



**HAL**  
open science

## Bridging the gap in social movement research: family as a vehicle for mobilization for the Yellow Vests

Antoine Bernard de Raymond, Sylvain Bordiec

### ► To cite this version:

Antoine Bernard de Raymond, Sylvain Bordiec. Bridging the gap in social movement research: family as a vehicle for mobilization for the Yellow Vests. *French Politics*, 2022, 20 (3-4), pp.504-528. 10.1057/s41253-022-00194-w . halshs-03834299

**HAL Id: halshs-03834299**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03834299v1>**

Submitted on 24 Nov 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

## **Bridging the gap in social movement research: family as a vehicle for mobilization for the Yellow Vests**

*Abstract:* The Yellow Vests movement has been a puzzle for social movement researchers, in that it seemed to be marked by a profound contradiction: a powerful and sustainable mass movement and the absence of what are usually considered to be the essential ingredients of a social movement. We argue that family is a key element in the Yellow Vests' mobilization. This element, which has gone largely unnoticed, allows us to understand the reasons for popular anger, the way in which public policy measures can undermine solidarity mechanisms specific to the working and lower middle classes, and finally the ways in which the movement was organized. Beyond the case of the Yellow Vests, the role of family in social movements remains relatively under-studied and poses a challenge to the dominant approach to these research objects (*Contentious Politics*). Taking the family underpinning of mobilizations into account, helps bridging the gap between cultural practices and strategic action in social movement research.

*Keywords:* Yellow Vests; Social movements; Grievances; Family; Household economy.

With its eruptive and insurrectional character, the Yellow Vests movement had a strong impact on French society. This movement has been the object of multiple contradictory interpretations, some seeing it as the emergence of a French-style "Tea Party" (Rouban, 2019), others seeing it as the return of class struggle (Denave, 2021). This movement has also been a puzzle for social movement researchers, in that it seemed to be marked by a profound contradiction: a powerful and sustainable mass movement and the absence of what are usually considered to be the essential ingredients of a social movement. Indeed, it is usually assumed that at an individual level a social movement is conditioned by dispositions to action and contention (Mathieu, 2004), and at a collective level by an organization providing resources (McAdam et al., 2001; McCarthy and Zald, 1973). Initially, the Yellow Vests lacked both. Moreover, this movement differs from "New Social Movements", which are oriented towards cultural, identity and self-fulfillment dimensions (Inglehart, 1977), by focusing on material conditions of existence and economic issues.

Interpretation of the Yellow Vests movement thus constitutes a triple challenge relating to: (i) its political meaning, (ii) its internal organization, composition and modes of action, and most importantly, (iii) the claims of the participants or even its causes. To solve this puzzle, we examine the claims of the

Yellow Vests, collected from a questionnaire survey on the movement's rallying places. We cross-reference these data with ethnographic observations of the mobilization as well as comprehensive interviews with the Yellow Vests. We argue that family, both in its economic and material dimensions (Dechaux, 2011 ; Skeggs, 1997) and in its social, political and symbolic dimensions (Bourdieu, 1993 ; Cadoret, 2011 ; Commaille, 2006), is a key element in the Yellow Vests' movement. This element, which has gone largely unnoticed, allows to understand the reasons for popular anger, the way in which public policy measures can undermine solidarity mechanisms specific to the working and lower middle classes, and finally the ways in which the movement was organized. We understand the family from two points of view. First, we focus on the nuclear family, i.e. the legal, symbolic, emotional and educational ties between parents and children within the same household. In the second part of the paper, we look at the family from the intergenerational standpoint of the mechanisms of solidarity between generations living apart from one another .

Beyond the case of the Yellow Vests, the role of family in social movements remains under-studied and poses a challenge to the dominant approach to these research objects (*Contentious Politics*). Indeed, this approach focuses mainly on the organizational and strategic features, the modes of action and the explicitly political dimension of social movements. Yet the divide between collective action and everyday life is far from being as clear-cut as it might seem (Haenfler et al., 2012). The objective of "placing the extraordinary of this movement in the ordinary conditions of existence" (Hayat et al., 2021) means analyzing the Yellow Vests through a family lens: we argue that family is a key element of their mobilization and thus propose to unveil the "family matrix" of their "body and soul commitments" (Fillieule et al., 2021). We show that the family plays a fourfold part in this mobilization: (1) from the standpoint of grievances and the economic dimension of the movement, certain fiscal measures are rejected because they undermine economic and cultural expectations relating to the family and the education of children; (2) these obstacles to the room for maneuver of individuals and

families feed a feeling of symbolic downgrading as well as a pessimistic vision of the future: the fear of intergenerational downgrading ("the children's future") thus appears to be a major driver of popular anger; (3) from an organizational standpoint, family arrangements allow (or on the contrary prevent) active participation in the movement; finally (4), the specific social nature of a roundabout makes it possible to recreate a sense of family belonging and find there, in contrast to the hardships experienced in the "real" family, a sort of "ideal" family, which goes some way to explaining the movement's attractiveness in rural and peri-urban areas.

### **Family in social movements**

In its different forms (*Resource Mobilization Theory*, *Political Process Theory*, *Contentious Politics*), the dominant approach to social movements focuses on collective action, its organizational and material dimensions, and its explicitly political orientation.

Other approaches – such as the sociology of activism – show the role played by family as an instance of political and activist socialization (Masclat, 2015; Pagis, 2014), as well as the interactions between activist pathways and family. But biographical paths and socialization are not the subject of this paper. Our primary interest here is the interaction between the family and the dynamics of social movements, in their material and practical dimensions (participation, organization, modes of action, sociability, etc.). Snow (2005) called for a renewal of the study of social movements through a more open conception. This call led to the consideration of subjective, cultural and identity dimensions in the study of social movements (Haenfler et al., 2012). From this perspective, we contribute to bridging the gap between family and social movements (Cf. Verberg, 2009).

Until now, family as a driver of mobilizations has been studied for movements explicitly aiming at defending the family, whether it is the defense of traditional family values (Robcis, 2015), or a reaction to a tragic event such as the death of a child (Verberg, 2009). It is thus the family as a cultural

phenomenon that has been explored. Here, we are specifically interested in the socio-economic dimension of the family as a key driver of social mobilization, in a movement that does not explicitly have a family motive. It should be noted that an important limitation of *Contentious Politics* is that it underestimates the role that motivations and grievances play in the dynamics of social movements (Simmons, 2014). In particular, it neglects the role played by material conditions and economic cycles (Caren et al., 2017), focusing instead on political opportunity structures, i.e. the holds offered (or not) by the field of power. Yet in the case of the Yellow Vests, economic causes play an obvious part in the mobilization (Blavier, 2021; Ravelli, 2021), but it is still necessary to specify in what way. From this point of view, the Yellow Vests movement has been predominantly interpreted as a class conflict, embodying for example the revival of labor conflicts in a context of a weakening of the conventional action repertoire of the labor movement (unions, strikes, collective bargaining). While we confirm the economic dimension of the Yellow Vests movement and the fact that it embodies a transformation of class conflicts, we nevertheless wish to emphasize that this conflict is not only part of the sphere of labor and production, but also and more broadly of that of ways of living, including consumption practices and ties with places and territories. If the diesel tax was so fiercely rejected by an entire portion of French society, it was not only due to the additional cost it represented, but also because it was perceived as an attack on a way of life, an unfair way of making certain disadvantaged social groups bear responsibility for climate change and symbolically delegitimizing them.

We argue that the Yellow Vests movement is not only part of the sphere of production, but also of that of consumption and access to goods, and that it mobilizes individuals not only as workers, but also as members of various collectives pertaining to the family sphere. In other words, if the question of purchasing power has so strongly mobilized a part of French society, this is above all because it put to the test the social status of working class families, the mechanisms of intergenerational solidarity, and their confidence in the future of the next generation. This is how we can understand the slogan, so

often heard on the occupied roundabouts, in the midst of demands for purchasing power and fiscal justice: "*We're not here for ourselves, we're here for our children!*" ("On est pas là pour nous, on est là pour nos enfants!"). We contend that, beyond the case of the Yellow Vests, this is a general mechanism: family is a crucial element of social reproduction (Bessières, Gollac, 2020). Therefore, socioeconomic mechanisms affecting or disrupting family arrangements are likely to trigger protest.

Regarding the individual characteristics of participants, the participation of women and the elderly has been noted by many observers as a distinctive characteristic of this movement compared to many other collective mobilizations. Specifically, the question of the mechanisms of intra-family solidarity allows us to clarify the participation of these categories of the population. This leads to some developments on the part of the family and family policies in France as socio-economic instances.

