

# **A Leaderless Movement In The Digital Age: Negotiating Spaces of Power in the case of the Yellow Vest Movement, 2018-19**

by

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# Abstract

This dissertation explores the ways in which the Yellow Vest protestors established practices of resistance, and in what ways they influenced the spaces of power established by French political and social structures. Through reliance on visual production ( graffiti, murals, videos) and analysis of language used in the media, this dissertation provides an overview of versatile practices the Yellow Vest protestors exhibited in the 65 weeks of protest against introduction of a carbon tax, during 2018-19. The research utilises concepts of everyday theory, such as ‘tactics’ and ‘space’ in order to attest to often conflicting actions amongst the protestors. The use of everyday theory in analysing a movement shows us how movements without a political core are sustained and how their heterogeneity becomes a source of political legitimacy. Other significant findings indicate to the importance of local level creation of community and establishment of collective identity in cases of social and political fragmentation.

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# INTRODUCTION

“ To the ordinary man.

To the common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets.”

Michel de Certeau, *“The Practice of Everyday Life”* (1988)

From the first week of roundabout disruption on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the Yellow Vest (YV) movement attested to the deep political and social disparities in France. The movement arose out of severe carbon taxation and continued to include concerns such as housing and police brutality. During 65 weeks of spontaneous gathering, and brutal clashes with the police that followed, the solidarity exhibited by the lower-middle classes and working classes of France created a severe crisis for the newly elected Macron administration. Some joined as first time demonstrators, or previously politically apathetic citizens. The Yellow Vests were indeed, the ubiquitous characters of French society – teachers, nurses, constructors, freelancers, unemployed workers, pensioners – yet the mounting financial pressures (in the protestors’ case, the introduction of carbon tax for drivers and commuters) sparked the incentive to galvanise and protest. Only loosely connected, often meeting across the sites of protest like social media platforms and traffic roundabouts, the Yellow Vests unexpectedly garnered public support from people across the political spectrum. It was a movement characterised by heterogeneity, and its actors and goals politically ambiguous.

Their attempts to remain politically ambiguous, and being without a clearly established political leadership makes the Yellow Vest movement a unique case in the studies of social

movements. A movement construed by local assemblies and collective speeches, the leaderless nature of the Yellow Vests contributes to further understanding of the multi-faceted nature of populism, and political potential of grassroots organising. While the far-right groups like *Egalite et Reconciliation* (antisemitic national socialists), *Action Francaise* (monarchists), or *Bastion Social* ( fascists), attempted to use the Yellow Vests as an organising ground, continuous involvement of left-leaning organisations undermined any xenophobic or right-nationalist positions by frequenting and participating in the same sites of occupation or demonstration. (S. Kipfer 2019, 210). Therefore, the trajectory and collective action of the Yellow Vests was not initiated or orchestrated by either side of the political spectrum, but became unified in their anti-government sentiment. Shared goals also indicated a necessity to communicate their grievances within the shared sites of protest, like roundabouts and streets. As some protestors inscribed on their vests - *Merci Macron, tu as ramen  la fraternit * (Thank you Macron, you brought us back fraternity) – the Yellow Vests contributed to the reshaping of social ties amongst marginalised French citizens. Weekly protests exhibited the protestors’ interference in public space and its reappropriation, all the while illuminating the socio-economic injustices and practices of state repression (Kipfer 2019, 219).

The essence of a social movement is to pose a challenge and open space to reassess the narratives formed by dominant authorities, cultural or social values. In an age where digital technologies redefined how social interaction or organization occurs, a “leaderless” movement represents a system distinct from formal organising, but is rooted in a collective, non-institutional challenge (Keshtiban et al. 2023, 23). Here, I conceptualise the Yellow Vests as a leaderless movement, in which the cohesive utilisation of online platforms and street protest ensure their political impact. Approaching the versatility of their experiences, with this research I hope to explore how have the everyday practices of protestors influenced the established

spaces of power. Given the lack of clear ideological hegemony within the movement, this dissertation also focuses on the ways in which the YV protesters negotiated and voiced their grievances with each other, and steered the movement, without a need for a centralised political core.

Such research questions align with recent contributions to the study of social movements – especially the strand of focusing on decentralised, horizontalist form of protest organising, whereby the use of space, symbols or performances are given equal political agency as any actor within the movement (Keshtiban et al. 2023, 22; Bennet, and Segerberg, 2012; 170). Interest in pluralism of experiences, as individual and yet conditioned by others, is also the basis of social critique of Michel de Certeau. Thus I devote attention to the micro-level analysis of practices and ways of contesting public spaces by the marginalised groups of society. Given the word limitation, I will highlight specific examples of practices that reflect wider concerns of the Yellow Vests. Conceptualisation of ‘space’ , and the practices of marginalised actors - known as ‘tactics’, are utilised as valuable research concepts for better understanding the evolving behaviour and logic demonstrated by the Yellow Vests in the 65 weeks of protest (de Certeau,1988; 29).

All the while exploring the unique stories of protestors, whether it be through video recordings or creative production, this body of research reflects upon the state of social dynamics in France, especially in the wake of severe economic disparities. Moreover, the relationships formed between the Yellow Vests also attest to a new strand of collective identity that emerged amongst the French commuters. By exploring the significance of this re-discovery of a sense of community, we can better understand the impact of the Yellow Vests within national and international politics. If their practices are approached as tangible acts of

resistance, and each act aims to engage those in power, then delving into the Yellow Vests how leaderless movements, albeit without a clearly defined political strategy, may become a continuum in a politically fragmented society. The use of violence, a type of protest behaviour that marked each weekly protest of the Yellow Vests, can demonstrate how movements re-emerge. This is particularly seen in this year's protests regarding pension law changes in Paris (Agence France Presse, 2023).

### *Literature landscape on the Yellow Vests*

The recent literature on the Yellow Vest movement has been primarily concerned with examining the conduct and mechanisms of the protesters as an indicator of wider structural dynamics in French politics. For scholars like Peter Wilkin, the emergence of the movement neatly reflects the contestation of global and local – with the neoliberal solutions for global issues like climate change affecting the survival of local, less urbanised communities in France (P. Wilkin, 2020; 74). Introduction of the heavy carbon tax, for instance, became one of the primary grievances of the protestors. In a televised address, President Macron justified the introduction of the tax as a dichotomy between “the end of the world” vs “end of the month”, signifying a polarised discourse on addressing the needs of the local communities, and global concerns (M. Martin, and M. Islar, 2021; 603).

The focus on structural aspects of this power contestation is also a research focus for Ljiljana Blagojevic, whose analysis reflects on the class tensions in France, and lack of appropriate intermediaries that would help broker social peace. (Lj. Blagojevic, 2021; 30). However, the Yellow Vests do not fit a typical stereotype of workers' movement, since their

mobilisation and cohesion does not depend on workers' representatives, like trade unions. Initial mobilisation of commuters and drivers was primarily the result of an online petition started by Priscila Ludovsky, and a viral video of activist Jacline Mouraud addressing Macron's lavish spending on his offices (Mouraud, 2018). In fact, the ability of 134 online groups and 286 Facebook events to coordinate the first onsite protest, shifted the need for intermediaries like trade unions, towards an online, politically encompassing coordination. (P. Morales et al., 2022; 1132).

The scholars' concern whether the YVs reflect a disputation of ideologies and political hegemony between the far right and far left is often a focal research point, however, another aspect of study emerged with protestors' reliance on the digital sphere. For instance, combining the longitudinal and cross-sectional data produced via online platforms have been used to predict whether a correlation can be made between online communication and the decision to participate in protest (Morales 2022, 1130). While the quantitative analysis reveals the patterns of participation in the movement, it does not necessarily account for the reasoning or motivations of protestors to join every weekend, nor how they perceive the movement and fellow participants. Here, the scholarship on new social movement theory and similar strands of actor and non-actor research, provides greater insight into how a movement without a clearly defined political core could be sustained and legitimised (G. Edwards, 2014).

