

“It’s All a Matter of Image!”: Aesthetics and Radical Democracy in the Yellow Vests Movement, or in Praise of Eugênio Bucci

Thomás Zicman de Barros

1. Introduction

“*It’s all a matter of image!*” (*Tout est une question d’image!*). These were the words pronounced by a big, bearded man when he was arrested on 2 January 2019 (Le Bart 2020: 70). This man was Éric Drouet, a 33-year-old truck driver who was a prominent figure of the Yellow Vests – the *Gilets jaunes* – a populist protest movement in France. Organised online and hyped by mainstream media before taking the streets, the Yellow Vests movement started blocking roads and occupying roundabouts all over the country on 17 November 2018. While it was frequently described as leaderless, the mobilisation had key figures. Besides the above-mentioned Drouet, another important face of the movement was Priscillia Ludosky, a 32-year-old tradeswoman who published an online petition against the rising prices of diesel and gas, focusing her criticism on the government’s carbon tax. Quite quickly, however, the movement and their symbol – a high-visibility vest – became the rallying point of multiple dissatisfactions in French society. As the movement gathered diverse demonstrators in a spectrum ranging from the radical right to the radical left, it evolved into being a general protest for purchasing power and more democracy – or for a “real democracy”, as some protestors demanded. Furthermore, it soon acquired an unequivocally populist character, as it claimed to represent the “people” against the “elites”.

Drouet was arrested for leading a non-authorised demonstration and was released later that same day. The most interesting part of this event, though, are precisely his words: “*It’s all a matter of image!*” One can dismiss this statement as a banal one – Drouet was simply hoping that the videos of his arrest would boost the movement. However, I believe it deserves further scrutiny.

The ultimate goal of this chapter is to discuss the seminal work of the innovative Brazilian scholar Eugênio Bucci and how it can contribute to the study of a populist movement such as the Yellow Vests.

Bucci's reflections on the role of desire in contemporary society and in recent protest movements allow for a refined interpretation of Drouet's claim. His captivating work, leads us to understand how this apparently banal statement tells something about the current epoch and about the limits of contemporary demonstrations, and of the intersections between protest and populist politics more broadly.

To discuss Bucci's contribution for an analysis of the Yellow Vests movement, this chapter is divided into three sections. First, I present some previous research on recent protest movements where I interviewed several participants of the Yellow Vests movement to show the centrality of desire in contemporary demonstrations. Second, I discuss the seminal work of Eugênio Bucci on the dynamics of contemporary communication and argue that it sheds new light on the importance of desire today. Moreover, Bucci allows for a thorough interpretation of Drouet's claim that "*It's all a matter of image!*", associating desire and aesthetics. Finally, the third section discusses a blind spot of Bucci's work: a possible way out from the dynamics of desire. I present the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation, formulated by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and brought to politics by Ernesto Laclau in his study of populism, as opening a door to consider aesthetic practices compatible with an ethics of radical democracy.

2. *Desire and Collective Identities*

The articulation of political theory and psychoanalysis – in what has been called “psychoanalytic political theory” or more precisely “critical fantasy studies” (Stavrakakis 2020: 1; Glynos 2021: 2–4) – opens a promising field in the humanities. Some have even argued for “*psychoanalysis as the only fruitful approach to the understanding of human reality*” (Laclau 2004: 326). Indeed, in recent years we have seen several publications exploring this path, notably in populism studies. I myself have tried to contribute to this effort in my study of recent populist protest movements.

In the last few years, I have followed the Yellow Vests movement and conducted psychosocial interviews with demonstrators who took part in it. These interviews took place in a town in the south of France. To preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, I will call this town Jaunet. The interviews followed a methodological protocol established by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, based on free association and gathering information both of the subjects' personal trajectory and their engagement in the movement (Hollway/Jefferson 2000: 14). A particular set of these interviews, and notably from an interview with a 20-year-old protestor called Gabriel – also

a fictional name – , raised my awareness of the importance of desire in collective mobilisations.

