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**BECOMING POLITICAL WHILE AVOIDING POLITICS:
A STUDY OF YELLOW VESTS FIRST-TIMERS**

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ABSTRACT

The French Yellow Vests movement offers a case study for examining the logics and effects of the avoidance of institutional politics. The movement brought together seasoned activists and a large share of first-time protesters, *i.e.* social actors with no prior experience in collective action or party politics. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic biographical interviews conducted with the latter, we argue that, paradoxically enough, avoiding politics was a condition of possibility for their entry and continuation in the mobilisation. Moreover, they became political insofar as they acquired a sense of entitlement to speak out publicly as citizens, and a new appetite for current affairs. Even though first-timers' interest in politics and their forms of knowledge remained very unequal, we urge to study the avoidance of institutional politics as political tactics that might, under certain circumstances, foster politicisation among the most disenfranchised groups.

KEYWORDS

Avoidance of politics, Politicization, First-time protesters, Social Movements, Yellow Vests, Ethnographic biographical interview

INTRODUCTION

*'The movement for the people who don't have a movement'*¹. This is how one of the respondents in our study described the Yellow Vests mobilisation (or the *Gilets Jaunes* as they are known in France). A distinctive feature of this movement is indeed that it brings together a large number of people who might be called 'first-time protesters' (or 'novices', to borrow the notion used by Smaoui 2017, Agrikoliansky and Aldrin 2019). In other words, it mobilises many social actors who not only have never previously taken part in any collective action or expressed any political commitment (partisan, trade union or community) but have even tended to steer clear of institutional politics altogether (many of them have regularly abstained from voting or have chosen parties that criticise the political 'system'). In the early days of the Yellow Vests mobilisation, the first-timers represented between a third and a half of the protesters, with an even higher proportion at the roundabout occupations (Collectif 2019, Dormagen, Michel and Reungoat 2021). The more experienced activists therefore had to constantly adjust to these first-time protesters, who were very different from them both socially and in terms of political interest and opinions². By 'activists' here, we mean social actors who have acquired activist capital through their involvement in political or protest organisations (Matonti and Poupeau 2004). These individuals also often have a fairly high level of cultural capital (in particular academic capital). Many post-2011 social movements have brought together activists and novices, but the Yellow Vests first-timers are different from the mainly educated urban novices that engaged in the *Occupy* (Milkman, Luce and Lewis 2014), *Indignados* (Ancelevici, Dufour and Nez 2016, Nez 2017) and *Nuit Debout*³ (Smaoui 2017) movements. The Yellow Vest first-

timers are by comparison less well educated (few have any post-18 education), and they come from the precariat, the 'stabilised' working classes or the lower middle classes (Collectif 2019, Dormagen, Michel and Reungoat 2021).

Between January 2019 and January 2021, we conducted in-depth interviews with twenty of these Yellow Vests first-timers to collect data on three main dimensions: their biographical trajectories (Chamboredon 1982, Bourdieu 1987, Passeron 1990), their ordinary relationships to institutional politics (Buton *et al.* 2016, Weisbein 2017) and their commitment as Yellow Vests (from a processual perspective, Fillieule 2001). We categorised these interviews as 'ethnographic biographical interviews' because they were conducted *in situ* (*i.e.* at the roundabouts, protests, assemblies, etc.) and because the respondents were interviewed at length (and repeatedly in the majority of cases) in their everyday environments⁴. At the time of each interview, the individual had been actively mobilised for a considerable period of time (from a few months to more than two years). They were hard-core members of the movement⁵. Without claiming to be representative in any way, our sample was made up of contrasted actors in terms of gender, age, family situation and types of mobilization (roundabout occupations, blockades, Saturday rallies, general assemblies, etc.), but almost all of them had had no post-18 education (see Table in Appendix). During the course of our data collection, we began to see a paradox emerging that has been observed by other researchers (Challier 2019 and Devaux *et al.* 2019), which required thorough investigation.

The Yellow Vests first-timers, along with the more seasoned activists, formed an enduring social movement that was a major and explicitly political mobilisation. It began in November 2018 as a demonstration against a new fuel tax, but its participants soon expanded their grievances to protest against the incumbent government and in particular against President Emmanuel Macron⁶. The movement even took on some insurrectional characteristics in late 2018 and was described as a radical and powerful mobilisation that required a practical and symbolic public policy response. Through their engagement in this objectively political mobilisation, we found that the first-timers who participated in our study had reduced their distance from institutional politics but that, paradoxically, this politicisation was accompanied by subtle forms of avoidance of institutional politics. In all the mobilisation contexts (including countless Facebook groups), both the Yellow Vests first-timers and the activists avoided expressing their voting preferences and discussing politicised themes (*i.e.* social issues converted into political problems by political actors (Lagroye 2003, Aït-Aoudia *et al.* 2010), as immigration and religion were in 2010s France). Although they were becoming increasingly political, the first-timers would avoid talking about institutional politics with one another.

This paradox echoes the findings of Eliasoph's pioneering research (1998), which revealed that engagement could be accompanied by the avoidance of politics in public. Eliasoph's respondents tended to focus on the entertaining, problem-solving or neutral dimensions of their commitment when interacting within environmentalist collectives, parents' groups and or country dance clubs. In her own words, politics would just 'evaporate' from the

public discourse. However, our study differs from that of Eliasoph's research on three counts.

First, the politics that our respondents avoided was institutional politics. Institutional politics refers to politics in the narrowest sense of the word, in other words the politics that involves professional politicians (Buton *et al.* 2016: 13). It is not politics in the expanded sense of the word that includes the ability to construct problems, to articulate a critique or to express publicly audible and admissible justifications (Duchesne and Haegel 2004, Hamidi 2006, Talpin 2010). Investigating ordinary citizens' relationships to institutional politics is generally challenging, even when using ethnographic observation, because the subject is rarely salient in everyday life (Mariot 2010). However, it is reasonable to expect institutional politics to be a prominent topic in a movement opposed to the government. Intriguingly though, during the ethnographic biographical interviews, our respondents reported that they frequently avoided the subject.