According to new social movement theorists like Jonathan Clifton and Patrice de la Broise, if the Yellow Vests are observed through the lens of actor-network theory (known as ANT) a new degree of complexity stems from the clashes between the Yellow Vests and the police, as well as from the decision-making to occupy traffic roundabouts or attack buildings

and institutions relevant for the French elites (Clifton, and de la Broise 2020; 363). Action-network theory rests upon the assumption that both human and non-human actors resist and challenge the state-legitimised actors and non-actors.

While action network theory echoes de Certeau's attribution of political pluralities to space and actors, often stripped away from their agency, ANT can also be compared to a recent study of networked social movements (NSMs). Joan Donovan uses the approach of networked social movements in her research, since the recent decade of Occupy Movements, the Indignados Movement, and Black Lives Matter demonstrated a new feature of social movements, where social organisation is unfailingly hybrid (occurs in the digital and is enacted in the streets). Movement activists rely on Internet platforms to connect multiple individuals and groups to incentivise them and galvanise their support over a social issue (Donovan 2018). While this dissertation will not delve into a deep analysis of the use of digital, it's an essential element in the Yellow Vests organisation and facilitation of protest.

Thinking with ANT and NSM provides effective tools in explaining the heterogeneous nature of the Yellow Vests. However, the existing scholarship does not necessarily ponder deeper into the experience, and meaning behind participating as a Yellow Vest. As later chapters will show, association with the Yellow Vests oftentimes became an act with violent repercussions, as participation enabled the police forces to act without legitimate authority. A valuable research like Sophie Wahnich's examination of "critical dynamics" amongst the Yellow Vests, shows the essentialism of exploring what the protesters defined as experience, how they transform, how their gestures and acts morph throughout the year (Wahnich 2020, 856). In the emergence of a social movement, an effort must be made to address all aspects that

might influence participation, whether it be wider political oppression, or more interpersonal connections that emerge between protestors.

Reflecting on individual's experience amounts to a more nuanced perception of the Yellow Vests, stemming from the micro-level dynamics that shaped their local communities. Wahnich effectively demonstrates the political repercussions of emotion, most notably fear and outrage, by analysing the language and signs made and worn by protestors. For instance, the language exhibited by the protestors was closely related to familial relations ("Don't hit my dad", in children's handwriting displayed on the vests), to the violence they experienced by the state ("Welcome to lacrymocracy" – lacrymogene being a synonym for tear gas), and anxiety over the future of community ("Young people in trouble, old people in misery") (Wahnich, 2020; 865-867). Mapping out experiences of the YVs is essential to mapping out the motivations behind the commitment to participate in continued protest. Experiences also attest to the wider political structures and how they condition protestors' involvement and relate to higher political institutions. Bearing in mind the significance of action-network theory and concepts of 'space' and 'tactics', I outline further how this dissertation plans to explore the practices of the Yellow Vests and their efforts in developing horizontal ways of decision-making.

### ***Chapter Outline***

In order to gain more in-depth insight into the mentality and logic behind the YV's behaviour and their re-appropriation of the public space, this dissertation is sectioned into three chapters of analysis. Stemming from de Certeau's notions regarding the versatile practices of individuals, the first chapter concerns itself with establishing the notions of 'space', 'actors',

and the often unpalpable ‘tactics’ they deploy as acts of resistance, in this case, as an alternative discourse to the neoliberal ideology of the French establishment. The first chapter will also explore how de Certeau’s framework of thinking compares and interacts with other approaches in the study of the social sphere. This especially refers to the relevance of space (urban plans, buildings) in fostering a protest. The scholars’ appreciation of recent digital hybridity in organising and facilitating protests, and emphasis on the non-actors (spaces, symbols, discourse formation) allows for a more nuanced consideration of grievance negotiation amongst Yellow Vests. Moreover, it shows how can a leaderless movement engage with the elites’ spaces of power, without necessarily being able to overturn it. More practical examples how multiple practices ensured movement credibility are explored in forthcoming chapters.

In this research, I rely on a variety of visual and discourse sources : from newspaper articles, report segments, protesters’ video addresses to wider public, and video recordings of acts of protests, as well as archives of art production created by protesters. Combining the media produced by Yellow Vests not only shows how the YV were organised, but it shows the alignments and disjunctions between their goals and actions. The second chapter will focus on a discourse and visual analysis of artwork produced by protesters, illustrating how grievances were communicated to protest participants, and the non-participants, or the Macron administration. In the same way as the yellow vest used by motorists became a distinguishing feature of any protestor, analysis of art forms provides another aspect of how symbolism and depictions established a shared language amongst the protesters of different political backgrounds. Various art forms reinstated the share aims and goals without the need for a top-down authority to re-affirm them. This chapter examines how a collective identity of the oppressed is formed, and the various degrees of networks that emerge through the creative production.

Lastly, I shift focus onto a contested feature of any protest – acts of violence – and suggest that the occupation of roundabouts and takeover of space associated with French elitism gets perceived as an act of resistance amongst the Yellow Vests. Based on several videos produced by the Yellow Vests, media outlets like France24, brut, DW News, France Info and others, the final chapter shows how the protestors re-appropriated spaces of power, and perhaps mapped out new geographies, within which community-building and solidarity occurred. Additionally, this chapter notes how reciprocal acts of violence between the protestors and the police, a factor that could be divisive amongst the protestors and result in protest fragmentation, was actually negotiated amongst the participants. The clashes with the police in such instances signified a mode of communication of YV needs and grievances. Therefore, this dissertation invites a discussion surrounding the experiences and practices of the Yellow Vests, as an indicator of the potential future non-institutional and collective challenges that may arise in other fragmented societies.

## **Chapter I – Establishing the practices of a leaderless movement**

### **(Concepts & Methodology)**

When an act of protest grasps the attention of the public or political establishment, oftentimes there is a tendency to reduce the nature of the protests (or if it endures, the social movement). The actors, or protesters, are categorised based on demographic traits and political ideologies, and their grievances are determined whether to be attention-worthy, inspiring, or a potential danger to the social status quo. As a movement becomes a matter of public and governmental scrutiny, in the midst of political positioning for or against the protesters, attention is lost to the nuances of why a movement endures, and the motivation behind the decision-making process of these actors. In the case of the Yellow Vests, many aspects of mobilisation were peculiar. Evidently, the movement garnered interest from many first-time demonstrators, and relied on spontaneous appearances at roundabouts each weekend. Motivation of protestors, therefore, rested upon a shared sense of being aggrieved, a shared sense of being that political institutions have failed and no longer invoke trust.

For those situated in the upper echelons of social and political power, whether it be the media or political institutions, there is a need to determine, define, and confine a social movement. According to Michel de Certeau's approach to social critique, the normative discourse will not necessarily suffer from these 'minor' practices illustrated in acts of protest, yet through solidarity and new meaning-making, the innumerable non-normative discourses are formed and persist (de Certeau, 1988; 49). By acknowledging the simultaneous existence of multiple practices, it's evident that they are not necessarily always in opposition (so what may be perceived as 'a dubious' practice, does not necessarily seek to overturn the normative discourse). Such plurality reflects the multiple mentalities within the Yellow Vests and maps

out their practices within the public spaces. This chapter reflects on the significance of theories of everyday life for the study of social movements, especially in the case of Yellow Vest movement, where motivations and behaviours of actors are diverse. Pursuit of goals and motivations towards anti-elitism within the cities attests to the conditionality between collective action and spatiality. Drawing from De Certeau's notion of 'tactics' and 'space', and in conversation with other scholars on spatial politics, I observe how a city can become a site for the study of politics. Especially since the previously established spaces of power become re-appropriated, and multiple discourses become apparent. Lastly, this chapter offers a consideration of interdisciplinary methods, such as discourse and visual analysis, as essential tools for insight into the varying degrees of experiences, motivations and the levels of commitment exhibited by the Yellow Vests.

