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Yellow Vests: Anti-austerity, pro-democracy, and popular (not populist)

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In the context of neoliberalism and its consequences for the economy and for democracy, this article offers a distinct framing of the political nature of the French “Yellow Vests” (*Gilets Jaunes*) movement. Fundamentally, the movement should be understood as a popular and radically democratic response to the growing social inequalities of top-down austerity governance. The movement, which began in 2018, was spontaneous, autonomous, and decentralized, made up primarily of loosely connected citizen networks and popular committees not bound by political affiliation, social class, or age group. Responding to the neoliberal policies of the government of President Emmanuel Macron, symbolized by an unpopular fuel tax, the Yellow Vests quickly developed into a wide-ranging movement with diverse forms of action and organization. Despite a carrot-and-stick response from the government, the movement continues to the present, though its impact was greatest in the first year, which is the focus of this paper. Difficult to classify, we understand the Yellow Vests as an instantiation of “popular politics”, or an atypical social movement, primarily defined by and significant for its ardent anti-austerity and pro-democracy positions. The movement is only misleadingly labeled populist or associated with populism; there is a collective intellectual awakening of political consciousness, with participants and supporters articulating their structural dispossession and setting out to strengthen their common good through collective action and more direct democracy, not through party politics or existing institutions, nor through charismatic leadership or other forms of centralized or top-down politics. The Yellow Vests therefore signify the prospect of democratizing democracy, or re-democratizing democracy, in the face of the legitimacy deficits of neoliberal governance.

KEYWORDS

Yellow Vests, *Gilets jaunes*, neoliberalism, austerity, social movement, populism, democracy

Introduction

Since the 2008 global financial meltdown, popular movements protesting economic inequalities have become more common. Bread riots in many countries of the Global South led into the Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011, followed quickly by the Occupy Wall Street movement across the Global North. Anti-authoritarian, anti-austerity, anti-police brutality, and anti-vaccine-mandate protest movements have made headlines in recent years. Despite many differences between them, online networks have been common resources for these new movements, and economic grievances have often been central. The “Yellow Vests” movement also emerged through digital mobilizations and channeled economic anxieties into real-world collective action. More distinctly, the Yellow Vests not only protested the neoliberal order but also enacted radically democratic alternatives for engaging with and transforming the state (even if the political and economic impact has been limited to date).

The Yellow Vests' repertoire of action was expansive, including occupying traffic roundabouts, weekly Saturday demonstrations, breaching of highway tolls, blockading refineries and transportation hubs, and holding public meetings such as workshops, assemblies, and "assemblies of assemblies". The Yellow Vests demanded a range of reforms, with a primary emphasis on rolling back austerity measures and implementing more democratic modes of national governance. These have been their core demands and they are the focus of this paper. Concerns about climate change have also been prominent, highlighted in slogans such as "For a social, fiscal, and environmental justice" and "End of the month, end of the world, same fight" (CHN Staff, 2018; Mehleb et al., 2021). Some individuals in the movement have supported anti-immigrant narratives, though xenophobia does not characterize the large majority of the movement (Higgins, 2018; Challier, 2019). For its scope and diversity, the movement has often eluded categorization and elicited competing and sometimes contradictory interpretations (Kouvélakis, 2019; Ravelli, 2020). Yet analysts agree that the Yellow Vests are one of France's largest and most sustained protest movements in decades.

This article examines the direct links between the neoliberal agenda and the Yellow Vests, focusing on the anti-austerity and pro-democracy characteristics of the movement. Studying the Yellow Vests means understanding the legitimate socio-economic grievances of large segments of the population, their collective forms of action and organization, and the authoritarian repressive measures. The Yellow Vests are therefore a call for help from populations haunted by precarity and excluded by an undemocratic ruling class. They are endowed with a strong animus against French President Emmanuel Macron, who is viewed as the face of neoliberalism, or, more specifically, the source of the austerity policies they oppose. For these reasons, in order to understand the Yellow Vests, neoliberal economic conditions should be foregrounded. The popular movement embraces direct democracy and demands it at scale as a means of checking and reining in the neoliberal state. There is no intent by the movement to enter or take over existing party and state institutions, and from this perspective, the populist lens is not helpful, as we elaborate. Rather, the expressed sentiments of the movement should be taken seriously, not in appeasement of an irate minority or a menacing right-wing movement, but as a genuine critique that offers clues to a more equitable society and a more inclusive government, not only for France but for much of the world struggling under 21st-century globalization.

This article addresses the following question: what is the political nature of the movement of the Yellow Vests? According to our view, beyond its heterogeneity, the Yellow Vests are a popular, anti-neoliberal, pro-democracy movement, an engine of potential for confronting and changing an increasingly corrupt establishment. Our analysis relies on literature review of scholarship, newspaper articles, surveys, and reports available in the public domain. We do not offer new data or original field research to the study of the Yellow Vests, though we offer new perspectives and formulations that clarify the democratic significance of the movement in the context of 21st century globalization, with implications for theory and policy.

The article is divided into three parts, beginning with a brief examination of the context of neoliberalism, understood as the dominant ideological and political matrix generating austerity

and repeated social crises. Next, we define the Yellow Vests movement, including its origins, organization, and demands as well as the political and police responses to it. In the final section, we address contending theorizations and attempt to answer the question of the political nature of the Yellow Vests movement. Our aim is to disclose and reinforce a view of the movement that has been too often misconstrued and marginalized by dominant establishments in politics and political thought, especially in the English-speaking world; that is, we spotlight and deepen analysis of the model of the Yellow Vests as a radically democratic remedy to neoliberal subjugation.

Austerity politics: The neoliberal context

This section examines neoliberal austerity governance as a condition for the possibility of the Yellow Vests movement. We focus on neoliberalism as an economic and political governance philosophy; we are concerned with neoliberalism as austerity policy more than neoliberal notions of individuals acting entrepreneurially and globally. As the "dominant ideology" (Bihr, 2011, p. 43)¹ of the day, neoliberalism must be interrogated for its complicity in extreme global wealth inequalities. Fewer and fewer people control more and more of the world's wealth and resources. For increasing numbers of people, neoliberalism is experienced as a mode of exacerbating economic inequality (Théret, 1991). The 2007–2008 global financial crisis heightened these trends and revealed the limits and dangers of neoliberal capitalism and the impotence or capture of state control over macro-economics (Kotz, 2009; Orléan, 2013). According to the World Inequality Report 2022, "The richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5% of it [...] Global wealth inequalities are even more pronounced than income inequalities. The poorest half of the global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth" (Chancel et al., 2021, p. 10). Financial markets today seem to hold supreme power (Giroux, 2021). To understand Yellow Vests movement, we must understand the social costs of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a late 20th-century variant of capitalism, an economic ideology with political implications and associated policies (Steger and Roy, 2021). To maximize efficiency and economic growth, the neoliberal program advocates generally for the deregulation of the economy, along with liberalization of trade and industry and the privatization of public enterprises. While professing a puritan commitment to the logic of markets, liberated from state planning or intervention, neoliberalism tends toward large-scale corporatism and monopolization. In turn, those powerful private interests are able influence regulation in their favor. Ironically, for its dependence on regulatory and jurisdictional concessions from the state, as well as for relying on state security and enforcement mechanisms, neoliberalism in fact rests on aggressive state interventionism (Lequesne-Roth, 2009, p. 222; Stokink, 2017, p. 2). For Romaric Godin, neoliberalism can

¹ French-language quotations in this paper are translated into English by author Perrier with the help of online translation tools and indicated by italics.

be cynically framed as enlisting the state in service of capital (Cargoet, 2019). The state apparatus in its power of administration, regulation, and control is quite simply exploited by the proponents of the commodification and financialization of the world to the benefit of the market economy and to the detriment of labor codes, public services, and social protection systems. The application of this ideology results in a rupture of the social contract between rulers and ruled.