The second difference between our approach and Eliasoph's is that we did not consider the avoidance of institutional politics to be the product of public interaction alone. We considered avoidance practices to also derive from the dispositions acquired socially by actors throughout their biographical trajectories, in everyday forms of sociability and power relations. It has been widely established that people steer clear of politics as a discussion topic in many interactions to avoid conflict and that political discussion presupposes trust between actors and hence much more than just interknowledge. Political conversations are thus more likely to occur in primary groups like the family and close-knit

peer groups, in other words in groups that are fairly homogeneous in terms of social position and political preferences – and vice versa, they are more likely to be avoided in socially and politically heterogeneous groups (see Gans 1967, Fitton 1973, Conover *et al.* 2002, Mutz and Mondak 2006; for a synthesis, see Braconnier 2010 and Agrikoliansky *et al.* 2019). It has also been shown that avoidance of politics is one of the arts of resistance to cultural domination (Scott 1990) in that it allows those with lower cultural capital to maintain face, including by appearing to accept dominant judgements while still having their own opinions. These considerations prompted us to pay special attention to both the biography of each of our respondents and the concrete groups that they were part of during the mobilisation.

Lastly, our study suggests that the avoidance of politics does not preclude an individual politicisation that goes beyond the mere acquisition of protester skills during a mobilisation. First of all, the Yellow Vests first-timers became political insofar as they acquired or reinforced a binary vision of the world that separated the political elites (*i.e.* institutional politics) from the rest of the social world (on the subject of politicisation through social identification and therefore antagonism, see Déloye and Haegel 2019: 75). Second, they became political because they developed a new sense that they were entitled to speak about politics, to discuss necessary reforms, to imagine the general organisation of society and to act like citizens. In other words, they developed what Bourdieu (2002) called subjective political competence (Gaxie 2007). And third, they became political through the reinforcement, albeit unequal and relative, of their knowledge of institutional politics and political categories – or what Bourdieu called objective political competence (*i.e.* an

expertise that can be measured by assessing an individual's level of knowledge of the actors and issues specific to the political field). To elucidate this paradox, we begin by analysing the first-timers' avoidance of politics according to their biographical trajectories and their times and places of mobilisation in the Yellow Vests movement, and then we attempt to understand the forms that their three-pronged politicisation took.

AVOIDING POLITICS, EMBODYING THE PEOPLE

The Yellow Vests movement suggests that the avoidance of institutional politics can provide the conditions of possibility for mobilisation, in particular regarding the emergence and continued engagement of first-time protesters. While we found that these avoidance practices were crucial in terms of our respondents' decision to join a movement whose members were conscious of their strong heterogeneity, they were nevertheless adjusted according to the interaction context.

The avoidance of politics as a condition of mobilisation of first-time protesters

When asked about the conditions of their initial entry into the protests, our respondents pointed to the absence of trade unions and 'politicos' (political parties and their associated activists) as a central element in their decision to engage. Robert was born in the 1950s into a family of repatriates ('pieds noirs') from Algeria. He left school with a vocational qualification (the *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle*) and worked first as a tradesman and then as a maintenance worker in a town in the south of France. On retirement, this father of

three moved with his wife to a more rural area, where he took up beekeeping. Both he and his wife joined a roundabout rally on the outskirts of their town two days after the first Yellow Vest protests were held on 17 November 2018. The couple were heavily invested in the movement over several months, even to the point where they felt they were '*creating new families*'. They participated in all the Saturday demonstrations in the town centre as well as in some *opérations péage gratuit*⁷, and they organised weekly meetings in their home. However, prior to the Yellow Vests movement, Robert had never taken part in a demonstration: '*ah no never, no politics at all, nothing*'. He told us that what had '*caught his attention*' in the local state TV channel's coverage of the Yellow Vests' first demonstration was precisely '*that there was no politics in it... No politics and no trade unions at the start*'.

It was a rallying cry specifically for those who were sick and tired of politicians, so I just thought well, why not, because I don't do politics and I didn't want anything to do with them either, so I thought this is the perfect opportunity, and that was it.

Robert was indeed highly suspicious of political actors. He told us that his '*parents were let down, let down by the votes*' first for De Gaulle and then for Mitterrand: '*That's why I hate governments*'. Alongside his socialisation within a repatriated family, his experience as a young tradesman was also formative in terms of his defiant attitude towards political actors. He had to give up working for himself in the late 1970s because of the '*high social security contributions*' and lack of public financial help for people setting up as self-employed at the time. He said '*it's always the same, they just lie to us*' and added that the state '*isn't there for us (...) the little people*'.

Robert told us that on the roundabout, *'we don't talk about it [politics] because we all have our own opinions'*. He stressed that *'we talk about our lives, but nothing else!'* Although he distrusted political actors, he did have political opinions, and he had voted in elections (including in 2019), *'mostly for extreme parties'* (in other words, for the *Front National/Rassemblement National*). While he maintained that the parties were *'all as bad as one another'*, he told us that for a long time he nevertheless felt that Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder and former leader of the *Front National*, who *'was in favour of us staying French and keeping migration out'*, was *'the only one who represented what I thought a bit'*. However, he told us that he kept *'his own thoughts on things'* to himself on the roundabout. Indeed, a condition of his and our other respondents' continued engagement appeared to be a distancing from actors conceived as political and an avoidance of exchanges relating to partisan preferences and voting behaviour.

These avoidance practices also reduced – but did not eliminate – the symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2008) usually exerted by more educated and/or experienced activists. While Robert gave out leaflets to motorists, he did not contribute to writing them. Off the record, he confided to the interviewer that he was not interested in the leaflets, did not read them and trusted the more seasoned activists on the roundabout to write them. He had nevertheless gradually become a mainstay and logistical support provider who was indispensable to the small collective's continuity. While he hardly ever attended the general assemblies and was not very fond of debating ideas, he indicated that in the Yellow Vest sociabilities *'we talk about our lives'*. One of the most popular modes of discourse in

the movement, particularly during the first weeks, was individual testimony in the form of life stories and conversations about working conditions, housing or family life. This testimonial register, by definition accessible to all, is situated at the core of the mobilising potential of avoidance practices. As has already been demonstrated by studies of other post-2011 occupation movements (Smaoui 2017, Nez 2017, 2018, Guionnet 2021), people were able to join this movement and remain in it without fear of stigmatisation or humiliation over any personal political incompetence or lack of advocacy skills, and during the course of their participation, they gradually became a political subject.

Avoiding politics to preserve the number and heterogeneity of the protesters

Since its very early days, the Yellow vests movement has been seen as nonpartisan, nonunion and relatively free of activists. While there have been many accounts of unionists and party members taking part in the movement, these individuals declare they '*leave the flag at home*'. This is a prerequisite for any protester with significant activist capital to join or remain in the movement. Many of our first-timer respondents recognised the added value that activists who had been involved in the *Nuit Debout* movement or the ZADs⁸ could bring to the movement, provided of course they proved they were '*yellow above all else*', to use Corinne's expression (see below)⁹. However, we discovered that these activists were not the only ones who were discreet about their voting preferences and who avoided subjects considered to be politicised, because our first-timer respondents also adopted and promoted these practices.

