

The future of the EU endangered by the lack of social cohesion: The French yellow vests movement's resounding warning

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Título / Title / Titolo

El futuro de la UE en peligro por falta de cohesión social
L'avenir de l'UE en danger par manque de cohésion sociale
Il futuro de l'UE in pericolo per mancanza di coesione sociale

Résumé / Resumen / Abstract / Riassunto

In a complicated European climate, the “Yellow Vests Movement” in France throws a dark veil over the future of the European Union, already strongly weakened by the Brexit. The extremely violent demonstrations that have rocked France in recent weeks clearly highlight the social divide now opposing the working class to the “élites”. Far from being an isolated case, the French discontent that led to the uprising is a symptom of the deep crisis gnawing away Western democracies and threatening the European Project..

En un clima europeo complicado, el “Movimiento de los chalecos amarillos” en Francia arroja un oscuro velo sobre el futuro de la Unión Europea, ya muy debilitado por el Brexit. Las manifestaciones extremadamente violentas que han sacudido Francia en las últimas semanas claramente ponen de relieve la división social que ahora enfrenta la clase obrera a las “élites”. Lejos de ser un caso aislado, el descontento francés que ha llevado a la revuelta es un síntoma de la profunda crisis que arrasa las democracias occidentales y amenaza el Proyecto Europeo..

Dans un climat européen déjà particulièrement tendu, le “Mouvement des gilets Jaunes” en France jette un voile sombre sur l'avenir de l'Union européenne, déjà fortement affaiblie par le Brexit. Les manifestations extrême-

ment violentes qui ont secoué l'Hexagone ces dernières semaines mettent clairement en exergue la fracture sociale en France et en Europe, opposant désormais la classe ouvrière aux “élites”. Bien loin d'être un cas isolé, le mécontentement français qui a conduit à la rébellion, est le symptôme de la crise profonde qui ronge les démocraties occidentales et met en péril le Projet européen..

In un clima europeo complicato, il “Movimento dei giubbotti gialli” in Francia stende un oscuro velo sul futuro dell'Unione Europea, già fortemente indebolito dalla Brexit. Le manifestazioni estremamente violente che hanno scosso la Francia nelle ultime settimane evidenziano chiaramente la divisione sociale che ora oppone la classe operaia alle “élite”: lungi dall'essere un caso isolato, il malcontento francese che ha portato alla rivolta è un sintomo della profonda crisi che affligge le democrazie occidentali e minaccia il Progetto europeo.

Mots-clé / Palabras clave / Keywords / Parole chiave

Yellow Vests Movement, European Union, Democracy in crisis

Movimiento de los chalecos amarillos, Unión europea, crisis de la democracia

“Mouvement des gilets Jaunes”, Union européenne, crise de la démocratie

Movimento dei giubbotti gialli, Unione europea, crisi della democrazia

Just a few weeks after a tense fortnight of negotiations on Brexit, and the turmoil caused by the deal, the EU must now face the challenges presented by the European-wide rise of rightwing populism, Italy's contagious anti-Brussels fiscal rebellion, Catalan regionalist aspiration to independence and the fraught problems posed by mass migration into unstable, indebted southern Europe, without assistance from Britain. Given its strong democratic, parliamentary and public service traditions, attachment to the rule of law and commitment to free and fair trade, Britain was seen by many as a model, particularly in post-Soviet central and Eastern Europe. Its departure will create a vacuum and might have irremediable consequences for the political future of the European Union, if any. Whatever European leaders may say, underestimating Britain's importance within the EU could be as damaging as overestimating it. Brexit also creates a precedent that we will never be able to erase. The damage to the idea of Europe will be considerable and lasting.

It is in this already quite difficult context that France --whose 18-month-in-office young President, Emmanuel Macron, had clearly stated his European ambitions, advocating for deeper EU political, budgetary and defense integration-- seems to be imploding.

What was seen at first as another French -usual- protest against an additional tax increase on fossil fuels, has turned into a rebellion. Demonstrations led to some of the worst urban violence in France since the May 1968 uprising and were marked by skirmishes between stone-throwing protesters and police officers firing tear gas, shattered store windows, burning cars and looting. Other parallels have even been drawn with the French Revolution, comparing the 2018 Yellow Vests protests for affordable gas to the march of the 7000 famished-working-women, from Paris to Versailles, under the rain, with pikes and pitchfork, screaming "*on veut du pain!*" (we want bread!) on October 5th, 1789.

