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Marta Camell Galí, Matteo Polleri, Federico Puletti

The *Gilets Jaunes*:
From Declassing to Counter-power

It's yellow. It's ugly. It doesn't go with anything, but it can change your life.
—*Détournement* of the highway safety campaign whose protagonist was the stylist Karl Lagerfeld, seen in Paris, Act 15 “Plein le dos”¹

Class struggle dresses in yellow.
—Seen in Nantes, Act 26 “Plein le dos”

Although often minimized or discredited by foreign media, the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) mobilization, which erupted in November 2018, has held France on tenterhooks for more than a year. The long days of rioting on the Champs-Élysées, the image of the presidential convoy of Emmanuel Macron surrounded by angry protesters, the “taking” of the Arc de Triomphe and the simultaneous occupation of around thirty-five hundred roundabouts across the entire national road network will remain in the collective memory as political events that mark the last decade. With more than fifty thousand demonstrations in the first six months of the mobilization² and despite police repression unheard of in Europe since 1968,³ the Yellow Vests in effect managed to destabilize the political framework of the second most important European economy, wresting several concessions from the government. Innovative in its practices of organization and struggle, this cycle of contestation was surprising for its unpredictability and duration, achieving in mere months more than the traditional union mobilizations and social movements of the preceding ten years had, continuing the struggle without any negotiations and continually seeking out further situations of conflict.⁴

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Like any unexpected social phenomenon, the *Gilets Jaunes* attracted many interpretations. Notably, within militant and university milieus it became the object of many political hypotheses and different analyses, giving rise to a real “quarrel” (Badiou 2019). In the context of this proliferation of contributions relating to the movement, we can distinguish three interpretative approaches that seem to us paradigmatic. The first approach is *deflationist*, the second *populist*, and the third, *localist*.

The first, affirming the movement has no political interest from an anti-capitalist perspective, holds that in a context where neoliberalism falls into the hands of “sovereignist” forces, the *Gilet Jaunes* and their demands are in fact compatible with this system, and do not constitute a true opposition to it (Badiou 2019). Far from being a force of rupture with the established order, this new figure of social mobilization would be instead its inverse reflection, lacking a solid form of organization and a truly structured political program openly committed to a “communist horizon.”

The second approach, while recognizing the political potential of the movement, claims to reduce the social composition and aspirations of the *Gilets Jaunes* to the layer of a recalcitrant “lower class” (*petit peuple*) acting against the economic policies of the European Union, tendentially identitarian and nationalist. This social composition would be opposed indeed to the effects of globalisation and in particular to the Maastricht project of European integration; in this sense, the “lower class” of the *Gilets Jaunes* would be situated in the same political sequence as the people of Brexit and the wave of “populisms” (Onfray 2020).

The third approach—the localist interpretation—is built, on the other hand, on a precise analysis of the sociology of the movement, its geography and development during the first months of the mobilization. It insists, rightly, on the radically new character of its forms of organization, on its “post-ideological” nature and on the context of crisis in the “Fordist” social and political structures of organization in which it emerged. Putting the accent on the “experiential” (Lianos 2018) aspect of the politics of the roundabouts, this interpretation aims mainly to emphasize the local and “communal” dimensions of its practices, to the detriment of the overall meaning of its development, in order to oppose the model of the *Gilets Jaunes* to the series of “alterglobalization” movements of the 2000s (Jeanpierre 2019).

All of these interpretations, which are based on sociological observation and suggest specific political horizons, adopt positions of exteriority in relation to the studied phenomenon, either more or less pronounced depending on the case. This is an epistemological perspective that characterizes

most proper social-scientific research and which guarantees a certain critical distance vis-à-vis the object of research and its transformations. Without questioning the legitimacy of this mode of enquiry, we propose, in the following pages, a different interpretation, based on the immanent “logic” of the movement (Rancière 2019) and forged through our accumulated exchanges in a work of “co-research” (Allavena and Polleri 2019; Gallo Lassere and Monferrand 2019) carried out over the course of more than a year.⁵ It is, thus, beginning from the lived experience of the assemblies, the demonstrations, and the surrounding conversations that we return to the uprising of the *Gilets Jaunes* and its evolution between November 2018 and January 2020. Given that their social and spatial composition is inseparable from their practices of struggle and open political perspectives, we advance the thesis that the *Gilets Jaunes* knew how to subvert the frustration and sad passions of social and geographic “declassing,,” turning it into an economic struggle and reappropriation of the political. The *Gilets Jaunes* thereby managed to constitute an unprecedented case of “democratic counter-power” within French society.

