

# MEMES WITH FORCE

Lessons from the Yellow Vests

Paul Torino &  
Adrian Wohlleben



## Notes

1 The fact is, even if our social identities did somehow mechanically program our political positions (which they don't), it wouldn't help us today. The great figures of "militant subjectivity" cannot be willfully resurrected out of thin air. As our more Marxist friends never tire of reminding us, the industrial profitability that supplied the material 'base' for the political consciousness of the workers movement throughout the first half of the 20th century has been progressively contracting since the 1970's, pushing the labor movement onto the defensive. The result has been a four-decades-long depressive spiral, the vast majority of labor struggles in the West having become almost purely defensive, and still being lost anyway. In the meantime, the revolutionary imagination of the West has been emptied-out, forced to reinvent itself along new premises.

2 On this point, see Fredy Perlman's classic article, "Worker-Student Action Committees, May 1968", available here: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/roger-gregoire-fredy-perlman-worker-student-action-committees-france-may-68>. "In the ex-universities, the division between 'students' and 'workers' was abolished in action, in the daily practice of the occupants; there were no special 'student tasks' and 'worker tasks.' However, *the action went further than the consciousness*. By going to 'the workers', people saw the workers as a specialized sector of society, they accepted the division of labor" (our emphasis).

3 This question being, can people whose lives are defined by incommensurable modes of violence experience the same world, the same language, a shared vision of freedom? The meme neither resolves nor suppresses this incommensurability—there is no shortcut to an existential commons. What it does, rather, is unleash these differences from any prerequisite of unity, by interrupting our comparative habit of legitimating suffering by 'weighing' one of its forms against another. The yellow vest opens the field of politics: suddenly the center is everywhere, and everyone can attack and get organized for their own reasons, irreconcilable as they may or may not be.

4 Mauvaise Troupe, "Cortège de Tête," in *Riots and Militant Occupations. Smashing a System, Building a World. A Critical Introduction*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield), 2018.

5 Anonymous, "The Unassignable Riot", in *War on the Streets. Tactical Lessons from the Global Civil War*, Ill Will Editions, 2016, 61-62. Originally published in *Lundi matin* 06/2016.

6 For example, in mid-December, when the Yellow Vests were primarily focused on toll booths, roundabouts, and the Saturday riots, some smaller towns began holding 'breadcrumb marches' in which they drew up a path to the homes of local officials. Upon arrival, they vandalized their property and threatened the politicians, sometimes even shooting off guns—a rarity in France, needless to say. This was an iterable gesture, capable of strategically expanding the tactical repertoire of the struggle and carrying a new form of partisan illumination into the sphere of everyday life. For a helpful discussion of iterability and improvisation at the level of street clashes, see (Anonymous), "Yes, And...", in *War on the Streets. Tactical Lessons from the Global Civil War*, Ill Will Editions, 2016.

7 Joshua Clover, *Riot, Strike, Riot*, Verso Books, 2016, 187.

8 Liaisons, "Encore. A Second Letter from Paris," *The New Inquiry*, 01.04.2019.

9 See Alessi Del'Umbria, "Full Metal Yellow Jacket," Ill Will Editions, 2019. Originally published in *Lundi matin*, Jan. 22, 2019.

10 Marcello Tarì, *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice* (Rome: Derive approdi, 2016).

11 Ivan Verstyuk, "No looting or anarchy in this EuroMaidan revolution," *Kyiv Post*, 01.20.2014. Accessible here: <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/no-looting-or-anarchy-in-this-euromaidan-revolution-335296.html>

## MEMES WITH FORCE: LESSONS FROM THE YELLOW VESTS

Paul Torino & Adrian Wohlleben

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nazis, and the extreme center. It is also impossible to imagine a new political consensus emerging between the Democrats and the GOP in a way that adequately addresses the anxieties and tumult of the age. If something like the Yellow Vests comes to the US, you can bet that it will be even more confusing and weird, even more violent and uncomfortable. It is our wager, however, that the coming movements won't be without their own charm, their own innovations, their own beauty.

