Climate Change and the Yellow Vest Movement

ZAHEER BABER

The Yellow Vest movement has been spreading from France to its neighbouring countries, as a response to the monstrous levels of inequality. Intellectuals on the left who have not been too impressed by the movement and want the overall transformation of neo-liberal capitalism should remember that when many parts of the world seem to be on the right-wing populist trajectory, any organised or deliberately non-organised movement can set off changes and effects in different, even unexpected, ways.

Capitalists” as the critical geographer David Harvey puts it, “are locked in a perpetual battle not only to produce values but to combat their potential negation” (Harvey 2017: 75). The perpetual struggle between capital and labour has, of course, been a constitutive feature of industrial capitalism right from its inception. The neo-liberal project, conceived theoretically much earlier (Slobodian 2018), but applied with a vengeance from the 1970s, has always engendered multiple forms of resistance with varied intended and unintended outcomes. Of course, perpetual struggle is the norm not just of the capital–labour contention but for almost any exercise of power (Davis 2016). Thus, colonialism, despite the claim of its apologists and nostalgia mongers such as Niall Ferguson, has always engendered organised resistance and not just in the colonies but in the heart of the colonial centres too (Gopal 2019).

The miners’ strike in Britain (1984–85), the countrywide protests against Margaret Thatcher’s poll tax (1990), the air traffic controllers’ strike in the United States (us) (1981), the concerted anti-austerity protests in Spain, Greece, Portugal and France (2011–2012), the Battle of Seattle (1999) and the ongoing protests at the World Trade Organization (wto) as well as the g20 meetings, the Chiapas uprising (1994), the Arab Spring (2010) and the Occupy Wall Street movement (ows) (2011) to mention just a few of the recent organised protests, all register the truism that humans, instead of passively accepting power structures, always exercise agency in the perpetual quest for reshaping the world with multiple intended and unintended consequences. The defenders of the so-called “free market” whether in academia or mass media will predictably mock any protest and social movement whose goal it is to contest the inequities generated by global capitalism. The relentless flinging of epithets such as “leaderless” “disorganised,” “dreamers,” “confused” in media narratives about the ows movement that erupted in 2011, was as unsurprising as the support from intellectuals on the left (Wallerstein 2011; Ali 2011; Hedges 2012; Gitlin 2012, 2013; Castells 2012; Calhoun 2013; Mitchell et al 2013; Chomsky 2012).

The Gilet Jaunes or the Yellow Vest movement in response to the French President Emmanuel Macron’s sudden hike in fuel taxes and the reduction of the existing speed limit on the highways is simply the latest in the ongoing process of the perpetual battle between capital and labour in its many forms. The Yellow Vest movement that erupted in France in November 2018 caught many—politicians as well as seasoned commentators—by surprise. With hindsight, coming as it did, close on the heels of a number of institutional changes to reinforce authoritarianism in France, the emergence of the Yellow Vest protests was not at all surprising. When Macron, the ex-investment banker with minimal direct experience of politics, contested the presidential elections in France, he positioned himself as a “centrist” who claimed that he rejected the traditional political elites—left or right (Fassin 2019). Indeed, as a technocrat, he represented himself as even above and beyond political parties and ideological divides, ostensibly seeking direct connection with the French people (Fassin 2019: 24).

However, despite his alleged concern for “the people,” his authoritarian style and initiatives were evident right from the beginning of his tenure. His suppression of parliamentary debate on major changes in favour of passing laws by decree considerably weakened the legislature. His attempt to abolish the Senate, the dramatic changes in labour laws without negotiations with the unions, the enhancement of the powers of the police at the expense of judges, the abolition of local taxes that reduced the power of municipalities, the targeting of media—including Le Monde—investigating...
Such as the flashball guns and explosive unprecedented repression unleashed by who commute long distances from the glaring members of the lower middle class directly affected large numbers of struggling reduction of highway speed limits directly. The sudden hikes in fuel prices and the estate markets in Paris into the suburbs. had been pushed out of expensive real pushed for “extreme centrism” (Ali 2011; Fassin 2019) that further squeezed the ma of “global competitiveness,” Macron 2017). Obsessed with the neo-liberal dog- for the eruption of Yellow Vest protests numerous government scandals all con- tributed to creating the wider context for the eruption of Yellow Vest protests (Fassin 2019: 24; Harding 2019; Marlow 2017). Obsessed with the neo-liberal dogma of “global competitiveness,” Macron pushed for “extreme centrism” (Ali 2011; Fassin 2019) that further squeezed the already squeezed—the struggling working poor and the lower middle class who had been pushed out of expensive real estate markets in Paris into the suburbs. The sudden hikes in fuel prices and the reduction of highway speed limits directly affected large numbers of struggling members of the lower middle class who commute long distances from the suburbs to work in the city centre. The unprecedented repression unleashed by the police deploying lethal weapons such as the flashball guns and explosive grenades not in use elsewhere in Europe contributed to many lost eyes and limbs.