Yet, if the gasoline tax increase was the sparkle which started the fire, it would be a huge mistake to analyze it as the cause of the uprising. It might have triggered it, but there are deeper root causes and more fundamental reasons:

First of all are indeed economic reasons, and especially the constant decline of living standards for the last ten years. In January 2016, the national statistical institute Insee announced that life expectancy had fallen for both sexes in France for the first time since World War II, and it's the native French working class that is likely driving the decline. In fact, the French outsiders are looking a lot like the poor Americans Charles Murray described in *Coming Apart*, failing not just in income and longevity but also in family formation, mental health, and education. Their political alienation is striking. Fewer than 2 percent of legislators in France's National Assembly today come from the working class, as opposed to 20 percent just after World War II. The first victims of this economical regression are the seniors (retirees who can barely survive with their pension and cannot help their children anymore as they used to), and the youth. Three years after finishing their studies, three-quarters of French university graduates are living on their own; by contrast, three-quarters of their contemporaries without university degrees still live with their parents.

Second of all, are the fiscal reasons: France is one of the most taxed country within the European Union. According to the latest *Eurostat* report that looks at the percentage of a country's GDP that comes from tax receipts France is top of the European league. Some 47.7% of the country's GDP is from tax revenues in 2017. (European Commission, 2018). If historically France has always defended paying high taxes as the price to pay for the public services as well as the welfare state that provides protection for the worse off, the country has reached its limits. In that context, high taxes on gasoline and diesel fuels are another "effort" asked to the citizens who were already struggling, for most of them. French citizens had actually been quite patient in accepting high carbon taxes. The cost of gas has never stopped increasing since 2007 and has reached 1,8 €/ liter in 2018, or more than \$6 (USD) per gallon, with taxes accounting for 60 percent.

Yet, the main reason at the root of the "Yellow Vests" movement is, in my opinion, more sociological. Despite the fact it took by surprise, the "Yellow Vests" movement is the result of a growing discontent and mistrust towards the institutions and the political parties – both of which have been latent for a long time already- and, as such, could have been anticipated rath-

er sooner than later. Yet, it was totally unanticipated by the government as well as by the political parties. While reaching its sixth week of violence, the movement remains paradoxically unstructured, which emphasizes even more the profound distrust of institutions and political parties. The “Yellow Vests” movement reflects a deeply fractured French society. It is the symptom of a spontaneous and self-determined uprising of the working class, feeling left behind and even despised by their political leaders that they reject as part of “metropolitans elites”. Therefore, “ the partial sacking of Paris’ rich, tourism-dominated districts last weekend was merely the physical expression of what all these movements feel deeply, in the view of analysts: hatred of the “winners” in the global system, symbolized by urban elites.” (Nossiter, Dec. 5, 2018)

Far from being a French exception, this phenomenon is the symptom of the fear common to most European workers, feeling endangered by the current economic model seen as integrating only a small amount of the population: the so-called “elite”. For the last few years, similar exasperation has been clearly expressed in Britain –leading to the Brexit- but also in Germany, Spain and several other member states, especially in Southern Europe. Indeed, in 2009 Italy already faced a similar uprising, organized by “*il Movimento 5 Stelle*” (The Five Star Movement), which grew up out of a similar disgust with political parties and a distrust of elites, and which has held itself out as the authentic expression of the popular will. As Christophe Guilluy analyzed, “from the 1980s onwards, it was clear there was a price to be paid for western societies adapting to a new economic model and that price was sacrificing the European and American working class. No one thought the fallout would hit the bedrock of the lower-middle class, too. It’s obvious now, however, that the new model not only weakened the fringes of the proletariat but society as a whole.” (Guilluy, 2015 and 2018)

To better understand the roots of such a large mistrust and discontent, a global vision --which many European political leaders have been lacking of for quite some time— is of utmost importance. In Europe, since

