Rebellious in Defence of Custom:

Deconstructing the Gilets Jaunes

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While the social make-up of gilets jaunes movement in France is novel in many respects, in this essay I focus on an analysis of the movement through the lens of class. Specifically, I examine the sociological composition, historical context and internal dynamics of the gilets jaunes in order to interrogate how class dynamics mediate the movement's material and symbolic demands. Applying E.P. Thompson's (1978) conception of class as a heuristic device for articulating the historical process of class-struggle, as well as borrowing his notion of rebellious traditional culture, I argue that the gilets jaunes movement fits Thompson's conception of a rebellious traditional culture of workers engaged in a class struggle in defence of a "customary moral economy" against the imposition of an "innovative market economy" (149-154). At its conception, the gilets jaunes protest took the form of a restoration of earlier, postwar class relations against a neoliberal regime characterized by budget austerity, high levels of inequality and low social mobility. However, following Thompson's dynamic conception of class, I argue further that in the span of a few months, the movement became more politically aware of itself and its capacities in the face of violent police suppression and through the experience of maintaining a participatory, egalitarian structure of organization. Thus, while it retained its initial moral framing, its demands became more radical, expanding to include ecological rights, the elimination of poverty and direct democratic participation in government decision-making. In addition, I propose that the movement's rejection of political party representation in favour of *visibility* — symbolized by donning the yellow high-visibility roadside vests — must be understood as a response to two mutually reenforcing crises: a political crisis of representation, resulting from an unaccountable social elite; and an economic crisis, resulting from forty years of neoliberal policies that deepened inequality and eroded the material

resources of the lower-middle and working class. The 'apolitical' stance of the protesters, who reject political representation but demand *visibility*, must therefore be understood in the context of the failure of both left and right political parties to address citizens' demands in the face of deteriorating material conditions. In the final section of the paper, I examine three limitations of the movement: its racial homogeneity; its focus on inequality over other social issues like poverty; and the shortfalls of its demands for institutional transformation.

The gilets jaunes and E.P. Thompson's conception of class

In this essay, I use a conception of class formulated by E.P. Thompson in "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?" in which he argues that the historical process of class struggle is the overriding factor in class formation rather than any abstract, ahistorical determinative structure (149). Because the development of capitalism is an ongoing historical process, Thompson argues that class structure must also be thought of as processual, arising as a category out of the struggle between social relations around the extraction and distribution of wealth, labour and resources. Thus, the current field of force delimiting the terrain of class struggle is analytically distinct *from* while contingent *upon* the outcomes of previous political, economic and social transformations. In the case of France, then, to speak of the lower-middle class and working class is to speak of them as "no more than a special case of the historical formations which arise out of class struggle" (150).

Rebellious in Defence of Custom

Writing of 18th century English society, Thompson characterized the struggles of the English peasantry against the depredations of early capitalist development as "rebellious in defence of custom" (154). He argues that, far from conceiving of themselves as a class, the peasantry nonetheless collectively resisted, "in the name of 'custom,' those economic

innovations (as enclosure, work-discipline, free market relations in grain) which the rulers or employers [sought] to impose" (154). These customs — whether common use-rights to land, the regulation of work and leisure or non-economic traditional practices like 'wife-swapping' — are characterized by Thompson as a "customary moral economy," which is defended as the peasant's own (154-155). However, this plebeian culture, Thompson writes, is still "constrained within the parameters of gentry hegemony" highlighting the "reciprocity of relations" underpinning the symbolics of protest (158). Thus, demands made by the protesters still fall within the limits of "what was politically 'possible'" (161).

Thompson distinguishes the conservatism of the plebs from the hegemonic conservatism of the English gentry, arguing that the content of former was not "identical with those proclaimed by the Church or authority" but rather was "defined within this plebeian culture itself" (153). It may have been irrational, superstitious, and based on archaic and folkloric customs, yet it was "not subject in its daily operations to the ideological domination of rulers" (153-154). Further, plebeian culture was often invoked in defence of the peasant's own material interests. It is in this sense of a moral invocation of social relations and obligations, perceived as traditional or customary, that I deploy Thompson's phrase in the French context.