In Western countries, with the transformation of the Welfare state and the extension of market relations, the contemporary family tends more and more to respond to a norm of individual fulfillment, rather than to the reproduction of traditional values (Ergas et al., 2019). One can question the relationship of the Yellow Vests to this norm which "henceforth [...] would offer [the individual] a fulfilling framework of life, both secure and capable of guaranteeing a certain freedom"<sup>1</sup> (Déchaux, 2011): in the working class and the lower middle class that make up the Yellow Vests, where "patrimonial accumulation is not very important", this fulfillment comes up against the deficit of economic means (Chauvel, 2016). Apart from the fact that it does not favor an adjustment with the dominant family norms, this deficit prevents parents from "holding their own in the sphere of expenditure" (Déchaux, 2011). The immediate hardships experienced by the working and lower-middle classes are part of a lengthier "transition from rapid and permanent growth to lasting stagnation" and that of the "backlash of the gap between aspirations and social possibilities of

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors' translation from French.

realization" (Chauvel, 2016). What is more, neo-liberal reforms of the welfare state have led to a reduction in the base of social assistance recipients. Increasingly, social programs are restricted to individuals and households below a poverty line. As a result, the lower middle classes are excluded from these social programs and have to cope on their own with the various risks (illness, unemployment, divorce, etc.) in an increasingly flexible labor market. Covering of these risks results in an increase in pre-committed expenses (private insurance, etc.) and an increased dependence on family solidarity. In these areas of social space, solidarity "readily takes the form of temporary cohabitation or domestic organization based on close household proximity and the nodal position of the mother" (Déchaux, 2011). Those forms of "intimate transactions" (Zelizer, 2007), unfold within the "maisonnée", a domestic unit irreducible to the household [members] sharing the same dwelling: "divorced parents effectively mobilized around the education of their common children, young adults with housing but not financial autonomy from their parents, dependent elderly people whose care implies forms of cohabitation at a distance" (Weber, 2011). The fact remains that compensation through family solidarity is not a sustainable solution (Chauvel, 2016). Moreover, benefiting from this solidarity is experienced as shameful and as a symptom of failure, as it shows an impossible access to autonomy (Faure, Le Dantec, 2017). Let us also note that sometimes this solidarity is not even possible, especially because of the geographical distance between parents and children, what is a frequent pattern among the Yellow Vests subject to work and residential mobility.

The "negative dissonance between narrow expectations and concrete realities" gradually generates "frustration", itself a potential generator of "revolutionary or anti-system oriented political actions" (Chauvel, 2016). Thus, according to Olivier Fillieule, the Yellow Vests movement originated in an "acute feeling (...) of being trapped in a destiny in which any perspective of intra and intergenerational mobility is absent" (Fillieule et al., 2020). In addition, the current deterioration of material living conditions fuels a more general fear that the next generation will endure conditions

that are even more difficult. "As the Yellow Vests very often claim: "We are not here for ourselves, we are here for our children!" An analysis of the Yellow Vests' grievances shows how the fear of intergenerational downgrading (Peugny, 2009; Eckert, 2014) plays a key part in the mobilization. We can formulate the hypothesis (beyond the Yellow Vests movement) that people are all the more likely to mobilize when material adversity affects not only them, but affects or might also affect their children.

Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the strategic, material and organizational dimensions of collective action. In particular, it emphasizes the effectiveness of large centralized organizations in collecting and distributing the resources necessary for large-scale mobilization. This vision struggles to account for poor people's movements which, precisely, do not have this type of organization (Piven and Cloward, 1978). Many studies on the mobilizations of low-resource groups (sex-workers, undocumented workers, the unemployed, the homeless) highlight the part played by third-party organizations in making these "unlikely mobilizations" (*mobilisations improbables*) possible (Hmed, 2007; Mathieu, 1999; Maurer and Pierru, 2001). This observation leads to a debate on the effects of patronage exercised by these third-party organizations on the mobilization and the deviation of its goals and practices (Cress and Snow, 1996). The Yellow Vests had neither a formal organization of their own, nor any third-party support organizations. Yet they were able to build a powerful and sustainable mass movement that won significant concessions from the government, more than many recent social movements. One explanation for this seemingly paradoxical success lies in both the modes of action (marked by their unconventional character and a break with legalism) and the informal and decentralized organization of the movement at roundabouts (Bernard de Raymond and Bordiec, 2019, 2020; Noiriel and Truong, 2019; Ravelli, 2019) and through local Facebook groups (Planche, 2020).

To this study of the political power of the roundabouts, we would like to add elements that specifically concern relationships between members of the movement that pre-existed the movement itself. Some



researchers have hypothesized that the informal networks of friendships that structure rural spaces, which function as invisible clubs conditioning access to different opportunities (jobs, romantic encounters, etc.) played a key part in the movement (Coquard, 2019). Nevertheless, when Yellow Vests were asked about their pre-movement acquaintances, they most often stated that they did not know the other participants, or very few of them. On the other hand, the fact that they participated as a family (couple, parents and children) was far less frequently reported. While the Yellow Vests mobilized in the name of their family, family can also be the practical collective that allows effective participation and avoids, in particular, people having to come alone to the roundabout. In the absence of any formal organization and formal membership, or of ties of friendship and solidarity that pre-exist the mobilization, family can be a concrete vector of participation in a social movement. This allows us to shed new light on poor people's movements and more generally on movements without formal organization or instituted hierarchy. From then on, family arrangements define opportunities and ways to mobilize, especially over time. In this paper, we examine how different family configurations and different practical arrangements, allow or hinder participation in the movement.

Finally, social movements do not have strategic and political goals alone, but are fed by subjective, identity-based constructions. Therefore, the sociability proper to a social movement can, at a certain point, become desirable in itself. A striking aspect of the Yellow Vests movement from this point of view is that many participants refer to the roundabout collective as a “substitute family”. Here, the reference to family is of course metaphorical, but it reflects a strong aspiration on the part of the participants, in the context of their living conditions in peri-urban and rural territories. The social structures of these territories (particularly in terms of the age of the population) as well as the residential and family trajectories of the Yellow Vests mean that they can often find themselves in situations of social isolation. We might then hypothesize that the ability of a social movement to offer affective and supportive ties similar to family ties can fuel a collective mobilization. We further

hypothesize that participants seek this substitute family tie all the more as the mobilization generates conflicts or even breakups with their family, friends or coworkers, as was often the case in the Yellow Vests movement.

## **Data and methods**

This paper combines a range of data and uses mixed (qualitative/ quantitative) methods. First, we use a dataset from a collective survey (Collectif d'enquête, 2019) with administration of a questionnaire on mobilization sites to participants in the movement (n=1477). This questionnaire included items on the socio-demographic status of individuals, the practical modalities of their participation, their grievances and demands. In the questionnaire, we used a certain number of open-ended questions, rather than closed questions only, because this mobilization did not seem to be structured around a single political line or demand. By using a few open-ended questions, we were able to capture the diversity of participants' motivations and expectations. In addition, these responses to open-ended questions can be checked against the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and their responses to closed-ended questions on the practicalities of their participation. This avoids the risk of problem imposition or over-rationalization that is sometimes pointed out with open questions. The processing of responses to open-ended questions lends itself to statistical textual analysis. We thus performed a hierarchical descending clustering on the corpus, according to the Reinert method (Reinert, 1983), using the Iramuteq software (Ratinaud and Marchand, 2015). The Reinert method is designed to identify the distribution laws of words in a corpus. From a table crossing the text segments and the analyzable forms (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs), it identifies homogeneous lexical classes by successive bi-partitions of the corpus, using factorial analysis. This method thus makes it possible to identify homogeneous classes of discourse and the systems of attraction and opposition between

these different classes<sup>2</sup>. This work allows us to test the coherence of the Yellow Vests' discourses. While many commentators have seen in the Yellow Vests' mobilization only an incoherent aggregate of individual demands (Dubet, 2019), here we can check whether, beyond its apparent heterogeneity, the Yellow Vests' discourse presents clearly identifiable underlying structures.

Between December 2018 and the March 2020 lockdown, we also conducted a long-term ethnographic survey on Yellow Vest groups in a territory in South West France. We conducted observations of the Yellow Vests' occupation sites and actions. We consistently introduced ourselves as social scientists conducting a scientific research on the Yellow Vests movement. In other words, any participant in the movement who spoke to us was aware that we were conducting a scientific survey. Most of the time, our approach was welcomed. Visiting at least once a week the town where the Yellow Vests of the area gathered, we made the days and the moments within each day of observation as diverse as possible. We were thus able to observe informal meetings, citizens' assemblies and celebrations, as well as informal discussions on the roundabouts and the Saturday demonstrations organized in that small town or in the regional capital, Bordeaux. In addition to our observations, we conducted comprehensive interviews (n=31) with Yellow Vests in the study area. Ethnographic observations were our main entry points to the interviews, which were indispensable for placing the social practices observed and the speeches heard *in situ* in the depths of biographical trajectories and in the economy of daily life: we asked the people we observed and with whom we exchanged informally if they were available for a face-to-face interview, in a quiet place out of sight of other Yellow Vests. The combination of these methods and types of data, and cross analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on the Yellow Vests and family, allows us to have both a robust knowledge of the distribution of

---

<sup>2</sup> The user sets the number of clusters to obtain. Nevertheless, it is up to each user to interpret the results. In particular, asking for too many clusters may result in clusters with a very small fraction of the text segments, or even redundant clusters. The user can therefore test different numbers of classes iteratively, to ensure the consistency of the classification. In our case, we used the default parameters of the software, and verified the robustness of this classification by subsequently varying the number of classes.

different Yellow Vest profiles, an understanding of the movement's modes of organization and action, as well as an understanding of the family processes and life courses within which participation in the movement took place.