Here, some contextualisation is required. A crucial author in fostering the articulation between political theory and psychoanalysis in populism studies was Ernesto Laclau. Deeply inspired by Jacques Lacan, Laclau’s reflections on populism used psychoanalysis to think of collective identities and radical democracy. However, for Laclau the basic unit of analysis in politics is a demand (Laclau 2005: 72–73). Following his framework, a political analyst who decides to investigate the Yellow Vests should list the various demands at the basis of the movement. One could say, for example, that the Yellow Vests had a set of demands for purchasing power – against the carbon tax – and demands for democracy – for a citizens’ referendum, for instance. While interviewing Gabriel, however, it soon became clear that demands were secondary in his engagement with the Yellow Vests. What mattered the most was desire.

Desire, for psychoanalysis, is not to be confounded with demand (Lacan [1963] 2004a: 76–77). In Lacan, desire is desire for desire. To put this in other words: one desires to be desired. To capture the other’s gaze, so to say. Lacan took this idea from Alexandre Kojève’s reading of G. W. Hegel, and articulated it with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis (Kojève 1947: 13; Hegel 1977 [11807]: 111–119).

As I have explained in detail elsewhere, for Lacan every subject is traversed by a lack (Zicman de Barros 2020: 514–516). In a psychoanalytic cliché, Lacan traces the roots of desire to early childhood. He says that when a baby is separated – even momentarily – from the maternal figure, a pre-symbolic full enjoyment experienced in the symbiosis between mother and new-born is lost. The quest for recovering this idealised enjoyment – which some of Freud’s contemporaries would call “oceanic feeling” (Freud 1961 [11929]: 65) – requires, therefore, reconquering the mother’s presence. It requires becoming once again the object of the mother’s love, of her desire. This dynamic, Lacan says, continues in adult life, in one’s quest for social approval, recognition. Of course, for any community throughout history, the dynamics of desire and recognition will assume a particular, radically contingent configuration. In any case, it is important to stress that whereas partial experiences of recognition are joyful, there is no such a thing as re-establishing the idealised full enjoyment. Nonetheless, desire is at the root of the fantasies that put the subject into motion in the first place.

As I indicated, my interview with Gabriel raised my attention to the primacy of desire in collective movements. While I interviewed him, it became clear that Gabriel did not have many friends. He explained his lack

of mates with his being “new in town”, even though he had been living there for seven years. As the interview unfolded, I could understand that he had some learning difficulties when he was at school, which generated some obstacles to integration and even made him the target of bullies.

His engagement in the movement changed this situation. Gabriel said to me that he loved to be surrounded by people. An aloof, solitary young man, Gabriel found in the movement a recognition, a way of being seen that he had never experienced before. He felt desired.

It is worth noting that, whereas Gabriel’s interview was paradigmatic in raising the hypothesis of the primacy of desire in political identification, it was not the only one. For instance, Emilia, a 65-year-old retired autonomous manual worker, claimed that the movement allowed for creating social bonds, an experience of belonging. In a similar way, Isabelle, a 35-year-old protestor, told me that the movement brought together people who were previously isolated. Among others, they confirm what Christian Le Bart described as a “communitarian nostalgia” present among the Yellow Vests, a will to gather in an increasingly fragmented society (Le Bart 2020: 49). Although Hollway and Jefferson claim that psychosocial interviews are not meant to be generalised as such (Hollway/Jefferson 2000: 104–105), these cases suggest that, for many protestors, demands were a secondary factor in the engagement with the Yellow Vests.

The idea of a primacy of desire in political identification implies precisely that the actual demands of a protest movement must not be taken for granted. Moreover, at a certain level of analysis the demands must take the back seat in favour of approaches that take into consideration the unconscious processes leading people to protest (Zicman de Barros 2020: 516–519). This position does not intend to dismiss the legitimacy of demands, but to understand the affective investment that constitutes and gives the strength to demands and populist movements in the first place (Žižek 2000: 126–127).

