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# Fuel Feud

## The Political Economy of the Yellow Vests

Quentin Ravelli

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Despite the importance of economic forces in shaping social struggles, political economy is rarely included in the explanations of social movements – as if the capitalist economy ought to be analyzed independently from its contestation. On the one hand, we examine values, commodities, production, wealth, profit, prices and wages. On the other, opportunities, organizations, resources, tactics and strategies. What makes this separation all the more unfortunate is that several notions could be used as cornerstones to connect both edifices. Crises, economic discrepancies, social classes, taxes and wages, often considered simply as contextual factors shedding light on the *moment of ignition of social struggles*, could instead be understood as fertile points of overlap between the two disciplines, capable of explaining *life-cycles of revolts and upheavals* by means of sociological reinterpretation of political economy. Antoine de Montchrestien, who first coined the term ‘political economy’ in his *Traité d’économie politique* in 1615, was already arguing against Aristotle who tended to disconnect social life from economic structure. But Montchrestien’s mercantilist theory focused on the use of commercial activity to build the authority of the State. Contestation was the last of his concerns, coming after tragedies and pastorals. Most political economists since then, from classical Adam Smith and Ricardo to neoclassic authors such as Menger and Walras to today’s neoliberals, have carefully kept social struggles at a distance, treating them as abnormalities, because otherwise they would challenge their harmonious systems. Even Marx, whose social theory is rooted in the economy, felt the weight of this intellectual division of labor. His ‘critique of political economy’ in *The Capital* remains largely disconnected from his political works like *Class Struggles in France*. Readers have to connect the dots between the falling rate of profit and the 1848 insurrection, because the fiscal crisis, the potato shortage or the railroad bankruptcy are only briefly mentioned in his presentation of the revolution.

In the aftermath of a global economic crisis, the eruption of economic grievances incites us to think further. The dramatic history of the Yellow Vests – the strongest social movement in France since 1968 – is certainly one of the best case-studies to test the vitality of political economy concepts when transplanted out of their original soil. But what exactly are the Yellow Vests? This broad working-class movement launched on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, defies our usual political categories. It was sparked by a fuel tax rise which would have placed the onus of ecological policies on the working poor of rural France, who need to use their car every day because the lack of public transportation leaves them with no other option. Faced with the ensuing mass movement against this ‘eco-tax’, or ‘carbon tax’, both on countryside roundabouts and the threshold of the palais de l’Elysée, the French White House, president Emmanuel Macron and his government were caught off guard. After many years of stagnating wages, insufficient pensions, the dismantlement of public services and neoliberal policies, Emmanuel Macron – a former investment banker dubbed the “president of the rich” – was seen as the embodiment of the capitalist culture: his cancellation of the *Impôt de Solidarité sur la Fortune*, or solidarity tax on wealth (ISF), was seen as favoring the wealthiest and was strongly rejected by the Yellow Vests, who also asked for a suppression of the ‘carbon tax’ and other taxes on small corporations and self-employed workers. Demonstrators soon demanded a raise on wages and pensions, and the possibility to change the law by referendum – *Référendum d’Initiative Citoyenne*. As early as December 5, 2018, the carbon tax was suspended but the bone of contention – economic discrepancies – remained. They fueled a long-lasting war punctuated by weekly ‘acts’, as demonstrators called them, like in a theatrical play. Every Saturday, outraged rural and peri-urban protagonists would leave their blockades on the roundabouts to storm luxurious neighborhoods of the capital, clashing with the police, and sometimes selectively torching fancy cars and plundering luxury shops, attracting widespread media attention.

Not only does this movement force us to bring political economy back into the analysis of social movements as a crucial *factor* – which is stronger than simply a *context* – for mobilization, it also prompts us to build new notions to understand how economic forces

may become the very stuff of new, powerful and creative struggles. Roundabout blockades in the countryside stopping truck and car traffic, demands for fiscal justice combined with the cry for legislative reform, the ability to bring together a vast array of socio-economic groups with no previous activist experience, the use of yellow safety jackets: all these methods, objectives, grievances, symbols and social convergences set us off-balance – including the Yellow Vests themselves. Born outside of labor organizations, the Yellow Vests despise traditional trade-union demonstrations as well as the convenient cleavage between right and left. They don't use obvious class or identity-based vocabulary, but their movement is nonetheless class-rooted, even if they don't say it out loud, which allows them to keep rightists on board.

Among the notions political economy can provide to help us understand this enigmatic social movement and probably many others, three of them deserve particular attention: *commodities' contradictory values as drivers for social contention*, which can explain why the selective access to basic goods, such as fuel, can spark strong contestation; *economic grievances coalesce which can transform economic justice into social justice*, thanks to snowballing demands, agglomerating grievances concerning wages or pensions with others on taxes, contributing to mining the State's authority; and *pivotal class fractions as builders for cross-class alliances*, a mechanism which helps us understand new types of class mobilizations outside classical labor organizations. Along the way, these notions show why social movement studies, when focused on “political structures of opportunity” and “resource mobilization”, often miss their targets.

Methodologically speaking, such a bewildering movement requires a resolute commitment inside the movement to avoid misinterpretations. I will rely on long-term participant observation of a group of Yellow Vests from a cluster of roundabouts in a small town in the Loiret department in the French countryside, 80 miles south of Paris, on an ongoing series of interviews with these activists and on the few significant statistical databases gathered by several groups of researchers. Some of these quantitative indicators are worth mentioning before going into further detail: in a country with a 10 % unemployment

rate, where the median family income is 2 519 € a month,<sup>1</sup> 16 % of Yellow Vests are unemployed and 25 % declare their monthly revenue to be under € 1200, 50 % earn less than € 2 000, and 75 % less than € 2 900 (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets jaunes 2019: 880-881)<sup>2</sup>. The main 'reason' given for demonstrating and occupying roundabouts is, by a significant margin, insufficient 'purchasing power', or *pouvoir d'achat*, a factor mentioned by 57 % of Yellow Vests, followed by demands for institutional reform. As Maxime Nicolle, aka Fly Rider, a prominent Yellow Vest figure, repeatedly says in his autobiography that even if he is not among the poorest of the Yellow Vests: 'I have always been a temp worker' (Nicolle 2020: 95). Precarious material conditions aren't only a precondition for protest: they are the flesh and bones of the movement, and this should incite us to go beyond the conventional tools of social movement studies.

### **1. Opportunities and resources: blunt tools for sharp fights**

How can we understand the 1934 teamster strikes without the more conciliatory attitude of Roosevelt's administration when compared to former governments, or the 1871 Paris Commune without the weakening of the French state in the midst of the Franco-Prussian war?<sup>3</sup> In many social movements, including the most powerful, political opportunities may indeed play crucial roles. These struggles are all shaped by historical contexts in which the exhaustion of state power opens up new opportunities for contestation, a concept which has become the bread and butter of social movement scholars. Doug McAdam even considers that 'most contemporary theories of revolution start from much the same premise, arguing that revolutions owe less to the efforts of the insurgents than to the work of systemic crises which render the existing regime weak and vulnerable to challenge from virtually any quarter.' (McAdam 1996: 24) Is it really the case? Are insurgents only playing a supporting role in their own insurrection? And what exactly is a 'systemic crisis', an expression which seems to reduce long-term economic contradictions to short-term political opportunities?