***Box 1 – The sociodemographic features of the Yellow Vests***

The Yellow Vests movement stands out from other contemporary social movements in terms of its demands, its organization and the characteristics of its participants. While the "new social movements" readily put forward issues of fundamental freedoms, protection of minority rights and more broadly "post-materialist" values, the Yellow Vests movement focused on issues of living conditions, purchasing power and the inability of the political class to understand and take charge of these issues. In terms of its organization, the Yellow Vests movement is a mass nationwide movement and is informally organized at the local level, both through Facebook groups and on occupied roundabouts. Finally, the characteristics of the participants in the movement contrast sharply with the characteristics of the traditional protest audiences (young, educated, urban, left-leaning): the participants in the Yellow Vests movement are mostly from the working classes, already in the labor force, with low levels of education, living in peri-urban and rural areas, and very much distancing themselves from the official political categories. Women have participated very actively in this movement, including as local leaders. Among the occupations represented on the roundabouts, and given that the spark for the movement was a fuel tax, there was an over-representation of occupations related to roads, transport and logistics (truck drivers, logistics workers, liberal nurses and care professions involving home care). Around this social base of workers from different sectors, there was also a significant presence of people withdrawn or excluded from the labor market: unemployed persons, people with disabilities, recipients of social allowances, housewives, retirees. These people played an essential part in the collective ability to "hold" occupied roundabouts. Notably absent from the movement (or under-represented) were the following professions: intellectual professions (teachers in particular), managers, liberal professions, workers in unionized sectors or large (ex-)public companies (railways, postal services, telecoms).

### **Family at the heart of the Yellow Vests' grievances**

To account for the Yellow Vests' grievances, let us look at the corpus of the questionnaire administered at rally sites (Collectif d'enquête, 2019). In this questionnaire, we asked participants the following question, "Why are you demonstrating today?". We built a corpus from the responses to this question.

To start analyzing this corpus, we can look at the table of the most frequent occurrences in the responses (Table 1).

Table 1 – Words and expressions most frequently used in the corpus

Form	Frequency	Type
Purchasing power	300	Noun
Tax	290	Noun
Pension	256	Noun
Child	208	Noun
Social	162	Adjective
Macron	146	Name
Government	138	Noun
Wage	129	Noun
Euro	125	Noun
Living	115	Noun

Most of the words in this table are fairly expected and correspond reasonably well to the publicly visible, media-oriented part of the mobilization<sup>3</sup>. Built centrally around the question of "purchasing power", the mobilization highlights the contradiction between the increasing cost of living ("tax", "euro", "living") and the stagnation of income ("wage", "pension"). The Yellow Vests also criticized the responsibility of the executive power ("Macron", "government") in this situation, as well as its disconnection from the concerns and constraints of the people.

On the other hand, one occurrence in this table might seem surprising, that of the term "child", in 4th position<sup>4</sup>. How can the figure of the child be the object of a mobilization, and more precisely of *this*

<sup>3</sup> Some topics are underestimated in this table, because they have multiple designations. In particular, the "fuel" topic comprises the words fuel (44), gasoline (41), diesel (22), diesel oil (7), fuel oil (4).

<sup>4</sup> The word "child" is part of the broader lexical field of filiation, which includes the terms son, daughter, kid, brat, etc.

mobilization, marked by the question of purchasing power? In order to take a deeper look at this point, we can examine the instantiations of the term in the corpus.

"Because of all the taxes, for my children's future, to build their future." (Female, in her thirties, *Employée*, small town)

"For purchasing power, we are middle class, but in 5 years we will have nothing, we have to react quickly, our children cannot support themselves. For our young" (Female, over 60, *employée*, medium-sized city)

"Ends of the month are tough, I have a job but I can't get by, it's frustrating to always say 'no' to your children, when you work you want to be proud" (Female, in her thirties, *employée*, small town)

"The more you earn, the more you pay. For example, my son opened his bakery with his girlfriend, despite working long hours, they only get 1,200 euros for the two of them, they come home at 8pm and don't see their children. (Female, over 60, working class, small town)

"For our children, to change the system, exit the [European Union], abolish the Senate, have a graduated system of taxation, things that go far deeper than just fuel" (Male, thirty years old, worker, large city)

"I have a personal motivation: I divorced in March 2016. I have my three children every other week, I have been unemployed since August, I am motivated to get involved. I used to pay a lot of taxes, now I'm on food aid. I have a lot of expenses with the after-school program" (Male, 40 years old, worker)

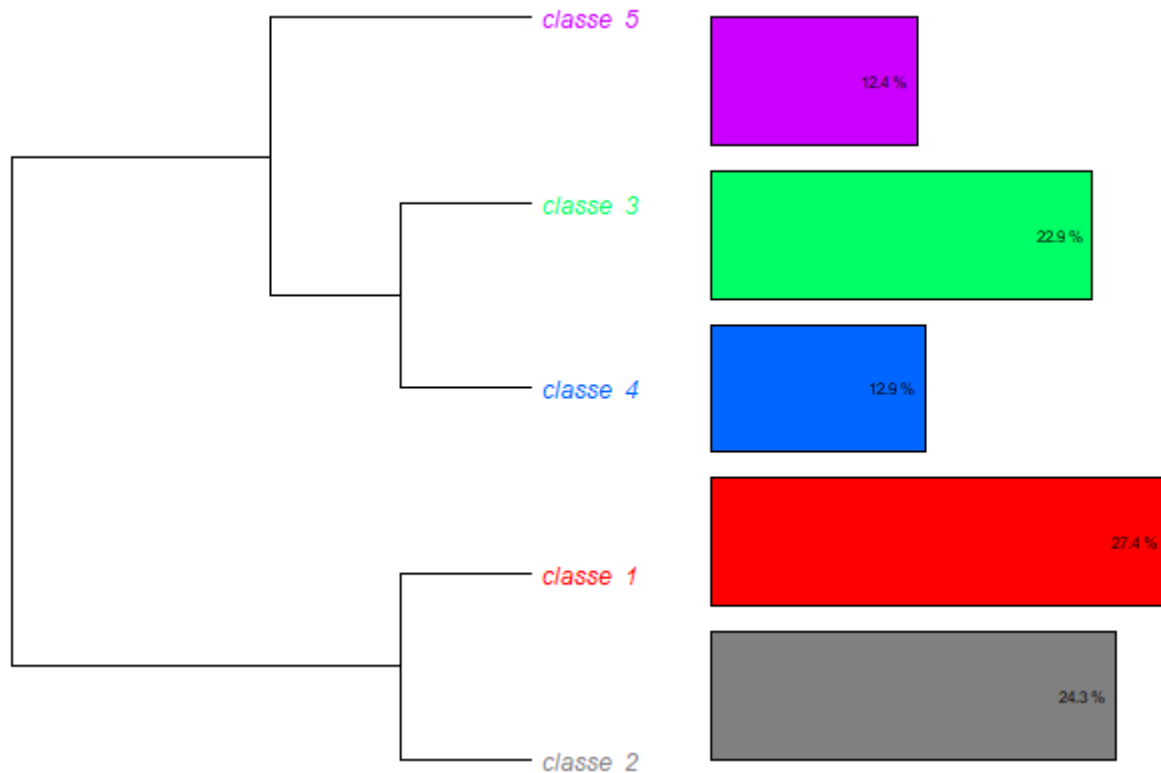
As we can see, the question of purchasing power or of difficulties in making end-of-month payments is likely to crystallize in the family sphere and in the relationship with children. The answers also often strongly emphasize the question of the future of children (or even grandchildren, in connection with the strong presence of retirees in the mobilization). While it has been noted several times that compared to the rest of the French population the Yellow Vests were characterized by a lower than average life satisfaction and a deteriorated relationship with the future (Algan et al., 2020; Duvoux and Papuchon, 2019), we see that this obstructed future is not only conceived on an individual level, but in a broader collective, including children in particular.