Similar ideas on the primacy of desire were expressed by Jacques Rancière. As David Howarth and Aletta Norval once stated, Rancière dealt with a “*pre-history of demands*” (Norval/Howarth 2016: 306; see also Norval 2007: 74–76). But what does this idea of “pre-history” stand for? To explain this, it is worth stressing that for Rancière, politics is first and foremost a matter of aesthetics, of being seen (Rancière 2000: 13–14). This is what is first at stake when what he calls an invisible “part of no-part” emerges and claims a place in a community (Rancière 1995: 49–50). Taking this into consideration, I argue that Rancière deals with a pre-history of demands in the sense that, before any demand is symbolically articulated, there is a

desire for recognition – a desire for the other’s desire. Rancière explicitly stressed this point in a recently published interview (Rancière 2021: 112).

Inspired by Rancière, the Brazilian scholar Daniel de Mendonça presented preliminary comments on the importance of a “*will of the equals*” in the construction of collective identities, notably in populist protest movements (de Mendonça 2014: 5–6; 2019: 193). He claims that this will would be the spark that begins and turns these events into mass protests (de Mendonça 2014: 18). Mendonça suggests that the will of the equals is a will to be equally counted, to constitute a “people” around the idea of equality and to be heard as such.

Mendonça’s preliminary comments are inspiring. Still, even if he suggests that the headstrong will to form a people goes well beyond the content of particular demands, I think he remains too closely tied to Laclau’s model of articulating demands (de Mendonça 2014: 20). Had Mendonça explored Lacan’s notion of desire, I think that his notion of “will” would lead to conclusions very close to mine.

3. *In Praise of Eugênio Bucci*

Some of the most insightful reflections on desire and politics were developed by another Brazilian. I am referring to Eugênio Bucci, a talented mind whose breakthrough contribution on communication and aesthetics should be incorporated into psychoanalytic political theory. In more than twenty years of study, Bucci has developed an inspiring analysis of how the contemporary dynamics of communication are entangled with a long-term transformation of capitalism. As he notes with accuracy, more than ever, the contemporary economy is driven by desire – or, as he says, by the capture of the audience’s gaze (Bucci 2019: 109).

The biggest companies of today do not sell well-defined products – at least not directly. They are *big techs*, notably digital social media platforms whose value comes from elsewhere. They come from capturing the audience’s gaze. They come from desire. Bucci refers to Lacan’s underdeveloped notion of “enjoyment value” (*valeur de jouissance*) taking the lead from Marx’s traditional theory of value in the understanding of contemporary capitalism driven by capturing one’s desire (Lacan 2004b [1967]: 202, 206; Bucci 2002: 26; 2021: 238–245).

According to Bucci, the users work for free for these companies. The audience provides the scopic work from which enjoyment value is extracted, exploited as never before. Indeed, in order for desire to be mobilised, these *big techs* must relay fantasies. Some of these are produced by other compa-

nies that rely on melodramatic fantasies promising full enjoyment in order to sell goods. But most of the content is produced by the users themselves. In the end, the users' gazes work for the big techs for free while scrolling on screens; the users' content provide the fantasies necessary for the big techs to mobilise desire; and the users themselves as potential consumers are the product these big techs sell to other corporations to present their advertisements. As Bucci puts it, the user is simultaneously labour force, raw material and commodity (Bucci 2021: 412).

Bucci's reflections have consequences for protest practices (Bucci 2016a: 138). As he says, the centrality of desire in contemporary capitalism emerges together with century-long advances in sciences and arts. For instance, Bucci discusses how the advent of the vanishing point in perspective drawing led to a transformation in aesthetics that conducted and conditioned a certain way of gazing (Bucci 2021: 399–405). The acme of these advances was reached with the advent of modern cameras. Nowadays, the subject is led to gaze in a certain way, captured by the vortex of screens and spectacles – and protest movements could not be indifferent to this fact.

Bucci believes that the aesthetic, performative dimension is central in protest movements (Bucci 2016a: 27–28). According to him, aesthetic and performative practices play a central role in strengthening any mobilisation because of the experiences of enjoyment they produce (Bucci 2015a: 409–410). For instance, Bucci claims that protest movements incorporate elements such as jokes and other ludic expressions that entails experiences of partial bodily enjoyment and generate what Paolo Gerbaudo has described as a “*moment of popular communion*” (Gerbaudo 2017: 170). Nonetheless, for Bucci these ludic experiences of enjoyment end up subordinated to another main source of enjoyment in protest movements: the enjoyment of capturing the desire in the others' gazes. And from a perspective that have not been yet sufficiently studied: the perspective of spectacle (Bucci 2021: 330–332; Debord 1967: § 4).