### *1.1. The everyday life theory and formulating the new social*

The emergence of everyday life theory occurred in a time of rapid economic, cultural, and social change that was unfolding in local and global spheres, and the nodes that illuminated such changes were highly urbanised cities. In the Western cities of the 1970s and 1980s, financial capital has grown with staggering speed. Rapid accumulation of wealth and the rise of business and trade significantly affected the urban landscape. Moreover, the restructuring of society occurring not only in the urban sphere also occurred in the previously pertinent social and cultural structures. ( J. Wills, 1994; 138) Across the social disciplines, including history, geography, and sociology, there has been an effort to account for the aforementioned social shifts. According to sociologist and proponent of ANT theory, Bruno Latour, with the newly emerged conditions existing group boundaries have become uncertain and require a devising of a new social. (Latour, 2005; 143),

While Latour might define it as uncertain, the boundaries of the emerging society actually take up an adaptive, web-like form of networks – governance, and economy are dependent on the communication of different levels of institutional decisions, where capital and information are the cogs of social organisation (M. Castells, 2000; 695). The scholars of everyday life theory like Ben Highmore share the same line of inquiry as Latour, where the social exists not solely as the material explanation of aspects of economics or behaviour, but its elusive, and diluted everywhere (Latour, 2005; 160). If research accounts for the unpalpable aspect of the social, as any practices that do not adhere to the normative behaviour, then the decisions of those pushed to the margins of the political reflect a novel form of political logic. In the case of the Yellow Vests, a micro-level approach, while still accounting for the wider context, may illuminate the worlds forged within the movement, including their sentiments, relationship-formation, and protest practices.

Moving away from the well-established ends of structural and post-structural thought, the everyday practice theory attempts to “fill the gap”, or act as a connector between catch-all concepts such as ‘systems’ or ‘logic’ (Highmore, 2001; 119). The research focus of the everyday scholars is often obscure, as the behaviours and experiences of focus subjects are unsuitable to quantify or generalise. Essentially, the occurrences of the everyday are approached with a sense of phenomenality or sensuality (most particularly, for authors like de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre) (Highmore, 2001; 117). Both de Certeau and Lefebvre offer similar theoretical tools for researching the everyday, encompassing a variety of occurrences, ranging from severe routinisation of the social, towards the enigmatic and mysticism of the social, undetermined by the normative discourse.

For Lefebvre, the significance of everyday is encapsulated in its fleeting temporality; “moments”, which Lefebvre proposes, are a snapshot and a critique of the everyday, providing versatile, and often conflicting sensations ( Highmore, 2001;120). A moment, or moments, are understood to be continuous and innumerable, but with a micro-focus on a singular, or plurality of moments which are the scaffold of the emerging social. His emphasis on the temporality and anti-staticism proves especially useful in the study of a weekly protest like the Yellow Vests, since their actions are rarely structured. Only through analysing specific visuals or re-counting their actions, can a logic and critique of the protest organising emerge.

The consequences of everyday analysis are different between Lefebvre and de Certeau, where the former is more curious how the critique of everyday can behold a moment will invert mainstream cultural values, while the latter does not necessarily perceive tensions, or ‘acts of resistance’ to be in opposition to normative discourse. For instance, Lefebvre researches the construction of festivals, as a display of radical difference to the routines and mundane of everyday life; a moment of effervescence that can fuel revolutionary fervour. If festivals represent the critique of the mundane, a parallel can be drawn with the Yellow Vests’ ability to galvanise support and participate in acts of occupation and demolition, week after week.

The actions of the Yellow Vests represent a disruption of the mundane, but as de Certeau would argue, their acts of resistance do not result in seminal social restructuring ( de Certeau, 1988; 93). Unlike Lefebvre, de Certeau’s framework of thinking permits a co-existence of difference, where those who behold power and those who experience a lack of it, are intertwined, and not disjointed. The notion of being intertwined with what could be

perceived as oppositional forces helps in considering the perpetual displays of violence between the Yellow Vests and the police forces. De Certeau, although quite elusive in his thought, provides a framework not rooted in dichotomies or inevitable overrule of discourses, but a framework where co-existence of difference might become a stepping stone in understanding emergence and dissolution of social movements, as reactionary and yet accepting of already established modes of resistance (such as assemblies, protest walks). After reviewing the distinctive approaches to the everyday study by de Certeau and Lefebvre, there should also be a consideration of how the aforementioned practices are enacted in the public spaces.

### *1.2.Mapping out the acts of resistance (tactics and space in the absence of power)*

In the studies of social movements, mobilisation of people is usually explained through exploration of wider economic and social conditions, but not of the conditions of the individual (Edwards, 2014). From de Certeau's thinking emerges the 'anonymous hero', one who remains underrepresented and erased from history, and who does not inhabit the political spheres of power. The site of research focus becomes not only the inner world of this anonymous hero, but how one relates to another hero. De Certeau traces the inner worlds of heroes by observing how they operate, the places they inhabit, and their private and public routines (de Certeau, 1988; xiv). Once a protest or a movement becomes large-scale and poses a contest for the governing bodies, the 'anonymous hero' is relinquished of the assumed passivity or political apathy becomes a site of incoherent pluralities (de Certeau, 1988; xiv).

With incoherent pluralities, de Certeau refers to often mixed expectations and ambitions of the actors, that do not necessarily want to overrun the normative discourse, but still wish to disobey it. In his analysis of de Certeau's thinking, Ben Highmore notes "acts of resistance" became a leitmotif in de Certeau's work, whereby the 'resistance' is defined as anything born out of difference or otherness to the cultural, economic, or social productions orchestrated by those in power (Highmore, 2001;151). Therefore, the following chapters reflect the parallels between the Yellow Vests and de Certeau's theory, since I reflect on how the protesters, as non-producers of cultural and economic conditions, manage to become disruptors to the normative discourse. The levels of protestors' disruption, and its consequences, are shown in their acts of occupation and choices in targeting buildings associated with French establishment.

Their resistance is reflected in the ability to control and re-appropriate the social and cultural symbols and spaces of those in power, which will be further explored in the later chapters. Yet again, an act of resistance is not necessarily an act of defiance; it simply enables those within the system to 'survive' or avoid being punished. Here, de Certeau uses Foucault's thinking regarding external power structure orchestrating the normative behaviours. (de Certeau, 1988; xvi). Ability to avoid, yet continue to provoke the Macron administration becomes noticeable in the murals and posters protestors' create, and by being mostly anonymous, the Yellow Vests avoid degrees of culpability while still probing the political authorities. While for de Certeau these acts of resistance might be unnoticeable, and 'microbe-like', their residue is clearly seen in Yellow Vests' online petitioning, video addresses, choices of roundabout sit-downs, and which streets to seize. ( de Certeau, 1988).

The two main conditions under which protesters can enact above-mentioned decisions, and which show the nature of protest practices, are aspects of temporality and opportunism. For example, the ability to seize public spaces or re-appropriate the language of those orchestrating the political, cultural, and urban landscape, requires a specific moment of the absence of power. For de Certeau, this is identified as ‘a tactic’; undetermined by laws, tactics do not completely distort existing spaces, but are essentially manipulating the spaces belonging to those in power. In the case of the Yellow Vests, this can range from graffiti, inscriptions on the vests, unofficial video productions, or disruption to traffic. What de Certeau would call “an art of the weak”, tactics present those practices and logic of the ones without the ability to determine political and social organisation.

The ones able to organise the political and the social, and the rationale behind their decision-making is known as ‘a strategy’ ( de Certeau, 1988; 49-52). As opposed to tactics, strategies generate relations and the diverse forms of political or economic rationality. Both tactics and strategies are unfolded in the sphere of the urban and digital, especially through limits imposed by police forces and the media, and in the ways the protestors manipulate their discourse. Moreover, ‘a space’ is conceptualised as a constant state of flux, where the social, economic and philosophical are interconnected. ( Wills, 1994; 137). Within the countless spaces, political practices are not perpetuated, but get morphed as time passes. Therefore, the ability of the Yellow Vests to re-appropriate public spaces might stem from the political fragmentation and polarisation of French society. By delving deeper into aforementioned concepts, versatile acts of resistance the Yellow Vests enact and the places in which they decide to occur can be better traced. Another important aspect of protest is not necessarily the collective actions, but under which spatial conditions they unfold.

