"A Renewal of Protest? Observing the Yellow Vests through the Biographical Lens"

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Introduction

The illustrated methodological reflection that we present here was carried out on the basis of an ongoing investigation into the yellow vests movement that began in France in November 2018 and continued for several months and even more than a year for some groups. The movement was revived again in June 2020, but was much more subdued. Our commentary is therefore primarily, but not only, linked with the scientific debates on social movements and collective action (cf. our paper in the Theme Panel "New Perspectives on Protest: Ordinary Citizens in Extraordinary Movements"). It is also more largely part of discussions regarding unconventional political participation and what connects ordinary citizens to "politics". These connections should be understood according to two meanings (Buton et al., 2016): is political in the *strict* sense (*politics*) that which is the business of political leaders, and therefore that which falls (or may fall - Lagroye 2003) within the scope of specialised political activity, the political sphere; is political in the *broadest* sense (*the political*) everything that is the subject of a critical analysis which is publicly valid (Boltanski, 1999 ; Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006), in most cases because it relates to a collective issue for a given community (Eliasoph, 1998). In studying the biographical stories of some yellow vests who are first-time protesters and thus have no prior activist involvement in an organisation and with little or no experience of the protest movement, we were also interested in their connections to politics in the sense of these two meanings. The analysis is based not only on their (potential) prior voting preferences, their opinions of politicians and legitimate political organisations (institutions, parties, trade unions, NGOs, etc.), but also their ways of thinking about community and categorising some issues as problematic and political (or not). In interviews, we listened to them explain their usual connections with politics and learned how this has changed through their involvement with the yellow vests.

Although in the study of social movements (as in all social sciences) there is currently a plethora of publications of a methodological nature (Kapiszewski et al., 2015), particularly on the methods of ethnographic work in activist circles (Della Porta, 2014), it seems to us that the use of biographical interviews is marginal, or at least not considered especially legitimate. In addition, it is very significant that the majority of works focusing on the biography of activists concentrate only on the biographical impacts of involvement (McAdam, 1999; Giugni, 2004 and 2013) and that since the pioneering study by Doug McAdam (1989), they primarily consider them from a quantitative perspective (need to accumulate cases) and with a strongly retrospective approach (several years, even several decades after involvement). It is very rare for

these studies to look into a small number of cases that is fewer than about 20 (less than 10% of studies according to the meta-analysis by Vestergren et al., 2016). Although the groundwork for this was laid by, in particular, D. Della Porta (1992), K. Blee (2013) and J. Auyero (2003), we believe that the challenge of analysing the biographies of activists through ethnographic interviews, even during the movement, merits discussion.

In doing so, we must clarify that before this investigation into the yellow vests (which was also based on survey research, Reungoat et al., RFSP 2019), we had not conducted work on social movements, although we were led to become interested in the topic[1]. Nevertheless, we are by and large more accustomed to the challenges of using biographical tools in social sciences (Buton, 2004; Buton et al., 2016). In this presentation, we do not want to fall into discussing methodologism as an abstract concept that is far removed from any hard facts in the field (we are all familiar with Paul Lazarsfeld's joke[2]), nor proclaim the innovation of a tool or put forward the umpteenth (sociological) revision.

Our objective is more simply to bring to light the ethnographic and biographical interview as a tool for our specific field and for the questions that we are asking (in a manner somewhat similar to Schaffer, 2014). Our approach is part of a research trend that can be described first as both constructivist and realist (social facts are constructions that become conventions, cf. Desrosières, 2010, in line with Durkheim's definition of institutions), second as processual (the social world is a product of history and is thus never totally determined, cf. Fillieule, 2019 for involvement, inspired by the interactionist concept of careers), and finally as following on from the works of Bourdieu and other French sociologists (Bourdieu et al., 1991) in aiming to be inseparably dispositionalist and contextualist. According to the concept set out by B. Lahire (2012), we understand individual practices as being the product of social dispositions AND the context of their activation and/or being put to the test ("dispositions + contexts = practices"). For approximately thirty years, following Bourdieu's sociology and the two first "schools" of Chicago, a significant proportion of French sociologists and political specialists have moved closer to ethnographic and biographical approaches, which having given rise to very active debates[3], especially with regard to the relationship between the researcher and the researched and the way of establishing its place in thoughts[4]. Lastly, our analysis is also drawn from the notion of protagonism, which was developed by Haïm Burstin (2013), a French Revolution historian, and introduced into French social sciences by B. Gobille and Q. Deluermoz (2015) as a means of considering political crises or "critical situations" (Dobry 2000, 2009) as "protagonistic situations".

In a very typical manner, the use of ethnographic and biographical interviews came about to participate in a conundrum illustrated by other investigations (particularly

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[1] Notably in researching the fight against AIDS (Buton, 2005, 2009) and on victims of war (Jouhanneau, 2013, 2015)

[2] George Bernard Shaw wrote: "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." (Man and Superman, 1903); Paul Lazarsfeld added: "and those who have nothing to teach, become methodologists" (which he felt is "an unfair misunderstanding of methodology") (presidential address at the 57th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Washington DC, September 1, 1962).

[3] See Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales 1986; Revue Française de Sociologie 1990; Politix 1994.

