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# Manifesting the revolutionary people: The Yellow Vest Movement and popular sovereignty

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The 2010s ended as they had begun: with mass popular uprisings (Brannen et al., 2020). And as had happened during the Arab Spring and the subsequent democratic movements of the early part of the decade, these protests took place outside of existing organizations such as parties, unions, or associations. In France, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, Ecuador, Hong Kong, or Algeria, it was as if *the people* were spontaneously rebelling against rising prices or the encroachment of freedom by their government, which they condemned as belonging to an oligarchy. The French Yellow Vest Movement, which began in November 2018 in opposition to a rise in fuel taxes, seems to have been the inaugural uprising of this wave of protests, and it received massive media coverage in France (Moualek, 2022; Siroux, 2020), as well as early and pronounced scholarly interest (Bendali & Rubert, 2020; Bourmeau, 2019; Confavreux, 2019; Jeanpierre, 2019; Le Bart, 2020; Ravelli, 2020). Yet there was then, and still is, no consensus on the political nature of the movement. Was it a movement of selfish motorists fighting to retain their right to pollute at low cost, or was it about social and environmental justice (Dormagen et al., 2021; Mehleb et al., 2021)? Was it the return of the working class to the center of the political stage or a movement that transcended class distinctions (Bantigny & Hayat, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2023)? Was it an apolitical movement with a series of demands derived from “anger” or “relative deprivation” (Lüders et al., 2021; Morales et al., 2020), or was it secretly controlled by leaders who had a political agenda?<sup>1</sup> Was it a populist or popular movement (Bergem, 2022; Guerra et al., 2019; Legris, 2022), right or left (Bendali et al., 2019; Cointet et al., 2021; Collectif d’enquête sur les Gilets jaunes, 2019)? Was it just another episode in the long history of protest in France, or was it an unprecedented movement aiming at nothing less than a brand new social contract (Devellennes, 2021)?

How can we make sense of this apparent impossibility of grasping what the Yellow Vest Movement really wanted? It seems that the Yellow Vests were not really heard, not because they did not speak—they were avidly invited onto TV shows, interviewed in newspapers, and many of them had tirelessly documented their own activity on social networks, especially Facebook (Baisnée et al., 2022; Souillard et al., 2020)—but because they did not speak appropriately political language, i.e., language that would have been transparent and easy to categorize for professional political commentators such as journalists and academics. Indeed, when they spoke, some of the basic elements of what has come to be known as a true political language in modern politics were missing. First, in modern politics, political language is the language of the professionals of political representation (Bourdieu, 1991b; Gaxie, 1978), whereas in the Yellow Vest

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Movement, everything was done so that there were no representatives and no representation (Hayat, 2022; Lefebvre, 2019). Second, modern political language is polarized and ideological. But the Yellow Vests spoke a language devoid of political markers: there was no manifesto, very few chants and slogans, no centralized decision-making procedures—despite some initiatives from groups often composed of long-time activists (Ravelli et al., 2020)—and the movement rejected the left–right divide or any form of partisanship (Bedock et al., 2020). This dual absence of representation and partisanship was not a lack (due to incompetence, for example), but a positive and active “avoidance of institutional politics” (Reungoat et al., 2022).

In this article, I will show that their very refusal to situate themselves politically was linked to a particular understanding of popular sovereignty. Indeed, it was accompanied by multiple performances in which Yellow Vests presented themselves as *the sovereign people* addressing their representatives, and in particular President Emmanuel Macron, whom they accused of having betrayed their mandate. For this reason, the tools of political theory—and in particular the analysis of the concept of popular sovereignty, its different meanings, their history, and political implications—can help to make sense of the movement beyond the apparent confusion of its forms. Considering the Yellow Vests’ protest as a certain way of claiming to exercise popular sovereignty can help make sense of this seemingly multifaceted movement, and perhaps by extension of other popular protests of the 2010s. In turn, describing how they thought about and performed popular sovereignty enriches our theoretical understanding of the concept, bringing new actors into the conversation. This kind of back-and-forth between political theory and social reality is part of problem-based political theory, where the validity of a political theory is tested by its pragmatic ability to solve empirical problems (Mansbridge, 2023; Warren, 2017). In this case, my aim is to make sense of recent popular upheavals and how the movements themselves made sense of their actions, using the resources of both democratic theory and social movement studies (Gobbi et al., 2022). Epistemologically, such an endeavor presupposes the belief in a shared capacity to use concepts, or at least the existence of a continuum between professional and lay or everyday uses of political concepts, particularly when it comes to making normative judgments (Boltanski, 2011; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006)—what proponents of grounded normative theory call “epistemological inclusion” (Ackerly et al., 2021). It considers that social and political movements do participate in the general conversation about political concepts and that political theorists should take their use of concepts seriously, even if they are sometimes expressed in less overtly theoretical terms and therefore require some form of translation.

Admittedly, the Yellow Vests were not political theorists in the usual sense. They did not enter into an academic debate about popular sovereignty by producing ideas about the meaning of the term. Rather, they practiced a form of politics that might be linked with popular sovereignty, performing a certain way of manifesting the people and claiming power. Although they did not have the usual activist trappings (stickers and posters), a majority of them wrote slogans and drew images on the back of their vests (Artières, 2022; Monchatre & Têtu, 2022), providing us with an invaluable source on how they used concepts, their understanding of the social realm, and the way they decided to present themselves.<sup>2</sup> Several attempts were also made, within the movement, to consolidate demands, which again gives us an idea of how the Yellow Vests may have conceptualized the movement’s goals. In this article, I will use both sources, always taking care to link the content of messages and claims with the position of enunciation adopted, i.e., as what and in the name of whom these messages are formulated. Ideologies are certainly defined by their semantic pattern (Freeden, 1996); but when they are enacted and appropriated by social movements, they are accompanied by certain stances and performances (Belorgey et al., 2011; Rai, 2015; Rioufreyt, 2019). This is especially true when it comes to popular sovereignty, as it requires the always contestable performance of appearing as (a true representation of) the people (Diehl, 2023; Ihl, 2016). As Jason Frank puts it, “images of peoplehood mediate the people’s relationship to their own political empowerment—how they understand themselves to be a part of and act as a people” (Frank, 2021, p. 71), making this way of claiming popular sovereignty an aesthetic as much as a political problem.

