"BECOMING YELLOW VESTS: THE POLITICISATION OF ORDINARY CITIZENS (FRANCE 2018-20)"

Paper for the Theme Panel
"New Perspectives on Protest: Ordinary Citizens in Extraordinary Movements"
APSA 2020 Virtual Annual Meeting (September 10th)

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In many respects, the sudden emergence of the Yellow Vests movement in French politics in the autumn of 2018 came as a complete surprise, as evidenced by the intensity of media coverage, the abundance of expert opinions on the issue and, more generally, the sheer number of discussions dedicated to it. Admittedly, the online petition against rising fuel prices launched in May 2018 by a self-employed woman from the Paris outskirts had quickly gathered one million signatures, and throughout October 2018, thousands of social media users had shared videos on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube criticising those measures aimed at motorists and urging people to get together. Yet, the protest day held on the 17th of November 2018 surprised everyone, not only by the sheer number of people it gathered (287,710 according to the French Ministry of the Interior), almost all of whom were wearing the "high visibility yellow vest" which is compulsory in all motor vehicles, but also by the large number of road blocks, especially in rural and peri-urban areas (around 2,000 roundabouts and motorway tolls were blocked) and the use of a wide range of slogans which went far beyond the mere anti-tax complaints. In the following weeks up until mid-December 2018, those demands expanded to include social justice and the reinvention of democracy, and the range of actions diversified: toll gate openings, blockades (particularly of fuel depots and hypermarket logistics hubs) and roundabout occupations were organised on a non-centralised basis, as well as weekly demonstrations in city centres, soon to be called "acts", which in some large cities, particularly in Paris, went as far as reaching the districts of political power, assuming a riotous or even uprising dimension, and which were often violently repressed by the security forces. This second phase thus took the form of a political crisis (Dobry 1986). After mid-December 2018, which saw the removal of protesters from roundabouts by the police, and despite a steady loss of demonstrators, the weekly marches and crackdown continued. It was also a phase of coordination marked by meetings being held on roundabouts or in city centres and by an attempt to achieve nationwide coordination through Assembly Meetings (*Assemblées des assemblées* - ADA) held every two months. The call to resume roundabout occupations in May 2019 and the anniversary weekend of the 16th and 17th of November 2019 were other highlights of this third phase, which eventually came to a halt due to lockdown (16th March-11th May 2020) and the state of health emergency.

This movement has also astounded social movement specialists, who have made two observations. First, although they share some similarities with "public square movements" and "occupation movements" whose horizontality and rejection of spokespersons they also espouse, the Yellow Vests deploy a relatively innovative range of action. The unruly takeover of rural and peri-

urban roundabouts (rather than city centre squares) and the iconic Saturday demonstrations, in particular, stand out for their peculiarity. Although they were close to the ritualised repertoire of action found in trade union rallies, the often erratic Saturday marches or "acts" did not follow their explicit and implicit rules and codes, especially in the first few weeks of the movement. No organisations nor organisers, no set itinerary or prior registration with the *prefecture*, no banners nor slogans, no chants (in the first few weeks), no security staff, no demands and, of course, no spokespersons for the media and the authorities. Only gradually will the movement build its own codes beyond the wearing of a yellow vest (songs, symbols and signs of recognition, routes, demonstrators' skills, especially when facing the police). Secondly, this movement is socially and politically diverse. It features a high proportion of working- and vulnerable middle-class individuals who were virtually absent from movements of the past two decades, and, alongside more experienced activists, especially during the first few weeks, first-timers with no previous activist experience and often little politicised. These newcomers in the art of protest get involved without being approached and supervised by organisations, be it trade unions whom they strongly mistrust or other social movement organisations. Such a coincidence - relative novelty of the repertoire, relative novelty of the protesters - raises a conundrum: to what extent does the entry of newcomers into protest make the Yellow Vests movement stand out?

The Yellow Vests movement thus allows us to explore the entry into protest of ordinary citizens and reflects a phenomenon shared by social movements held throughout the world in recent years, in particular the anti-austerity movements (Indignados, Occupy) marked by a significant presence of first-timers (Nez & al 2016) or occasional protesters (Sabucedo & al 2017). Questions can be raised as to the meaning and impact of this phenomenon which seems both to reveal ongoing changes in the relationship between citizens and politics, in particular the contemporary forms of unconventional political participation, and to bring about a shift in the forms of protest. Traditional ways of analysing social movements, particularly the "resource mobilisation" approach, are also being put to the test (Jeanpierre 2019): how should we account for the entry into and continued protest of individuals who are remote from the political field, with no activist experience and, for many, without the usual cultural, social and economic resources for activism?

The mobilisation of these new protesters, most of whom come from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, must be viewed in relation to their social conditions. While these are not the subject of this article, several features common to these protesters, particularly among our interviewees[1], can be mentioned: a precarious career path, a low level of income, isolation and alienation from trade unions, an obligation to be self-sufficient; a low level of political socialisation within the family, network of friends, at school or at work; a pattern of declining social status and day-to-day economic hardship. Yet, these characteristics are also those of many French people who did not, however, get involved in the movement. So how is it that, from November 2018 onwards, a number of ordinary citizens decided to get together for several weeks, months or even more than a year? To what extent does their commitment, unprecedented for them, contribute to giving the movement some of its unique features? Does this experience of protest affect their relationship

[1] See our paper entitled "A renewal of protest. Observing the Yellow Vests through the Biographical Lens", Division 46 - Qualitative Methods, APSA 2020 Virtual Annual Meeting.

with the political and social world? The purpose of this paper is to provide some answers to these questions.

Our investigation fits into a historiography that is substantial when it comes to studying social movements and relationship to politics, but still sparse when it comes to the Yellow Vests themselves. Our approach to social movements falls within a line of research that is both constructivist and realistic (social facts are constructions that become conventions, cf. Desrosières 2010, consistent with the Durkheimian definition of institutions), as well as process-based, thus inseparably structuralist and interactionist (the social world is historically produced and therefore never fully determined (Fillieule 2019; Fillieule and Broqua 2020)).

Here we consider unconventional political involvement and ordinary relationships to "politics" in two ways (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 ; 2006), in most cases because it relates to a collective issue for a given community (Eliasoph 2003). One of the differences in our approach is that we do not separate the study of the relationship between politics and the political (unlike many studies ultimately focused on voting behaviour), thus allowing us to identify *the political* in situations of intense avoidance of *politics*.

As several social movement specialists have questioned the commonalities of mobilisations that have emerged worldwide after 2010 (e.g. Glasius & Pleyers 2013; Della Porta 2014; Ancelovici, Dufour & Nez 2016), some of them have signalled the specific role played by participants with no prior activist experience. According to El Chazli, what made the Egyptian 2011 revolutionary situation unprecedented was the fact that "action went well beyond the usual activist circles" and encompassed tens of thousands of "lay people" whose trajectories he then endeavoured to delineate (2012: 80). While other authors have pointed out the presence of some unexperienced individuals among the Spanish Indignados (Taibo 2013) and US Occupy movement (Juris 2012), they have not centred their analyses on first-time protesters' engagement in and effect on the movements. Ancelovici, Dufour and Nez's complaint about the lack of a "microanalysis of activists' trajectories before, during and after the [post-2011 protests in Europe and North America]" (2016: 20) is therefore all the more relevant in the case of first-timers.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, no research has yet been carried out on first-time protesters. More generally, the essay approach (see in particular Jeanpierre 2019) or the publication of opinion pieces in the media have so far prevailed (and got a head start) over the collection of empirical data and the publication of scientific papers. A few studies have been carried out, others are still in progress, the results of which are yet to be published in most cases. Among those whose initial results have been published, several have attempted to assess the socio-demographic profiles and political leanings of the campaigners using quantitative *in situ* or online methods (Reungoat & al, 2019; Guerra, T. & al, 2019; Ravelli & al 2020), highlighting in particular the importance of first-time protesters in the movement, especially at roundabouts; others have presented the results of ethnographic surveys conducted at roundabouts (Challier 2019; Devaux & al., 2019) or the evolution of the Yellow Vests' online debates and grievances through the lens of the media coverage of the movement (Sebbah & al 2018 and 2019).