### POSTSCRIPT: SIX NOTES FOR FUTURE STRUGGLES

1. *To spread an ungovernable idea of common happiness, it is first necessary to become ungovernable.*

2. *Memes with force allow people to self-authorize, enabling them to act directly on their suffering. In this way, they subvert the management of our movements by internal and external police.*

3. *Memes that polarize the situation from top to bottom, concentrating the hostility on a centrist target, will allow the largest antagonism to emerge, making it harder for reformers to forestall the revolt, and opening up the possibility of communism in a real and practical way.*

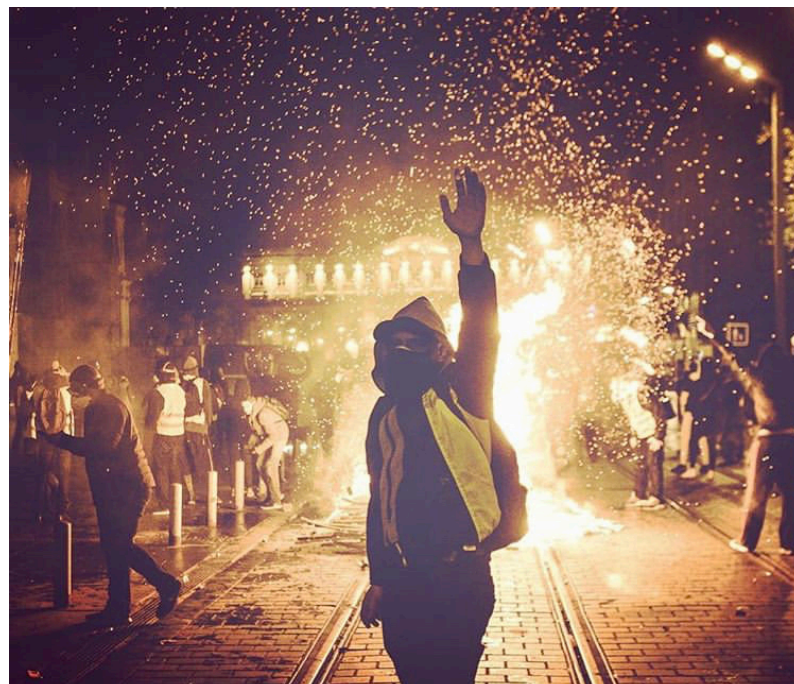
4. *Do not exclude 'conservatives' from the movement ideologically; rather, popularize gestures that their ideology cannot endorse. One way to do this is to legitimate property destruction against the super-rich. Show, don't tell.*

5. *Although the use of graffiti and other messaging might be necessary to counter the influence of right-wing slogans early on, do not allow any one group or tendency to hegemonize the meme until the state has fully lost control.*

5.1. *Graffiti should be used in two ways only: to express hostility toward the shared enemy, and to celebrate the tactical repertoire you want to see and the heroic deeds of the movement as a whole. Do not speak in the name of a 'subject' or exclude components of the movement.*

6. *If the riot's power to suspend social identities and predicates cannot generate alongside itself territorial places wherein to expand, persist, and cross over into the duration of everyday life, it becomes a cruel festival.*

January 2019



The moment of the *Gilets jaunes*, or 'Yellow Vests' has ruptured the consensus of French politics and social life. Since mid-November, hundreds of thousands of disaffected people have repeatedly rioted in the city centers, blocked highways and oil refineries, occupied toll booths and roundabouts across the country, and clashed with police. Although the early phase of the movement legitimized itself with slogans about the gasoline tax initiated by Macron and his team of technocrats, when the tax was repealed under a flurry of cobblestones, the Yellow Vests refused to go home. Leftists, commentators, and politicians have failed to understand the basic intention of the movement, while the politicals—from the anarchists to the unionists to the neo-Nazis—either attempt to steer the movement or else reject it completely. So far, the Yellow Vests have initiated a process that no one understands, but that no one can ignore. Whatever the outcome of the present sequence of struggle, it is clear that the Yellow Vests have broken the rules of politics and social movements as we know them. We think it's worthwhile to begin drawing some lessons from this complex and unfinished sequence, in the hopes that we may better act within similar circumstances in the future, which are bound to arrive.

## RADICAL ACTIONS, NOT RADICAL ACTORS

It is not the insurrection that many love to dream about, it is not an act of sedition, it is not the seizure of a territory. It is something else. Some new thing whose word hasn't been invented yet.

-*Liaisons*, "Encore"

If we insist on reading today's social ruptures through the categories of the 20th century, we can be sure to misread them. It is no accident that many on the far-Left initially interpreted the Yellow Vest phenomenon in France as fascist or naively populist (and therefore in need of a radical "correction"), or that others were so quick to decry the evils of a "cross-class" alliance. *Contemporary political rationality cannot comprehend radical actions, only radical actors.* The truth of action, we are told, lies in the *identity* and *motivations* of its protagonists, which constitute the real objects of social inquiry. A movement could express itself in a thousand different ways, but it will only really become comprehensible and valid once it can be pushed through a legitimizing vector erected by these two factors. From which place in the social order did the action emerge? What intersection in the matrix of oppression do these participants represent? It is assumed that the answer will reveal the collective social interests of the movement, at which point one can decide whether or not to "support" or "oppose" it, as if one were shopping in an ideological supermarket.<sup>1</sup> How did this impulse to seek out a subject behind all action develop? Where does it come from?