I will therefore focus on how the Yellow Vests presented themselves and their demands, and from there, I will try to reconstruct how they understood popular sovereignty in a way that might be useful to political theorists. I will show that to support their claim to be the manifestation of the sovereign people, the Yellow Vests presented themselves as the return of the original sovereign people to the political stage, recalling the constitutive moment of the French

Republic, i.e. the French Revolution. While French revolutionary imagery has been part of the official symbols of state sovereignty since the late 19th century—making most political and social movements after World War II, particularly on the left, reluctant to use them—the Yellow Vest Movement reclaimed these symbols in their enactment of popular sovereignty, on an unprecedented scale.<sup>3</sup> Following historian Sophie Wahnich, we can say that this unusual reference was central to the way the Yellow Vests imbued themselves with a collective identity: They “made use of this historical rather than theoretical knowledge to give themselves points of support and reference points” (Wahnich, 2020). And they did so not to overthrow the government or install a direct democracy, but to control its actions in the face of its apparent oligarchic drift. As was the case during the Revolution, their initial grievances were reformulated as directives from the sovereign people, which representatives must obey in order to regain the people’s trust. In this sense, the Yellow Vest Movement proved to be the bearer of an original conception of popular sovereignty: It combined, on the one hand, a claim to hold constituent power (Brito Vieira, 2015; Frank, 2010; Kalyvas, 2005; Rubinelli, 2020), which fueled the demands for recourse to referendums (Abrial et al., 2022), and on the other a negative conception of sovereignty as popular control (Rosanvallon, 2008) already seen in Aristotle (Lane, 2016) but less common in modern theories of sovereignty—a combination akin to Rousseau’s conception of popular sovereignty (Garsten, 2010; Hallward, 2023; McKay, 2022; Nikolakakis, 2023). The central ambition of this article will then be to show how this conception of sovereignty enables us to link the political performance of the Yellow Vests (picturing themselves as a manifestation of the entire French people), their reference to the French Revolution, and their demands for popular control—thus shedding new light on the movement, and highlighting one of the possibilities for making use of the concept of popular sovereignty.

This article will be divided into four parts. First, I will examine what it meant for the Yellow Vest Movement to adopt a populist position of enunciation—speaking for all the people, despite the social and political diversity of its members—in order to support their claim to be a manifestation of the sovereign people. Second, I will show how this stance was fueled by an appeal to French revolutionary imagery, with the Yellow Vests claiming to be the new *Sans-Culottes*. In the third part, I will focus on the content of the grievances collected digitally, particularly on the *Le Vrai Débat* platform, presented as directives from the sovereign people. I will show that the Yellow Vests did not claim popular sovereignty as a way to replace elected officials in their daily political activities, but rather as a way for them to remind representatives that the people were the true origin of their power and that they must listen to their grievances and serve their interests exclusively. In the last part, I will hypothesize that this conception of popular sovereignty is characteristic of a popular will to democratically control the activity of representatives in a situation where the usual institutions for doing so, primarily political parties, no longer perform this function.

## 1 | MANIFESTING THE SOVEREIGN PEOPLE: THE YELLOW VESTS AS A POPULIST SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The Yellow Vest Movement was fundamentally diverse, both in terms of the social position of its members and in terms of their political opinions, preferred forms of action and the direction they wanted the movement to take (Dormagen et al., 2022). Yet they had one seemingly paradoxical trait in common: their acceptance of this fundamental diversity as precisely the proof that they were indeed the people in their totality, and thus could claim sovereignty. This emphasis on unity across political divides is one of the few elements that gave the movement cohesion, making it very difficult to classify according to the usual political categories. They claimed to have nothing to do with either the left or the right, and nothing to do with the history of social movements, trade unionism, or any kind of group representing just a fraction of the people. Fundamentally, they claimed not to be a social movement speaking for the people, but to *be* the people in all their universality. It was undoubtedly a representative claim, aiming at mobilizing the group that it contributed to forming and imbuing with coherence and presence (Bourdieu, 1991a; Castiglione & Pollak, 2019; Disch, 2021; Disch et al., 2019; Saward, 2010). But it was a very particular representative claim, which might be better grasped using Jason Frank’s concept of “popular manifestation,” i.e., the emergence of “the people as a collective actor,” especially in



**FIGURE 1** The sovereign people. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8675.12736)]

“crowds and informal assemblies” (Frank, 2021, pp. 25–27). It is a form of democratic representation, but one which reveals its fundamentally aporetic character: the impossibility for any representative claim to fully represent the represented, and thus the necessity for the people to manifest themselves on occasion. And when they do, in the streets or popular assemblies, “they at once claim to represent the people while also signaling the material plenitude beyond any representational claim,” they “make manifest that which escapes representational capture” (Frank, 2021, p. 11). They must appear as the represented, whose mere presence shows that their institutional representation is not enough to represent them entirely, and thus forces representatives to hear the sovereign people they are supposed to represent.

This is why Yellow Vests did not claim to represent anyone but themselves, and largely refused any form of organized representation (Hayat, 2022); this is why they actively rejected any element from the traditional repertoire of actions of social movements or political parties, why they had no manifesto and no recognized spokespersons. They did not need any of these, or more precisely they actively refused to use them, because it would have impeded their ability to claim to be the sovereign people, i.e., the represented, those who hold no mandate. Because they individually represented no one but themselves, they were collectively the represented, a manifestation of the true French people, following a logic of synecdoche, or *pars pro toto*, where one part stands for the whole without any mandate (Ankersmit, 2019; Sande, 2020).<sup>4</sup> During the movement, this claim to be a manifestation of the sovereign people was put forward by several Yellow Vests in the way they staged their protest and presented themselves. References to the people and their sovereignty were numerous on the back of their vests: “We are the people,” “Power to the people—this is democracy,” “We are Yellow, we are the people, listen to the people,” “the people only are sovereign, Macron this is the end,” “Democracy: a regime in which power is held or controlled by the people (this is us!!),” or, in a more developed way: “I am Yellow Vest, I am the people, I am a woman, a man, a child, I am of all colors, I am of all religions and without religion, I am democracy, I am France, I am liberty, equality and fraternity, and I rise up in the face of injustice” (Figure 1).

So the Yellow Vests were the whole people not only in the sense of a large inclusive set of individuals, open to anyone, in accordance with liberal values of tolerance. Nor did they claim to be the whole people in the sense of a descriptive representation of all social classes in society—minus the elites. They claimed to be the *sovereign* people, i.e., the ultimate holder of political legitimacy, on which the political system was based, and who had been betrayed by their representatives.