Socio-spatial Composition and Political Conjuncture

Accused many times of being a “pre-political” movement and sometimes stigmatized as reactionary and “barbaric” (but also “fascioid,” “putschist,” “racist,” “anti-Semitic” or “homophobic”), the *Gilets Jaunes*, rather, expressed the politicization of a significant section of the lower classes and of certain strata of the middle classes in the process of proletarianization. These are the social strata affected by the psycho-economic suffering brought about by neo-liberalism and by the gradual phasing out of all attempts at social and geographic mobility, two closely linked dimensions in a centralized country like France. In this perspective, an analysis of the movement in terms of social composition must be integrated into research on its spatial composition.

The opposition expressed since November 2018 against the increase⁶ in taxes on fuel (the “carbon tax”) easily translated into the language of protest against the profound changes taking place in French society, however often these passed unnoticed. After the financial crisis of 2008, the incomes of the lower classes of the population have progressively diminished (Bourguignon 2019), so much so that fixed expenses such as housing, electricity, gas, water and school fees have increased much quicker than inflation (Fassin and Defossez 2019). This inverse evolution of income against expenses has also had the consequence that a whole part of the population has found

itself having a smaller and smaller budget to meet all its needs. This impoverishment is all the more painful because it has affected a part of the population that was not excluded from the circuits of production of wealth. At the same time, the increasing cost of real estate, especially in big cities, has driven a certain number of low-income households to move away from the urban centers, where their place of work is located, to rent or buy housing in areas described as “peri-urban.”⁷ Neither city, nor country, these places maintain a strong dependence on the urban centers even if they are spatially removed from these. Abandoned by public services, these areas constitute a zone of limbo as much from the socioeconomic point of view as the political. Here, public transport services are insufficient or in the process of being dismantled, while the widespread feeling toward institutional politics is that it counts for nothing as soon electoral campaigns are over.

All this explains why in these territories—the most active throughout the mobilization—the carbon tax was not only rejected as an unjust tax (because indirect and not progressive) but was able to be the vector of the politicization of a generalized feeling of exasperation—the feeling of “being fed up” (“*ras-le-bol*”) as often expressed in the first calls to protest—anchored in the material living conditions of increasingly large segments of the population. Watching the movement closely in these first weeks, many inquiries showed an overall consistency in the profiles encountered, not in terms of professional status, but from the point of view of the social position occupied. Salaried or self-employed workers belonging to the “lower classes” or to “intermediary” professions (Coquard 2018), retired, unemployed, part-time or precarious workers, all having experienced a certain economic fragility, the *Gilets Jaunes* expressed a variegated set of those who are disadvantaged in society and who see themselves being less and less protected in the social transformations imposed by neoliberalism. This is the multitude of those dispossessed of dignified conditions of existence and the possibility of political decisions over their own destiny, thanks to a presidential political system separated from society.

It is enough then to add to these structural conditions a few conjunctural factors to understand the reasons that led to the explosion of the movement between October and November 2018. Since his arrival at the Élysée with the presidential elections of 2017, Emmanuel Macron launched a real offensive against French welfare, established procedures of political mediation, and trade union organizations. In this situation, the defeat of the rail workers’ strike during the summer of 2018 against the reform of the rail service strongly marked public debate, especially since it was accompanied by a

scandal linked directly to the figure of the president. Indeed, a security officer to the president, improperly disguised as a police officer, was recognized on the margins of the May Day demonstration, as he was violently repressing demonstrators. The erasure of all forms of social and political mediation, the dismantling of the institutions of the welfare state, an ambiguous relationship between the officials of the Élysée and the Police Prefecture, and a generalized delegitimization of the figure of the president: these were key elements of the French political situation in the summer of 2018. This conjuncture became heated in the fall, with the increase of fuel taxes justified by an acceleration in the country's ecological transition.