### *1.3. The city as the linchpin of spatial politics*

As the concepts of tactics and spaces offered by de Certeau demonstrate, discussion of everyday practices, and by extension that of protestors' logic, depends on spatio-temporal activities. To best observe the spatio-temporal dynamics, the city presents itself as a focal point of discussion. As an operational concept, what we know as a highly urbanised, multi-million people city, becomes the site of discussing local and global contexts. For de Certeau, a city rests upon myths and trajectories framed by the ones controlling spaces of power throughout time. However, the city also becomes a place of possibilities, and especially through the act of walking, where spaces can be (mis)used by the ones marginalised from the normative discourse. ( de Certeau, 1988;93). With possibilities, the city becomes an arena of proliferation of alternative discourses and misunderstanding of practices. The very acts of protests and formation of social movement represents a challenge to the mainstream social structures, yet it still a familiar enough practice to the actors. Where temporality and structuring the social and political happens in accordance to time, routines and bureaucracy, focusing on the space provides us with a more nuanced understanding of practices of the Yellow Vests and the meaning they assigned to weekly demonstrations. Within the streets and on the roundabouts, mobility of the oppressed is localised, and they have an opportunity to form collective identities. Space limits where Yellow Vests can spread out, where they can find their own political legitimacy. Essentially, space is used as a tool of pushing back against the Macron administration simply by occupying it. Therefore, spatiality is seminal for organising and conducting a movement without a political core.

Other scholars also pin-point the city as evidence of interplay between the geographical structures and those of social relations. While de Certeau presents space in a constant state of flux, geographer and urban politics scholar, Doreen Massey, is critical of the assumed limitlessness of spaces (Massey, 1994; 121). Massey presents the space as a linchpin of social relations; it is not only constituted by the social relations, but that the social relations give relevance and constitute a space. While de Certeau often offers a space as a non-political, constantly morphing site, when applied to the concept of a city, Massey argues that depoliticisation of the realm of the spatial is unlikely (so there would never be an absence of power, for instance). For Massey, space should not be determined in the absence or lack, but a positive definition of both space and time is needed for comprehending the dynamics that unfold in the urban geographies of cities (Massey, 1994; 127). Despite the space being often considered as a site of unpalpable dynamics, Massey suggests there is an element of order in the spatial. Therefore, the actions of Yellow Vests continue to present possibilities for change to the pre-existing structures. Nevertheless, the political and cultural control exuded by those in positions of power still poses limits under which the Yellow Vests could act in (i.e. blocking off access or arresting protesters).

Alongside the theorisation of space, a question arises how a public space, especially in a city, gets claimed and by whom. In Don Mitchell's use of the notion of "the right to a city", the public space becomes a site for the pursuit of social justice (Mitchell, 2003; 233). There is a degree of dichotomy, even paradox, between the wide-open, monitored and controlled public space with the anonymity of protestors that utilise it. A public space becomes a ground for fostering relationships and enables a re-discovery of community. Moreover, Mitchell highlights that the social processes that occur in the public space also upset the pre-conceived spatial forms, ordained by the urban planners and ruling political structures. In this dissertation,

by relying on aspects of action network theory, Mitchell's concerns are amplified; the Yellow Vests were incentivised to utilise public spaces initially through technological enactment of grievances, and form loosely linked networks. A sense of solidarity and identities as Yellow Vests were only possible with the consistency of protest, and rapid growth in the scale of protest. In order to account for various paths the Yellow Vests' have taken with the movement, and the reasons for participating, an interdisciplinary approach maps out such multitude of individual decisions.

#### *1.4. Acts of resistance through visual & discourse analysis*

For the duration of the Yellow Vest movement, two strands of visuals have been formed. The one seen on the streets, which included neon-yellow vests, street demonstrations that often followed with demolition of the places. Another one was virtual, that relied on the narrative formed by cameras, smartphones, circulation of live addresses and posts on social platforms. The nuances of organising the Yellow Vests could best be explored by the use of visual analysis. With the use of images or video production, protestors' exhibit their knowledge and reliance on older cultural symbols, and often manipulate the mainstream meaning of them. (della Porta, 2014). Reception and decoding of such images ( in the second chapter, this is illustrated by murals) varies, and in the different interpretations by the participants and non-participants lies the political and social legitimacy of the Yellow Vests.

By devising statutes of image production, Monique Sicard points out that the artists' production reflects commitment to the movement and desire to act politically. The digital also becomes a place to fabricate a new telling of history, and form new symbolism, and power to

steer the Yellow Vests movement down multiple paths (Sicard, 2021). Visual analysis provides a foundation for the following two chapters, where artwork is approached as a mode of resistance, and the geographical spread of the protesters offers a contestation of spaces of power. In analysing digital photos, archives of artwork, videos from France 24, DW News, alternative media outlets like Brut., and YouTube, this dissertation rests upon a plethora of examples that should indicate the individuality of actors, their motivations, and how they communicated with one another.

In order to better understand the gravitas of produced visual material, I reflect upon the language used in the cases of slogans, speeches, website and news snippets. For studies of social movements, relying on methodological pluralism can best attest to the heterogeneity and often contradictory behaviours of the Yellow Vests (della Porta, 2014; 7). Through discourse analysis, we can better understand the historical and political re-appropriation of terms by the Yellow Vests, and how certain phrases can be understood as an example of de Certeau's tactics; meanings and allegories against the French establishment that belong only to those wearing the vests. As part of a linguistic turn, actors become "signifying agents" who actively interpret grievances and define goals, rather than passively carry out messages (Lindekilde, 2014; 196). Such critical approach to discourse analysis aligns with the heterogeneous nature of Yellow Vests, and can assist in understanding modes of communication that are established.

Through following news websites, inscriptions on walls, speeches of Yellow Vests, a deeper understanding how movement texts draw on existing discourses and how such texts are re-shaped based on who the audience is. Moreover, discourse analysis corresponds to de Certeau's theorisation, since it is founded in micro-sociological analysis of the everyday

interactions and tends to refer to the wider structures of the social. In this research, discourse and visual analysis are utilised to trace concepts such as tactics and space negotiation in the range of experiences and everyday practices of the Yellow Vests. With an interdisciplinary approach, a snapshot of the reasons why people joined the movement, and how it was sustained for 65 weeks, can be provided.

## **Chapter II – Art forms as modes of resistance**

For the duration of the Yellow Vest protests, the public attention has primarily been diverted towards instances of protest violence, whether it be ransacking of buildings or clashes with the police. Although a movement without a centralised decision-making apparatus, the actions of the Yellow Vests rested upon two patterns: each Saturday, public protests were arranged ( named Acts by protestors and labelled as such in the media) ; and occupation of toll gates on highways and roundabouts at the peripheries of cities and towns. ( D.Shultziner et al., 2020; 536) While much of the literature on YV correlates the production of art as political acts during periods of protest, a more in-depth analysis of the artwork's significance is left unexplored. For instance, visual symbols like yellow vests become pivotal in ensuring movements' recognition and outreach.

This chapter, primarily relying on empirical evidence from Getty Images, online archives like Alemy, blogs, and images used in news cycles, maps out several aspects of protesting for the Yellow Vest movement. Here, I make correlations between the messages and symbolism found in the graffiti inscribed around the places Yellow Vests led their protests. Alongside the murals near localities frequented by the protestors, such as 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, and live dance performances during the violence of police forces, I offer the anonymised, yet

far-reaching mode of communication amongst the Yellow Vests. Most of the artwork evoked historical and political symbolism in order to disseminate and reaffirm the message not only to the protestors, but also to the national and international audience ( della Porta, 2014; 5). Moreover, selected art forms indicate a sense of shared struggle, especially an anti-government sentiment. However art forms present an effective, non-violent practices that ensured the Yellow Vests have political credibility and did not require a representative; art is an individual representation, yet indicates commonly shared sentiments.