People experience neoliberalism in the form of austerity measures. These can be defined as “a set of economic policies aimed at containing or reducing the share of public expenditure in economic activity” (Borriello, 2018). Austerity can concern various aspects of the state: increased taxation, freezing wages, reducing unemployment benefits and other social services, and privatizing public sectors. Austerity has widespread social costs, including stagnating or suppressing living standards for most of the population and increasing poverty. In order to sustain growth in transnational economic and financial sectors, neoliberalism often requires states to “tighten the belt” among the general population, even if such austerity generates social crises. Austerity measures erode the purchasing power of average consumers, especially the lower classes and most precarious. France has been subjected to neoliberalism for several decades, and the dogmatic application of its economic precepts continues to lead to social protests. Studies have linked austerity to protests across Europe (Sabucedo et al., 2017), and France has been considered “the social-movement country par excellence” (Grossman, 2019, p. 31).

In France, 1983 marked a turning point. Elites of the left under President François Mitterrand rallied to the dogma of neoliberalism already applied previously by the right. After that, neoliberalism advanced at cruising speed through successive governments. In 2010, in response to the 2008 crisis, the political will emerged to scale back pensions. The population of France experiences in particular inequalities in terms of wealth and income: “All the possessions of the poorest 50% represent only 8% of the total wealth, while at the other end of the social scale, 1% of the richest French people concentrate 17% of the wealth” (Durand, 2018). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, inequalities have worsened since the crisis: “The 10% of people with the lowest incomes suffered the crisis more severely. Their income has fallen by 1% per year on average” (OECD, 2015, p. 1). In addition, the report states that inequalities have increased due to the use of “non-standard jobs, i.e. temporary contracts, part-time and freelancers”. In short, France has become impoverished.

Emmanuel Macron became President of France in May 2017. His ideology has been described as neoliberal (Mouffe and Blin, 2018) or ultra-liberal (Durand, 2017) or even “illiberal”, for the extreme measures it has taken to enforce its ideology (Fassin, 2017). Indeed, neoliberal structural reforms seemed to be “the main, if not the only objective of the Macron five-year term” (Amable, 2021, p. 275). In June 2017, the French Court of Auditors recommended to the government “unprecedented” expenditure cuts (Cour des Comptes France, 2017) in order to meet European commitments and in particular the 3% rule (the proportion of GDP that deficit spending should not exceed). Even though it had tax-exempted the movable income of the wealthiest social classes, the French government decided to reduce Personal

Housing Allowance. This measure, justified by the government’s desire to save money and reduce public spending, would impact 6.5 million beneficiaries, including 800,000 students (Le Monde, 2017). France has since intensified the privatization of public companies, a policy deemed “neoliberal poison” (Attac, 2020, p. 10). According to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE, 2019), the number of people living below the poverty line increased from nearly 8.8 million in 2016 to 9.2 million in 2019. Students, single people, and single-parent families are among the hardest hit. Some critics dubbed Macron “President of the Rich”, and he was regarded as a neoliberal enforcer, as well as a corrupt figure.² In the spring of 2018, thousands of bikers and other motorists organized disruptive protests via Facebook “Anger” groups (Sénécat, 2019) in opposition to unpopular speed-limit reductions on certain roadways, which the government claimed would improve safety and reduce pollution. Other explicitly “anti-Macron” groups also predated the Yellow Vests movement.

More than economic costs, neoliberalism threatens democracy itself (Caré and Châton, 2016). The unpopularity of austerity measures often requires states to bypass democratic channels. For example, the French government invoked article 49.3 of the Constitution on February 29, 2020 in order to push through controversial pension reform without a vote. As Thibaut Rioufreyt writes, “Neoliberals aim to restrict both the principle and the scope of popular sovereignty so that it cannot challenge the spontaneous order of the market” (Rioufreyt, 2021, p. 134). According to some authors the economic rationality specific to neoliberal ideology has overtaken democratic principles. According to Wendy Brown, the economic rationality of neoliberalism has become a “governmentality”, a set of techniques, practices and values of power that have superseded democracy (Brown, 2018). Brown highlights the undemocratic drift of the state when it rescues private banking institutions but seems to sacrifice citizens at the altar of austerity. The unprecedented mobilization of the Yellow Vests reflects the feeling of helplessness in the face of the neoliberal state. But the Yellow Vests also caught the attention of the neoliberal establishment and caused it to react, even threatened it. Symbolically, perhaps, the French executive quickly prepared a helicopter to exfiltrate the president from demonstrations on Saturday, December 8, 2018, to avoid confrontation with the Yellow Vests.

In short, neoliberal austerity policy is the point of friction between, on the one hand, the financial and sovereign debt crises, and, on the other hand, the French social crises of economic angst and democratic deficit. The Yellow Vests movement cannot be understood outside of this context. Neoliberal austerity and its champion in the Macron presidency are the very condition of possibility for the protest movement, shaping its forms, practices, and demands, as we shall see.

² For example, a presidential corruption scandal known as the Benalla Affair emerged in the summer of 2018 and contributed to widespread distrust of the executive branch (Chamorel, 2019, p. 50). For an overview of the many controversies of Macron’s five-year term, see Ama Koffi (2021).

The Yellow Vests movement

Having contextualized neoliberalism and austerity politics, this section examines the emergence, characteristics, and agenda of the Yellow Vests movement, as well as the state's authoritarian responses to it. This examination leads into an assessment of the political nature of the Yellow Vests and the different ways it can be theorized.

Origins and overview

The *Gilets Jaunes* or Yellow Vests movement debuted on Saturday, November 17, 2018, about 18 months into the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, catching most analysts and politicians off guard.³ The movement derives its name from the standardized reflective yellow safety vests regularly donned or displayed by participants, which were widely available since a 2008 law required every motor vehicle on the road to carry them. The high-visibility vest became a movement brand for large numbers of people experiencing economic anxiety and political marginalization. It symbolized a call to action and a cry to be seen in the face of undemocratic austerity policy. The Yellow Vests movement popularized the now iconic vest as a symbol of protest, though earlier movements had utilized them as well, for example, in early 2018, in demonstrations against a disruptive new Paris-Rennes high-speed train line.