[4] As demonstrated by the French reception of Bourdieu, 1999.

quantitative studies): the yellow vests movement is defined by both the strong presence of profiles that are not usually seen among protesters and the existence of original forms of action (for the French sphere of social movements). On one side, a large portion, if not the majority, of yellow vests were new to protesting, especially at the start of the movement. There were also a number of collaborations and tensions between these ordinary citizens, who are removed from politics, and the activist networks that formed another significant section of the yellow vests. On the other side, the movement employed actions that appeared to be relatively original and largely made up of informal occupations and blockades, regular protests that were not structured by prior organisation, citizen assemblies and heavy use of social media. The movement thus developed modes of action that were simultaneously on a local and national scale, physical and digital, disorganised and regular, deliberative and riotous, which can be compared (as they have been thoroughly) to some crisis situations in France (1789, 1968), as well as more recent, revolutionary (Nuit Debout protests, Arab Spring) and post-2011 anti-austerity incidents.

The question is thus as simple as it is formidable: to what extent is the (relative) renewal of forms of protest, from involvement in the movement to possible disengagement, related to the (relative) newness of those involved? It is formidable because it is obviously not for us to naively claim to draw a link of simple causality between the two phenomena, nor to note the "originality" of a contentious repertoire (as defined by Tilly), but rather to examine them. We know that highlighting originality is a journalistic, but also scientific, cliché (making it possible to add value to the subject by differentiating it from older, even archaic, forms of unconventional participation), and that the modes of action described are in essence in no way unprecedented (Mathieu, 2019). It is rather a matter of understanding the fact that new protesters, lacking the essential knowledge and protest means of experienced activists, become involved and then create, adopt, use and support some modes of action, which have been tested in most instances by the latter. In other words, we hope that, thanks to a tool that allows us to conduct documented, thorough and in-depth analyses of individual cases of involvement, we will be able to clarify the social logics of protest and the specific forms that it takes, the formulation of which also partly escapes the main parties concerned themselves. It is also formidable because research questions are never purely scientific, but depend on the institutional and practical conditions for producing sociological research, which keep the sound (and expensive) quantitative investigations for research institutes or specially funded projects and leave qualitative investigation through interviews or long-term immersion as the only fieldwork available for "artisanal" sociology.

With part of our team in the field since November 2018, we were able to conduct a series of interviews in February 2019 with yellow vests whom we met on the very site of their involvement (roundabouts, protests, assemblies). Our investigation involved a localised perspective: all of our interviewees, currently about 20, belonged to the same area of protest around a large city in the south of France, although their activity sometimes reached beyond this scope (to other cities, including Paris). Some of our interviewees knew each other, and all of them knew that we had been (to some extent) present "in" the movement and that we were not only interested in this, but also sympathetic towards the cause. They often suggested that we meet other "interesting" yellow vests who they were close with. These interviews vary depending on the degree of acquaintance or even familiarity between the interviewer and the

interviewee (sometimes quite strong, sometimes almost non-existent), depending on the methods for leading the interview (types of question preferred) and depending on whether it was possible to repeat the interview (we sought this option as much as possible to extend the line of questioning). The ethnographic and biographical aspect of the interview was developed to varying extents and was particularly more difficult during interviews with more than one person at a time (couples, friends); the case that we will present here is part of those on which we have the most information. However, all of the interviews shared the same general guidelines of three major themes: the biographies, the connection with politics and involvement in the yellow vests. All were also based on the idea that it is important, as far as possible, to not be satisfied with simply collecting opinions, but to also describe behaviours, social connections and events. The point of the interview is, of course, giving time to the interviewees to express themselves in their own words, rather than taking refuge in the expression of these viewpoints, to which survey research too often reduces the (supposed) opinions of their own research subjects in line with their own analysis categories (Schaffer, 2014). Last but not least, the work of conducting interviews consists of more than just the actual time spent interviewing and the tricky task of transcribing the conversation into written form. In our research, we dedicated a significant amount of time to collectively analysing the interviews carried out, challenging our interpretations, explaining agreements and disagreements, (re)reading the verbatim transcripts and connecting them with the stories and larger contexts of which the thus re-established biographies are a part. One of the attributes of our work is largely based on pooling our data and analyses, which allows us to combat the risk of overinterpretation, an ever-present phenomenon when a sociologist is alone with "their" data.

Before entering into an in-depth presentation of the case of a first-time yellow vest protester (2), that of Stéphane, we shall outline our methodological approach and discuss the challenges and the literature on the ethnographic and biographical approach via interviews (1).

1. *From the ethnographic and biographical interview as a tool to analysing the stories of yellow vests*

It is largely illusory to present, as part of this paper, the discussion of a tool (interview) and a concept (approach) that are used so often in European and American social sciences. There is ample literature on the matter and the timelines and "pioneering" works are primarily restricted to their own discipline (history, sociology, anthropology, political science, etc.) and to the national contexts (even if the authors and works are circulated from one country to another). Therefore, we intend to only specify how the tool of ethnographic and biographical interview, which brings together two sometimes refined traditions, allows us to address and consider biographical stories and forms of involvement.

According to Stéphane Beaud and Florence Weber (2010), whose *Guide de l'enquête de terrain* has made a considerable contribution to encouraging the return of ethnographic practices in sociology and political science in France, we cannot truly talk about ethnographic research if the researcher has not spent time in an environment of inter-knowledge that allows him to understand how individuals are members of multiple groups and to understand the impacts of reputation. In this

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respect, we are not ethnographers of the yellow vests. Our practice of observation was only participatory at times (it was distant even at the start, as it was a matter of completing questionnaires). Our involvement in the movement was both consistent and unequal in the time spent and set apart from the relatively constant presence at irregular weekly protests (for very practical reasons connected to our working conditions). Nevertheless, this involvement was sufficiently significant and, above all, focused on an area of protest to enable us to cross-reference some pieces of information with those that we were given by the interviewees who we questioned. It encouraged us to become familiar with local protest spaces (that we now know in detail) alongside our interview subjects, thus enabling many additional meetings that proved effective to a certain extent in observing the impacts of reputation. In a way, mainly when repeated, the interview thus takes place in a sequence that makes it possible to go back and forth between developing hypotheses and gathering information, thus balancing out knowledge through immersion, similar to our goal to recreate as astutely as possible, for each interviewee, their networks and social spaces in which they developed (family, work, friends, leisure, etc.).