Method

Alongside observations made during various Yellow Vests actions (roundabout occupations, demonstrations, local meetings, national meetings), and after an initial quantitative survey in which one of us took part, we began in 2019 a series of interviews with Yellow Vests protesters encountered on the very site of their involvement, from a localised perspective: all our interviewees, now numbering about twenty, belong to the same protest area based around a large city in the south of France, even if their activity occasionally extends beyond this space (to other cities, including Paris); some of our interviewees know each other, they know that we have been (more or less) present "in" the movement and that we express not only interest but also sympathy towards it; they often suggest that we meet other "interesting" Yellow Vests close to them. 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), on the way the interview is conducted (preferred types of questions), and on whether or not it is possible to repeat the interview (we try to use this opportunity as much as possible in order to extend the questioning). The ethnographic and biographical dimension of the interview is more or less developed, and is more complex when interviewing two people at the same time (couples, friends). Nevertheless, all the interviews share the same general framework based on three main themes: biographical background, relationship with politics, and involvement in the Yellow Vests movement. All of them are also based on the idea that it is important, as far as possible, not only to collect opinions, but also to get people to describe behaviours, social relations and events: the value of the interview obviously lies in the time given to interviewees to express themselves in their own words, and not to seek refuge in the expression of these opinions, to which survey research too often reduces the (assumed) opinions of their own survey subjects in its own categories of analysis (Schaffer 2014). Last but not least, the interviewing work obviously does not end with the interview itself and the painstaking process of transcription from oral to written form. In our research, we allocate a considerable amount of time to the collective analysis of each other's interviews, comparing our interpretations, clarifying agreements and disagreements, (re)reading transcriptions of the interviews and relating them to the stories or wider contexts to which biographical journeys thus reconstructed belong. One of the qualities of our work rests largely on the pooling of our data and analyses, which enables us to address the risk of over-interpretation, always present when sociologists are left alone with "their" data.

Results

1/ The significant number of first-time protesters is linked to popular modes of sociability that imply a distinct relationship to *the political* compared with many social movements. This relationship, marked by an avoidance of *politics*, contributes to shaping the movement both with regard to the choice of places and forms of action and in terms of the framing process.

2/ Involvement in the movement leads to politicisation. a/ It contributes to the gaining of political knowledge, but above all to the acquisition of protest practices and know-how. b/ It causes certain Yellow Vests to emerge as protagonists of a political crisis and, in doing so, as political subjects. c/ It widens the gap with traditional figures of representation (government officials, elected

representatives, trade unions) and generates mistrust towards the media and some law enforcement agencies, without necessarily leading to the challenging of representative democracy. d/ It leads to a more homogeneous vision of the social world based on the condemnation of inequalities and the lack of recognition of work. In that sense, it is likely to clash with the culturalist perspective of today's prevailing identity-related nationalism by promoting the return, beyond a Marxist perspective, of a social issue deemed archaic.

1. The influence of first-timers on the forms of mobilisation

The Yellow Vests movement is relatively diverse from a social point of view, bringing together, unlike social movements seen in previous decades, members of the working class and the vulnerable middle class as well as a large proportion of people who are getting involved for the first time, with a large overlap between both groups (Reungoat & al, 2019). Marked from the outset by its great openness (a) and by a relative aversion towards politics and the political (b), the Yellow Vests campaign can only appeal to people, particularly from the working- and lower-middle-classes, hitherto hostile to any form of commitment, and is fuelled by their involvement as first-time protesters. Beyond that, these first-timers contribute to the action repertoire and the framing of the movement (c).

a. Open spaces for mobilisation

For the initial preparatory meetings ahead of the 17th of November 2018 event, Yellow Vests started gathering in car parks in peri-urban shopping areas. Subsequently, it was mainly on roundabouts that the movement spread in November-December 2018, especially those located on the outskirts of urban areas and in rural areas. In the early days, Yellow Vests would use roundabouts as traffic filtering points, then they began preparing for long-term occupation, erecting huts in December until they were eventually evicted by the police, handing out leaflets to motorists and urging them to support the movement. Unlike the blockade of roundabouts on the outskirts of towns (already carried out occasionally by truck drivers or farmers), their occupation could be considered as unprecedented and conducive to the involvement of first-time protesters. On the one hand, it seemed to embrace the different aspects associated with "public square movements" in a very different setting, since it was not central: claiming and holding on to a territory, with all the necessary facilities on site to ensure food, shelter and security, as well as more traditional militant activities (banners, flags, leaflets, meetings). On the other, it offered all the advantages of familiarity for ordinary citizens: these are public spaces defined by their accessibility by car. Since they are meant to facilitate the flow of road traffic and access to car parks in retail parks, roundabouts are part of the daily life of millions of motorists, and millions of daily commuting trips are made through them; their permanent occupation was often experienced as a pleasurable transgression of the principle of fluidity associated with their design (along with safety, which is always relative in practice). Compared with the city centre, home to activist demonstrations but also the seat of power, the roundabout thus offered a much more convenient space to protest, as well as a much more important and visible spot due to it being much busier.

Moreover, the continuous occupation of the first few weeks, i.e. the total hourly range, greatly opened up the opportunities for engagement. Protesters could choose to spend several minutes or several hours there, come back every day or from time to time at any moment, day or

night. Thus, the many pensioners who got involved in the early days came across individuals who were rarely seen in non-category-based social movements: mothers (including single mothers), people with disabilities, the unemployed, or even homeless people who "held the fort" during the night. In addition, many participants went there alone, unsure as to who they would find on site. As places of largely informal interaction, occupied roundabouts made it possible for people to break free from certain forms of social isolation, talk about their lives, discover that others shared similar experiences, and all this at a very low entry cost: no need to display any cultural capital nor activist background in order to speak out and take action - which is not to say that such assets had no effect on the times when the Yellow Vests chose to act or on the parts of the roundabouts where they were involved.

In return, first-time protesters contributed to the ongoing support of the movement. The variety of activities allowed participants who lacked specific political or activist skills to be of use, for example through the loan of equipment, the building of makeshift wooden huts with pallets, cooking, donations, food distribution, or simply through being there to "make up the numbers", thus helping to sustain the occupation. As a result, professional and domestic skills of ordinary citizens frequently found their place on busy roundabouts, as our qualitative materials help describe in detail.

For example, Béatrice and François went to a roundabout together at the beginning of December 2018. Having been living in a common-law relationship for several years, both were nearly 50, separated and parents (Beatrice was even a grandmother). She was working as an auxiliary care worker (and psychotherapist), he was an unemployed logistics worker. She came from a small business family background, but had a troubled family, work and marital history, as well as health problems; her family was clearly right-wing, even extreme right-wing in some cases. He came from a working-class immigrant background, far removed from politics; having lost his father at a very young age, he worked for 20 years in the same retail company, where he experienced major changes in the logistics organisation (just-in-time flows, task interoperability, monitoring, etc.). Together they founded an association that helps people who fall outside the scope of the welfare state's public services. Stricken by bereavement in November 2018, they were not available to commit themselves, but very quickly gave in to François' strong urge to go and see what was happening. On a weekday evening in December, they went to a nearby roundabout on the outskirts of their local town, brought a thermos flask of coffee and were warmly welcomed – "*here come the reinforcements!*" – by a dozen or so people who were busy handing out leaflets to motorists calling for the creation of a citizens' initiative referendum (RIC). Upon arrival, they offered to print leaflets free of charge on their association's printer and were soon asked to help with the handing out.

