ah-oo*" and a chant of "*Ré-vo-lu-tion!*"

The cops answered with another volley of tear gas, the canisters skittering and exploding, bouncing off people's heads. I was hit with the poison directly, collapsing to my knees, blinded, vomiting, hyperventilating, turned and twisted and crushed in the boiling crowd, in what felt like a cattle drive. From out of nowhere a balaclava-clad man—I never saw his face—took me in his arms, poured saline solution in my

eyes, and stood me up. His name was Tanguy, twenty-three years old, and I wanted to cling to him, but in the churning of people he was gone. I fled from the battle at Rue Balzac to the shattered Hugo Boss boutique on the south side of the avenue. A father and child of seven in his arms watched the melee at a distance, their faces lit with anticipation. An elderly couple cackled at the sight of the smashed Boss windows and wrecked vestibule. *C'EST MOI, LE BOSS*, declared the graffiti on the store's walls. I locked eyes with a yellow-vested masked woman, aged about fifty-five, who pulled down her bandanna and smiled and gave me a deliriously happy thumbs-up.

I fled farther up a side street and found a medic station staffed with volunteers in white with Red Cross symbols on their shirts and helmets. "It's been very bad today, very violent. They are gassing everybody," a medic told me. Stretched on the sidewalk were a half-dozen victims, stunned, listless, in shock, some with oxygen masks. The injuries on March 16, I was told, included a person who lost a hand from the dispersal grenades, another whose foot was so lacerated from shrapnel that it hung by strings of flesh. (The seemingly indiscriminate use of these "nonlethal" methods of crowd control by French authorities garnered condemnations from numerous human-rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.) Léa Beauvais, the medic, told me the grenades exploded around her as she attempted to treat a man on the Champs that day whom the police had pummeled. Beauvais showed me the spot where she had bandaged him. The ground was splashed with a great deal of fresh blood, and we stared at the blood in silence.

Faced with the escalating police response to their own escalations, the Gilets of course could not hold the Champs-Élysées for longer than the one symbolic day each week. By nightfall on March 16, with at least eighty storefronts and other properties attacked, an estimated \$5.6 million in damage done in Paris alone, and some two hundred people arrested, the protesters had been cleared from the avenue.

It was just one Saturday in a continuum, an act in a play with no end, as the Gilets had taken to calling their weekend ritual. By April, after more than five months of direct action and riot, the Gilets had caused nearly \$200 million in property damage. Scaring off prospective visitors to France, they were said to have reduced hotel bookings during a single month, December 2018, by 1.1 percent throughout the country, and by 5.3 percent in Paris. The Associated Press in February reported that since the advent of the movement 72,600 workers in 5,000 companies had been put on reduced hours, for reduced pay, and that businesses in city centers across France “saw revenue fall by 20 to 40 percent on average in recent weeks due to demonstrations taking place every Saturday.” Bruno Le Maire, minister of the economy, said in December that the impact of the protests was “severe and ongoing,” and he emphasized that Paris had been hit hardest.

The disruption, the destruction, the chaos had achieved at least some of the movement’s goals. Immediately in the wake of the protests in December, desperate to appease the mob, Macron scrapped the despised carbon tax. He followed it that month with a 10-billion-euro stimulus package to aid the poor and lower middle classes of France, despite the concerns of the austerity-minded European Union. In April, after the violence of mid-March, he announced further concessions, estimated to cost an additional 5 billion euros, which included tax cuts for lower-income households, the indexing of pensions to inflation, and greater latitude for mayors and regional elected officials to fend off cuts in public services in their districts. Serge Halimi told me that the uprising had “stopped in its tracks Macron’s plan to eliminate one hundred twenty thousand public service jobs, which are already in short supply. It roused public opinion against the privatization of Aéroports de Paris, and it is likely now that this very bad plan will not succeed. None of this would have been possible without the Gilets Jaunes.”

The Gilets could have claimed victory on these issues and gone home. As of this writing, they have not.

They have refused to be mollified by what they perceive as crumbs tossed from the throne of power. Their war against the rich, in the age of climate change, is one driven by an understanding unique among protest movements in France: that the privilege to lord and the privilege to pollute are one and the same, and that confronting the climate crisis means a confrontation with unregulated capitalism. It is a call to arms that should resound across the world.

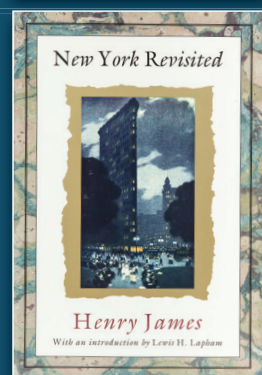
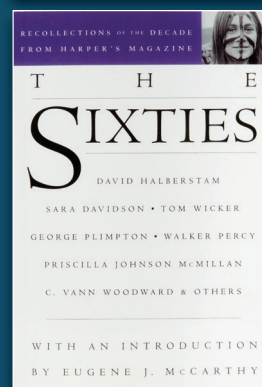
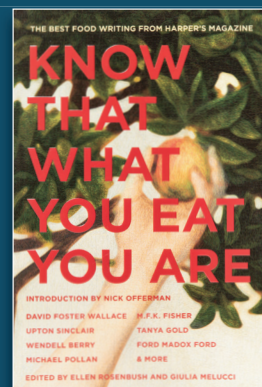
The rage is not going away, and rage in France, a remarkably unstable country among Western democracies, has had consequences. The nation has progressed forward, and regressed grievously, in fits and spasms on an epic scale. Its First Republic, that of 1792, degenerated into mass murder, then tyranny and the Napoleonic wars, the grandly humane ambition of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* unrealized. Its Second Republic, following the Paris uprising of 1848—one led by the children of the sansculottes, an armed working class—lasted only three years, dissipating in Bonapartist restoration. The revolt of the Paris Commune in 1871 gave way to the Third Republic, which endured almost as long as the present-day Fifth Republic, but ended in the national shame of collaboration, the Vichy police state, and the deportation of 75,000 Jews—and this in the country that in 1791 became the first in Europe, urged on by ensanguined revolutionaries like Robespierre, to declare Jews official citizens with all due rights and protections.

The social-welfare system first envisioned during the Terror was only successfully implemented following massive labor unrest after the trauma and dislocations of the Great Depression and once again after World War II. France’s constitution and its branches of government have been scrapped and reconfigured repeatedly, for better and for worse. In 1968, over the course of just a few days of revolt, the Fifth Republic nearly collapsed. The Gilets have demanded a new republic based on social, economic, and, not least, ecological justice. Time will tell whether they have the strength and the means to bring France to the necessary point of crisis. ■

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