The case of Corinne, Domi, Sandrine and Cindy exemplifies this. These four women became heavily involved in a small, mostly female group after meeting at a roundabout occupation in a town in the south of France. They set up and took part in actions to block warehouses and to open toll barriers on motorways. They attended all the demonstrations in the regional metropolis, and some of them also went to one of the ‘acts’¹⁰ in Paris. They all described how partisan preferences, voting behaviour and politicised themes were avoided in conversations both on the roundabout site and at the rallies held in the metropolis. Corinne was in her fifties, married with a grown-up daughter and a former restaurant worker who was undergoing retraining. She did not hide her past voting habits but described her involvement in the Yellow Vests as ‘*nonpolitical*’. When asked about the partisan affiliations of the other Yellow Vests she met on the roundabout, she explained that ‘*we talk about it a bit, but we don’t go into it too much*’ adding ‘*Yeah, we don’t actually put our political convictions out there. We do talk about them. But just like generally*’.

These behaviours were above all practices of discretion, in the Goffman (1982) sense of concealing disagreements, rather than coercive endeavours to exclude deviants. For Corinne, who rented a detached house in the town outskirts, this rejection of the ostentatious display of political preferences was reminiscent of the sociabilities specific to *The France of the Little-Middles* (Cartier *et al.* 2016). The four friends refused to condemn the *Rassemblement National* sympathisers (‘*everyone’s entitled to their opinions*’) but nevertheless ensured they were not allowed to speak out too explicitly in the movement (‘*not here*’). This at least was what we were given to understand by Domi. Aged around forty with a grown-up son, she had been living alone in the regional metropolis for two

years. She came from a family of seasonal workers who were very distanced from politics. Her employment history was marked by precariousness. At the time of the interviews, she was working as a temporary care assistant in a nursing home. An abstentionist, she told us she was first and foremost a Yellow Vest, citing the slogan '*not right, not left, yellow!*'

The only things we're not going to 'accept', in inverted commas, are the fascists, those who're going to shout about their roots. Yeah you've got the right to. But on the other hand [Corinne: *But not here*] you're not going to shout it from the rooftops. Everyone's entitled to their opinions. We're just asking you not to attack people, because we've seen people, haven't we, stopping cars and talking to them about immigrants and all that. But that's not the aim of the Yellow Vests. We've always made a distinction in that respect.

Born in the 1970s and brought up in a city by a single mother of African origin, Sandrine had moved out to a town after several separations and was bringing up her youngest child as a single mother. She had had a string of low-skilled jobs just to put food on the table, sometimes several at once, and was working '*here and there*', often '*cash in hand*', at the time of the interviews. She had thus regularly experienced financial precariousness and had sometimes had to resort to food aid associations. She was proud she had instilled the duty to vote in her children and told us she voted '*sometimes right, sometimes left*' but sometimes cast the blank vote. In our interview, she told us how one particular '*fascist*' who would come to the various roundabout protests in the region (including their own) was treated.

Sandrine: He was always chanting stuff against Muslims and that so Cori sent him packing and he came over to me so I sent him packing as well I told him (...) '*listen this is the Yellow Vests here so there's no such thing as the North Africans, the non-North Africans, the*

Italians, the Portuguese, the Spanish, we couldn't give a shit', excuse the expression, I told him 'we couldn't give a shit so if you want to make these kinds of comments you can go to another roundabout' and he said 'yeah well I'm going to whatever roundabout I want' and I said 'no no, not here no fascists no way we don't need them here, that's not what we're fighting about, we're fighting about people not having enough money to feed themselves even those who work innit. Even those who're self-employed. So just to be clear, you can take your words and you can go and find a roundabout where they think the same as you, cos that's definitely not the case here'.

For these four friends, avoiding politics meant above all maintaining discretion on voting preferences and politicised subjects in certain contexts.

Domi: We don't put our political opinions out there, those of us who have them.

Corinne: We're all just Yellow Vests.

Domi: And I, I think that politics is a subject that always makes people argue. We've always said we should never talk about politics as a family, cos it just makes people argue.

Corinne: Yeah, that's true.

Domi: And I think that's something we don't want to create in the Yellow Vests. We want to keep this solidarity.

It is clear then that any ostentatious expression of political preferences on this roundabout was denounced to encourage not just the unity of the movement but also its image in public opinion and therefore its capacity to recruit. Any talk of '*immigrants and all that*' meant there was a risk people would feel attacked and be put off by the image of a '*fascists*' movement. All in all, the avoidance of politics was the condition both of the continued involvement of the first-timers already engaged in the movement and of the mobilisation's

broadest possible expansion. In short, avoiding institutional politics as a Yellow Vest meant working to preserve the number and internal heterogeneity of the protesters.

The activation of predispositions to avoidance and its contexts

Giving an account of the first-timers' avoidance practices presupposes, as with any practice, an understanding of how their predisposition to avoid politics was actualised in certain contexts. Stéphane's account of the drafting of a text at the *Assemblée des Assemblées* (ADA)¹¹ gives us an insight into how this working-class, first-time protester's efforts to avoid politics and maintain a movement that was very aware of its heterogeneity were rooted in his biographical trajectory. It also shows how some participants specifically avoided institutional political language, even in contexts – and indeed precisely because of the context in this case – as emblematic as these Yellow Vests '*Etats Généraux*'¹².

Stéphane was in his forties and had no post-18 qualifications. He was self-taught and had worked as a freelancer setting up various communication media design projects. He had had a chequered career with a high degree of geographical mobility and was unemployed following professional burnout when the movement started in November 2018. He had a partner but no children and had been living in the city centre for a few years at the time of the interview. Although sceptical about the movement initially, his view of it had changed, and he had joined in the December. He soon became part of the local assembly and the communications committee and then, mandated by the assembly, became heavily involved in the ADAs. He conceived and presented his commitment in the form of a '*project*' or '*job*',

whose guiding principle was to maintain the unity of the movement against the divisions that undermined it and in particular against any political recuperations, for example on the occasion of the drafting of an ADA's final appeal, which he gave a detailed account of.

