

# THE ACCELERATED LEARNING OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE : THE CASE OF THE YELLOW VESTS' MOVEMENT IN FRANCE

**RETHINKING A WORLD IN "CRISIS" ACCELERATION,  
ALIENATION, AND THE CRITIQUE OF LIFE FORMS**  
**October 2022**

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# 1 Issues: the learning of the public sphere

# 1.1 How can we consider the public sphere of Habermas in the context of acceleration societies ?

Rosa's theory (2013, 2017) of acceleration societies

→ alienation effects:

- is the formation of a massive (deliberating) assembly possible ?
- is equality possible despite social classes and heterogenous cultural identities in such a massive assembly ?
- is free critical thinking within such an assembly possible ?

## To answer those questions

- The case of the Yellow Vests' movement in France, between 2018-2019;
- Fraser's review of the public sphere;
- Media theories.

# 1.2 Context of the Yellow Vests' social movement

## from Fall 2018 until fall 2019

### Causes :

- ❑ Increase of the oil taxes, impacting the purchasing power of many workers depending on their cars on a daily basis.

### Development:

- ❑ A movement, born out of any established and structured parties, unions or organizations, without any leaders or personalities, any political programme or background.
- ❑ Unprecedented phenomenon.
  - Mainstream media rather mocked the « populist » movement
  - Researchers took a more observatory stance

## **Indeed the Yellow Vests made some political and economic achievements.**

Their strategies of communication and action were a success

- ❑ French government was forced to set up an emergency plan amounting to 10 billions of euros which settled:
  - the cancelling of the carbon tax rise on oil,
  - the cancelling of the social contribution tax on small pensions,
  - the rise of the activity bonus for minimum wages,
  - the exemption of tax for overtime working hours and for favouring low incomes and small pensions.

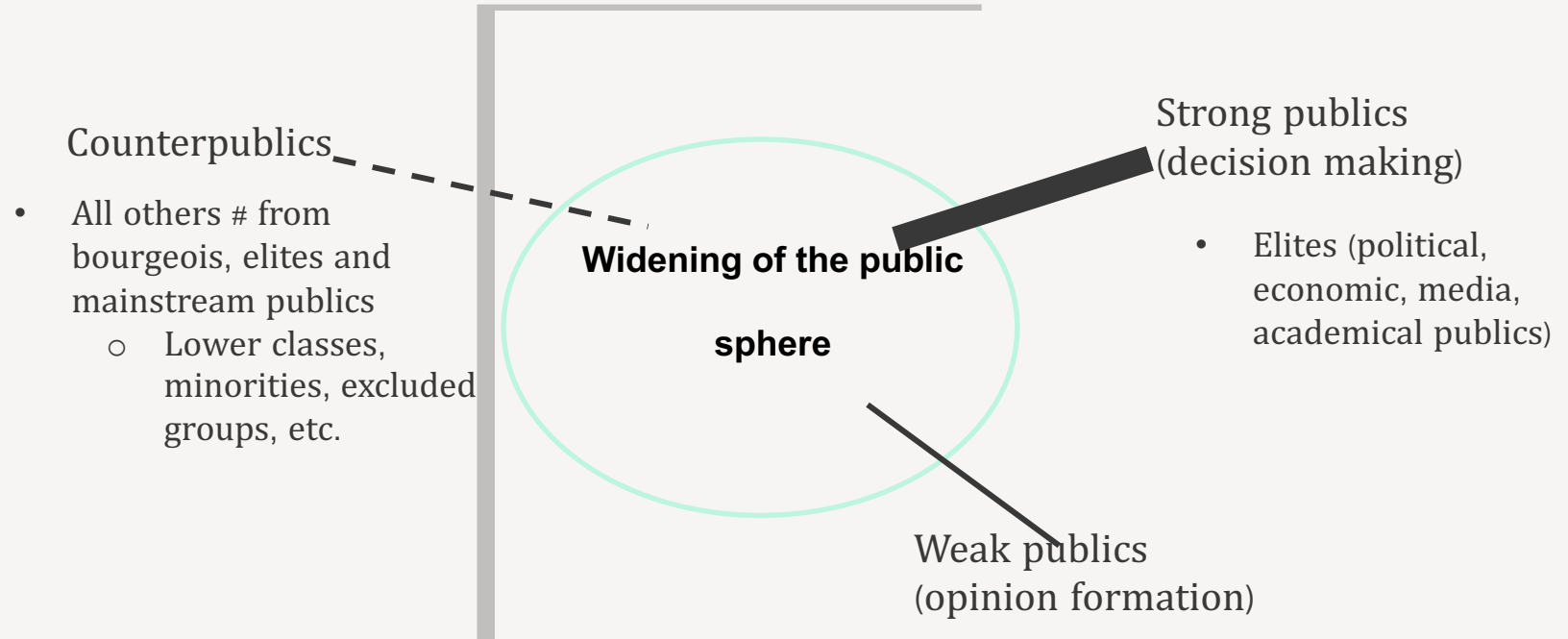
## The postulate of a strong public according to Fraser's theory with the tool of social media

