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The Gilets Jaunes roundabout: A symbol, medium, and public space

Multitudes n°74, 2019, pp.7-15

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“Thanks to Macron for our renewed fraternal bond”

Sign on a roundabout in the south-east of France

The Gilets Jaunes movement has done more for the fluorescent yellow vest than even Karl Lagerfeld, who a decade ago declared, “It’s yellow, ugly, and doesn’t go with anything, but might just save your life.”¹ Reading between the lines of fear and hope, who and what are the Gilets Jaunes? Before the camps that have sprung up around French roundabouts are bulldozed into oblivion, and before curiosity can be replaced by rejection, I set out to discover the reality and seek out “the unexpected.”² Rather like Julio Cortázar in his exploration of the Paris-Marseille freeway,³ or my walk with Gilles Rabin around Paris at the time of the 2005 riots,⁴ it was as an “open-air geographer” that I decided to tackle this phenomenon, by going on an—as-yet incomplete—journey of discovery to a handful of roundabouts in eastern France.

Emotion and reason

Like many French people, my first encounter with the movement came at a toll booth: near Chambéry, on a Sunday in November. I cursed the go-slow operation but took advantage of the free passage offered by these “angry people.”⁵

The arrogance exuding from the commentary offered by many intellectuals, journalists, and much of the political class on these “people in yellow” was difficult to take. I was outraged by the dismissive judgements passed on the regions concerned and the people involved: that they were xenophobic, misogynist, violent, fascist, out of touch, unable to see the “real” societal and environmental issues at stake, or to adapt. To a certain extent, these were my regions. This tribe was also my family, my friends, and my childhood. Perhaps this last-ditch uprising to prevent its demise might have something to say about society, about its range of different situations and imaginaries.

Paradox and fluidity

The movement is characterized by paradox: first, by the contrast between its high level of visibility—the mandatory vest⁶—and the social invisibility of the individuals who belong to it; second, by the fixed way in which the roundabout is appropriated by its occupants

¹ French road safety advert.

² Henri Maldiney, *Art et existence* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003).

³ Julio Cortázar, trans. Anne McLean, *Autonauts of the Cosmoroute: A Timeless Voyage from Paris to Marseille* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2007).

⁴ Luc Gwiazdzinski and Gilles Rabin, *Périphéries. Un voyage à pied autour de Paris* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007).

⁵ Banner on a toll booth in Isère.

⁶ All vehicles are required to carry a yellow vest following a decision of the French Interministerial Committee on Road Safety issued on February 13, 2018.

compared to the symbol of the mobile society that it represents; and finally, by the decision to “occupy” a place as off-putting and detestable as a roundabout, and manage to turn it into a place of life and welcoming encounter.

The Gilets Jaunes present us with a permanent, protean, unstable, proliferating movement: in a word, one that is “hypermodern.” When we think we have pinned it down, it has already changed. No sooner have its leaders been identified than they have already vanished. When we think we have identified its methods of action, it has already developed new ones. No sooner has it been mapped out than it has already metamorphosed.

New geographical imaginaries

Through their actions and appropriations, the Gilets Jaunes form a discontinuous figure, an archipelago of islands in a geography of actions, a new, bright yellow “scene” that combines “the group of people, as they move from place to place [. . .] the places through which they move [. . .] [and] the movement itself.”⁷

In Paris, the movement challenges the usual geography of demonstrations by reaching into different neighborhoods, such as Montmartre and around the Avenue Kléber. When it published a map of the “sites of power” on which the “traditional demonstration routes” were marked,⁸ *Le monde diplomatique*, accused of “an incitement to crime,”⁹ unleashed a controversy that demonstrates the importance of revisiting established ideas.

The geography of demonstrations now includes other cities and metropolitan areas that form a fractal, polytopic pattern of offshoots, with the increasingly decentralized “Yellow Saturdays” providing an outline for a less centralist vision of France. By appropriating the transit areas of a “metropolitanized” region, and blocking highways as streets were once blocked in the past, the Gilets Jaunes movement reveals the change in the scale of our everyday living spaces. And it singles out in particular the proliferating symbol of the roundabout—whose numbers have grown from 5000 in the mid-1990s to over 40,000 today—in a France that has become “disfigured”¹⁰ or “ugly,”¹¹ with its monotonous housing developments, bypasses, wastelands, and out-of-town shopping malls situated amid the loveliness of “corn-growing plains” or in the ruins of the threadbare wooded pastureland that remains from times gone by.