Let us now see how this lexical register of children unfolds in the grievances of the Yellow Vests. We carried out a Hierarchical Clustering<sup>5</sup> on our corpus. This classification identifies 5 clusters among the grievances of the Yellow Vests (see Graph 1). Clusters 1 and 2 are the most important (they represent 27.4 and 24.3 % of the segments respectively). Similar to one another, they are globally opposed to clusters 3, 4 and 5.

---

<sup>5</sup> We set the size of the segments to be analyzed to 20 occurrences.

Graph 1 – Hierarchical Clustering Dendrogram



Cluster 1 depicts the material and financial hardship of the movement's participants, from the household economy perspective (see Table 2). The semantic field of difficulties at the end of the month (*to make it, to get by, to pay, to live, to survive, difficult, to have to, to help, bill, rent, misery, to struggle, to work hard, to die*) is therefore not inscribed in an individual perspective but in that of the household, or even of the extended family. All these difficulties are thus indexed on the vocabulary of the family: *child, mother, husband, son, daughter, studies, grandchildren*, etc. These difficulties are understood in relation to a standard of "good living", which can no longer be satisfied (*living instead of surviving*) and which reduces everything beyond the bare necessities to a minimum (*vacations, leisure, going out, pleasure*). This inability to access leisure activities or "small pleasures" generates indignation and even a feeling of injustice (decency, shame). It is also related to a logic of family support or mutual aid (*help,*



*studies, retirement home*). Class 1 thus refers to *the use* that is made of disposable income, and the trade-offs between various expenses and among household members. The vocabulary of class 1 is typically used by women, belonging to the occupation category of *Employé.e.s*, who participate in the movement on roundabouts and who have a right-wing political orientation (Table 3).

Cluster 2 also highlights the material hardships of the movement's participants, but rather than describing the problems within households and families, it underlines the contradiction between the stagnation of incomes (*salaries, pensions, allowances*) and the increase in the cost of living (*prices, cost of living, inflation, expensive*) - and in particular of pre-committed spending (*gasoline, mutual insurance, electricity, basic necessities*). In particular, the Yellow Vests point to the responsibility of the public authorities in the increase of these expenses (*taxes, CSG, VAT*). This contradiction between stagnating incomes and rising expenses is the source of muted anger (*just fed-up*), combined with a feeling of not being heard, or even of being despised by elected officials or the government (*up there, lie, pretext, disguised*). This anger is coupled with a feeling of injustice, one that consists in making the poor or the middle classes pay, rather than the upper classes (*ISF*). Cluster 2 is typical of male workers and seems to complement Cluster 1: in most households, while women “hold the purse strings” and control expenses, men are usually the main bread winner and are in charge of bringing home as much money as possible.

This grievance of an eroding purchasing power may seem surprising, given that in France (as in most Western countries) the purchasing power of households continues to rise on average<sup>6</sup>, despite decades of weak economic growth. But these aggregate measures of purchasing power are subject to a range of criticisms. Firstly, they are based on an average measure of inflation, which does not take into account the evolution of relative prices or the existence of non-homothetic preferences. When

---

<sup>6</sup> See for instance, French Statistics' webpage on purchasing power: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2830166> (Retrieved Jan 28, 2022).

adjusting for inflation, Jaravel finds, for example, that the bottom 20% of the US income distribution became poorer during the 2010s (Jaravel, 2021). Secondly, purchasing power is calculated on the basis of consumption expenditures. However, some expenditures that are not counted as consumption expenditures put a heavy burden on household budgets (taxes, insurance, mortgage loans, etc.). This is particularly true of pre-committed expenditures, which prevent people from really using their budget freely (Martinache, 2019). The weight of constrained spending rose from around 12.5% to 30% between 1960 and 2010 (Martinache, 2019). If the grievances of the Yellow Vests were sometimes deemed unreasonable or even childish by the French elites, they might in fact reveal the inability of the official record systems to capture the deteriorating living conditions of one segment of the population (Blavier, 2021).

Table 2 - Terms contributing most strongly to lexical clusters.

Cluster	Terms
Cluster 1	live, work, euro, child, month, pay, make it, get by, end_of_the_month, job, grand, help, earn, mother, holiday, eat, survive, have to, help, see, tough, sometimes, struggle, remaining, house, husband, pleasure, leisure, son, people, go, hold till the end, car, difficult, bill, time, regular, old, shame, rent, feeling, retirement home, decent, misery, go, daughter, work hard, situation, study, die ( <i>crever</i> )
Cluster 2	tax, purchasing power, raise, pension, CSG ( <i>social security tax</i> ), lower, wage, increase, raise, fuel, gas, price, gasoil, minimum wage, just_fed_up, to tax, to increase, general, cost, inflation, product, living, worker, expensive, indexing, ISF, electricity, necessity, VAT, speed limit ( <i>80km/h</i> ), dishes, mutual insurance, fuel, allowance, lock, lie, retired, discontent, taxation, pretext, logic, cross_the_street, taxed, forecast, up there, high, disguised, consideration, carbon (-tax)
Cluster 3	politics, people, Macron, Referendum ( <i>RIC</i> ), system, assembly, republic, government, Europe, place, change, vote, democracy, rich, class, national, man, poor, take back, decide, sovereignty, democratic, average, decision, president, privilege, elect, Senate, politician, lobbies, dissolve, equally, European, put, change, lead, institution, finance, constituent, banker, take back control ( <i>retrouver</i> ), French, fight, constitution, deep, feeling, direct, represent, representativeness
Cluster 4	social, justice, fiscal, injustice, public, service, wealth, equality, capitalism, freedom, distribution, inequality, hospital, brotherhood, climate, ecological, (fiscal) avoidance, word, economic, capitalist, society, environment, (tax-) haven, disappearing, alternative, redistribution, word, change, evasion, support, real, popular, gift, acquire, initiative, destruction, human, democracy, effort, only, end, value, propose, center, model, climate, better, really, mainly, speed
Cluster 5	Yellow vests, movement, claim, supporter, support, violence, wait, agree, show, worse, come, policeman, occasion, numerous, cause, concern, see, thing, media, violent, blow up, Commercy, apolitical, right (conservative), important, exchange, demonstration, women, inform, group, management, go ( <i>passer</i> ), beginning, part, question, speak, reality, roundabout, game, idea, face, create, move, bet, try, happy, need, vote, legitimate, goal

Clusters 3, 4 and 5 are of less direct interest to us here. We will therefore present them more succinctly.

Cluster 3 deals with the issue of political representation and the distance between the governing and the governed. Faced with elites accused of being disconnected from the realities experienced by ordinary people, the Yellow Vests reaffirmed a principle of popular sovereignty. Cluster 4 corresponds to a classic form of social criticism of inequalities and injustices produced by the capitalist system. It is more the result of the left wing of the movement, present at the demonstrations and more urban and