In this context, the "*gilet jaune*" (yellow vest), *détourned* from its usual meaning which associates it with a law prescribing visible clothing to prevent road accidents, became the instrument to make visible the *generalized accident* of a whole part of the population most penalized by the policies promoted by Macron. In expressing at once a means of political subjectivation and a modality of protest, this costume revived, on the one hand, the history of the French revolution, which adopted as its symbol the Phrygian cap of freed slaves and, on the other hand, the popular counter-culture of carnival (Sloterdijk 2018). Its function was in this case to put everyone on equal footing in disrespecting established power and in defiance of a centralist and technocratic government whose resignation was immediately demanded. But the *gilet jaune* also became a means of communication and a singular surface of inscription; since it constituted the "board" on which to write or draw the multiplicity of pleas, reflections, and demands brought forward by the movement.

Reinvention of Class Struggle and the Reappropriation of Politics

At the beginning of fall in 2018, the opposition to the supposed "eco-tax" promoted by Macron was immediately very broad. In October, many videos posted on Facebook denouncing its strategy of offloading the costs of ecological transition on the lower part of the population went viral. Meanwhile, a petition launched on the internet got more than a million signatures in a few days.⁸ By November, hundreds of pages or groups on social media, such as the Facebook group, "France is angry" (*La France en Colère*), had been created and joined by hundreds of thousands of people. These online communities played a leading role in breaking the isolation and increasing the sense of political illegitimacy over the choices made by the government. Drums started beating on social media, where it was decided to adopt the *gilet jaune* as a symbol and to begin the occupations of the roundabouts, these elements

of the peri-urban fabric created to make circulation more fluid, where blockage actions could happen and where permanent meeting and organizing points could easily be created.

Since the very first weeks, the protest has played on a *double temporality*: occupation of the roundabouts with blockage or slowdown of circulation during the week, and demonstrations in the rich areas of the capital on the weekend. The Saturday demonstrations were not announced to the police, but publicized through anonymous accounts on social media. The blockage of production and consumption through the occupation of the nodes of circulation, and the collective irruption in the metropolitan centers thus constituted the two principal axes around which the *Gilets Jaunes*' practices of struggle were organized. These two axes make it possible to identify the three main points of attack in the contestation: the questioning of the forms of government of the enlarged reproduction of the socioeconomic system; the demand for a decentralization of state structures; and the critique of politico-geographic hierarchies crossing social space. If the occupation of the roundabouts indeed made it possible to create new spaces of sociability and local assemblies, the Saturday demonstrations—called “Acts” and organized on a weekly basis in the capital or in other cities—targeted the centers of economic, political and symbolic power in the country.

This double temporality that characterizes the practices of the movement not only represented its form of expression and its strategy of struggle. It was above all its vector of transformation and consolidation over time, thus channeling the two fundamental claims of the *Gilets Jaunes*: the reinvention of social conflict in the context of the weakening of the effectiveness of the traditional strike, and the reappropriation of the ultimate meaning of political experience, namely the creation of new forms of living and organizing together, antagonistic and alternative vis-à-vis existing institutions. On the one hand, in fact, we have the multitudinous irruption in the “wealthy neighborhoods” of the big cities, in malls and in logistics distribution districts: a practice aimed both at the destabilization of constituted power (through the assault on institutional buildings) and at disturbing the flows of capitalist valorization made throughout the whole reproductive cycle of the economy (production-circulation-consumption). On the other hand, the occupation of the roundabouts and the formation of hundreds of local assemblies allow the reconstitution of hubs for the socialization of suffering, where it is possible to collect the many different “complaints” (*doléances*) and discuss the overall conditions into which society has fallen. In other words, these are places where collective speech becomes political decision

and organization, aimed at putting the mechanisms of reproduction of the dominant socio-political order into crisis, and experimenting with other possible connections. Behind the constant reference of the *Gilets Jaunes* to the republican motto of “fraternity” among participants in the movement, what stands out is indeed their ability to re-open not only the imaginary of the strike and of social conflict, but also the desire to break with solitude and to return the materiality of existence to its political dimension through the constitution of a new “moral economy” (Hayat 2019). This is because it is the sharing of a certain experience of injustice and readiness to fight which characterize the participants of the movement, much more so than their belonging to a particular professional category.