Not only does this mainstream analysis of social movements sideline the main characters of the story, it also obscures their anger and the reasons why they act, which cannot be reduced to sizing up the opponent and waiting for the right time and the right place to strike. People often fight against all odds because they can't make a living anymore, or because they think it's fair, and not because they have made a savvy calculation of their chances of victory, like chess players do. In the case of the Yellow Vests, such preexisting strategical thinking is nowhere to be found – but economic grievances are everywhere, and they are overwhelming. Since analysis of social movements has moved away from the “why” to the “when” (Tarrow 1994: 17-18), it is now urgent to revisit the “why” armed with a new conceptual apparatus rooted in empirical case studies.

*Windowless: a movement with no opportunity*

Relying on a “highly consensual list of dimensions of political opportunity” drawn from works by Kriesi (1991), Brockett (1992), Rucht (1996) and Tarrow (1994), McAdam (1996) identifies four central elements of political opportunity structures: the openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; the instability of elite alignments; allies from dominant classes; the level of state repression. Far from favoring the Yellow Vests, these four factors were working against them: institutions were closed, elites aligned, dominant classes unified, and police repression was exceptionally harsh – but the insurgents went to war nonetheless.

A few months before November 17, 2018, social unrest was rife in France. In Spring, from April to June, rail workers were on strike against a governmental project to open the railroad system to private competition and to end the special status of train drivers. Railroad closures in the countryside, less stable employment conditions, lower wages and pensions were looming ahead. Many other categories of workers – lawyers, nurses and pilots, among others – were also fighting against measures leading to the liberalization of their professional sectors.<sup>4</sup> Even though these movements had much in common, notably the struggle against

the reduction of public services, stagnating wages and privatization, they remained on separate tracks. Trade-union leaders and politicians, along with the media and the press, were all talking about a potential *convergence* of these struggles – “convergence des luttes” – but such a convergence never went beyond wishful thinking, or unfounded fear. The different movements advanced in parallel rather than converging with each other, and they all failed: the government didn’t flinch and corporate leaders were able to move forward with their plans, defeating all contestation. Far from opening up that year, political opportunities had been closing down, one after the other.

Despite these very unfavorable conditions, the Yellow Vests’ call to action was immediately taken up by hundreds of thousands of protesters. Right from the very first day of the mobilization, even in remote regions of the French countryside, large crowds gathered on the roundabouts at the entrance of villages. Over the following days, they built cabins in the middle or on the sides of the roundabouts to protect themselves from the cold, to create a place to talk together and organize. This mode of collective action was surprisingly new, contradicting Charles Tilly’s affirmation that social movements tend to adopt familiar tools of action: ‘innovation is rarer, and harder to explain’.<sup>5</sup> Without the help of any trade-union, association or political party, 287 710 persons flocked to roundabouts and demonstrated in the center of cities, according to the probably underestimated figures of the government. On the Champs-Élysées, an impressive wave of protestors submerged the Etoile round about, where the Arc de Triomphe stands. This was the “first Act” of the movement, which gave birth to a new tradition: every Saturday, Yellow Vests would go to Paris and demonstrate, week after week, maintaining their anger in the face of stiff police repression, without any encouraging sign of significant division – or ‘opportunity’ – within the government.

Far from a response to a structure of opportunity, the birth of the movement was characterized by the absence of any structure of political opportunity.<sup>6</sup> This concept, the cornerstone of Political Process Theory (PPT), is ‘currently the hegemonic paradigm among social movement analysts (Goodwin and Jasper 2004:3), claiming that ‘social movements emerge as the result of ‘expanding’ political opportunities’ is thus inoperative here. The

Yellow Vest movement gained traction against all odds. To put it bluntly, windowless movements don't wait for windows to open – they just break them. The other central concept of social movement studies, *resource mobilization*, proves no more helpful, because the Yellow Vests did not have any pre-existing organization, financial support, or even significant social ties at their disposition to construct the movement.

*Resources of loneliness: the movement generates its own strength*

One of the most striking aspects of the Yellow Vest movement is the absence of previously existing social ties between activists: trade-union membership, familial bonds, relationships born on the shop-floor, at school or university, which often explain political recruitment processes, did not play a decisive role. Only 17 % of Yellow Vests belong or have belonged to a political party, 32 % to a trade-union and 38 % to an association; 46 % of roundabout Yellow Vests and 29 % of demonstration Yellow Vests<sup>7</sup> had never been involved in a social movement before; 75 % think parties shouldn't play any role in the movement and 59 % think the same concerning trade-unions (Collectif d'Enquête sur les Gilets jaunes: 885 and 883). Even more striking, among the delegates at the Yellow Vest 'Assembly of assemblies' – a nationwide coordinating body bringing together representatives of roundabouts and local groups, where, given the more traditional organizational structure, one might expect an overwhelming majority of participants to be seasoned activists – only 12 % say they belong or have belonged to a political party and 31 % to a trade-union, 32 % refuse the distinction between right and left; 30 % and 22 % did not vote in the presidential elections of 2012 and 2017 and 19 % had simply never demonstrated before in their lives (Ravelli et al. 2020: 16 and 23).<sup>8</sup>

Individual experiences on roundabouts confirm this distance from organized activism: most Yellow Vests in the Loiret came to the roundabouts on their own, or, in relatively few



cases, with a handful of friends or relatives who did not stay long. This is how a 54-year-old car mechanic explains his very first day as a Yellow Vest:

On Saturday, November 17, at 8am, I came to the roundabout, all alone. I scratched my head and said to myself: ‘okay...’. At 8:30, a retired man arrived, all pumped up: ‘I am fed up! Our pensions! I won’t move from here!’ There were two of us, then three, four, five... And at one point I said to myself that we were here but we weren’t blocking anything. So I looked up the Facebook group “Angry France” and realized that the Peanut roundabout was blockaded, that Châlette roundabout was beginning to be blockaded, that there were many people and a lot of material. I sent an invitation to these groups, saying we were on the Ponies roundabout and we were short of material, because I had seen Facebook lives with tires, and pallets. Solidarity worked, and ten minutes afterwards people arrived with a truck, tires, pallets, and we blockaded the roundabout.

This story shows how the movement aggregates individuals – ‘we were two, then three, four, five...’ – until they become a mass of people capable of blocking the traffic on the roundabout, not only challenging the circulation of commodities, but also disturbing shopping mall directors, policemen, mayors, and other elected officials. Of course, not all Yellow Vests share the same experience, and some of them used their networks: for instance, one plumber and heating engineer, a prominent activist of the same roundabout, mobilized his professional network and arrived on the roundabout with a few colleagues who were also small-scale entrepreneurs. However, most Yellow Vests came alone, even those with significant social capital, and, more importantly, those who *stayed* on the roundabout for the next several months did not know each other beforehand, as most interviews attest. In other words, previously existing links did not form the cement of the movement, which came instead from those created during the mobilization itself. The figure of the *lonesome Yellow Vest* creating a community is far more representative of the average rank-and-file than individuals well endowed with social resources, multiple memberships and coherent collective strategies. For someone like the aforementioned car mechanic, even though he knows many people in town, the movement generates its social resources, allowing him to meet people he hadn’t seen for some time:

I met a few people I already knew because I am from this place and my parents owned a shop here. I work in a garage so I know quite a few people, it's been thirty years now. Also, I was into sports, in a football club, so I had the opportunity to know many, many people. I met former colleagues, people who used to take their kids to football, garage clients.