Pace Thompson, the gilets jaunes should not be thought of as merely 'working class' in a static or determinative sense, but rather as a group of people engaged in a struggle that seeks to defend what they perceive as a customary relation, rooted in the historical past, between themselves and the social elite. Working firmly within the limits of the 20th century political imaginary, the movement's most common demands are to redistribute wealth downward through progressive taxation and increased public services, and for the removal of president Macron. The first demand, in essence, calls for a return to postwar class relations, when social spending in

France was at an all-time high and inequality was comparatively less pronounced. The second evokes an extremely personal, almost metaphysical relationship the president and the people that acts as a justification for the bypassing of political parties — which they regard as elitist and corrupt — while echoing a long tradition of contestation between the French people and their *tête d'état*. In other words, the initial demands of the movement — tax reform and the removal of Macron — share a congruence with Thompson's notion of a "rebellious traditional culture" defending a "customary moral economy" against an "innovative market economy" (154-155). Instead of the English plebs, however, it is the rural French *artisans et ouvriers* who are defending the "traditional" social relations of postwar France from the depredations of a neoliberal "innovative" economy.

Just as the peasants and artisans of 18th century England should not be thought of as a class in and of itself, the gilets jaunes should not be thought of as making up a specific class or classes but as a dynamic social formation borne of historical circumstance and collectivized, in the first instance, in defence of common material interests. As such, the gilets jaunes are in some ways a novel coalition of social groups and in some ways not. A sociological survey of 166 participants, taken in 2018 at the end of November and beginning of December, describes a movement made up of both blue and white collar workers, the majority of whom describe themselves as lower-middle class and working class (Verso Books). The movement features both a high number of women (45%) and of older citizens — nearly three times as many participants over 65 as those between the ages of 18-24 (Verso Books). Shopkeepers, small business owners and manual labourers are most heavily represented while managers and executives made up only 5% of those surveyed (Verso Books). Broad enthusiasm for the movement, which finds its most concentrated support in employees (63%), manual workers (59%) and the self-employed (62%),

supports the study's findings (Palombari and Venturini 2018). In other words, the movement represents an unusually diverse cross section of France: petit bourgeois and working class, active and retired, male and female all gathered under one vest.

With regard to political affiliation, participants overwhelmingly expressed distrust of mainstream political parties on both sides of the spectrum. Indeed, the dominant response, when asked to rank themselves on the political spectrum was 'apolitical' (Verso Books). Moreover, 81% of those interviewed rejected the involvement of any political party in the movement, two-thirds denied significant trade union involvement and almost half the participants said that they had never participated in a political mobilization before (Verso Books). The high concentration of small business owners and day labourers in the movement explains in part the lack of interest in unions. However, the unions, for their part, are largely supportive of the movement, though careful not to condone certain demands like the call for lower taxes, which they view as an important retributive mechanism (Fassin and Defosser 2019, 83).

As diverse as it is, the movement remains coalesced around certain common issues, the most important of which are taxation and the demand for the resignation of president Macron. First, though the movement originated as a protest against a tax hike on gasoline, the demands quickly expanded to a broad demand for income redistribution — lower taxes for workers, greater purchasing power, higher wages and pensions, and a restoration of the wealth tax (Fassin and Defosser 81). Thus, while the gas tax was the trigger for the protests, the movement itself is "less a revolt against a particular tax, or in defence of car use, than a revolt against a tax and benefit system considered unfair" (Verso Books). Second, there is widespread anger toward President Macron, who they perceive to be arrogant and dismissive. While protesters variably blamed the state, the government and a system which "despised them and devalued them

symbolically," their demand for respect and recognition was often expressed toward Macron himself. One in five surveyed called for Macron's resignation, while "the terms 'monarchy', 'oligarchy' or 'dictatorship' were often used to emphasize [the government's] illegitimacy" (Verso Books). In an interview taken mid-December, Anthony Joubert, one of the movement's founders, emphasized the executive's personal duty to the citizens: "it's [Macron] who has to understand us. He should be spending his time listening instead of creating a situation where restaurants can charge 15 euros for a bottle of water" (Williamson 2018). Similarly, a protester in the November 24 demonstrations reenforced this perceived personal connection, stating that "Macron listens to nothing. He's suddenly concerned about ecology, but it's a lie: it's a pretext to make us pay more tax" (Willsher 2018). Both men clearly link their demands regarding taxation and purchasing power with Macron's refusal to listen. These two demands — tax reform and the resignation of Macron — reveal the rebellious conservative perspective at the heart of the movement because each demands social change on the basis of a moral right rooted in the historical past. The rebellion of the protesters against the state is mediated through a nostalgic vision of class relations, in which the demand for "fairer" taxation, accepts the state as a central arbiter of social relations, while explicit references to Macron's duty to listen to and care for "the people" evoke a Gaullist, paternalistic relation between president and populace.