Indeed, Bucci invites one to go beyond my previous comments on the importance of desire and recognition in protest movements. He does this because he stresses the existence of two gazes involved in protest movements. First, as I explained above, the protestor faces the other protestors' gazes – which, as Laurent Jeanpierre suggests, are generally welcoming despite the internal divisions of the movement (Jeanpierre 2019: 98–101). This gaze is at the basis of the idea that aloof citizens find recognition among peers in protest movements, establishing a community.

But Bucci demonstrates that there is a second kind of gaze in place. In parallel and articulation with these internal dynamics of desire, there is also a search for another kind of recognition. Parallel to other fellow protes-

tors’ gazes, one also seeks to capture another gaze: the general public’s gaze, a gaze behind the camera (Bucci 2016a: 33–34, 112–113). If there is an “aesthetic enjoyment”, as Bucci says, it is mostly guided by this second gaze (Bucci 2016a: 28, 55). As he says, demonstrations are foremost driven by desire – by the almost exhibitionist desire to be visible, to be seen (Bucci 2016a: 113, 134). While this desire may be legitimate in itself – it is completely understandable that the subaltern seeks to be seen – Bucci claims that this desire to appear would be even more present in the context of the narcissistic, exhibitionist, and fetishised dynamics of contemporary communication (Bucci 2016a: 169; 2015b: § 9–10). Indeed, for Bucci the main goal of many recent protests is not even to conquer the broader public’s sympathy or to convince other citizens to join the movement, but simply to appear through any means. What matters, above everything else, is to be seen.

Bucci’s scholarship allows for an interpretation of the most important symbol of the Yellow Vests movement – the high-visibility vest. Since 2008, the yellow vest has been a mandatory road safety item. It is required to be worn by the driver in the event that his car breaks down in the middle of the road so that other vehicles will see him and prevent further accidents. On 24 October 2018, at 6 p.m., when the movement was still being organised online, this ordinary vest made with a bright yellow fabric gained a new meaning. It was at this time that Ghislain Coutard, a 36-year-old mechanical technician, posted a viral video suggesting that the protestors should wear the yellow vest or place it over the car’s dashboard to show support for the mobilisation. Following Bucci, one understands how this outfit clearly reverberates a desire to be visible to others and, not least, to public authority.

Moreover, Bucci allows for a more profound interpretation of Drouet’s claim that *“It’s all a matter of image!”* Whereas the Yellow Vests criticised political representation, the movement also used cameras in the construction, the representation of their image (Le Bart 2020: 67–69). Different cameras recorded the Yellow Vests. There were, of course, the cameras of mainstream media. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that the movement itself was boosted by mainstream media and that Drouet and Ludosky only emerged as prominent figures of the movement because mainstream media gave them a platform in the first place. As Nina Santos has shown, mainstream media plays a central role shaping discourses of apparently horizontal leaderless movements (Santos 2020a: 94–96, 2020b: 78). According to Bucci, however, one should also consider how the movement relied on photos, videos and live streaming from demonstrators themselves. The selfie, he says, merges cameraman and protestor in a single

person – in a world where the narcissistic dynamics of desire takes the lead, to gaze and to be gazed can become the same thing (Bucci 2016a: 154).

Bucci's contribution investigates dimensions not explored by other scholars such as Judith Butler. Butler's recent works on protest movements have stressed the importance of cameras in moulding contemporary demonstrations. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's idea of a "space of appearances" (Arendt 1958: 199), Butler understands that for any protest movement to exist, it must at first appear to the others and be recognised by them (Butler 2015: 19, 72–73). Nonetheless, whereas Butler has extensively written on desire in the past (Butler 1987: 197–199), her current reflections on contemporary demonstrations do not focus on this notion.

Furthermore, contrary to Bucci, Butler does not develop a clear criticism of the current protest movements. All in all, Butler tends to see contemporary demonstrations as inherently emancipatory. From a different approach, Bucci's reflections highlight three problems with recent protests dominated by desire in its narcissistic form. For him, the contemporary revolts tend to sustain the economic order, to sacralise pure spectacular violence, and to reinforce closure toward others.