What is important in this narrative, is the fact that the mechanic did not *convince* anyone to come with him but he unexpectedly met acquaintances on the roundabout. Like a planet, the roundabout exerts a strong attraction in itself. Over the weeks, the gatherings on the Peanut roundabout forged a small society, without deliberate recruitment among friends or relatives. Quite often, familial links, rather than fostering the movement, hamper or hobble it. Husbands and wives may – sometimes quite justifiably from a marital standpoint – see roundabout sociability as a danger to the stability of the family environment. A former *gendarme*<sup>9</sup> relates the story one of the friends who came with him and couldn't stay: “his girlfriend has kids and put him under pressure, so he came a few Saturdays after the 17, but after that he left the thing, even if he was still supporting it. It's too bad because I would have liked to keep on experiencing what I had been experiencing with him, but that's the way it is.’ Later in the interview, he explains: ‘There was a relationship with an ex I had to forget, so it helped me to forget about it and focus on other goals’. Loneliness can be a paradoxical resource because it triggers behaviors that compensate for the weight of solitude. Even those who do have political networks did not mobilize them willfully. One communist party member, for instance, did not come to the roundabout as an activist with other comrades, but as a single mother with other single mothers: “Solo mums like me, in the same situation. We came here with the kids.”

Of course, according to resource mobilization theorists, organizational resources are only one of many different kinds of resources, such as money and equipment (material resources), skills to run a meeting (cultural resources), spatial and financial capital (material resources), and labor (human resources) (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). The Yellow Vests did share the few resources they had in terms of time, experience and materials, such as

pallets and tires to block roundabouts, or gifts like stuffed animals for children on Christmas day. Others used their personal social networks, like 33 year-old truck driver Eric Drouet, from Melun, who relied on his tuning car owners network to foster his Yellow Vest group ‘Angry France’ – *La France en Colère* – which had more than 300 000 followers two months after the beginning of the movement, or 32 year-old temporary worker Maxime Nicolle, who relied on his Facebook motorbike group called GSR-GSXS 750. But when he created *Fly Rider Info Blocage*, its success surpassed all expectations:

The avalanche didn’t stop. I had to ask my sister-in-law and a friend to help us. We had started the group thinking “we’ll do *live streaming* to try and inform people”, but we never thought we’d reach 180 000 thousand people. I was hoping for 500, 1000, 2000 at most, to whom we’d give info on the movement. I had never thought we could weigh in, I mean exist for real. I didn’t think one day I’d get to talk with ministers”. (Nicolle 2020, p. 105)

This kind of unexpected success that radically transforms the life course of an individual Yellow Vest is a recurrent theme in stories about the movement. No matter how hard we try to explain someone’s life as a Yellow Vest with reference to his or her *previous life*, the movement’s resources by preexisting resources, a gap remains. This gap can’t be explained by the emergence of hidden resources, because most Yellow Vests did not have money, political skills, or space to share: here again, their lack of resources explains more than the few resources they did have at their disposal. Their lack of space leads them to take over roundabouts and build wooden cabins on them. Their lack of political skills explains the absence of well-structured general assemblies. Their lack of money was a central reason for joining the movement. In the interviews, most activists mention their low wages, pensions and benefits. They became involved in this movement because they wanted to improve their economic conditions and gain access to unfairly distributed resources, not because they wanted to share the few resources they had.

As table 1 clearly shows, the main grievance – *revendication* – is economic: “purchasing power” is mentioned by 43% of Yellow Vests on roundabouts and 37% in demonstrations, from a sample of 927 individuals. It should be noted that among the

responses that refer to ‘inequality and injustice’ (22% and 31%), most activists talk about ‘social injustice’ or ‘fiscal injustice’: this category increases the weight of economic grievances. When asked directly about the reason for participating in the movement, economic grievances figure in 49 % of responses given in demonstrations and 65 % on roundabouts.

**Fig. 1 - Grievances and reasons for mobilization in the Yellow Vests movement**

	Purchasing power	Institutional Reforms	Inequality and injustice	Against Government	Public Services
Roundabout Grievances	43 %	27 %	22 %	28 %	2 %
Demonstration Grievances	37 %	35 %	31 %	34 %	3 %
All Grievances	41 %	31 %	26 %	31 %	2 %
Reasons for Roundabout Mobilisation	65 %	22 %	13 %	22 %	5 %
Reasons for Demonstration	49 %	26 %	19 %	31 %	3 %
All reasons	57 %	27 %	26 %	17 %	4 %

N = 927. Source: Enquête collective par questionnaire sur les Gilets jaunes (Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets jaunes 2019)

The reasons for participating in a movement are far more powerful explanatory factors than the opportunities that present themselves or the resources possessed, and in this case economic reasons are overwhelmingly present. They should be examined as such, *literally* – and not as convenient metaphors, as is too often the case in social movement studies. The field that has now been colonized by such economic vocabulary: since the 1970s, articles talk *ad nauseam* about ‘Social Movement Industries’, ‘Social Movement Entrepreneurs’, ‘Social Movement Organizations’, ‘Social Movement Workers’ and even ‘product differentiation’ (McCarthy and Zald 1977, p. 1234, 1236). This hasty identification of activists, insurgents and striking workers with managers or marketers out for greater returns on investment is questionable from a moral point of view. Moreover, it is scientifically dubious, and would merit a detailed critique capable of retracing the genealogy of such categories, one that goes

further back than Hirschman (2004[1970]) with his model for understanding organizational change and the interchangeable and often absurd application of his categories to firms and grassroots protest movements alike. This second-degree use of economic concepts could be seen as a form of economicism, reducing all social logics to economics. But in fact it does exactly the opposite: it empties economics of its content, obscuring the economic backbone of social life – commodities, grievances, classes – which now need to be reintegrated into social movement analysis.

## **2. Fuel, tax and social class: political economy applied to the Yellow Vests**

Political economy has at least three meanings, and all three contribute to the analysis of a powerful social movement like the Yellow Vests. Firstly, it refers to the tools used by the State to implement its economic policies, relying on economic indicators to adapt its decisions to its objectives. This may be called *governmental political economy*. Secondly, it is a scientific discipline which analyzes the economic sphere without disconnecting it from social and political factors or the reverse, explaining social and political logics by their underlying economic structures. This may be called *mainstream political economy*, often identified with market economics, because its center of gravity is market harmony, based on the relationship between offer and demand. The third kind of political economy comprises essentially a critique of the two others: it is also a scientific discipline but it tries to deconstruct the ideological assumptions and harmful consequences of economic policies and erroneous economic theories – its analytical center of gravity is profit, rooted in exploitation and class antagonism. This may be called *critical political economy*. The history of the Yellow Vests shows how these three streams of political economy interact, and often violently oppose each other.

On the level of governmental political economy, the two decades preceding 2018 were characterized by a continuous stream of privatizations of France's main economic sectors and, above all, the flexibilization of the labor market. Under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (2007-2012), the policy 'work more to earn more' included tax exemption on overtime, implemented in 2007. After the 2008 market crunch, which generated the highest inflation in years and seriously damaged incomes and purchasing power, a 'self-entrepreneur' status was created in January 2009, to develop micro-companies – this entrepreneurial spirit was then seriously damaged by bankruptcies, debts and overtaxation among artisans and small business owners, who massively joined the first wave of the Yellow Vests years later. Under François Hollande (2012-2017), labor minister Myriam El Khomri passed the 2016 labor law, or *loi travail*, supported by Pierre Gattaz, president of the largest corporations' union, the Medef, and Emmanuel Macron, then minister of finance. Facilitating lay-offs, reducing overtime payments and severance packages, this law contributed to the increased precarity of French workers, maintaining high unemployment rates. After Emmanuel Macron was elected, in addition to the rail reform already mentioned and the subsequent closure of small railroad stations in the countryside, justice system reforms were passed, meeting with the opposition of many magistrates and lawyers due to the suppression of local courts – and health reforms continued to reduce the number of public hospitals, from 1416 in 2013 to 1356 in 2018.<sup>10</sup> The cumulative effects of these reforms – employment precarity and public service shortage – contributed to the radicalization of specific class fractions, those already hit by declining incomes since the 2008 economic crisis. Self-employed workers, health care professionals, truck drivers, the long-term unemployed and pensioners gathered on the roundabouts and in demonstrations. One essential component for these cross-class alliances was fiscal injustice, leading to a collective claim for social justice. All of which was triggered by the rising price of a basic good: oil.