In this sense, the Yellow Vest Movement might be said to belong to the constellation of “populist social movements” (Aslanidis, 2016b), in which protesters “claim to represent the democratic sovereign, not a sectional interest such as

an economic class" (Canovan, 1999, p. 4). And indeed, several authors have included the Yellow Vest Movement in the broad category of populism (Guerra et al., 2019; Lüders et al., 2021; Tarragoni, 2019). If we consider populism as a strictly discursive phenomenon, in the wake of Ernesto Laclau's seminal analysis (Laclau, 2007), characterized by any discourse that articulates an antagonistic understanding of the people as opposed to the elites, then the Yellow Vest Movement might be seen as populist. Similarly, a purely "ideational" understanding of populism, such as the one advocated by Cas Mudde (Mudde, 2017), where populism is seen as an "ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), might allow us to consider most of the public discourse of Yellow Vests as populist. Discursive and ideational definitions, which are ultimately closer together than their advocates often recognize (Aslanidis, 2016a), even though their implicit judgments of the phenomenon are somewhat different (Katsambekis, 2022), help to make sense of some crucial aspects of the Yellow Vest Movement. However, what matters is to understand what this populist discursive or ideational element entailed for the movement (Bergem, 2022).

In this regard, the claim to be a manifestation of the sovereign people led the Yellow Vests to constantly perform unity, "because they 'are' the people. And 'the people' can only be unanimous" (Kouvelakis, 2019, p. 80). This performance of unity came at the expense of expressing differences of opinion within the movement (Reungoat et al., 2022), and more crucially differences of identity, including class identity. This might seem contradictory to the social affiliation of the movement, which began as a protest against an increase in fuel taxes whose burden was disproportionately borne by the poor. From the outset, it was a *popular* movement, in the social sense of the people as the lower class, and it could entirely fit what has been described as plebeian populism, "whose goal is to *increase* the welfare of the masses *against* oligarchic domination, backed up by a plebeian authority that *exceeds* the power conceded by the institutional structure" (Vergara, 2020a, p. 239). Yet this plebeian identity was partly at odds with the performance of unity that allowed the movement to claim to manifest the people as a whole. This ambivalence between the two meanings of "people"—as *populus* and as *plebs* (Breugh, 2013; Laclau, 2007; Vatter, 2012)—was echoed in the social characteristics of the movement (Hoibian, 2019). Although most Yellow Vests were on a tight budget (Blavier, 2021) and their median income, by their own statements, appeared to be lower than that of the general population (Collectif d'enquête sur les Gilets jaunes, 2019), many did not belong to the lowest classes but to the "*petits-moyens*," lower-middle classes living in houses in suburban residential areas (Cartier et al., 2008), often owning their own cars—hence the initial focus on fuel tax and the choice of the high visibility yellow vest, a legal requirement for motorists in France. More importantly, many Yellow Vests were careful to distance themselves from the lower classes, displaying in their discourse and actions elements of what has been called a "triangular consciousness" (Schwartz, 2009) or "triadic populism" (Judis, 2016), rejecting both the highest and lowest strata of society, both the elites and the welfare-dependent poor ("*les assistés*") or what they termed misfits ("*les cassos*") (Legris, 2022). As a result, members of the suburban working classes, often from ethnic minorities, living in council housing, and dependent on public transport, were mostly absent from the movement (Marlière, 2020; Xelka, 2019), which displayed a consistent refusal to address racism—although the racialized poor may have been more invisible than absent (Geisser, 2019), and some movements opposed to racist police violence took part in some demonstrations (Brakni, 2019). The Yellow Vests also seem to have been very reluctant to collaborate with organizations that have long represented the people in the sense of the social class of workers, first and foremost the trade unions, with a view to a possible plebeian front (Quijoux & Gourgues, 2018; Sophié Bérout, 2022). There may have been a plebeian element to the Yellow Vest Movement, but it was far from hegemonic. It coexisted with a sense of distinction from the underclass, and it was constantly and actively pushed aside in order to focus on the unity of the people, sometimes to the detriment of valorizing their undoubtedly real plebeian origin.

However, this reluctance to play the plebeian card, which is consistent with the Yellow Vests' populist discourse, led to a difficulty in giving cohesion to the movement. In most populist movements, if this cohesion does not come from a bottom-up plebeian struggle for justice, it is given top-down, by the populist party or leader. The latter case is in fact the norm in what have been described as archetypal populist movements, such as the People's Party in the USA, Latin American populist governments, or contemporary far-right or far-left political parties (Weyland, 2017). These



were always political enterprises using various means to mobilize the people they claimed to stand for in order to achieve power, often (but not always) embodied by a strong leader (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014; Urbinati, 2019). But if we consider the strategy, aims, and modes of organization of the Yellow Vest Movement, we are far away from that: There was no desire to replace existing representatives with new ones, no participation in electoral competition, or even the creation of a stable organization that could seek to exert a lasting influence on institutional politics. Certainly, they were organized through many networks operating at different scales, and there were forms of spokespersonship and leadership, but there was no “intentional organization,” rather “distributed action” and “distributed leadership” (Nunes, 2021). On the contrary, their shared understanding of what manifesting the sovereign people requires led them to actively produce evidence that they did not seek political power and that they had no leader (Hayat, 2022). Yet they had to construct a common identity to give coherence and consistency to their distributed action. They claimed to be the sovereign people, and that’s populism all right, but to move beyond this strictly discursive observation, we need to turn to the actual actions and performances that gave the movement its ability to picture itself as a manifestation of the sovereign people. This is fundamentally, as Jason Frank notes, “an aesthetic problem,” focused on “how this authorizing entity, the people, publicly appears, how it makes itself visible and tangible, how the people takes shape as a collective actor . . . , how the people appear and how they act” (Frank, 2021, pp. 24–25). To understand how the Yellow Vest Movement could claim to be a manifestation of the sovereign people, we need to go beyond the observation of its populist positioning and study the strategy of aesthetic representation that gave it its cohesion despite its extreme (and defining) diversity.