If we are accustomed to letting concrete actions disappear, to seeing only the 'social' relation between actors, this is because we have inherited a conception of politics in which *discourse*, the communication of information, forms the ideal political act. If acting together is simply another way of speaking to one another or to a third party, if revolt is simply another mode of making demands, if war is simply politics by other means, then the impulse to *interpret* action understandably takes hold of us. In order for one person to interpret the statement of another, a shared symbolic context of meaning must obtain between us, and it is our respective institutional upbringing that makes this possible.

Contemporary politics sees in action nothing but a *conversation* between constituencies and populations in society. It is for this reason that, when radical activity emerges in a way that is relatively anonymous, that lacks a consistent author, and persistently refuses to answer to our compositional ("who are you?")

a vortex like the Yellow Vests, wherein diverse practices flow into a common area of articulation, than from continuous clashes between rival political groups, or the struggles of marginalized groups to represent their interests within the increasingly hollow 'center' of normative society. Certainly, the opposite is becoming harder to imagine: that a broad cross-section of the US would unite under a single identity and banner.

A struggle of this nature could look like this:

*Angry and disenfranchised people begin descending on the city centers, or on logistical sites like airports and ports. Their angry invasion resonates in a distinct yet parallel way with people living in marginalized or low-income neighborhoods either inside the city or at its edges (graffiti crews, rednecks, truck drivers, drug dealers, sex workers, former-prisoners, pensioners). Ethical extremists of various ideological or subcultural persuasions operate alongside one another in the streets, united only by their respective unwillingness to police each other's anger at the system (for better and for worse: anarchists, neonazis, soccer hooligans, gang members). The various social groups never synthesize into a larger whole, but simply move alongside one another, occasionally clashing with one another, but returning week after week to smash the glittering facades of the cities and attacking police and governmental buildings. Those who can't make it to the urban centers block the roads and arterial infrastructure on which they depend, from outside. This heterogeneous alliance of 'randos' from the near-and-far hinterlands and urban ethical extremists repolarizes the political situation from top and bottom, rather than left and right. Politicians, leftist organizations, trade unions and N.G.O.'s initially distance themselves from the confusing mêlée and denounce the violence. The crowds pay them no mind, owing them no allegiance. Realizing they have been eclipsed, leftist organizations have no choice but to tuck their tail and chase after the crowds from a rearguard position, attempting however possible to co-opt, manage, and eventually pacify them. College students and middle managers of all demographics attempt to shame and divide the rioters racially, sexually, geographically, by class, by any axis of identity they can, so as to better gain a foothold in the chaos. Along the way, the police will commit their usual heavy-handed blunders, which will (at first) widen the antagonism and expand the struggle, forcing the government to deploy the National Guard. When they reach this point, struggles will either dissipate, or else succeed in fracturing the armed forces and inducing widespread social defection...*

Revolutionaries should be prepared, because the situation is likely to get more confusing and not less. It seems unlikely to us that the country will plunge into a civil war between anti-fascists, neo-

to underscore that, setting aside union halls, in Kiev's EuroMaidan movement property destruction against businesses was considered unacceptable, and rarely occurred. Contrary to civil unrest in other European nations such as Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and France, where storefront windows are routinely attacked during lively demonstrations, an article in the *Kyiv Post* from January 20, 2014 asserts that "in two months of confrontation, there has not been a single shop window broken in Kyiv's downtown. Granted, Ukraine's protesters aren't shy about taking apart fences or ripping up paving stones, but those acts of vandalism also serve the larger plan."<sup>11</sup>

Undoubtedly, liberalism and fascism both line up to defend the market, disagreeing only about who should be able to participate in its licit institutions, and at what scale. These groups have great difficulty ideologically condoning property destruction. Where they do tolerate it, this destruction must be ethnicized. Nationalists can only explain their particular attacks on sites and targets in a ethno-nationalist and political way. The windows smashed out at the synagogue in downtown Chicago in 2017 were a *personal* and racial attack on the members of the congregation. What they can't accept is generalized attacks on private property, a violence that clearly attacks the market: anti-capitalist violence. It is one thing to attack a union hall or government office, it is quite another to destroy entire shopping districts. This is perhaps the most difficult thing to introduce in American movements, where property damage and vandalism are seen as reckless and without strategic sense.