### *1.1 Commonly used symbols in the Yellow Vest movement*

Before delving deeper into the political significance of artwork produced during the Yellow Vest movement, one must reflect on the symbolic impact of the yellow vest itself. On October 24 2018, before Act I came to fruition, Ghislain Coutard from Narbonne released a video addressing the public to join the motorists protests, and place a yellow vest on the dashboard as a sign of solidarity ( Sky News, 2019). As Sophie Wahnich points out, the yellow vest becomes an effective tool of communication – it is about becoming visible, and audible, and an indicator of siding with the impoverished and struggling protestors. (Wahnich, 2020, 858). The yellow vest, part of the required kit of any driver, soon transpired its initial role. As Le Monde reports, its simplicity and inexpensiveness enabled the protestors to become “ a visual spectacle” ( Le Monde, 2019). Part of the visual captivation was to differentiate themselves from the elite, and to re-affirm their grievances and severity of carbon tax for their livelihood. Wearing a yellow vest permitted the police to do quick searches, limited access to blocked-off areas. The vest conveyed a message of ‘a threat’ or ‘ a perpetrator’ to the public order, which will allowed the police for easier targeting; more will be discussed on the yellow vest violence in the next chapter.

The political consequences of wearing the yellow vest and invoking its symbolism were felt both nationally and internationally. For instance, Jean-Luc Melenchon as the leader of the La France Insoumise, left-leaning political party and in opposition to President Macron, wore the yellow vest inside the National Assembly as a sign of protest to police brutality against the Yellow Vests (Brut., 2018). On an international scale, similar yellow vest movements against austerity and the cost of living emerged in countries like Croatia, Germany, Canada, the UK, Spain, Serbia and similar( de Cilia, and McCurdy, 2020). Therefore, the yellow vest become a leitmotif in any form of art production, as it distinguished between participants and non-participants, it also indicated association with a movement strongly against the political institutions currently governing France. The vest symbolised non-exclusionary participation, and an easy tool for large scale mobilisation without a need of centralised political campaign.

### *1.2. Graffiti as tactics and mode of communication*

In a movement that depends on spontaneous and continuous attendance for political recognition, the Yellow Vests had to establish versatile ways of communicating and re-affirming their goals to each other. As an art tool often utilised in critiquing the normative discourse, I suggest graffiti could indicate just how the protestors perceived their opposition. It provides a sense of shared grievances that would resonate with the participant, and reach out to non-participant audience. According to Jeffery Juris, mass protests prove a building ground for intense feelings, and often times to oppositional identities to be structured and displayed. (Juris, 2008; 65). While its impossible to analyse the messages behind the multitude of graffiti that so quickly emerged ( and quickly disappeared), in the following examples, I convey some

general sentiments that rest upon anti-elite sentiment, class struggle, and acts of solidarity among the Yellow Vests.

Focusing on graffiti as mode of message dissemination is closely related to the choice artists make in choosing the locality for their artwork. The following figures are created in spaces with high-volume of people mobility, and in close proximity to the governmental spaces of work or social life. For instance, Figure 1 shows two graffiti inscribed at the closed commercial store on Champs-Elysees avenue, one of the hotspots of the movement action. (Guillot, 2019). The particular focus shifts towards the inscription on the right, “ *Eh bien, donnez-leur du biocarburant!*” Brigitte Macron. Depending on the translation, the graffiti essentially says “ *Well, let them have biofuel – signed Brigitte Macron ( wife of the president)*”. Biofuel can be associated with the pressures that amounted with Macron’s imposition of the



Figure 1- Graffiti on Champs Elysees Avenue, November 2018

carbon tax, and the Yellow Vests inability to afford items like biofuel. During Act 2, on November 24, 2018, the police began to use tear gas and water cannons to disperse protestors, sparking the first clashes of violence between the Yellow Vests and the police. ( France 24,2018). This graffiti emerged in the days after. The phrase alludes to a well-known cultural and linguistic phrase associated to French revolution – Marie Antoinette’s “ Let them eat cake”.

In both cases, Brigitte Macron, and Marie Antoinette, as wives of the unpopular leaders, are shown to be clueless and deaf to the suffering of the people.

Drawing from historical contexts, artists through simple phrases weave shared sentiments of aggrievance, a sense of polarisation and socially differentiated society, not far from the one that began a seminal event in French history in 1789 (Sicard, 2021). Thus, the participants of protest effectively utilise the space to disseminate information about their grievances, and sign-post reminders of their goals to other participants.



Figure 2 Graffiti at Rue Arsene Houssaye, March 17, 2019

Although the targeting and violence towards the commercial and high end stores will be further discussed in the next chapter, the importance of localities should be noted for the production and dissemination of messages, created by anonymous actors. In reference to Jonathan Clifton's stance that correlation between human and non-human entities foster change, we witness here the non-actors ( i.e. shops, facades, and location) evoke a particular role of an agent for the Yellow Vest movement ( Clifton, and de la Broise, 2020; 368). As Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate, the phrases such as "*No mercy for bourgeois*", and "*Let us consume until the end of the world*" echo the foundational principles under which the Yellow Vests initially gathered – anti-elite and anti-globalisation sentiments. (P. Charmorel, 2019; 49).

The graffiti therefore, serve as a form of reinstating the goals of the movement, without having to select a leader or spokesperson that could engage the non-participants. Associating the graffiti to Certeau's tactics, art production also becomes a covert challenge to governmental authorities.

Moreover, graffiti can be closely associated with what de Certeau understood to be contestation of space – the inscriptions appeared in front of stores frequented by those that were unaffected by the rising costs of living, by those occupying the seats of political power. The inscriptions like the ones in figures 2 and 3, without an accountable individual that can be



*Figure 3 Graffiti at a commercial store, March 2, 2019*

apprehended, present a tactic of a horizontally organised movement to become visible, and collectively challenge authorities and display dissatisfaction with social and economic disparities. Similarly to graffiti, but with a more complex message dissemination, the Yellow Vest artists also produced murals that caught the attention of media and government authorities.

### *1.2. Murals as tactics and assertion of credibility*

The murals present a captivating and image-reproducing opportunity for the movement,



Figure 4 Pascal Boyart, “Liberty leading the people” January, 2019

but they also show how the protestors relayed to each other the important markings of the movement. The mural in figure 4 is a creation of Pascal Boyart, an associate with the Black Lines movement that produced a 100 meters fresco series following a theme of Yellow Vests ( 20 minutes, 2019). Boyart offers a modern take on Delacroix’s “Liberty leading the people.” In this image, Liberty leads a new wave of French revolutionaries, ones that are masked up against the polices’ tear gas ( Louvre, 2023). Here, Boyart gives the Yellow Vests with a historical and revolutionary dimension. By doing so, the actions and continuous protests of Yellow Vests are given historical significance, as the ones who will bring about the change for better conditions; instead of being protestors who destroy and ransack, their actions are legitimised and justified as actions of historical significance (Sicard, 2021). Thus murals become a visual tactic, since they openly contest the behaviours and actions of those in power, and how they might frame the actions of the Yellow Vest.

Another political dimension of this type of image production becomes apparent when prominent movement figures become depicted. Figure 5 shows Belgium artist Magic with Jerome Rodrigues standing in front of a portrait of Rodrigues ( 20 minutes, 2019). Rodrigues built his name for passionate anti-elite, yet pacifist speeches. On January 26, 2019, Rodrigues was blinded by a crowd-control grenade. As a prominent figure of the Yellow Vests, Rodrigues's eye loss serves as a reminder of the police brutality against the protestors.