The Yellow Vests movement arose in reaction to economic stress and resentment of state policy perceived to be exacerbating those stresses. These grievances can be traced back in online discussions and networking months prior to the movement's explosive debut in the streets.⁴ The Yellow Vests repeatedly decried that millions of people lived in poverty in a supposedly rich and developed country. With a sense of abandonment, many participants and supporters saw a "need for a new social regulation of capitalism" (Piketty, 2019). In the words of one Yellow Vest, "The Republic [...] is privatized by a minority [...] Authority is no longer subordinated to the sovereignty of the people, but to the power of the Market" (quoted in Redaction, 2019). More particularly, the uprising concerned the question of the valuation of work and the issue of spatial and social mobility (Spire, 2019). People rallied because their household budgets, already tightly constrained, were

set to worsen under deliberate government policy (Blavier, 2021). The stagnation of living standards and the increasing costs of living, and in particular an announced increase to an existing carbon tax on fuel, are regarded as triggers for the movement (Boyer et al., 2020; Mercier, 2020). The scheduled rate hike to the environmental tax on fuel would impact the residents of semi-urban and rural areas for whom the use of automobiles was essential, especially for work commutes (Collectif, 2019b). The government appeared to be financing its ecological transition policy on the backs of the most precarious car users and exempting the big polluters. "The Yellow Vest movement", therefore, "objected not to environmental-protection policies as such, but rather to the imposing of their costs on those less able to bear them" (Chamorel, 2019, p. 51). In addition, only a small part—19%—of the revenue was actually allocated to the touted ecological transition fund.

The fuel-tax increase turned out to be the "final straw". Frustrated citizens began calling for a day of action. Videos posted and shared on Facebook contributed to the momentum of the call and created a snowball effect. A viral Facebook page entitled "National blockade against the fuel increase" ("*Blocage national contre la hausse du Carburant*"), created in October, 2018, by truckdrivers, called for a demonstration against the price of gasoline to take place at Porte de Bercy in Paris on Saturday, November 17, 2018, the date that would mark movement's debut. Organizers pointed out the lack of public transit in rural areas and the dependence on cars to get around. Independently, some "fed up" and "rant" style videos also appeared online, many going "viral" with millions of views. One denounced the "tracking of drivers" through the imposition of a tax at the entrance to large cities, while another proposed a general mobilization and a stoppage of the country on November 17, while another launched the idea of displaying the yellow vest on the dashboard of vehicles as a "color code" of support for the planned demonstration (Coutard, 2018; Mouraud, 2018; Pelerin, 2018; RTBF with AFP, 2018). Numerous Facebook pages also appeared under various names to promote the initial event and the momentum of the movement.

The day came, and unprecedented demonstrations swept much of the country. More than a quarter of a million people took to the streets, disrupting the normalcy of daily life and captivating national and international news media. Maximizing their visibility and complementing their reflective vests, demonstrators occupied traffic roundabouts, which became sites of daily presence and weekly demonstrations. Shacks and support structures were established, debates took place, decisions were made collectively, and actions were coordinated. This set of practices became the basis for what many regard as exemplary of deliberative and direct democracy (the democratic aspects of the movement will be discussed further in subsequent sections). Yet in mainstream political discourse and news media, the movement was often reduced to unruly mobs and vandals, and the police responses tended to be disproportionately violent (the violence of the movement is considered below in the subsection on repressive measures).

Backed by numbers in the streets, the Yellow Vests took on the power structures of state and society and achieved a small but significant victory on December 4, 2018, just a few weeks into the movement: the government postponed the implementation of the fuel-tax increase for six months, and then, one day later,

3 The movement's emergence was not entirely unpredictable. For example, during the 2017 budget debate, an environmental senator from Loire-Atlantique, Ronan Dantec, warned that a massive out-cry against the carbon tax could emerge from those who live in semi-urban areas. In addition, in the summer of 2018, the National Commission for Public Debate (NCPD) published a report in which it informed the state of the strong feeling of social injustice in the distribution of energy transition costs and the ineptitude of exonerating the largest polluters (NCPD, 2018, p. 18). The government was therefore aware of the risks of increasing austerity measures.

4 Opposition to tax burdens and automotive speed-limit reductions already existed on Facebook. An influential petition "For Lower Fuel Prices at the Pump!" ("*Pour une baisse des prix du carburant à la pompe*"), launched in May 2018 on [Change.org](https://www.change.org) and addressed to the Minister for Ecological and Solidarity Transition, drew hundreds of thousands signatories (Ludosky, 2018).

canceled the planned increase altogether (France 24, 2018). The tax itself, however, persisted, along with the myriad of other neoliberal structures burdening the population. In this sense, the first phase of the Yellow Vests movement may be deemed a partial success: it achieved a focal demand—stopping the tax hike. With broad popular support, as we shall see, the movement also generated political pressure for the government to take action, and so led to other modest achievements. However, though one of France's largest and most sustained protest movements in its history, most of the Yellow Vests demands were not met, and its actual impact on economic conditions remains minimal.

Yet success can be measured in other ways as well. The Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 in the United States did not achieve any significant demands (indeed, the Occupy movement generally refrained from making specific demands), though it has been widely credited with drawing public attention to the injustice of wealth inequalities and for politicizing a discourse around it. The Yellow Vests has had a similar effect as well, drawing attention to ongoing inequalities and compelling political discourse to address it. For example, “everyone knows better, thanks to the “yellow vests”, the list of injustices committed by the current government [...] An exorbitant tank of gas, an even more fussy automotive technical control, and everything is brought to the surface” (Halimi, 2019). More, the movement made visible the violence latent in the structures of neoliberal politics. It has unmasked a façade of democratic consent and legitimacy by exposing the violence inherent in the system. By forcing that violence to take direct form for all to see, the Yellow Vests have revealed coercive and undemocratic tendencies of the neoliberal state, arguably unmasking an authoritarian core.

Following the first momentous weeks of the movement, regular participation rates declined from hundreds to tens of thousands, ebbing and flowing over the coming months until the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic put a freeze on the movement, after more than 70 Saturdays of protest. The movement resumed later in the fall and has continued to make the news in the months and years since then, responding to the national mood and political events. For example, the imposition of vaccine mandates in 2021 and Macron's re-election in 2022 both prompted surges of people back into the streets, with many demonstrations brandishing the yellow vests and familiar methods and messages. It remains to be seen what impact the war in Ukraine will have on the movement, exacerbating costs of living, especially the price of fuel. The details of the post-2019 period are beyond the scope of this paper; instead, our focus is on the first year of the movement, considering its dramatic appearance and significant impact on French politics.

Geography, demographics, public opinion

While the Yellow Vests movement was marked more by diversity than by homogeneity, in terms of culture and political affiliation, as this section recounts, there are some important commonalities and shared experiences among participants and supporters. For example, the movement is organically rooted in the countryside and smaller municipalities, and in opposition to the major cities, evincing a stark town–city divide. Geographer

Christophe Guilluy characterizes this as “a confirmation of the confrontation between peripheral France and metropolitan France” (quoted in Bastié, 2018). The historian Vermeren recalls the territorial and economic divide between the French metropolises which represent 50% of the production of wealth even though they represent only 5% of the territory: “The popular classes have been abandoned by the elites of the metropolises” (France Culture, 2021). Following the geographer Jacques Lévy (Institut Kervégan, 2018), the movement of Yellow Vests above all reveals a problem of vulnerability and exclusion, not exactly *poverty*, which is rather concentrated in the centers and suburbs of the largest cities. The common ground of smaller suburban and rural discontent was equally a sense of widening inequality, frustrated expectations, and perceptions of diminished living standards and corrupted democratic representation.

