

“The difficulties faced by the ‘Yellow Vests’ are the consequence of fifty years of urban planning policies”¹

By Stéphane Lecler²

An essential reason for the movement of the “Yellow Vests” has been insufficiently highlighted, though it underlies the majority of the other reasons. The difficulties faced by the “Yellow Vests” are, for the most part, the consequence of urban planning policies that have been implemented in our country for the last fifty years. In brief, those policies have consisted in the emptying out of the villages, towns and cities (both small and mid-size) of a large part of their inhabitants and activities to the profit of soulless and lifeless suburbs. These policies, from which few areas have escaped, have been articulated around this triptych: urban sprawl, shopping centers and car ownership.

The academic researcher Gabriel Dupuy³ has shown how the totality of public and private decisions made in the field of urban planning over the course of the last few decades has contributed to the establishment of a veritable system of “automobile dependency”: consistent public investment made in favor of highways, beltways, interchanges and traffic circles – and to the detriment of the renovation of aging railroad lines and the development of bicycle routes – has made possible and favored the spread of sparsely filled suburbs devoted to single-family homes. These neighborhoods, which have few, if any, businesses or public services, have insufficient populations to warrant public transportation, which makes the use of cars indispensable – a vicious cycle that frequently leads to the purchase of several cars per household.

This situation produces the feeling of relegation to a lower rank felt by a number of the inhabitants of these areas, whose way of life is completely urban in character and who, as a result, aspire to accede to the jobs, services and amenities of the city, for both themselves and their children, but who attain them with

¹ Stéphane Lecler, « Les difficultés des “gilets jaunes” sont la conséquence de cinquante ans de politique d’urbanisme » published in *Le Monde* on 2 January 2019. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 14 January 2019. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted. Thanks to Jean-Pierre Baudet for bringing this text to our attention.

² According to *Le Monde*, Stéphane Lecler is an urban planner who “has held various positions in the field of transportation and urban planning at both the local and national levels of government. He currently works in Paris’ city hall.”

³ Note by *Le Monde*: Professor Emeritus of Spatial Planning at the Université de Paris-I-Panthéon-Sorbonne.

increasing difficulty. As a result, these people are hypersensitive to the price of automobile fuel.⁴

The need for encounters

Fifty years ago, the philosopher Henri Lefebvre⁵ alerted his readers to the risks of the fragmentation of spaces and social groups caused by this explosion of the cities. According to him, the solution to these centrifugal tendencies lay in the affirmation and effective implementation of a “right to the city,” a condition for the preservation and deepening of human civilization through access to the services and places for exchanges and encounters offered by urban centrality.

This ambition is more relevant today than ever before. The fact that the “Yellow Vest” movement hasn’t been very concerned with the middle and working classes living in the big cities and metropolises confirms the observation, that despite appearances, everyday life is probably easier and more tolerable there than in the suburbs. The functional and social proximity and diversity that characterize the urban areas – the mixture of residences, employers, businesses and services – increase the opportunities for encounters, jobs, diversions and the autonomy of young people, all at a [relatively] low cost where mobility is concerned.

The fraternity, conviviality and solidarity in evidence at the traffic circles occupied by the “Yellow Vests” reveal a strong need for encounters, exchanges and helping hands, which are increasingly lacking in the everyday lives of a number of these people, and neither the television nor the weekly trip to the shopping center really compensates for their absence.

Downtown areas in a state of clinical death

The development of suburban shopping centers in our country and the closure of businesses in the villages and towns that result from it, which is without equivalent in the rest of Europe and is perfectly described by the journalist⁶ Olivier

⁴ An increase in taxes on fuel purchases is one of the main reasons for the Yellow Vests’ protests.

⁵ Cf. *Le droit a la ville* (Paris, Éditions Anthropos, 1968). But Jean-Pierre Baudet points out that Lefebvre was not the first to offer a strong critique of urban planning. Cf. Raoul Vaneigem, “Comments Against Urban Planning,” and Guy Debord, “Critique of Urban Planning,” both published in *Internationale situationniste* #6 (August 1961) and available in English here: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/is6.html>.

⁶ Note by *Le Monde*: and contributor to *Le Monde*.