As the analysis of the oral and written productions of the assemblies of the *Gilets Jaunes* shows, this co-implication of social conflict, instance of democratization and experimentation with autonomy, emerges from the first “Acts,” with the shift from the refusal of the carbon tax to the demand for the “resignation” of the President to the demand for more “buying power” for the poorest social classes. A demand in which the need to be constituted as an autonomous and alternative “counter-power” vis-à-vis dominant powers remains no less important than the need for a reappropriation of the wealth produced in society (Negri 2018; Balibar 2018).

The double temporality of the *Gilets Jaunes* thus expresses the two lines of force traversing a movement that emerges as an “uprising” against constituted power: there will be no reinvention of the class struggle without reappropriation of political experience. And no reappropriation of politics, without the practice of direct democracy and the invention of new common institutions.

All Power to the Roundabouts! Toward a Democratic Counter-power?

The “democratic question” indeed plays a major role in understanding the *Gilets Jaunes* movement (Plenel 2019). In a critical or negative sense, the uprising points its finger not only at inequality in the distribution of wealth. More generally, it points toward the relationship social inequality maintains with the structural crisis in the mechanisms of representation and the balance of powers of the presidential system of the Fifth Republic. In a positive or affirmative sense, the *Gilets Jaunes* expressed a need for the radical reinvention of democracy, as much on the level of big political institutions, as on that of local autonomy and the experience of daily life. Addressing this need took several forms: discussion groups on social media to occupy the roundabouts, from the formation of local assemblies to the refusal of the “Great

Debate” proposed by Macron in order to exit the crisis, to the construction of the self-managed digital consultation platform, the “True Debate.” This series of heterogeneous attempts share a common denominator: the practice of *direct democracy* as a political expression of social counter-power.

Direct democracy is therefore, first, the common name expressed by the local groups that make up the “body” of a profoundly polycentric movement. In their collective experimenting with organizational forms, the *Gilets Jaunes* immediately valued horizontal practices of democracy as a terrain of vertical struggle against “Macron and his world.” Second, it is the *modus operandi* adopted for the construction of the autonomy of the movement (Branaccio and Camell Galí 2019). The experiment of a democratic counter-power, in fact, must first be understood as a quest for the independence of the movement vis-à-vis the unions, political parties and, more generally, all forms of representation. A course of struggle that later passed through refusal to negotiate with the government and all forms of mediation with the contested “old world,” to finally arrive at the opening of a variety of infrastructures of collective confrontation and deliberation. Spaces such as the “Assembly of Assemblies” (AdA) of the *Gilets Jaunes* were a vector of subjectivation and a decisive instrument of coordination for groups of people far removed from traditional politics.

The AdA gathered together hundreds of local assemblies from all over France at each iteration, with the objective of meeting, discussing and drawing up a common strategy for the movement. This experience is based on the idea that “all power is in the local assemblies”: a principle that embodies, in our perspective, the double meaning that the *Gilets Jaunes* gave to the practice of autonomy. On the one hand, the development of a movement that is totally independent of already existing organizations; on the other hand, the momentum of self-normativizing expressed in the inventions of common procedures and rules guaranteeing horizontality and the diffusion of power across networks. These two elements constitute the autonomous temporality of the movement since it is also with the AdA that the *Gilets Jaunes* developed their own “agenda,” and it is there that the movement anchored itself over time as a counter-power.