> Béatrice: But very quickly, we were serving coffee to everyone and then someone said: "I'm dying for a pee, why don't you replace me?" and she gave me the RIC [her partner laughs: "we were handing out flyers and stuff"] and within about ten minutes I found myself, right away, handing out the RIC in the rain [Interviewer: to motorists] yeah, to drivers.

Approaching the roundabout with the rules of politeness and sociability with which they were familiar (never come empty-handed, show an interest in everyone, help if you can), Beatrice and François found it all the more easy to fit in given the openness and almost total absence of formal hierarchy that prevailed. Their involvement in the movement quickly grew, via their town's

general assembly, and in particular its "Communication Committee" for which, because they had "*a printer and paper*", they offered to produce a small newspaper to hand out to people at various events; this weekly newspaper, of which they were the main editors, soon earned them a growing reputation in the movement not only at local level, but also nationally (via the Assembly Meetings, as well as through its posting on the Internet). Following the call to reclaim roundabouts on the 4th of May 2019, they also initiated the occupation of another roundabout on the outskirts of town, chosen above all for its convenience: located nearer their home and the Yellow Vests living in the western villages, it was large and shady, relatively protected from speeding cars, and included a private plot of land where market garden produce could be sold, allowing for permanent and active occupation (including film screenings). The occupation arrangements reflected the use of many domestic skills, including a very gendered division of labour: on Saturdays for example, several women would prepare the evening meal and make copies of the newspaper (folding, collating) until the other Yellow Vests returned from the rally in the city centre.

b. *Concealing frame misalignments or avoiding politics*

Interviews with Yellow Vests and ethnographic observation of interactions at mobilisation sites shed light on the modes of sociability and the codes prevailing in such interactions, one of the most significant of which is undoubtedly the avoidance of politics. We seem to be dealing here with a more or less conscious strategy or tactics of restraint, whether on the part of the already militant groups or on that of first-time protesters. In keeping with the frame analysis model (Benford and Snow, 2000), which focuses on the construction of meaning (including the righteousness of the cause, the means of action) for the protest by the activists themselves, it seems that the Yellow Vests, when it comes to politics in the narrow sense, are less concerned with aligning different or antagonistic frameworks than with hiding possible misalignments. Activism, but also mere voting preferences (both past and present) thus appear as invisible scars whose potential disclosure (in the sense of Goffman 1963) must be kept under control.

These tactics were embraced by well-seasoned activists. Unlike traditional demonstrations where ideological and organisational allegiances, such as partisan affiliations, are prominently displayed (through colours and logos, chants and slogans, leaflets, flags or stickers), activists most often hid their partisan, trade union or association membership, kept quiet about their activist identity or disclosed it only very gradually. During the first few weeks, many activists who had proselytised (particularly those close to the *Rassemblement National*) or simply displayed their affiliation were expelled from rallies and roundabouts. In all areas of mobilisation, including the many Facebook groups, any claim to political preferences or stance on politicised themes, already espoused by specialist political actors (Lagroye 2003), such as immigration, was condemned. The avoidance of politics or of the most divisive issues was particularly clear in places where frameworks were built most explicitly in the form of long-developed and extensively discussed statements of demands that were subject to the widest possible agreement, whether at local assembly, roundabout or city centre level, or even more so at Assembly Meetings, which regularly brought together representatives of the latter at national level to coordinate the movement.

But strategies of restraint were also embraced by first-time protesters, for whom "politics" is very often an object of mistrust and political convictions, if any, must be suppressed or at least downplayed. For instance, Corinne, a former employee in the hotel industry undergoing professional retraining, in her 50s, married and mother of a young man, joined with other women

in many initiatives to block warehouses and open motorway tolls in the region while also attending all the rallies held in the regional metropolis. She did not hide her prior voting history, but corrected us when it came to qualifying her commitment to the Yellow Vests movement.

> *Interviewer: So, the Yellow Vests was your first, er, political involvement?*
> Corinne: Apolitical, yeah rather! Yeah! You could say that... I really don't like the word "political".

Then, when asked about the partisan affiliation of the Yellow Vests she sees on the roundabout, she said:

> "I couldn't really say. No, because we ... we don't really talk about it... yeah, we talk about it... without going too far that is. [Pause] Yeah, our, our political convictions, er, we don't actually flaunt them. We talk about it. But in general terms."

Such strategies of restraint are very often those found within the families of first-time protesters from working-class backgrounds, where politics is seen as somewhat divisive and confrontational. All other things being different, according to an already well-known pattern (see Eliasoph 1999 for similar observations in three voluntary associations in the United States), first-time protesters introduced these strategies into the movement. Domi belonged to the same group of friends "in yellow" (who met via the movement) as Corinne (both were interviewed at the same time); she was in her 40s, living alone, mother of a young woman. Born into a family of fairground entertainers far removed from politics, her professional career had been marked by instability and she now held a temporary job as a helper in an elderly care home. She was a non-voter and claimed first and foremost to be a Yellow Vest, referring to the oft-repeated catchphrase "*neither right nor left, yellow*!"

> Domi: Those who have them do not put forward their political views.
> Corinne: To us, we are all Yellow Vests.
> Domi: On top of that, I think politics is something that has always annoyed people. We've always said: in the family we should never talk about politics, because it makes people angry.
> Corinne: Yeah, that's right.
> Domi: And I think that's exactly what we don't want to happen to the Yellow Vests. We want to stick together.

The avoidance of politics thus reveals a mistrust of the political and trade union sphere which is specific to a movement that, especially in its early days, not only built itself up primarily outside of partisan, trade union, associative or activist organisations, but which also presented itself, partly for this very reason, as politically very diverse, attracting voters of all political persuasions (including from the *Rassemblement National* or *La France Insoumise* and from Trotskyist and Communist parties) as well as individuals who do not relate to any party. For Corinne, who rents a house in a peri-urban area (on the outskirts of a small town), the rejection of ideological ostentation (see above: "*we don't actually flaunt them*") is reminiscent of the sociabilities specific to the "France of the Little-Middles" (Cartier *et al* 2008). Believing that they are split (and for that reason forgotten) between the most privileged classes (bourgeois) and the least deprived ones (the "welfare scroungers"), these French women from the lower middle classes refuse to condemn RN supporters, while at the same time banning them from speaking too openly, even when they tend to be left-leaning (as in her case).

> Corinne: The only thing we won't "accept" as such are fascists, those who scream about their roots. You have the right. But then... you don't shout it from the rooftops. We're all entitled to our opinions. We just say

> don't be aggressive with people, because we've seen them right, stopping cars, talking to people, er, about immigrants and all that. That's not what Yellow Vests are about.

As we can see, it is indeed the unity of the movement that must be promoted by condemning any ostentatious display of political preferences, but also its public image, and therefore its ability to enlist: to speak of "immigrants and all that" is also running the risk of "being aggressive with people", who might be put off by the perception of a "fascist" movement. For Corinne, this statement also seems to reflect her conviction that "roots" (as in the expression "native French", "*Français de souche*") should not be a criterion for inclusion in the Yellow Vests movement. In the end, the avoidance of politics constitutes a major prerequisite for the involvement of first-time protesters who are little politicised, often ideologically ill-equipped and who often come from working-class backgrounds: it is both a condition for retaining those Yellow Vests already involved in the movement, and that of the possibility of the widest possible expansion of the movement.

c. *The relative specialisation of the repertoires of action*

The social and political diversity of the movement contributed to the gradual diversification of its repertoire of action, not without sometimes giving rise to conflicts within groups in the same area over the strategy to follow. It also lead to forms of specialisation in different types of action, in which first-time protesters were often involved. As the weeks went by, a distinction emerged within the Yellow Vests, sometimes within roundabouts or between them, but mainly between roundabouts and collectives mobilised in the town centres of medium and large conurbations. Some of the activists turned more towards activities aimed at formalising deliberation and codifying decision-making processes, through the setting up of general assemblies and, sometimes within these assemblies, of committees (action, communication, organisation, etc.) whose modes of operation were extended at national level by the Assembly Meetings for the purpose of coordination and structuring. This trend can be described as "assemblyist" or "citizenist" and compared to post-2011 public square movements, the French equivalent of which was the Nuit Debout movement in 2016 (Smaoui 2017, Collectif RFSP 2017). The aim was to draw up a set of demands that could be submitted to the media and the political sphere on behalf of the movement. Other Yellow Vests pursued more concrete and instantly "useful" initiatives, in particular blockades and the opening of motorway tolls which were a major feature in the early days of the movement, thus exposing themselves to police repression which became particularly severe from December 2018 onwards. Within these collectives, interactions were more informal, more often held in small groups, more focused on seeking a rejection of conflict, and political preferences and judgements were less elaborate and more often based on the expression of moral categories. In a way, Saturday demonstrations - the so-called "acts" - brought together representatives from both "families" of Yellow Vests.