## CONCLUSION: A WAGER

In the coming years, struggles could emerge around a feeling of disgust, and not a common experience of suffering. From our perspective, nothing could be better today. The characteristic human experience in the American ex-urbs and hinterlands is utterly unlike the sorts of metropolitan factories on which the workers movement was built. Today's suburban and rural sprawl produces extreme alienation, isolation and loneliness. American society today is separated by increasingly complex lines of differentiation: class, trade, race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, weight, politics, subculture, diet, health profile, astrological identity, etc. Certainly, struggles will continue to emerge on the basis of alterity and political difference, but we aren't confident that these will be liberatory struggles. It feels, at this point, more likely that liberatory struggles will emerge from

and projectual questions ("why are you doing this?"), it tends to be unrecognizable to political analysts and activists alike.

It is precisely this received wisdom that the Yellow Vests have been laying to waste, week after week. What is emerging today in France is a radical form of collective action that does not rely on a coherent ideology, motivation, participant, or regional location. Above all, it is not proceeding by means of a dialogue with its enemy. It is the logic of this new mode of practical composition that we must aim to understand.

## MEMES WITH FORCE

"Whoever has a song written about them never lives long."  
-W.B. Yeats, *Mythologies*

How did a rupture like the *Gilets jaunes* come into being? At a time where naming and identifying groups and people has become a hegemonic practice among activists and police alike, it is important (from all sides) to identify how an amorphous and radically unstable movement could continue to explode into the streets for over two months.

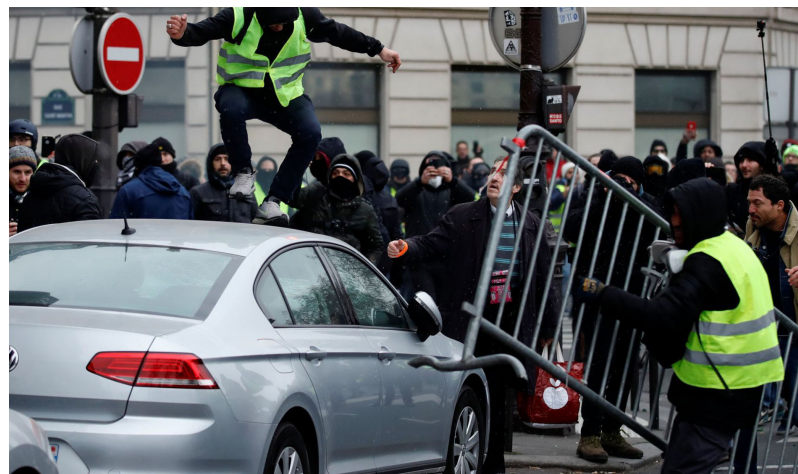
Ferguson and Standing Rock were subjected to constant "naming" operations, from within and from without. In both cases, the ability to name the "legitimate claimants" of the movement contributed in direct ways to destroying it. That every tendency of these movements claimed to act in the name of "the community" is not totally without sense: whoever forms the normative center of a population forms the natural representative ideal. For democrats and reformers, establishing the right to speak for the movement is a precondition of political power. Once the subject of a movement is sufficiently described and defined, the moment inevitably begins to shrink and dry up: leaders are called to bargain, militants are repressed, and large numbers of active participants are reduced to simple "supporters" of a struggle that is no longer properly common. When movements begin to cohere around charismatic individuals and loudmouths, it is only a matter of course that the poorest and most militant - and usually most racially marginalized - (e.g. Joshua Williams, Red Fawn) absorb the bulk of the repression. It therefore makes sense that, from Ferguson and Standing Rock to Bordeaux and Toulouse, the most uncompromising and determined actions today



are not originating in the political cliques or activist networks. The gap between the ideologues and the actual revolutionaries is widening. As their conceptions of the nature and meaning of struggle become increasingly asymmetrical, they become increasingly unintelligible to one another.