Beyond these regular features of the movement, the identities and backgrounds of participants varied widely (Sebbah et al., 2018; Collectif, 2019a; Gilets Jaunes et al., 2019). Surveys completed by 526 members of Yellow Vests Facebook groups identified the strong presence of workers and employees, the unemployed, and a strong female presence (L'Humanité, 2018). A larger survey of several thousand people who identified with the movement revealed that the majority of Yellow Vests had a job (57%), many were pre-retired or retired (21%), and a smaller minority were unemployed (11%) and fewer still were post-secondary students (3%) (ELABE, 2019). The movement also mobilized thousands of high school students, shutting down more than 150 high schools in December with mass walkouts (Le Monde, 2018).

The political leanings of the movement cannot be neatly pinned down by left–right categories. A quantitative survey carried out by an online questionnaire from 300 Facebook groups determined that 60% of Yellow Vests questioned were not neatly situated on the left or the right of the political spectrum (Collectif, 2019a). The early momentum of the movement was initially boosted by right-wing networks, but the movement could only misleadingly be labeled as far-right. According to one reporter,

In three weeks of interviewing scores of Gilets chosen at random in the streets of Paris, in other cities such as Rouen, and in small towns around the capital, I found not one who fit this profile—not one supporter of the National Rally or Marine Le Pen, not one who mentioned Jews, or expressed hatred of immigrants or Muslims, or whose ideas of governance could be remotely described as “illiberal” (Ketcham, 2019).

To the extent that some analysts characterize the movement “illiberal”, the antagonism is directed at the “ultra-liberal” policies typified by the Macron government, a liberalism that has abandoned “fraternity” (Pabst, 2019), or what we have been calling neoliberalism. Importantly, this has not entailed a turn to statism or authoritarian leaders. Reconciling the left and right wings in the movement without a leader or party has certainly proven challenging, but from the beginning, there has been a relatively non-partisan convergence on popular opposition to the status quo (Hayat, 2022). Surveys indicate that low standards of living were the main concern, followed closely by feelings of injustice and social exclusion (ELABE, 2019). In his analysis of the sociological characteristics of the movement, Alain Bihl observes

the presence of a “*multi-class composition*” with proletarians, lower layers of management, craftsmen, auto-entrepreneurs, nurses, small employers. What do they all have in common? “*These are all victims of the austerity policies practiced by all governments for nearly four decades*” (Bühr, 2018). Stepping back, Balibar assesses the Yellow Vests movement as “*a representative sample*” of what the French population “*is becoming*” (Balibar, 2018), signifying a condition that is increasingly the norm for more and more people.

In addition to its diverse constituency, the movement also enjoyed strong support of the French public. A survey published December 5, 2018, showed that 72% of French people supported the movement (Misrachi, 2018). In January 2019, more than 4,000 artists and intellectuals signed a petition of support for the movement (Reporterre, 2019). The Yellow Vests were most supported by the electorate of Marine Le Pen (ranked on the far right) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (ranked on the far left) at 87% and 83% respectively. According to research by Statista Research Department (Statista Research Department, 2019), it is noted that the support and sympathy curve was at its maximum for the first month of protests, with 70 to 75% of the population expressing support and sympathy. At the end of April 2019, the rate still reached 50% (Statista Research Department, 2020). As historian Gerard Noiriel points out, “the feeling of injustice is one of the most powerful affective springs for mobilizing individuals. This is also one of the reasons for the popularity of Yellow Vests in public opinion” (Noiriel, 2019). It is worth noting, of course, that the Yellow Vests have also been controversial and often criticized in the public sphere; for example, “*It’s time for the Yellow Vests movement to end*”, stated an editorial economist (Seux, 2018).

Organization: Informal and democratic

Organizationally, the movement lacked formal or centralized structure, and it operated outside of conventional institutions, independent of established parties and other official organizations; even labor unions had little to do with the movement (partly because establishment institutions were regarded with suspicion by the movement, and partly because the feeling was often mutual). Lacking hierarchical command, the Yellow Vests became a “big tent”, hosting not only diverse political sensibilities and identities but also different approaches to gathering and organizing. Yellow Vests groups and various associations were created in villages, towns, and departments (sub-national regional jurisdictions), many with their own distinct approaches to organizing and decision-making. Independent media stamped “yellow vests” also appeared and hundreds of Facebook pages illustrated the diversified channels of the movement. The Yellow Vests were loosely organized, multimodal, and *ad hoc*. Early on, the town of Commercy, which became known for its leadership in organizing, released an influential video on November 30, 2018, urging all supporters to create local assemblies or popular committees (Boncompagni, 2020), which were already fast becoming the norm.

On the whole, the movement was remarkably democratic. Though lacking formalized structures, and though quite different from conventional models of representative democracy, the Yellow Vests clearly practiced deliberative democracy and direct

democracy (the latter also known as radical or participatory democracy). In Balibar’s characterization, the Yellow Vests decried “*the bankruptcy of representative politics*” and proposed an alternative “*based on the self-representation (and therefore the presence in person) of ‘outraged’ citizens on the public square*” (Balibar, 2019). Of course deliberative aspects of the movement, involving dialogue, information sharing, and consensus building, played out extensively online, across social media platforms and digital communication networks, but deliberation also took place offline in the real world. The direct democracy of the movement, in which participants not only communicated and shared messages but also made decisions and undertook direct action in real time, happened primarily at hundreds of occupied roundabouts and other public sites, as participants formed assemblies and committees on the ground. Many analysts have explored various aspects of the Yellow Vests’ democratic mobilizations around the roundabouts (Monod, 2019; Zancarini-Fournel, 2019; Ravelli, 2020; Develennes, 2021). Far from being without any organized form, the movement of yellow vests enacted many flexible and community-based democratic devices: classic general assemblies, voting, more or less regular meetings, informal and horizontal deliberative practices. Shaped partly by reactive opposition to the authoritarian state, which was understood to be top-down and pyramidal in power structure, the Yellow Vests enacted the antithesis: a horizontal, inclusive, participatory association.

Yet, crucially, the Yellow Vests also incorporated some vertical or nested tiers of organization. Delegating upward into higher committees, steering committees, and other regional bodies, made it possible for the Yellow Vests to coordinate and make decisions at larger scales, including the national scale. As such a steering mechanism and one of the movement’s most notable innovations was the Assembly of Assemblies (Dreano, 2020; Ravelli et al., 2020; Jeanpierre, 2021), where different Yellow Vests groups converged in a specific place for a few days to deliberate demands and agendas. Attendees were delegated by election at local assemblies. The Assemblies of Assemblies—there would be several held in different locations over the course of the first year—were spaces of dialogue and sharing of experiences and practices. They have been described as “*an autonomous and enduring collective force of Yellow Vests on a national scale*”, exploring “*paths of a concrete, anti-racist and feminist anti-capitalism*” (Ravelli et al., 2020).