These forms of commitment were not mutually exclusive, as some Yellow Vests combined them or adopted them successively. Moreover, contrary to what one might imagine, first-time protesters did not systematically head for the second repertoire. Through the example of two first-timers, we seek to show the processes that lead to the specialisation of modes of action. Activists' relationships to modes of action and spaces of mobilisation can be linked to their personal history, in particular their family origins, their educational and professional paths, their modes of

sociability and their relationship to politics, but also to the activist skills and know-how they acquired during the protest movement.

Clara, a novice protester

Coming from a family background where politics was rarely discussed (her parents – insurance salesman father, teaching mother - were separated), Clara also lacked strong political socialisation in the social or professional circles she frequented. Now in her 20s, she had recently entered the relatively junior profession of medical-psychological assistant, after graduating with a technological baccalaureate (ST2S) and experiencing several failures in post-baccalaureate education, particularly at nursing school and then at university. Her professional environment, which marked a slight social downgrading compared with her parents' positions, was characterised by a high degree of isolation due primarily to her status as a temporary worker (no regular team, no trade union organisation). While Clara showed, at the time of the interview and after several months in the Yellow Vests movement, a real interest in politics and a degree of objective competence (i.e. a relative knowledge of the political field), she suffered from a low level of subjective competence (i.e. the feeling of being allowed to talk about politics): uncomfortable in the expression of a structured opinion or in the advocacy of a political position, she was aware of these difficulties.

> Clara: Erm... I mostly talked to a guy who told me, er... who challenged me and said I shouldn't be so naive. Because when we were talking about my vote for Macron in 2017, he said, er, "do you remember why you voted for him and all that ...? "and I didn't really have any... specific memories, measures that, that I wanted Macron to implement because... all he's put in place for the moment is, er... [pause] it's pretty, er... pretty... pffff it's ok, well I don't like it. Later I heard about the wealth tax. He talked a lot about the wealth tax. But at the time, I didn't really understand what was at stake, the... how it worked, er.... And, er, there were people who were in favour of removing the wealth tax, there were some who were against removing it and saying "Yes, but it scares the rich away" and... and there were arguments in favour and against.... And I was having a hard time making up my mind...

When interviewed and asked to express her points of view, she tended to repeat opinions she had already heard. Her relationship to the movement's modes of action and spaces of mobilisation could be linked to her educational background, which provided her with limited cultural capital and left her unaccustomed to producing structured oral or written reasoning or arguments. More generally, this young woman seemed to suffer from a certain social isolation, as if her relationships were limited to interactions on social networks, through which she also kept abreast of current events.

As much as she liked to hand out flyers at rallies calling people to vote against President Macron, for whom she had voted in 2017 with much regret, and whose rejection was the only clearly expressed political dimension of her commitment, Clara jokingly conceded that writing (them) was "*not her thing*". Having joined the movement on her own on the 17th of November 2018, she showed above all great sensitivity to the modes of sociability and the expression of opinions close to the working classes. The sharing of experiences and discussions "in small groups" around a bonfire during occupation actions were thus described as the most beautiful moments of the campaign. In contrast, spaces dedicated to debate or speeches during general assemblies where interactions were highly formalised, most often led by activists with cultural capital and/or militant experience and with a greater degree of strategic or ideological content, were considered both boring and pointless, mere babble.

> Clara: At the beginning, yeah, I used to go to general assemblies [GA] quite a lot [...] And then [...] I started to attend less regularly and now, it's been a while since I've been there, er...
> *Interviewer: You're less interested in GAs?*
> Clara: Well... Yeah, it's a bit... a bit more boring now because... at the beginning they let people from all over the place talk, and sometimes people say things but... in the end, it's not, it's not necessarily useful, like they say er.... "Yeah, I agree with the movement, what you're doing is great" but... then er... listening to blah blah blah... well, it's a bit... [...] Well, er, I'm more into discussions when we're in small groups... than when it's more general and people speak in turns.

Clara wanted to do "useful" things and clearly favoured "direct" action with immediate impact, such action being more exposed to the kind of police repression she routinely encountered. She had been involved in several business and fuel depot blockades and had taken part in demonstrations on a very regular basis for several months. Her whole "yellow" journey was driven by this quest for usefulness, as the following excerpt shows:

> Clara: Well, out of this frustration that grew, on the X. roundabout, from blocking people and, well, not doing much, I decided to do something really useful. So I went to the S. motorway toll where they were letting people through for free.

Ultimately for Clara, "doing the Yellow Vests", as she says, primarily meant being at the heart of an event she was hoping for, and contributing to it in a modest way, with a degree of determination, but always in a subordinate role and often in support of other activists. Clara mentioned on several occasions how much she regretted having missed out on some of the rallies (especially in Paris), and her commitment did not seem to have worn off (at the time the interview was conducted, i.e. in the spring of 2019). For her, Yellow Vests symbolised the defence of a certain moral economy, reminiscent of the one identified by E. P. Thompson in 1971, the stance of which was based on a certain sense of right and wrong in the sharing of wealth and the responsibility of elites in this respect, and which condemned a situation in which people were ill-treated or otherwise obsessed with survival (she described herself as "a bit of an ant" who still manages to get by), on the basis of a Manichean opposition between people, who work and pay taxes, and their elected representatives, who are collectively described as "liars and profiteers" (as she wrote on her own yellow vest). Clara embodies this vision of a legitimately angry, united people who had to get organised in order to be efficient, helped by a balance of power that might scare the powers that be.

Stéphane, a unifying force

Stéphane joined the movement in December 2018 after having viewed its initial steps with some scepticism (not being a driver himself, he took a cautious view of the opposition to a supposedly eco-friendly tax). He did not take part in any blockade or motorway toll initiatives, and hardly ever attended roundabout events. However, he soon joined the local assembly and communication committee before getting involved, as appointed by that local assembly, in the Assembly Meetings (*Assemblées des assemblées* - ADA), the first of which took place in January 2019 in order to coordinate the Yellow Vests movement (five of those ADAs brought together, each time over several days, several hundred representatives between January 2019 and March 2020), and of which he organised one of the editions (which kept him busy for six months). His substantial (almost full-time) involvement and the choice of a more deliberative mode of action

were rooted in his personal background where the relationship to politics was marked by mistrust of the political field, but where resources conducive to debate and horizontality had been gradually acquired.

Perfectly at ease with argumentative debates involving ideological or strategic issues, Stéphane showed in the spring of 2020 strong political expertise, largely self-taught and rather belatedly developed, in particular via alternative media, Web platforms and a brief experience with *La France Insoumise* during the 2017 election campaign, which fostered, in his own words, a "*grassroots education through the prism of mistrust*" of politicians and a world seen as governed by money and lobbies. Above all, his family and professional background had lead him to take into account all points of view. On the one hand, he was raised by his mother and maternal grandparents and had to deal with a somewhat emotional rivalry between his mother and his grandmother, in the course of a happy childhood spent in a working-class, "*pied-noir*" community in the south of France (his grandfather was a building contractor and was the patriarchal figurehead of an important lineage, his mother did odd jobs, and almost no one had gone on to higher education). He soon left home to attend boarding school where, attracted by the artistic field (especially graphic arts), he began to encounter many different views. After a brief stint at a prestigious school of graphic novels, he embarked on a career as a computer graphic designer and Internet developer where he self-trained and had to frequently deal with clients and colleagues. His career had its ups and downs. At the end of 2018, he decided to take a break in order to focus once again on artistic projects (video, fiction), partly with his new partner, an actress and dancer, after a professional burn-out and a difficult search for accommodation in a relatively expensive city centre. He was therefore available and had reasons to get involved in view of his extremely precarious situation.