The Yellow Vests are not a traditional social movement. The social movement paradigm refers to a process by which groups get organized around their distinct experience of social institutions (or around their distinct experience of oppression, as in the case of the New Left), work to advance the interests of their respective constituencies, and link up with other institutional segments along the way. From the “Worker-Student Action Committees” of May ’68, to the failed alliance between French rail workers and university occupations exactly 50 years later, this Trotskyist model of organization continues to exert a lasting influence on how an escalation of conflict comes to be imagined.<sup>2</sup> Since each constituent group is understood to have become politicized through its institutional consciousness, composition is imagined as taking place segment-to-segment, through a ‘convergence of struggles’ ultimately imagined to culminate in a general strike. Yet the present moment has witnessed little to no proliferation of minor or partial subjectivities, no ‘*queer Yellow Vests*’, ‘*student Yellow Vests*’ or ‘*worker Yellow Vests*.’ Hardly anyone is insisting on their distinct socio-institutional predicates and traditional forms of struggle to the exclusion of the others. While no one can yet say where it will lead, the Yellow Vests have shown that it is possible to construct a practical sequence of revolt in which *anyone* can participate irreducibly without either foregrounding the particular interests of any marginalized groups or defaulting to a White, patriarchal, petty bourgeois, or otherwise hegemonic grammar of suffering. This is the gauntlet that the current movement has thrown down, and which it falls to revolutionaries everywhere to think through.

Considered in itself, donning a safety vest carries with it no unifying ideology, principle, or demand, nor any particular subject-position or identity. It operates as what we might call a ‘meme with force’. A meme does not necessarily alter the *content* of a struggle. In France, for instance, the catalyzing factors are without a doubt eminently familiar social pressures, such as the rising cost of living, diminishing social mobility, cuts to public services, a triumphant neoliberal government who spits in the eyes of the working poor, etc. What the meme of the Yellow Vest offers is a malleable *form* within which this content can assume the force of an intervention. Within every political struggle there is a minimal formalization; to this extent, the meme reopens the basic question of the Party, and offers



have we seen such a high capacity to disrupt everything accompanied by such an indeterminacy of anything like a demand, identity, ideological consistency or program. The ‘official’ antagonism has been almost entirely concentrated on a single office of power, namely, the Macron administration. Certainly, this is ideologically spurious, since it suggests a ‘mis-management’ of the capitalist class relation, a confusion of effects and causes. However, although it is philosophically or critically insufficient as an analysis of power, it has practically allowed a broad cross section of people to recognize common targets, allowing the polarization to remain as broad as possible. It is precisely the ideological indeterminacy of the situation, aided by the movement’s *under*-construction of its enemy, that has allowed the rupture to widen and intensify in the way it has.

This raises a serious question, namely, what has prevented the movement from succumbing to a fascist drift? Certainly, the more conventional anti-fascist tactic of attacking and chasing-out organized cadres of right wing extremists from the demonstrations has made it harder for the latter to achieve any measure of influence disproportionate to their numbers. We believe, however, that widespread vandalism has limited the influence of nationalists more than anything else. The Yellow Vests have taught us the strategic importance of joining actively in movements that do not depart from a recognizably far-Left grammar, and working to legitimate property destruction within them.

Consider the case of Maidan. Because nationalism (democratic and fascist alike) is a technique for creating alliances between the rich and poor ‘in the name of the people’, it is important



confrontation, as it helps to account for the shift in the function of speech within the movement. Things would indeed be different if the Yellow Vests were once again taking over the city plazas and engaging in the sort of direct-democratic general assemblies that had defined the 2016 *Nuit debout* movement, and the movement of occupations before it. While calls for a ‘citizens referendum’ continue to be made from different corners of the movement, the Yellow Vests have for the most part admirably refused to trade their practical initiative for political representation, and have confronted the state less as an interlocutor than as a kinetic and physical opponent. Rallies and public assemblies have not featured prominently in the struggle so far. While assemblies and inter-roundabout spokescouncils do occur, they retain the character of local, strategic, situated moments of logistical self-organization and coordination. The moment anyone begins to present themselves as a representative of the movement, or claims the legitimacy to speak for the movement as a whole, they find themselves preaching in a desert. No one can take on the voice of the movement in any convincing way, least of all those who claim to. The acephalous character of the Yellow Vests’ tactical repertoire—riot, blockades, commandeering toll booths, occupying roundabouts, etc.—has contributed to a radical diminution of the power of ‘official’ political speech. It is this that has ensured, for now anyway, that the populism in question remains an ecstatic and plebeian one; that the disidentification with both the forces of order and the lonely atomization preceding the movement prevails over the representational and assimilationist temptation; and that where speech does occur, that it serves primarily to renew and extend our commitment to defending those sites of collective life assembled throughout the movement, from roundabout to roundabout, which is a type of speech that is qualitatively distinct from the proclamatory universe of politicians. It is entirely likely that the movement will be crushed, its revolutionary aspirations dashed, the moment it allows itself to be reduced to a constituent force in the great game of democracy, well-known in France, wherein an ostensible 6th Republic would come to replace the current stupidity.