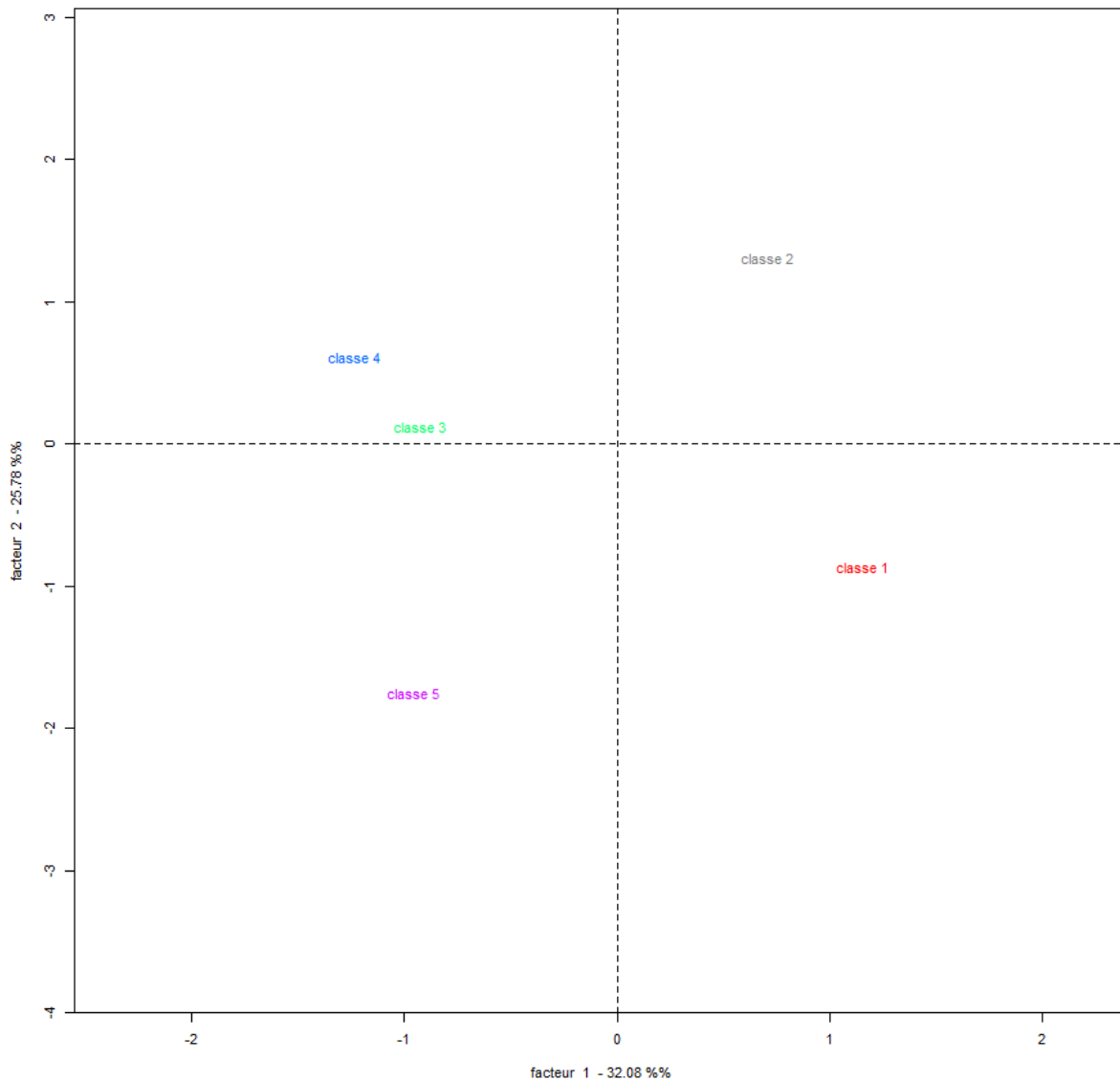
educated than the Yellow Vests of the roundabouts (Table 3). Finally, Cluster 5 refers to the Yellow Vests as a social movement and to its organization. It includes both the question of the movement's means of action, in particular in the face of police and judicial repression, and that of its longer-term organization (*Commercy*) to give it the means to carry political weight, beyond the occupation of roundabouts and road blocks. It should be noted that this lexical class is typical of people who do not necessarily feel personally concerned by the issues raised by the Yellow Vests, but who nevertheless want to participate in the movement out of solidarity. Or they represent a figure of the volunteer/engaged third party (Bernard de Raymond and Tétart, 2019), who comes to places where the Yellow Vests are demonstrating, in order to talk to them and form their own idea of the movement, without letting themselves be forced to accept the vision conveyed by the media.

*Table 3 - Individual modalities contributing most strongly to lexical classes*

Cluster	Modalities
Cluster 1	<i>Employé.e</i> , female, roundabout, disability, conservative
Cluster 2	Worker, roundabout, retired, age 60+, rural, male
Cluster 3	Manager, demonstration, independent worker, mid-level
Cluster 4	Left-wing/progressive, demonstration, student, large city,
Cluster 5	Left-wing/progressive, student, manager, assembly (AdA),

Performing a Multiple Correspondence Analysis on the corpus of Yellow Vest grievances, the different lexical classes break down along the first two factorial axes as follows:

Graph 2 - Lexical space of Yellow Vest grievances, Axes 1 and 2 of the factorial analysis



The first factor contrasts the material living conditions of the Yellow Vests with the political dimension of the movement, while axis 2 contrasts the Yellow Vests (as individuals and as a social movement) with the political system, the government, and institutions.

Having studied how the Yellow Vests' grievances unfold globally, let us now look more specifically at the part that family, in particular in its intergenerational and solidarity dimensions, plays in these grievances and in the increased sense of injustice among those taking part in the movement.

### **The rise of constrained spending as an indicator of the tension between membership between social class and social status**

In contrast to the claims made by political process theory, which focuses on the opportunities offered by the political system, it must be emphasized that popular revolts and collective mobilizations often have an economic underpinning. But it is still necessary to specify how, or even better to explain why, certain socio-economic inequalities do not lead to revolts, while others, perhaps objectively less profound, do indeed lead to a social movement. Contrary to deterministic materialist reasoning, we must remember that any objective situation passes through the lens of cultural patterns of perception, which give meaning to experiences and practices. Indeed, the Yellow Vests are generally not among the poorest populations in French society. They work, pay taxes, and sometimes earn a good living (Collective, 2019). Thus, what was at stake in this mobilization was not so much poverty in the primary sense of the term, but rather the decline in real purchasing power and access to the consumption norm of the middle class, which is the reference group for the Yellow Vests<sup>7</sup>. While the tension between stagnating incomes and increasing expenses, i.e. the decrease of "disposable income" (*reste-à-vivre*) has been repeatedly identified as the trigger for popular anger (Blavier, 2021; Martinache, 2019), analysis of the Yellow Vests' grievances shows that it is in the family dimension and specifically in

---

<sup>7</sup> The fact that the Yellow Vests are working-class yet identify with the middle class is consistent with the results from Oesch and Vigna (2021), who show that, statistically, there has been no decline of the subjective social status of low-skilled workers in Western countries since the 1980s. In other words, while the Yellow Vests claim to represent "the people", in opposition to "the elite" or "the rich", they also see themselves as above the "social outcasts" or people with the most precarious jobs (such as immigrants). As shown by recent research on contemporary rural France (Challier, 2019; Coquard, 2019), keeping the poorest at a distance (both practically and symbolically) is key to members of the working class, in order to maintain their social status.

relation to children, that this tension feeds a feeling of injustice<sup>8</sup>. This means that the question of inequality and injustice is not experienced solely or even primarily at an individual level (as the theory of rational choice posits), but first and foremost in relation to one's entourage, and to the nuclear family in particular. For those participating in the movement, the link between difficult ends of the month and children is common sense, as this demonstrator testifies by contrast:

I'm here by solidarity. We're doing okay, we don't have children (Man, in his fifties, worker, left-leaning, demonstration)

The issue of purchasing power is thus seen specifically through the opportunities provided to children.

As this young woman says:

"Today I am protesting because I would like my children to have food on their plates now and later on. I would like to give them food and not just potatoes the last two weeks of the month" (woman, under 30, other occupational category, no stated political preference, roundabout)

Faced with the difficulties of making ends meet, participants in the Yellow Vests movement have to adopt coping strategies that include restrictions on food, which is a frequent and flexible expense. Food was an item frequently put forward by the Yellow Vests as a marker of the worsening of their material situation. The question of "how much does it cost to fill a shopping cart" or "how much does it cost to fill the fridge" was almost standard in Yellow Vest discourse. Indeed, the shopping cart or the fridge are two material devices used in all Western households, embodying the collective dimension of consumption (Cochoy, 2008). These observations concerning children help to explain a very specific characteristic of the movement, that of the age of the participants. As has been regularly noted, the movement was not driven by young people (and even less so by students), but essentially by middle-aged working people (between 30 and 50 years old) likely to have both children to raise and sometimes

---

<sup>8</sup> More precisely, it first feeds a feeling of individual failure and shame, which the rallies on roundabouts turned into collective anger against the elites (see Bernard de Raymond and Bordiec, 2019, 2020).

retired parents to care for. In some cases, participants were old enough to have children who were at the stage of entering the labor force and of becoming parents. As will be seen, the children's difficulties in achieving full financial independence was one of the seeds of popular anger. This also sheds light on the strong participation of women in the movement, who often had a lower wage than the men but who were in charge of the household accounts (Perrin-Heredia, 2011; Siblot, 2006). The fact that the mobilization was framed around purchasing power (rather than the standard left-wing demands of wage increase and wealth redistribution) helps explain why it was so appealing to women.