Radicalization through struggle

Though the spirit of rebellious conservatism remained, as the movement developed protesters became more aware of their own political capacities and the demands of the movement became more radical. Such development is evident in the content of the declaration of the first assembly of assemblies, convened in Commerçy at the end of January 2019 (ROAR Collective). Following several days of debates, workshops and democratic decision-making, the document

released at the end of January called for a mass strike in the name of a radical transformation of French society and the state (ROAR Collective). Among its demands, it listed "the end of misery in all its forms, the transformation of the institutions (with projects like the Citizen Initiated Referendum, constituent assembly, the end of the privileges of the elected representatives), the ecological transition … equality and the recognition of anyone no matter what nationality" (ROAR Collective). Such radical demands marked a significant departure from the initial goals of the protest. It is tempting to argue, following Mark Davis (2018), that the struggle by the protesters against the state begot increasing awareness of new possibilities and of *radical needs* (Davis 146-147). In *Old Gods, New Enigmas,* Davis argues that through the experience of engaging in class struggle — whether for shorter hours, higher wages or lower taxes — workers broaden and deepen their understanding of their own political potential. In the course of struggling for their economic and political rights, they develop new radical goals to address qualitative needs like the need for community and human relationships, for universality and for free time and activity (146-147). Similarly for the gilets jaunes, in just over two months, the visceral experience of a reactionary state apparatus in the form of police brutality, coupled with work of organizing a leaderless, egalitarian movement, led to a radical shift in many of those in the movement.

In Stathis Kouvelakis' (2019) piece on the gilets jaunes for *New Left Review,* he notes that this shift may partly be due to the subtle facilitation of participatory decision-making by those in the movement with more political experience, either through schooling or previous collective organizing (84). During the first assembly of assemblies, he writes, a small group of "mostly men, played an informal but effective role in catalyzing collective activity and providing a conceptual framework for it," and in particular that those belonging to social-libertarian group

‘Là qu’on vive’ “helped prepare the ground for the group’s emphasis on self-organization and direct democracy” (85). However, despite the tendency for more radical calls for institutional change to come from the more left-leaning and highly educated factions of the movement, such appeals were generally received favourably — for instance, the demand for popular sovereignty won unanimous approval (89). Thus, out of a diversity of views, radical demands found a place alongside earlier calls for higher purchasing power and lower taxes. Following Thompson’s conception of class as *processual*, and Davis’ notion of *radical needs*, the movement’s development from relatively conservative aims to more radical ones cannot be understood as two alternative, static conceptions of the movement, but as equally significant descriptions of internally fluid dynamics. Thus, the existence within the movement of heterogenous and even contradictory internal political goals is not a puzzle to be resolved but rather evidence of the dynamism inherent in the movement itself.

Visibility in the French context

The refusal of the gilets jaunes to elect spokespeople within the movement, as well as their rejection of both mainstream and fringe political parties stands in seemingly ironic contrast to the central complaint they have been left out of politics. What seems like a contradiction, however, must be understood as a reaction to the development in France of twin crises of political representation and capitalist exploitation. In light of these two historical processes, the symbol of the protest — the high-visibility yellow vest that every driver in France carries — can be understood as a symbolic demand for *visibility* — a reaction premised on the perceived invisibility of the protesters within an unfair political economic system. Thus, the distinction between *visibility* and representation lies in the rejection of political representation as a rigged game, in which the choice of right or left results in the same government policies, and the real

needs of the citizens are made invisible. This experience of invisibility, consciously or not, shaped the symbolism of the yellow vests and perhaps as well the choice of the roundabout as a stage upon which the act of protest would be performed.