There were about ten of us sitting around a table in a little room, it was late, we were all really tired and things were going really really badly. What I mean is, the [ADA] appeal, drafting [the appeal], the first meeting, horrible. I was confronted with these ultra-politicised people, not all of them were, but some were. People who'd already started to write the appeal (...). Where had all this come from? And well, it clearly looked like a speech written by Mélenchon... And then I just dug my heels in a bit and said to them 'But you've actually got to stop with the political speeches. That's not what the Yellow Vests are, it's much broader than that'. I mean (...) if we start to put vocabulary that is already connoted from this party or that party or from an activist movement into the vocabulary, (...), we're effectively connoting the *Assemblée des Assemblées*, which is currently playing a major role in structuring the Yellow Vests. (...) Like, say, someone from the NPA¹³, they'll say 'I'm anti-capitalist'. And then someone from *France Insoumise*¹⁴, they'll also say 'I'm anti-capitalist' but maybe not always so assertively. There're some who wouldn't dare say it and some who will say it. (...) So what do we want? Do we want to end up just among the leftists? (...) [The next morning] they read out the text. And I was thinking I'd have to rip into them. But actually the text was good. They'd actually taken out most of the stuff that was too politicised of their own initiative.

Stéphane was trying to ensure that the Yellow Vests did not become just another '*leftist*' movement in order not to alienate some of the first-time protesters. This desire to see

different people and different points of view come together took on meaning in his biographical trajectory – and this is where the ethnographic biographical interview proves particularly heuristic. Stéphane had held various positions during his working life that had given him (and sometimes required of him) a certain autonomy and encouraged a propensity to observe, adapt and accept different perspectives. He had had to learn and make do not just in his professional career but also during his teenage years at boarding school, an experience he described as being marked by learning conciliation with his immediate surrounding world.

His taste for conciliation also manifested in political matters. He told us he wanted to *'break down the divisions and try to bring people back to the middle, everywhere'*. Stéphane had not inherited political knowledge from his family or school and had voted on and off for the left over the years. His family were quite indifferent to politics and distrustful of politicians, who were *'all rotten to the core'*. At boarding school, he tended to spend time with people who, like him, aspired to an artistic career. From the age of 19 onwards, he evolved in a professional world that was devoid of trade unions and far removed from the intense political socialisation spaces that universities can represent. He nevertheless taught himself about politics and, through the internet and social media, acquired a vision of the world where the powerful decide the fate of all. Although he unequivocally rejected the far right and the neo-liberal president, Macron, he refused to identify himself as *'left wing'*, on the one hand because of the mistrust of politicians of all stripes he had inherited from both his family and his professional background as a freelancer and on the other, more

importantly, because he saw the Yellow Vests as a gathering of the French people in which there was no exclusivity and no regard for individual voting preferences.

Stéphane came from a family of 'pieds noirs' who had experienced no upward social mobility. Based on his professional activity, on the affluence he had experienced at times and on the circles he moved in, he could be seen as having defected from the working classes to the middle classes. He nevertheless saw himself more as a precarious artist who was now '*at the bottom of the social ladder*'. His evident loyalty to his origins played a decisive role in the intensity and form of his involvement in the Yellow Vests, in particular in his determination to avoid the language used by political professionals. This is what he meant when he presented himself as a 'second-generation Yellow Vest'. He saw the Yellow Vests as ordinary citizens, like his parents and grandparents, who were angry and did not feel represented in politics (or if so only poorly) and who might thus turn to protest votes against those in power. His focus on the unity of the Yellow Vests, his respect for the humblest among the participants and his action to prevent any form of partisan recuperation that would lead to their disaffection all seemed to derive from this strong loyalty.

While our interviews with these first-time protesters revealed the biographical shaping of predispositions to the avoidance of politics, they were not sufficient to rigorously describe the contexts in which these predispositions were actualised. In her study of the discussion spaces within different types of associations, Eliasoph (1998) clearly showed in this sense how 'political evaporation' operated differently according to the utterance context,

particularly within the domain of public speaking. We also found that our respondents' avoidance of politics was linked to the interaction scenes and constructed social enclaves. Avoidance practices seemed to be especially prevalent in the collectives perceived as the most politically composite. For example, Grégory, the founder of a local Facebook group that had more than 17,000 members at its height in early 2019, explained that his job as group moderator was to publish '*no political stuff, no union stuff (...) we have to remain a neutral medium*'. This was the first time this thirty-year-old, who was very distanced from institutional politics, had ever become involved in a movement, which he described as '*truly nonpolitical*'. His concern to neutralise politicised discourse seemed particularly acute because he was doing it in a very public and potentially very heterogeneous scene.

In the more affinitive enclaves that had formed backstage in the diverse repertoires of action deployed within the Yellow Vests movement (including within some roundabout occupations), the rules of exchange were more relaxed. Our respondents were willing to talk about their voting preferences or about more politicised themes using different language registers, notably innuendo, humour and collusion, within small groups of two or three friends, within their couples or family groups when all were involved in the movement and sometimes even within some social network communities.

In this respect, our findings are in line with the literature on political discussion. Regardless of the research methods used, studies in this field have tended to show that people talk about politics among themselves when in primary groups marked by strong interknowledge and relationships of trust and that conversely politics is avoided in groups

where the level of interknowledge is low and the links tenuous and in places where potential or actual heterogeneity is perceived (for a synthesis, see Braconnier 2010: 109-121; Déloye and Haegel 2019: 74; Minozzi *et al.* 2020: 4-6).

In sum, the avoidance of partisan labels and politicised discourse was crucial in the construction of a movement whose unifying and legitimising narrative centred on horizontality and participant equality. In addition to the avoidance practices mobilised, the fact that the movement had emerged outside of any partisan, trade union, community or activist organisations contributed to making it a highly politically composite conglomerate, attracting the support of individuals of all political persuasions (with the exception of Macron supporters) and none. This heterogeneity, which was evidenced by the quantitative surveys conducted (see above) but more importantly was perceived by our respondents themselves, contributed, as is the case with any social movement (Champagne 1984), to the movement's symbolic coup de force. This lived diversity participated in constructing the Yellow Vests as a movement that embodied the people. In addition, the gradual establishment of close-knit collectives and even primary groups ('*new families*', as Robert called them), where the bonds of trust were such that institutional politics were avoided less, played an equally critical role for the first-time protesters who were part of them. In short, the avoidance of politics had encouraged our first-time protesters to join and continue in the movement, and some had even constructed fully-fledged protester enclaves. The practice also preserved the heterogeneity, participant numbers and cohesion of the larger movement, which in turn gave our Yellow Vests the sense that they embodied

the people. The avoidance of institutional politics did not therefore prevent forms of individual politicisation.