To explain the first danger diagnosed by Bucci, it is worth stressing that, for him, protest movements caught in the contemporary dynamics of communication only reinforce the mobilisation of desire and the production of "enjoyment value". Whereas protestors may produce discourses that seem emancipatory, the grammar sustaining these discourses is the same one that allows contemporary capitalism to thrive unchallenged. As Bucci claims, when contestation is driven by the dynamics of spectacle, it ends up simply reaffirming the existing order (Bucci 2021: 333; 2016a: 165; 2016b: 405–407; Debord 1967: § 8).

This futile character of protest movements is directly related with Bucci's second criticism of contemporary demonstrations: their appeal to violence. Bucci claims that the violence of recent protest movements differs from the past as it constitutes narcissistic aesthetic practices (Bucci 2016a: 98–101). It is through violence, he says, that a narcissist, exhibitionist "aesthetic enjoyment" could be experienced (Bucci 2016a: 53, 64, 152–155, 160; 2015b: § 9–10). The spectacle of violence, or the violence transformed in joyful entertainment that can capture the other's gaze is more important than any other ethical consideration (Bucci 2016a: 103). Once again, for Bucci the desire to appear in recent protests does not imply a search for approval from a broader audience. From Bucci's perspective, a statement such as "*It is all a matter of image!*" cannot be read as necessarily meaning that the movement should keep a "good" appearance, but instead must be

interpreted as indicating protestors’ crude desire to appear, with no further considerations, and even by violent means. As Bucci says, even when the media coverage aims to be negative, focusing on “violent” demonstrators, it can end up fuelling the movement’s narcissism by giving an exciting aura of rebellion to the revolt (Bucci 2016a: 166; Le Bart 2020: 69–70, 123, 129, 158). Indeed, in the case of the Yellow Vests movement, their cinematic raid on the Arc de Triomphe, perpetrated on 1 December 2018, could be seen by Bucci as a spectacular aesthetic practice that sacralises violence as a means to appear no matter what.

One would not be far, here, from all kinds of expressions of what Oliver Marchart has called an “aesthetics of conflict” (Marchart 2019: 23). And this is connected with the third criticism emerging from Bucci’s work: the recent protests’ tendency to exclude others. Indeed, the “aesthetics of conflict” that praises the spectacular moment of conflict also draws thick borders separating “us” from “them”. The dynamics of contemporary communication, extremely narcissistic, favour the construction of gated communities with closed identities, and the moralist scapegoating of others. Not by chance, many in a populist movement such as the Yellow Vests would talk in the name of a “sovereign people” to demarcate themselves not only against the elites, but also against foreigners and those who live on welfare, the “*assistés*”.

4. Sublimation Beyond Desire

Although Bucci’s reflections are seminal, adding a second key dimension to the discussions around desire in contemporary times, there is a blind spot in his work. And, unfortunately, it is precisely in this blind spot that one should find the next necessary step of the discussion around desire: the way out. In Bucci’s framework, there is no way out. The logics of desire have captured the world, and nothing can be done that does not repeat the aesthetic practices that move contemporary capitalism.

To a certain extent, Bucci is a pessimist. Maybe he is right in his attitude, and maybe it is too much to ask for a writer not only to diagnose the problems of his time but also to present solutions for these problems. However, I believe that this path should be explored – and that psychoanalysis may come at hand once again.

It is true that Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, was also a pessimist concerning politics. Freud’s work on mass psychology was ground-breaking, demonstrating the place of love in mass formations (Freud 1955 [11921]: 90). As Bucci himself says, “*the glue that aggregates the mass must*

be thought of as a libidinal alloy” (Bucci 2020: 64). However, for Freud the love that gathers a mass is dangerous. It blinds the subjects (Freud 1955 [11921]: 113). Furthermore, it establishes moralist scapegoating dynamic. According to Freud, society tends to organise itself in gated communities with closed identities, and to see in an antagonistic other the roots of all evil (Freud 1961 [11921]: 110–114).