## 2 | PORTRAITS OF THE YELLOW VESTS AS SANS-CULOTTES

I would argue that a central element in the movement’s cohesion was its appeal to the memory of the historic revolutionary event that founded the Republic, at least as recounted in history textbooks, official political imagery, and popular fiction: the French Revolution of 1789 (Furet, 1981). The Yellow Vests situated their action within the narrative of the Revolution, presenting their movement as a resurgence of this founding uprising. They used a populist discourse, but unlike most populist movements, their aim was not to mobilize an electorate to come to power but to prove that they were the constituent people—a claim similar to those made in the Occupy movement (Brito Vieira, 2015; Sande, 2020). To support their claim, they performed a resurgence of the (imagined) French constituent moment, the Revolution. The interpretation of the Yellow Vests as a historical resurgence of the French Revolution is not new. It was even, very early on, commonplace for journalists in their interpretation of the movement to make the Yellow Vests the heirs of the revolutionaries, and more precisely of the Sans-Culottes: a book was entitled *The Sovereign People, from the Sans-Culottes to the Gilets jaunes*,<sup>5</sup> and many newspaper and magazine articles made this connection: “Yellow Vests and Sans-Culottes,”<sup>6</sup> “Sans-Culottes yesterday and Yellow Vests today,”<sup>7</sup> “Facing the monarch Macron, Yellow Vests dream of themselves as Sans-Culottes,”<sup>8</sup> “Why the Yellow Vests claim to be descendants of the French Revolution”<sup>9</sup>; “Are Yellow Vests today’s Sans-Culottes?,”<sup>10</sup> “The Yellow Vests, like an air of revolution in France,”<sup>11</sup> and “Yellow Vests, Sans-Culottes and Phrygian hats: revolutions and clothing symbols.”<sup>12</sup>

What is perhaps more interesting is to note the occurrence of references to the Revolution among Yellow Vests themselves (Wahnich, 2020). This was the case among the (unofficial) spokespersons, with Priscilla Ludosky, the woman who launched the first petition denouncing the fuel tax increase, and Maxime Nicole, a prominent figure in the movement, reenacting in December 2018 the Tennis Court Oath (*Serment du Jeu de Paume*) during which Deputies of the Third Estates, sitting as a National Assembly, took an oath not to secede until a Constitution was voted.<sup>13</sup> Such references were also common among the movement’s rank and file. Certainly, not all Yellow Vests used ideological symbols, but those who did used republican ones, such as the French flag, the French national anthem (*La Marseillaise*), or the Phrygian hat. And not all Yellow Vests referred to the past, but those who did referred primarily to the Revolution. This can be seen from the inscriptions on the back of the vests themselves. The reference appeared mainly through dates, such as “1789 2018/19” or “1789+230 = 2019”; sometimes, the reference was supplemented by



**FIGURE 2** Revolutionary years. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8675.12736)]

explanations: “1789: down with the King! 2018: Down with the Money-King! Citizen Revolution!”, “1789/monarchy 2019/oligarchy”; “Warning to Macron 1789–2018”; “Sire, they have taken the Bastille.—Is it a revolt?—No, Sire, it is the Revolution!!! 1789–2019”. In some cases, there were intermediary dates, as if the Yellow Vests were picking up and continuing an interrupted history, started in 1789—because there was never, to my knowledge, an earlier date written<sup>14</sup>: “1789 > 1793 > 1830 > 1848 > 1871 > 1968 > 2018 The people is back”; “The people’s cry 1789 1870 1968 2018 / 1848” (Figure 2).

In addition to the dates, Yellow Vests sometimes made direct reference to the actors of the Revolution, and in the first place to the *Sans-Culottes*. They presented themselves as the new *Sans-Culottes*, the only sovereigns, asserting their constitutional right to rebel—sometimes quoting the voted but never applied Jacobin Constitution of 1793: “We are the *sans-culottes*. We give up nothing. All united,” “To acts citizens, form your battalions” (a play on words between arms and acts in the words of the *Marseillaise*), “toothless + penniless = *sans-culotte*” (another wordplay referring to a phrase allegedly used by former president François Hollande describing the poor as “*sans-dents*,” literally “toothless”), “Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen. Article 35. When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is for the people and for each portion of the people the most sacred of rights and the most indispensable of duties. RIC [Citizens’ initiative referendum]. By the people for the people” (Figure 3).

They were the sovereign people threatening to overthrow their representatives, as they believed was their constitutional right—a sense of legitimacy that explained much of their anger at police violence. Indeed, the repression seemed all the more illegitimate in that they felt they were exercising their most fundamental political rights. Through their persons, their bodies were made vulnerable by the very fact of claiming their rights, they claimed that it was the Republic itself that was wounded (Butler, 2018). Hence, the constant use of the symbol of Marianne, in the Phrygian cap—often weeping, an image that was first used after the 2015 Paris terror attacks—sometimes one-eyed or beaten up, to denounce police violence (Figure 4).

And finally, many vests directly threatened Emmanuel Macron, seen as an immoral president, who favored the rich at the expense of ordinary citizens, with the same fate as his distant predecessor Louis XVI: the guillotine. Often, the guillotine design was complemented by direct threats, such as “Macron, Louis XVI is waiting for you,” “Macron, you will not finish your term,” “France, 1789–2019, we can do it again,” “Macron, remember,” or “Because this is our project,” a reference to a famous campaign speech (Figure 5).





FIGURE 3 The Yellow Vests as sans-culottes. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8675.12736)]



FIGURE 4 Marianne. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8675.12736)]



FIGURE 5 Macron and the guillotine. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8675.12736)]

**FIGURE 6** “Guillotining you is our project.”<sup>15</sup> [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8675.12736)]



This use of revolutionary imagery of the guillotine was not limited to the back of the vests. On many roundabouts, a guillotine was built, and sometimes mock executions were staged (Figure 6). Historian Nathalie Alzas has shown how these executions were part of a long history of carnivalesque practices, where effigies of authority figures such as ministers were symbolically ridiculed, injured, or even killed; yet guillotines were almost never used in these demonstrations, and “direct attack on the president of the Republic [was a] rare occurrence” (Alzas, 2019). Simulating the execution of the head of state by guillotine was most likely a first in the history of social movements, yet the scene was repeated on many roundabouts and drawn on many backs of vests.

Contrary to what one might imagine given the importance of the Revolution to French national identity, such references were not common features of French protests. In fact, this was the first protest since the end of World War II to make such extensive use of revolutionary imagery. Of course, since the 1989 celebration of the bicentennial of the Revolution, the event has occupied an unparalleled place in French national identity and distinctive brand of republicanism (Garcia, 2020; Kaplan, 1995; Ory, 1992). But direct reference to the Revolution belonged more to history textbooks and official celebrations than protests (Gérard, 1970; Martigny, 2016; Société d'histoire de la révolution de 1848 et des révolutions du XIXe siècle, 1992). Although many of the movement's claims came from much more recent protests (Mazeau, 2018), the French Revolution was not simply part of the movement's imagery; it was one of the main elements that allowed the Yellow Vests to perform their claim to be a manifestation of the whole sovereign people. Most importantly, these references do not seem to have been contested; on the contrary, they made sense to many Yellow Vests who reproduced and used them, even without direct knowledge of the revolutionary events.