*Fuel feud: commodity dual value as driver for social contestation*

The idea that commodities have a dual nature goes all the way back to Aristotle's *Politics*: 'Every possession has a double use. Both of these uses belong to it as such, but not in the same way, the one being proper and the other not proper to the thing. In the case of shoes, for example, one can wear them or one can trade them.' (Aristotle and Lord, p. 15 ; 1257a6-10) This distinction founds a philosophical separation between two types of economics, or 'chrematistics', in Aristotle's terms. Firstly, the necessary or fair chrematistic, where a good is exchanged between the producer and the buyer at its 'fair price', without added value, the economic transaction being subordinated to domestic human needs defined by the *oikonomia*, where 'oikos' means 'home'. Secondly, the unnecessary or bad chrematistic, where a commodity is exchanged with added value for the sake of commercial accumulation, the economic transaction escaping the sphere of human needs of the *oikonomia*. For Aristotle, things have value because of their usefulness for mankind. Making profit, in his theory, is morally reprehensible, and damages political life.

Classical political economy theorists maintained this dual theory of value, without the Aristotelian moral criticism, and included labor as the main source of value. Locke distinguished between the intrinsic and the market value of things. He thought that the value of things came from labor, while their price came from supply and demand (Dooley 2009: 112). Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* reasserts this dual nature of commodities: things have a 'value in use' and a 'value in exchange', which often exist in inverse proportions as in the famous example of diamond and water: 'the things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange' (Smith 1976 [1776]: 44-5). Karl Marx's first and arguably most important chapter of *The Capital* identifies the wealth of capitalist mode of production with an 'immense collection of commodities', and develops a theory based on the dual nature of commodities (Marx 2019 [1867]). Like his predecessors, he sees labor as the only source of value, but he does so from a fundamentally different perspective to Adam Smith, who doesn't see that wealth comes from exploitation and the creation of surplus-value,

which generate class antagonisms, as well as a series of contradictions between production and consumption and between use value and exchange value, because workers revenues, amputated from the surplus value, don't allow them to buy all the commodities they produce.

The beginning of the Yellow Vest movement springs from this contradiction between production and consumption, from the impossibility, for many workers, to satisfy their basic needs with their low wages. As is often the case, this conflict initially crystalizes around specific commodities, not all of them at the same time, even though the same antagonism between exchange value and use value can be identified in many other commodities, like pharmaceutical products, torn between profit and health (Ravelli 2011 and 2015). In 2018 in France, the conflict between the exchange and use value of fuel was the triggering factor for the movement. Of course, this was never expressed in the abstract terms of mainstream or critical political economies. Rather it was a reaction to governmental political economy measures. More precisely, Yellow Vest contention was prompted by the government's fiscal policy on fossil fuels, an 'eco-tax' or 'carbon tax', which happened to be on the colliding course of a more structural process in which the price of transportation was becoming unbearable for many workers.

However, the price of fuel, like that of other basic commodities, is never entirely set by natural logics of supply and demand. It is heavily politicized – particularly in France. In the US, the excise federal tax amounts to 18.4 cents a gallon on gasoline and 24.4c on diesel, while state taxes vary from 14.66 cents in Alaska (14.40c on diesel) to 61.20 cents in California on gasoline (86.93c on diesel), which makes a 12.30% tax on gas (268.6c per gallon) and 14.04% on diesel (at 276.3c per gallon) in Alaska, and 25.07% tax on gas (at 317.5c per gallon) and 30.77% on diesel (at 361.7c per gallon) in California,<sup>11</sup> the contrast being partly explained by different levels of oil production in these two states but also by California's ecological policy. In contrast, French drivers pay more tax than fuel when they fill up at the gas station: as we see on fig. 2, in October 2018, just a few weeks before the upheaval, 0.94 € went to the state for every 1.53€ paid per liter of gas (SP 95) – that is, 61.44 % tax – and 0.85 € out of 1.45€ for each liter of diesel – that is, 58.62% tax.<sup>12</sup> In other



words, for each liter bought ‘à la pompe’, at the gas station, only 38,56 % (for gas) and 41,38 % (for diesel) paid for the product itself.

**Fig. 2 - The anatomy of exchange value: one liter of fuel**

	Gas		Diesel	
<b>Price per liter</b>	1,53	100%	1,45	100,00%
<b>Brent</b>	0,41	26,80%	0,41	28,28%
<b>Refining</b>	0,07	4,58%	0,08	5,52%
<b>Distribution</b>	0,11	7,19%	0,11	7,59%
<b>TVA on product</b>	0,12	7,84%	0,12	8,28%
<b>TICPE – ‘eco-tax’</b>	0,69	45,10%	0,61	42,07%
<b>TVA on TICPE</b>	0,13	8,50%	0,12	8,28%
<b>Total taxes</b>	0,94	61,44%	0,85	58,62%

Source: Connaissance des Énergies, UFIP et données ministérielles. October 2018.

As we can see, fuel is subject to three levels of tax: firstly, the TVA or ‘Tax on Added Value’ (VAT), instituted in 1953, is paid by every consumer and is not linked to any ‘added value’, despite its name. Secondly, the TICPE, *Taxe Intérieure de Consommation sur les Produits Énergétique* or Energy Products Domestic Consumer Tax, was created in 2008. It was a new version of the 2003 TIPP – *Taxe Intérieure de consommation sur les Produits Pétroliers* – which had already increased the scope of the previous TIP – *Taxe Intérieure Pétrolière*, or Petroleum Domestic Tax, created in 1928 to organize refining industries, and which played an increasingly important role after the 1973 oil crisis. The third level is the VAT on the TICPE, a sort of tax on tax, or squared tax, which applies the VAT, already applied to the raw product, to the final product price after the TICPE has been added. Of course, to determine how much the product itself costs, we would need to include the rate of profit made by oil companies who extract, refine and transport it. But these figures, often kept secret or obscured, like all surplus-value in a capitalist system (Burawoy 1982 [1979]), are more difficult to calculate, and the Yellow Vest movement essentially targeted the state’s fiscal policy.

This multi-layered fiscal cake was already difficult to accept for many drivers before Fall 2018. But the government didn't hear the growing anger and decided to increase the already outrageous level of taxation on fuel. On the following chart, we can see the difference between the expected raise in fuel prices, since 2019, and the real price, after the government decided to freeze the new tax in December 2020.

**Fig. 3 – Evolution of tax on fuel (TICPE): with Yellow Vests and without Yellow Vests**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*	2020*	2021*	2022*				
<b>Diesel</b>	42,84	42,84	46,82	49,81	53,07	59,4	<i>64,76</i>	59,4	<i>70,12</i>	59,4	<i>75,47</i>	59,4	<i>78,23</i>	59,4
<b>Gas SP95-E5</b>	60,69	60,69	62,41	64,12	65,07	68,29	<i>70,7</i>	68,3	<i>73,05</i>	68,3	<i>75,43</i>	68,29	<i>77,8</i>	68,29

\*Based on the tax forecast without the Yellow Vests movement (in italics) and with tax freeze instituted in response to the Yellow Vest movement.