The recommendations from Beaud and Weber go beyond immersion. Their definition of field surveys also reflects two priorities on which the supporters of ethnography in American political science also concentrate[5]. Schatz (2009) highlighted the importance of the researcher being aware of the significance that those being observed approve of their practices; Yanow (2009) emphasised the defining feature of narrative and reflective writing. These two latter criteria, traditional in conducting interviews for ethnographers (Heyl, 2007), are also important to us. Conducting ethnographic interviews is a matter of keeping in mind the knowledge of anthropology (on observation as a research technique, on attention to language and categories of "native" classification) and the Chicago school (on taking into account individual experiences, inter-personal dynamics and meanings specific to the interviewee), as well as certain constructivist and postmodern criticisms (on the implicit approaches to research or the contingent and focused nature of discourse). This is also a matter of not forgetting that the actual interview is part of a larger sequence (well described by Kvale 1996[6]), from the development of an interview guide and a series of instructions to the final writing, all of which requires rigorous reflection.

In truth, we see ethnographic research as being part of a broader form of epistemology that is specific to social and historical sciences (Buton, 2008), which requires a long-term empirical undertaking concerned with the contextualisation and inherent meaning of practices and categories, reflexivity in the use of methods and tools, and care in using the available theorisation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This epistemology therefore maintains that human and social sciences are sciences that are extremely specific and tricky because they confront the researcher with the common humanity that is shared with the subject, although they also carry with them a desire to break away from common sense, including with that of those being studied. In other words, they employ various methods (statistics, interview, observation and all possible combinations of methods possible) to achieve the proper distance between the academic and the subject that is needed for objectification, this distance being sometimes already there (in time, space or social sphere) or having to be developed (when investigating in one's own environment). It could be said that

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[5] In France, M. Avanza, S. Mazouz and B. Pudal conveyed the concept in this context.
[6] "thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, reporting".

research into social sciences should always overcome the distance between the researcher and the subject being researched, and thus indicates two-fold work of first de-singularising (objectification) and second re-singularising (restoring their particularities to the cases studied) our subject (Buton and Mariot, 2009).

The challenge of this double movement becomes all the more important when our interviews primarily focus on the life story model: we asked our interviewees to talk about their childhood, their family, their professional life, etc. However, this study requires that additional attention be paid to the distance between the interviewer and the interviewee and to the relationship that is formed before, during and after the interview, in the narrow sense, in addition to taking a stand on the crucial issue of what testimonies reveal about the realities they describe. We know that in the context of an interview (whether ethnographic, biographical or other), the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee determines in part the information gathered (a fact observed is intrinsically linked to the conditions under which it is possible or created, which is also the case for the positivist model of survey research, although the implications are impossible to evaluate accurately). Of the potential analogies for thinking about the position of the researcher, Kvale (1996) supported that of the miner (who is interested in "rich veins") and the traveller (who recounts conversation with people they meet). Other researchers have highlighted that those being interviewed were not simply sources of information, but possibly collaborators (Mishler, 1986), especially in the sense of emancipation. We believed that these approaches seemed suggestive: we sometimes look for "good customers" for the analysis, those who are talkative and easy-going (but not all are like this), we like to use parts of stories that we have been told and we think that interviews can help investigations to reformulate some points, even becoming aware of some determining factors (for example). Better still, we imagine eventually revisiting them to invite them to recount their experience of the yellow vests in front of the camera. However, the social sciences researchers lose a lot of their own value if they act only as miners, travellers or liberators. While the interviewer must be aware of the connection to the investigation, it is to verify their interpretation – which claims to be objective – and, particularly with a life story, to not fall into the trap of questioning the truthfulness of the material when it is actually enough to listen and reproduce what is being said as people talk about themselves. No piece of material provides information all on its own and the biographical interview is only a tool for analysis and sociological work. It is essential to keep in mind that "the biographical technique (especially when the life story is obtained by directly questioning the subjects (...)) aims, by nature, to trigger the illusion of transparency in social facts, the reconciliation of the subject and the object of knowledge, the social subject becoming here the analyst of their own story and the interview relationship enhancing the maieutic method" and that, for this reason, it is not necessary "to treat it like a mode of social knowledge that is radically distinct from other means of building sociological information" (Chamboredon 1983).

Although it is conceivable to be "working the hyphen" (Fine, 1994) and to reflect on the result of the interview and its purpose alongside interviewees, this is by no means necessary for a sociological study. In a similar fashion, while there is a need to take into account the "challenge of turning the anthropological lens back upon the self", this is not the objective of sociological research. The aim of this is to understand both a story and the conditions under which it is created, its contexts and relevant social

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spaces. The purpose of a biographical approach is in part (de-singularising) in analysing the conditions in how it came to be, the interview itself providing some of the aspects, but never the entire story (the actors do not have turnkeys) ; on the other hand (re-singularising), in examining its own specific characteristics, which are different to others, including those of family and friends. In other words, sociological study consists of extricating the content of the conversation held with the interviewee to clarify the knowledge obtained beforehand (or at the same time) on the structures and interactions that determine it in part. To put it bluntly, it is necessary to continue complying with the principle of partial non-consciousness for actors and, in particular, the principle of non-consciousness regarding their social class. In *The Craft of Sociology* (written in 1968) Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron mention Hoggart and focus on a text by Schatzman and Strauss (1955) to explain all that is required in this interview situation. Although old, the lesson is still valuable.