- ❑ The Yellow Vests were all but legitimate voices;
  - Our postulate:
    - ❖ They acquire public sphere skills to make them heard and listened and become, first a counterpublic, then a strong public;
    - ❖ With the help of social media.



# 1.3 Fraser's theory of counter publics and public sphere

# Some concepts of Fraser's theory of the public sphere 1/3



# Some concepts of Fraser's theory of the public sphere 2/3

The path to a wider public sphere, with as many diverse counterpublics as possible, sounds like one of the best safeguards of the democratic dynamics.

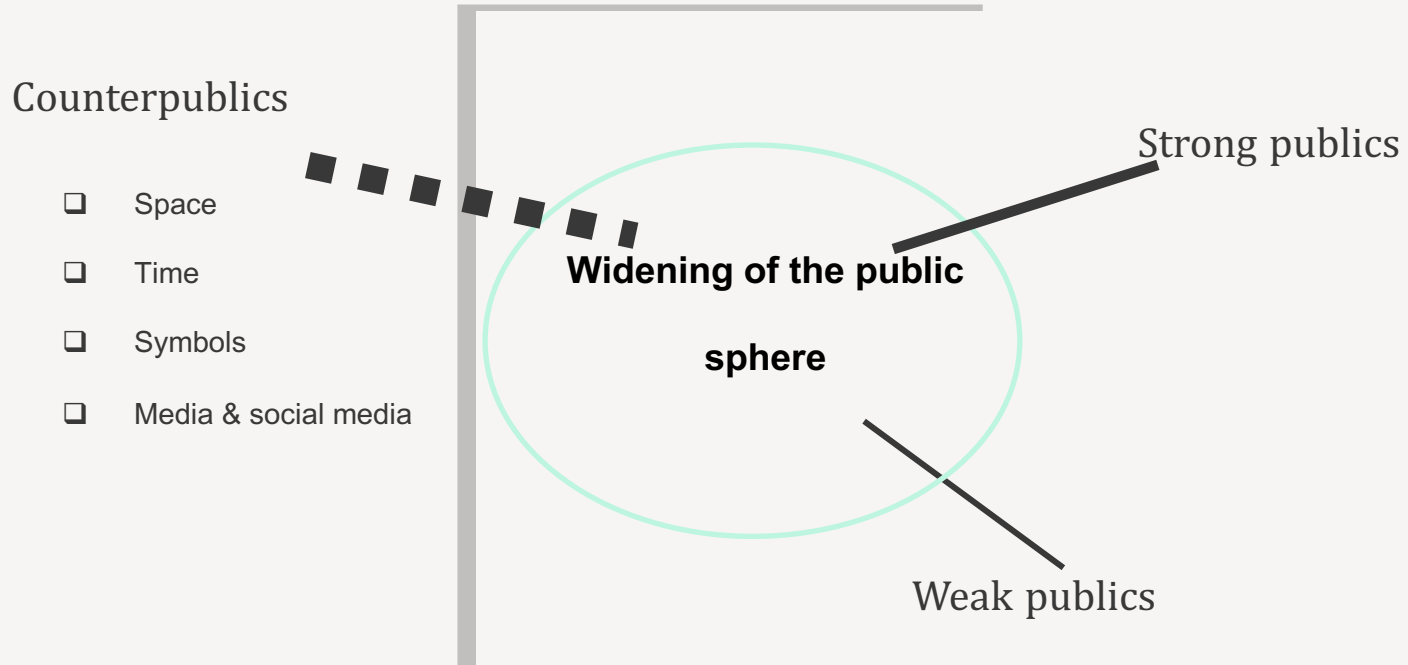
# 1. 4 Methodology

## Empirical secondary data

- ❑ Quantitative and qualitative analyses
- ❑ Political science and sociology (mainly)