Indeed, since the objective of the Yellow Vests was to appear as the manifestation of the French people as a whole, the reference to the French Revolution gave cohesion to the movement and was immediately understandable, at least by most members of the national community—while at the same time excluding from the outset non-nationals or French people who did not recognize themselves in this reference. By speaking as the people in its entirety, Yellow Vests deployed a sense of entitlement stemming in part from a sense of being real, active, and included French

citizens—which came with nationalistic overtones. This is quite common in populist movements, which often “identify themselves with a ‘heartland’ that represents an idealised conception of the community they serve” (Taggart, 2004). Creating unanimity on national grounds is never far from nationalism, and the movement has proven susceptible to appropriation by all sorts of tendencies and people who know how to wield the vocabulary of sovereignty—as evidenced by the fact that many Yellow Vests have become strongly in favor of “Frexit,” a slogan emblazoned on many vests. But to focus solely on the implicit nationalism of the Frenchness of this reference would be to miss the other side of the coin: the contesting and protesting nature of this aspect of Frenchness. The image of a fundamentally turbulent and restive French people turns reference to this contentious element of French identity (as constructed and celebrated even by schools, museums, artworks, and so on) into a possible means of protest. On December 1, 2018, near the Champs-Élysées, someone had written on the wall “ July 14, 1789, vandals ransack a historical monument,”<sup>16</sup> illustrating how the common depiction by journalists of the Yellow Vests as vandals (*casseurs*) was misleading if one took into account the fact that they were reenacting a revolutionary gesture, the riot, that was deeply rooted in French national identity (Bantigny, 2020; Larrère, 2019).

Their conscious reenactment of the Revolution symbolized their sense of making history, a sense that has been described as “protagonism” (Burstin, 2013; Deluermoz & Gobille, 2016). Their claim of being a manifestation of the French people was supported by this appeal to the “democratic sublime” ubiquitous in narratives of the Revolution. Then, as Jason Frank analyzed, “it was invoked to describe the Revolution’s drama, the patriotism and the virtue it required of its citizens, the popular enthusiasm that inspired their heroic acts of sacrifice, but, above all, it was invoked to describe the people themselves. The Revolution revealed the sovereign people to be the sublime actor of their own collective history” (Frank, 2021, p. 11). Repeating the history of the Revolution and imitating its protagonists was a way of appropriating this sublime, and thus appearing as a manifestation of the same sovereign people who had then emerged on the public stage, and on whom the whole republican order was supposed to rest.

### 3 | FROM GRIEVANCES TO DIRECTIVES: CONSTRUCTING THE POPULAR WILL

In this regard, the image of the Sans-Culottes, as the symbol of the collective struggle for popular sovereignty, may well encapsulate the central identity of the Yellow Vests, which gave it cohesion in the absence of a unified populist representation. But of course, this is not an empty image. Characterizing the Yellow Vests as the resurgence of the revolutionary people carried with it its share of associated representations, not just aesthetic but political too. The revolutionary people, as portrayed here, were an active people, whose forms of activity gave content to popular sovereignty. Now, from this point of view, a fundamental activity of the people of the Revolution found an echo at the time of the Yellow Vests: the drafting of *cahiers de doléances*. Before the outbreak of the Revolution, these cahiers, written at the request of the king, had put the people into words and into motion. The aim then was to find out what the people wanted, in order to find an acceptable solution to the fiscal crisis. At the time of the Yellow Vests, it was quite the opposite: *cahiers* were opened in town halls, on the initiative of the authorities, but only after the movement had begun, and rather to channel it, or even stop it (Latour, 2019). But the authorities, in launching these *cahiers*, were simply copying a practice that had already been put in place from within the movement, sometimes locally as in the Gironde department (Della Sudda et al., 2023), sometimes through digital platforms. Here, the aim was not so much to collect grievances to inform the government, but rather to bring out directives from the people which, taken together, could constitute the manifestation of the general will.

On November 29, 2018, such a survey led to the formulation of 42 “directives of the people” addressed to “the deputies of France” so that they “transform them into laws”—a text that ended with this conclusion: “Deputies, make our voice heard in the Assembly. Obey the will of the people. Enforce these Directives. Signed: The Yellow Vests.”<sup>17</sup> A “symbolic takeover by force” (Bourdieu, 1991a) was at work in this representative claim: those who made these claims public claimed to speak on behalf of the Yellow Vests, presenting them as claiming to carry “the will of the people,” thus introducing a double equivalence between this list of “directives of the people,” “the Yellow Vests” and “the will



of the people." In doing so, they not only doubly legitimized their demands as those of the movement and those of the people, but they also produced the unity of the pivotal element of this equivalence: *The Yellow Vest Movement*. In this sense, one could say that the very activity of collecting demands and selecting the most consensual ones was part of the performance of the movement's unity—in a way that strongly resonates with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's notion of "chains of equivalence" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). But as we can see, their relationship to popular sovereignty was ambiguous: On the one hand, the writers of the survey presented the "directives" as "the will of the people," but on the other hand, they addressed their demands to their representatives, so that their voices would be "heard in the Assembly." In this respect, it seems that they were presenting a petition to their representatives, not claiming the direct exercise of sovereignty. This can be seen in the content of the 42 demands: they wanted "elected officials" to have "a median salary" and the presidential term to be seven years instead of five, but the only reference to direct power was the demand to have the right to a "popular referendum," after consultation with parliament, if a petition gathered enough signatures. If they were indeed acting as the sovereign people, they were not asking to replace elected representatives but to control them in order to make sure that they defended the general interest and were not using their power to put themselves above the rest of the nation.

This understanding of popular sovereignty could also be seen in the most sophisticated and open tool used to define the demands of the Yellow Vests: a digital platform called "*Le Vrai Débat*" (The True Debate), set up in January 2019 by Yellow Vests figures to counter Emmanuel Macron's "*Grand Débat National*" (Great National Debate) platform, accused of trying to defuse the movement (Gourgues, 2020, 2023; Legris, 2019, 2022). Unlike Macron's platform, in the *Vrai Débat*, citizens had the opportunity to make proposals on any topic, justify them, and vote for them. This makes it a unique source for identifying the most consensual and supported demands. Admittedly, by making visible the most consensual demands, those who had received the most votes, the platform introduced a bias: It crushed the diversity of opinions of the Yellow Vests. However, this is exactly what the platform itself could be said to have intended to produce, participating in a performance of unity that has rarely been contested in the movement. While it cannot be said to be representative of the movement in a descriptive sense, it produced a symbolic representation of the movement, and its content is not arbitrary, since it was the result of a deliberative process of the intended audience of the representative claim, i.e., people who identified as Yellow Vests.