More broadly, the increase in constrained spending reduces the possibilities of access to leisure activities, to the "little pleasures" of daily life, once again in relation to children:

"I'm here because of the difficulty of making ends meet; I work but I can't get by, it's frustrating to always say 'no' to the children, when you work you want to be proud" (Female, 30 years old, *employée*, small town)

"I'm here because of taxes, the CSG (*social security tax*), wages and pensions: when you deduct groceries and housing, we have 500 euros left to live on, we have a child, we can't afford to live" (Female, over 60, worker, roundabout)

In terms of their occupation, while the Yellow Vests belong to the working class, from a cultural point of view a significant proportion of them belong to the middle class and see themselves as part of that class<sup>9</sup>. As has often been noted, they are not among the most precarious people (in France, the latter live in the suburbs of large cities, rather than in rural or peri-urban areas), but instead find themselves in situations of thwarted upward mobility. The Yellow Vests thus reflect the classic Mertonian case of tension between membership group and reference group (Merton, 1949), a tension that is revealed and brought to a climax by the rise in constrained spending (starting with gasoline, but also "bills", "gas", "electricity", "technical inspection" and "rent", according to the Yellow Vests - see cluster 2 of

---

<sup>9</sup> In the eyes of the Yellow Vests, one belongs to the middle class as soon as one earns the equivalent of full-time minimum wage job (approximately 1,250 €/month).



the hierarchical clustering). For the Yellow Vests, access (or the impossibility of access) to the middle-class consumption standards (leisure, vacations, etc.) thus threatens their capacity to abide by a norm of "good parenting" enjoining parents to help their children to discover their "latent personality", to favor dialogue and negotiation with them, and to renounce control and the use of force (Martin, 2014), all of which are supposedly conducive, according to the middle-class "model of perpetual social mobility", to "careers that fit" (Chauvel, 2016). The Yellow Vests do not necessarily experience long periods of unemployment, nor do the majority find themselves in the situation of having to accept a job below their level of qualification. However, not only do Yellow Vests experience a downgrading that is invisible for public statistics, but also do they experience a symbolic downgrading, linked to their progressive distancing from the consumption norm of the middle class, and in particular the impossibility of allowing their children to access it. This is how we can interpret the Yellow Vests' recurrent demand to "live with dignity from their work".

### **Intergenerational downgrading as a trigger for popular anger**

The question of purchasing power interacts not only with the family as the nuclear family, but also with the family understood as intergenerational solidarity mechanisms. Beyond the issue of purchasing power, the Yellow Vest mobilization brings to the fore the question of the impossibility of coping with an unexpected expense (breakdown of a car or appliance, accident in a life course). While in neo-liberal capitalism individuals and households are encouraged to invest in numerous savings products in order to commit themselves to the future and prepare for that of their children, we note that the topic of savings is completely absent from the Yellow Vests' corpus of grievances.

In a manner specific to these social groups, family represents an important mechanism of solidarity when it comes to facing difficulties or unforeseen events. The deterioration of purchasing power is

therefore partly linked to these forms of family solidarity and to the mechanisms of personal restraint that they induce.

Within the couple:

"I have a mom who has Alzheimer's, she is in a retirement home (*EHPAD*), my dad doesn't heat his home anymore, he doesn't eat meat anymore to be able to pay !" (Woman, over 60, middle profession, conservative, medium-size town)

From parents to their children:

Actually it's for my children and grandchildren. I'm a widow, I don't have any financial problems but I have to help my mother for the retirement home (*EHPAD*) and my children, I can't keep up and it's not right that they have to ask me. I have a grandson who needs 6,000 euros for a sound engineering school and we can't help him when my son is on minimum wage. The impossibility for disabled women to divorce: a disabled woman receives a pension but if she marries there is nothing left, so we are dependent on the man we marry, which makes us dependent. (Woman, over 60, with a disability, roundabout, no political orientation, medium-size town)

Having to rely more and more on these forms of solidarity has a knock-on effect on other expenses, especially on access to anything beyond the bare necessities.

My two children are about 35 years old and I have to help them financially. As a result, I can't go on vacation. We're here for the kids too (Woman, in her fifties, independent worker, no political orientation, demonstration, rural area)

As for elderly people, the increase in the social security tax (*CSG*) on small pensions raises anger not so much because it burdens a personal budget, but because it limits the possibilities of providing for their children and grandchildren:

I'm here for purchasing power. I'm on social allowance (*RSA*), I eat only once a day to help my daughter who has a son (Man, in his fifties, worker, Left-wing, Large city)

This inner-family solidarity also goes from (adult) children to their elderly parents:

My working life is over, but when I see the people, young people, it is a shame, and never will I ask my children for money when I have to go to a retirement home, this I don't want to see (Man, over 60, manager, conservative, roundabout, large city)

The issue of purchasing power can thus be interpreted not only from a static point of view, but also from a dynamic point of view, as part of the life cycle of individuals. We can hypothesize that the cost of access to full material independence is increasing, and that this puts intergenerational family solidarity under pressure. Or else one can assume that being able to afford these costs requires a certain amount of stability, both professional and personal. This sheds light on a particular characteristic of the Yellow Vests: they are not only characterized by certain types of job or place of residence, but also often by paths marked by accidents or breakups. An accident at work, a divorce, a chronic illness, a child with a disability or a parent who is no longer independent, or a combination of these events, and all of a sudden one is no longer able to keep the tight budget that had been planned. Thus reinterpreted, the Yellow Vests' crisis and the rejection of the carbon tax appear - among other things - as a crisis of family solidarity mechanisms specific to working-class backgrounds. This deterioration forms the basis of the Yellow Vests' pessimistic relationship with the future, which is effectively about that of their children. In other words, the fear of intergenerational downgrading is a major driver of the popular revolt. While the Yellow Vests may already be experiencing personal difficulties but are, to a certain extent, accepting them as a form of destiny, on the other hand, the feeling that their own children "won't make it", or that their children's situation will be worse than their own, seems to represent an unacceptable prospect.

I'm not demonstrating for myself, I'm getting by. I have 4 children, in 10 years I will be retired. I know I won't get anything, I don't know if my children will have a pension (Man, in his forties, intermediate profession, no political orientation, roundabout)

Everything is going up, we can't cope anymore. I have two children and I don't want them to be slaves (Man, under 30, *Employé*, no political orientation)

Strikingly, parental concerns for the future of their children does not necessarily lead to a selfish withdrawal into oneself and one's loved ones, but rather participates in a more general concern for the breakdown of society. The starting point for the Yellow Vests' grievances is therefore often their own situation, moving towards that of their loved ones and finally to more general considerations about society.

For my children and grandchildren and all those who are in poverty (Man, over 60, retired, conservative, roundabout)

My claims have evolved over time. Initially a personal motivation, then my family, my grandmother and my mother are disabled, and finally in relation to laws and taxes and poverty. Since I've been in the movement, I've studied politics a lot more and I want to fight more. I have opened my eyes, I have learned new things, talking about it, I feel like a slave. Basically we are in France, liberty, equality, fraternity, these are real words! Today, I'm not okay with the way things are going (Woman, under 30, worker, roundabout, large city)

## **Family and participation in the movement**

While grievances and affects play an important part in a social movement, organizational features still play a major part in the dynamics and achievements of a mobilization. From this point of view, the Yellow Vest movement was a puzzle, insofar as contrary to what resource mobilization theory assumes, the Yellow Vests had little or no individual or collective resources with which to organize a social movement. Social scientists who have studied this movement have solved this conundrum by highlighting the specific part played by the Yellow Vests' rallying devices, the roundabouts. By subverting the function of the roundabouts and by organizing gatherings in their everyday environment, the Yellow Vests were able to constitute a collective force for action and overcome many of the usual obstacles to individual participation in a mobilization.

We wish to add to this explanation by showing how family affects participation in the movement. In conventional mobilizations, organized by trade unions, parties or associations, members are given the resources to gather, to travel to the place of the demonstration, to put forward their demands, etc. As a result, many people mobilize as members of these organizations. In the case of the Yellow Vests, people participated *intuitu personae*. Some researchers have hypothesized that participation was nonetheless invisibly structured by the informal networks which effectively organize life in the French countryside (Charmes, 2011; Coquard, 2019). But our research showed that most participants did not know each other before the mobilization. It cannot be said, therefore, that it is the informal “clubs” that structure rural areas that drove the mobilization. However, it can be costly to join a group event as an individual (Fisher and al., 2019; Wahlström and Wennerhag, 2014). We highlight the fact that Yellow Vests often participated in the movement as a family, whether as a couple or with their children, which meant both feeling authorized to do so and being available for it. More generally, practical family arrangements were an important element enabling (or preventing) sustained participation in the movement. Our ethnographic material, consisting of observation notes on roundabouts and tolls, at assemblies and demonstrations, as well as interviews with participants, make it possible on the one hand to reconstruct the family configurations that make the commitments (im)possible and, on the other hand, to bring to light the practical family arrangements that help or hinder concrete involvement and its inscription in the duration.

### *Family configurations*

In some respects, the "ideal" family configuration for participation in the movement is to be free of any household task that limits the possibilities of engagement. In the demonstrations and on the roundabouts, the most assiduous and sometimes the most resistant to the movement's loss of steam were often those who had no "family burden". This absence of family responsibilities concerning the

organization of daily life frees up time and saves time and energy that is potentially available for commitment to the movement.