A POLITICISATION DISTANCED FROM POLITICS

Although they tended to avoid politics in their everyday exchanges, the Yellow Vests were nevertheless political through their protest actions and through their local or national production of demands (*e.g.* those formulated at the ADAs and through the *Vrai Débat*¹⁵). The most active first-timers thus acquired a very diverse know-how in the registers of collective mobilisation (Authors 2020). Their politicisation took three forms. First, they expressed a vision of the world that pitted the people against the political elite. Second, each of the first-timers felt more entitled to speak out publicly on political issues in the broad sense. Third, as a result of their involvement in the movement, they acquired an interest in and some knowledge, albeit very unequal, of politics.

Are the Yellow Vests the people? A binary representation of the social world

In the various protester enclaves that our respondents had built over the course of this protean movement, they had developed visions of the world based on social antagonism and identification that fostered their individual politicisation.

On the one hand, our first-timers vocally expressed antagonism towards those in power. While this antagonism was generally indiscriminate, it was sometimes specifically towards

key figures (including first and foremost President Macron). Very often, this antagonistic discourse manifested against an existing backdrop of distrust and with a strength of feeling that was only intensified by the elites' show of contempt for the movement (Grossman 2019). Our respondents defended quite a coherent representation of the social world, where the Yellow Vests were fighting for the interests of the '*little people*', to use Robert's expression, against the 'big guns', in other words the actors, as represented by the political and media elites (in particular the 24-hour news channels), that had the power to define politics in a democracy. Hence, 'them' for our Yellow Vests respondents was not the 'fat cat' or the 'rich' (indeed the economic elites were less unanimously criticised) but an entity defined by political power. Disappointed by how the news channels covered the movement and especially its repression, the Yellow Vests had turned instead to alternative media and their own social networks. The respondents' frequent expressions of antagonism towards the forces of law and order largely stemmed from the movement itself, where they had seen means of repression that were either entirely unsuspected or that they had previously considered legitimate and fair.

On the other hand, with regard to the identification dimension, our respondents discovered through informal discussions that other participants had similar or even worse living conditions than their own. Identifying with one another in this way led them to express the same deep sense of social injustice, which is known to fuel alternative forms of politicisation and provide motives for protest (Gamson 1992). These two dimensions made up one single system: the 'people' of the Yellow Vests movement were opposed to the government, which claimed to represent the people¹⁶. It is probably not possible to speak

here of coherent ‘perspectives on the world’, such as those highlighted by Cramer (2016) among the inhabitants of rural Wisconsin, but it was certainly a fairly homogeneous social worldview. This vision of a popular ‘we’, the ‘*little people*’, who were opposed to the political elites was not altogether a negative one, because it mobilised principles of justice, such as the denunciation of inequalities, the call for more democracy, the demand for dignity for all.

Such a binary conception of the world invalidates the principles of France’s supposedly ‘democratic’ representative government, which the Yellow Vests argue is not acting, unlike them, in the name of popular sovereignty, in other words ‘of, by and for the people’. It also affects the tripartite division of social conscience (Schwartz 2014, Challier 2019) associated with the stabilised sections of the working and lower middle classes, which several of our respondents belonged to. Indeed, this binary conception places so much emphasis on the dominant that the most impoverished sections of society (the long-term unemployed, welfare recipients and recently arrived migrants) partly escape condemnation, publicly at least. The fact that extremely socioeconomically precarious people were participants in the movement and that highly politicised issues such as Islam, secularism and immigration were avoided also contributed to the invisibilisation of any opposition among our respondents to ‘the have-nots’. Admittedly, this discreetness was also advantaged by our interview situation, because the respondents would have found it difficult to criticise ‘trailer trash’ or immigrants in front of interviewers they would have assumed to be left-wing. Here again, a key point was that we had to reconstitute each

Yellow Vest's circles of interaction, or enclaves, which varied in intensity, continuity, regularity and social homogeneity.

Yannick was aged around 40 and had left school with no qualifications. He lived on his own after separating from his partner and had worked most of his life as a security guard. At the time of the interview, he was spending his time modifying cars. He had decided to join the roundabout occupation near his home because, like the other protesters, he too felt '*angry*'. Despite being injured during a demonstration, he became heavily involved in various Yellow Vests actions, notably as a 'street medic'. A well-known local figure, he participated in several ADAs and even in actions outside of France. A committed abstentionist, he expressed a general mistrust of politics.

Politics, you go along, you put your bit of paper in, and you think your voice will count for something, it'll have some influence, but actually when you know how it all works, behind the scenes, day-to-day, no, because it used to be every seven years you were considered, now you're only pseudo-considered every five years, but in actual fact nothing changes.

Yannick contrasted the political world's 'wheeling and dealing', which he had observed at local level, with the solidarity of the Yellow Vests movement, which sought '*a better living for everyone*', and told us of his sudden realisation that people had to '*step outside their own four walls*' (a variant of the '*wake-up call*' that the mobilisation represented for people who judged retrospectively that they had been '*sheep*' for a long time).

The movement, well, actually, when you start talking to people and you think you're having a hard time – you're having a hard time, you're feeling all sorry for yourself, and then you talk to other people and, 'oh yeah!', you actually don't know if you could go through 10% of what they're going through, when you already feel at your lowest. So you revise your expectations a bit, or at least you revise where the bottom is, you know? [...] you learn about solidarity again, empathy, because you'll be needing these as well. And you realise you've been put in a box, and in this box there are other boxes, this is how I imagine it, you know, it's like the pigeon holes at the sorting office, in the old days, when you had all those boxes, well, we just all started to poke our heads out and look around (...).

Yannick also admitted that he had had a '*change of heart*' regarding his perception of immigration since joining the movement and that this had helped alter the derogatory judgements he may have previously made about 'the have-nots'.

The movement has made me find out a lot more, a lot more about these migrations, about these population displacements, the whys and wherefores, and I realise now it's actually us in the West who're causing it all, starting wars over there, causing populations to be displaced, we're supplying the weapons, we're supplying the support, we'll supply whatever you want.

Citizens! Politicisation as a sense of entitlement

During our interview with Yannick, he described himself as a '*citizen medic*' and referred to the participants who filmed during the demonstrations as '*citizen reporters*'. The abstract

notion of 'citizen' is, if not vague, then at least susceptible to varied and contradictory uses, just like the notions of 'people' and 'democracy'. But this feeling of speaking out as a citizen was certainly a key element at the individual level in the Yellow Vests' defence of the people against the rulers.