The first Assembly of Assemblies was held in late January 2019 in Sorby-Saint-Martin, a village near Commercy, with 75 delegations present. Attendees characterized themselves and their goals: “*Who are we, the yellow vests? A popular movement, emanation of the people in its diversity. What do we want? Live with dignity, without being afraid of tomorrow*” (Hennequin and Kempf, 2019). An appeal was adopted that contains additional insights into the movement: “*We have risen against this deeply violent, unjust and unbearable society [...] 26 billionaires own as much as half of humanity, that’s unacceptable [...] With our yellow vests, we speak again*” (Assembly of Assemblies, 2019). In April 2019, the Saint-Nazaire Assembly of Assemblies brought together delegates from 200 local groups and 800 people in a self-managed “House of the People”. Their mission statement recognized a need to escape from capitalism and insists on “*horizontality*” (Kempf, 2019). The assembly was structured on thematic debates in working committees and a plenary assembly. It produced specific reports,

a general summary, and final votes. In June 2019, the Montceau-Mines Assembly of Assemblies brought together nearly 700 people and 232 delegations (Guittou-Boussion, 2019). Debates were structured in a more egalitarian fashion, into small groups so that more individuals could express themselves. Written summaries of the discussions capped the process. Priorities included, for example, supporting a referendum on the privatization of Aéroports de Paris. The assembly's final declaration called for a "convergence of struggles" to end the presidential quinquennium and the Macron regime. A majority also voted to affirm the need to exit capitalism (Guittou-Boussion, 2019). Assemblies of Assemblies were also held in Montpellier, November 2019, Toulouse, March 2020, and in Ile-de-France, June 2021.

In short, Yellow Vests have practiced radically democratic organization, loosely combining horizontal modes (lateral networks of committees and assemblies), with more innovative *bottom-up* verticality and decision-making processes (delegating to higher committees and Assemblies of Assemblies). This democratic ethos constitutes a cornerstone of the movement and prefigures its calls for a more democratic French state.

Demands: Economic and political

At its core, the Yellow Vests movement demands fair living standards, working conditions, unemployment support, and political representation. In late November 2018, Yellow Vests organizers collaborated to issue a press release with 42 demands (L'Obs, 2018). Several themes are explicit, including purchasing power, social policy, taxation, democracy, economy, public services, and immigration. The demands include quite specific progressive demands: end homelessness; more progressive income tax; minimum wage at 1,300 euros net; support for small shops in villages and town centers, and "big ones should pay big, little ones should pay little". The list also included the "end of the austerity policy" with the following clarification: "We stop repaying the interest on the debt which is declared illegitimate and we start repaying the debt without taking money from the poor and the less poor but by getting the 80 billion from tax evasion". This clear and practical language avoids the discourses of identity, racism, illiberalism, and conspiracy theorizing that have sometimes been associated with the movement. The Yellow Vests also wanted the restoration of the solidarity tax on wealth, the abolition of which was considered a tax injustice, a demand that was refused by President Macron on December 5, 2018.

Among the most prominent demands of the movement is the call for institutionalizing direct democracy through a proposed "Citizens' Initiative Referendum" ("CIR" or acronym "RIC" in French) (Evangelisti, 2021). This would put a wide range of governance matters directly to the people of France through case-by-case and issue-by-issue plebiscite. The CIR could take several forms, including four main ones: legislative referendum to vote for a law; abrogatory referendum to repeal a text of law; recall referendum to dismiss a political representative; and the constituent referendum to revise the constitution. Some authors believe, moreover, that the constitution of a state should not be written by powerful elites but by the citizenry through direct

participation and constituent power (Goupil and Matalon, 2018). For the political scientist Marlière "the Yellow Vests express above all a radical criticism of the regime of political representation" (Marlière, 2018). The Yellow Vests want to "get rid of the oligarchic elements relating to political representation to keep only the democratic elements" (Bedock et al., 2019). Circumventing the institution of representation is one way to achieve this. Through the CIR, the representative and parliamentary system would simply become limited by the intervention of a new democratic branch. The National Assembly would no longer monopolize the general will. The popular initiative would allow the body of citizens to exercise legislative power jointly with the representative institutions.

Support for the CIR was enshrined in the "People's Directives" document sent to MPs by certain groups of Yellow Vests at the end of November 2018 (Lehut, 2018). The directive reiterated the calls for the "end of the austerity policy" and for the inclusion of a popular referendum in the constitution, along with a proposal that the people could directly propose legislation, given a certain threshold of signatories. In addition, it was also proposed to return to the seven-year term for the President of the Republic, in order to break the automatic alignment of presidential and legislative elections and thus allow the voice of the people to be heard in the interims.

The CIR proposal not only signified the radically democratic proclivities of the movement but also provided a focal point to unite the Yellow Vests around a single and far-reaching political reform, although it remains an ideal with little traction inside established parties and institutions.

State response: Carrot and stick

The political response involved gestures of accommodation and modest concessions. On December 10, 2018, the government announced a wide range of ameliorative measures estimated in the billions of euros (Élysée, 2018). President Macron declared an "economic and social state of emergency" with the expressed goal of bettering the conditions of the French working class. In particular, the project contained the cancellation of the increase of the carbon tax, as already discussed, plus the payment of the employment bonus, and the cancellation of the rise of the "CSG" (generalized social contribution) for small pensions between 1,200 and 2,000 euros per month (Élysée, 2018). The proposals were incorporated into law later that month. At the same time, the president also declared a "Great National Debate" (Bennani et al., 2019) with terms set by the executive, focusing on "taxation and public spending, the organization of the state and public services, the ecological transition, democracy and citizenship", and was to last two months. The organization of this great debate, a form of "procedural concession" (Lamy, 2019) partially achieved the government's strategic goal of taking over the modalities of discussion in the public sphere. The president concluded the process with a press conference on April 25, 2019, announcing a decline in income tax and the reindexing of small pensions on inflation but maintained the decision to suppress the Solidarity tax on wealth and refused the introduction of the Citizens' Initiative Referendum. These half measures were not enough to extinguish the social fire.

Law enforcement was far less compromising. The policing strategy had focused on zero tolerance for public disruption. The Yellow Vests were described as rioters of extreme violence by the state services (Bourdin, 2019; Le Monde, 2019).⁵ These emphases seem exaggerated. The movement was almost entirely peaceful, considering the organizing and demonstrating outlined above, and it was always unarmed – no guns or bombs – but expressions of violence were also not uncommon, including particularly vandalism and clashes with police (Shultziner and Kornblit, 2020). Nonviolent disruptive actions, like blocking roads, were sometimes classified by the state as violent. The most infamous act of violence of the movement involved vandalism of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. In order to crush the “violence” of the Yellow Vests, the police unleashed massive state force. The journalist David Dufresne documented the repressive force from November 2018 to May 2019, recording two deaths, 24 lost eyes, five hands torn off, and 325 head injuries; there were 19,000 “sub-lethal” concussion cannons fired (in French, “Lanceurs de balles de défense” or LBD), and thousands of stun grenades and tear-gas canisters (Dufresne, 2020). Victims who lost eyes were not only Yellow Vests but also unfortunate passers-by AFP France (2019). The Streetpress newspaper reports the figures of the Ministry of Justice (early July 2019): there were about 11,000 detained by police, nearly 4,700 cases referred to the courts and just under 50% of cases immediately heard, nearly 3,000 convictions handed down (one third of which received prison sentences of between a few months and three years), and among them, about 440 warrants of committal. Regarding the police repression suffered by the movement, researcher Della Sudda recognizes that “demonstrations of ‘yellow vests’ were marked by a strategy of maintaining order in Paris based on confrontation and the use of force against participants” (Della Sudda, 2020). Fillieule and Jobard also recognize the police tactic of “nassage” or kettling, corralling demonstrators to lockdown their mobility within a small confined space (Fillieule and Jobard, 2020, p. 78–80). In addition, most of the structures erected by the Yellow Vests around the roundabouts were destroyed by public authorities.