Nevertheless, in Freud’s own work there are some clues on how to find a way out of pessimism. Clues that, to some extent, were further explored by Lacan, and then articulated with politics by Laclau in his reflections on another kind of populism that would be radical democratic. The main concept to be invoked here is the concept of sublimation.

Sublimation offers a way out from Bucci’s pessimism because it also opens the path for dealing with some issues emerging from implicit assumptions in his thought. For instance, at certain passages Bucci associates an emancipatory ethics with a certain ideal of rationality, and opposes this ethics to aesthetics (Bucci 2016a: 101–101, 113). Indeed, although Bucci follows Rancière and claims that the field of aesthetics refers to everything that is related to sense (Bucci 2015a: 427–428; 2016b: 405–407), in his writings he seems to consider that there is only one kind of “aesthetic enjoyment” – precisely the fetishised, fantasmatic enjoyment of being kidnapped by the dynamics of desire, by the other’s gaze, which foster closed identities, gated communities, and ultimately spectacular violence (Bucci 2015a: 433–434; 2016a: 64, 125, 160). Aesthetics, from this perspective, offers no way out – at least not at a time when image became a means for producing value.

I believe this picture should be reconsidered in three points. First, one could rethink the very definition of “violence”. Why are some practices considered “violent” and others are not? And can one consider expressions of “violence” that may not be narcissistic and spectacular? Second, following Emmy Eklundh, one should question whether the separation between rationality and affects can hold (Eklundh 2020: 121). Are these dimensions separable, and can one get rid of affects? Third, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics should also be investigated. For instance, how to interpret Wittgenstein’s aphorism that “*ethics and aesthetics are one and the same*” (Wittgenstein 2001: § 6.421)?

The concept of sublimation allows one to solve some of these issues. For instance, Joel Birman claims that already in Freud what matters in sublimation is not excluding affects in favour of rationality, but channeling affects in a certain way (Birman 2005: 210–211). Moreover, in Freud’s work sublimation is precisely a destiny of the drive associated with aesthetic practices. But, as Lacan points out, not all aesthetic practices are

sublimatory. Lacan explores a differentiation presented by Freud in his essay on narcissism, which opposes sublimation and idealisation, to claim that the aesthetic practices of sublimation accompany an emancipatory ethics, an emancipatory way of facing reality (Freud 1957 [1914]: 94; Lacan 2019 [1960]: 187–188). Not far from Wittgenstein’s idea that ethics and aesthetics are one and the same, Freud and Lacan understood that symbols matter, but that it is also important to investigate how one relates with these symbols (Lacan 2019: 202, 266).

To understand the aesthetic practices of sublimation and the emancipatory ethics they entail, it is worth recalling and critiquing Marchart’s idea of an “aesthetics of conflict” referred above. It is important to clarify the origins of this notion. In a recent text, Marchart has discussed what he calls a “conflictual aesthetics”. As he says, this notion stands for “*both a conflicting aesthetics and an aesthetics of conflict*” (Marchart 2019: 23). As the sentence suggests, Marchart amalgamates two dimensions of aesthetic practices. On the one hand, an “aesthetics of conflict” refers quite literally to the aesthetic practices of protest, based on drawing a line between “us” and “them”. On the other hand, Marchart describes a “conflicting aesthetics” as a set of aesthetic practices that do not “fit”, that troubles the symbolic order.

For Marchart, both the “aesthetics of conflict” and the “conflicting aesthetics” go together. He only distinguishes them to highlight two dimensions of a conflictual aesthetics that for him are ultimately inseparable. I understand this as a problem. While I believe that an “aesthetics of conflict” and a “conflicting aesthetics” can coexist, it is clear for me that they should not be simply merged. In fact, to use Marchart’s terms, I claim that the aesthetic practices of sublimation are precisely these “conflicting aesthetics”, these aesthetic practices that do not “fit”. I claim these are transgressive aesthetic practices that break with the idealised fantasies of full enjoyment and that put the contemporary narcissistic dynamics of desire in check (Safatle 2013: 42–43; Birman 2019: 196–197).