44,000 users participated, making 1 million votes from January 30 to March 3, 2019. Among the 50 most voted demands, although many were about economic issues, the most consensual were about democracy and political representation, including four in the top five.<sup>18</sup> Some of them were about the possibility of organizing a public consultation, a referendum, if enough citizens wanted it—a possibility comparable to what exists in Switzerland, Italy, or in some American states. This is a good indicator of the early importance in the movement of the demand for a *Référendum d'initiative citoyenne* or RIC (Citizens' Initiative Referendum), which quickly became the signature demand of the movement.<sup>19</sup>

2# Citizens' Initiative Referendum in the Constitution

23# Removal of paragraph 3 of Article 89 of the Constitution which allows the use of referendum to be avoided by convening the Congress of Parliament

49# Ask for a referendum "Are you in favour of convening a constituent assembly to redefine how the country should be governed?"

But the most numerous demands, and the highest on the list, were about elections and representatives. Their demands painted a picture of their perception of the legitimacy of elected officials, their current behavior, and what should be done to correct the flaws in representation. According to the participants, legislators should only be elected if they had a real majority, they should have fewer privileges (especially financial), they should be morally sounder, not corrupt, more present in the assembly, dedicated only to the general interest and not to lobbies, less prone to demagoguery and more controlled by justice.

- 1# Removal of remuneration and privileges of all elected officials (including the President) after mandate
- 3# Clean record for elected officials
- 4# Consideration of blank or invalid votes as votes cast and invalidation of an election if it is a majority vote
- 9# Make it compulsory for MPs to be present during votes and deduct from their allowances if not
- 10# Ban lobbying in Parliament and institutions
- 13# Reduce the “lifestyle” of elected representatives (...) Abolition of privileges granted to parliamentarians.
- 24# Ban political polls during election campaigns
- 40# Abolish judiciary immunity for MPs

The majority of participants in this platform were not opposed to representation or calling for direct democracy. Nor was there a demand for a descriptive form of representation, in which representatives would resemble their constituents or share common social characteristics (Mansbridge, 1999). We can see here the difference with a more plebeian understanding of popular sovereignty: There was no demand for representatives of the *plebs* or the working class, for example, as advocated by some radical republicans on the model of the Roman Tribune of the Plebs (Barthas, 2018; McCormick, 2011; Vergara, 2020b) or as demanded by the early French socialist and labor movements (Rosanvallon, 1998). However, it was fundamental to the participants to get rid of all privileges that would allow representatives to form a caste, an oligarchy—they wanted what (Bedock et al., 2020) called “statutory proximity.” In short, the Yellow Vests seem to have been in favor of a moral renovation of representative democracy, with legislators who served the universality of citizens, not themselves or private interests like lobbies. They wanted the possibility for the sovereign people, i.e., the represented, to have the final call through a referendum when needed, thus institutionalizing the power of the represented over their representatives.

We can see here the ambivalent conception of popular sovereignty deployed by the Yellow Vests. Most accounts of popular sovereignty assume a dichotomy between two meanings: either the concept simply refers to the origin of power, or popular sovereignty requires the direct exercise of power by the people—whether in the legislative realm alone or also in government, according to a view derived from ancient conceptions of democracy (Espejo, 2011; Tuck, 2016; Wolkenstein, 2019).<sup>20</sup> However, popular uprisings such as the Yellow Vest Movement point to another possibility: the use of the rhetoric of popular sovereignty not to overthrow representatives in order to replace them with direct-democratic mechanisms or a new populist leader, but to remind existing representatives that they remain ultimately subordinate to the sovereign people and thus should listen to their voice. As Judith Butler explains in her analysis of the performative aspect of popular assemblies, “popular sovereignty is ... a form of reflexive self-making that is separate from the very representative regime it legitimates” (Butler, 2018, p. 169). Spontaneous (or pretending to be thus) popular demonstrations and assemblies can be seen as claims to exercise popular sovereignty, understood in this way: Since “the power of the populace remains separate from the power of those elected, even after they have elected them,” it is possible for the people to “continue to contest the conditions and results of elections as well as the actions of elected officials” (Butler, 2018, p. 162), by protesting through non-institutional means. This is different from the usual idea that representatives should be responsive to the expression of the wishes of the represented (Pitkin, 1972) or should listen to public opinion (Ghins, 2022): The voice of the sovereign people is not just something that the government has to take into account to make a good decision, but an order, which requires immediate action. This also differs from the imperative mandate, where elected representatives are constrained in their actions by the promises made at the time of election—which is simply an institutionalization of promissory representation (Mansbridge, 2003). Here, protesters claiming to be the sovereign people suddenly burst onto the political scene during the mandate, passing judgment on what is done in their name. The lists of grievances collected within the Yellow Vest Movement can thus function as directives from the people, which representatives must obey—or else resign.



## 4 | TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

The Yellow Vest Movement was thus unified by two apparently contradictory elements. On the one hand, they claimed to be a manifestation of the constituent sovereign people and thus to have the same legitimacy as the original revolutionary mob that took the Bastille and beheaded their king. This element led some of the Yellow Vests to carry out illegal actions, such as occupying public spaces, blocking motorways and toll booths, various forms of damage during unauthorized weekly demonstrations, burning down prefectures, threatening members of parliament—actions that most social movements had long since dropped from their repertoires (Tartakowsky, 1989). On the other hand, when asked about their demands, the picture that emerges from their proposals as the will of the people was not revolutionary, at least in regard to the demands of radical social movements of the 20th century, and in particular their understanding of democracy (Hardt & Negri, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Pateman, 1970; ). The Yellow Vests argued for what could be described as a functional representative democracy, with representatives who have fewer privileges than today, and with mechanisms that allow citizens to pass judgment on what is done in their name, and sometimes to express their will directly through referendums.