The spaces of the movement’s demands sketch out a region caught between what might remain of a “deep countryside” that has long been used as a background for presidential candidate posters, a “banlieue” still awaiting its promised “Marshall Plan,” and the glossy city centers. They also draw attention to a “peri-urban,” or “rurban,” lifestyle in which people inhabit time and space by car, flitting between the neighborhoods of an “urban sprawl.”¹²

⁷ William Straw, “Scenes and Sensibilities,” *Public*, nos. 22–23 (2001).

⁸ Agnès Stienne, “À Paris, les lieux du pouvoir,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 5, 2018.

⁹ Pauline Perrenot, “Lieux de pouvoir: la carte du Monde diplomatique qui n’a pas plu à l’élite journalistique,” January 7, 2019, www.acrimed.org/Lieux-de-pouvoir-la-carte-du-Monde-diplomatique.

¹⁰ “France défigurée [France Disfigured]” was the name of a popular French television program on environmental protection broadcast on the Première channel from 1971 to 1977, and then briefly on France 2 in 1995.

¹¹ Xavier de Jarcy and Vincent Rémy, “Comment la France est devenue moche?” *Télérama*, February 12, 2010.

¹² Francesco Indovina (ed.), *La Città diffusa* (Venice: DAEST-IUAV, 1990).

Geographies and utopias of action

By focusing on roundabouts, reappropriating them, taking ownership of them, and succeeding in “occupying” them,¹³ the Gilets Jaunes negate the very idea of “non-places.”¹⁴ With a presence on both the web and in the public space, the movement turns roundabouts into hybrid “hyperplaces” that are augmented, solidified, and intensified by multiple activities, links, and synergies between the real and virtual worlds, between the web and on the ground.

Whether legal or illegal, these “unfinished places”¹⁵ *define a form of concrete utopia* that locates aspirations within the materiality of the world, opening up new horizons in a space where everything seemed blocked, and seeking to recover a territory of freedom. Their experiences connect to other forms of occupation, territorial resistance, and “oppositional communes” (*communs oppositionnels*) such as the ZAD (“zones à défendre”) activist camps, the Nuit Debout protest movement, and acts of “guerilla gardening.”

Communities of experience

The Gilets Jaunes are developing their own kinds of performances, narratives, and territorial fictionalizations (leaflets, interviews, and social networks). They are constructing “situations,”¹⁶ creating spatialities, setting up arrangements, and “temporary autonomous zones.”¹⁷ Here, those who say they have been abandoned feel like they exist. In just a few weeks, they have formed genuine “communities of experience.”¹⁸ In October, most of them did not know one another, but they now speak of friendship, love, and fraternity, and even dread it all coming to an end. The roundabout is a small world where everyone has a nickname. The solidarity is not feigned. It’s rather “like back in the mining days,” as they recall in the Pays-Haut region.

The Gilets Jaunes did not opt for roundabouts by chance. These are places where cars slow down and where people can “leaflet,” places where cars visibly converge and are redistributed: “People see us living and having conversations, and that might make them want to join us.” They are identifiable, lived places “where you can arrange to meet someone.”

The facilities, rebuilt countless times following removal, fire, and destruction, have gradually turned into camps, or even proper little villages with cabins and outbuildings, composting toilets, and stacks of pallets and kindling. The longevity of the occupation is often the result of a fragile compromise with the security forces and elected representatives, and depends on the relationships that have formed. On the roundabouts, the Gilets Jaunes and gendarmes often call one another by their first names.

¹³ Eric Dardel, *L’Homme et la Terre: nature de la réalité géographique* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 1952).

¹⁴ Marc Augé, trans. John Howe, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

¹⁵ Luc Gwiazdzinski, “Localiser les in-finis,” in *Lieux infinis. Construire des bâtiments ou des lieux?* ed. Encore Heureux (Paris: B42, 2018), 39–53.

¹⁶ “A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events”: *Internationale Situationniste* no. 1 (1958), trans. Ken Knabb.

¹⁷ Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991).

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1990 [1934]).

On the ground, there is always a good atmosphere: “Everyone feels good here,” you hear at each gyratory. You end up forgetting the noise from the road and the power generator thanks to the animated conversations and motley playlist of songs emanating from the sound system: from “Bella Ciao” to the “Chant des Partisans,” the back catalog of Zaz, Michel Sardou, and the Gilets Jaunes’ “hymns.”