*Figure 5 Magic, "Portrait of Jerome Rodrigues", February 2019*

Selecting him as an image subject re-affirms the Yellow Vests' need to protest, especially since protests must highlight acts of police brutality, and governmental oppression. Although this mural may covertly express it, the easy recognition of Rodrigues conveys the same message to the wider public, the media, and participants of the movement. Since the movement did not have leaders or consistent spokespeople, portrayal of recognisable figures is used to garner support and cohesion amongst the protestors. Therefore, graffiti and murals often reflect general sentiments shared amongst the Yellow Vests, whether related to romanticisation of the movement, anti-government sentiment, or scorn towards armed police forces (I. Bergem, 2022; 301).

Lastly, some murals directly mocked the responses to the Yellow Vests from the Macron administration. Figure 6 presents a caricature of President Macron angrily facing a yellow wave. As part of the Black Lines movement mural sequence, it is a direct critique of Macron's attempt to suppress the movement, and shows his perceived inability to do so. We see elements such as 'grand debate' to be his rescue vessel, with police officers with crowd



Figure 6 Black Lines Movement, "Macron facing the Yellow Wave", 2019

repellent weapons at his feet. All of it is insufficient in fighting off the yellow vests. These elements could be understood as elements of critique towards Macron's attempts to negotiate and appease the public. Macron's efforts such as public town halls, and stalling on the carbon tax imposition were met with severe distrust or disbelief on the side of the protestors (rFi,2019). Given the elements depicted, a mural becomes a direct message to the governmental bodies, that negotiation over Yellow Vests' grievances will not be done on his terms, and will be difficult to achieve. Through murals, therefore, it becomes apparent how artistic practices of the Yellow Vests challenge the governmental credibility, re-affirm the goals that initially brought the protestors together, and a shared sense of grandiosity regarding their political motivation. While image productions pool from generalised sentiments shared amongst the

Yellow Vests, observing performances that were held during protest gives us insight into individuals' choice of practice within the movement.

### *1.3.Dance performance as tactics and tracing experiences of protest*

Alongside the use of graffiti, another mode of communication that had effects in both the public and digital spheres, were the video recordings of various art forms and performances held during Saturday's protests. Protestors' yellow vests became accompanied by a variety of pamphlets, props and artistic creations associated with French history and politics. As scholar of performative politics, Jeffery Juris argues performances have the ability to evoke emotion, and yet create verbal and non-verbal messages for mass consumption ( Juris, 2008; 65). For instance, wearing inscriptions of the national anthem on their vests, or Marianne's hat ( as personifications of the French Republic) or paper-mashed figures of Macron, the Yellow Vests engaged in a series of performances. Visual symbolism effectively re-instates the marginalised groups back at the centre of French history and society, and as such, challenges the social and economic inequalities deepened by those occupying seats of power. Through covert and indirect messages, the Yellow Vests establish recognisable symbols and modes of communicating with each other, regarding their goals and grievances without the need for a defined manifesto.

Furthermore, creative production that rests upon body movement provides a dimension of spatiality to the movement. Observing how dancing can occur on the streets highlights how the Yellow Vests behaved within spaces of power controlled by the government, and which practices they might have adopted. An illustrative example of this are the works of Nadia

Vadori- Gauthier PhD, a performance artist with background in dance, visual arts and performance art. In her videos, Gauthier demonstrates how performance can be situated within multiple acts of protest, and how maybe an unconventional mode of communication within the movement can cause differing reactions amongst fellow protesters.

In a video recording of Gauthier's dance during one of the Saturday's protest, we can identify some of the common conditions of protest that the Yellow Vests faced. The protest becomes a stage, where the dance highlights practices and actions of protestors unfold in the background. The recording, compiled of ten individual dances from a Saturday's protests shows the Yellow Vests' versatile reactions. Some were indifferent, others entertained, some were inappropriate towards Gauthier, and others who would join in. ( Gauthier, 2018). The visual significance for practice analysis comes in the moment when protestors get tear-gassed; it illustrates a sense of solidarity and camaraderie amongst protestors. The abrupt stop to dancing also reflects that the practices of the protestors, whether they be conventional protesting or more artistic, were still controlled and limited by the French government.

Here, dance becomes an alternative, non-verbal way of strengthening the incentives to protest; it's a way of demonstrating support, but the 'unusual' movement also highlights the interlink between spatiality and acts of protest. For instance, how the protestors occupy and position themselves in the streets, whether they over-crowd each other, or changes in their movements when targeted by the police. Without a clearly defined political core, the decisions to breach spaces of power are often spontaneous, and non-tactical. Therefore, practices that the Yellow Vests adopt during protest are often a mimicry of one another, and relying on one another in determining appropriate protest behaviour ( Lindekilde, 2014; 200). Furthermore,

Gauthier also documented her day as a participant of the protest, and present us with a microcosm of the practices the protestors had to enact as participants of the movement.

“Accompanied by my friend Laurence who watched over the camera, I did 10 dances. Three in the morning, when the police prevented yellow vests from accessing the Champs-Élysées. A fourth, past security checkpoints. Three on the Champs-Élysées, as protesters ran to escape tear gas. I remember the image of an elegant old man, dressed in a worn raincoat, probably living in the avenue and who seemed to be taking his Sunday walk among the demonstrators, as if nothing had happened. Around 2 p.m., I went to take shelter in a café on rue Lafayette..... the atmosphere was an amazing mix of everydayness and urgency. People were filming with their phones. While I was dancing the Starbucks to my left was attacked, then had to run for cover. I was stunned by the hose and gas. I decided to quit.”

( Extract taken from accompanying video description, Gauthier, 2018)

Gauthier’s account illustrates several differing practices during the time of protests. Blockades and restrictions on the free movement are imposed on the protestors, limiting the spaces where they could act or challenge spaces of power. The account reflects on whether the use of force by security forces is legitimate, and the ability of such strategies to dissuade further protest. Moreover, Gauthier reflects on the paradoxical sentiment, as we have seen in the cases of the murals; the protests gathered attention of ordinary people and placed them in an ‘atmosphere of urgency’. However, her account also shows the division between the participants and non-participants of the movement, whereby those unaffected by the cost-of-living crisis simply proceed with their own everyday practices.

Guthier was certainly not the only performer or recorder of the Yellow Vest movement. Artistic performances essentially provide an alternative lens into the formation and conduct of protest and capture the inter-relations between the protestors. Therefore, focusing on creative production as acts of resistance provide us with a nuanced language that is used in disseminating the shared goals of protest. Art becomes not only an indicator of the general sentiments amongst the protesters, but also reflect on individual’s practices and perceptions of the power struggles at hand. Art production illuminate non-violent practices which can prove

a long-term challenge to established political institutions. More importantly, the localities under which they are created also attest to the political dimension of art practices, as they either provide affirmation to the protest, or taunt and attempt to influence contested authorities.

### **Chapter III – Occupation and acts of violence as modes of resistance**

The non-institutional, horizontally organised nature of the Yellow Vests has been particularly emulated through acts of roundabout occupation and clashes with police forces. While analysis of various art forms signal the more intangible ways in which political power can be challenged, the movement also became associated with more overt practices of violent behaviour. By March 2020, around 4000 Yellow Vests were injured with permanent disfigurement, 8700 were placed in custody, and 390 were serving prison sentences; amongst the protestors, 12 people lost their lives (J. Troian et al 2020; 1173). Although rarely accounted for, such injuries and persecution come with significant psychological consequences and lead to perpetuation of violence. As the following protestors' videos show, each week's Act was based on repetition of same violent practices, including setting fires to objects and buildings, being teargassed and attacked with non-lethal weapons, and clashing with the police. Yet despite the disruptive and violent practices of a group of the Yellow Vests, these practices did not lead to a visible rift among the protesters in a form of a counter-movement.