We are therefore far from the model of the biographical method proposed by D. Bertaux, largely disseminated within the International Sociological Association (ISA) from the end of the 1970s, to which a large section of French sociology very quickly became opposed (Chamboredon, 1983, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1986): taking into account the actor's agency does not make it possible to forget the structures that act within (even if they do not determine it). Although Bourdieu appeared himself to give in to the siren call of familiarity between the interviewer and interviewee (1999), he then returned, admittedly to old field of investigation (Manet), to the importance of considering not only the effects of a specific environment on forming habitus, but also the effects of all of the environments and spaces that have been passed through and experienced across a lifetime (family, work, locality, etc.) by the parties involved. Complying with the principle of non-consciousness, when we know the life story, it means not only adding as much depth as possible to the description of spaces crossed by the interviewees and objectifying these spaces, possibly by means of ad hoc interviews (if the sociological literature does not already provide enough), but also, and primarily, reflecting on everything "outside the field" that the interviewees only skim over, even if they do not reveal much.

To take an example – one that is very simplified – one of our interviewees revealed very little about her family and occupation because she did not consider these important to the subject of the interview – her actions as a yellow vest – and because the distance from the researcher made it more difficult to share information that is considered personal. However, her experience of relative social downgrading (compared to her expectations in terms of academic future and her parents' objective position) and her first professional experiences as a temporary care worker (medical-psychological assistance in a care home) contributes – in addition to other elements – to understanding not only this first-time involvement itself (the "reasons" for a revolt), but also the specific forms it takes: those of a rather individual and isolated rallying in actions that are often risky and therefore very real, but always in subordinate positions. As we shall demonstrate with Stéphane, the value of using the biographical interview tool, when based on prior and maintained familiarity, lies simply in the possibility of having multiple analyses, thus making it possible to understand what makes a social actor become involved and "adopt" this or that type of action. The danger here is in overinterpretation by highlighting a coherence, a linearity or a need for a connection between life story and protest activity. Therefore, attention must be paid to the tensions and contradictions that can be seen in life

stories (and the activity). The question of familiarity with the interviewees must no longer be taken for granted and considered as necessarily being an advantage.

Alongside the hotly debated question of the biography in history, the "life story" in sociology was originally established in the fundamental work *The Polish Peasant*, before being further developed, notably in works by the interactionist sociology of the Chicago school (Becker, 1966). In the French scientific environment, our approach picks up from both the works of Chamboredon (1983), who considered the biographical tool as a technique among others and refused to separate the study of a life story from that of its relevant contexts, and those that defend a broader dispositionist-contextualist perspective (Lahire, 2012) that is inspired by the field/habitus theoretical model developed by Pierre Bourdieu, while going beyond it. In addition, the study of individual cases must not fall into the trap of opposing common and academic sense, with regard to the individual and society (Elias, 1993). Interview technique presents common biases, especially of an academic nature, which are well documented in the literature. The most important factor, in the context of our study, concerns the social distance (and, to a greater extent, the relationship) between the interviewer and interviewee, particularly when conducting interviews with those from the working class (Schatzman and Strauss, 1955). For interviewers with strong cultural capital, as we are, the risk is primarily in legitimist or relativist (even "miserabilist" or "populist") interpretations when looking at the social practices of working class or low-income interviewees who we are researching (Grignon, Passeron, 1989). The main bias is, of course, relativist: in our field, there is a considerable risk of giving in to populist promotion of the social subject (the oppressed people who "finally" become activists) and the temptation to re-establish agency for groups that are forgotten or marginalised.

In the sociology of social movements and political organisation, it is generally standard to conduct interview sessions from a prosopographic, therefore quantitative, perspective. These surveys are rarely exhaustive and often function by creating cases that are hoped to be sufficiently "contrasted" to be representative. We took a portion of our questioning from studies of activist careers, inspired by the works of E. Hugues and H. Becker, by asking our interviewees about the conditions surrounding their introduction to the yellow vests and how it came about, about their activity "in" the movement and potentially about their disengagement or withdrawal (Fillieule, 2018). Due to its nature, the "biographical impacts" of involvement are difficult to imagine for a movement that is both new and topical. Nevertheless, we have still given our full attention to the effects of a "life in yellow" on the family, professional and political lives of those being interviewed (however, "career changes" are naturally rare in a relatively short period of time). On the other hand, one concept appeared to us to be particularly heuristic in considering the process of questioning while in the middle of doing so: protagonism. Developed by the historian Haïm Burstin (2005) in his study of the Saint-Marcel suburb in Paris during the revolutionary era (1789-1794), it is the subject of strong discussion between French researchers with regard to considering the participation of ordinary citizens during crises or critical situations (Gobille and Deluermoz, 2015; Goujon and Shukan, 2015 for example), such as that triggered by the yellow vests movement (as described below). In the context of political crisis (as defined by Dobry 2009), which has a specific grammar marked by possibility and uncertainty, ordinary citizens have a feeling of living through events from day to day and can be established as protagonists, meaning that they throw

themselves into the unknown area (for them) of political action: they are no longer content to simply go along with events, but want to participate, see what is happening, step into the limelight and let it be known. Their act of speaking up strengthens their feeling of living through history, more so if they protest in the knowledge of creating history, and the desire to be recognised as doing so, by being at the forefront and looking for forms of recognition (which could be media sources today or, in revolutionary times, instituted by the authorities in place). Incidentally, these steps into the limelight consist of more than just speaking out on political issues, but can also be based on very simple, very specific actions and individual gestures of support (bringing food, making things).