In order to further understand the symbolism of visibility, such a sentiment must be situated in a broader context of historical developments in the social and political structure of the Fifth Republic alongside global political and economic dynamics. Politically, at the moment of its conception, the Fifth Republic contained the seeds of a crisis of representation. Inaugurated by Charles de Gaulle in 1958, the new republic "actively encouraged the fusion of political and administrative power in a highly centralized state," which led to a consolidation of power in a new *class dirigeante:* a "tightly interlocking" strata of administrators, politicians and business elites who attended the same 'grandes écoles' (founded under de Gaulle), obtained the same rotating positions in the public and private sectors and held the same ideological positions (Girling 7). The result, as Jacques Rancière points out, was the development of a "culture of consensus," that gave "precedence to the science of experts over the passions of the multitude" (Rancière 75). In addition, de Gaulle reestablished the office of the presidency as a symbolically and materially central position in French politics by insisting that the president be directly elected (Girling 7). De Gaulle believed that the president should rise above parliamentary politics, embodying the state by "projecting the power and prestige of France" (7). Indeed, this is clearly the image of the presidency that Macron seeks to emulate — five days into the gilets jaunes protests, as some 280,000 protesters around France took to the streets, Macron welcomed journalists into the presidential palace to give them a tour of the "costly renovation of its sumptuous ballroom" (Fassin and Defossez 77). Ironically, it was also the image that protesters took to heart, in viewing Macron as personally responsible for their misery.

Second, the last forty years in France have been characterized by increasing inequality and steeply declining purchasing power for the social groups most heavily represented in the gilets jaunes movement. By contrast, prior to the mid-1970s, the postwar period of the *trente glorieuses* saw a rapid expansion of the middle class as new industrial production, centred around modern technologies (of which the automobile was by far the most significant), transformed both city and countryside (Girling 7). In a parallel dynamic, a new consumerist culture, essential to the reigning Keynesian vision of demand-side economic growth, literally and figuratively paved over social tensions (7). Thus, even as inequality began rising in the 1980s, after the oil shocks of the 1970s and the neoliberal turn toward austerity and budget discipline, generous welfare protections and strong purchasing power continued to buy working and middle class quiescence (Fassin and Defosser 79). By the time of the financial crisis of 2009, the resolution of which resulted in an immense upward distribution of wealth at the same time as a recession applied downward pressure on wages and employment, class tensions had once again risen to the fore (79). Since then, falling purchasing power, particularly for the lower-middle and working classes has only intensified the feeling that the political and economic systems was corrupt and unfair (79).

In sum, the governing consensus between left and right political parties, stemming from the common structural position of the *class dirigeante* within the Fifth Republic, left large swathes of the population increasingly unrepresented. On the other hand, from the 1980s onward economic conditions steadily deteriorated, a process that accelerated dramatically after the financial crisis of 2009. These twin dynamics are central to the feelings of invisibility by the lower-middle and working classes that are now being channeled through the gilets jaunes' symbolic call for visibility, expressed in the donning of the high-visibility yellow vests.

Limitations of the movement

While the movement is diverse in many respects and enjoys a high level of support across demographics, it suffers from a lack of racial diversity. Though careful to use the language of inclusion, the movement's populist rhetoric of national solidarity — referred to by Stathis Kouvelakis as *francité* — is an obstacle to building trust and engaging with racialized communities and non-french peoples — particularly those groups that populate the impoverished urban *banlieus* (Kouvelakis 89-90). Though many within the movement have worked assiduously to steer public discussion away from problematic language, "in particular the use of 'cas soc' or cas sociaux, a racialized version of 'welfare scroungers' — that were sometimes heard in the early weeks of the movement," Kouvelakis notes that the position "inherent in the call for *francité* that marks the identity of the gilets jaunes" acts as both a normative force for inclusion, uniting all "behind the national flag" and one of exclusion for all those who fall outside historical, cultural and legal definitions of citizen (84; 91). On the one hand, the erasure of difference marks the dissolution of the individual into the greater body politic, and on the other, it marks the dissolution of the needs and identifications of marginalized groups into an implicitly assimilationist conception of the French people. As Kouvelakis puts it, *francité* "occludes the invisibilization of non-nationals and the fact that, against the yardstick of 'French-ness', some nationals (whites, non-Muslims) turn out to be more 'French' than others" (91). Further, by claiming to represent those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the gilets jaunes excludes those groups "who contest *francité*…and who belong to an overwhelming extent to the same social world of 'below'" (91).