The average age is fairly high: around forty, if not older. The majority of people are of working age, and there are slightly more men than women. The latter are heavily involved in the life of the roundabout: many are housewives, separated from their partners, who have come “to fight for better living conditions.” On most roundabouts you find a core group consisting of retirees and working-age women, supplemented by young workers in their thirties. There are lots of skilled tradespeople, manual laborers, low-level service workers, and a few farmers who sometimes lend a tractor or supplies, and provide wood. A few professions, such as nursing, are particularly strongly represented. Some work for several employers and the majority work staggered shifts.

The groups vary in size depending on the time of day: from between three to ten people in the morning to a dozen in the afternoon, and twenty to forty in the evening. Peak numbers are reached with the Friday general assembly, which attracts around a hundred people. On some roundabouts, which act as a place of congregation for the Saturday gatherings, the group swells to several hundred. The Gilets Jaunes ensure there is always someone present on the roundabout in order to prevent it from being destroyed or occupied by others. The Friday assemblies take place on-site: “so that people passing by in cars can see there are lots of us.” The roundabout acts as a “base camp” where the Gilets Jaunes and other citizens can come to restock on wood, equipment, and food. The roundabout is the point of departure for toll booth blockades, demonstrations, and leafleting campaigns in shopping malls.

People on the roundabouts “don’t like leaders” and “are scared of them.” Instead, they have representatives who “speak better than others” and “contact persons” elected at the assemblies to represent specific areas, such as “managing funds,” “organization,” “security,” and “liaison and communication” with the town hall and other groups. On many roundabouts, an “action idea sheet” and planning sheet are pinned up in the cabins. Things appear to be more compartmentalized on the related social networks, with a main “private” circle of a dozen or so key actors to discuss strategic issues and a WhatsApp or Facebook group to inform a wider network.

The camps or “villages” that have formed reflect an esthetic in which things are cobbled together, in which the temporary becomes long-term; an esthetic of getting by and recycling, of the precarious, and of solidarity. From the road, the roundabout can resemble a “comforting nativity scene” with all of its crib figures in place, or an “unsettling nest of pirates” drowned in the fumes. It all depends on your point of view.

A willingness to be put to the test

When asked what kind of society they want, the Gilets Jaunes often respond in terms of equality and sharing. A sign at the entrance to a cabin on one of the roundabouts provides

a fair summary of the spirit of place: “I’ll listen to them when they talk about humanity rather than millions.”¹⁹

While their slogans may focus on issues of purchasing power, calls for the president to step down, and the Citizens’ Initiative Referendum, their underlying demand is always to be visible and heard: “We want to be active participants, not just represented.” The word “dignity” often crops up in discussions. For most people, the occupation is the culmination of a gradual process—“this has been coming for thirty years”²⁰—and its focus is on the future: “I’m doing this for my children and grandchildren.” They are also motivated by the desire to uphold the values of their family: “I work in management now, but I know where I came from. I’m also doing this in tribute to my parents.” At most sites there is always a helping hand, a friendly word of greeting, and a coffee to break the ice and warm people up. The roundabouts are welcoming places, and signs displayed on the approach invite drivers to stop by for ten minutes. There are no xenophobic comments; in fact, Aslan tells me the story of a troublemaker who used unacceptable language and was set straight by the entire group before being excluded. The roundabout is the positive symbol of the movement, its medium, its window on the urban area and the world.

Free spaces for public debate

Beyond this spirit of place, the hope is that the energy of these roundabout theaters—places of reappropriation, occupation, and invention—will continue. The experience demonstrates the social “performance” of the roundabout, turned café and metropolitan village square. These liberating arrangements could be turned into agoras for citizens’ debates, assemblies, and round tables open to all. This “democratic design” is yet to be imagined. In the age of the digital society, the spirit of the roundabouts demonstrates the importance of face-to-face encounters. It would not be the least of the paradoxes presented by the Gilets Jaunes if the “free” space of the roundabouts were to help us find meaning and prevent us—appropriately enough—from going round in circles.

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¹⁹ Words taken from the lyrics of Keni Arkana’s song “Vie d’artiste,” released in 2012.

²⁰ Pierre, a 72-year-old farmer I met on a roundabout in the Lorraine region.

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