## LOOTING AS ANTI-FASCIST MEASURE

One of the central novelties of the Yellow Vest movement lies in the unprecedented discrepancy between the rapid growth of collective power and the simultaneous absence of a positive horizon. Rarely

what is perhaps the minimal basis for organizing a force of rupture in the twenty-first century. The fluidity of the meme makes it possible to join a march, a blockade or a roundabout occupation without having to buy into a “common interest” or the legitimizing “beliefs” of a movement. It does not solve, but simply defers the question of a common grammar of suffering to a later point.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, however, it has the power to suspend the suspensions that define our metropolitan social separation. Differences of experience or ideology are neither effaced nor resolved, but their resolution no longer forms a precondition for engagement with others. The meme authorizes everyone to act on their respective experience of how the ‘elites’ (a deliberately *under*-constructed enemy) have screwed them over, like a Tarot deck in which the audience fills in the personal content. Each of us is invited to intervene against the enemy without waiting or asking permission, and for our own reasons. Masses of people are able to collaborate and act alongside one another, to express their social rage and frustration without falling back upon conventional models of collective organization to mediate the distances within and between social groups (political parties, direct democratic assemblies, gangs, etc.). In spite of its apparently monochromatic homogeneity, therefore, the meme in fact facilitates the most radical affirmation of singularity. There is no other mode of social composition that more directly encourages us to trust in the adequacy of our own perception, to act upon our reading of our situation.

The Yellow Vests are not a ‘coalition’ of diverse yet pre-existing political groups. The concept of the coalition still belongs to the horizon of the ‘convergence of struggles’. But, so far, the Yellow Vests are producing far more than they represent. If they continue to retain the initiative, if their productive and inventive powers are not subordinated to the logic of demands and negotiation, if they do not begin to carry out their irruptive interventions in the name of any stable population or constituency, they might just succeed in exiting the depressive cycle of 20th century revolutions, in which one government is quickly replaced by another.

Nobody knows in advance what the compositional limits of a meme are; its coherence is spelled out in an entirely *a posteriori* manner, week by week, piece by piece. Whatever the ‘Yellow Vests’ will come to mean will be based on its concrete effects in different times and places. This open-endedness gives it an obvious strength, since it can be taken up by anyone, pushed in virtually any direction. Having freed itself of any inherent reference to a stable ‘subject’, it opens onto a limitless horizon of experimentation. As with any meme, its currency depends on its ability to expand and reinvent itself, to resonate and combine with new content and modes of

expression. Here, purity is inversely correlated to strength. The meme is modeled not on the universality of the Idea but on the *unlimited* movement of the simulacrum, since its vitality increases the more it replicates, mutates, and moves virally. The moment it finds itself unable to overcome obstacles and continue the process of mutation, the moment it is forced to police its edges, to sift claimants from imposters, authentic members from the ‘violent agitators’, it loses its creative or experimental fringe and peters out.



### THE CORTÈGE DE TÊTE

The *cortège de tête* [‘head of the demo’] phenomenon during the 2016 Labor Law movement marked the first moment in recent French history where a social movement managed to produce a meme alongside and within itself. From its position at the front lines, the *cortège de tête* determines the rhythm, the tempo, and the slogans for large demonstrations. Normally jealously guarded by unions and formal organizations, whose leaders treat it as a stage for self-aggrandizing performances behind pseudo-unitary banners, in 2016 the space was seized by graffiti kids, YouTubers, students, and other youth of all sorts, who conferred on it the air of a splinter march. This gesture of ‘seizing the head position’ itself quickly became a meme,

*rhythms and textures.*

It is this combination of a memetic mode of composition and a destituent or place-making mode of cohabitation that explains the movement’s unparalleled ferocity and longevity.

### ECSTATIC POPULISM

Are we dealing with a ‘populist’ movement? Have the Yellow Vests become a populist symbol?

