

The Dispossessed
The Working Classes and their Instinct for Survival

Christophe Guilluy

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This slim volume, 133 pages, is by a French geographer,¹ who has developed a theory of 'peripheral France'. He comments on the growth in holiday homes by the coast, and the use of properties that would otherwise serve as a primary residence as Airbnb. He also remarks a great deal on the increase in 'working from home' that has arisen since the 2020-2021 Covid pandemic; ruminates about Low Emission Zones; and makes the amusing point that many of the architect-designed 'urban villages' that litter our environment today resemble the setting used for the 1967 TV series *The Prisoner*.

This serves to introduce the reader to his main theme, namely that the assumptions underpinning contemporary politics – by which he means politics since 1990 – are false. The idea of a limitless planet, successful globalization, and desirable metropolitan values are dismissed. Globalization, 'end of history' theories, liberalism and 'Third Way' arguments are no longer valid; and in most cases never were. Attention is repeatedly drawn to the intellectually lightweight nature of much of the western political class. Guilluy describes their discourse as meaningless pseudo-intellectual babble, and on p. 74 points out that many years ago, and in a different context, the Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini described many of the characteristics that surround us now in his critique of the consumer society.²

There is a lot of extravagant rhetoric here. And many highfalutin but enjoyable arguments, of which this, on p. 110, is typical:

The ruling classes of Western countries are blind and deaf, and also powerless – a powerlessness that they have patiently organised and manufactured, first by handing over politics to supranational technocratic bodies, then by abandoning themselves to the banks and, consequently, by causing the debt to explode. Illegitimate in the eyes of public opinion, without real economic and political power, their world is self-destructing

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christophe_Guilluy>

² See, for example,
<https://www.eudia.org/wp-content/uploads/Borghesi_Pasolini_Power_Consumption.pdf>.

before our eyes.

Much of what follows is debatable. But his description of how this type of politics has seen a collapse of middle-class prosperity alongside an on-going portrayal of the working class as victims or useless, anti-social layabouts, will ring true in many ears. This leads him to his conclusion: the 'yellow vests' (*gilets jaunes*) are a noble group, fighting back against this decline.³ He sees them as a solid, honourable block of ordinary people, fighting to regain their dignity. In his words, the working classes want 'a properly paid job, regulated by law, which offers them security'.

This is partially correct. The 'yellow vest' protests started when President Macron's government increased the tax levied on diesel fuel. Most domestic vehicles in France used diesel fuel and, despite many exemptions, a lot of the electorate were affected. The tax was raised partly to encourage people to switch to less polluting fuels. At the same time the speed limit on country roads was reduced to 50 mph (80 kph) to promote road safety, and traffic enforcement cameras were installed to police this. This affected some French motorists in rural areas, and the vandalising of traffic enforcement cameras followed as a secondary feature of the anti-fuel tax protests. Later targets of the activists included the general nature of Macron's economic policy, including a proposed wealth tax.

The protests lasted through 2018-2019 and eventually wound down in 2020 during the Covid lock-down. The government agreed to withdraw or modify some of the proposed tax increases. Guilluy sees Brexit and the emergence of Trump and the MAGA movement in the US as a similar phenomenon. This is nonsense. The 'yellow vest' protestors were not campaigning to leave the EU, build walls to keep out immigrants or introduce international trade tariffs. Their leaders, or, at any rate, the most prominent individuals associated with them, were an eclectic group, and none 'cut through' to national politics.⁴ The movement did not coalesce into a political party and unlike Farage, Johnson and Trump, it was not funded by powerful businesses, oligarchs and tax exiles.

None of this prevents Guilluy from stating that 'the working class' – which

³ Since 2008 all French drivers have been required to have a high-visibility vest in their vehicle, for use in the event of an emergency. Hence the use of this garment in the fuel tax protests . . . a symbol of 'break down'.

⁴ The most prominent to emerge were Jacline Mourad, a hypnotherapist and parapsychologist who runs a 'paranormal and ectoplasm centre'; Etienne Chouard, a teacher and blogger who at one point published his views on the Rothschilds and international banking; Priscillia Ludovsky, a mixed-race woman who runs a cosmetics business from home; Eric Drouet, a truck driver, who has called for an insurrection and Jerome Rodrigues, a plumber.

he presents as an amorphous, but determined grouping – are now acting out of a survival instinct and engaging in a 'defence of a protective way of life' against large numbers of immigrants who have not integrated, unlike, as he puts it, the 'old immigrants'. We seem to be in Lord Glassman territory here. Some people believe these arguments have great validity. Others do not. Rather than revisit them in the context of this review, it is simpler, and less exhausting, to note that Guilluy's book is all diagnosis but no treatment.

Despite his grim, determined arguments and wide-ranging condemnations he arrives at the conclusion that what majority want is 'pragmatism'. He defines this as 'the search for the "least worst" kind of reality' and concludes:

The return of ordinary people to the centre is the only answer to the threat of chaos, and the only condition for reconstruction. This anchoring in ordinary reality will not lead us to a perfect world, but (and this will already be a great deal) to a world that will have meaning. This is now the only horizon.

Exactly what this would look like, and who would carry it out isn't specified. Is it just a return to the consensus politics typical of the three decades after 1945? Does he want fewer Clinton-Blair 'modernisers' and a more matter-a-fact class of politicians? Does the desire for 'pragmatism' mean telling people they can't have everything? What modifications would he make to the media – particularly social media and the internet – to prevent the 'threat of chaos' that worries him (and the rest of us)? It would be helpful if he was a bit more precise. Instead, we are left with an entertaining essay rather than a guide to a possible future.

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Simon Matthews' study of Winston Churchill during the phoney war –
A Study in Failure: Churchill at the Admiralty 1939-1940 –
is published by Oldcastle Books in 2026.