2. Stéphane, "a yellow vest for two generations"

As part of this paper, we want to illustrate the purpose of our ethnographic and biographical approach through the case of Stéphane, whose place in the yellow vests is worth evaluating through astute description of his involvement, his social and professional life and his connection to politics. The materials collected made it possible to better understand both the reasons for Stéphane's involvement and the form that it takes within the movement.

First of all is a very succinct summary of the yellow vests movement in France. It appeared on 17 November 2018 in the large-scale occupation and blockade of roundabouts across the country to protest the increase in an environmental tax on fuel that had been criticised online for several months. Against all expectations, the protests grew rapidly, but without an official representation making itself clear, over the end of November and in December 2018. In addition to the occupations of roundabouts taking place were the opening of motorway tolls, blockades of fuel stores and hypermarket warehouses and protests that, from 24 November, 1 and 8 December, took on a very pronounced riotous nature, especially in areas of power around the Champs-Elysées. The movement had very quickly created a major political crisis that led President Macron and his government to make concessions that were judged (at first) as being substantial (speech on 10 December) and to adopt clear repressive measures. Like any political crisis, the end of 2018 lead to a general challenge of the republican government and representative democracy, fed by continuous media coverage (especially by 24-hour news channels) and a rise in those speaking out in the political sphere, among intellectuals and experts and the population itself, while support for the movement was largely expressed through survey-based opinion polls. The feeling that something is happening and that it should be reported, whether discouraged or encouraged, also became widespread, which led to huge and all-out discussion, both in written and audio-visual form, and various historical precedents being dredged up (references to the French Revolution and May 68 were gradually established). One part of this discussion that cannot be ignored is the factor of the yellow vests themselves, especially online[7], but also taking the form of surveys carried out by social science researchers, including the authors of this paper, throughout 2019.

Although the rallies saw a downward trend across 2019 and more so in the first quarter of 2020 (marked by the overall quarantine from mid-March to mid-May in response to the coronavirus pandemic), the yellow vests movement's ability to

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[7] For example, photographers such as Serge d'Ignazio.

endure, which was unprecedented in France, was striking. Weekly protests held every Saturday in several large cities, defined like so many as "actions" by the yellow vests themselves, that became increasingly violent and heavily suppressed by the police and the justice system were added to other forms of expression. Despite the prohibition and their dismantling by law enforcement, the roundabouts persisted or were "taken back" here and there in France over the course of the year. Local citizen assemblies were also established, but most were at risk of being shut down after summer 2019. Lastly, organisational, structural and coordinating initiatives came to light, largely without result, with the notable exception of the Assemblées Des Assemblées (ADA). These initiatives, of which there were five between January 2019 and March 2020, are ad hoc groups that aim to coordinate the movement on a national scale. Each local group of yellow vests (local groups or roundabouts) could send two representatives. The ADAs established a place to meet and exchange ideas on ways to continue the protest. One also voted to merge with the movement against pension reform in December 2019 – February 2020. Another trait struck observers and stood out in the first interviews: a strong section of the yellow vests are first-time protesters with no prior political involvement, from working-class and low-income backgrounds and seemingly belonging to a "marginalised" France, although this analysis category is too wide ranging to be precise (Bruneau et al., 2018), it refers at least to those who are the most "invisible" or "hindered" groups in the country (Beaud et al., 2006; Jeanpierre, 2019) and those who would ordinarily not express themselves and their discontent in this fashion.

Stéphane's involvement is undoubtedly representative of a small minority of yellow vests in that he combines local, primarily in the *assemblée* faction (citizen assemblies in large cities), regional and national action, in his efforts to coordinate the movement, which led him to visit some of their "media personalities" and to become heavily involved in the ADAs. To put it another way, Stéphane currently has a level of notoriety that reaches beyond his local area, a large city in the south of France; without being identified as a leader by major national media sources, he has spoken in reports and documentaries, even on some local television studios. However, at first glance, Stéphane is a first-time protester who has never had long-term involvement in politics and nothing predisposed him to act in a social movement. From a working-class background, having not undertaken further university studies, he is a self-taught freelancer who, throughout a somewhat tumultuous professional career that has led him to travel, had a variety of projects in website design, became unemployed following job burnout and found himself at the start of the movement in November 2018.

We met Stéphane on several occasions and in different circumstances in the context of our investigation into the yellow vests, starting in December 2018. As he was identified very early on as an important actor in rallying in the city that was our main area of study and therefore considered by us as a first-choice source to understand this movement, Stéphane agreed to an initial 2.5-hour interview with ER in February 2019. He then met FB for an in-depth biographical interview (4 hours 40 minutes) in June 2019 and then for an additional interview (3 hours 20 minutes) in June 2020, with others planned. We thus have a corpus of full interviews (more than 10 hours) that are supplemented by several exchanges during protests and during some ADAs. For lack of a place in this presentation, we did not request many extracts from interviews or fieldwork notes. This means that the presentation of Stéphane's social

life will be summarised briefly here, although it will have the advantage of not being reduced it to its most basic sociological details: a man of approximately 40 years old, whose parents are working class (labourer and "casual work"), unemployed after having been (throughout a tumultuous career) primarily a computer graphics designer and web developer, no higher education qualifications, in a relationship, no children, has been living in the centre of a large French city for four years.