Among the Yellow Vests surveyed, the "familyless" are mostly single men living alone, cut off from the labor market, on sick leave or retired, or parents, divorced and living away from their children. Mickaël, 40 years old in 2019, father of three teenage girls still living in his home county in the North, is one of these "familyless" men with a daily presence on the roundabout. Although they are essential to maintaining a constant presence on the roundabouts, they are sometimes despised by the other participants and referred to as "social outcasts" (*les cas soc'* – people in great financial and/or social distress). "My daughters are scared for me! I tell them: "It's for you that I'm doing it and that I'll go all the way!", Mickaël told us a few days after he and other Yellow Vests in the shack where he lived almost full time during the first half of 2019 were shot at. Despite physical distance, his children seem to remain omnipresent in his mind and a central motive and justification for engagement. What is more, with the ongoing sociability offered by roundabout settlements, the Yellow Vests represent a "chosen" family, whose joys contrast with the boredom and problems inherent to the (real) family.

Participants with family responsibilities show a variety of family configurations. Among those who are single, there are "single parents", mainly women who still have children to raise. Among the couples, there are retired people whose children no longer live with them. There are also workers, either active or on sick leave, parents whose commitment sometimes operates "solo". In such cases, the other member of the couple, who is not committed in the movement, takes care of the household. But most often, the commitment is made as a couple, without the children. This family configuration of commitment is based on the couple's history and on the political and activist emulation that this encourages in certain circumstances. Consider the case of Hélène, who is in her fifties. She is the mother of three children (two boys and a girl aged 23, 19 and 21), whom she has most of the time raised alone. Originally from the South-East, where she lived until 2015, when she moved to Gironde

county to live with her new partner Jean, a 62-year-old administrative employee in the local civil service, who is also a parent, but with older children. These parents and children form a stepfamily of which only five members live together full time (Jean, Hélène and her three children). Hélène says she was not really interested in political and social issues until she met Jean. She links this situation to her childhood "in a family where politics were not discussed" and where she had "a huge lack of self-confidence". When she arrived in the Gironde, she started training and then working as a caregiver. In this professional context, she gave voice to her views on inequality. Although her children now have reached adulthood, they are experiencing economic hardship and Hélène feels a "moral obligation" to help them. "I took in my daughter who had her baby, all alone, who came with nothing (...). All this to say that I got my daughter back and financially, it's really hard". The Yellow Vest movement came at the right time for this new feeling of being allowed to take a "political" stand to flourish. "So I'm fighting a little bit for myself, but mainly for my children (...). My professional life is over. After all, I will always be able to get by!". In Hélène's discourse, the safeguarding of children's future ("some still manage to eat, but our children, what will become of them? There will be nothing left!") - both her own and those of others, is the fundamental motive of the movement. To the immediate and specific case of gas, she opposes the future and general case of children. This opposition has to do with the construction of justifications for the commitment. Arguing that it is based on children makes it possible to express an openness to others and a future capable of elevating one's commitment. For people new to political action and social movements, invoking future generations can help them take on such a commitment.

### *Practical family arrangements*

Occupying roundabouts for a long period of time requires biographical availability from participants. Within the families, there were "pillars" of the Yellow Vest movement, able to be present for a long time and to occupy several places. These "pillars" were mostly parents (sometimes grandparents), active or retired, with enough time and energy, and children old enough, to reduce or even suspend

their presence in the domestic sphere. On one of the roundabouts of our study - the "women's roundabout" – a married couple of workers settled for several months, living night and day in a shack built by the Yellow Vests. While the husband was on sick leave, the spouse continued to work and do her shifts at the major local wine co-op. When they were away from home, her teenage daughter took care of their 7-year-old girl.

The roundabout was this couple's main place of mobilization. Here they sometimes met Huguette and Alphonse, a retired couple over 70 years old from Paris and the North, whose children had left the family residence. Huguette and Alphonse were omnipresent in the movement. The couple was inseparable on the sites of the mobilization: going together made it easier to enter the sites and avoid running the risk of finding oneself without anyone to talk to. The logistical, material and emotional resources that the family could represent are also revealed through the case of Hélène, Jean and their respective children. The commitment was part of the material and affective security that the couple provides: "There are two of us, we are lucky to be in a couple and to be Yellow Vests as a couple!". Hélène and Jean allowed each other this commitment at the same time as, for the benefit of the social fight, they allowed themselves to "desert" the domestic sphere. This desertion strongly displeased Hélène's children, to whom she responded: "My life has been for you, I still love you so much, I will always be there for you, but now I am not here, but this is still about you!". Hélène actually regretted their absence from this social movement: "I tell my son: 'But why aren't you a Yellow Vest? I don't understand!' The assiduous and lengthy participation of couples with children and "single parents" was part of a relative withdrawal by children, who were busy with other activities - school, professional, sports, cultural - and not very receptive to the mobilization. Despite the disaffection and detachment of their children, the parental impetus for commitment remained alive: "Is your wife proud? Your children, they will be proud of you later?" Hélène yelled ironically at a policeman who was threatening her during a demonstration.



### *Household chores*

The fact that family is, for the Yellow Vests, a vector of commitment in the movement is undeniable. At the same time, family is sometimes a factor that prevents or disrupts engagement. The movement does not only sharpen and reinforce the practices and feelings of family solidarity. It also generates disunions and family disagreements.

First, some family configurations can prevent or restrict commitment. Mobilization entails costs and trade-offs with other realms of life, such as work and family tasks. For example, while single moms initially played a major role in the mobilization and were put forward by the media as heroes of the movement, they have tended to leave it more quickly than others. In other instances, the participation to the movement triggers a family conflict. "Since I've been a Yellow Vest, my sisters don't talk to me anymore!" deplores Karine (a 46-year-old leader of the "women's roundabout"), who benefits, on the other hand, from the moral and logistic support of her husband and her children. For Isabelle's sisters, it seems being a Yellow Vest is shameful and demeaning: to see one of their own taking part in this movement is unacceptable. In order to avoid such a family conflict, a Yellow Vest may withdraw from the mobilization. On the contrary, some will endure the family breakup and, as a consequence, will intensify their participation in the movement: in that case, the Yellow Vests become a "chosen" family or, better yet, a substitution family, which induces an "over-engagement".

Beyond those cases of acute family conflict, local Yellow Vests groups, functioning without any formal centralized organization, tend to recreate a peaceful family atmosphere (Bernard de Raymond and Bordiec, 2020). Members of the same local group often identified themselves as "family" ("*la famille*"). But beyond the metaphorical use of the word "family", there were, among the Yellow Vests, practices that can be qualified as family. Typically, the architecture of shacks built on roundabouts could reproduce that of a home (living room, kitchen, bedroom), and Yellow Vests enjoyed sharing meals

together, sitting around the same table, watching television, talking about the movement or simply about their daily lives. To be true, not all Yellow Vests have sought for this conviviality and family atmosphere. But for those not engaged in the movement, it created a reward for activism (Gaxie, 2017). Also, those who valued this chosen family often put forward in interviews – by contrast – the isolation in which they found themselves, living in rural areas.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have shown the part that family played in the triggering and practical organization of the Yellow Vests movement in France. We have thus been able to shed light on some of the puzzles linked to this powerful social movement, which nevertheless had neither a central organization to mobilize resources, nor experienced activists. In particular, the roots of popular anger in the family sphere help explain the participation of socio-demographic profiles that are rarely found in collective mobilizations (people with low levels of education and little political experience, women from working-class backgrounds, the elderly, and people living in rural or suburban areas). The family dimension of the movement also made it possible to elucidate some of the modalities of the movement's organization and action and to complete the explanations related to the specificity of the roundabouts as rallying devices.

Beyond the case of the Yellow Vests, we believe that the mechanisms presented in this paper have a very general scope, and that they shed light on a little-studied point in the sociology of mobilizations. By highlighting the role that family played in the Yellow Vests movement, we have helped to bridge the gap between the sociology of social movements and the sociology of cultural practices. Moreover, this paper sheds light on a crucial point in the sociology of mobilizations: in the name of what are we ready to take risks and make sacrifices?

## References

Algan, Y., Malgouyres, C., and Senik, C. (2020) *Territories, well-being and public policy*, Notes du CAE, 55. Paris: Conseil d'Analyse Economique.

Attias-Donfut C., Lapierre N., Ségalen M. (2002) *Le Nouvel Esprit de famille*. Paris : Odile Jacob.

Bernard de Raymond, A., and Bordiec, S. (2019) Tenir : les Gilets jaunes, mouvement d'occupation de places publiques. *Métropolitiques*.

Bernard de Raymond, A., and Tétart, G. (2019) Destructures d'OGM et désobéissance civique : Le mouvement des Faucheurs volontaires en France. *Revue des Sciences Sociales* (61) : 16-25.

Bernard de Raymond, A., and Bordiec, S. (2020) La forme politique des ronds-points. Les Gilets jaunes saisis par leurs lieux de rassemblements. *Condition humaine/ Conditions politiques* (1).