The idea of the “people” (*Lat: populus / popularis*) has always had two senses. On the one hand, Western states need the spectral figure of the ‘People’ for a precise juridical reason, namely, in order to position the source of their authority outside of themselves in such a way that this source never in fact *appears*. The People in this juridical sense is the law’s own self-presupposition, a pure fiction that exists only on paper, or on the lips of politicians. On the other hand, the term has always also meant the poor, the disadvantaged, ‘ordinary people’. It is a shifting placeholder, analogous to what for centuries was known as the ‘pleb’.<sup>9</sup> The two senses of the term have nothing in common but a name. More importantly, as Marcello Tarì reminds us, they are actually mutually exclusive in practice: “just as insurrectionism as an ideology exists only when there is no uprising, populism exists only when the people are absent.”<sup>10</sup> When the people are really in the streets, government cannot rule, and the newfangled parliamentary populisms of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain appeared precisely at the moment when the riots and square occupations of 2011-12 were defeated. The Yellow Vests are not the same ‘People’ in whose name the law speaks. If anything, the vest is the uniform of the *ex-citizen*, the symbol of a negative or ecstatic populism that has forcefully stepped out-of-joint from the law that legitimates itself in its name. There is no denying that the fundamental antagonist in this struggle remains the ‘elites in government’, of which the central chant, *Macron, démission!*, a demand for dethronement, is emblematic. Yet it would be entirely premature for anyone to claim that a new constituent subject can be glimpsed through the thick clouds of tear gas filling the cities each week. The only thing we’re certain of seeing is a mass of individuals and small groups engaged in almost totally unmediated acts of constructing a *rapport de force* with its government, the outcome of which no one can as of yet predict.

It is important to emphasize this ballistic inclination of the Yellow Vests, their predilection for force relations and direct

Chiapas and the Kurds in Rojava. It was these latter struggles that have most clearly proven the strategic efficacy of weaponizing ‘place’ as an element of attack, of converting the *vital inhabitation* of an intensely-lived territory into a means for the delegitimation of state and economic management.

At the same time, the maneuver of the Yellow Vests is different. Instead of many people from across Europe converging on two or three ‘zones to defend’, which ensures that the initiative in fixing the location of politics continues to be determined by the prerogative of Vinci and other corporations like it, the Yellow Vest roundabouts remain proximate to everyday life. This proximity to everyday life is the key to the revolutionary potential of the movement: the closer the blockades are to the home of the participants, the more likely these places can become personal and important in a million other ways. And the fact that it is a roundabout that is occupied rather than a forest or a valley strips the prefigurative or utopian content from these movements. While this might at first glance appear to be a weakness, it may prove to be a strength.

As anyone who has visited the ZAD and returned home to the city can attest, the feeling of power one gains from driving into the cop-free zone falls away as soon as one leaves. The ZAD is something akin to a living state of exception from the world around it (albeit a real one, rather than a juridical fiction). By contrast, to occupy the roundabout *near* where one lives ensures that the collective confidence, tactical intelligence, and shared political sensibility the Yellow Vests cultivate from one day to the next traverses and contaminates the networks, ties, friendships and bonds of social life in these same areas. What were utopian feelings in the action camps, in the roundabout blockades now bleed into the space of everyday life rather than holding themselves apart from it. Nor does the roundabout maintain an extraterrestrial existence alongside normal life in the way the “radical” spaces of Berlin do.

The ferocity of the Saturday riots can only be explained by the affinities found on the roundabouts. According to all reports, every Saturday the crowds are increasingly composed of tightly-organized small-groups who show up prepared to act together in tactical and intelligent ways. Since no one is hanging around Paris, Bordeaux or Toulouse long enough to form social ties, it stands to reason that it is precisely the ties developed in an everyday life that is now ‘filtered’ through the roundabouts that are going on the offensive during the weekend “Acts”. The opposition is not, as has sometimes been suggested, between the strategic front of the Saturday riot and that of the roundabouts. *The roundabout is the membrane, the point of contact, between the riot and daily life, each with their own distinctive*

and was soon repeated in every large march throughout the months-long sequence of struggle. Due to its wild energy and aggressive disposition toward the police, the *cortège de tête* provoked frequent confrontations, which in turn led to more people joining and an increased level of material preparation from one demo to the next. The *cortège* functioned like “an aggregation point, as physical as it is political. Bit by bit, it magnetized the desire for revolt, the rage, the cohort of unruly bodies, the wounded, the unresigned, and the ungovernable.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, as its name suggests, there can be no *cortège de tête* without the union processions marching behind it, a fact that ensured that the power of contagion remained essentially captured within the spatio-temporal logic of the traditional social movement. In spite of this limitation, like the Yellow Vests, the *cortège de tête* meme facilitated the creation of a space in which a new sort of composition of people could occur, one that similarly tended to suspend all prior institutional roles and identities. As a musician wrote at the time,

The singularity of the *cortège de tête* lies in its generic character, which evades capture by any identity. In it, people are encountering others who they should never meet under the normal course of things, whose assigned positions appear radically incommensurate. What could be more worrisome for power than to observe the practical weaving-together of those very bodies it busies itself keeping apart? [...] If becoming-revolutionary means anything, it is precisely this assumption of the clinamen, this self-abandonment, this uncompromising engagement with the possible opened up by the situation [...] The *cortège de tête* embodies the neutral and anonymous coalescence, the becoming-anyone of this whole human multiplicity whose specific origins find themselves locally and punctually suspended.<sup>5</sup>

