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Two Americans Decipher the French Yellow Vest Crisis

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#YellowVests, #EmmanuelMacron, #Paris

Over the last few months, around 100,000 French people have transformed the hi-vis vest designed for road safety into a symbol for their anger against tax hikes on fuel and an emblem of the divide between the winners and losers of globalization and urban and rural populations. But are the Yellow Vests just more incorrigible French protesters 50 years after May 1968, or rather misunderstood visionaries? Here are two Americans' views on the situation.

“The movement’s total lack of structure is what strikes me the most,” says Karen Weisblatt, a Chicago-born associate professor at the Sciences Po school in Paris and founder of a philanthropic strategy consulting firm. “France has accustomed us to protests and strikes, but these events always have specific objectives and are supervised by unions and political parties. Even the May 1968 demonstrations had a clear goal — a more open society. Here we simply have anarchy. The government gave into the initial demands to reverse tax hikes on fuel. But now the Yellow Vests want

more financial, social, and job security without really knowing what else.”

Far from criticizing the “incorrigible Gauls,” as might be expected, the Francophile, New York entrepreneur Alan Quasha who heads up an investment fund, claims to understand the protestors who “struggle to make ends meet.” He keeps an eye on current affairs in France, where he has owned a second home for many years. What’s more, he is not surprised by the protests in which the unions are absent. “The unions are incapable of communicating the real issues and people are smart. They know there is a problem in France, where it is very difficult to do business, invest, have employees work longer, and remain flexible to meet client orders. When capitalism is not welcome, the money disappears.” However, he is surprised by something. “Here in New York, we expected a lot from Emmanuel Macron. We thought he was going to find a solution for transforming the country and making it more attractive to investors. And what he has done so far is fantastic.”

Not everyone shares this opinion. “Some people in France seem to be waking up to the level of distress in their country,” says Karen Weisblatt, speaking as a Democrat from Chicago. “Many think that because there are safety nets and a welfare state that the problems have been solved. But you need more than healthcare and a salary to feel like you have a good life. You also need perspectives for the future and the ability to progress and improve your situation. Just like in the United States, there is not enough social mobility in France. However, in America there is more media coverage of the system’s shortcomings, coupled with a policy of positive discrimination, whereas the Parisian elite pays little attention to the issues at hand.”

The American Dream may still be alive, but the French version is flagging... According to Alan Quasha, the source of the problem can be found elsewhere. “It could be said that France has become too socialist. When a government meddles in everything it creates expectations and makes it very difficult to change this culture. But the government cannot solve all the world’s problems. It is simply not possible. Unless of course you believe that a socialist economy can function.” And Alan Quasha does not seem to think so, sharing his views at a time when these socialist ideals supported by figures such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the youngest Democrat representative ever elected to Congress, are gaining more and more traction in the United States.