The Yellow Vests had undoubtedly caused a political crisis. They had explicitly called for the ruling power to be ousted and had genuinely managed to rattle it for a few weeks, forcing it to back down, take unplanned measures and deploy a considerable repressive arsenal that included a propaganda campaign to denigrate the Yellow Vests as radical and violent rioters. While our respondents had blocked roads, confronted the police in the city centres and demonstrated without authorisation, they had also experienced 'democratic' moments, such as the drawing up of proposals and the promotion of some symbolic measures, most notably the citizens' initiative referendum. Some of the participants had even considered starting a revolution, calling for a change of government, for the establishment of a national constituent assembly and for the president to stand down. Most believed they were making history. They were living an experience that would prove a watershed rather than just another social movement. It was during this critical process, with all its uncertainty, weakening of institutions and disruption of daily life, that the participants gained a sense of political emancipation. They felt they were becoming citizens rather than just voters. They had become political subjects, people who were heard, protagonists (Burstin 2013, Deluermoz and Gobile 2015; see also Authors 2021).

In other words, we observed a second kind of politicisation here. The movement had (sometimes considerably) transformed the subjective political competence of these first-timers, who now felt entitled to talk politics in the broad sense and express themselves publicly on general issues rather than just in primary groups (family, friends, colleagues). This sense of entitlement is quite exceptional for individuals with little educational background, and it owed much to the avoidance of overly sophisticated discussions on institutional politics and the discreetness of the educated, activist contingent of the Yellow Vests (who refrained from 'lecturing') and hence to the (relative) levelling of positions among all the Yellow Vests in the protester enclaves. The principle of horizontality and therefore of equality among the Yellow Vests along with their mistrust of (self-)proclaimed spokesperson leaders and organisational forms has played a decisive role in the movement's history ever since the Yellow Vests in Commercy called for the creation of local citizen assemblies in December 2018. This sense of entitlement resulting from participation in the movement took several forms among our working-class and middle-class respondents. While all political mobilisations probably have an emancipatory power, it is rare for them to involve social actors with little educational background and jobs that are not very highly regarded. This was the case with Béatrice, a community care assistant in her late forties and mother of four who lived with her partner François. She was notably (along with François) involved in the production of a Yellow Vests weekly bulletin.

Béatrice had failed her baccalaureate and gone on to experience several career changes during her professional life. Her personal life was also marked by various disruptions, not least a divorce. She came from a background of small business owners with right and far-

right leanings. She had been living for a number of years with François, a separated father of three, who was himself from a working-class background and, at the time of the interview, was an unemployed maintenance worker. Together, they had founded a charity that helped people who were excluded from public welfare services. They became involved in the movement in December 2018 when they went along to one of the roundabout occupations and were warmly welcomed. They very quickly began to participate in the life of the roundabout (before subsequently joining another one), in weekly demonstrations (including those at some distance from their home), in the local assemblies and some ADAs and also most importantly in publishing the weekly 8-page bulletin for over a year. On their first evening at the roundabout, they had offered to help produce the leaflets that were being distributed using the '*printer and paper*' they had acquired through their charity. Because they liked the paper format, unlike the young autonomous activists they met later in their local assembly's communications committee, who preferred digital media, they decided to launch a bulletin. The first issue included an explanation in cartoon form of the different types of citizens' initiative referendums (revocatory, abrogative, legislative and constituent) needed to '*establish a democracy*' as well as a reproduction of the first ADA appeal, which had been put together a week earlier. The bulletin also contained portraits and testimonies of various Yellow Vests as well as in-depth articles on major issues such as pension reform, the European Union and the automation of jobs. In October 2019, a few months after Béatrice and François had finally ventured their own contributions, albeit under pseudonyms, Béatrice wrote: '*My strength lies in words, information and my determination to never give up*'.

Béatrice had voted for the *Front National* on and off and did not systematically avoid talking about institutional politics. Indeed, she once spoke to us at length on the subject during an ADA. She had been fairly strongly socialised to politics within her family, which comprised both De Gaulle and Pétain supporters as well as one ancestor who had been closely associated with a longstanding *Front National* official. She followed political figures on Facebook and had a fairly detailed knowledge of certain local political figures. That said, her lack of post-18 education (which she had come to regret and tried to remedy at midlife), her gender (in a traditionalist environment) and her love of partying had all contributed to distancing her from the political field, which she did not get directly involved in.

Clara was another example. She was single and in her mid-twenties, and she worked as a temporary care assistant in a nursing home. At the time of the interviews, she was notably planning to distribute a leaflet urging people to vote against Macron in the 2019 European elections. Her situation was quite different to Béatrice's, however. She had a technological baccalaureate but had experienced several failures at post-18 education level before obtaining a care worker diploma. She was fairly socially isolated and had had little socialisation in politics (her parents were separated, her teacher mother had always voted for the left), but she had taken an interest in the presidential elections, voting for Macron in 2017. However, her moral judgements of most of the political classes were negative. She kept herself informed on current affairs through the internet and had joined the movement on her own on 17 November. She did not belong to any group or participate in any of the roundabout occupations, but she would sometimes meet up with some of her colleagues.

Before her participation in the Yellow Vests movement, she had let *'other people demonstrate for [her] a bit'*. She told us she had never *'spoken up once'* even though she was *'fed up'* with paying bills when those in power were *'liars, manipulators, profiteers'* (words written on her hi-vis vest). She had been a very active contributor over the previous six months (interview in June 2019), although she viewed her contribution as relatively modest. She had steadfastly and enthusiastically participated in demonstrations and blockades in discreet support roles (including in direct confrontations with the police) and had felt she was witnessing major historical events (she expressed regret at having missed some of the most high-profile ones). Although she did not feel very comfortable or indeed put at ease in the small number of general assemblies she had attended, she did actually dare to speak out at one of them. She had also had a leaflet written by some of the left-wing activist Yellow Vests, which she distributed in the street to passers-by urging them to *'give [President Macron] a good thrashing'* at the European elections. She was very conscious of the injustices she faced in her job and had gained confidence through the mobilisation in her ability to bring about change: *'What I learned was, you disrupt the state'*. A huge phenomenon of the Yellow Vests movement thus appears to be the politicisation of ordinary citizens who are generally quite distanced from politics but who feel authorised to talk on the subject for the first time as a result of their newly acquired know-how and knowledge. Does the movement therefore address the deviation from the norm of electoral citizenship, which presupposes a preference is expressed in full knowledge of the facts, in other words in an informed and enlightened manner (Converse 1964, Gaxie 1978)?