This background was not conducive to political socialisation. There was little interest in politics in his family and the tendency was to cast protest votes with varying degrees of radicalism. Stéphane believed that he had been a "*Yellow Vest for two generations*" and defined the movement as being for "*people who have no movement*". This statement is symptomatic of a kind of loyalty usually associated with tensions felt by class defectors, of which Stéphane displayed several characteristics (having lived for a time in Paris and the United States, he had gained cultural baggage through his work and travels, saw himself first and foremost as an artist, frequented independent and artistic circles, etc.); his fear of class betrayal could be seen in his reluctance to become a homeowner or his own boss when the opportunity arose. The statement also shows the overriding importance for him of the movement's unity, and justifies his opposition to any form of political exploitation. The concept of autonomous collectives committed to equality, horizontality and debate, which he had first experienced during a short stay in the ZAD of Notre-Dame des Landes (an occupation against the building of an airport), appealed to him when he discovered the assemblies, and in particular the ADAs which were concerned with organising and structuring the movement, but also represented it in dealings with the media.

> "And so I saw this kind of hyper-horizontality in terms of respecting everyone's speaking time, taking turns, etc. It was really fascinating to me; I found it quite functional in the end because everyone had the ability to express themselves. No-one really stood out from the crowd, which wasn't a bad thing. And then I saw that some things were being put in place, and in particular that the [local] GA had found a form of legitimacy that enabled it to contact the media, issue press releases, to... to... well, there you go... to communicate in a general way.

> And... and that in itself was a great thing! [...] They were people that we, that we... we can say that they're pretty much in a "citizenist" movement. Er, and in a movement of... er, of... of hyper-horizontality. There we go. That's, that's what you can really say! It's because they were very conscious about the importance of gathering the views of the grassroots and very much against the emergence of figureheads who would take the limelight [...]. And so... er, I discovered all that. So, they were people who knew about Nuit Debout, who knew about the ZAD environment, etc. or who knew about, er, citizen actions with working groups... precisely with workshops aimed at gathering opinions, etc."

Therefore, his mistrust towards the political field and representative democracy did not mean he rejected all forms of activism: on the contrary, Stéphane showed great enthusiasm for the engineering of debate and for the experimentation and formalisation of collective decision-making tools, where his skills and professional experience allowed him to position himself as a mediator and coordinator. This positioning required and provided a very fine reading of the movement, which we took full advantage of (he was a key source of information for us): for example, he clearly identified the different Yellow Vests' "profiles".

> "So, I found myself there, and I saw that there were different profiles on site. There were real "roundabout profiles", of... er, people who are more into direct action and who find it a bit heavy-handed at times, even the way they are forced to operate in a horizontal democracy. Er... and there were those who are very comfortable with that. Including very urban people. Er, people from big cities and they, they're like fish in water, they know how it works and so on. (...)
>
> They're people who are really grounded, pretty hands-on. They're not at all politicised city-dwellers who have very, very developed views of the struggle. They're more like the Yellow Vests as we imagined them on the 17th of November. People who are really local or who have a genuine real-life experience, but not particularly politicised. Those are the ones who ended up taking over the motorway toll in B. They're the ones who blocked the fuel depot in F. Er... it's that kind of action. [...] And I also realised that these, these people, with whom I got along really well right, could only see themselves through this kind of action. They don't see themselves in the blah blah blah, thingy, etc, etc. For them, it's the blockades and hitting the economy that will allow things to move forward, and not mass education, stuff, speeches, etc. And... and... they have their own form of legitimacy. [...] I have a great deal of respect for these people even if they're, er... some of them are a bit gruff, more thingy. I also find myself quite comfortable in a more... yeah, less abstract environment, more.... More direct. More direct."

From then on, his aim was to reconcile these different profiles, to "*make sure that it is what brings us together that is more important than what divides us*", to "*break down the divides and try to bring people back towards the middle, everywhere*". He worked at it within the ADAs, considering launching his own coordination structure, and regularly appearing in the media as a spokesperson mindful of the various points of view and opposed to any form of recuperation by organised activists.

Whilst Clara contributed to the nurturing of a rather riotous repertoire of action, directly opposed to political authority, which also expresses a form of anger, Stéphane was more concerned with maintaining both a more deliberative repertoire of action and one that was more geared towards the production of a political narrative that was faithful to the diversity of the movement, and in particular respectful of the prominent place that first-time protesters, those people "with no movement", had held from the outset. Both express, in their own way, a rejection of the politicisation of the movement, of its entry into the political field, which in many ways echoes the avoidance of politics and the political (as conflict) outlined above. In this way, they both contribute to shaping the Yellow Vests movement, both in terms of its repertoires of action as well as through the development of modes of sociability and interaction within the movement, and

thus more broadly through the production of frameworks aimed at describing it and articulating its demands.

2. The social movement as a vehicle for politicisation

Ironically, the avoidance of politics in the Yellow Vests movement allowed for some processes of politicisation of its participants to occur. Indeed, among first-time protesters, mobilisation also contributed to the acquisition of political knowledge, but above all of protest skills and know-how (a). In the Yellow Vests movement, our interviewees became protagonists of a political crisis (b). Mobilisation not only strengthened a mistrust of specialised politics (c), but also affected the vision of the social world, its links and its divisions (d).

a. A place for both conventional and unconventional political education

For some Yellow Vests, mobilisation became the setting for politicisation in the sense of gaining both objective and subjective skills to talk about and navigate the political field. This is the case for Stéphane, Clara and François, who seem to have acquired a better ability to sort through and understand the personalities and issues of specialised politics through interactions within the movement. Domi's case is particularly significant in this respect. As we saw earlier, Domi, who was almost 50 years old, had been staying clear of specialised politics for a long time. During the interview, she displayed relatively weak political knowledge, hesitating, for example, when it came to placing elected representatives such as former President Nicolas Sarkozy on a left-to-right axis or when she mentioned the role of the Senate. "*I have never voted in my life*" she said. She explained that she was, in fact, never able to vote because of her frequent moves, which led her to be considered "*homeless*", with no address for tax purposes. She was even literally homeless when she arrived in a new area in 2017, was denied rental accommodation and had to sleep in her car before getting a place in a hostel. At the time of the interview, which took place shortly before the European elections in the spring of 2019, she was still not registered on the electoral roll. Yet, in the run-up to this election, which usually generates a fairly low turnout, she "*regretted not being able to vote*" for the first time in her life. She even expressed some fairly strong ideas that "*Macron should not have a majority*" and that a list of Yellow Vests candidates would not be the right way to achieve this.

> *Interviewer: And you... if you could vote, then who would you vote for? To challenge Macron?*
> Domi: Ah. Not Marine [Le Pen] that's for sure.
> Corinne: Yeah, me neither. Even if I cast a blank vote, I'm not voting for Marine.
> Domi: But.... Yeah, but you shouldn't cast a blank vote!
> Corinne: Oh well, yeah, but it's a vote all the same.
> Domi: No. No because a blank vote goes, it goes to the majority.