The final chapter focuses on the more visible displays of power struggle between the Yellow Vests and the French government. Violent practices that transpire covert tactics, the protestors openly engage in spatial condensation, whether by targeting French monuments or places inhabited by French elites. I also account for the alternative modes of resistance to violence, but which also illustrate a degree of absence of political power. This is seen in cases of the occupation of roundabouts and Yellow Vests' women gathering. Given the perpetuality of violence between the two oppositions, a question arises regarding the state of French democracy. If a place of democracy allows for "spaces of mobilisation", where citizens have a right to assemble and protest, use of violence demonstrates signs of autocratic traits in French

governing. ( Mena et al. 2018; 572). I consider the Yellow Vests as emerging expressions of a radical form of democracy ( horizontal, bottom-up cooperation), but which still have to abide by the structures of representative democracies ( Mena et al. 2018 ; 580). Video recordings produced by the protestors serve as a foundation of this chapters' analysis, since they reflect the versatility of practices and behaviours that occurred, and how they evolved, during the Yellow Vests' Acts. This chapter also pools from reports and news segments from media outlets including France 24, DW News, France Info, and Le Monde, in order to show which actions became known as defining for the trajectory of the movement.

### ***1.1.Occupation of roundabouts and emergence of a collective identity***

In the continuous occupation of roundabouts and highway tolls, the Yellow Vests had one of their most successful collective action that effectively disrupted French social order. In fact, it is not surprising that the first instances of organising the protester occurred on the roundabouts. As an innovative strategy, roundabouts serve as a place not frequented by those in power, as nodes of geographical connections. They were widespread, autonomous and unsupervised, making them ideal for averting from police violence ( Pauline Trouillard, 2022; 508). Roundabouts were closely associated with the primary grievance of the Yellow Vest protests- that of the introduction of carbon tax - since the taxation directly affected the mobility of workers, and the relationship between the rural and urban parts of the country. As sociologist Jean Viard pointed out for France Info, France is a society conditioned by mobility. Interestingly for Viard, the people who occupied the roundabouts did not necessarily gather on the basis of joint class struggle, but primarily as drivers, and 'as people, found each other.' ( France Info, 2020) By distilling the significance of class, Viard echoes principles of the new social movement theory whereby the notions of identity, cultural values, and ways of living are

the primary motivations for mobilisation (Edwards, 2014). Thus the roundabout presents a place of formation of collective identity, and where a sense of shared practices and local-level organisation can occur without an imposition of a general movement agenda.

Indeed, the participants of the Yellow Vest movement tended to identify as the oppressed, or as the ones without a say in democratic decision-making (Chamorel, 2019; 60). By being spontaneous and autonomous, gatherings at the roundabouts exhibited traits of an ‘alternative’ order. According to Sixtine Van Outryve, the roundabout embodied a site for socialising, sharing experiences, welcoming newcomers. For a leaderless structure, it was also a practice of assembly and organised political conduct (Outryve, 2023). I have observed several videos produced both by news media outlets and protestors themselves at the roundabout. For example, in the protestors’ address after the Act XII protest illustrates Outryve’s ideas regarding the emerging structural and institutional traits of the movement in a localised site (Gilet Jaunes Community, 2019).

Sheltered underneath an improvised booth, the protestors all read parts of the speech, instead of designating a spokesperson. The speech primarily resonated the anti-government sentiment mentioned previously, sending a message that the “leaders should be shaking on their pedestal.” However, the Yellow Vests do not associate this threat with acts of violence, but that the Macron administration should be concerned over the protestors’ ability to come together, “learn to respect one another, and learning together.” Moreover, the speech touched upon their desire to create popular assemblies with local representatives of Yellow Vests sub-divisions, instead of relying on the government to listen and consider their shared grievances (Gilet Jaunes Community, 2019). Therefore, the Yellow Vests who didn’t opt for acts of ransacking

or acted in violence like other participant did during the protests in cities, they often exhibited efforts of institutionalised and alternative order in decision-making. For such occurrence, their practices rested upon creation of solidarity, and working on establishing local levels of influence.

The media portrayal of the YV's weekly Acts was oftentimes unfavourable to the movement, yet the representation of protestors that occupied roundabouts was relatively sympathetic. For instance, in France 24's segment on "What do the Yellow Vest protestors want?" there is a sense of relative calm, suffering of the protestors due to harsh living conditions, and that despite it all, a new community emerged at roundabouts – a non-space – where there are no specific nodes of political or social power at play. ( France 24, 2019). For example, the visuals of police clapping as a sign of support of a finished day of protesting. The videographer captures how the protestors share food, make coffee together and build a shared sense of community. Some Yellow Vests open doors to their impoverished homes; as nurses and contract workers, they struggle to keep the lights on. Interviewees reflect a new-found sense of community. As the scenes show, the harsh living conditions become associated with their practices during the protests.

Virgine, a nurse, wondered whether the protestors would show real solidarity, " Between races and religions, it's the united fronts we always wanted to see." In another case, Clement draws caricatures on the vests; he reflects on the need to return to local-centred community: " loss of contact since the small shops and bakers have been replaced by chains." Yet at roundabouts, "you become friends in 2 hours", and " many talk of the 6<sup>th</sup> republic, so something needs to happen." ( France 24, 2019) .These statements reflect seminal outcomes of the Yellow

Vest as a movement : the importance of a collective identity in the times of high polarisation in society; the gentrification trends that deepen socio-economic rifts and alienation within French society. It reflects a sense of purpose, and correlation with revolutionary efforts, but that the protestors can only have organisational impact on a local level. The Yellow Vests have the ability re-build solidarity and social networks amongst commuters. However, this relative media sympathy underlines an important distinction between the degrees of geography and political struggle. For instance, contestation of space at a roundabout is not a significant blow to those orchestrating social and political institutions as it would be a proximate challenge to their institutions like in the case of occupation of Arc de Triomphe or gatherings in front of Ministry of Interior.

### ***1.2.Ransacking buildings and contesting spaces of power***

The images and videos that circled the world and captivated international audience predominantly involved acts of violence committed by both the Yellow Vests and the police. One of the pivotal events for the portrayal of Yellow Vests nationally and internationally became the protest actions that occurred during Act 3, on 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2018. While many came to march peacefully that day, certain groups broke into the police's parameter around Arc de Triomphe and Champs Elysées avenue. In the video filmed by a protestor and reports produced by France 24, the use of tear gas suggested governmental concerns over their breach into a space controlled and financed by the French elites. Protestors shout, and cars are set on fire as the groups move towards Arc de Triomphe. Without an organisational structure, the protestors distort to looting and destruction. This will influence the future portrayal as they challenged the normative discoursed posted by the French political institutions.

In France 24's segments, the camera takes note of the dug-out cobble stones that were thrown at the police; graffiti of "Yellow Vests will triumph"; and inevitably, the camera shifts to the internal destructions of Arc de Triomphe. The damages done later were portrayed as "apocalyptic scenes", according to the Supreme Court, "invaluable, 1 million euro worth of damages", "delinquents that stamped out the fire commemorating the unknown soldier." (France 24, DW News, 2019). The words of condemning their actions and presentation of a threat show that the sympathy to their struggles gets diluted in the discourse formation, and now only present a threat to the social order. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, around 10 people were sentenced to serve 10 years in prison, with no previous criminal record. The report acknowledged they were not the main instigators of the takeover of Arc de Triomphe. (France Info, 2019). Again, this was a pivotal moment for the Yellow Vests, and their further relationship with Macron's government and police forces. Arc de Triomphe is a beacon of French history – of their losses in the World War I and of the days of French Empire; essentially, a symbol of French values and culture. (Low et al, 2012).

The ability of the protestors to take over such a monument presents a direct contestation of a space of power previously ordained by those in positions of political and social power. As a direct challenge, therefore, the Arc de Triomphe presents an un-authorised space for their gathering and mobilisation. As Mena would note, without the ability to gather in front of the monument, limits to the emerged aspects of radical democracy have been imposed. (Mena et al., 2018) The takeover of the Arc of Triomphe also determined the peculiarity of the Yellow Vests, and that was the difficulty to be dissuaded by the use of tear gas and other weapons of crowd dispersal. After this, the Yellow Vests goals transpired the grievances regarding the standards of living, to also illuminate the severe issue of police brutality that was present in France.