Full citizens? Limitations and ambivalences of the politicisation of ordinary citizens

Did the mobilisation equip these first-time protesters with a knowledge of institutional politics, in other words an objective political competence that was sufficiently detailed to make them 'ideologists' in Converse's sense? Did it make up for the participants' low-level cultural and especially academic capital, which generally fosters such competence? It is difficult to give a definitive answer to these questions for three reasons. First, caution should be exercised when interpreting the comments made in our interview situations, because it was explicitly stated that the respondent's relationship to politics would be discussed. Second, the semi-structured interview, unlike the questionnaire, is not a tool suited to measuring a competence. Third, it was not really possible to assess the respondents' evolution in this sense, because we did not know their previous state of knowledge. A follow-up study would be necessary to evaluate the scale and intensity of these individual evolutions over time. Despite these limitations and bearing in mind that the interview situation nevertheless facilitated political discourse in that it did not (overly) impose any scholarly or sophisticated knowledge frameworks related to politics, it is striking that the sense of entitlement our respondents acquired through their participation in the movement often led them to explain and sometimes even 'lecture' us in topics that we would have been assumed to be specialists in. Yannick informed us that Macron had manipulated the postponement of the upcoming presidential election. Domi and Corinne enlightened us on the blank vote. Stéphane gave us a detailed account of the democratic question in the citizens' assembly. These observations were, however, sometimes untrue (Macron had not manipulated the postponement) and frequently imprecise (the blank vote

does not go ‘to the majority’). In other words, the objective competence acquired by our respondents was often questionable.

The general impression was, unsurprisingly, that the most competent among our respondents were those who already had some long-held (like Béatrice) or recent (like Stéphane and Clara) interest in politics prior to the movement. For example, Clara knew the name of her MP and told us she leaned towards *La France Insoumise* because of her environmentalist convictions, her concern for social justice and her sovereigntism, which were roughly in line with the offer set out by Mélenchon’s movement. If appetency contributes to knowledge in politics as it does in every other domain, involvement in the movement had very clearly generated a greater interest in current affairs among our respondents. Some, like Stéphane, endeavoured to increase their knowledge and understanding of protest movements and the social world through written and audiovisual documentation. Several respondents addressed the highly political topics of the upcoming European (2019) and local (2020) elections in our interviews. What preferences should be expressed in the vote? Should Macron be punished at the 2019 European elections? What was the legitimacy of Yellow candidacies? Stéphane’s level of sophistication was by far the highest among our respondents, especially when he described the internal dynamics of the Yellow Vests movement, as the following extract shows:

The problem with the assemblies [is that] they come from the far left and so they polarise people to the far left and they politicise. And that’s going to pose a big problem going forward. What I mean is, there’s a quest for legitimacy in the Yellow Vests movement. Just

by putting your vest on you're saying 'I'm a Yellow Vest' (...) But if you say 'I'm a Yellow Vest, France for the French', that's not the same as saying 'I'm a Yellow Vest and anti-capitalist', is it. And... this quest for legitimacy is still ongoing now, but it's intensified a bit with the assemblies. There are the local assemblies and the ADAs on the one hand. Really good press (...) They're reminiscent of the *Etats Généraux*, like we said earlier! On the other hand, you've got the faces of the movement, Priscilla [Ludosky], Maxime Nicolle, Jérôme Rodriguez, etc., who appear on TV shows, quite a lot. (...) You've also got these pseudo-faces with their political ambitions (...) who decide to go to the European elections when the grassroots don't want to. You ask any Yellow Vest, nobody wants to go to the European elections. And so, there's some mistrust beginning to appear between the groups.

Conversely, other respondents evidenced forms of *remise de soi* in favour of people deemed more competent. For example, Robert placed his trust in the activists on his roundabout when it came to any political issues he considered complex, and Clara left it to two activists to write the leaflet she distributed. The positioning of these two respondents in the movement placed them in the camp of ordinary protagonism, providing action and support (Goujon and Shukan 2015), rather than in the camp of political protagonism, which is more consistent with the canons of activism (elaborating organisational proposals and demands), which is where Stéphane was typically situated.

It is of course crucial to understand how the Yellow Vests gather information to get a sense of their objective political competence. We know that our respondents were often disappointed with the dominant media and that they turned instead to alternative media and their social networks. But what exactly was the outcome of keeping a 24-hour news

channel on all the time (including during our interview) or of chatting within video gaming groups, as in François's case, or with family members on Facebook? How far was information credited or discredited depending on who provided it? The respondents' newly acquired subjective competence facilitated the acquisition of 'objective' knowledge, but it did not protect against the circulation of false news and rumours. More baffling, however, was the fact that our respondents' intense involvement in the movement did not appear to have dramatically affected their voting preferences, although many said they had changed their minds on certain issues, such as immigration for Yannick, wealth tax for Clara and police violence for Robert. Robert was in fact distancing himself from Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* through his intense and continuing interactions within his new Yellow 'family', but Domi's abstentionism seemed likely to continue, and the past tendencies of Béatrice and François to vote for the *Front National/Rassemblement National* had not been challenged by any political alternative they deemed to be credible. More generally, the respondents' distrust of politics seemed to have been strengthened or consolidated.

CONCLUSION

Domi's comment '*we don't put our political opinions out there, those of us who have them*' clearly indicates just how much the avoidance of politics was a condition of involvement in the Yellow Vests action and occupation groups for many of these first-time protesters. It highlights the fact that while it was imperative not to declare one's political opinions, it was also not necessary to have any. Like other post-2011 movements, the Yellow Vests

mobilisation was a context for the politicisation of novices. In a time of growing distrust of political representatives and the traditional social movement organisations, what forms did this politicisation take? On the one hand, the first-timers' politicisation through the creation of a homogeneous social worldview that opposes the '*little people*' and the political elites reinforced, as a whole, a distance from politics that was often already present. On the other, their politicisation was also fundamentally based on a new sense of entitlement to talk about politics in the broad sense, which was made possible largely by their distance from politics. The classic dilemma of representation and delegation therefore remains (Michels 1999, Manin 1997): how is it possible to succeed without creating an organisational structure, which implies abandoning any claim of horizontality and overcoming all distrust of forms of delegation? While our respondents perceived the importance of this issue, they struggled to find a solution to it. This is exemplified in the following exchange with François in June 2020, a few weeks after the (first) lockdown was lifted following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. He told us '*We've got to enter the political arena*', but he was not clear how that should happen.