At least as far as metropolitan centers like Paris are concerned (the blockades in the West being a different story), the power and the limits of the 2016 sequence were determined by the ability to flee the logic of a “convergence of struggles,” and it was a memetic mode of composition that made this flight possible. However, the anonymous becoming of the *cortège de tête* was restricted to the form of the riot, one whose duration was entirely tethered to the rhythm set by the labor union officials. Without a union march, there was no head-space to usurp. In spite of its tremendous power, it was the distinctive form of the *cortège* meme that placed a ceiling on its ability to expand and mutate, eventually crushing it.

Mememes do not call for interpretation so much as improvisation. If they challenge us to assume a posture or disposition, it would be less that of the scholar than the visionary who remains on the lookout for *iterable gestures*, those creative acts that harbor a new sequence of experimental repetition.<sup>6</sup>



## DESTITUTION & PLACE

A communist revolution is not the sum of its riots, revolts, or battles. It is nothing other than the process whereby millions of people succeed in reorganizing their day-to-day existence in accordance with non-economic ideas of what happiness or the good life can and should look like. While the past decade of radical movements, occupations, and revolts have allowed countless people to experience firsthand the intelligence and dignity of collective self-organization without the mediation of money, such ‘communist measures’ are ultimately only historically significant to the extent that they allow themselves to become irreversible. Without the growth of a confident, durable, *common sensibility*, the suspensions of this world are guaranteed to topple back into the old ways of doing things.

Autonomous and communist forms and practices must find a way to spread and endure, but how? It’s a question anyone who has lived through the power and dignity of a riot has undoubtedly asked themselves, at the moment they must return to the video games, social media profiles, and ‘business casual’ that hem in the space of private life. *The order of the riot remains flanked by the disorder of normal life*. How can we make the leap from suspending time to reorganizing it, generating lasting forms of anarchic collectivity? Is it possible (as Joshua Clover, for example, seems to suggest) for the riot to spill beyond the form of the riot altogether, that a “cascading series” of riots could, of their own energy, “succeed in preserving their own existences while drawing forth other struggles to take their main chance against a spreading disorder”?<sup>7</sup> Can riots engender *communally reproductive* forms of self-organization? Or is it necessary that another, entirely distinct dynamism of struggle emerges alongside them?

As concerns action, there are not two opposing tendencies in the Yellow Vest movement: one that riots and destroys the cities, and the other that blocks roundabouts and builds collective canteens. While both are undoubtedly happening, what is decisive is understanding how these two dynamisms fit together, for it is this that explains both the originality and the tenacity of the movement. The riots in the cities have been intimately bound up in a parallel process that has relocalized the very experience of politics itself. It is the constitution of collective *places* that forms the destituent/revolutionary kernel of the movement, that overcomes the opposition between the riot and everyday life. A Parisian letter to the *Liaisons* collective recently observed, “the prerogative of the Gilets Jaunes is

to organize themselves where they live, at the regional level, and not in terms of a precise political identity. It is thus no coincidence that, in a given region, the roundabout is precisely the minimal unit of connection.”<sup>8</sup> As its author reminds us, in France, small rural roundabouts call up a different history than the plazas and squares of the larger cities, which were the *locus classicus* of the citizenist assemblies of *Nuit debout* in 2016, and which importantly have *not* been occupied by Yellow Vests so far. For us, this observation hints at a larger ethical-political wager: in the destituent paradigm that defines the politics to come, *place* will supercede *position*. The need to invest and defend new places or ‘sites of life’ will eclipse the centrality of ‘social’ differentiations like identities and symbolic *positions* within a matrix of oppression. What does it mean to establish a ‘place’, and how have the Yellow Vests linked place-making to the riots and blockades that have become so definitive of contemporary struggles?



### The Roundabouts

By occupying roundabouts where the participants live—and even going as far as constructing some 200 shacks and buildings upon the roundabouts in which to eat, share resources, and conspire—the Yellow Vests are engendering a place of life amidst the dead spaces of late-capitalist circulation. This improbable feat was also observed recently in Chico, California, where climate refugees built an encampment in a Wal-Mart parking lot following the wild fires earlier this year. Consciously or not, they have inherited something from the gesture of the ZAD and the No-TAV movements, the Zapatistas in