This apparent mismatch between the means and ends of the movement might stem from the predominance of newcomers to politics, unfamiliar with appropriate forms of protest. But this somewhat paternalistic argument only shifts the question: Why newcomers would enter politics on this occasion and claim to be the sovereign people? Maybe it is linked with the current transformations of representative democracy, and in particular the decreasing ability of citizens to make their voices heard by politicians. It is of paramount importance in a representative democracy to have the means for citizens to express a judgment on their representatives between elections. This is necessary for representation to function properly, as any representative system requires institutionalized forms of responsiveness (Pitkin, 1972), but also for specifically democratic reasons. As Nadia Urbani puts it, democratic representation requires that the “sovereign people retain a *negative power* that allows them to investigate, judge, influence and censure their lawmakers” (Urbinati, 2006, p. 28). Yet, in most representative governments, including the French Republic, parties are the only institutionalized means of organizing this citizen control (Manin, 1997). But when these parties are no longer trusted to accomplish this, citizens must resort to forms of direct interpellation of their representatives, not as party members, but as the constituents in their full generality.

The appeal to the tradition of the French Revolution thus takes on another meaning. Acting as the constituent people was not only a means to be seen as legitimate, but it also revived a long-lost revolutionary mechanism of popular control. Indeed, the Sans-Culottes might be seen as the symbol of the sovereign people acting as the bearers of popular sovereignty, and using this position to exercise control over their representatives. Historically, the Sans-Culottes usually did not claim a direct exercise of sovereignty in all matters (Guermaz, 2017). They considered that their main political role was to “put pressure on the seat of power” (Lucas, 1988, p. 448), which meant trying to influence the Convention, primarily through petitions, and, for their more radical members, to “develop a political system in which popular ‘checks’ on political rule could be enforced by the people” (von Eggers, 2016, p. 255). Their role—and this is largely how they had been seen and even constructed by the Jacobins (Burstin, 2005)—was not to replace the Assembly, but to monitor it, to ensure that deputies defended the general interest, not their own or that of the rich, and sometimes to be consulted on the laws that were passed. This understanding of sovereignty was largely shared by revolutionary actors. It was a founding element of the Constitution proposals by both Condorcet and the Jacobins, despite their differences. It was largely inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (Robisco, 1993), which was the epicenter of the debates in 1793–1794, not only in the Convention but also in the Parisian sections, where the activity of the Sans-Culottes was concentrated (Soboul, 1962; 1963; Manin, 1988). The core of this understanding of popular sovereignty was that the people were the true sovereign, the representatives were only their servants, they had to defend the general interest, under the control of the people, and if they betrayed their mandate, the people could legitimately rise up (McKay, 2022; Rousselière, 2021).

With the repression that followed the fall of the Jacobins in Thermidor Year II (July 1794) and the failure of the insurrection of Prairial Year III (May 1795), the Sans-Culottes movement all but disappeared (Tønnesson, 1959).

However, this notion of popular sovereignty did not entirely, despite the Empire and the Restoration, and could be seen at work in the history of 19th-century protest, notably in the insurrections of 1830, 1848, and 1871 (Aprile, 2010; Jennings, 2011; Riot-Sarcey, 2016). In these events, revolutionaries generally presented themselves as citizens, embodying the sovereign people as a whole and seeking to ensure that representatives acted in the general interest. Two revolutionary institutions in particular claimed to be direct manifestations of the sovereign people: the National Guard and the popular societies, or clubs, both of which emerged during the Revolution and were open to all male citizens (Amann, 1975; Carrot, 2001). They allowed citizens to participate directly in politics, but even the most radical Republicans saw them as a way for citizens to monitor elected officials and thus protect the Republic.

But these institutions, and the discourses of citizenship that supported them, almost entirely disappeared after the Paris Commune. Indeed, after the Commune, the labor movement gradually occupied most of the political space of popular protest, and European social democracy, following the initial critiques Marx and Engels addressed to strategies centered on popular sovereignty, was reluctant to claim to represent the people as the universality of citizens (Möller, 2023). There was no longer a mobilization manifesting the whole of the people, the representation of the people having been picked up by the union and the party. Indeed, people who mobilized in the 20th century did so with attention to the class, gender and/or race position from which they expressed themselves, and the interest of the dominated groups they intended to defend. In contrast, the Yellow Vests, like their distant revolutionary ancestors, claimed to be citizens, a figure that the triumph of the class-struggle imaginary had relegated to the background, but which had somehow remained available.<sup>21</sup> Such a resurgence does not necessarily mean that there has been a continuous underground transmission from the 19th century to the present. Following the notion of history championed by Walter Benjamin, echoes of the past can occur when distant events suddenly take on new meaning in the present (Riot-Sarcey, 2016). The mere fact that the Revolution is such an important part of French political culture might make its memory “flash in a moment of danger” (Benjamin, 2005, sec. VI)—in the same way that the Roman Republic seemed present to 18th-century revolutionaries (Sellers, 2014). In the current crisis of the French democratic system, of which the election of Emmanuel Macron and the seemingly unstoppable rise of the far right could be symptoms, the Yellow Vests could be said to have drawn on this old popular republican repertoire to imagine new ways of manifesting the sovereign people.

Another way to understand the resonance between the Yellow Vests and the Sans-Culottes is that it follows logically from the similarity of their situations and projects. Indeed, a great deal of their cohesion and momentum came from speaking as the sovereign people, while not asking for popular power but simply for popular control—something that was observed not only in France but in most of the popular uprisings of the 2010s. Such movements express themselves from a very general position, beyond partisan and identity-based cleavages, because the effectiveness of this rhetoric lies in the fact that these claims are presented not from a specific position, but as the claims of the represented. These movements claim to manifest the people who address their representatives and ask them to serve the general interest, in a way that is aligned with an inclusive understanding of representation, more than a rebuttal of political representation per se (Hayat, 2018). When institutional means, such as the mechanisms of electoral democracy, are deemed insufficient to enable the multitude to prevent the capture of the state by oligarchic elites (Bagg, 2018), the manifestation of the sovereign people could be an alternative route to ensuring that democratic representation delivers on its promises. We can then envisage a reason for the recent reappearance of this understanding of popular sovereignty: the failure of the left (either political or unionist) to frame the expression of popular demands, obliging citizens wishing to exercise their democratic right to control elected representatives to do so by claiming to be a manifestation of the sovereign people. Admittedly, this role may have been played in the past by political parties, and there may be good reason to wish for spontaneous manifestations of the people to crystallize into parties, as “the bod[ies] that rende[r] the subjectivizing crowd event into a moment in the subjective process of the politicized people” (Dean, 2016, p. 157). But perhaps the resurgence of a political aesthetic that draws its strength from forms of manifestation of the people that existed before the institutionalization of mass political parties could be apprehended for its own sake, and the new paths it opens up for popular sovereignty explored. This would require an alternative history of popular sovereignty, yet to be written, which would follow the means by which the people submit their representatives to their will, without seeking to take power.