Bessière., and Gollac, S. (2020) La famille, une institution économique In *Le genre du capital*. Paris : La Découverte : 23-51

Blavier, P. (2021) *Gilets jaunes, la révolte des budgets contraints*. Paris : PUF.

Bourdieu, P. (1993) À propos de la famille comme catégorie réalisée. [Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales.100](#) : 32-36.

Cadoret, A. (2011) Familles : ordre symbolique et parenté In [Sacrees familles ! Toulouse. Erès](#) :163-177.

Caren, N., Gaby, S., and Herrold, C. (2017) Economic Breakdown and Collective Action. *Social Problems* 64(1): 133–155.

Charmes, E. (2011) Au-delà du rêve du village : le club et la clubbisation. *Métropolitiques.eu*.

Chauvel, L. (2016) *La Spirale du déclassement. Essai sur la société des illusions*. Paris: Le Seuil.

Cochoy, F. (2008) Calculation, qualculation, calqulation: Shopping cart arithmetic, equipped cognition and the clustered consumer. *Marketing Theory* 8: 15–44.

Collectif d'enquête (2019) Investigating a protest movement in the heat of the moment. *Revue française de science politique* Vol. 69(5): 869–892.

Commaille, J. (1996) *Misères de la famille. Question d'Etat*. Paris : Presses de la FNSP.

-(2006) L'économie socio-politique des liens familiaux. *Dialogue* 174 : 95-105.

Coquard, B. (2019) *Ceux qui restent*. Paris: La Découverte.

Cress, D. M., and Snow, D. A. (1996) Mobilization at the Margins: Resources, Benefactors, and the Viability of Homeless Social Movement Organizations. *American Sociological Review* 61(6): 1089–1109.

Déchaux, J.-H. (2011) Réalités et limites de l'entraide familiale. In *Repenser la solidarité*. Paris: PUF.

Denave, L. (2021) *S'engager dans la guerre des classes*. Paris: Raisons d'agir.

Dubet, F. (2019) *Le temps des passions tristes*. Paris : Seuil.

Duvoux, N., and Papuchon, A. (2019, March 21) Temps de crise : l'occasion de repenser la structure sociale. *AOC media - Analyse Opinion Critique*.

Eckert, H. (2014) Déclassement et hantise du déclassement. *Revue française de pédagogie*, 188 : 87-108.

Ergas, Y., Jenson, J., and Michel, S. (Eds.) (2017) *Reassembling Motherhood: Procreation and Care in a Globalized World*. New-York: Columbia University Press.

Faure, L., Le Dantec, E. (2017) Expériences résidentielles, insécurité socio-économique et reconfiguration des appartenances sociales lors de l'entrée dans la vie. *Sociologie* 8 (2) :161-180.

Antoine Bernard de Raymond, Sylvain Bordiec, « Bridging the gap in social movement research: family as a vehicle for mobilization for the Yellow Vests », *French Politics*, 2022

*Version pré-publication, ne pas citer*

Fillieule, O., Hayat, S., and Monchatre, S. (2020) Trois regards sur le mouvement des « Gilets jaunes ».

*La nouvelle revue du travail* (17).

Fisher, D. R., Andrews, K. T., Caren, N., Chenoweth, E., Heaney, M. T., Leung, T., Perkins, L. N., and

Pressman, J. (2019) The science of contemporary street protest: New efforts in the United States.

*Science Advances* 5(10): eaaw5461.

Gaxie, D. (2017) The Rewards of Activism. *Politika*, <https://www.politika.io/en/notice/the-rewards-of-activism>.

Haenfler, R., Johnson, B., and Jones, E. (2012) Lifestyle Movements: Exploring the Intersection of Lifestyle and Social Movements. *Social Movement Studies* 11(1): 1–20.

Hmed, C. (2007) Contester une institution dans le cas d'une mobilisation improbable : la « grève des loyers » dans les foyers Sonacotra dans les années 1970. *Sociétés contemporaines* 65(1): 55–81.

Inglehart, R. (1977) *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*.

NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jaravel, X. (2019) Inflation Inequality: Measurement, Causes, and Policy Implications. *Annual review of Economics*, 13(1): 599-629.

Lenoir, R. (2011) La solidarité familiale : une question morale ? In *Repenser la solidarité*. Paris: PUF.

Lenoir, R. (2003) *Généalogie de la morale familiale*. Paris : Seuil.

Martin, C. (2014) « Être un bon parent » : une injonction contemporaine. (1er édition.). Paris: Presses de l'EHESP.

Martinache, I. (2019) L'impouvoir d'achat. *La Vie des idées*.

Masclat, C. (2015) Inherited Feminism? *Politix* 109(1): 45–68.

Antoine Bernard de Raymond, Sylvain Bordiec, « Bridging the gap in social movement research: family as a vehicle for mobilization for the Yellow Vests », *French Politics*, 2022

*Version pré-publication, ne pas citer*

Mathieu, L. (1999) Une mobilisation improbable : l'occupation de l'église Saint-Nizier par les prostituées lyonnaises. *Revue française de sociologie* 40(3): 475–499.

Mathieu, L. (2004) *Comment lutter ? Sociologie et mouvements sociaux*. Paris: Textuel.

Maurer, S., and Pierru, E. (2001) Le mouvement des chômeurs de l'hiver 1997-1998 Retour sur un « miracle social ». *Revue française de science politique* 51(3): 371–407.

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., and Tilly, C. (2001) *Dynamics of Contention*. (First Edition edition.). Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

McCarthy, J. D., and Zald, M. N. (1973) *The trend of social movements in America: professionalization and resource mobilization*. Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press.

Merton, R. K. (1949) *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Messu, M. (2019) La solidarité familiale. Heurs et malheurs d'un syntagme "affectif". *Recherches familiales* 16(1): 65-82.

Noiriel, G., and Truong, N. (2019) *Les gilets jaunes à la lumière de l'histoire*. La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube.

Pagis, J. (2014) *Mai 68, un pavé dans leur histoire: Événements et socialisation politique*. Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po.

Parsons, T. (1949) *Essays in Sociological Theory Pure and Applied*. Glencoe : Free Press.

Perrin-Heredia, A. (2011) Faire les comptes : normes comptables, normes sociales. *Genèses* 84(3): 69–92.

Peugny, C. (2009) *Le déclassé*. Paris: Grasset.

Piven, F. F., and Cloward, R. (1978) *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Vintage.

Planche, V. (2020) *S'unir dans la diversité. Étude des valeurs partagées par les membres du mouvement des Gilets Jaunes à Nîmes*. Marseille: EHESS.

Ratinaud, P., and Marchand, P. (2015) Des mondes lexicaux aux représentations sociales. Une première approche des thématiques dans les débats à l'Assemblée nationale (1998-2014). *Mots. Les langages du politique* (108): 57–77.

Ravelli, Q. (2019) Un chaos organisé : les ronds-points du Loiret comme structure politique. In *Approches Ethnographiques Des Gilets Jaunes: Enquêtes et Expériences*. Presented at the Approches ethnographiques des Gilets jaunes: enquêtes et expériences Paris: EHESS.

Ravelli, Q. (2021) Fuel Feud. The Political Economy of the Yellow Vest. In *The Political Economy of Social Movements*. In Press.

Reinert, M. (1983) Une méthode de classification descendante hiérarchique : application à l'analyse lexicale par contexte. *Cahiers de l'analyse de données*, 8(2): 187-198.

Robcis, C. (2015) Catholics, the "Theory of Gender," and the Turn to the Human in France: A New Dreyfus Affair? *The Journal of Modern History* 87(4): 892–923.

Rouban, L. (2019, January 28) Les « gilets jaunes », une transition populiste de droite. *The Conversation*.

Siblot, Y. (2006) « Je suis la secrétaire de la famille ! » La prise en charge féminine des tâches administratives entre subordination et ressource. *Genèses* (64): 46–66.

Simmons, E. (2014) Grievances do matter in mobilization. *Theory and Society* 43(5): 513–546.

Antoine Bernard de Raymond, Sylvain Bordiec, « Bridging the gap in social movement research: family as a vehicle for mobilization for the Yellow Vests », *French Politics*, 2022  
*Version pré-publication, ne pas citer*

Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London : Sage.

Snow, D. (2005) Social Movements as Challenges to Authority: Resistance to an Emerging Conceptual Hegemony. *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 25: 3–25.

Verberg, N. (2009) Family-based Social Activism: Rethinking the Social Role of Families. *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes* 2.

Wahlström, M., and Wennerhag, M. (2014) Alone in the crowd: Lone protesters in Western European demonstrations. *International Sociology* 29(6): 565–583.

Weber, F. (2011) Qu'est-ce que la protection rapprochée ? In *Repenser la solidarité*. Paris: PUF.

Zelizer, V. A. (2007) *The Purchase of Intimacy*. (New e. édition.). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.