One of the goals of the extreme police and legal responses was to disrupt the movement. It is not clear what effect the heavy-handed response had on the movement’s momentum, however. The gradual decline and periodic disappearance of mobilization is due to several factors, including electoral cycles which played “their usual role of stifling social movements” (Framont, 2019) as well as usual movement fatigue. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that the French government exercised repressive authoritarian measures, according to definitions offered by scholars of authoritarianism (Planel, 2015; Glasius, 2018; Fautras, 2019) against the Yellow Vests. According to Della Sudda, for example, “Numerous testimonies of people intimidated, searched, arrested, or threatened attesting to the worrying restriction of the freedom to demonstrate show a ‘permanent state of emergency’

⁵ For example, Laurent Nuñez, Secretary of State at the Ministry of the Interior, emphasized: “scenes of riots, urban guerrillas and that the 10,000 people who were present in Paris on the Champs-Élysées were people who were there to fight it out. Yes, there were individuals from the ultra movements, they were there, but we also had extremely radicalized yellow vests” (Bourdin, 2019).

[...] The judicial treatment reserved for ‘yellow vests’ confirms this analysis, giving the feeling of a particularly severe ‘class’ justice for the working classes” (Della Sudda, 2020). In their response, the French government seems to resemble Palheta’s notion of the “neoliberal-authoritarian state” (Palheta, 2018) or Godin’s notion of “authoritarian democracy” (Godin, 2019). Despite some violent expressions of protesters, the French Government’s policing policy has been the subject of serious criticism by defenders of civil liberties. Yellow Vests have also received some form of international “support” from the UN, Amnesty International, and other organizations. Out of 372 official proceedings initiated against the police, there have been very few disciplinary actions taken against police officers, and some have even been decorated (Pascariello, 2019). For Gunthert, “the visibility of police violence contributes in a fundamental way to the unveiling of the authoritarian drift of regimes confronted with the crisis of neoliberal capitalism” (Gunthert, 2020). In part, the movement’s outbursts of rioting and vandalism can be understood as reactions to the disproportionate violence meted out by the police (Wahnich, 2019).

Having considered the movement’s background, organization, and demands, as well as state responses to it, this paper turns now to the more analytical question of how to think about the movement.

Theorizing the movement

The Yellow Vests movement is a sociopolitical mobilization that appears atypical for its disparate expressions and constituents. We agree with Devellennes, the Yellow Vests have invented a new type of social movement that has challenged the dominant form of the social contract between the rulers and the ruling class (Devellennes, 2021). While Kouvelakis cautions that the phenomenon is both “overinterpreted and resistant to interpretations” (Kouvelakis, 2019), there are different theoretical frameworks through which to interpret the movement. One approach is to view the movement through the lens of civil disobedience or civil resistance theory; however, this application is problematic, or at least complicated, by the movement’s embrace of some forms of violence, and this perspective is not further considered here. More commonly, analysts of the Yellow Vests apply the prisms of populism, social movement theory, and participatory democracy. As this section details, populism is not an appropriate category in this context; the social movement label must be qualified; and the radical democracy of the movement is not simply ‘horizontal’.

The “populist” prism

At first glance, it is tempting to categorize the Yellow Vests as a “populist” movement or a “populist social movement” as many analysts have done (François and Collages, 2018; Guerra et al., 2019; Rouban, 2019; Lem, 2020; Hamdaoui, 2021; Misje Bergem, 2022). The problem with such applications, however, is that populism is a complex compound concept that takes on different emphases in different contexts (Taggart, 2000; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Mouffe, 2018). In our view, as we explain here, the most widespread definitions and their applications are

either too broad to be useful (because they omit the narrowing criteria of actually seeking state power) or too tailored to right-wing movements (a false stereotype that misses the movement's popular character).

According to prevalent usage, populism refers essentially to movements that (claim to) champion the people *en masse* against a perceived corrupt elite or establishment (Mudde, 2004; Aslanidis, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Van Bohemen et al., 2019). On top of this core feature, additional attributes are sometimes ascribed, including the deployment of reductive us/them narratives, conveying simplistic or ambiguous demands for reform, and adhering to charismatic or authoritarian leadership. Moreover, for many analysts, populism itself is mostly a right-wing phenomenon. For example, some analysts include in their definition of populism an ideology of “the *pure* people” (Mudde, 2004; emphasis added), with clear ultra-nationalist undertones, in addition to proclivities for strong-man leadership. Some analysts even peg “bad manners” to their definition of populist leaders, alluding to such crass figures as Donald Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte (Molloy, 2018, quoting populism scholars Mudde and Moffitt). However, populism has been identified on the left as well (Mouffe, 2018; Van Bohemen et al., 2019); for example, during the Eurozone crisis, Greek and Spanish left-wing parties, Syriza and Podemos respectively, each sought to channel the popular will of the masses against what they decried as a corrupt regime of elite austerity politics (Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, 2017; Font and Tsakatika, 2021). In short, populism is often defined as a politicized mobilization of the many against the few and may or may not have nationalist, right-wing, authoritarian overtones.

If we accept this definition of populism, then the Yellow Vests appear to fit the mold, since they have framed their movement as a popular movement of the French people against a corrupted elite. However, the parallels mostly end there. While some minority of the movement's participants and supporters may count as right-wing nationalist, the movement in general has not adopted an ethnic or exclusionary nationalist rhetoric or an identarian “purity” of any kind, as noted in previous sections. Moreover, while some aspects of the movement's agenda may be deemed reductive or simplistic, which is another attribute often associated with populism, the Yellow Vests actually put forth quite specific reform demands, ranging from minor policy changes (canceling fuel-tax increases) to constitutional amendments (the Citizens' Initiative Referendum).

More fundamentally, however, we do not accept the definition of populism outlined above. It has been framed so loosely that nearly any political movement seems to count, even those that explicitly refrain from seeking power. For example, the Occupy Wall Street movement itself, with its “We are the 99%” motto castigating the richest 1%, is explicitly classified as populist by Aslanidis (2017) using this rubric, never minding that the movement refused to advance or endorse leadership candidates or even adopt a policy agenda. According to the same logic, the Arab uprisings of 2011 should also be cast as populist: “The people demand the fall of the regime” was the central chant of crowds across half a dozen Arab countries, expressing the putatively definitive feature of populism—the people vs. the elite. Again, though, these movements eschewed the institutions of

power and sought to pressure them to change rather than take them over (Castells, 2012; Gelvin, 2015; Bayat, 2017). To this dragnet of ‘populism’ we could add environmental movements as *global* populists, for speaking for all of the world's population against the corrupt polluting elites. Confronted by the immense sweep of populism so construed, Aslanidis (2017) goes so far as to dub populism the “master frame” of political movements across the globe today. For us, this suggests that the term has been overextended.