The Yellow Vests were a manifestation of the French people, recovering a tradition of popular unrest that began during the French Revolution—or so they claimed. This gave them cohesion, despite their diversity and without the elements that usually unify social movements, especially populist ones: a common material experience of socioeconomic domination, a (collective or individual) representative, or even just a manifesto or organization. They were the proverbial sovereign, as described in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and their message was clear: they wanted their representatives to act as their stewards, not their masters, and to use their power to pursue the general interest, not their own. In this article, I have identified this understanding of popular sovereignty as embedded in French history, and in a certain reading of Frenchness as understood in a national narrative starting with the 1789 Revolution. But as the 2019 wave of protests showed, the Yellow Vests were not isolated in their approach. Speaking as the people as a whole, outside of parties and unions, to directly ask representatives to devote themselves more to the general interest, seems to be a widespread characteristic of recent popular uprisings. This form of popular sovereignty, because it homogenizes the people and finds its legitimacy in the unity performed, sometimes to the detriment of the visibility of power relations within the movement and between social groups, carries its own risks, especially if it is appropriated by nationalists. But it can also be a starting point from which people usually distant from politics can mobilize and become more actively involved in the public sphere. In this sense, the resurgence of the theme of popular sovereignty could be good news for progressive and radical movements that seem to have lost much of their momentum. Discovering how these popular uprisings echo the fragmented and forgotten history of popular sovereignty could enable political theorists to take a fresh look at the possibilities of the concept of popular sovereignty that have been crushed by its monopolization by the state, helping to reopen our political imagination.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Numerous newspaper articles have been directly devoted to these revelations about the hidden political tendencies of leading personalities, e.g., Félix Roudaut, “Gilets jaunes: ces militants pas si apolitiques qui ont rejoint le mouvement,” RTL, December 7, 2018, or Adrien Sénécat, “Derrière la percée des ‘gilets jaunes’, des réseaux pas si ‘spontanés’ et ‘apolitiques,’” *Le Monde*, April 17, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the photos were taken by the author at the Paris demonstrations, supplemented by photos found on a collaborative open-source database, *pleinledos*.

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this has had a seemingly lasting effect on the French repertoire of protest action: after the Yellow Vests, all kinds of social movements have used the imagery of the French Republic, including union-led protests, such as the 2023 movement against pension reform, or the Communist Party, which published a poster comparing Macron to Louis XVI, something it had never done with any other president before.

<sup>4</sup> This was a common form of representation before the triumph of representative government (Hayat et al., 2020; Hofmann, 1973; Podlech, 1984; Sintomer, 2018), particularly when it came to popular protest, where “the crowd easily acquired the function of representing the community whose members composed it” (Lucas, 1988, p. 426). Only the triumph of representative government made the notion of political representation as mandate—a combination of authorization, acting for and responsiveness (Pitkin, 1972)—hegemonic.

<sup>5</sup> <https://livre.fnac.com/a14175768/Jean-Charles-Courcot-Le-Peuple-Souverain>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/le-journal-des-idees/gilets-jaunes-et-sans-culottes-1846305>

- <sup>7</sup>[https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/economie-social/sans-culottes-hier-et-gilets-jaunes-aujourd-hui\\_AN-201901210208.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/economie-social/sans-culottes-hier-et-gilets-jaunes-aujourd-hui_AN-201901210208.html)
- <sup>8</sup><https://www.humanite.fr/politique/gilets-jaunes/face-au-monarque-macron-les-gilets-jaunes-se-revent-sans-culottes-664443>
- <sup>9</sup><https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2407643-20190103-pourquoi-gilets-jaunes-revendiquent-revolution-francaise>
- <sup>10</sup><http://newsjunkiepost.com/2018/12/07/are-the-gilets-jaunes-todays-sans-culottes/>
- <sup>11</sup><https://www.courrierinternational.com/dessin/les-gilets-jaunes-comme-un-air-de-revolution-en-france>
- <sup>12</sup><https://libnanews.com/france-gilets-jaunes-jacquerie-sans-culottes/>
- <sup>13</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GMkWDN\\_B8&ab\\_channel=LeHuffPost](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GMkWDN_B8&ab_channel=LeHuffPost)
- <sup>14</sup>One exception is the reference to the Gauls, the people living in parts of what is now France during the Roman invasion—it is part of popular culture, especially with the prominence of the comic strip *Astérix et Obélix*, but the reference was all the more important because Emmanuel Macron referred to the French as “*Gaulois réfractaires*.”
- <sup>15</sup>© Julien Billy. Source: “Une guillotine sur le rond-point de Lachamp,” *La Commère* 43, November 21, 2018, <https://www.lacommere43.fr/actualites/item/19276-gilets-jaunes-une-guillotine-fabriquee-sur-le-rond-point-de-lachamp.html>. Reproduced with the kind permission of the author.
- <sup>16</sup><http://ecoeuretcuisine.canalblog.com/archives/2018/12/19/36953017.html>.
- <sup>17</sup>[https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/les-gilets-jaunes-publient-une-nouvelle-flopee-de-revendications\\_135860.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/les-gilets-jaunes-publient-une-nouvelle-flopee-de-revendications_135860.html). For an analysis of the 42 directives, see Bergem (2022).
- <sup>18</sup>I used the ranking of proposals made by the research center Triangle, as posted on the *Vrai Débat* website (Dartigues et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the site has been shut down, so I used an archive from November 12, 2020: [https://web.archive.org/web/20201112020816/http://www.le-vrai-debat.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/triangle\\_top.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20201112020816/http://www.le-vrai-debat.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/triangle_top.html)
- <sup>19</sup>There is a striking parallel here with the online platform set up by the 5-Star movement in Italy, called Rousseau, which promoted a form of “direct parliamentarianism” within the movement (Deseriis, 2017).
- <sup>20</sup>The scholastic distinction between national and popular sovereignty, invented by jurists such as Carré de Malberg at the end of the 19th century, however dubious it may be from a historical point of view, could be useful here (Brunet, 2004).
- <sup>21</sup>We should note an important difference between sans-culottes or 19th-century insurrections and the Yellow Vest Movement: its geographic scale. While the former were mostly urban, and more specifically Parisian, the Yellow Vest Movement was national, and particularly developed in rural and suburban areas. Such a change might be linked with many different economic factors, including the gentrification of Paris and the long-term redistribution of industrial jobs in France, and lead to a specific “geography of contestation” (Bourdin & Torre, 2023).

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