As Fassin puts it, the repressive might of the police to quell the protestors “have caused injuries on a scale not seen since the protests at the time of the Algerian War” (2019: 24). Macron’s first response was to ignore the protests and, under the direct orders of the Ministry of the Interior, give the police a free hand in the hope that the protests would die out soon. When that did not happen, following a dominant trope, Macron suggested that apparently the real problem was that French workers were “lazy.” He even claimed that any unemployed worker could simply “cross the street” to find work. The continued clashes on the streets of Paris, particularly in the upscale shopping and tourist districts forced Macron to reluctantly roll back the fuel tax and offer some concessions. Most protestors were not too impressed. Speaking to reporters, one activist said, “He is trying to land back on his feet but we can see that he isn’t sincere, that it’s all smoke and mirrors.” “It’s just window dressing, for the media, some trivial measures, it almost sounds very radical, but it lacks political substance … almost all serious changes involve multiple phases” (Kagarlitsky cited in Rockhill 2019: 7). As Rockhill (2019: 9) points out, whereas activists on the ground are participating in social struggles in motion and inventing new tactics, professional thinkers viewing them from a distance tend to apprehend them with their fixed and ready-made concepts.

He adds that many intellectuals were surprised and caught off guard by the Yellow Vest movement and were critical of it “precisely because they are not involved in the persistent daily struggles out of which they emerge” (Rockhill 2019: 8). An example of the disconnect between the daily struggles of the protestors was the critique of the Yellow Vests protesting the fuel tax from a climate change perspective. The Macron government had ideologically used the general concern about the environmental degradation and climate change to push through the “carbon tax” as well as other “investor friendly” policies that added to the distress of those already struggling to make ends meet.

The claim that concern about climate change was the reason behind the flat fuel tax hike is of course absurd but consistent with the professional production and dissemination of slick corporate greenwashing strategies. Even the worst offenders, corporations such as ExxonMobil who salivate at the prospect of reduced oil drilling costs due to climate change-induced melting ice in the Arctic region, also naturally contribute funds for Earth Day festivals and recycling campaigns. Recently in India, after many legal challenges from environmental activists, the ecologically rich Hasdeo Arand forest in Chhattisgarh was given official clearance for mining by corporations. Responding to the real concerns about the environmental degradation that will surely follow, the buzzword of corporate social responsibility was predictably invoked by the corporate spokesperson who said: “the Adani Group is a responsible corporate citizen and it is evident from our care for the environment and communities … We are committed to the people and ecology of Chhattisgarh …” (Nandi 2019). Reflecting on the critique of the Yellow Vests from a climate change perspective, Jeremy Harding (2019) rightly points out that while it is easy for the average Parisian—with ready access to public transportation—to flaunt the lack of car ownership as a snobbish “ecologically conscious” status symbol, the struggling suburban and rural protestors pushed out of the city centres due to unaffordable real estate prices, are completely dependent on their automobiles for making a living. They were indeed the hardest and most immediately hit by the flat fuel tax hikes.

Social Agents
As for the impatience of some intellectuals with the “leaderless” and “fragmented” Yellow Vests allegedly bereft of a coherent, critical vision of systemic change, French history offers a rich repertoire of precisely such social agents playing a not insignificant role in effecting social change. As Eric Hobsbawm (1962: 58) points out, “the French Revolution was not made or led by a formed party of movement in the modern sense, nor by men attempting to carry out a systematic program.” Despite major differences in the goals and outcomes, the Sansculottes...
or the “shapeless, mostly urban movement of the labouring poor, small craftsmen, shopkeepers, artisans, tiny entrepreneurs and the like” who were the “actual demonstrators, rioters, constructors of barricades” in 1793–94, bear more than a passing resemblance to the current Yellow Vest protestors.