In this discussion with Corinne (who, for her part, stated that she had always voted), Domi did not hesitate to assert her voting preferences (a refusal to vote for the *Rassemblement National*), but also to express herself confidently on the electoral counter-productivity of the blank vote, "*something that few people realise*", she said a little later. Therefore, what emerged here was, if not a gain in objective political expertise, then at least some subjective political skill, some confidence in her ability and legitimacy to speak about specialised politics - which could, however, also be

exacerbated by the interview situation which prompts people to express and defend their opinion, and which generally (as in this case) prevents any contradiction by sociologists.

Beyond this conventional political education, this study also uncovered a variety of non-conventional learning experiences. Those relate first of all to an adjustment of behaviour during demonstrations and in the face of violent repression. Faced with the strong repression of the Yellow Vests movement by the State apparatus, both first-time protesters and more experienced activists learned to equip themselves, act and react. All of our interviewees acquired protective equipment for demonstrations (masks, helmets, physiological saline solution) despite it being banned. Clara gained some knowledge about the justice system and law enforcement agencies that enabled her to behave more confidently while demonstrating. Like many other Yellow Vests, she was now able to distinguish between the different policing bodies. She was also aware that police officers were not allowed to open her bag or confiscate her property, and she was aware of some of the possible charges that could be brought against her during demonstrations. She adapted her behaviour accordingly, for example, when faced by a *CRS* officer (French riot police) who wanted to confiscate a ski mask in her backpack, something she had initially objected to:

> "after a while I gave it to him because he put his baton away and I felt that he was going to, er, check up on me and then if I rebelled, he was going to, you know, arrest me, pin "rebellion" on me and potentially "violence" as well."

As for Domi, she took the habit of hiding her keys before leaving for a demonstration for fear of being held in police custody.

Similarly, the first-time protesters we met had assimilated various learning experiences such as secrecy in action, attention to personal information and mistrust of the intelligence services in the organisation (which sometimes contributed to making it difficult to get an interview). The first signs of underground know-how started to appear in the course of the interviews. "*Well, I took the pictures off my phone because… it's better if they don't find them. I mean, I still have some stuff, I should take it off really, because…*" as Clara told us. All of them made it more or less clear that actions soon stopped being planned through social networks.

> Corinne: Sure, of course. We suspected there was a lot of undercover activity in the beginning too. It was the police, er…
> Domi: And yes, quite frankly, we've had some snitches right from the start of the movement!
> Corinne: So that's when we learned how to organise ourselves a little bit more, to… to only trust… some people.

It can be hypothesised that those defensive and organisational protest skills reinforce mistrust of the state, itself perceived as a foe.

Involvement in the movement also gave first-time protesters the opportunity to experience more traditional militant activities, such as public speaking at general assemblies, taking part in debates and decision-making, and sometimes even interacting with elected officials. Hence, within the movement, Clara soon found herself handing out leaflets and discussing their contents with passers-by. Although her poor academic background and her relatively low political knowledge did not give her the feeling of being capable of writing leaflets and putting them together on her own, after a few months of involvement in the movement she decided, together with two other Yellow

Vests, to produce and distribute her own leaflets calling for a vote against Emmanuel Macron's party in the European elections. On the ground, she also acquired a certain sense of the pace of action during blockades. Looking back on her arrival at a blockade site, she said:

> "I could see a big cloud of smoke from a distance, and I thought "that's not possible, they burnt several tyres all at once?! It's a shame!" Anyway, you have to let the tyres burn slowly when the police arrive or else."

For some first-time protesters, taking part in the movement also made it possible to develop or diversify their knowledge based on already existing skills. This is the case with Grégory. Deeply involved in the launch of the movement at local level, he managed a Facebook page that within a few weeks boasted more than 10,000 subscribers. Grégory quickly found himself at the forefront of the movement, which led him to organise events, manage communication via many live events, become a local media figure, acquire great notoriety within the movement, rub shoulders with a number of national personalities and address several thousand people. Without any previous activist experience, he came into the movement with professional event management skills that he had developed through work. Of course, organising and leading meetings, "*managing people a little*" and mediating between participants were all new experiences for him, but his main involvement in the movement was focused on communication and community outreach activities (social network management, live event production), based in part on his web and video skills that the movement helped to broaden.

b. *Becoming protagonists in critical times*

In a context of political crisis, our interviewees learned about and adopted a protest behaviour that can be described as protagonist following the work of the historian Haïm Burstin on how ordinary citizens became revolutionaries during the French Revolution (Burstin 2013) and more broadly in times of crisis (Deluermoz & Gobille 2015). Although the Yellow Vests movement only took the form of a political crisis up until the removal of protestors from roundabouts in mid-December 2018, several aspects of the interviewees' actions and stories amount to an experience of protagonism. They all spoke out as ordinary citizens and demanded recognition as such; they gained visibility and sometimes even notoriety; and, above all, they discovered their power to change the world. Such experiences could also be accompanied by a transformation of the relationship to time, characterised by an intensification of one's existence through mobilisation, but also by a feeling of making history and changing the course of one's personal destiny. These are all dimensions of protagonism, which our first-timer interviewees described in interviews and which contribute to making them political *subjects*.

Grégory's experience of the movement saw him emerge from anonymity and acquire new notoriety and legitimacy. During the interviews, he eagerly listed the names of the media who interviewed him but also the first names of various national media figures of the movement with whom he was in contact. Grégory became someone you could recognize:

> "[On the 17th of November 2018] I didn't even know the names of the Yellow Vests around me and... it's true that... not that everyone was listening to me but, I had a certain... I think a certain charisma, people knew who I was in the end, and as a result..."

Stéphane also appeared as the protagonist of a political crisis who acquired notoriety and recognition within the movement. He became "*identified*" (in Telegram groups in particular) and publicly visible via the local and regional media:

> "Well I'm, I'm known by now. My name doesn't appear specifically, but generally speaking, Stéphane from town X, you can tell who that is".

Furthermore, the Yellow Vests movement gave him faith in his ability to change the world. For example, recalling the first Assembly Meeting, he said with excitement:

> "And we were also thinking, This is it; we're making history, we're making history here!"

This feeling of being part of history in the making was shared and described by Clara, Corinne and Domi. Domi thus compared the Yellow Vests movement to the great social protests of the past:

> "Still, France was at the top-end, no question about it. From there, we keep going backwards and backwards... But there are people who fought for that! We can't ignore what they did for us! We just can't! Well I... it's a matter of respect as well, respect for our elders, for what they've done, for what they've suffered too. Just like in maybe 40 or 50 years' time, when someone talks to you about the Yellow Vests, when we finally get... because we won't give up! So that's why I'm saying: not maybe, but when we get what we need, people will say, Well, our ancestors fought..."

Clara expressed the same willingness to witness and take part in the country's history in the making, showing how the experience of mobilisation managed to turn a daily routine into an intense experience in the name of a just cause, to the point of becoming addictive. In the account of her involvement, Clara thus expressed on several occasions a desire to be part of it, to observe and to play a part in the event:

> "I could see that there was something going on and I wanted to go and see what was happening and there it was, I wanted to witness things and experience them, I think."

She was even afraid of missing out on some historic moments and still regretted not having "*gone up to Paris*" to demonstrate.

> "Yeah, people came back and said, "Yeah, that was good", and all that. "It's something you need to do", "You only see that sort of thing a couple of times in your life", you know, that kind of stuff... They were motivated, you know. It was, yeah, it was what it was. Then yeah... In S.'s group, which I join on occasion, people that I still hang out with, well some of them went and yes, I should, I should have gone anyway.
>
> People who told me about it said it was horrible, but... it's... I'm addicted now, I want to be there all the time! I don't know, it's like that! [Laughs] Even if we're gassed or whatever... I don't know! [Pause] Even if there's a risk of being arrested... "

c. *Reinforcing a general sense of mistrust of specialist politics*

In addition to these conventional and protest learning experiences, mobilisation provided first-time protesters with an experience of a two-fold transformation of their relationship to politics, but also to the political, in other words of their vision of the social world and the community, its organisational principles and the position they held in it.