The sheer size and ability of Yellow Vests to act violently influenced the media portrayal of the groups, but it also encouraged violent behaviour towards other spaces associated to elitism. The Yellow Vests set fire to Fouquet's, a well-known restaurant where the likes of Nicolas Sarkozy and Emmanuel Macron dined; they broke front stores of luxury shops down Champs Elysee, or they fork lifted into walls of Societe Generale Bank (Line Press, France Info, 2018). Such cases again reinforce the anti-government sentiment shared amongst the Yellow Vests. Moreover, as Clifton's use of communication and actors demonstrate – the luxury shops become the non-human actants that are meant to constitute the legitimacy of the Yellow Vests, and make them visible to the general public( Clifton, 2020; 366) . However, the scale of the violence became a rather sporadic and unpredictable, although it was not entirely condemned by the non-participants or local residents ( Le Monde, 2019). In their actions, we see the impact of a lack of centralised political core – the protestors result to actions with no expectation of political consequence, but are acted on sporadically and incoherently. However, in their incoherence, they evoke emotionality, in both the protestors and non-participants.

In the less favourable media, like DW News or France 24, the scenes were sensationalised as “ unrecognisable streets of Paris”, with “ trucks flipped and set on fire” , “traffic lights rooted out.” ( DW News, and France 24, 2019). Moreover, the practices that exhibited violence and destruction had a dual effect on the rest of the Yellow vests, and the non-participants. Many luxury shops, including tourist hotspots like the Eiffel Tower, Museum d'Orsay were closing and blocked off on Saturdays with “ fears of fresh violence “, as certain media outlets reported (France 24, 2019). The discourse formed reflects potential of severe dangers from the Yellow Vests, and their actions run course in making them exclusionary and

without support. However, amongst the Yellow Vests who do not necessarily engage in violent behaviour, there is an understanding, and a degree of legitimacy given to the use of violence in order to react and take over spaces of power where the state ‘resides’. The goals of the movement end up being more relevant than the practices each of the protestors deploys.

Indeed not all practices of the Yellow Vests in relation to opposing the government were violent. In fact, the movement initially comprised predominantly of women. In several instances women held their own protest against the use of violence, and called for a focus on the initial grievances. In the reports produced by EuroNews and France 24, women are photographed wearing Marianne’s hat, singing the Marseillaise and with yellow balloons in hand. ( France 24, and Euronews; 2019) In their statements, women turn the governmental discourse of the protestors as trouble-makers and threats, and instead remind the wider public of their identities – “ as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, and sisters of all citizens, our anger is legitimate” ( Euronews, 2019). Thus by reinforcing their own narrative as ordinary citizens for whom the government does not take care of, the women legitimise the acts of protest. In news produced by France 24, another woman re-affirmed the romanticisation or the historical dimension attributed to the Yellow Vest protest – “ Revolution started with women who couldn’t feed their starving children anymore”. Thus violence amongst the protestors is seen primarily as reactionary – to an extent towards the police brutality, and to the irrevocably dire social and economic conditions. Through their non-violent practices, women effectively communicated the causes of their struggles and yet they still did not delegitimise or undermine the actions of other Yellow Vests, who engaged in looting and burning.

Therefore, acts of violence enacted between the Yellow Vests and police forces have manifold effects. The violence attest to the lack of organised and centralised political core, since instances of ransacking are often sporadic and incoherent. Yet, these are reactionary to the socio-economic struggles they continued to face, and reflect on the frustration with inability to communicate their grievances with those controlling political institutions. The practices such as violent behaviour are direct attempts to influence and challenge the areas where those with political power inhabit, or associate their status with.

## Conclusion

The Yellow Vest movement captivated the national and international attention for its peculiarity of being politically ambiguous and without a defined political core. It belonged to countless citizens who were commuters and drivers, and for whom the introduction of a carbon tax in 2018 signified a further deepening of their social and economic disparities. The significance of this movement for the wider debates on populism, grassroots organising and social movements is found in the movement's heterogeneity and ambiguity and in the plurality of their decision making. Most importantly, the Yellow Vests not only attest to the ability of continuous protest without a centralised political core, but they echo the importance of local-level building of collective identities in the time of great political and social polarisation.

In this dissertation, I set out to explore instances of how the everyday practices of protestors might have influenced the well-established spaces of power. One cannot attest to innumerable practices that unfolded on the daily basis, whether it be campaigning, drafting up letters, posting online, assembling, looting, attacking, or sharing acts of kindness. This dissertation sought to delve deeper into the practices of several art forms, and into understanding the decision-making behind the choices of violent behaviour. Another important aspect of understanding their everyday practices also included researching the ways in which the Yellow Vests voiced their grievances with each other and the wider public, and how perhaps those grievances were negotiated and re-affirmed.

As a foundational framework of thinking, notions developed by de Certeau in relation to better encapsulate ordinary citizens' motivation have proven the leading thread of this dissertation. In thinking about the presence of dominant discourses, and the undercurrent practices that may seek to challenge it, French society becomes perceived as an arena of pluralities, in which those with political and social power seem to still orchestrate the distances in which marginalised groups can go to. 'Tactics', and 'use of space' broadened the discussion about structural dichotomies, to that of pluralities. Oftentimes the decisions of the Yellow Vests may be incoherent or contradictory, but they still operated under a certain logic and reflect individual's frustration and fears that come from living in disparities. If the scholarship on social movements expands their research focus into the sphere of non-actors ( such as public spaces, symbols, language use), then the decision-making and mobilisation of the protest reaches into more unpalatable ways of undermining the authorities, and pre-conceived norms of behaviour.

Understanding the use of symbols and visual imagery allows us to unearth multiple realities of the Yellow Vests movement. For some, the Yellow Vest gatherings related to excruciating costs of living; for others, the struggle transformed into highlighting acts of state oppression and police brutality. In the second chapter, this dissertation offered an overview and three possible sites where message and meaning making can occur. The exploration of graffiti and murals, most of them now existing in digital forms and are only disseminated online, reconfirmed how important the use of space can be in re-asserting the grievances and goals of a movement without a political core. Due to a lack of word count, I had to limit the analysis of dance performances to a singular recorded performance, but I would hope this becomes a further strand of analysis within research exploring actors and non-actors in construing a movement. Recording performances positions the performance as 'a disruption' to the 'disruption' ( i.e. the act of protest). Performances not only highlight the verbal and non-verbal

messages, but also show how protestors relate to the spaces they aim to control, or simply utilise.

The use of visual analysis and aspects of discourse analysis also assisted in contextualising the instances of violence exhibited during the weekly protests. In the final chapter, I suggested the clashes with the police were not only reactionary and resulted in often negative portrayal in the media, but protestors' acts of violence also indicated their ability to challenge the spaces of power where political and social institutions rested upon. Violence, a usually divisive practice, was still seen as legitimate, although not practiced by all the Yellow Vests. The final chapter reflected upon how protestors, with their tents and weakly constructed sheds, mapped out new geographies of the roundabout and facilitated a creation of a new strand of collective identity. In fact, the sentiment of hope and new-found community has been a distinguishing point amongst all practices explored in the dissertation.

The Yellow Vests enable us to explore multiple strands of social and economic structures – a case study of political dynamics, a case of interplay between global issues and local struggles – there is a plethora of research questions left to be explored. However, I can only hope that even deeper insight into the experiences and motivations behind the participation of the Yellow Vests can be conducted, whether through a different method of fieldwork research or interviews with the participants. With that in mind, more individualised aspects of being a participant in the Yellow Vest movement, and how a leaderless movement might arise and survive, could become apparent. For now, I can only hope this dissertation is a small contribution to the conversations regarding horizontal mobilisation of ordinary citizens, and whether leaderless movements become a standardised form of protest in the challenge towards oppressive authorities.

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