To recover a more useful definition of populism, we restrict its application to movements that *not only* identify with the masses against an elite *but also* involve leaders or parties seeking to control politics through the state. In this sense, Occupy Wall Street would *not* be considered populist, though subsequent presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders, which it inspired, would. Similarly, Spain's own 2011 occupy movement, the anti-austerity 15-M movement, or the *indignados*, was clearly a popular movement (Ouziel, 2022), but not a populist movement, because it refused to engage institutionally with politics; the political party it inspired, however, Podemos, *was* populist, for taking the many-vs.-the-few message of the social movement into the arena of party politics. Movements may be popular and antiestablishment, but, lacking a vertical or centralized component, not populist. This more qualified view of populism is less prevalent in the literature but can be cited. Populism for Mouffe (2018, p. 19), for example, also requires “horizontalist movements to engage with the political institutions”. Roberts (2017, p. 682) has distinguished social movements from populism in similar terms: “Although both forms of popular subjectivity contest established elites, social movements mobilize such contestation from the bottom-up, whereas populism typically mobilizes mass constituencies from the top-down behind the leadership of a counter-elite”. Similarly, Pabst (2019) rules out populism in the case of the Yellow Vests because, he points out, the movement is anti-statist and posits no counter-elite. Noiriel (2019) also rejects the populist label for the Yellow Vests, finding the movement too diverse and too bound up in democratic struggle against structures of domination to be so reduced.

For these reasons, despite prevailing usage, the lens of populism is not helpful for understanding Yellow Vest politics. Like the Occupy movements and the Arab Springs of Egypt and Tunisia before them, the Yellow Vests can be interpreted as a popular movements or as a “social movement” more instructively than by applying a diluted rubric of “populism”.

“Social movement” categories and “popular” politics

A more useful lens for viewing the Yellow Vests is the sociological concept of “social movement”. In terms of its basic definition and its main analytical categories, the concept of social movement maps more neatly onto our case study.

According to the scholarly literature, a social movement (McAdam et al., 1996; Benford and David, 2000; Tarrow, 2012; Della Porta and Diani, 2015; Tilly et al., 2019) refers to a social or political movement operating outside of conventional institutions

such as political parties or electoral politics, though often seeking to influence them in some way. It is the collective pursuit of social or political change “by other means”. Social movements can be transgressive, subversive, inventive, contentious, and often in new spaces and in new media. Social movements can incorporate cultural as well as political goals and identities, and may involve relatively low or high political stakes, though typically with reform-oriented goals rather than revolutionary goals and generally falling short of the resort to arms or military conflict. Common examples of social movements include environmental movements, women’s liberation movements, movements for gay and transexual rights, Occupy Wall Street, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter, to name just a few. The Yellow Vests are more at home in this category than in the literature on populism.

While the social movement research literature overlaps with notions of “everyday resistances” and “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) and has much in common with the literatures on civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance (Sharp, 1973; Schock, 2015), it has established its own distinct sub-disciplinary boundaries. Classic concepts deployed in the literature on social movements include:

- Mobilization resources—the structures, channels, technology, technical know-how, and organizing traditions available to activists and groups.
- Repertoires of action—methods of conduct utilized by activists or groups in the pursuit of change, such as petitions, demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, direct action, etc.
- Political opportunities—situational factors outside the control of activists and groups, such as changes in government or shifts in public opinion, or major events or crises, etc., that create openings for movements to gain traction.
- Framing—tactical messaging or narrative strategies that aim to link movement objectives with widely shared values or grievances, to make the claims of a movement resonate with key audiences.
- Dynamics of contention, or contentious politics—a more agent-centric approach to analyzing the interplay between the politics of a movement and the politics of the opposing state or institutions, including innovative leadership styles, creative forms of action, and the impacts of state repression and concessions.

These categories provide a multifaceted framework for analyzing and comparing social movements, and the Yellow Vests can be assessed in these terms. For example, for mobilizing structures, the Yellow Vests relied heavily on online social networks, Facebook groups in particular, as well as the model of local popular committee organizing and the innovation of the Assemblies of Assemblies. In terms of repertoires of action, Yellow Vests enacted a wide array of methods, including classical demonstrations, online activities, participatory organizing, occupying public spaces, blockading public infrastructure, and employing limited forms of violence, typically limited to property destruction. Framing is clearly a vital component of Yellow Vest activity, in slogans and media messaging, emphasizing the economic hardships and democratic deficits of austerity politics, in their emphasis on broad-based values of fairness

and inclusion, and in their polemical targeting of the Macron government in particular. Finally, dynamics of contention provide a framework for appreciating the importance of agency and leadership styles of particular communities and branches of Yellow Vest activism in relation to the range of repressive and conciliatory measures of the state. This brief application is not meant to be exhaustive but suggestive of the analytical and comparative potential of the social movement lens in this context.

While many studies have applied aspects of the social movement framework to the Yellow Vests (Adam-Troian et al., 2020; Royall, 2020; Martin and Islar, 2021), there is no consensus on the appropriateness of this application to the Yellow Vests (Royall, 2020) and some studies caution against it. For example, some have claimed that the violence of the Yellow Vests puts it in a separate category from standard social movements like Occupy (Shultziner and Kornblit, 2020). For others, the Yellow Vests should not be considered classic social movements because they lack a historic identity narrative and lack a united or even a coherent front (Truong, 2018; Bantigny et al., 2019, p. 13–14).

Recognizing that the social movement framework comes with its own conceptual baggage and sometimes inconsistent interpretations, the term “social movement” could be substituted by the more generic “popular movement” or “popular politics”. Popular politics, or popular movements, refers simply to a movement or a politics of ordinary people, nonpartisan, non-sectarian, and like social movements, operate mostly outside of or at cross currents to established political institutions. “Popular movement” can be considered mostly synonymous with “social movement”, but “popular” signifies that the movement’s identity is generally cast widely to encompass the people as a whole or an entire community, not just a segment of it, whereas social movements also include movements with specific identities as narrow subsets of populations. The notion of popular politics also escapes the expectation of perfectly nonviolent or civil conduct on the part of the movement that is attached to some conceptualizations of social movements. Popular politics is politics undertaken by non-state and typically non-military actors, though it can be unruly and sometimes violent. Using popular as a designation for the Yellow Vests retains much of the analytical utility of the social movement perspective but sidesteps restrictive notions of permissible forms of action and distinguishes it from narrower identity-based movements.

Organizational analysis

Popular politics can be radically democratic when coordination and decision-making are “bottom up” or networked and tiered, as exemplified in the Yellow Vests movement. This form of participatory-democratic organization is not to be confused with either state-based or with strictly horizontalist models. In recent years, activist and scholarly discourse has privileged horizontalism. According to the horizontalist view, established institutions like states, political parties, and even labor unions are fixed hierarchies and ultimately oppressive and resistant to direct democracy (Gordon, 2007; Castells, 2012; Smith et al., 2013; Dixon, 2014).

Protest movements often therefore aspire to the opposite: perfectly horizontal organizing. This is true of many anarchist movements, and also the 2011 popular protests that swept many parts of the world, from the Arab uprisings to Occupy Wall Street. From the horizontalist perspective, liberal or representative or majority-rule democracy is deemed too hierarchical, too close to the corrupting structures of absolutist power. Majority voting is shunned for its exclusion of minority and dissenting views, and electing representatives is regarded as alienating and corruptible. The norm for social movements of the 21st century has rather been decision-making by deliberative process and unanimous consent, and action only *via* direct participation. Horizontalists also reject the elevation of spokespersons and specific platforms and demands, except for within the local context and what can be agreed upon through collective unanimity, to militate against the risk of elite or exclusionary interests dominating the collective. Some have criticized the “fetishism” of strict horizontalism (Harvey, 2012, p. 69–70) for impractically delimiting the mobilization capacity of movements and confining it to small communities (Gordon, 2007, p. 47–77; Carpenter, 2017, p. 64–65).