The TICPE is the fourth source of the French government's income, at 13.3 billion euros, coming in after the VAT (211.4 billion), income tax (78,9 billion), and corporate tax (61.4 billion).<sup>13</sup> The government was expecting to make 17 billion € from the TICPE following the tax increase, but was forced by the Yellow Vests to freeze the raise, losing approximately 4.7 billion €. This, in itself, shows the movement's efficiency: working-class families will collectively pay less for their transport, even though the decrease may appear insignificant on an individual level. This freeze is exactly what a now famous Yellow Vest, Priscilla Ludosky, a 34 year-old cosmetic shop keeper from Savigny-Le-Temple, a town close to Paris, was expecting when she launched her petition "*Pour une baisse des prix du carburant à la pompe !*" – 'Fuel Prices at the Gas Station should go down!' – which attracted more than a million signatures.

Of course, this victory did not change the overall fuel budget of working-class families, who often drive hundreds of kilometers every week just to go to work and buy goods, and who remain heavily dependent upon the use-value of oil. Use-value dependence is,

however, very different in cities, where public transportation is developed, when compared to rural areas, where public transportation, when it exists, is being cut back by other governmental policies – railroads and bus lines are closed when there are not profitable. This geographical discrepancy explains why most Yellow Vest come from the countryside, a rather uncommon feature for such a powerful social movement: fuel, for them, means something profoundly different to what it means for the urban upper middle-class, who saw this ‘ecotax’ as a genuine ecological policy. Unsurprisingly, the significance of fuel for the French rural working-class was reflected in the tactics and symbols of the movement: blocking the traffic at roundabouts can be seen as a form of neo-luddism, or even an indirect strike, because the car, with its gas tank, is an unavoidable tool to go to work. Drivers’ legal obligation to carry a ‘fluorescent security vest’ or a ‘high visibility vest’ – a car owner can be fined from 135€ to 750 € if this obligation is not respected<sup>14</sup> – was appropriated and turned upside down, such that drivers’ financial stigma was reversed.

Ten years earlier, a feud over fuel and basic commodity prices had already set off a 44-day general strike in the French Caribbean and Réunion islands, a movement which had started in November 2008 in French Guyana against the rise of the price of fuel. This unusual mass movement, which exposed profound racial and class divides, was driven by an umbrella group called ‘Stand Up against exploitation’ or LKP – *Liyannaj kont pwofitasyon* in creole – whose main objective was to fight against ‘expensive life’ – *la vie chère* – and demand lower prices on fuel and other basic products, including food. Yellow Vest grievances were strikingly similar, as Michelle Zancarini-Fournel (2019: 58) points out, and the repertoire of collective action, including gas station and road blockades, was also comparable. Significantly, the Yellow Vest Priscilla Ludosky, who launched the petition against the rise of fuel price, is a black woman whose parents were born in Martinique, an island in the French Caribbean where the 2009 general strike paralyzed the economy for 38 days. In both this 2009 economic post-colonial struggle and the 2018 Yellow Vest movement, access to basic commodities played a similar role, showing that the importance and meaning of fuel differ according to social and racial backgrounds.

The antagonism between use-value and exchange-value is also quite different according to the nature of the values of the commodities involved. For instance, during the 2007 and 2008 food riots in thirty countries, one of the main origins of the movements may be traced back to international financial speculation, as companies such as Goldman Sachs made large purchases of long options on commodities futures, which destabilized the wheat market. In the case of the Yellow Vests, it is the fiscal policy of the French government which was at stake. It became the main economic grievance of the Yellow Vests, who personally targeted Emmanuel Macron in their slogans, songs and banners. However, the movement was not anti-State or even anti-tax in nature: its representation of fiscal injustice was more sophisticated than it first appears. This is probably the reason why it was able to connect divergent – and sometimes contradictory – economic grievances, and progressively shifted, over the months, toward a more left-wing-friendly political platform.

*Grievance coalescence: from fiscal injustice to social justice*

Tax resistance is a classic theme of social movement literature and among social scientists and historians, even if it is not often seen through the lenses of political economy and commodity value analysis. Charles Tilly's portrait of the 1765 American resistance to British-imposed Stamp Act (Tilly 1978) reminds us that it was a major event that contributed to the American Revolution. Nicolas Delalande's long-term history of tax struggles in the French context establishes a continuity from the 1789 Revolution to contemporary social movements (Delalande 2014). In recent years, tax rises and new taxes have often sparked contestation. This was the case during the revolt of the 'Bonnet Rouges', or 'Red Hats' of 2013-2014 in Brittany, often compared to the Yellow Vests both because the movement was already opposing an 'ecotax' and due to its cross-class dimension, despite its more clearly business-oriented platform (Rabier 2019). Another example is the Lebanese struggle against the government in Fall 2019, triggered by the October 17 proposition to tax Viber and

Whatsapp applications. It cascaded into a broad movement against state policies, in particular the privatization and austerity measures taken in the interests of sovereign debt reduction. Protesters argued this debt should be restructured and not sacralized at the expense of social programs.

In these examples, anti-tax and anti-state sentiments don't always go hand in hand. In the case of the Yellow Vests, most activists are not against taxation *per se*. They are well aware that taxes can pay for public services like schools, hospitals, post offices, security and public transportation. But most of them are against the objects and class-structure of taxation, which is a different way to frame the issue. Instead of opposing ecology to fuel, they oppose different populations and economic agents that are subject to discriminatory forms of taxation. For instance, in the aforementioned questionnaire, one question was: 'Some people defend the fuel tax rise for ecological reasons. What would you say to them?' Most answers were like these ones:

1a- 'They should tax kerosene, big boats, big polluting factories' – 41 year-old woman, caregiver, voted for France Insoumise (FI) – Union member.

2a- 'No climate justice without social justice: first let's tax kerosene' – 28 year-old man, farm worker, voted for FI.

3a- 'Open the window and jump out' – 31 year-old man, farmer, former FI voter who has decided not to vote anymore – Former member of FI and associations.

4a- 'Waste, lobbies (deforestation...) and planes, boats, transports that aren't taxed' – 43 year-old woman, newspaper distributor – Party and association member.

5a- 'They should go by foot, take the train and burn their car' – 62 year-old man, comedian, voted for the Socialist Party (PS) – Member of PS, SFA [Comedians and Artists French Trade-Union], and the CGT union.

6a- 'It's hot air. Let's develop free public transport massively and people won't use their cars' – 63 year-old man, teacher, voted for the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA – Party, union and association member.

In this first group of respondents, in which there are a number of political party members and union activists — France Insoumise (FI), New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) or Socialist Party (PS), the latter less often mentioned than the others — the risk is that answers reflect the views of the political parties or unions on the left that are not specific to the Yellow Vest movement. To avoid this, it is important to select the responses of Yellow Vests with no previous political experience, for instance those who say they had never been to any demonstration before this movement. We find that the answers, even if they are expressed differently, using less slogan-like vocabulary (no ‘open the door and jump’ and ‘no climate justice without social justice’ here) and with more spelling mistakes because often the respondents also stopped school earlier, are often more clear and detailed:

1b- ‘Abusive because real polluters are big factories, planes / ocean liners’ – 53 year-old man, no job mentioned but ‘2<sup>nd</sup> category disability’ and CAP diploma (vocational diploma usually obtained at age 16) voted for the National Front – No party, union or associative membership.

2b- ‘They are wrong, ecology is not pollution by cars [unreadable] protecting the planet – ocean liners, planes, plastic in the ocean, pesticides... – 63 year old woman, administrative director, no vote mentioned – No party, union or associative membership.

3b- ‘They should tax kerosene, big boats, big polluting factories’ – 41 year-old woman, caregiver, voted FI – Union member.

4b- ‘Once again, the ordinary people are the ones who pay the price for millions of euros of fiscal evasion. Bringing back the ISF [solidarity tax on wealth] would allow for the ecological transition’ – 31 year-old man, supermarket section manager, did not vote – No party, union or associative membership.