Distinct yet inseparable from the issue of race is the movement's focus on inequality over other social issues like poverty. It is crucial here to eschew clichéd characterizations of rural

French people as backwards and racist, and instead take stock of how the lived experience of those who make up the movement shapes their demands. For instance, many of the gilets jaunes have seen their standard of living drop much more dramatically compared to other social groups. Such an experience, precisely because it was *relatively* more precipitous than for others, was experienced in isolation with a broader increase in economic insecurity. In light of this phenomenon, perceptions of the movement as far-right, while missing the mark considerably, pick up on the sometimes spoken but usually implicit sentiment that the protesters see themselves as having been treated *exceptionally* badly and consequently as paying more than their fair share. Moreover, as the call for tax cuts suggest, the gilets jaunes are overwhelmingly tax payers, rather than direct beneficiaries of state welfare. The implication is that there are others who *don't* pay their fair share — a group that certainly includes the rich but also, for some in the movement, those who receive state assistance.

Poor and racialized groups, on the other hand — who in many ways fared worse in the same period — experienced the same historical dynamics in the context of a system that had *already failed them*. As Fassin and Defosser point out, the poorer, racialized classes in France, who are "mostly of African descent… suffer the highest rates of unemployment and poverty… see little investment in public services," experience higher rates of police violence and often do not own a car (84). Thus, it is no surprise that "when interviewed, they declare that they do not really identify with a movement that is mostly white," finding it "ironic that the yellow vests seem to be discovering what they have experienced themselves for decades: social marginalization, economic hardship and police violence" (84). Furthermore, without dismissing the movement's aims, many of those who are worse off than the gilets jaunes do not necessarily stand to gain much from their demands. For instance, tax breaks would not help, and may even

indirectly hurt those who rely on state support, while a minimum wage increase has little to offer the unemployed.

The third limitation of the movement is that its programmatic demands for renewed democratic participation aim decidedly short of the transformation of state structures needed to allow for the possibility of the success of their more radical goals. For instance, the demand for a renegotiation of processes of participation, expressed through projects like the Citizen Initiated Referendum, move toward some mixture of plebiscite and referendum but neglect the need to dismantle deep structural asymmetries of power at regional, national and global levels. Similarly, the demand for progressive redistribution of wealth through tax reform leaves untouched the institutionalization of capital accumulation, including the state's role in maintaining capitalism through violence. Returning to Thompson, who argued that the demands of the protesting peasantry in 18th century England always fell within the limits of the politically "possible," the limitations of invoking past customary relations are here reflected in the case of the gilets jaunes. Karl Marx (1987) warned against such the romanticization of tradition in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* when he cautioned that social revolution must not "draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future" (18). The class relations of the past, though they may in some ways have been relatively more equitable than today, remain relations of domination and exploitation. As such, without a radical transformation of the state, and of the class system itself, the moral economy of the gilets jaunes — if successfully implemented — may simply affect a temporary return to the marginally more equitable quiescence of the postwar *trente glorieuses*.

Conclusion

The gilets jaunes is a multifaceted, dynamic movement that emerged from the effects of neoliberal economic policies and a crisis of political representation. Composed of lower-middle

and working class, predominantly white men and women, the movement began as a defence of a customary moral economy grounded in postwar class relations against the increasingly destructive predations of a neoliberal "innovative" market economy. Through the experience of struggle, the movement evolved by developing its political awareness and becoming more radical. In addition, it utilized a highly effective symbolism of the yellow roadside vest to call for *visibility* in light of a perceived lack of representation within an unfair political economic system. However, the movement also has limitations: its lack of racial diversity in light of the inherently problematic notion of *francité*; its narrow focus on inequality over broader issues of social justice; and the shortfalls of its programs for radical change, which call for direct democracy and greater equality but leave oppressive institutions of power relatively unchanged. Despite diversity in age, gender and class, if the movement is to continue to grow there is little doubt that it will have to draw in the poor and racialized communities of the urban *banlieus*, as well as make alliances with other political actors like unionized labour and the student movement. This may entail leaving behind certain programs for change, like lower taxation, and expanding others, like citizenship rights. It may also entail calling for an even more radical transformation of oppressive social institutions, as challenges to police brutality within the movement have done (Haynes 2019). While its future remains uncertain, the gilets jaunes portend new ruptures and new coalitions to come. Insofar as the movement continues to attempt to reach beyond nostalgic conceptions of class relations toward more radical forms of social and political organization, it may yet extend the bounds of what is politically "possible" for the French people to achieve.

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