From this, it is possible to understand why Laclau associated sublimation with what some authors have called radical democracy, inviting one to consider that there might be different kinds of populism, and that some populist experiences can be emancipatory (Laclau 2005: 113). While in undemocratic populism what prevails is an “aesthetics of conflict” that builds thick walls between the “people” and a threatening external world, in radical democratic populism, one is dealing with aesthetic practices that question gated communities (Zicman de Barros 2022: 13). This sublimatory “conflicting aesthetics” fosters awareness of the fact that moralist scapegoating fantasies based on the sharp division between “us” and “them”

cannot hold. In this process, instead of locking “us” in a closed identity, this conflicting aesthetics leads one to welcome the other. It is at the heart of a radical democratic populism because it problematises the very idea of the “people” to include the radically excluded, what Rancière called the “part of no-part”.

As the Yellow Vests was a diverse movement, I found these radical democratic populist dynamics among some protestors in Jaunet. Although it is hard to establish whether this posture was majoritarian in the movement, for many among the Yellow Vests, the references to the “people” and even to “sovereignty” did not refer to an entity with closed borders that excludes foreigners and the “*assistés*”. For instance, I interviewed Anabelle, a 50-year-old craftsperson who showed an openness to the new and welcomed the anguish of facing the unknown, of welcoming the other – and enjoyed it. Furthermore, it became clear that for some, the very occupation of roundabouts can be seen as constructing a place for exchange and openness to the others. Indeed, a key issue for these radical democratic protestors was precisely to defend and protect the occupied roundabout both from the police repression and from the undemocratic tendencies within the movement itself. One could say that they tried to establish identity-building mechanisms that would allow for an ethical openness not to be lost (Zicman de Barros 2021: 322).

Desire is present in their efforts, but not in its narcissistic form. Instead, there is a match of various desires in a quest for a “real democracy”. However, this “real democracy” does not appear as an ideal to be reached after the enemies are eliminated. “Real democracy”, for them, is not only unrealised, but also unrealisable and enjoyed as such (Marchart 2002: 254). As Jeanpierre described it, they enjoy the encounter, the exchange, and the perspective of “*doing and learning collectively, sharing [...], inventing new ways of living*” (Jeanpierre 2019: 109–110).

5. Conclusion

This chapter started out as a praise for Eugênio Bucci. I claimed that his work on the configurations of desire in contemporary capitalism and the dynamics of communication associated with them constitutes a major contribution toward a critical assessment of recent populist protest movements such as the Yellow Vests.

I started the chapter presenting previous studies on the psychoanalytic notion of desire and its role in mass mobilisation. From a set of psychosocial interviews with demonstrators taking part the Yellow Vests move-

ment, I claimed that desire was the main element driving the engagement in the protests. Desire, as Lacan says, should not be confused with demand. Desire involves a search for recognition, for being loved. In this context, in the second section I affirmed that Bucci provided a deep analysis of the dynamics of desire in contemporary times that moved beyond the simple statement that a desire to belong is at the heart of protest movements. As Bucci says, contemporary protest movements’ desire for recognition ends up reproducing a grammar of the industry of entertainment and melodrama. They reproduce a narcissistic and exhibitionist quest for being seen. Protestors experience an “aesthetic enjoyment” from capturing the others’ gaze. Drouet’s claim that *“It’s all a matter of image!”* can be read against this background, as well as some spectacular acts of violence perpetrated by the Yellow Vests.

A praise to Bucci that does not invite further reflections would not be faithful to his intellectual style. As a result, in the last section of this chapter I discussed a blind spot in Bucci’s framework: the absence of an emergency exit, of an escape route from the traps of desire. Counterweighing Bucci’s pessimism, I claimed that the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation can offer a way out. Sublimation involves different aesthetic practices that allow for a questioning of established identities and an openness to others. Furthermore, its inclusionary character has led some to associate it with an ethics of radical democracy that would be at the heart of an emancipatory kind of populism. As I claim, this radical democratic populism was present among some sectors of the Yellow Vests movement. Instead of appealing to a narcissistic idea of a “people”, separated from the external world in gated communities, some participants of the protest would instead understand the “people” as an entity with open borders, that constantly seeks to be more inclusive.

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