It can be said that we have a close, active relationship with Stéphane (exchanging texts and e-mails, going for a drink) and this is largely based on trust that is primarily supported by our own sympathy for the movement and our recognition of his personal contribution to it. Stéphane is unquestionably a "good customer" and doubly so as he provides a mine of information on the movement with shrewd analysis of its complexity and has proven to be willing to chat and talk about himself. However, he is also an ally with whom we want to establish other forms of collaboration (filmed accounts, for example). Lastly, this relationship is indivisibly founded on an intellectual agreement between academics and an ordinary, self-employed citizen on intellectual matters and in other areas, whose objective is also to tell the story by rebuilding his experience in written form. This explains the general tone of seriousness and reflection during the interviews: Stéphane wants to explain and clarify to us, as if teaching, and he has to try not to lose his train of thought when he digresses and addresses a wider audience through them. Even when referring to very personal aspects of his life, he remains exact, a skill obtained in part in the communication tasks that he carries out on behalf of the movement.

Stéphane's involvement in the movement is as much political as it is intellectual, as he quickly adopted the form of a testimony and is working to unify and consolidate the movement. At first glance, he felt distant from the first actions taken by the yellow vests – he has no car and lives in the city centre – but he went to a protest with his partner and took a camera to document what happened. In autumn 2019, after a period of job burnout in a small company and a complicated, bad experience moving to a new city with higher rents, Stéphane decided to live temporarily on benefits in order to complete several film projects – one of which is fiction – that he had had in mind for a number of years. In the era of smartphones and social media, producing images to document facts has become commonplace and widespread, which is in fact how Stéphane met the administrator of a yellow vests Facebook group for the city – through taking photos. Stéphane initially helped him, before quickly becoming involved in the local city centre assembly, which meets outside every week, and then in the communication committee for this assembly. He tells of how he immediately felt that communication is essential in a movement that wants to be horizontal and without leaders, which he likes. This gives him an opportunity to make use of his professional expertise (using a computer, drafting reports, developing IT tools, especially through networks, etc.) and he was given, almost by default, the task of representing the assembly at the first ADA, which took place in Commercy at the end of January 2019. From starting out being an observer who accumulated hours of footage, Stéphane has gradually become an important actor in the local fight, being present at general meetings, protests and even passing through some roundabout demonstration sites, but above all involved in the work of "unifying" ADAs. He took part in five ADAs, which throughout 2019 brought together several hundred yellow vests from all over France for two or three days, and he also organised one, which took up six months of his time. In doing so, he approached some media figures,

particularly because he contributed to developing the ADA's stances (as a charter or voted motions) and endeavours to establish its structure of national coordination, while still maintaining its horizontal nature. He has been asked to answer questions from journalists and to participate in televised debates; in particular, he has broken into public speaking alongside local politicians, to the point that he says he is now ready to debate the president of France or the minister of the Interior, or with well-known intellectuals who support the yellow vests. In addition, he is working on contributing to a collection of accounts and an analysis of the movement by other members, which was initiated by a historian who is a yellow vest member.

As we can see, this involvement is intense: Stéphane sees and presents it as a "project" and a "job", the guiding principle of which is in maintaining the unity of the movement against divisions that undermine it, and in particular against political misrepresentation, especially by left-wing movements (notably the LFI party, trade unions, "autonomists"). In the first two or three weeks of the movement, the yellow vests were encouraged by right-wing conservative and reactionary political and media forces and their movement was interpreted using the analogy of medieval peasant revolts, fascist associations from the 1930s and more recent movements that are opposed to government taxes, such as the *bonnets rouges*[8]. However, from mid-December 2019, the movement was heavily flooded with left-wing activists, particularly anarchists and trade unionists. The latter seem to have contributed to ousting the extreme right-wing activists and to directing the demands already being established towards social, fiscal and democratic justice, which were the demands set out at Commercy. In both the city being studied and the ADAs, the movement thus saw the meeting, collaboration and, sometimes, the opposition of first-time protesters and long-term activists. One of Stéphane's goals with the ADAs was to prevent the latter from getting the upper hand over the former, which would lead to a partisan aspect in the movement. On his part, it was a matter of ensuring that the yellow vests do not become more of a "leftist" movement so as not to ostracise some of the first-time protesters. In his opinion, the yellow vests are "a movement of people who do not have a movement", and although activists, such as those from Zone to Defend (ZAD) or Nuit Debout, can offer interesting points, starting with the practice of horizontality in debates and mistrust of spokespeople, they must not take over and damage the "intellectual collective" that is the foundation of the movement's inclusivity. This concern is translated in concrete terms, to give only one example, by the place given to ADAs. Stéphane is in favour of them only meeting at irregular intervals, so that they do not appear to be a sort of "government" of the yellow vests, the heart and soul of which is, above all, local and can be found at roundabouts, in villages and in citizen assemblies.

In addition to being heavily involved, Stéphane also contributes on an intellectual level, as he has, of course, a very considerable capacity for hard work, especially in maintaining connections between the yellow vests and preparing events, although he has only very little involvement in the group's demonstrations. This point is extremely important: Stéphane had attended protests for a long time and was convinced that police violence happened prior to, and actually led to, the riots. He was therefore outraged by the many injuries inflicted by police[9], seeing them as penalties handed down by the justice system on the yellow vests. He is in danger sometimes himself

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[8] Originating in Brittany in October 2013, the *Bonnets rouges (red hats)* movement protested against the introduced of an environmental tax on heavy vehicles and to maintain employment in the region.

(his camera was broken in clashes with law enforcement). However, he does not take part in organised activities in the region that involve direct contact with the police, such as blockades or occupation of roundabouts. He participates publicly as little as possible and less and less frequently. Over time he has become increasingly and strongly critical of violence by demonstrators in that it discredits the movement, especially in the mass media, which systematically and unsurprisingly focuses on the riotous and destructive aspect of the movement, which is certainly sensational but also morally condemnable.