This example of democratic self-organization shows, then, the deep link between the territorialization of the movement and the overall significance of the struggle it waged. Far from being simply social figures from “peripheral” locations, the *Gilets Jaunes* testified rather to the complexity of the socio-urban structure of contemporary capitalism, and directly attacked the connection between the distribution of socially produced surplus value and the re-writing of the current geography of economic and political power.

In the construction of spaces such as the AdA, this political struggle, inseparable from a critique of the capitalist system in its totality, showed a considerable striking force that touched the foundations of constituted power. By organizing itself as a multiplicity of local committees, online groups, citizen assemblies and roundabouts, the movement was able to resist the authoritarian reorganization of the state machine. Its power was precisely the opening up of a perspective of autonomy based on democratic principles without renouncing the “larger” level of conflict against Macron and his project of neoliberal reform.

More than functioning as organizational formalization and centralization, the AdA presented itself as a flexible infrastructure produced for the purpose of meeting and linking the multiplicity of demands of the *Gilets Jaunes*, without any claim to internal homogenization or hierarchization. From the Citizen Initiative Referendum (RIC) to the battle against the privatization of airports in Paris, the convergences with ecological and union struggles, and the discussions on an overall strategy for “ending capitalism,” a multiple and proliferating collection of demands was composed and recomposed in the debates of the AdA. This experience of coordination was situated within a radically anti-bureaucratic horizon and sought a political form able to live up to the multitudinous dimension of the social uprising launched in November 2018. A sort of platform for open political cooperation, operating through the constant revision of the mechanisms of discussion and political decision, according to the principle of decentralization and the exchange of responsibilities and skills. In other words, a federation of local assemblies and rebellious singularities, which showed itself capable of giving a new impetus to social, political, and ecological conflicts in France. An experiment that, it seems to us, opens new possibilities for the 2020s in Europe.

—Translated by Christina Aislinn Chalmers

Notes

- 1 “Plein le dos” (<https://pleinledos.org/>) is an artistic and militant project which aims to collect photos of slogans appearing on the backs of yellow vests, everywhere in France, in order to create a collective popular memory. A selection of these photos is collected in the Collectif Plein le dos 2019.
- 2 According to the figures given by the French Ministry of Internal Affairs.
- 3 More than ten thousand were taken into custody by the national police force, more than five thousand people went to trial and around a thousand were sentenced to prison time. Since the beginning of the *Gilets Jaunes* the documentarian David Dufresne (2019) has monitored and classified the episodes of police violence. The tally is two deaths, 323 head wounds, twenty-five people with lost eyes, four hands torn off. The

- high number of wounded people is due to the use of weapons such as the manual sting-ball grenade, the F4 teargas grenade, the GLIF4 instant teargas grenade (containing a dose of TNT) which are forbidden elsewhere in Europe.
- 4 In 2010, the movement opposing the pension reform was beaten, and the reform was voted through. The same result occurred with the movement in spring 2016 against the then titled “Work Bill” (*Loi Travail*) or the “El Khomri Bill.” At the beginning of the summer, the reform was voted through by Parliament despite street demonstrations around the whole of France and the movement’s growth under the name “Nuit Debout,” which included occupations in the squares of many towns. In March 2018, the movement contesting the reforms to the national railway service would also have no effect.
 - 5 Certain works of co-research are available on the collective site “Plateforme d’Enquêtes Militantes”: <http://www.platenqmil.com/apropos>.
 - 6 Tax increases of 6.5 cents on diesel and 2.9 cents on gasoline, in addition to the 7.6 and 3.9 cent price increases of these two fuels, respectively, in the course of 2018.
 - 7 These are not defined as zones of “fixed poverty,” which is equally largely present in the urban centers. It is therefore necessary, as various sociologists suggest, to avoid simplistic dichotomies such as center/periphery and city/country (Béhar, Dang-vu and Delpirou 2018). For a deeper examination of the question (Lussault 2019).
 - 8 The petition entitled, “For a reduction in fuel prices,” was launched by Priscilla Ludowski and addressed to the Minister for ecological transition, François de Rugy: <https://www.change.org/p/pour-une-baisse-des-prix-%C3%A0-la-pompe-essence-diesel>.

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