The Yellow Vest movement represents the most recent iteration of concerted resistance against the unbearable global social inequality and social distress in the wake of neo-liberalism. While some European intellectuals such as Badiou and Žižek are not too impressed by the outcome so far, under the current bleak economic and political conditions, any act of resistance and push-back is to be welcomed. If nothing else, the gradual disappearance of the term “capitalism”—derided in some quarters for being too “ideological” if not outright crude and vulgar “economic determinism”—might even stage a long overdue comeback. Indeed, the term evokes such institutionalised hostility that according to sociologist John Bellamy Foster (2011) an invitation to speak on climate change from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the United States, explicitly stipulated that the term capitalism should not be used in the talk. In the work of another critical scholar of the environment, the euphemism “the treadmill of production” rather than “capitalism” is used to identify the major drivers of climate change (Schnaiberg 1980). While discussing Thomas Piketty’s Capital with Bill Moyers, the eminent economist Paul Krugman (2014) points out that these days most professional economists rarely use the term “capitalism” partly for fear of being labelled as biased ideologues. The obscene level of unbearable global inequality (Elliott 2019), of course, does nothing to temper the technocratic obsession with economic growth and the pursuit of higher gross domestic product (GDP) rates at all costs (Harvey 2012). This obsession has to do with the fact that since it is neo-liberal capitalism that is the real driver of climate change, the current epoch should really be designated as Capitalocene rather than the Anthropocene (Moore 2015). The latter term wrongly implies that all humans are equally responsible for the unfolding climate catastrophe, when in fact it is the current economic model that is the problem (Moore and Patel 2018; Klein 2015). Reports of the incredible rates of destruction of animal species and habitats and climate change have only fuelled “market friendly” strategies such as “carbon trading,” “carbon offsets” and “cap and trade” although even these pointless and quite delusional schemes do not go unchallenged by the apostles of neo-liberalism (Watts 2018). The Yellow Vest movement that is now spreading from France to neighbouring Belgium is an unsurprising response to the grotesque levels of inequality. Intellectuals on the left who have not been too impressed by the movement because they demand piecemeal concessions rather than push for the overall transformation of neo-liberal capitalism would do well to remember that in these desperate times, when many parts of the world seem to be on a right-wing populist trajectory, any organised or deliberately
non-organised movement can be transformational in the long run. The effects of any protest and social movement live on and infuse society in myriad unexpected ways (Baber 2015, 2016). As Bertolt Brecht (cited in Wood 2019: 28), reflecting on a homeless shelter in New York City, wrote:

The world is not changed by this...
But a few men have a bed for the night
A few men have a bed for the night...
But the world is not changed by this
Everything changes. You can
Begin anew with your very fresh breath.
But what has been, has been. And the water
You once poured into the wine, you can
Never drain off again.

What has been, has been. The water
That you poured into the wine, you can
Never drain off again. But
Everything changes. You can
Begin anew with your very last breath.

REFERENCES


The world is not changed by this...
But a few men have a bed for the night
A few men have a bed for the night...
But the world is not changed by this
Everything changes. You can
Begin anew with your very fresh breath.
But what has been, has been. And the water
You once poured into the wine, you can
Never drain off again.

What has been, has been. The water
That you poured into the wine, you can
Never drain off again. But
Everything changes. You can
Begin anew with your very last breath.

EPWRF India Time Series

Data sets from Agriculture Census have been added to the Agricultural Statistics module of the EPWRF India Time Series (ITS) online database. This sub-module contains state-wise data on:

- Number, Area and Average Size of Operational Holdings by Gender, by Social Groups and by Size Groups
- Characteristics of Operational Holdings by Tenancy Status, Terms of Leasing, Land Use, Irrigation Status, Sources of Irrigation and Cropping Pattern

These characteristics are provided in a two-way classification by Social Groups and Size Groups.

- Social Groups include Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Others and Institutional Holders
- Size Groups include Marginal (Below 1.00 hectare), Small (1.00 < 2.00 hectares), Semi-medium (2.00 < 4.00 hectares), Medium (4.00 < 10.00 hectares) and Large (10.00 hectares and above)

These data are available quinquennially from 1970–71 for all the ten Censuses conducted so far and sourced from All-India Reports on Agriculture Census published by Agriculture Census Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India. The EPWRF ITS has 18 modules covering a range of macro-economic, financial sectors and social sector indicators of India

For more details, visit www.epwrfin.in or e-mail to: its@epwrfin.in