## 2 Findings: the Yellow Vests' learnings

# The Yellow Vests' evolution: first non-public, then counterpublic to strong public



## 2.1 Facebook as a learning tool for the competing public sphere

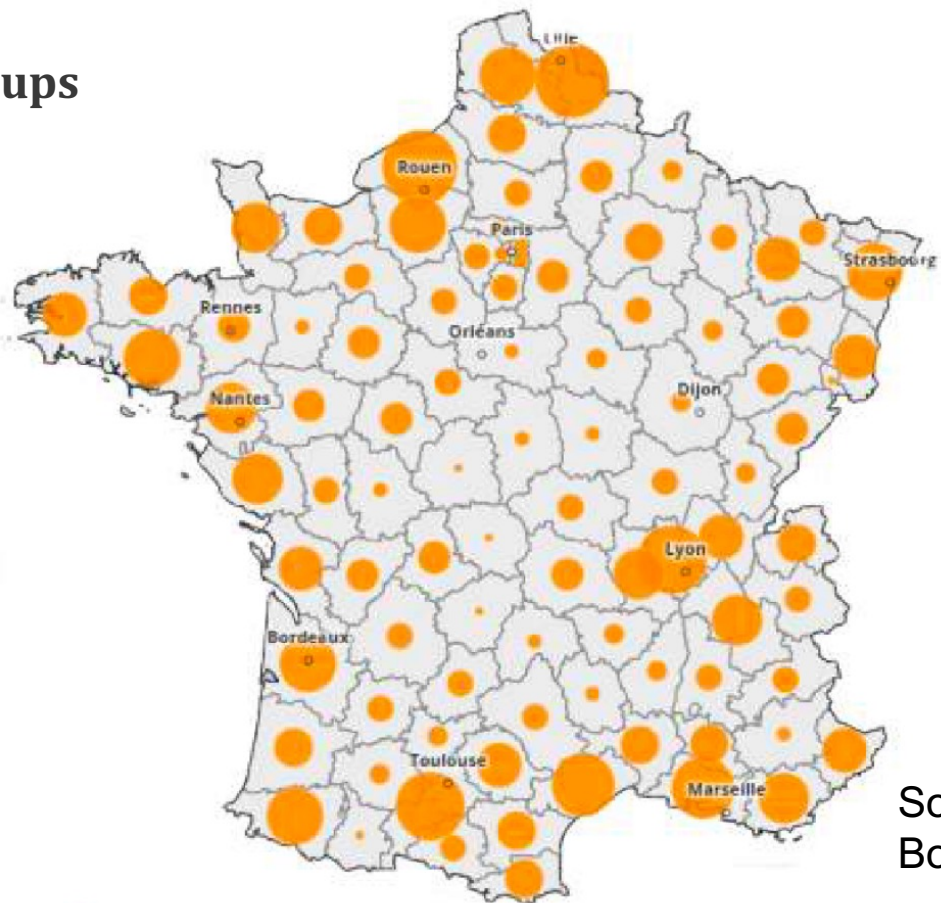
### Numbers of groups, number of people

Tableau 1. *Caractéristiques des groupes Facebook analysés*

Public du groupe	Nombre de groupes	Nombre de membres	Nombre de publications avant le 14 décembre 2018
National	287	2 454 585	281 365
Régional	113	254 068	138 739
Départemental	317	529 412	323 217
Local	834	1 025 628	730 295
Total	1 548	4 263 693	1 473 616

Source: Boyer Pierre C. et al., 2020, p. 118.