5b- ‘Taxes won’t solve the problem’ – 56 year-old woman, no job mentioned, voted FN – No party, union or associative membership.

6b- ‘We should tax liners, container carriers, planes that pollute even more and are partly useless. Most people use their car to go to work.’ – 40 year-old woman, department manager at a Camsp [Centre d’Action Medico-Social Précoce, a structure dedicated to helping handicapped pre-schoolers], voted Macron – Member of an association.

Common to the two groups of respondents is the distinction between average citizens who drive to work and have to pay an important tax on fuel (TICPE), and private corporations – airline companies, cruiser boats, container ships, road freight transport – who don’t have to pay the TICPE.<sup>15</sup> This fiscal injustice is often linked to ecology, because those who benefit the most from these tax exemptions are precisely those who pollute the most. This comparison lead protesters to see the carbon tax as a fake ecological measure, pretending to finance green policies but in fact used to increase the government’s general budget. Commodities’ use value is, once again, an important part of the debate (grievances 1a, 4a, 1b, 2b, 3b, 6b), as the respective carbon and sulfur footprints of car fuel and bunker fuel are different: the latter is less refined and produces more carbon dioxide, and incomparably more sulfur oxide.

The second aspect of the fiscal injustice argument involves the Solidarity Tax on Wealth, or *Impôt de Solidarité sur la Fortune* (ISF), as mentioned by grievance 4b. Created by the Socialist government of François Mitterrand in 1982, the Tax on Great Wealth (IGF), or *Impôt sur les Grandes Fortunes*, became the ISF in 1989. This tax is payed by the wealthiest citizens, and its threshold has frequently been raised — from € 770 000 in 2008 to € 1.3 million in 2012 — such that fewer rich people pay it. Emmanuel Macron’s reform sought to remove the ISF altogether, replacing it with a new tax that would include only real estate properties and exclude financial capital. This was one of the most highly contested political decisions among Yellow Vests, who were for the reinstatement of the ISF. In grievance 4b, the representation of fiscal injustice is also fostered by a third issue, frequently mentioned by the Yellow Vests, which is fiscal evasion, officially estimated to amount to, at the very least, between 30 and 36 billion every year in France, and that figure only accounts

for international tax evasion.<sup>16</sup> As a result, Yellow Vests fight for some taxes and against others corresponds to a conception of justice in which small tax payers and large corporations are pitted against each other: this political economic framing of the situation insists on the divide between commodity taxation, which is unfair because it is paid by everyone no matter the income, and wealth taxation, which is judged more acceptable because it is applied according to people's income.

This contrasted approach to taxation confirms that 'tax resistance' can flourish from within an 'attachment to the State', as formulated by Alexis Spire (2018), who analyses tax resistance in France according to social class positions, and efficiently demonstrates the role of specific social groups, like self-employed workers in such resistance. However, in Spire's analysis, those who are the most critical are also the ones who benefit the most from state remittances, which is not exactly the case for the Yellow Vests: small entrepreneurs are often clearly against any type of tax, while Yellow Vests on welfare benefit, or working for the public service, like nurses, had a more nuanced approach to the allocation of tax money. In any case, this class-driven approach to taxation was sufficiently flexible to include, over the months, more and more grievances. One of them concerns pensions, a question which later lay at the very heart of the longest railroad strike since 1968, only a few months after the peak of Yellow Vests contention: between December 5, 2019 and January 2020, there were 46 days of strike against the government's proposed pension reform. Pensions were already a pressing issue for many Yellow Vests, many of whom were retired or about to retire, as is clearly shown by the age structure of the participants: 20-29 year-olds make up 13.8 % of Yellow Vest demonstrators and 11.7% of those on roundabouts (the national average being 12.3%), 30-39 year-olds are 19.5 % in demonstrations and 15,8% on roundabouts (the national average being 11%), 40-49 year-olds make up 17,7% of demonstrators and 15,6 % of roundabout occupants (the national average being 12.8%), 50-59 year-olds represent 23,2% of demonstrators and 22,7% of roundabout occupants (the national average is 11.8%), 60-69 year olds make up 19.1% of demonstrators and 24,7 % of roundabouts occupants (national average is 13%), 70-79 year olds make up 4.8% of demonstrators and 8.7% of roundabout



occupants (national average is 8.8%) (Collectif d'enquête 2019; 880). One Yellow Vest from the Chalëtte roundabout, a recently retired factory worker in a company producing auto-parts for Renault trucks, identifies pensions as a crucial issue:

It's been two years since I retired and when I saw for myself they were attacking pensions, I noticed that the CSG [Social Security Contribution] had risen from 6% to 8% on my retirement benefit, but for me it was a lot. I took that badly and I did not expect that from the new government, which is Emmanuel Macron's presidency. So I started to have doubts, saying to myself: 'there's something wrong'. Later, what attracted my attention is when he targeted retired persons in the crowd, saying 'you're not after 5 euros, you have to lose 5 euros!' and also the APL [allowance for housing] for students. Then I told myself: 'there is a problem, there is something broken, the purchasing power of the French people is under attack!' (...) I also noticed the issue of retirement payments being indexed on inflation, which was 0.3% and was not linked to living costs. So, unavoidably, every year everything costs more and for us, even if we get € 1500 pension, the value is not the same. We lose. So I said: 'that's no good either. And of course, we had this famous Yellow Vest outbreak. I did not come the first week, but I live close by, there's a roundabout right here, I was passing by quite often and one day I told myself: 'Damn! Maybe you should go and have a look! Why all these people are here?' They all had a Yellow vest, so I took one too.

Another important frame alignment in this process of *grievance coalescence* around fiscal injustice concerns wages, which was not, in the first days of the movement, as important as the cancellation of the fuel tax raise. This convergence was not always easy. For instance, on one of the three roundabouts of le Loiret, I observed several conversations between Yellow Vests concerning taxes and wages. One of them, on December 28, took place inside and outside of the Chesnoy roundabout cabin:

Around the oven, one young Yellow vest, A, backed by B, is upset. He says he will leave the roundabout if we don't block the crossroads for real, stopping all and every vehicle. Another one, C, a young woman often involved in 'free tollgate operations', seems exasperated by this position, and leaves the cabin. The conversation continues, inside and outside of the cabin, until A and B, the two Yellow Vest standing for total blockade, face passive resistance: one Yellow Vest stands by the fire, shrugs his shoulders and ostensibly turns his back on them.

Another one, D, tries to calm the situation down, praising A's capacity to talk so much that she can force anyone to surrender: when they go to demonstrations in Paris, she talks and talks until the CRS [riot police] 'bleed from the ears'. Outside, a 50-year old entrepreneur who is carrying his drilling machine in his hand, shaking it when he talks between two cabin repairs, introduces another subject: he says that the government should suppress taxes but that it would be stupid to raise wages at the same time. All the benefit of tax suppression would be lost. A, now standing outside, doesn't agree and thinks we can cancel taxes while raising wages, which is good for many workers, even those who work in large corporations. Later, during the blockade, I notice that she, more than the other Yellow Vests, allows foreign truck drivers – many of them from Poland – pass the picket lines. [December 28, 2019 – Evening]

This example shows how two different topics – actions and grievances – intertwine on the politically flexible structure of the roundabout, spinning in and out of the Yellow Vest headquarters, generating dissent and consent, as well as transfer mechanisms between conversations and groups of protesters. For each subject, two points of views are expressed: for a selective blockade that would sensitize local communities to Yellow vests grievances, or for a total blockade to stop all traffic and economic circulations of commodities; for an alleviation of taxes, excluding wage raises, or for a raise on minimum wages along with the cancelation of tax raises. Over the months, the second options gained ground to the detriment of the first ones, and new grievances emerged concerning pensions, wages, constitutional rights, direct democracy, and the limitation of congress and senate member privileges – on one of the three roundabouts of the Loiret, for instance, the official wages of senators was posted on the wall of the cabin.