Considering Stéphane's most fundamental characteristics, this type of commitment makes sense. As a white-collar worker with an unstable job on low income and living in the city centre, Stéphane is willing to invest his time primarily in observation, organisation and cooperative tasks. His "neutral" political position is more intriguing: while he feels relatively "left-wing", he does not claim it in the movement, which he intends to spare from any political exploitation. The interviews here provide initial answers. Voting for the left on and off, political culture was not passed on to him by his family or at school. In his family, it is more a question of indifference to politics and mistrust of politicians ("all rotten") that dominate viewpoints. At boarding school, he socialised more with those who, like him, had aspirations of an artistic career and his higher education came to an end after the first year at a well-known school for comic book design, where his taste for manga style design was not (yet) widely shared and valued. From the age of 19, he had to work as a freelancer, on a job-by-job basis, in a professional world with no trade unions and far from the places of intense political socialisation that universities can be. As with his work, however, he trained himself in political matters and acquired a vision of the world through the internet and social networks, according to which the powerful decide the fate of the world (he researched the Bilderberg Group in particular). His broad geographical mobility, in several cities in France, but also for a brief period in the United States (while he was in a relationship with an American student), his continued professional commitment, his passion for the arts (he draws comic strips, plans to make documentaries, is creating an art installation with his new partner, who is an actress and dancer) also lie in the way of a commitment to politics, whether conventional or not. However, a few things happened just prior to his participation in the yellow vests movement. Firstly, he visited the Zone to Defend (ZAD) at Notre-Dame des Landes[10], a hotspot for protest in France during the 2010s, for several days, thanks to a computer engineer friend. It was there that he discovered, and became interested in, self-governance and a horizontal practice of democracy. Secondly, shortly after arriving in his new city, he also met activists in *La France Insoumise (LFI)*, a left-wing movement created by Jean-Luc Mélenchon during the 2017 presidential campaign (in which Mélenchon won more than 7 million votes, i.e. 19.6% of the votes cast). He helped his new friends a bit by taking charge of a candidate's communications for a few months, but he was very quickly annoyed by the pretentiousness of the national leaders of LFI around Mélenchon, who were making decisions for the local group, which is supposed to act autonomously through the collaborative platform "*L'avenir en commun*". This brief experience – as well as his professional availability, and perhaps the artistic community that his girlfriend is involved in –, pushed him to

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[9] Cf. the work of journalist David Dufresne, who has produced a dossier of police violence cases by setting up the "Allo Place Beauvau" platform.

[10] The mobilisation is based on the illegal occupation of a site planned for the construction of a new airport in the countryside near Nantes. This led to the long term setup of occupants living alternative lifestyles generally based on a strong sense of horizontalism.

educate himself on politics again, even prior to the yellow vests bursting on the scene, with all the good will and modesty of someone who is self-taught. He continues to develop his historical and political knowledge by reading intellectual essays (such as those by Emmanuel Todd and Hervé Guillemin) and watching videos on the internet (such as those by Usul, a "leftist" close to the online newspaper Mediapart). While he unequivocally rejects the extreme right and the neo-liberal French president, Stéphane nevertheless refuses to define himself as "on the left", in defiance of politicians of all stripes that is inherited from both his family and from his professional community of freelancers, but above all because he sees the yellow vests as the reunion of the French people, without any exclusion whatsoever, whatever the voting preferences are of the individuals among them. As it makes a detailed analysis of a relationship to politics possible, the biographical and ethnographic interview enables us to understand what other methods would describe as a contradiction between an intense involvement in modes of action sought out by the assembly in radical left-wing circles and the desire to "break down the barriers".

We could use Stéphane's statement at length for comments to describe how, through his participation in the yellow vests movement, and above all through his role as spokesperson for them, he now possesses political expertise that is both subjective and objective (in the sense of Bourdieu) and that is much more consistent than before. On the one hand, the movement has enabled him to acquire a very precise knowledge of the political field, of institutions, of political abbreviations, but also of the complex mechanisms of delegation and the practice of democracy from the bottom up; on the other hand, he has gained a sense of authority to speak politically, including with speakers such as the intellectuals he has come across (including us), which has resulted in him sharing his knowledge with them on several occasions (the interview situation makes it possible, perhaps even encourages it, but it is not enough, far from it). However, we will instead focus our analysis on what, in Stéphane's biographical trajectory, allows us to hypothesise about the socially gained aptitudes that enable the activation of, through involvement in the yellow vests, a cooperative and neutral position that is marked by the avoidance of politics in the narrow sense (that of political formations and leaders), in its 'assemblist' version here.

Indeed, Stéphane's biographical trajectory sees him taking up different positions that allow (and sometimes require) a certain autonomy while also favouring roles involving observation, adaptation, and acceptance of different points of view. Having gone freelance early in his working life, Stéphane knows all about geographical but also social mobility, with ups and downs in environments that are very different from his home environment (we will return to this point) Self-taught in everything – including drawing, his childhood passion, which resulted in him attending a well-known comic book school that he soon left -, his "project-based" profession presupposes having the ability to learn new skills, to find and win over customers, to sometimes lead teams, to bounce back after failures, and even to show a certain resistance towards the hierarchical authority that he has come across on a few occasions (especially in his last position, with the constraints of an employee without the benefits). It is not only in his professional career that Stéphane has had to learn, observe and deal with things. He describes his school experience at boarding school – an experience that educational sociologists consider decisive – as characterised by learning to reconcile with the immediate surrounding world: "*seeing the plurality of*

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points of view, encountering people who come from different backgrounds and then seeing how you position yourself, that you can still talk to everyone, that sometimes there are people who are assholes and you have to let them do their thing rather than attacking them".

