

Color and Politics

by Michael Curtis



It's not that easy being green, when I think it would be nicer being red, or yellow, or something much more colorful than that, even in a blue world alone. Certainly, most political parties agree even about about green when choosing colors, as well as symbols, rosettes and ties, officially or informally, to represent them or their point of view. Colors are part of the identity of parties, or of ways of life, as lavender and pink often refer to homosexuality, or gold to capitalism, or orange to Christian democracy, red to leftism and revolution or blue to conservatism, except in American politics, or green for environmentalism, or black for right wing, fascist or Nazi policies, and now by ISIS. Shifts in color used by a party may reflect changes in policy. Some colors may be avoided: no party, for fear of being considered uninteresting or dull, is likely to adopt grey.

To the distress of the world, black has been found interesting. Blackshirts, Italian squadristi, date from March 1919, formed of disaffected soldiers and paramilitary groups as opponents of political and economic organizations of socialists, then against communists, Catholics, and trade unionists. With original membership of about 200,000 dressed in black uniforms and prone to violence and intimidation they were loyal to their leader Benito Mussolini, later Il Duce, who became important with the March on Rome on October 28, 1922.

Blackshirts were imitated in many countries, especially in Britain with the rise in 1932 of the British Union of Fascists led by Sir Oswald Mosley, anticommunist, antisemitic, eager to replace parliamentary democracy with dictatorship. The BUF was dissolved in 1940 after Mosley and prominent members of his party were arrested and interned as a threat to national security in World War II.

With the advance of environmentalism, color green may be more present in politics. Already, there is a plan drafted in Congress for a Green New Deal intended to cut greenhouse gas emission, and generating all U.S. electricity from clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy source.

Recent political activity in France and in the U.S. reflect the political use of color.

First France, where yellow has become a symbol of resistance to governmental authority manifested by the *gilets jaunes*, Yellow Vest movement. At its start, largely organized through social media groups, as opposition to the proposed governmental increase in fuel tax, on November 17, 2018, 287,000 protestors demonstrated. In spite of proposed government concessions, further demonstrations took place each week for thirteen consecutive weekends though the numbers who took to the streets has declined: on February 7, 2019 it was 69,000.

The color Yellow has appeared to be a unifying factor for the Movement which has no formal structure or leadership, or common theme. On the contrary among the protestors there are internal divisions, with differing proposals, including the storming of the Elysee Palace, the presidential residence, direct talks with government, lower taxes and social charges, equal pay for men and women, institutional changes such as combining the positions of president and prime minister, and citizens' initiative referendum.

However, from the beginning the Yellow Vests have been violent, and protestors have in some places created a virtual war zone, fighting not only the police but also infighting each other as rival groups did in Lyon on February 9, 2019. Violence has included destruction of boards of the National Assembly, the use of tear gas canisters, bottles of wine as projectiles, graffiti thrown on French national places, tollbooths on major waterways burned down, defacing of the Arc de Triomphe and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The most egregious action has been an arson attack on the country home in Motreff in Finistere department of Brittany of Richard Ferrand, President of the National Assembly, and close friend of President Emmanuel Macron.

In spite of the violence, injuries occurring, and losses to tourism and to businesses, the Yellow Vests are, according to an ITOP poll on February 4, 2019, not condemned. About 58% of the population have positive view of them, 31% supporting and 27% expressing sympathy. Another poll, Harris, in December, 2018, reported that 72% supported the Yellow Vests though 85% opposed violence.

The Yellow Vests constitute a puzzling problem. In a sense they can be seen as angry, populist, nihilist, without meaningful or specific target but with symptoms of collective despair and little hope for a a better world. They, as people supposedly abandoned in the Peripheral France and in a globalized world, though in general they are not poor. They

can be seen in a negative way as hating elites, those coming from ENA, and also concerned with immigration from Africa.

Yet interestingly in the rhetoric that is spouted in the demonstrations, there are references to parallels with the French Revolution of 1789. They sing the Marseillaise, not the Communist Internationale, symbolically wave the tricolor not the Communist red flag. A march was held to the Place de la Concorde in Paris, the place of many executions during the French Revolution. It remains to be seen whether Macron, a complex individual, can imitate King Louis XVI and get together the elite, clergy, and citizens to discuss finances.

The color white has not often been used symbolically, except as signals of surrender or despair. Such was not the case in the U.S. House of Representatives, on February 5, 2019 when Democratic Congresswomen dressed in white at the Presidential State of Union address as a general protest of President Trump's handling of issues, health care, equal pay, issues that women think important.

This is not the first time that some women wore white for political purposes. This was done by Shirley Chisholm in 1969, Geraldine Ferraro in 1984, and Hillary Clinton in July 2016, as well as women at the presidential address in February 2017. A century ago, the British suffragettes on the original women's march on February 28, 1909 used white to symbolize purity in person and purpose.

It remains to be seen if the Congressional women in white, even those running for the Presidency, are equally pure in person and purpose.