In this process of grievance coalescence, the second half of December was an important turning point, because workers unions stopped showing restraint or even upfront hostility toward the Yellow vests, who had initially been often accused of being right-wing and anti-union: in workplaces, among union rank-and-file and shop stewards, a quiver of support was palpable, despite leadership opposition. Of course, old and new grievances are not randomly supported by Yellow Vests independently of social background. If grievance coalescence took place around fiscal injustice, and was able to shift from a potentially corporatist movement towards a platform that was more clearly against social injustice, it is

thanks to the combination of several class-fractions which played an important role in the historical transformation of the Yellow Vest. For this reason, we may call them ‘pivotal’ class fractions, and complement commodity analysis with class analysis.

*Pivotal class fractions as builders for cross-class alliances*

What I call a ‘pivotal class-fraction’ is a specific social group which starts to revolt because of rapidly changing conditions of existence, and around which other social groups begin to act, generating a swiveling process whereby a large social movement can take shape and change direction. It is not a fulcrum but a rotating force providing the movement with historical capacity for change, not only in relation to its opponent but in relation to itself or, more accurately, to its different possible selves. The spinning trajectory of the pivotal class-fraction guides the movement through tipping points or thresholds that may change its course, its program and even its political nature. Drawing in other social groups, it may be counterbalanced or even replaced by another or several pivotal class-fractions. It may be assumed that every social movement has one or many pivots, which are all the more efficient in forging the overall structure of the contestation when they aren’t confined to pre-existing institutional forms – parties, unions, legal channels, stabilized grievance machineries. However, relations between pivotal class fractions are probably as important as identification with a given pivotal class fraction, because movements often connect previously separated groups, generating cross-class alliances and increasing the movement’s strength. For instance, in post-crisis Spain, debt contention heavily relied on racialized construction workers who were disproportionately affected by predatory lending practices before the market crash, and by massive lay-offs afterwards (Ravelli 2019). But this group alone can’t explain the scale of the movement against banks and foreclosures: the role of migrant women, often working in the cleaning and food services, as well as the Spanish small entrepreneurs from the

construction business from the middle class and who were ruined by the crisis, also played crucial roles.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, the first pivotal fraction comprises small business owners, called ‘artisans’ in France. These small entrepreneurs, often self-employed, with a status of ‘auto-entrepreneur’, or employing a handful of workers, sometimes from their own family, frequently saw their income decline year after year. The theme of the small entrepreneur ‘suffocated’ by taxes had become a social issue, often raised by right wing politicians. In the countryside and in small towns, many of them use their cars very often, not only to go to work but as a inevitable part of their daily jobs. The carbon tax was seen an offense to their professions, already struggling to maintain a decent turnover. According to the previously mentioned statistics, 11% of the Yellow Vests were ‘artisans’ (Collectif d’Enquête 2019: 881), which is far more than in the general population. On the peanut roundabout, many well-known Yellow vests had a small company in the construction, plumbing, carpentry, farming, gardening or animal husbandry sectors.

One of them was the center of the mobilization on the Peanut roundabout and, to some extent, its ‘leader’ for three months. At 37 years old, he considers himself lucky because he had been able to buy a house on credit in his early twenties and was relatively well off despite long working hours – often 72 hours a week. In the interview he said that he had been ‘waiting for twenty years’ for such a movement to emerge. He had no previous activist experience, except for a short period in high school. He had come to the roundabout on the very first day – November 17, 2018 – with a few friends who had similar professions and were in comparable financial situations. One of them was a car dealer, another a landscape gardener, a third a fiber optic cable installer. He decided to sleep on the roundabout and from then on, spent most of his time and energy on building the struggle. After a few weeks he was considered a pillar of the movement and became the roundabout’s spokesperson and delegate for the meetings with officials, the mayor, the sub-prefect, or local representatives of large corporations trying to negotiate with the Yellow Vests to lift or ease the blockades.

What is crucial to understanding the political economy of the Yellow Vests is the fact that these artisans – often men, but not always – have an ambivalent class identity. On the one hand, they are businessmen, deal with financial issues, checks and balances, complex tax schemes, and act as bosses who hire and fire workers when they have to. But on the other hand, they have the same living conditions as many workers or public servants in France in terms of income, social networks, cultural choices and educational level. They often come from the working-class and don't mingle with the local upper crust. This is probably one of the reasons why the Yellow Vests are fundamentally different from the Red Hats, who were able to build connections with medium- and large-sized corporations' senior management, with union bosses and politicians, and to frame their mobilization as a Breton regionalist current whose 11-point political platform – against taxes, social dumping and relocalization of political decision centers in Brittany – did not include pensions and wages raises.

This ambiguous class identity tilted toward working-class grievances because these small business owners met other social groups on the roundabouts: health care workers, industrial workers, precarious unemployed workers, retired workers. Some of the small business owners even came and stayed on the roundabout *with their own employees*, an unthinkable gesture for a businessman from the upper middle-class, such as the director of a factory, whose class-identity radically separates him from shop-floor culture. Among health care workers, mostly women, many of them are nurses, caregivers, personal care assistants, midwives, stretcher-bearers, only rarely doctors. On the Loiret roundabouts, some of them were private duty nurses who shared the artisans' grievances concerning taxes, and also traveled a lot by car from one patient to the next. But they mostly came from nearby hospitals, very disappointed by their deteriorating working conditions, the dismantlement and privatization of public health care services and dissatisfied by the lack of any real support for the Yellow Vests among union leaders, even locally. As for the industrial workers, most of them suffered from a very low standard of living, on the verge of poverty or even amongst the long term marginalized, surviving more than living. But others did have more stable employment and sources of income than the artisans, because they worked as skilled

operators in large factories, like pharmaceutical plants, where wages are higher than the income of plumbers or construction business owners.

The Yellow Vest movement also drew on empowered retired workers, part of the ‘grey power’ which emerged in the 1990s (Viriot-Durandal 2003). As they had more time than others, they stayed on the roundabout every day, chatting, building the cabin, organizing operations, orienting conversations towards the minute details of their old days with insufficient money, days where health care privatization, once again, was at stake. Of course, other smaller groups played their part on the roundabout, like truck drivers or disabled persons, but not necessarily as class fractions because of their smaller numbers – even if the case of truck drivers merits more in-depth study, because they were both the target and the subject of the mobilization. In any case, these roundabout encounters contributed to the incorporation of new grievances, and to the evolution of the movement toward a more left-wing platform, where the sense of public services and the pressing need to increase minimum wages not only stood by demands on tax, but even tended to replace them. Not only did pivotal class fraction dynamics allow for unusual cross-class alliances, they also brought social groups together in a process of ‘frame alignment’, such that a carpenter in his fifties from the Loiret without previous grassroots activist experience, could end up thinking, dressing and acting like a young Black Block activist trained to clash with the police in anti-globalization protests.