An alternative has been articulated in the literature on radical democracy, a third way between the undemocratic or semi-democratic hierarchies of conventional states, on the one hand, and the creed of horizontalism on the other. For example, Bookchin (1994) has explored models of direct democracy, which are typically associated with scales no larger than a small city, that can extend to much larger scales in a kind of confederalism he calls “communes of communes”. Along the same lines, Arendt has argued that the grassroots committee or council model common to many historic social revolutions integrates both horizontal networking and vertical tiering through upward delegation of authority without sacrificing its radically democratic character and without ossifying into states (Arendt, 2006, p. 240–270). Ostrom has described this form of community-based organization as “polycentric” and “nested layers” (Ostrom, 2010). The basic blueprint sketched by Bookchin, Arendt, Ostrom, and others, is neither strictly horizontalist nor statist. It is radically democratic yet also capable of coordinating and decision-making at large scale.

Notably, the Yellow Vests exemplify this model (Bookchin and van Outryve, 2019). The movement rejected conventional political institutions because of their centralized and top-down character, without also becoming trapped in the paralysis of horizontalism. While their foundations were primarily horizontal, they were not horizontalist. Setting them apart from the occupy movements of 2011, the Yellow Vests leveraged majority votes in their decision-making and drafting of demands, and they delegated authority upward to semi-formal *ad hoc* umbrella organizations, tiering their popular committees vertically, as in the Assemblies of Assemblies. There is much to learn from the Yellow Vests as a case study in democratic organization. Though beyond the scope of this paper, more work is required into the strengths and weaknesses, achievements and failures, of the organizational laboratories constituted by the movement. At the same time, the question of organizational form itself offers little qualitative insight into the movement.

Conclusion: Anti-austerity, pro-democracy popular movement

The substance of the movement is not to be found in a populist caricature or an elaborate sociological taxonomy, nor solely by recognition of its sophisticated participatory organization. The significance of the movement and its defining features are particular to its focused critique of neoliberal politics and its related commitment to strengthening democratic traditions.

The movement’s anti-neoliberalism is encapsulated in its strident opposition to austerity politics and the collective penalizing of a population for the sake of an unaccountable global system of transnational finance. In some ways, the anti-neoliberal aspect resolves the contradiction between the calls for lower taxes, on the one hand, and increased social services on the other. The movement was not overall anti-capitalist. The Yellow Vests directed their ire not against the corporate bosses but against the government, against institutionalized injustices stemming from state policy. Many small bosses and independent entrepreneurs were also in the ranks of the Yellow Vests. The Yellow Vests indicted the neoliberal government policy led by the iron fist of Macronism. Has France become a “neoliberal authoritarian state”? By observing the mobilizations of the Yellow Vests, it is clear that the Macronism integrates antidemocratic practices. As we have noted above, the degree of repressive violence, the standing assertions of presidentialism, and the misrepresentations of the movement, all constitute neoliberal authoritarian practices. With their reflective vests, the movement signifies a call for help while also reflecting back the violence of the state. They have made visible the impact of neoliberalism on society and democracy.

In countermovement, the Yellow Vests enacted the change they wanted to see: they coordinated and made decisions in ways that were radically and directly democratic while calling for more radical and direct democracy in the state (Boulo, 2021). While France’s Fifth Republic is known for its high concentration of powers in the presidency, the constitution still speaks of “*the government of the people, by the people and for the people*” (article 2). How can we conceptualize the pro-democracy activism of the Yellow Vests, beyond schematizing its forms? For the philosopher Balibar, democratization can take three main paths: “*more participation and self-management, more control of constituents over their representatives, more open social conflicts and, where appropriate, organized*” (Balibar, 2017). Are these not the paths pursued by the Yellow Vests? For Rousseau, the calls and conduct of the Yellow Vests amount to a practice and a vision of “continuous democracy” (Rousseau, 2022). Democratizing the constitution, as the Yellow Vests called for in their Citizens’ Initiative Referendum, has been theorized as a kind of extension of democracy that could be called “democratic constitutionalism” (Tully, 2014, p. 323–324), in distinction to the predominant constitutional democracy. This means instead of democracy shaped by a constitution, a constitution shaped by democracy. Though often derided by centrist democrats and liberals, the plebiscite as a model of governance signifies a deeper adherence to the principle of democracy than the liberal representative model. In their direct action for direct democracy, the Yellow Vests are also enacting what Tully calls “practices of civic freedom” (Tully, 2014, p. 7).

This means they express their political freedom not within a pre-set and semi-democratic civil code handed down by the state, but, in their conduct outside and across the system, enact a more basic kind of civic freedom, to challenge and democratize the very rules of the game.

The French Yellow Vests are a social or popular movement defined by their democratic opposition to austerity authoritarianism. The movement has been unprecedented in its scope and duration, in its Saturday marches week after week, in its widespread capture of roundabouts, in its union non-alignment, in its proliferation of new civic committees and popular assemblies, and in its desire to democratize the constitution. The movement is the expression of a significant part of the French public. It is also an expression of France beyond and in some ways against the capital Paris: rurality, villages, towns, and small cities. It is a movement that transcends political affiliations, social classes, and age categories, making it difficult to classify. While it may be easy and common to simply brand the Yellow Vests as *populist*, this lacks conceptual rigor and larger-picture thinking. Most of the specific qualities associated with the populist label do not apply to the movement, except for the core generalization of the many *v.* the few, which applies to most of contemporary politics. The *social movement* framework elucidates the Yellow Vests on numerous fronts but still says little about its substantive and normative content, its actual ideology. The alternative qualifier *popular* for the Yellow Vests does most of the work intended by the *populist* and *social movement* labels combined, while avoiding their excesses and weaknesses. The term *popular* also offers inroads into thinking about alternative forms of organizing that do not fit neatly into horizontalist discourse of social movements today, for a more nuanced and constructive approach to participatory organization. Still, to get closer to the core of the movement, we need to look beyond analytical and formal descriptions.

We have concluded that the Yellow Vests are a kind of popular or social movement of specific significance for their democratic praxis in the face of a neoliberal order. In short, the movement is most notable for its commitment to radically democratic norms and a fundamental opposition to austerity politics. These conclusions are significant for analysts and policymakers interested in uncovering neoliberal blinders and outdated path dependencies. Seeing the Yellow Vests for what they are, rather than how they appear to powerful institutions, discloses policy orientations that could redress legitimacy deficits in national and global governance and ultimately reinforce European integration efforts, even if it calls current orthodoxies into question. Neoliberalism has dominated the agenda, and the neoliberal state has proven increasingly incapable of solving challenges such as democratic deficits and ecological transition. On the current course, by one party or another, austerity government leads to authoritarian government. The Yellow Vests offer an intervention, simultaneously taking a stand and reflecting light in the darkness.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

BP conducted the large majority of research into the literature on the Yellow Vests and neoliberalism, conceptualized the thesis and abstract, wrote a first incomplete rough draft of the manuscript, and contributed especially to the final version of the first two sections of the paper (on neoliberalism and on the Yellow Vests case study). MC edited and revised the paper, cut 10k words and added 4k more, helped to refine the thesis and abstract, did most of the editing and formatting, and substantively rewrote and expanded the theory section and the concluding section, adding sources and discussion, with feedback from BP. For revisions, BP reviewed most of the sources requested by reviewers, and MC integrated them into the paper, along with completing most other revisions requested by reviewers. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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