François: we've got to get into politics, we don't have any choice, at some point we've got to get into it, if we want to influence politics we have to get into politics unfortunately, we've got to make an impact [...]

Interviewer: Get into politics, you mean?

François: you don't have to become especially political, but you do have to get your feet wet, we've got no choice.

Interviewer: yeah but how do you get your feet wet?

François: well you can get your feet wet by..., I don't know by participating... tsk we can't set up a political group, that'd be too complicated, apart from we'd have the brains behind it, but no, there'll always be recuperations and that... but we have to get involved politically.

All in all, the French Yellow Vests movement offers an illuminating, if unexpected, case study for examining the logics and effects of the avoidance of politics. There is a lot to learn from investigating an individual's reluctance to express electoral preferences or to tackle topics in the domain of political competition. It requires hard work *not* to articulate institutional political concerns in public (Eliasoph 1998) – Yellow Vests first-timers are a case in point. Similarly, comparative politics scholars, in particular those interested in political participation in authoritarian situations, have warned against taking public expressions of political apathy at face value. Merging these insights may provide fresh perspectives on the avoidance of politics as a political tactic that might even, under certain circumstances, foster politicisation among the most disenfranchised groups.

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APPENDIX

Table of respondents:

| Pseudonym | Date of 1st interview | Sex | Approximate age | Civil status | Highest educational level | Occupation |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-----|-----------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Agnès | 11/06/2019 | F | 50-55 | single, 3 children | 12th grade (marketing) | Unemployed, adult disability allowance |
| Alexandre | 15/05/2019 | M | 25-30 | single | Two-year university degree in technology (social work) | Student and youth worker |
| Béatrice | 28/05/2020 | F | 45-50 | in a relationship, 4 children | Diploma for Access to University Studies | Community care assistant |
| Christine | 03/01/2019 | F | 55-60 | in a relationship, 3 children | A levels (technological accounting) | Housewife, foster mum |
| Cindy | 02/01/2019 | F | 25-30 | single | Vocational qualification* (floristry) | Temporary worker |
| Clara | 24/05/2019 | F | 25-30 | single | One-year university degree in care work | Temporary care assistant |
| Corinne | 02/01/2019 | F | 45-50 | in a relationship, 2 children | Two-year university degree in technology | Former restaurant worker, retraining |
| Domi | 02/01/2019 | F | 45-50 | single, 1 child | 9th grade | Temporary care assistant |
| François | 02/06/2020 | M | 45-50 | in a relationship, 2 children | Vocational qualification* (plumbing) | Unemployed (maintenance worker) |
| Grégory | 28/03/2019 | M | 30-35 | single | A levels (technological accounting) | Freelance photographer (welfare recipient) |
| Guilhem | 26/11/2020 | M | 30-35 | single, 1 child | Agricultural secondary school (no degree) | Unemployed (adult disability allowance) |
| Jean Christophe | 03/01/2019 | M | 45-50 | in a relationship, 3 children | Vocational qualification* (pâtisserie) | Prison warden |
| Jean-Pierre | 03/01/2019 | M | 55-60 | in a relationship | NA | Clerical worker (post |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------|------------|---|-------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| | | | | | | office) |
| <i>Jonathan</i> | 03/01/2019 | M | 20-25 | single | A levels (general) | Fast food restaurant employee |
| <i>Mireille</i> | 01/11/2019 | F | 60-65 | single, 2 children | 9th grade | Unemployed, adult disability allowance |
| <i>Robert</i> | 21/05/2019 | M | 60-65 | in a relationship, 3 children | Vocational qualification* (painter) | Retired (tradesman, maintenance) |
| <i>Sandrine</i> | 02/01/2019 | F | 45-50 | single, 3 children | Vocational qualification* (secretary) | Unemployed (odd jobs) |
| <i>Sophie</i> | 05/02/2021 | F | 60-65 | single, 3 children | 9th grade | Unemployed (childminder) |
| <i>Stéphane</i> | 04/02/2019 | M | 40-45 | in a relationship | A levels (general) | Unemployed (freelancer, welfare recipient) |
| <i>Yannick</i> | 21/12/2020 | M | 40-45 | single, 1 child | 9th grade | Unemployed (security guard) |

* Vocational certificate obtained 2 years after the 8th grade

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all French data extracts and quotations from French sources have been translated into English.

2 For another comparison, see Shultiziner and Kornblit, 2020.

3 *Nuit Debout* is a social movement in France that emerged from protests in 2016 against proposed labour reforms (*Loi Travail*).

4 We built a case for ethnographic biographical interviews in Authors 2020.

5 To preserve their anonymity, we have changed their first names (family names are rarely used in the *gilets jaunes* movement) and some of their social characteristics in order to 'reconstruct cases that are sociologically correct but socially false' (Weber 2008, p. 142).

6 There have been very few empirical studies published in English on the Yellow Vests. See, however, Guerra *et al.* 2019 and Hayat 2022. For a synthesis, see Fillieule and Dafflon 2022. For an early analysis, see Collectif 2019. For more normative views, see Chamorel 2019, Wilkin 2020 and, from a different perspective, Kouvelakis 2019.

7 An *opération péage gratuit* is a form of non-violent demonstration where protesters raise the barrier on a toll road allowing motorists to use the road for free.

8 ZAD is an acronym for *zone à défendre* and refers to a militant occupation of land to prevent a proposed development project from going ahead.

9 On the importance of self-categorisation as a Yellow Vest, see Adam-Troian *et al.* 2021.

10 The Saturday demonstrations were referred to by both the Yellow Vests and the media as *acte I*, *acte II*, and so on, thus likening them to acts in a play. Three interviews were conducted with these women. The first was with all four, the second was with Corinne and Domi, and the third was with Sandrine and Cindy.

11 The ADAs were an attempt to coordinate the Yellow Vests at national level by bringing together delegates from each of the Yellow Vests collectives across the country at regular intervals. Organised over two to three days, they generally consisted of thematic workshops followed by a plenary session and a final declaration. In all, five ADAs were held between January 2019 and March 2020.

12 The *États Généraux* was a pre-Revolution consultative assembly that brought together the clergy, the nobility and the people.

13 NPA refers to the far-left party *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*.

14 *La France Insoumise* is a left-wing social democrat party founded by Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

15 The *Vrai Débat* was an online consultation tool set up by the Yellow Vests as an alternative to the national debate launched by Macron in response to the movement. It aimed to collect proposals in a transparent and neutral manner from all citizens for presentation to the president.

16 For a different analysis of the Yellow Vests' 'populism', see Guerra *et al.* 2019.