Ironically, these unusual connections between different class fractions took place on a piece of urban architecture which is not only the symbol of rural France’s no man’s land, but also the incarnation of the neoliberalism Yellow Vests tend to combat. As Eyal Weizman, the founder of forensic architecture, says in *The Roundabout Revolutions*:

The development of the round-about coincides with an early twentieth-century faith in deregulation and self-regulation whose principles had become prominent through political and economic theories of liberalism. For one thing, the roundabout took the police out of road intersections. It was up to the drivers themselves rather than the traffic officers (or the traffic lights) to manage their own movements. (...) The

roundabout's unfulfilled promise, however, like that of deregulated capitalism, was to optimize flow with minimum top-down intervention. Just like the 'self-regulated' market, it has not only come into crisis, it has become the mode by which crisis took shape. (Weizman 2015: 29-30)

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to social struggles, the economy moves in mysterious ways. As a general rule, economic crises generate anger and contestation, but the times and places of the upheaval can't be forecasted and are often surprising. The usual tools of social movement studies prove insufficient: they need to be rejuvenated and set in a more powerful framework, where the economy is mobilized in concrete, subtle, and relevant ways, rather than being put to work to expand the already long list of global theories of capitalism, which are often remote from the daily life of capitalism itself. Dusting off well worn political economy concepts is insufficient: we need to recast carefully selected notions within a sociological understanding of social struggles, so they can efficiently help us dissect contestations, which often remain enigmatic processes. Commodity value analysis, economic grievance coalescence and the study of pivotal class fractions are three interrelated experimental tools that contribute to this research program. They should allow analysts to shed light on many other social movements above and beyond the Yellow Vest case study presented here. The first one, commodity value analysis, helps us understand, for instance, that the 'rising price of grain' is not only a triggering factor for farmers' contestations: it is the reason why they fight, it is the source of their anger itself. If we wish to take this anger seriously, then the use value and exchange value of grain, like the dual value of fuel, deserve careful analysis. The second one, economic grievance coalescence, shows that social movements' orientations are not fixed but tend to oscillate according to the incorporation of new grievances, sometimes contradictory ones, contributing to the historical dimension of social movements. And the third one, the study of pivotal class fractions, may change the oversimplified view of class antagonism as being a binary combat, because it describes the interplay between different

social strata, without losing sight of the underlying conflict of exploitation that keeps the pieces of the social puzzle together.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, the structure of political opportunities can't really shed light on a movement which sprang up with strength and enthusiasm after a series of social movement setbacks and defeats, without strategic calculations concerning possible outcomes, but under the pressure of economic survival, unfulfilled needs, and a strong sense of social justice. As for the mobilization of resources, most Yellow Vests being devoid of financial means, political influence or organizational networks, as union or association membership only played a secondary role in the recruitment process, the main tool they had at their disposal is their time – for unemployed and retired workers only – in addition to their professional skills and meagre material supplies like pallets and tires. One could always argue that resource mobilization still matters, even when the movement generates its own resources, but then the concept proves 'tautological' and loses its explanatory power (Goodwin and Jasper 2004: 4). How can a movement be so powerful and long-lasting if it is windowless and resourceless? To solve this conundrum, one needs to turn to other explanations, such as political economy. One of the sources of the inefficiency of political economy notions in the existing literature, apart from the pitfalls of fake economicism discussed above, may come from a profound misunderstanding concerning the meaning of 'social movement'. Some movements are *struggles*, and others are *organizations* – and even social movement scholars who work within a political economy framework often blur the line between organizations and struggles, sometimes because organizations call themselves a movement.<sup>17</sup> In their account of two 'movements' – the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and the Bolivarian Movement toward Socialism (MAS) – Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein nuance the scope of their comparison, because the MAS 'no longer qualifies as a social movement per se, since it became a political party' (Wickham-Crowley and Eckstein 2015, p. 16). Studying outright rebellions, like the Yellow Vests, instead of institutionalized political parties where opportunities and resources are everywhere, may be a good antidote to the ailments of social movement theory.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> INSEE, « Revenu, niveau de vie et pauvreté en 2016 », « Enquête revenus fiscaux et sociaux 2016 », 2018: [www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3650234?sommaire=3650460#titre-bloc-1](http://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3650234?sommaire=3650460#titre-bloc-1);

<sup>2</sup> Questionnaires on 1 333 Yellow Vests (755 in demonstrations, 498 on roundabouts) from November 2018 to July 2018; sub-population of n=927 for the reason for involvement.

<sup>3</sup> Farrell Dobbs *Teamster Rebellion*, for instance, is full of strategic questions concerning the opportunities for action in the New Deal context (Dobbs 2004 [1972]). Roosevelt's policy decision, however, may also be seen as a result of social struggles, in a quite pragmatic way: "he was like the general of a guerrilla army whose columns, fighting blindly in the mountains through dense ravines and thickets, suddenly converge, half by plan and half by coincidence, and debouch into the plain below." (Burns 1984, p. 226)

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<sup>4</sup> Air France workers – pilots and others – were asking for a 6 % raise.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Charles Tilly (1978, p. 154-155): in the four models built by the author according to the ‘probability of adoption of mean’ and the ‘dissimilarity from existing means’ – ‘sheer efficiency’, ‘advantage of familiarity’, ‘flexible repertoire’, and ‘rigid repertoire’ models – the Yellow Vests repertoire can’t find its category because there is both a low probability and a high dissimilarity between former and new repertoires. A fifth model is needed for disruptive repertoires.

<sup>6</sup> It could even be argued that this absence of opportunity contributed to the determination of the protesters who felt they were facing a wall and had to tear it down.

<sup>7</sup> These two different but overlapping populations correspond to the two main modes of contestation – rural or semi-rural roundabout occupations and urban demonstrations – which shaped the movement.

<sup>8</sup> Results of a questionnaire distributed to 195 Yellow Vests at the third Assembly of the assemblies (or ‘Ada’) of Montceau-les-Mines, on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30, June 2019, with Loïc Bonin, Pauline Liochon and Naomi Toth. The results of the fourth Ada, in Montpellier, mostly confirm the former.

<sup>9</sup> In France, gendarmes belong to the military but their tasks are similar to police forces.

<sup>10</sup> DREES (2019), *Études et résultats*, « En 2018, le nombre de places en hospitalisation a temps partiel progresse à un rythme soutenu », 1130, p. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Taxes, as of July 2019, according to the American Petroleum Institute’s ‘Notes to State Motor Fuel Excise Tax Report’. Prices, as of March 24, 2020, according to AAA gas prices. <https://gasprices.aaa.com/state-gas-price-averages/>

<sup>12</sup> Source : UFIP et données ministérielles (connaissance des énergies)

<sup>13</sup> *Projet de loi de finance 2019*, enregistré à la présidence de l’Assemblée nationale le 24 septembre 2018, n° 1255, p. 28. [http://www.assembleenationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/115b1255\\_projet-loi.pdf](http://www.assembleenationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/115b1255_projet-loi.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Article premier de l’arrêté du 29 septembre 2008 relatif au gilet de haute visibilité, conformément à l’article R. 416-19 du code de la route.

<sup>15</sup> Article 265bis du code des douanes.

<sup>16</sup> Bocquet Eric (2012), *Commission d’enquête sur l’évasion des capitaux et des actifs hors de France et ses incidences fiscales*, rapport n°673 ; another estimate, including other types of fiscal frauds, mentions 46 to 56 billion, cf. Solidaires Finances Publiques (2013), *Évasions et fraudes fiscales, contrôle fiscal. Rapport du syndicat national Solidaires Finances Publiques*, p. 16. <http://docplayer.fr/1593137-Rapport-du-syndicat-national-solidaires-finances-publiques.html>

<sup>17</sup> This confusion between struggles and organizations is maintained by a confusing vocabulary, for instance when researchers talk about ‘recruitment processes’ indistinctly in the two cases – for instance in the anti-military movement in Texas and in the religious organization Nichiren Shoshu (Snow et al. 1986 and Snow et al. 1980).