2010, there have been indications that the international financial crisis, which started in the US in 2007, has been evolving into a social epidemic. In France, as in all western countries, the social climate has mutated from a system, which used to integrate the majority economically, politically and culturally into an unequal monster that benefits only the already wealthy, by creating even more wealth. Due to the strategic character of the financial sector, both public and political debates have focused on the economic aspects of the crisis, as well as on the major factors that have conditioned its evolution: management of the public debt, the response to the housing bubble and the evolution of broader economic activity. In contrast, the issue of social cohesion has been left behind, perceived as collateral damage “*only*”. Yet, 118 million of people were living below the poverty threshold within the EU in 2016, and thus “considered at risk of poverty or social exclusion”¹ (Eurostat). There has been an obvious failure to address the recession “both from the perspective of social investment, which emphasizes the productivity of the human factor, and from the perspective of social sustainability, which raises the necessity of preserving social capital, understood as “the wealth of institutions, community relations and cultural patterns that increase the potential of a society to face future challenges.” (Laparra, 2012).

Although all European Union countries have experienced rising social needs, poverty and inequality have appeared in each case with different levels of intensity and scope. Changes in unemployment have not been uniform, with great variations in rates among countries. Thus, common trends are striking and should not be ignored any longer: since 2010, rising unemployment in many countries and the falling wages of the workers with the fewest resources have in many cases led to a stagnation or even decline in living standards and a rapid increase in social vulnerability. Simultaneously, increasing difficulties in financing social spending have limited the ability of the safety net to meet the unprecedented increase in demand for redistributive public po-

¹Source : Eurostat EU-27 and EU-28, 2005–2016.

licies. The economic divide has led to a fracture within the European society, opposing the working-class and lower middle-class to the so-called elites. As Michael J. Sandel explained, “one of the biggest failures of the last generation of mainstream parties has been the failure to take seriously and to speak directly to people’s aspiration to feel that they have some meaningful say in shaping the forces that govern their lives.” Thus, a large constituency of working-class voters feel that not only has the economy left them behind, but so has the culture, that the sources of their dignity, the dignity of labor, have been eroded and mocked by developments with globalization. (Sandel/Cowley, 2016). The Brexit was the first striking European example of this failure, the violent divide currently opposing “la France périphérique” (peripheral France) to Paris and the metropolises is another one, emphasizing not only social despair but a sense of disempowerment. Indeed, as the French, many European citizens feel bereft of their capital, not only financially but also socially and culturally. There is an urgent need to address the democratic failure not only in France, but in Europe and most western countries. Social democracy is in desperate need of reinvigoration, because it has over the past several decades lost its moral and civic energy and purpose. It’s become a largely managerial and technocratic orientation to politics. It has lost its ability to inspire working people, and its vision, its moral and civic vision, has faltered. So for two generations after the Second World War, social democracy did have an animating vision, which was to create and to deepen and to articulate welfare states, and to moderate and provide a counterbalance to the power of unfettered market capitalism. (Sandel/Cowley, 2016).

As the French Yellow Vests’ uprising has demonstrated, not only are there economic distress, a deep social fracture and a massive popular discontent, but there is also an urgent need for Europe to reconnect with its citizens and make them feel empowered in a meaningful project. Many scenarios have been suggested and studied by experts and scholars regarding the future of Europe – the most probable one being

a North-South European split, in which Germany, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian and Baltic states could break away to form a sort of modern-day version of the Hanseatic League. If that point were reached, the very idea of a union of Europe would most probably forever die. What made Europe so unique, so special and even “great” was the fact it raised from the ashes of a continent almost fully destroyed by three consecutive of the most atrocious wars the world has ever seen. It was built as a dream of common and eternal peace, on the European Enlightenment’s legacy of open societies based on legal rights, obligations and individual freedoms. For several generations, it meant more freedom, of speech and expression, of traveling without borders, more opportunities as well, allowing several Erasmus generations to go study in another European country, and workers to move without any restrictions. It used to symbolize a better future for our children, protecting the arts and the environment, and developing educative and research projects. What happened to that vision of Europe? Instead, in the eyes of many, it has become the symbol of a series of cold and inappropriate political decisions social regression, and staggering quest for competitiveness. If there were still a future left for the European project, it would have to be dedicated to protect its citizens, while empowering them in a meaningful and socially cohesive Union.

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