Razemon in his investigation *Comment la France a tué ses villes*⁷ (Rue de l'Échiquier, 2016), sadly illustrates this loss of social connections.

These *private* temples of commodity consumption stoke the desire to buy things, as well as certain frustrations, without any of the qualities or possibilities that one finds in a real urban public space. And though our country is already over-equipped with shopping centers, hundreds of thousands of additional square meters [of such spaces] will be opened up in the course of the next few years, in a head-long rush that none of the innumerable laws and regulatory commissions established in the last forty years will manage to regulate, to the detriment of thousands of hectares of farmland and natural areas. The commercial vacancy rate in French town centers reached the unprecedented level of 11 percent in 2017 and surpassed 20 percent in a number of small and middle-sized villages, whose centers are in state of clinical death and present an image of hopelessness to those who still inhabit them. Thus a part of history, a part of French civilization and national identity, which is disappearing right before our eyes, is the victim of irresponsible policies.⁸

The drama lies in the fact that the disastrous model of the suburban shopping center is now being adopted by public services, hospitals, health centers, sports facilities, cultural establishments, etc., which are increasingly leaving the town centers and implanting themselves nearby beltways and interchanges in places that have no history or [inherent] qualities and are only accessible by car, despite the facts that only a part of the population is motorized and that young people and the elderly are even less so than others.

Encouraging a reasonable density

So, what should we do to remedy these developments, which have such disastrous social and environmental consequences? A few simple measures can be

⁷ *How France Has Killed its Cities.*

⁸ But, as Jean-Pierre Baudet has noted in an email to the translator, this situation is not simply the result of bad policy. “‘Urban planning’ is only the concrete implementation of the conditions of life that are required by a society dominated by the submission to work and commodity consumption. ‘Urban planning’ is anything but an error made by the political class. Without its organization of everyday life in its perfect alienation, in ‘slices of life’ (housing, work, consumption, entertainment) that are programmed and bound together by the indispensable automobile, capitalist domination would hardly have any chance of survival. It is ‘urban planning’ that guarantees economic alienation as an organized totality and that confers upon it the solidity that results in the repetitive gestures of everyday life, the abandonment of any aesthetic or poetic meaning, the nonexistence of any civility and the undisputed ascension of consumerist solipsism [...] [One can] never separate ‘urban planning’ from its real social function, which is the organization of the terrain of domination by the commodity economy.”

rapidly put into place by the national government and by local representatives who have an expert knowledge of the urban planning policies of their districts: organize urban planning at the most basic level of life [*l'échelle des bassins de vie*], which is the only pertinent one, by confiding the responsibility for local urban planning to the inter-municipal authorities, with development programmed by the ALUR⁹ law of 2014, which must be finalized; reinvest heavily in the centers of large and middle-sized villages by renovating dilapidated houses and by encouraging a reasonable density in those areas, which often have remarkable patrimonial qualities, so that new inhabitants will feel welcome there, which is an ambition developed in 2018 by the governmental program “*Action cœur de ville*,”¹⁰ which must be amplified; achieve as rapidly as possible the objective of “net-zero artificialization of the soil” promised by Nicolas Hulot in the biodiversity plan that was announced in July 2018; decree an immediate moratorium on the opening of new shopping centers and implement an active policy that urbanizes existing ones by improving access to them via public transportation and active methods (bicycles) and by transforming them into real city neighborhoods that include housing, community facilities and green spaces that are accessible to all; aid town-center businesses by modernizing and developing new services that are funded by taxes on home deliveries made by Internet sites and on parking lots at shopping centers; and, finally, improve public transportation lines and active methods of travel between rural and suburban areas and urban centers by way of frequent and rapid connections that operate in the spirit of partnership.

The adage of the Middle Ages that proclaimed “city air makes you free” remains completely valid today. To fight against the “house arrest” denounced by the “Yellow Vests,” we must implement policies that allow each person to completely enjoy the “right to the city,” which must never be reserved just for the inhabitants of the town centers, but should profit the entirety of the population that aspires to be part of society.

⁹ Note by *Le Monde: Accès au Logement et un Urbanisme Rénové* (Access to Housing and Renewed Urban Planning).

¹⁰ “Heart of the City Action.”