It was first and foremost with regards to politics seen as a specialised political field that involvement in the movement affected first-time protesters. It reinforced, rather than generated, a mistrust towards the traditional key players in the field of representation: government, elected

officials, political parties and trade unions. This mistrust was even one of the unifying themes of the movement. Here, too, attitudes and situations reinforced one another. Many of our interviewees came from family socialisations where the relationship with political leaders was guided by distance, indifference, mistrust or criticism. One of the unifying foundations on which the Yellow Vests' rhetoric was based was the critical focus on President Macron and his government, as evidenced by one of the movement's main rallying songs in which his name is mentioned: "*Emmanuel Macron, you dickhead, we're coming for you!*". In this respect, they were merely reacting to the dynamics of presidentialisation and, above all, the personalisation of political power in the Fifth Republic, which Emmanuel Macron had significantly stepped up, to the extent where he had described his exercise of power as "Jupiterian" and dared journalists and opponents suspicious of one of his close collaborators to "come and get me". Echoing President Macron's moral judgements about the French (these "Gauls resistant to change", too lazy to find a job when "all you have to do is cross the street"), it is often on a moral ground that this mistrust was expressed towards political leaders described in terms of immorality, treachery and profit. For example, Clara said that she wrote the following messages on her yellow vest on the 17th of November 2018:

> "Liars, Manipulators, Profiteers" something like that. Er..." Macron out! "Er..."The angry French people". That's it."

A widening of mistrust towards politics has also been noted at times. For example, Robert, a regular National Front voter who was heavily involved on the roundabouts, told us that he had even lost confidence in Marine Le Pen and that he now "put her in the same basket" as the others. It is important to note that this strong mistrust of political figures did not necessarily seem to be associated with a rejection of representative democracy per se. Instead, our interview participants were calling for better representation, more in tune with their interests and social profiles (Bedock & al.). Although this aspect still needs to be explored, the assumption can be linked to the fact that elsewhere too, first-time protesters, if not less vehement, seem to show greater moderation in their criticism of the system than experienced activists, as seen among the Spanish Indignados (Taibo 2013). In the same way, this strong mistrust towards partisan players did not necessarily lead first-time protesters to distance themselves from conventional channels of involvement. For instance, among our interviewees, those who used to vote before the movement said that they would also vote in the 2019 European elections.

Although less unanimous, strong criticism of trade union leadership was also frequently expressed by first-time protesters. This can be related to their career paths. The movement draws largely from business sectors with no union representation (Collectif 2019), such as self-employed individuals, craftsmen and clerks among men, and healthcare providers (nursing auxiliaries, care workers, etc.) among women. Here, the experience of the movement has often confirmed the participants' low level of socialisation towards trade union involvement. The lack of trade union support during the first weeks of the movement was indeed strongly and unanimously criticised by the interviewees, as was the unions' "coyness" and compliance with the usual itineraries negotiated with the authorities during some joint demonstrations. Distinctions can nevertheless be drawn in the comments between such criticism of trade union organisations and leadership and the acknowledgement of the involvement of "grassroots" trade unionists in the Yellow Vests movement at local level.

Lastly, involvement in the movement might have generated rather than strengthened a narrative of mistrust towards the media by encouraging a critical stance towards its rhetoric and sometimes leading to changes in the sources of information. During the interviews, Corinne and Domi compared their personal experience of mobilisation and police repression with their media coverage on television. While they made a distinction between television, which "*is in the hands of a few fat cats*", and local newspapers, which according to Domi "*are much more real*", their preference was clearly for live feeds, social networks or Messenger groups. As Corinne put it, "*when it's shared live, it can't lie*".

d. From individual experiences to the condemnation of inequalities

Beyond this criticism which attests to the homogenisation of some representations in the rhetoric of the Yellow Vests, mobilisation has led to the rearticulation of the social question.

Involvement in the movement and in particular in occupation initiatives seemed to facilitate the development of these processes of politicisation through daily interactions on roundabouts and other places of mobilisation. The Yellow Vests movement can be compared here to other occupation movements where similar phenomena occurred, such as squats, Zones to Defend (ZAD) or, more recently, city square occupation movements (Nez 2017). During the month of December 2018, various roundabouts and motorway tolls were occupied day and night and became the setting for (sometimes) intense socialisation and strong bonding experiences. People talked to each other; the sharing of (often intimate) personal accounts and recounting of (often difficult) life experiences were frequently used as a means of socialising. Mobilisation became a place of recognition of one' s peers. It is from these interactions that emerged a process of politicisation of the rhetoric and of the interpretation of the social world, as seen in the evolution of the Yellow Vests' demands. For some of the protesters, the experience of mobilisation enabled them to go beyond the sharing of individual accounts and create a collective narrative that placed them squarely within a system criticised as being a source of inequality and to which a legitimate call for change could be made. Embedded in the condemnation of injustice, difficult personal experiences became the driving force behind the anger aimed at political leaders.

In other words, the act of sharing individual stories about living conditions contributed to the construction of common frames (Snow et al. 1986, 2014; Goffman 1991), political subjectivation and a shift in demands towards a challenge of social and tax inequalities, followed by institutions (via a call, from mid-December 2018, for a Popular Initiative Referendum) (Sebbah 2019). Such demands did not exist at the beginning of the movement which was initially set up to protest against a government measure to increase fuel prices and in defence of consumer buying power. The Yellow Vests movement is a good example of a phenomenon shared by many social movements. Contrary to retrospective illusion, the identification and unification of demands and perceived injustices did not pre-date the movement, and it is through involvement in the movement that a relative alignment of these patterns of interpretation emerged.

For our interviewees, the issues of inequality, devaluation of work and demands for its recognition were key. For instance, in Clara's statement, those who work and pay taxes were pitted against the politicians who are profiteering. Such rhetoric is often rooted in a sense of a levelling off of possible future expectations and economic security. The entire interview with Corinne and Domi was marked by the acute awareness of a "breakdown" in the 2000s that shattered the value of

work and the living conditions of self-employed workers. As Domi said when describing her conversations during the Saturday demonstrations,

> "We all have this one thing in common, and that is our rights, putting value back into what we work towards every day, so that, er, we don't actually create a group but we're a whole group, in fact."

Consequently, through interpersonal exchanges, the movement also promoted a partial transformation of the relationship to the political, understood as an interpretation of the collective, of coexistence and of visions of the social world, its divisions and its links. Remarkably, it was thus able to rearticulate social issues, beyond both a Marxist perspective and the culturalism of identity-based nationalism.

For Yellow Vests, the development of criticism regarding social order, inequality and injustice stemmed from a socially- and not culturally-grounded conception of community. Here, the fact that politics was avoided as a talking point on roundabouts and in protest initiatives in order to preserve civility between Yellow Vests and prevent any political or trade union recuperation constrained the demands being voiced within the movement. As a result, social issues were brought to the fore and cultural ones brushed aside. Issues that had been the subject of intense partisan politicisation since the 1980s, in particular immigration, the place of foreigners and Islam, were removed from collective exchanges, but also from demands. While those topics might be present in interpersonal conversations or in interviews, they were less so in the watchwords that governed the movement. It was therefore precisely because of the avoidance of what had been politicised in previous decades (immigration, Islam) that collective and interpersonal discussions focused on social rather than cultural issues, and came to rearticulate them.

Indeed, among first-time protesters, criticism of inequalities and social order was also voiced outside of Marxist references and perspectives. Employers seemed to be largely excluded from the list of foes, and speeches on social exploitation were scarce. The business community was significant here since self-employed individuals or vulnerable employees made up a sizeable proportion of the Yellow Vests movement. The hypothesis of a decline in the "tripartite social consciousness" of working classes feeling "wronged by both the most powerful and the poorest" (Schwartz 2011), in favour of a binary vision, has been suggested (Challier 2019). The movement would be an opportunity for convergence, at least by default, towards "those at the bottom", represented by individuals living in highly precarious conditions (the homeless, unemployed individuals reaching the end of their benefits allowance, people on disability benefit often considered as "trailer trash (*cassos*)"…) against those at the top, epitomised by political figures and in particular the President and those in power. Here as well, the hypothesis ought to be challenged with longer-term empirical data.