# Mapping of the groups



Nombre de membres de groupes Facebook par département



Source:  
Boyer et al., 2019, p. 5





Source: Pictures copyright free from the WWW

## The properties of Facebook as a learning device

For Lefebvre (2019), Facebook became the roundabout of the roundabouts :

where they could erect huts or barracks so they could stay, share meals and discussions make blockades, see themselves and be seen. It did generate a non-hierarchical and yet efficient dynamic.

On the qualitative side, Jatteau (2019) makes a comparison:

- The printing technique gave the people access to reading,
- The internet technique might give access to writing and speaking.

## 2. 2 Acquiring Political Codes and Skills to Reach the Public Sphere

By themselves without the help of established organizations:

- more difficult

But

- more creative

And

- immediate practice (statements, discourses, broadcasting, meetings... within one group and between groups)

## Emancipating themselves from the customary registry of collective actions

Apart from the traditional demonstrations and blockades :

□ **Space:**

huts on the roundabouts and monuments out of wooden pallets.

□ **Time:**

theatre act as a frame for each set of actions (52 acts from November 2018 to November 2019).

□ **Symbol:**

safety yellow vest into a new lower-middle-class and low-class symbol.

□ **Media:**

Alternative or independent media.

## Conquering mainstream media

With all these:

⇒ actions and innovations

(Space/Time/Symbols/  
Media & social media);

====> reach the mainstream media;

=====> amplify their claims and  
reach out.

## 2.3 Learning to be a Strong Public

November 2018:

- oil taxes project ;
- beginning of the movement.

December 2018: the

- bill of law on oil taxes cancelled;
- emergency social programme of 10 billion euros adopted.

Why did the movement go on after this success?

## Building arguments for a deeper change

More than oil prices...

Their critique aimed at the political system, globally.

## The grounding of the claims

Indeed, the movement made visible :

The social suffering within parts of the French population, mainly from the middle and lower working classes experiencing a deterioration of their life and working conditions.

It allowed people, usually considered as 'subalterns', to express and share their narratives (Lefebvre, 2019).



## Women and men...

Men: craftsmen, blue-collar workers, truck drivers;  
Women: care workers, even nurses, maids...

Women were very present in this movement compared to others (Bendali and Rubert, 2020).

This is explained by the fact that women form a great part of the most vulnerable people, hit harder by the degrading life and working conditions.

## Quick learning movement but vanishing already?

The movement was torn between:

- embracing conformism;
- maintaining their radical democratic process.

For instance:

in April, then in June 2019, the Assembly of assemblies accounted for 700 hundred delegates, representing 235 groups throughout France (Lefebvre, 2019).

The continuity of the movement seemed hardly possible without permanent structures.

# 3 Discussion: 3 key perspectives

## 3.1 The learning dynamics of the public sphere in a context of inequality

In this case of the Yellow Vests, Fraser's theory helps understand how the learning of the public sphere can occur in spite of inequality.

## 3. 2 Learning in a context of acceleration

Facebook, one of the most conformist social media, was used in a disruptive way;

Allowing people to regain some control on their lives thanks to:

- accelerated learning
- the connecting at different levels, locally, regionally and globally.

### 3. 3 Learning in 3 key points

Some visions about the learning and the widening of the public sphere:

Collective learning is possible despite diverse and even controversial trends (populism, far right and far left trends).

Acceleration was useful and meaningful in this learning process.

A move from anger and frustration to cognition and metacognition was made, as they wanted:

- Not only to know the public sphere and how to act;
- But to think about the way they think and the way they act.

### 3. 4 To conclude, some questions about the deliberating option

It raises questions about critical thinking on a massive scale:

- ❑ A radical and equal deliberating system is meaningful but how could it be possible on the long-term?
- ❑ What would it take to make it feasible in terms of social, political, economical orientation and transformation?
- ❑ Or could intermittent movements become a relevant model of action in a the public sphere and in context of acceleration?

### 3. 4 Some questions about populism

It also raises questions about the nature and the outcomes of populism:

- ❑ Which of the 2 populisms, the reactionary one or the progressive one (Fraser, 2011, 2019), will prevail?
- ❑ Can we expect some rationality and social transformation from progressive populism as Fraser suggests it?



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