Furthermore, his family set-up is quite exceptional but is not an isolated case (Weber, 2005). Born from a short-lived relationship, he did not know his biological father, having discovered his existence very late on, or the man whose name he carries, who married his mother after his birth but his mother divorced very quickly. For more than 30 years, his mother has shared her life with another man, who works in the truck industry, but Stéphane has never seen him as his father, but more of an older brother. Thus, he was brought up by his mother but also by his maternal grandparents in an "extended Mediterranean" family, i.e. patriarchal. Having fled French Algeria in 1957 and primarily lived in the south of France, his grandparents had a large family in which Stéphane's mother is the eldest daughter and as such, as he points out, the "second mother" to the siblings. Stéphane thus spent part of his childhood at his grandparents' home, with his mother but also with his aunts and uncles, like "the little one" loved by all, even the centre of their affectionate rivalries. His grandfather mostly worked in construction independently while his mother took on odd jobs: life was lived modestly, in a socially diverse neighbourhood with the majority of people being working class, but also including some more bourgeois families - who he socialised with to a certain extent. Stéphane described a happy childhood, though certainly affected by the absence of a "real" father, but also with the privileged status as an only child, (to be) eldest of the third generation. The way in which he describes the very strong rivalry between his mother and grandmother highlights that he does not want to decide, judge or take sides, but rather acknowledge the different points of view and deal with them in a dispassionate way.

Stéphane comes from a family of "pied-noirs" who did not have any particular social status: none of the aunts and uncles (except one) have a higher education qualification or work in middle management positions. He has not completed any studies either but, at the height of his career, he was in a position to become a homeowner, or a small business owner, in short to become a class defector, in a French society where moving up the social ladder is not the norm. Yet he declares that he has chosen to refuse his social standing. Through his professional activity, by the financial wealth he enjoys at times, by the social circles he is involved in (mainly thanks to his girlfriend), Stéphane could be considered as a "defector" from the working classes to the middle classes. However, he does not see himself as such, but rather thinks of himself as a precarious artist - who prefers to revive his passion at the turn of his forties rather than continue working for a system he no longer wants to support. His attitude towards the possibility of moving up the social ladder and its consequences, and therefore towards a central problem faced by individuals who move around socially, thus expresses a loyalty to where he comes from, which seems to play a decisive role in the intensity and form of his involvement in the yellow vests. This is what the phrase "*yellow vest for two generations*" encapsulates: Stéphane seeks to defend a definition of the yellow vests that is inclusive of his parents and grandparents. He sees the yellow vests as ordinary citizens, who do not feel represented or are poorly represented in politics, who are angry and therefore frequently resort to "protest" votes relating to those in power, as exemplified by those who support the *National Front.* This includes citizens forgotten or otherwise crushed

by a capitalist system that makes them, according to another phrase, "*calves for the slaughterhouse*", and who therefore have no choice but to fight to avoid this sad fate. The strength of this loyalty – he also returned to the south of France to be closer to his parents and his seriously ill stepfather – seems to us to be the cornerstone of his interest in the unity of the yellow vests and respect for the most modest among them, and his actions to prevent any form of political exploitation that would lead to separating them.

For the first time, Stéphane's involvement in political protest is thus the product of a specific biographical trajectory. It remains that a potential reason for this involvement lies within the crisis itself. By its nature, a crisis enables the expression of positions that have little legitimacy in the course of ordinary life, in which institutions endure: the crisis of the yellow vests is thereby a protagonistic situation, to follow the path suggested by Deluermoz and Gobille (2015) based on the notion of protagonism forged by the historian Burstin (2013). Indeed, it seems to us that Stéphane embodies, in a particularly important way, the figure of the protagonist found in many "ordinary" yellow vests, who are first-time protesters, without a history of activism. The crisis caused by their protest makes them political subjects for the first time in their eyes, speaking out and making themselves known, feeling like history is being made and waiting for the recognition of this capacity for action that has been acquired at last. In Stéphane's particular case, it is obvious that his involvement in the ADAs and in the development of their collective positions, his obsession with a horizontal and transparent structuring of the movement and its perpetuation and posterity, his public appearances, his publication projects, his enthusiastic meetings with significant figures and prominent intellectuals, his fundamental belief in the movement's ability to change the world, if not immediately, at least in the long term, in short, sets him apart as an emblematic protagonist. That is to say, a common man finally recognised as deserving of a chapter in our specialised representative system, a "democracy of abstention" (Braconnier, Dormagen, 2007) in which pure political professionals are increasingly common (Bollaert, Ollion, Michon, 2017). However, taking into account the idea of a protagonistic situation would presuppose completing this first interpretation with an analysis that is more sensitive to the dynamics of Stéphane's protest process, focused on the different stages of involvement and on the effects of successive situations that are marked by uncertainty but also by enhanced reflexivity, the experience of a richer and denser time, on the capacity to act and on the desire to testify.

To conclude, our case study raises a difficult question: do the first-time protesters simply take up – thereby appropriating and modifying – methods of protest already in use, whereby the profound contradiction lies in its tension between the revolutionary aspect that is deeply critical of the system in place and the deliberative aspect that seems specially adjusted to the new spirit of capitalism and the representative regime (concern for communication, horizontality, informality, consensus) (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2006) ? Or is the involvement of ordinary citizens in the yellow vests movement perhaps, and more radically, a work of democratic subjectification in the sense of the philosopher J. Rancière (2014), that is, a demand for equality among all "citizens" as political subjects in the strictest sense of the term?

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