Concluding discussion. The politicisation of Yellow Vests: critical perspectives

To conclude, we would like to put forward a few insights gained from our study, which will enable us to compare it with those of other post-2011 movements and highlight a number of indicators of change in today's political societies.

First of all, the movement's make-up and the singular relationship to *politics* and *the political* that it entails gave it an initial limit. The alienation from the political field on the part of many of the protesters, especially first-timers, and their belonging to the working class, contributed to distancing political figures from the movement, or even made it unintelligible in their eyes. The exclusion within the movement of party-political rhetoric and standard ideological markers not only ensured the group's cohesion, but was also at odds with the prevailing classifying categories, especially media and political ones, and made it easier to discredit the movement. It also made it more difficult for it to gain support from the middle classes for whom these dominant categories had largely been assimilated and, especially at the beginning of the movement, from activists belonging to more traditional social movements and trade union organisations. Indeed, the lack of widespread backing from the middle classes largely contributed to the failure by the Yellow Vests to take the political system to crisis point, something which had been achieved at the beginning of the movement but was soon thwarted both by government policy (measures taken, holding of a major debate and mounting police repression) and by the media's growing interest in "violence" alone. The Yellow Vests mobilisation raises once again the issue of conditions of possibility for large social movements bringing together individuals from the middle and working classes.

A second limit, partly linked to the aforementioned aspects of make-up and relationship to politics, lies in the scale at which the movement developed across the country and the constant rejection of any form of national structure. In a movement that was born without coordination and relied heavily on social networks, the weight of first-timers and the working-class profile of some of the Yellow Vests gave rise to a mostly local mobilisation, via small-scale collectives whose action was often limited to one or several roundabouts, whose coordination was late and incomplete at local level and which hardly ever reached national level, despite a few attempts, including through Assembly Meetings.

The Yellow Vests movement can be compared here to post-2011 movements, in particular "public square movements", which shared the same determination to distance themselves from the traditional partisan and trade union representative organisations, rooted, in the case of the Yellow Vests, in their affiliation to business sectors with little or no union representation. They also shared the same critical view of representative democracy and the political field, deemed unethical. The strong presence of first-time protesters in the movement also contributed, through its choice of local direct action and the shunning of formal debate (unlike post-2011 movements) or codification of exchanges in assemblies (not to mention a relative aversion to this kind of activities for some Yellow Vests), to its inability to initiate any kind of structuring on a larger scale. Nevertheless, as with public square movements, the reluctance to appoint representatives and concern about potential attempts at partisan recuperation restricted not only the movement's institutionalisation, but also the opportunity for immediate impact in the political arena or in terms of reforms and setting the agenda. However, the limits of the French political system under the Fifth Republic and its inability to take social protest movements into account are also at stake here. As a neo-corporatist state relying on an often restricted dialogue between government led by an all-powerful executive and organised interest groups (in particular "reformist" trade union organisations), the current regime in France has relieved Members of Parliament and partisan stakeholders, often subservient to partisan leaderships who have now become more receptive to expert and think tank opinions, of their power to mediate in the politicisation of social groups' demands and the translation of their aspirations into public issues.

The return and rearticulation of social issues at the expense of cultural ones, which we saw in our study, provides a strong indication of the misalignment between the established political field and the aspirations voiced by a number of working- and vulnerable middle-class groups. The Yellow Vests' strong condemnation of inequalities and social and tax injustices affecting the "weak" is in stark contrast to the increasing focus initiated by the National Front over the last thirty years on the issues of migration and national identity within the partisan arena. The cartelization of political parties (Katz & Mair 1995, Aucante and Dézé, 2008) and, in France, both the gradual disappearance of the Communist Party (Pudal 2009) and the embourgeoisement of the Socialist Party (Lefèbvre and Sawicki 2006), traditional mouthpieces for the working classes, have also exacerbated this.

By the same token, the Yellow Vests seem to be part of a larger movement of (re)territorialisation of struggle at local level. The movement here follows the recent shift in the scale of repertoires of action, in the wake of city square occupation movements, again in favour of a local dimension in which they are anchored through various (and often difficult) forms of coordination at national level. Here again, the Yellow Vests movement can be compared heuristically to post-2011 movements. It is therefore likely that the impact of the movement was particularly felt at local level, in particular through the creation of networks of sociability and mutual support likely to be structured into dormant protest networks that could be reactivated at a later date. There is also a good chance that the mobilisation's major consequences were mostly felt at personal level.

Our study of the movement's impact on first-time protesters has essentially been conducted through the prism of politicisation. Here, the Yellow Vests movement provides an apparent paradox. This deeply political mobilisation, strongly unified by its opposition to the figure of President Macron (who himself fuelled this feeling of contempt for the working class through several of his public statements), had to develop through cohesion and consensus management which led to the sidelining of the issues of partisan stances and ideological unification. This paradox – which is only apparent – is also the condition for politicization: the Yellow Vests' politicisation in the sense of a shift in their relationship to *the political* is in fact achieved by concealing the differences in their relationship to *politics* (both in terms of partisan affiliations and alienation from/interest in politics).

While mobilisation provided some of our interviewees with objective political skills (i.e. a better grasp and ability to identify the various categories in the institutional political field, mainly in relation to mistrust), it was also an opportunity for most of them to become dissenting individuals, protagonists of a major critical period, and it changed their representations of the social and political world.

Politicisation thus comprises several dimensions. It is a place for learning in terms of knowledge, but above all in terms of protest know-how and behaviour, be it through the conversion of already acquired (professional, domestic) practices and skills into protest activity or through the trial of new practices. Here again, the analysis needs to be compared with the classic politicisation processes within social movements, particularly in other recent movements like occupation (Nez 2017) or public square movements (El Chazli 2012; Goujon and Shukan 2015; Smaoui 2017). For our interviewees, being a Yellow Vest reinforces their mistrust of political figures while fostering a sense of empowerment and helping them to acquire new protest

capabilities. Nevertheless, these two dimensions remain puzzling in part and require further analysis, in particular in terms of monitoring our interviewees' personal journey over time.

Indeed, whilst concealing misalignments in frames of action enabled the movement to exist and last over time, the question arises as to the limits to that shift in the relationship to *the political*, understood as a reconfiguration of the view of the social world, its boundaries and the position of the interviewees within it. In other words, whether there is a shift and a real alignment effect on frames of action. In terms of the relationship to *politics*, avoidance strategies and tactics make it difficult to fully measure the potential effects of changing voter preferences and may underestimate them. If the Yellow Vests' mistrust of political figures was strengthened by protest experience, it is because it was partly pre-existing. With regards to the relationship to *the political*, the question remains as to how far, or rather among which interviewees, the movement can lead to an alignment of visions of the social world where a straightforward opposition between the elite and a united people would lead to the disappearance or reduction of the distance felt and expressed within the working classes and the vulnerable middle classes with the fringes, especially those in a very precarious situation (the 'trailer trash', the 'homeless') or migrant populations.

Finally, the question arises as to the duration, in a routine context and after a downturn in mobilisation, of the experience of protagonism in a crisis situation, in terms of awareness of the right to speak out, the capacity to act and the ability to take back individual and collective control of one's own destiny. These effects will have to be investigated and the hypothesis of a new readiness to protest will have to be put to the test over a longer period of time through the follow-up of our interviewees. It will also be worth asking whether the experience of mobilisation has produced ripple effects beyond politicisation in our interviewees' lives, particularly in the workplace or in the close personal space of family and marital relationships. All that remains is for us to find out what one of our interviewees meant when she described her parting with her partner during the movement as "having kicked one Macron out of her house"....

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